
FUSE
Illustration by
Mitz Vah
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME
13


Reiha hurriedly activated Floor-wide Light, an elemental magic useful for illuminating one's surroundings. What it revealed made the entire group gasp.
They were in a vast wasteland piled high with the corpses of imperial soldiers. At the very top of the tallest pile, a single monster was sitting cross-legged in meditation. It was Zegion. He wasn't seated directly on the dead but instead was floating ever so slightly in the air, proving that he was highly trained in the magic arts.
"Welcome, brave fellows."
The voice was low but clear. Every word he uttered seemed to swell into an overpowering presence.
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Ultima
Nuclear Flame
Testarossa
Death Streak
Carrera
Gravity Collapse
THE PRIMAL DEMONS' NIGHTMARISH ABYSS CORES

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime 13

FUSE
Illustration by Mitz Vah

YEN ON
New York

Copyright

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FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford
Cover art by Mitz Vah

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PROLOGUE

TWO MISGIVINGS

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



PROLOGUE

TWO MISGIVINGS

Gadora was at an impasse—about two things, mainly. One, it went without saying, was about who might have been trying to murder him.

If the assailant didn't even alert me to their presence, that lowers the range of possibilities greatly. I have my thoughts on their identity…but…

But Gadora admitted to himself, he was too afraid to state the name. Because if his forebodings turned out to be true, it meant all his sinister designs—and those of Yuuki and his gang as well—had been playing into Emperor Ludora's hands the whole time.

…No, it may just be possible. The emperor has lived far, far longer than I have. He commands knowledge beyond any average person's perception, and he has the power to match. It wouldn't be strange at all if he saw how events would transpire and made his move decades in advance. But if so…

Gadora was far away from the Empire. But if his suspicions were true, he thought, then Yuuki was in danger. So now what? Should he warn him or just let him be? That was the problem. Yuuki was hardly a stranger; he had a decent enough affinity for the man. Despite that, Gadora was firmly on the side of Rimuru's forces at present. He couldn't rock the boat right this moment.

If he was truly concerned, he could have revealed everything to Rimuru and sought his advice. But if he disclosed all this uncertain intelligence and turned out to be wrong, it'd send Rimuru's trust in Gadora plummeting. Gadora had already betrayed the Empire once;

any further loss of confidence would affect his very position in life.

The pluses and minuses to all his options left Gadora frozen in place, unable to take action. And that wasn't all. The second doubt in his mind made all his thoughts frazzled, flying in every direction.

That face, that ambition… It is absolutely the same as what Emperor Ludora exhibited. But even the sight of me didn't seem to faze him at all. He truly appears to know nothing…and I doubt he is a fake, but…

There was no way Ludora could be there. No matter which angle you debated it from, Gadora concluded there was no other answer… which meant that person was just someone who resembled Ludora.

But if that person was His Highness… No, that's silly talk. Let's think about who stabbed me. I have to conclude that I know the murderer, but if my hunch is right, that kid Yuuki is in trouble. I'm not sure if I'll be able to sleep at night unless I at least give him a warning. And let's inform Sir Rimuru as well.

In the end, Gadora gave his friendship first priority. It might damage his reputation, but that was fine. In this nation, after all, might truly did make right—and in Gadora's eyes, survival of the fittest was exactly what he hoped for.

Finally reaching this conclusion, Gadora quickly sprang into action.

"Yuuki, it's me. I'd like to give you some advice. To tell the truth—"

Before even asking what Yuuki was doing, Gadora laid out his main points in a single onrush.

"Whoa, um, this is sudden."

"I am afraid it has to be. Think about my position, won't you? Sir Rimuru might start to foster doubts about me thanks to this, so I don't have time to debate the finer points with you. I'll do what I can over here, so just keep an eye out for any nighttime assassins, all right?"

With that, Gadora ended his magical call with Yuuki. Then in the same motion, he walked off to report to Rimuru. In a well-oiled business, he recognized how important it was to stay in touch, report what you know, and be open to discussion. He was an expert at raising the apprentices and other people under him, and he didn't

scrimp on those tenets.



“So the old man’s okay after all, huh? And I guess he’s made himself at home over at Rimuru’s place, even.”

Yuuki mulled this over with a grin, his gaze toward the window. The imperial capital was facing a long rainstorm, all but blocking his view outside—but even through the rain, his eyes detected a suspicious figure. Based on the person’s well-trained movements, it was clearly someone directed to surveil him. The realization made Yuuki smile expectantly, and he stayed where he was. Kagali, the other person in the room, spoke up first.

“Do you mean Gadora? Well, I’m sure he did. Even a former demon lord like me has always found him a wily sort—the kind you’d best never turn your back on. That’s why our relationship was so fruitful for us.”

Yuuki nodded. “It was. I gained my position in this nation thanks to him. And just now he gave me some of the most valuable information I could ask for.”

Gadora, he was sure, wouldn’t hesitate to give him useful intel on Tempest. For example, intel on Chronoa, that sort-of Hero. Her fate was still unknown, but if Rimuru was alive, he must have defeated her. Still, if Rimuru had actually contained all her wild violence, there’d have to be rumors about it by now—but Yuuki had heard nothing.

Gadora didn’t mention her, either, so Yuuki couldn’t discount the possibility that Chronoa was dead. Maybe he was worrying too much about it. He decided to move on. He needed to work out the issues Gadora brought up in his emergency report.

“Oh, did he? And what did he have to say?”

“So apparently Masayuki is the spitting image of Emperor Ludora.”

“Huh?”

Yuuki grinned at Kagali, who was too flummoxed to say anything else. If someone told *him* that out of the blue, he'd probably react the same way.

"Right? It makes no sense. I thought that wizard finally lost his marbles, but it doesn't seem like he's joking. I *really* don't think the emperor transformed into Masayuki or whatever, though… I can't be a hundred percent sure of that, but…"

Yuuki recalled his encounters with Masayuki. His smile dissolved. Looking back, Masayuki hadn't been summoned to this world. As he put it, "*I turned around, and next thing I knew, I was here.*" He was a visitor, someone who came to this world out of sheer happenstance, or so he thought. But…

But I can't fully prove that Masayuki's an otherworlder. I mean, he used magic and skills to—

He stopped himself before his mind went any further down this path.

"…Actually, let's save Masayuki for later. Right now we need to talk about the guys watching us."

"Oh? You were piquing my interest just then. But you're right. It's a bit stifling, being observed like this all the time."

"Right? It'll hinder our plans, and before that, I think we're gonna have to dispose of all our preparations anyway."

"What was that?"

"You heard me. If the old man's telling the truth, it's safe to say we're in serious danger."

If Gadora wasn't lying, moving the Composite Division currently deployed for the Dwarven Kingdom was a bad decision. Yuuki had no idea what would happen—but even before that, he needed to step back and figure out who was friend or foe. It was a complete restart, and that's exactly how cornered Yuuki and his cohorts were.

"…Ah. Then yes, now's no time to be talking about that Masayuki boy."

Kagali never doubted Yuuki's words. If Yuuki saw danger ahead, there was never any refuting that.

"He told me he sought an audience with the emperor, only to have someone stab him in the back."

“Someone? Not Kondo?” Kagali paused, then dismissed the idea. “No. I assumed that nobody besides Kondo could kill Gadora, but I could picture some hidden talent among the more undercover Single Digits.”

Besides, Tatsuya Kondo as the culprit was all too expected. Yuuki wouldn’t be demonstrating so much surprise if it were him.

“I agree with you on that, yeah. But I’m surprised for another reason. Gadora said he thinks he knows who stabbed him.”

The room fell silent. Kagali took a breath and peered into Yuuki’s eyes.

“…Someone both of us know well, you’re saying?”

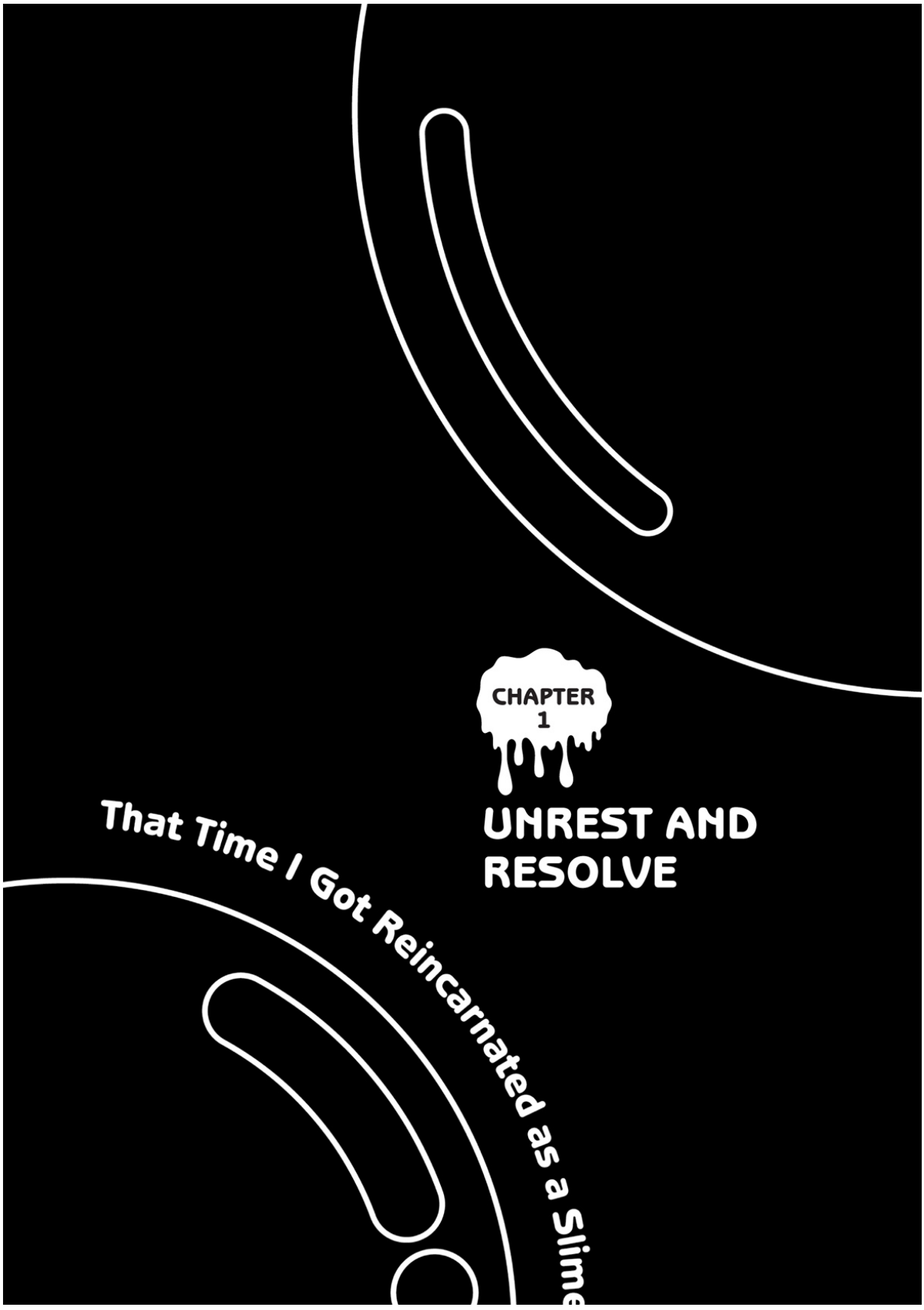
Her eyes told him the story. They said *Tell her, or else.* Yuuki gave this a half smile and a light nod.

“Believe it or not, yes. Of course, Gadora could always be mistaken, but I really don’t think there’s a way to mistake *this*.”

Kagali’s eyes widened. “So it’s someone in our circle?”

Her smile had vanished.

“Yes,” Yuuki replied, nodding. His smile, meanwhile, only grew wider. “Our double-crosser is—”


That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime
CHAPTER 1
UNREST AND RESOLVE



CHAPTER 1

UNREST AND RESOLVE

A month had passed since my cabinet meeting. Today I was once again back in my Control Center, keeping up on my imperial observations.

With all our intelligence being gathered here, Benimaru and I were basically living in this place. We still went back home at night, though. For all I knew, if I left the Control Center unoccupied, Veldora and Ramiris might turn it into their secret hideout. I built that retreat for myself, and I wanted it to be used. Benimaru was keeping up appearances, too, so I imagined he was resting in his quarters as well—not that I needed to worry about that sort of thing, I just didn't want my top commander collapsing from exhaustion before the final battle.

We had staff assigned to the Control Center at all times by this point—three shifts running the complex twenty-four hours a day during wartime. I wanted to be sure nobody was overworked. Managing our health, at least, was something I wanted to be thorough with.

Of course, my comrade Veldora was not a concern of mine on that front, and neither was Ramiris. Both of *them* got ample rest without me having to remind them—or really, they went out and screwed around all the time. They were excited about the war at first, but after a month of no movement, they seemed utterly bored with it. They were selfishly back in their own research lab now, telling me to inform them if something happened. Ah well. They'd just get in the way of things regardless, so I let 'em do what they wanted.

Right now, the top brass in the Control Center was Benimaru, Soei, and me, along with my secretaries Shion and Diablo. Geld was there, too; I shouldn't forget about him. I felt bad about halting his construction projects for so long. I really wanted to get this war over with fast, before Frey started getting *really* mad.

But that, of course, depended on my opponents. In war, the attacking side held the initiative; if the opponent never showed up, you couldn't fight even if you wanted to. The Empire's tank battalion, which I assumed would enter the scene in around twenty days, was moving far slower than expected. In fact, they seemed to be crawling along on purpose, trying to show off their might as they advanced. My Argos magic system kept a watchful eye on them day and night, but if you'd never seen a tank before, I'm sure they looked like terrifying creatures. Even a *real* monster was still gonna be afraid of giant, horrible opponents, and the magic beasts ranked A or below in the forest had already fled far away from the advancing imperial force.

So where were they? Well past their borders, that's for sure. Entering our nation without permission was fully against international law, as enacted by the Council of the West, but the Empire never did play by the rules. With things as they were, the question was how we could strategically take advantage of this. We could use it as a cover to stage a surprise attack…but we really did need to try talking at least once, I thought. There would be an order from the Empire to surrender, I understood, so until we could reply, I wanted to hold off on any attack.

"I know it's too slow of us, but we haven't finished our own preparations yet. I see no need to attempt to deceive them. We will decide everything in the first battle regardless."

Benimaru agreed with me, not looking particularly concerned. So a bit relieved, I watched over our continued preparations for the anti-Empire war.

Finally, all those days of waiting were about to come to a close. The Empire had stopped advancing and begun to assemble into

formation. They were no fools—they had zero intention of fighting fair and square from the beginning, it would seem, so apart from the tanks, they had brought platoons of infantry into the forest as well. Vast numbers, in fact. Their total number had exceeded seven hundred thousand, around 70 percent of the Empire's entire force. We had known about this for days now, but it was worth going over again.

"Guess it's safe to assume this is the main force," I said.

"I imagine so," Benimaru agreed. "It appears they intend to trap the dwarven army, and their tanks are acting as decoys."

"So they're trying to avoid being pincered in as they advance into our territory. They're being remarkably careful, considering the size of this force."

The tank battalions seemed slow not because it was a show of force or whatever. They had a more important goal in mind—to attract our attention until they could get their main force of foot soldiers in position.

"Not that we didn't see through their schemes, of course. Having control over information puts us at quite the advantage," Benimaru said with a smirk.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Well played, Sir Rimuru. Dancing on your palm the whole time, were they not?"

Diablo, wasting no opportunity to praise me, also interjected. I was used to it by now, so I gave him a nod and a "Yep" for his effort. Figure out how Diablo's mind works, and he's actually really easy to handle.

"Regarding the imperial infantry, I think we slightly underestimated the threat they pose. Each one of the soldiers seems decently powerful enough, and we've seen nobody defect from their ranks. They are assembling at a site about nineteen miles away from Rimuru, the capital. That's where they are building a command headquarters and establishing their position."

Soei, attracting the attention of everyone else in the room, went into further detail. Moss, it turned out, had given him some valuable intel as well, intel that proved accurate beyond complaint. It was a nice complement to our Argos, and it gave us a picture-perfect map

of the enemy's location.

"If they're this close to our throats, wouldn't it seem unnatural if we *didn't* react?" I asked.

"No, I wouldn't be so sure. They see themselves as the superior force here, and what's more, they are trying to keep their actions covert. Presumably, they're preparing to demand our surrender, then spring right into action."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… I agree with Sir Benimaru. If I could add to his counsel: Nineteen miles is almost the perfect distance for the imperial army. Magic-based observation loses its accuracy at long range. They are safe from any legion magic that might hinder all their forces at once. That, they believe, is how they are operating. It is hilarious to witness, but that is the best they are capable of."

Apparently my concerns were for nothing. I thought the Empire would suspect our lack of activity to be a trap, but here I was being told that the enemy absolutely believed we weren't on to them. The only remaining concern was the strength of this enemy infantry.

"So, Soei, how strong are these foot soldiers?"

Soei brought up their threat level, so they had to pack a punch. Depending on his response, I figured we might have to rework our plans.

"If I could give a broad evaluation using the traditional human-ranking system, they rank the equivalent of a B. There are many advanced troops who rank over A among them, and even the lesser troops wouldn't rank below C-plus. Even compared to the knight corps of the Western Nations, I would call them quite a superior force."

Yes, that was more power than I expected. But in this world, wars were all quality over quantity. A bunch of B rankers was nothing to trifle with, but a single A rank would be far more dangerous.

…Of course, I didn't want to underestimate their abilities as a fighting force.

"So there are practically no emergency recruits among them? They're all career soldiers?"

"Right. From their training to the quality of their gear and tactics, they appear to outclass the Western Nation's knights. Even your

Hellflare would have difficulty piercing their magical defense."

The way Soei put it, the imperial army had legion magic cast over them at all times. They were a truly impressive force, trained to the hilt, and a platoon of them would be the equivalent of an A in rank.

A force who truly worked as a team, such as Gobta's, could be a menace. It wasn't just the sum of each member's skill; it was more like exponential growth. If twenty or so of them deserved an A, simple arithmetic meant we had to fight against thirty-five thousand of these A-ranked threats. Frankly, we couldn't let our guards down. They were a pretty dangerous foe.

"Ah, we'll be fine. That's what the Dungeon is for."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Force them to scatter inside the Dungeon, and it'll be easy to destroy the enemy before they unleash their full force. Everything is just as you anticipated, Sir Rimuru."

Not really, no. It just meant fending them off inside the Dungeon turned out to be the best strategy of all. But depending on the enemy's war power…

Wait. Hang on. Something dawned on me: No matter how much power the enemy brought with them, this interception strategy was valid either way. Inside the Dungeon, it was possible to disperse their forces as we concentrated ours. That was why, if you really wanted to conquer the Dungeon, you had to do it with small teams of elites, or you had no chance. *Raphael strikes again*, I thought.

"You know, looking back, I'm really glad we have Ramiris here," I couldn't help but blurt out. Benimaru agreed with me.

"We'll keep our city from being damaged, and it'll be a breeze to maintain our advantage. As a military commander, she's the last person I'd want as my enemy."

He could give frank praise like this precisely because she wasn't around to hear him. If he complimented her in person, she'd be sneering and bragging to him all day. Regardless:

"So it sounds like we've got no problems, but how is Gobta's force doing?"

My magic was currently powering a set of large screens in the Control Center, displaying scenes from multiple points. One shot depicted the area near the Dwarven Kingdom. Two thousand tanks

were there, all in neat formation. They, too, were located around nineteen miles away from the central entrance, the closest access to Dwargon's capital—exactly where we predicted they'd be.

My main concern was the capabilities of these tanks. Their turrets were pointed straight at the large main gate, one I had visited many times by now. These so-called magitanks, or whatever, were supposed to be stronger than the tanks I was aware of from Earth. Perhaps those cannons had more range than those from my old world. I sincerely doubted their fire could actually reach the gate, but…

In the public square on the other side of the gate, Gobta's and Gabil's forces were on standby. Both were leading their respective troops, diligently performing their duties. There were no unexpected skirmishes along the way, and the residents of the inn town were already fully evacuated. Now, as planned, Gobta's and Gabil's soldiers had rendezvoused here to serve as Dwarven Kingdom reinforcements.

"The Dwarven Kingdom has accepted Gobta's and Gabil's forces. This will be a united front, so they have not given up their command," said Benimaru.

I wasn't worried about that, since Gazel already gave us his permission, but it looked like the dwarven army kept their promises.

"Sounds like there's no problem, then."

"I have my concerns about how well they'll mesh with the dwarven force…but if the Tempestians attack, and the dwarves focus strictly on defense, I imagine things will turn out well."

A military situation like this ran the risk of a jumbled, confused chain of command. Being a joint effort between armies of differing nations, they'd have to decide whose orders took first priority. If Benimaru was there, he could use his Born Leader unique skill to force his command on them all; even in a battlefield where allies and enemies were mixed among one another, with that they'd never have to worry about accidental friendly fire. With the dwarves on the scene, however, things could potentially end in chaos. Therefore, strictly dividing responsibilities between offense and defense would actually make things more efficient.

“Maybe I’d better talk things over with Gazel one more time, just in case.”

“Indeed, with the Empire deploying, there is little time left before the start of hostilities. It’s about time for us to deploy as well, so would you like to contact him to make your final confirmations?”

Benimaru seemed to agree with me. So without hesitation, I reached out for our newly installed contact terminal.

✳

This contact terminal was a magical telepathic device that Vester had invented. The great thing about it was that it could convey not only voice but visual information as well. It was shaped like a desktop computer, complete with a monitor, mouse, and keyboard—well, not a mouse—more like a palm-size crystal ball. The terminal activated when you touched that ball. After that, just point out the person to contact among the figures etched into the keyboard, and you’d be connected to them.

We kept it to a simple design so anybody could use it, although it did have its flaws. I said it conveyed visual information, but these were more like thoughts reconstructed in your brain. In other words, when you were jacked into your contact terminal, anything you thought could be picked up by the other side.

This was the same fundamental concept as Thought Communication, and while I was used to it enough that I could shut out extraneous thoughts, newbies might wind up unintentionally leaking intel. Any wicked ideas you came up with could come through loud and clear to your partner… And forget about hiding any secret intentions. I definitely wouldn’t use this terminal to go cruising for dates. The average, untrained person was better off using the device’s audio functions only.

But hey, they’ll address that in version two.

“Hello? This is Rimuru. Is King Gazel there?”

I began with “Hello” in this world, too, as if that was the only

logical option. It was too much of a habit to drop by now, so I didn't hesitate. But thanks to that (much to my bemusement), it had already become established contact-terminal etiquette.

"Hello. I will call for His Highness. Would you mind waiting a few moments in the meantime?"

"All right."

I could hear panicked activity on the other end. I'm sure they had someone trained in handling the terminal, but hearing my name must've unnerved the person on the other end a bit. If the CEO of my old company called my desk phone out of nowhere, I'd probably be freaking out, too. Maybe I should've been a little more considerate.

"How rude to keep Sir Rimuru himself waiting!"

Shion was fuming about it already. If that's what you think, maybe I should've had *you* make the call, huh? Because I think that kinda falls under the job description of a secretary, doesn't it? But Shion never touched the contact terminal, and the reason was simple: She didn't know how to use it. Or maybe not that, exactly. I kept teaching her how it worked, but her thoughts were apparently too strong for the device to handle. Ever since she blew out one terminal, she'd been kinda reluctant to try again… So really, she had no right to complain.

"Personally, instead of relying on some gadget like this, I'd use Spatial Transport to meet the man himself. In fact, I could bring King Gazel here, but what do you think?"

Diablo was being his usual Diablo-ish bossy self, but I wasn't too concerned. The king had his own business, no doubt, so it'd be more polite to set up an appointment first. It was my fault this time for calling him out of nowhere. It was natural that I'd have to wait a bit—and unreasonable to get angry at all about it.

"Well, if Sir Rimuru called for me without warning, it would be difficult *not* to panic. I sympathize with the dwarf over there."

Hearing Geld say that, I silently wished some of that common sense would rub off on Shion and Diablo.

In not even three minutes, I heard from Gazel.

“Sorry for the wait. I was just thinking I should contact you before long.”

Gazel’s voice boomed from the speaker adjacent to the monitor. There was no image. Raphael was handling all the operations for me, so I could transmit whatever video I wanted—but Gazel was still getting a grip on this, so he was probably sticking to audio only. Smart choice.

“Ah, good. I just wanted to confirm with you one more time about the way we’ll divide up roles in our united force.”

“Mmm, yes. That is important, but before that, I need to inform you of something. The Eastern gate into Dwargon is being blockaded by the Empire’s force.”

Just as Gadora had warned. That was probably the force led by Yuuki.

“Yes, we have it on-screen here. I’ll send it to you.”

I pointed the Argos system toward imperial lands. It was a long distance, with a magical barrier in the way as well, so the image wasn’t exactly clear—but we could still see a crowd blocking the highway leading to the East gate.

“It’s just like you told us, isn’t it? When I heard about the enemy defector, I suspected it was a trap, but perhaps we can trust that man a little.”

“Oh, I don’t know yet. There’s no doubt that Gadora’s given up on the Empire, but I’m not sure I’d trust him right now. There’s every chance he’s being used without being aware of it, too. I’d keep a watchful eye on him.”

“Ha! Tell me how you really feel, then! I’m quite glad to hear that from you.”

Gazel flashed me a joyful smile. I guess he was testing to see if I was on my guard. He never stops playing the “old training partner” card with me.

“Now, Rimuru. The envoy I sent to the Empire is just being given the runaround by them, it seems. By our laws, Dwargon can launch the first attack only as a last resort. That’s a disadvantage for us, but we dwarves pride ourselves on it, and so we must wait for the

Empire to act. You don't need to join us in that credo, but what are your plans, exactly?"

Gazel's smile rapidly dissolved, replaced with a look of concern.

How should I interpret his intentions here? I turned my eyes to Benimaru. He returned my gaze with an easy smile. We didn't even need to exchange words, so tuned in we were to each other. I exhaled, straightened myself up, and turned back toward the monitor. Watching the totally blank screen, I tried to sound as formal as possible.

"The imperial forces have invaded our territory without warning or permission. We cannot shut our eyes to this, and we are considering strong measures in response, including military options. Along those lines, as part of our alliance, I wanted to confirm your compliance with these measures."

That sort of thing.

Benimaru seemed satisfied with it. Shion happily nodded. Geld was virtually quaking with excitement, and Diablo was giddily taking down notes about something or other. I had no idea what he was writing or what he was going to do with those notes, but I was sure it was nothing good. Resolving to seize those from him afterward, I waited for Gazel's response.

"Mmm! You're starting to sound more like a king every day. Excellent. You invited them so deep into your territory because you intended to intercept them here from the start, didn't you?"

"Of course. We could have fought them at the border, considering the potential damage to our town…but if we do that, they might try framing it as self-defense against a monster invasion or something later on. If they're in our lands, that stops them from claiming that, and it instills a sense of danger in the Western Nations, too. We've already evacuated our citizens, and by this point, we've got just cause to strike."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I like your force of personality, but I have to take points off for revealing all that."

Gazel laughed at me. He was the one who prodded me about it, and this was how he thanked me? But he wasn't done yet.

"Be that as it may, I don't want anything slogging us down. With

our militaries in particular, we can't afford to have any discord. So let me spell it out for you. I am going to leave our negotiations with the Empire to the Jura-Tempest Federation. If, after that, you decide open warfare is the option to take, then let the Armed Nation of Dwargon act on their alliance with Tempest and join the fray! And to avoid command-chain confusion during the war, we in Dwargon will focus strictly on defending our lands. Is that all right with you?"

Ooh. That was a clearer answer than I expected. I thought that since the Dwarven Kingdom had a position of absolute neutrality, they wouldn't dare to interfere unless they were invading our territory. Benimaru and I had anticipated that as well, so I accepted the proposal without particular alarm.

"Thank you. I feel a lot better hearing that."

"Don't be silly. You must have expected this to happen from the beginning. It's the safest tactic, to be sure, but if our alliance forces ever run into trouble, at least we're justified to take action now. If you ever need us, feel free to tap our resources."

Ah, how reliable of him. I had the backing of Dwargon, a nation undefeated for a millennium, and just having a place to run to in the event of defeat was enough to give me peace of mind in this fight.

"All right. We'll send off our envoy as planned."

"We will need to divide our forces between Central and the East in order to protect them. It's in our own interests to keep our army on the defensive, too. And be careful. This new 'tank' weapon is a complete question mark on the battlefield. Even looking at the Empire's equipment, something tells me that the age of the sword may be coming to an end. Forgive me for putting you in such a dangerous role."

Gazel, perhaps out of concern, added that statement. No, I sure couldn't tell him to rest easy. As he said, we didn't know how these magic tanks performed. So I decided to give him a warning, even though I didn't think it was necessary.

"Based on my own knowledge, I am aware of a weapon called a tank from my own world as well. They use controlled explosions of gunpowder to send metal shells flying through the air. It's a simple principle, although the mechanism it runs on is a lot more complex—

but with their power, range, and accuracy, it's an incredible weapon, I think. If these Empire-made magitanks run on a similar setup, there's a chance that current tactics can't handle them."

Gazel was right. The age of the sword would soon be over, and it was likely to bring about an even more violent battlefield.

What would happen if you used magic instead of gunpowder to send shells flying? I had Raphael simulate that for me, and the results were terrifying. It turned out that, depending on the spell invoked, you could create a magical artillery shell (a magishell?) that was overwhelmingly more powerful than what a tank, the epitome of modern Earthly science, could launch. And we're talking a massive weapon, too…

"Are you telling me that magic defenses won't work?"

"Exactly. You'd need a full Magic Barrier to fend it off. And given the power involved, you'd need to redouble your defense with things like trenches and earthen walls."

"I knew it. I suppose all of us think the same way. We, too, have been working on a 'magic-armor-soldier' project to prepare us for the new era. They might've beaten us to the punch, but it's not like we have any right to complain, eh? So can we beat them, or what?"

A tough question to answer. All I could give him was this:

"It's not a matter of 'can we' or 'can't we,' really. We're just going to! That's all I can tell you."

The words seemed to satisfy Gazel just as much as my friends here.

"Heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, ain't that reassuring! Best of luck out there!"

"We're on it!"

That's how I ended my exchange with Gazel. As final confirmations went, I thought it was pretty good.

"That's all the confirmation you need, right?"

"It will suffice. We have a pledge from him that we can do whatever we like."

I nodded my agreement with Benimaru. The time had come. Now that we'd reached this point, we didn't have to wait for the Empire to make a move. We were all ready to go here, so why not kick things

off officially? Justice was on our side. The imperial forces had invaded deep into the Forest of Jura—that was demon lord territory, and there was no sugarcoating that.

Now we needed to negotiate things so we'd look like we were panicked and *definitely* not aware of every single thing they were up to. So who to order for it? Gobta and Gabil weren't exactly proper diplomats, and more importantly, they weren't very good negotiators. Especially Gabil… Looking back to our first encounter, I'm never gonna send *him* on any envoy work. So I decided to order Testarossa out. With her, at least, I knew she wouldn't get killed if the Empire decided to shoot first and ask questions later.

Maybe it was all a farce, but we did need to offer a promise. I think it's just fine to launch a preemptive attack without saying anything, but when you're a demon lord, the way you act kind of matters. So I sent off a Thought Communication to make the order.



As Rimuru and Gazel were talking on their contact terminals, Gobta's First Army Corps (with around twelve thousand soldiers) and Gabil's Third Corps (around three thousand) had gathered together behind the grand gate into the Dwarven Kingdom, approximately fifteen thousand in all. They had not entered the cave itself but were camped in a large open square at the outer edge. The evacuation of everyone in the inn town was successfully completed, and now they were waiting for the Empire's next move. No messenger had come from the Empire yet, no surrender order ferried to them, but everyone gathered here could sense that the war was about to begin.

The dwarven army was also hurriedly preparing for combat. The Royal Order of Dwarves consisted of seven divisions, and two of them—the Engineering Division and the Magic Support Division—were busily reinforcing the main gate and erecting a temporary barrier. An earthen wall, built up with earth magic, could have a fire

spell applied to it to instantly make it stouter than a brick equivalent; enhance it even further, and you had a virtual barrier of iron.

Thus, in a very fluid process, a tri-layer defense wall was built outside the main gate—and as work continued on it, the Royal Order's Heavy Strike Division sprang into action. The officers and soldiers were covered head to toe in magical gear, but despite that, they all nimbly lined up in formation. Some sort of event must have taken place…but Gobta and his army didn't pay it much mind.

As the dwarves busied themselves, the First and Third Corps were all relaxing in their own ways. Gobta and Gabil were sitting on the ground, having a friendly meal together. Next to them, for some reason, there was a table setting, complete with an extravagant parasol. Sitting on its white chairs were Testarossa and Ultima, who appeared to be enjoying a little tea party.

They were being served by Veyron, looking every part like a staffer at a tropical resort. Despite his advanced age, his back was fully straight in an amazing, statuesque posture.

"Hey, y'know, this is really, really good! It feels so…manly, yeah? Great stuff!"

"Indeed, my goblin friend! I am just as satisfied. This delicate flavoring…and the more you chew, the more flavor seeps out of it. Truly a delight for the taste buds!"

Gobta and Gabil were offering high praise to a meal prepared by Zonda, Ultima's underling. It was a whole roast on the bone, like a cartoon snack for a caveman, simply seasoned with salt and herbs. This wasn't from the army's pantry; whatever it was, Zonda had gone out and hunted it himself.

"As a chef, it is a tremendous honor to have two army generals offer me such praise. My specialty is court palace cuisine, so this kind of camp food is out of my expertise. Please forgive me if anything displeases you."

With that, Zonda bowed gracefully and retreated to Ultima's side. His double-breasted chef's coat was a Shuna-crafted masterpiece, made from hellmoth silk and dyed the same shade of light purple as Zonda's hair. It certainly made him stand out from the armor and military dress he was surrounded by. Even Testarossa and Ultima

were sporting custom-made military uniforms; Testarossa was wearing pants, and Ultima opted for a skirt, but both were unmistakably army gear.

It was no surprise that Zonda stood out. He carried himself in an ever-so-sophisticated way, one that seemed unsuitable for the battlefield. He certainly brought a touch of class to this camp, and by now, he was indispensable. He had been teaching many of the soldiers the finer points of camp cuisine, winning their hearts and stomachs, and being Ultima's direct underling gave him a lot of freedom. Ultima being rather a free spirit herself, she had a lot of authority as an adviser to corps leader Gabil, and she wasn't afraid to use it. With her bold, proud demeanor, she had no problem overriding any and all complaints from the other demons. She was practically demonic royalty already, and only a small handful of people could dare offer a complaint to her.

"It's not to my taste. You're not offering enough dishes, either. I wish there was more variety."

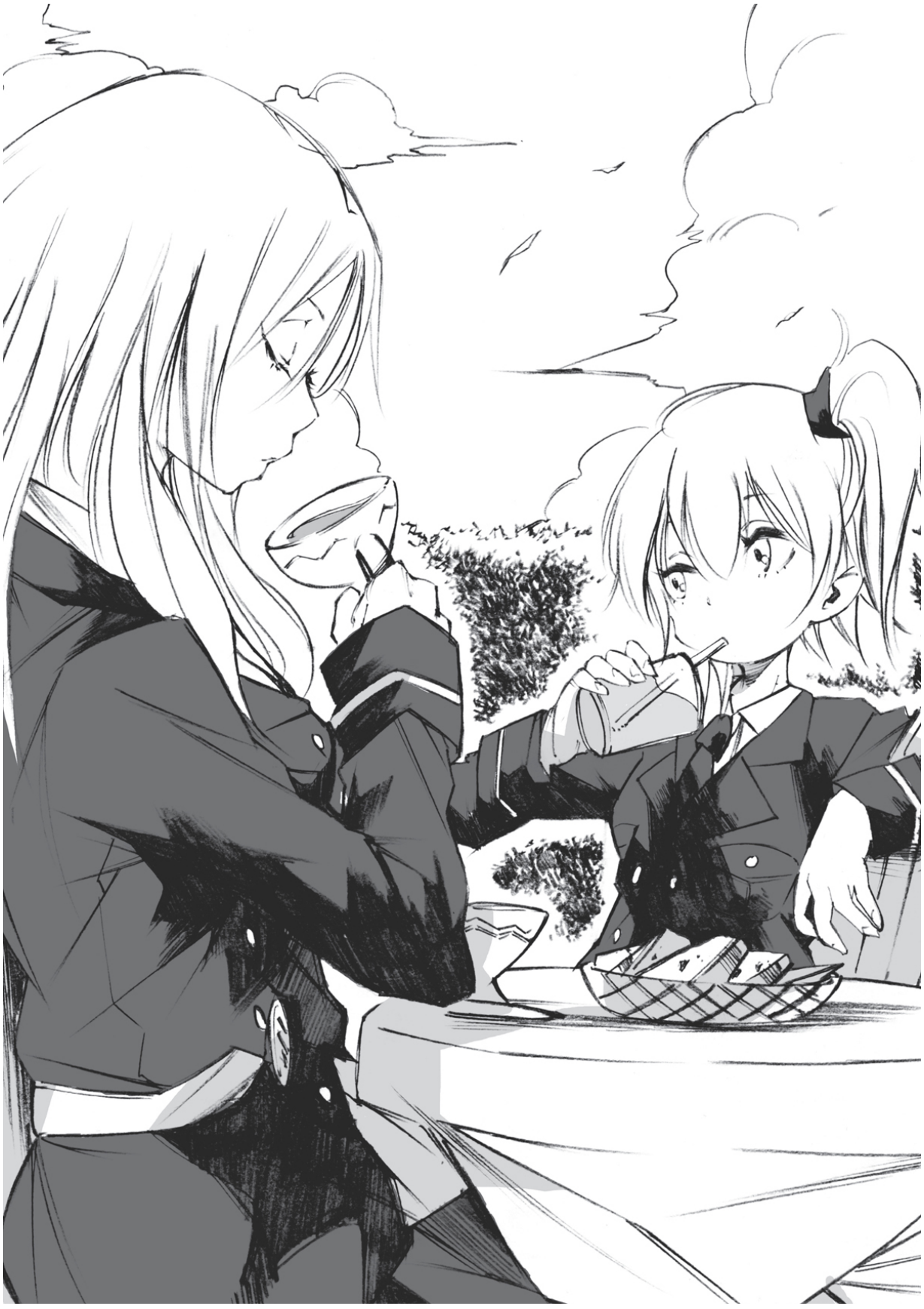
"I think you've got a point there. Going with these roasts and this basic hot pot—it's just way too skimpy. You've come to know Shuna and Mr. Yoshida by now. Hone your skills and make yourself more useful to us!"

Unlike the effusive Gobta and Gabil, Testarossa and Ultima were not exactly fans.

"I'm deeply sorry," Zonda meekly replied, before Gabil spoke up.

"No, no, Zonda, not at all! And I'm sure Ultima completely approves of your skill! The problem, I imagine, lies not in the taste."

The sudden remark drew the attention of everyone around them. Testarossa looked intrigued, Ultima was peeved that someone was disagreeing with her, and Zonda was visibly shaken at the possibility that he just upset his boss. Veyron, meanwhile, was as unaffected as always.





Gobta, of course, ignored all this and asked a question.

“Huh. What d’you mean by that?”

“Ah, thank you for asking, Gobta! How to put it? My younger sister gripes at me all the time, you see. She keeps saying I should think about things from a more feminine perspective.”

“What d’you mean by that?” Gobta asked again, taking a bite out of his roast.

“That’s the thing, Gobta. Here we are, enjoying this meal, not worrying about whoever might be seeing us. But Testarossa and Ultima can’t afford to follow our lead in that respect, no?”

Now Zonda understood what Gabil was driving at. It made sense to him. Until he obtained a physical body, food had never been a requirement for him—and so he had forgotten something quite basic. Good cuisine, after all, was about more than just taste.

“Gee, Gabil, that’s a very good point! Not the kinda thing you normally say at all, either!”

“No, no, it’s something I’m working on as well, you see. Of course, it’s honestly more something Sir Rimuru taught me, but…”

Gabil began to spin an anecdote from when he asked Rimuru for advice not long ago. “*Rimuru*,” he had said to him, “*I want to be as popular with the women as you are. What do you suggest I do?*”

“You’re asking me *that? Because, look, I’m still a virg—uh, never mind. Gabil, let me give you this piece of wisdom. If you want girls to like you, you gotta learn how to be delicate. Do that, and they’ll naturally flock to you.”*

That, Gabil proudly explained, was what Rimuru had told him.

“Then I remembered what Soka told me. And it dawned on me that Rimuru was just advising me not to do anything a woman wouldn’t like—the most basic of things!”

Everyone was impressed by Gabil’s impassioned argument. Sir Rimuru strikes again, in a way. If he was overhearing this, he definitely would’ve blushed—good thing he wasn’t around, then, because nobody else was going to stop Gabil from prattling on about him.

“Lady Ultima, Lady Testarossa, please accept my apology. I promise I will do my best to meet your expectations the next time I

cook for you."

With a graceful bow, Zonda stepped in front of Ultima and Testarossa and took a knee.

"Look at that. You've got quite a talented servant. And meanwhile, look at *mine*…"

"What are you talking about? Moss seems perfectly useful to me. And if Cien's working in your place, Testa, he must be incredibly good at paperwork, right? My servants are more about manual labor, so I envy you having someone you can assign those kinds of chores to."

"Well, Ult, maybe you're right. No point asking for what you can't have, though."

Testarossa and Ultima continued talking, all but ignoring the kneeling Zonda. Their attitude might've seemed cold to Gobta and the rest, but it was actually quite the opposite. Being at the pinnacle of demons as they were, they rarely even took any interest in other people, let alone praised them. Veyron and Zonda, fully aware of this, became noticeably nervous when their names came up—but at the same time, they felt a sense of elation, like their souls were set aflame, basking in the recognition their masters offered them.

But not everybody picked up on this.

"Boy," Gobta said, "it's tough being a lady, huh? Like, I guess they're asking you for that thing where you have to cut it into small bites so it's easier to eat, right? I get what Gabil's saying, but honestly, that's too much work!"

"Gobta, that's the sort of thing you should never say out loud, no matter how strongly you feel about it. It's the first step, you see, to becoming a gentleman. That—yes, *that*—was what Sir Rimuru taught me."

"No, no, I understand that, okay? But this is a battlefield. You gotta eat when you can and not ask for fancy stuff. As a corps leader, I think that's the right way to act around here!"

As long as I can eat, Gobta thought, *what's it matter what it is?* And given they were in a soon-to-be war zone, he felt justified pointing out how selfish it was to say something like that. The fact that he was appointed the leader of an entire army gave him a sense

of responsibility—and what's more, he wanted to show his soldiers that he was just a *bit* cooler than all of them, or so he thought.

That's why he said it. And he was right. It was a perfectly valid argument. But sometimes, people just won't listen to the truth. And Gobta probably should have thought about that first.

"Gobta's a pretty funny guy! That was actually hilarious!"

"You said it. I'm so glad I'm assigned to him."

Ultima and Testarossa were all smiles. Their eyes, on the other hand, weren't smiling at all. *Oh, man*, thought everybody but Gobta, *these demons are serious trouble.*

"Wh-whoa, Gobta. Um, Commander Gobta? Let's keep it at that. I'm sure our intelligence officers understand, so…"

It was Gobchi, one of Gobta's aides-de-camp, who hurriedly stepped up to stop him. He knew Gobta enough to realize that his superior officer had no ill intentions; he was just expressing his honest opinion. To him, Gobta wasn't wrong about a thing. But in this world, being right wasn't enough to guarantee your survival. Some people simply didn't listen to valid arguments. As a goblin who knew how to read a social situation, Gobchi knew that Testarossa and Ultima were two people you did *not* want to get on the wrong side of. After all, common sense dictated that someone who enjoyed a little teatime on a battlefield was unconventional, to say the least.

Gobta, he said to himself, *you really shouldn't be lecturing those two!* And as he predicted, Gobta was in a terrifyingly dangerous situation. Testarossa and Ultima weren't angry or anything. They simply thought he was an interesting toy. But if a pair of Primal Demons thought of him as a toy, it meant nothing less than Gobta's life hanging in the balance.

But then a miracle happened.

"Hey, uh, Testarossa, you got a moment to chat?"

Rimuru chose this exact second to throw Testarossa a contact-terminal call. Gobta's life was spared for another day.

"Not a problem at all. What can I do for you, Sir Rimuru?"

Testarossa kneeled on the spot. Those around her immediately realized whom she was currently in "contact" with. It wasn't long before everyone else was on their knees, although Rimuru wasn't

aware of that.

“Oh, um, wait one sec,” he nonchalantly said before sending a Thought Communication Gobta’s and Gabil’s way: (Are we connected now?)

(Yes, sir!)

(I am on the line as well, my lord!)

They both sensed Rimuru nodding. But the next thing he said surprised them all.

“I’ve just finished a meeting with King Gazel. We decided that the Tempest forces would take the lead against the Empire, but before that, we’re gonna go to the bargaining table with them.”

He really wanted to launch a preemptive attack, he explained, but before that, they planned to reach out and offer them a chance to surrender. Then Rimuru went on to explain his arrangement with Gazel, Testarossa and the others listening in without interrupting. Once he was done:

“So, Sir Rimuru, you’d like me to represent you in that negotiation?”

The ever-perceptive Testarossa spoke up first. She was confirming it for politeness’s sake, but in her mind, it was already settled business. The problem, then, was how to entrap the Empire.

“Ah, yeah, I would. As a diplomat, I’ll let you keep your authorization to act with my full powers if need be. You may also consult with me any time via Thought Communication, and you’ll still have the same status as a corps commander, so I want you to work with Gobta and Gabil to get the job done.”

“As you wish.”

Although she and Ultima were currently deployed as observers, Testarossa was also the commander of the Western Deployment. That army wouldn’t have a role to play this time, but it was still one of the largest in Tempest. In terms of rank, that put her on par with Gobta and Gabil, so she made the perfect candidate for an emissary to the Empire.

“Right. Great. Now, I imagine you’re gonna be exposed to some danger in this job, but are you okay with that?”

Rimuru seemed concerned, but Testarossa had already gleefully

accepted the post.

“Nothing wrong with that, no. I will gladly show the ignorant citizens of the Empire the full majesty of your glory.”

“Okay, um, cool? I mean, I’d like to avoid war if possible, but I don’t think that’s gonna be doable this time, so…”

“So we will declare the Empire our enemies and lay waste to it, then?”

“…Huh?! Well, like, I guess, but—”

“Then leave this negotiation to me, Sir Rimuru. If they are foolish enough to reject your merciful ultimatum, they do not deserve to breathe for another minute. I will destroy each and every one of them.”

Testarossa was ready to kill. It visibly dismayed Gabil. *I’d much rather not have this terrifying woman in my life*, he thought. Gobta, on the other hand, was still running on Gobta time.

(I don’t think you have anythin’ to worry about, Sir Rimuru. Testarossa’s just talking a big game because she’s excited for her first trip to the battlefield. I’ll be supporting her every step of the way, so we’re rock-solid over here!)

It was a bold declaration for someone as socially oblivious as him.

(Wait, you’ll join her?!)

(Of course! I’m commanding an army; I got a responsibility to uphold, and part of that job is to keep our more vulnerable women protected.)

Gobta stuck his chest out proudly at the stunned Rimuru. Even Testarossa had to chuckle a bit.

This goblin… He’s a fool, but I can’t hate him for it.

Being misunderstood to this extent even made Testarossa want to laugh it off. The fact that he totally failed to notice that she wasn’t even trying to hide her brutality… He was a real my-way-or-the-highway guy, she had to admit.

(…All right. Then I’ll send Ranga over as well, so both he and you can be Testarossa’s bodyguards. If the Empire agrees to our demands, then great. If they don’t, it’s gonna be war right then and there, so try not to die on me, okay?)

(I’m on the job, Sir Rimuru. I got a lot of experience running from

my opponents, y'know!)

(Ah yes, you do, don't you? Then go make me proud, Gobta!)

With that, Rimuru shut off the Thought Communication. The monster armies now had their marching orders. Everyone fell quiet, collecting their thoughts…

"All right, we're finally up! Let's get this camp cleared out and get moving!"

Gobta's command roared across the cave—and with it, the monster army began moving as a single entity.



As I gave the order to Testarossa's group, the main thought on my mind was *Hmm, this isn't exactly what I was expecting…*

Part of me began to wonder if they thought we were being too hasty but couldn't say anything about it. Which, I mean, I get it. If you want to be all majestic as a demon lord, it's not natural to act like you're freaking out. I think I handled that the right way with them, but I couldn't be sure.

Still, it's amazing how much I can count on Testarossa. She's such a refined woman, and I was confident she'd make sure the Empire knew just how dignified a ruler I was. She said she was going to annihilate the imperial army, but I wondered if she was serious about that? She couldn't be, really…? But then again, she and Diablo are like two peas in a pod. That made *her* a big handful for me, too, and it made me realize she was probably being serious.

These Primals are extremely dangerous. Maybe I should stop her… Ah, but it's too late for that, isn't it? This is war. You'll have all the time in the world to pity your adversary after you win.

Besides, I was already seeing some unexpected benefits there. By that, I'm talking about Gobta's growth. Maybe it's because I'd put him in a position of responsibility, but I could tell he was making a serious effort to live up to it. He really became a man, I guess, and the more he grew, the easier things would be for me. I wanted him to

keep up the good work, but I was afraid he might step on a land mine pretty soon. Yes, it had been fun to watch as a spectator, but before Testarossa got *really* angry, I thought maybe Gobta oughtta be let in on the joke.

With this in mind, I spoke up.

“Ranga, you there?”

“At once!”

Ranga popped out from my shadow, tail wagging and looking all cute. I had an urge to sidle up and take a nap in his fluff, but I had to hold back.

“Ranga, team up with Gobta and protect him if anything happens.”

His tail froze mid-wag. After a moment of silence, he replied, sounding rather dejected.

“…I understand, my lord. When do you want me to leave?”

He was kind of acting like a kid who didn’t want to go on a car trip. It didn’t take more than a moment’s thought to realize what he was thinking, but my orders remained unchanged. As long as we didn’t know what the Empire was fully capable of, Gobta—and Gobta alone—remained a concern of mine.

“Right now, if you could, please.”

“I am off, then…”

With a hangdog look (pardon the pun), Ranga padded off. Did he hate being away from me that much…?

“Thanks. I’m counting on you, okay? Gobta’s gotten a lot more reliable lately, but I’ll feel so much better if you’re there for him!”

I felt kind of like a heel, but for now, I needed him to pitch in. So I gave him a few more parting words, and he immediately reacted:

“Leave this to me, my lord!”

Now he seemed to be glowing with motivation. His footsteps, languid up to now, were accelerating into a brisk trot. He can cast Spatial Transport anyway, so I was sure he’d make it to Gobta and the gang before they departed. Quite a relief.

“So we’re gonna be negotiating with the Empire, but it’s all but guaranteed our talks are gonna break down. Once they do, we plan to declare war on the spot and start fighting immediately. In which

case, how should we position our forces…?”

By the sound of Testarossa, we were definitely about to have war on our hands. I’d really like to avoid it, but it’s impossible. If they’ve marched this deep into our lands, I sincerely doubted they’d go back without doing anything. At the very least, we’d need to tango with them one time, in order to show off our powers. But we were facing a tank battalion, an unknown force. An ill-advised strategy could seriously cost us.

We had to decide on our plan carefully. And that was exactly the moment when Benimaru would come into play.

“If Testarossa’s negotiations lead to war, our city will be immediately isolated inside the labyrinth,” he told me.

“In that case, we’d better call Ramiris.”

“Indeed. We’ve come this far. The war is about to start. I don’t think she’s going to be bored much longer.”

I feel it’s wrong to think of war as entertainment, but… This is where a monster’s way of thinking differs from a human’s, I suppose.

“So?”

As we planned, our city would be protected by the labyrinth, the world’s best defensive structure. We’d be fighting on our turf, and I’d like to believe that gave us the initiative. The problem was Gobta’s force.

“If you think about it, the two forces are well out of proportion with each other. But at the same time, the enemy is amassed into a gigantic ball, and along those lines, we can think of these tanks as a single monster. If anything, *we* have the advantage.”

That, and as Benimaru confidently explained, the supply troops who came with the tanks didn’t really even count as hostiles. I wasn’t so sure about that, but his self-assured words were very convincing. I decided to hear him out.

“However, if we deploy our forces too widely, they might fall victim to the tanks’ fire. I made a calculation of their estimated power based on the knowledge you shared with me, Sir Rimuru, and the results convince me that the Green Numbers won’t be able to stand up to it. Thus, for our first sortie against the Empire, I’d like to deploy the Goblin Riders alone.”

Huh? Isn't that a bit harsh?

"You want to challenge them with only a hundred mounted forces?"

"That's right. We will begin with that, to see how things go. If the enemy's tanks are as I predict, we can win if we send the whole army into battle, but if they exceed our expectations, we will have to rethink our strategy at that point. So either way, we have to try to fight them, and when we do, I don't want to needlessly rack up casualties."

Benimaru coolly laid it out for me. As he put it, the goblins would be used as a touchstone—and if things really went south, Gobta and his Riders would wind up sacrificial lambs. But Benimaru was unfazed. In fact, he made this cold, calculated decision precisely because it'd be the most efficient thing to do.

"So what'll happen to them in the worst-case scenario?"

"I've told them to use Shadow Motion to retreat as they see fit."

Aha. And there was another reason why he couldn't deploy the Green Numbers, huh? Benimaru was making his estimates of the tanks' performance based on my memory—or my knowledge, I guess. But everything I knew about tanks had come from what I'd seen on TV, essentially, so it was all pretty vague. But I also had a powerful ally in Raphael, so as vague as my knowledge was, I thought I was able to give Benimaru some pretty accurate specs.

In addition to that, we already had visual confirmation of what the Empire's tanks looked like. We knew the length and caliber of their guns, and we were also aware of the sub-weapons they were equipped with, a bit like machine guns. They manufactured these with otherworlder expertise, I'm sure, so it should be similar in operation. Their power and performance were unknown, but as we figured, if we just paid attention to the stuff we should be wary of, it'd all work out.

Benimaru's estimations and Raphael's calculations were within the margin of error to each other. It was safe to say that Benimaru's plan was the right way. It was certainly better than anything an amateur like me could come up with anyway.

His plan was as follows: First, as soon as the battle begins, the

one hundred-strong Goblin Rider cavalry will charge in unison. They'll take advantage of their high-speed maneuverability, using erratic movements to give the tank guns no chance to aim. In this way, they should be able to avoid direct hits. Given their small size, they'll be able to nimbly respond to any situation; in fact, if they're lucky enough, they could use a stick-and-move approach to toy with their foes.

Hearing all that, I was convinced. *If you're scared*, Benimaru apparently told Gobta's team, *you lose*. Of course, you never knew what would happen on the battlefield. The enemy might try pulling something wild on us, and there was every chance they'd score a lucky hit or two. I know he said that nobody's gonna die as long as they don't score a direct hit, but you never know until you pop open the lid. That was why we had to make sure everyone understood to retreat immediately in an emergency.

"But running away, keep in mind, is the last thing any of us want to do. I'd never allow them to sully your prestigious name, Sir Rimuru."

Now I was more afraid of Benimaru than the Empire.

"Well, don't make them do anything rash, okay?"

"I'm afraid that's impossible. In war, if you want to win, it's the polite thing to give it your all."

Benimaru briskly smiled at me, no hesitation on his face.

That was cool and all, but I had mixed feelings. I understood his point of view, but he was making it sound inevitable that someone was gonna get whacked out there. I don't really give a crap about *my* prestige. Having it helps keep my nation's name protected and all, but if we got ourselves killed to save our good name, wasn't that defeating the purpose? Like, I just didn't wanna see any of my friends hurt, so…

Well, let's just assume the worst and make sure the Third Corps is on standby, ready to be transported in at any time. *If I was fighting this myself*, I thought with an uneasy look in my eye, *I'd never have to worry about any of this.*



Lieutenant General Gaster, Caligulio's confidant and leader of the Armored Division, was commanding the Magitank Force for this expedition. He was a muscular and fearless man in his midthirties, and right then he was on the rear guard, sitting back in his state-of-the-art command vehicle and enjoying the atmosphere of the battlefield. The forest around him was as unchanged as always, with nothing to block their way.

Gaster, who had grown accustomed to this scenery, began mulling over the fame he would gain from this battle. *I'm going to defeat the Armed Nation of Dwargon, an impregnable fortress for over a thousand years—and Gazel himself, the Heroic King. How thrilling can this get?*

In his mind, he envisioned all the people cheering for him. It'd be the birth of a new champion who would go down in history as one of the greatest of all time. Just dreaming about it made Gaster's heart soar. The man who defeated Gazel, the Heroic King, would have the epithet *hero* applied to him for eternity; it'd come in the not-too-distant future, guaranteed to happen. Gaster's Magitank Force had enough war power to make sure of that.

Two thousand of these magical tanks were now lined up, moving in well-drilled unison. Their formation as they lumbered across the plains at the foot of the mountains was divided into twenty horizontal rows, each with a hundred tanks. It was a magnificent view, and Gaster couldn't have been happier to see it…but he was already falling into his opponents' hands. Each of these tanks was around thirty-five feet long by twelve feet wide—and with two thousand of them out at once, they couldn't just go anywhere. Gaster deployed his troops in the exact location he had surveyed in advance, and that, it turned out, was exactly where Rimuru and his advisers had expected them to be.

Gaster had no idea this was going to happen, but he was an excellent soldier nonetheless. He was a lieutenant general, and as

such, his personal combat skills were formidable. As he saw it, he was as good as any knight in the Imperial Guardians. *The only reason I haven't been selected*, he reasoned, *is because I haven't had a chance to participate in ranking duels. Being in charge of a division like this is akin to being on military duty all the year through.*

That irked him mightily. Of course, a lieutenant general is a high-ranking position; there were only a handful in the Empire, akin in social status to high-ranking nobility. He was well out of reach of the common person, no doubt, but that wasn't enough to satisfy Gaster. Someday, he would replace Caligulio and become a full-fledged commander himself—and then he'd be a hero.

Gaster was an ambitious man—honor, not money, mattered to him. That was why he volunteered to wage the decisive battle against the Heroic King Gazel instead of conquering the labyrinth. And Gaster had more than enough ability to back up that ambition. He possessed the unique skill Performer, which gave him command over any sort of audio phenomena, allowing him to analyze situations in detail simply by listening to the sound around him. He could also use special sound waves to issue specific commands to people, leading his allies even in the middle of chaotic battle.

It was the greatest power an army officer could desire, but that wasn't all. Performer could also be used as a vicious attack. Gaster could manipulate sound waves and manipulate them at will, using a sonic cannon to destroy the very cells of his foes. Clearly, Gaster was one of the most powerful people in the Empire.

Pfft! The Guardians might be strong and all, but only if they bear the legendary gear granted to them by the emperor! I deserve those weapons and armor far more than any of them…

If he could only get his hands on that Legend-class gear, he confidently believed, he, too, could join the lofty ranks of the Single Digits.

Gaster's mind was occupied with all these fantasies, but he wasn't letting his guard down during this op.

Hmm? Something changing in the forest?

The sound around him suddenly stopped. It was the first time he'd ever experienced such a thing.

"Abort camp preparations and take cautionary positions!"

Upon giving the order, Gaster focused more intently, turning his attention to the forest to his left. The atmospheric sounds of birds and animals had disappeared; no insects were chirping at all. There was something tense in the air…that, and the sound of small footsteps, as well as that of leaves rustling closer and closer. It was far-off but moving quickly.

They're trying to take us by surprise. Not a bad move, but they picked the wrong foe to try it on.

Gaster chuckled to himself. Based on his analysis of the ambient sound, there were approximately a hundred figures approaching. They had intelligence that the demon lord's forces were gathering near the inn town, so they likely deployed out from there. It was proof positive that Caligulio's plans were working out well. The demon lord's inn-town forces had completely missed the main body of the imperial army. And when a seven-hundred-thousand-strong army weighs down upon that demon lord's throat, oh, the sheer panic they'd all experience! Just imagining the scene made Gaster smirk.

Now they were a bit over six miles away. Before much longer, they'd be in range of their magicannons. Those could fire up to nineteen miles away, at the expense of accuracy dwindling to near nothing; the actual effective range was more like one and a half or two miles. Of course, with the right type of explosive shells, you didn't need to worry about accuracy.

This enemy force was small—and concentrated in a tiny area. Perhaps they thought they could use the trees as cover, as long as they didn't go out in the open.

…Well, think again. First, let's give 'em a salute to liven things up.

Their special ammunition was still in the prototype stage, so they could prepare only two rounds, but the blast radius could extend up to a hundred feet or so. The power of that explosion was currently unmatched by explosive magic, generating tens of thousands of degrees of heat and a concussive shock wave that could deform the terrain itself. It was a one-of-a-kind weapon, one only available on

Gaster's command vehicle, but he had no intention of saving it for a rainy day.

Without hesitation, he loaded it up and pointed the muzzle of his cannon into the forest. Then he barked out orders to his battalion; in the unlikely event that the enemy escaped, he wanted them to be ready to intercept.

"Left flank battalion, turn counterclockwise!"

The soldiers had been setting up tents for their encampment, but given that the Dwarven Kingdom was under twenty miles away, they were in a constant state of tension. As soon as they received the order from Gaster, they began calmly packing up the wagons the tanks were towing. It wasn't long before everyone was ready for battle.

Without another moment's hesitation, the left-wing battalion of five hundred tanks floated in the air, orienting itself toward the forest. Gaster and his men were ready—and as if waiting for that moment, a single monster appeared from the depths of the lush forest. It was wolf-shaped, with two horns growing out of its forehead, and its enormity was remarkable—a good sixteen feet long, making it look proportional to one of their tanks.

This has to be the Ranga monster reported by the IIB. They call him the demon lord's pet or some such nonsense, but supposedly he ranks an A-plus in battle…

That made him a big deal, then.

"Just one? What are they thinking…? Wait."

Gaster considered what this wolf's mission was. *If he came alone, he's not here to fight. It's probably serving as some kind of warning. It figures… You want to protect your position as demon lord, so you can't take any half measures. Heh-heh-heh… You'll regret that.*

As Gaster saw it, his enemy wanted to intimidate him with Ranga's towering presence, sapping his will to fight.

"It seems this Rimuru is quite a proud demon lord, isn't he? Trying to protect his lofty reputation by giving up the chance to surprise us?"

He let out a loud, ringing laugh. His officers quickly joined him, melting the anxiety among their soldiers. They were at just the right level of tension.

Ranga was close to them now, his steps relaxed. He was showing no sign of a fight; as Gaster suspected, he was here to negotiate. He finally stopped about thirty feet away, right in front of the lieutenant general and his team. A woman who had been sitting sidesaddle on him gracefully jumped off his back, making hardly a sound as she did. Then without a care in the world, she walked right up to Gaster's vehicle.

When he laid eyes upon her, this woman with beauty beyond what any human could possibly achieve, Gaster felt a chill run down his spine, like a dagger of ice had stabbed him.

…What? The sounds this woman makes… It's so strange.

There was the sound of a heartbeat, but it was playing an eerie melody. He could hear her blood flow as well, but it was both faster and quieter than that of a human being. *Too* fast, even. If someone's blood flowed that fast, it'd be far too much for the body to bear. Now Ranga didn't even register to Gaster. His eyes were squarely upon the woman.

Her long pure-white hair flowed beautifully, accentuating her beauty, but her body was clothed in a stern military uniform that poorly matched her looks. The bottom of it resembled a pair of riding pants, with the thighs loosely bulging out. There was someone else riding on Ranga's back, but he didn't even register to Gaster—that's how much the eerie presence of the woman had taken over his consciousness.

Who is she…? The IIB said nothing about her. Ranga's considered a high-ranking official of the demon lord's, and this woman's far more dangerous than him!

Gaster felt justified in criticizing the Imperial Information Bureau. But there was no one here to complain to. More important right then was the fact that someone intimately close with the demon lord was here with him. So he spoke in a dignified voice to hide his overwhelming anxiety.

"You're an emissary from the demon lord Rimuru, aren't you? You contacted me quicker than anticipated, but I'm glad his officers are such thoughtful, talented people. So what is your business?"

The woman smiled sweetly at Gaster's question. "It is a pleasure

to meet you. My name is Testarossa, and I serve the great demon lord Rimuru, ruler of these lands. As for why I've come here today…"

After saying that much, the woman's smile widened. It was a smile of pure, unadulterated evil.

"I convey to you the words of my master: Leave here at once, and we will overlook this violation of our borders. But if you invade any farther, you will be shown no mercy."

Testarossa's bloodred eyes glowed as she made her statement. Gaster nervously gasped. He tried to say "Surely you're joking" or the like, but before he could, Testarossa moved—just a light wave of the hand, but at that moment, a wall of flames appeared just a couple feet in front of the tank battalion's first row. It was gone in an instant, but on the ground, the molten remains of the fire had formed a fine line of glass in the soil.

"Do I make myself clear? Cross this line, and your lives will be extinguished. If you are not prepared for that, stay where you are. Now, good day to you."

Testarossa gave the lieutenant general a graceful bow, then turned on her heels and walked away, as if she had lost interest in the conversation. It was her way of stating that the time for negotiating was over. Ranga, of course, was wagging his tail at her. Only the small figure swinging around on his back still took notice of Gaster, but Gaster himself no longer cared.

H-how dare you make fun of me! Who the hell do you think you're talking to?! And attempting such an obvious bluff in front of all this firepower!

He was furious, as if everything he ever believed in had been shattered, and it instantly cost him his composure. She had said what she wanted to say, and she hadn't given Gaster's side even a moment of her time—the kind of approach the Empire typically used on their foes. But receiving it back in kind had ignited Gaster's anger, and any fear he felt before had disappeared.

So he made the wrong decision. He was around fifteen feet away from Testarossa, who was now exactly halfway between him and Ranga.

Think I'll let you get away with this?

Gaster made up his mind. Courtesy to emissaries was not a concern for the Empire. If they surrender, fine. If not, prepare to be overrun with all our might. That was the Empire's motto, and since Testarossa just insulted the Empire with her attitude, that was more than enough reason to begin hostilities.

"Can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, sir!"

"Shoot that cocky bastard's head off. After that, have the twenty tanks in front fire a simultaneous volley. Let's show the demons lurking in the forest the majesty of our empire!"

Secretly, Gaster used his Performer skill to lay down his orders. The first to react was the sniper attached to his command vehicle. Quickly, he lifted up his rifle and took aim at Testarossa—and then the long-range spellgun fired off a silent shot. This was an enhanced version of the standard magic-powered spellgun, its range extended to over a mile; at only a couple dozen feet away, she was as good as dead. The bullet inside was infused with the elemental magic Fireball—and what would happen if a bullet filled with that ripped into your body? Well before the target could think about it, they'd explode into flames, burning from the inside out. Even if a monster was naturally resistant to magic, that resistance often didn't extend to its internals.

There was no way to escape from a bullet traveling faster than the speed of sound, and Gaster was thus assured of Testarossa's impending death. But the moment the bullet was released and over the threshold, Testarossa turned around—her face so evil, and so beautiful.

Gaster's eyes widened in astonishment. The bullet that was supposed to pierce Testarossa's body was stopped by a single, delicate index finger. This was a bullet fired at three times the speed of sound, packed to the gills with magic force—but that magic never released itself. Instead, it was helplessly plucked out of the air and discarded, like she was playing with some cheap toy.

"So that's your answer? Well, lovely! A very fine one, too. Let's make it a fair fight, then."

With that, Testarossa joined Ranga, never looking back—and then they walked away, as if nothing had happened. Gaster almost

fell into a panic, but he overcame it by sheer force of will. Fear and humiliation competed against each other in his mind, and humiliation won out. The rank-and-file soldiers had no idea what just happened; only he and the sniper accurately understood.

If that was how it was, time to continue as planned—and mow them down with the tank guns, their most powerful weapons. That was the best means he had to protect his pride as an imperial soldier.

“Lieutenant General, what should we do?”

“Don’t fall back! Don’t let her tricks and illusions deceive you! We are the glorious imperial army, and we will bring victory to His Majesty the Emperor! Begin the bombardment as planned…now!!”

Responding to Gaster’s shouted command, the tanks deployed on the left flank went on the move. The warning had been abjectly ignored. The first row trundled forward in order to build space between themselves—and with that, the glass boundary line was broken.



The war was on, and it came a lot more easily than expected. The imperial troops didn’t hesitate to step over the final warning line Testarossa had burned into the ground, and with that, we were at war with the Eastern Empire.

“It’s on, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And this is just the beginning!”

Ramiris and Veldora were talking to each other, acting all haughty and laid-back in their rather lofty chairs. I let out a sigh. This wasn’t a game; it was real war. I wished they’d brace themselves and treat this a little more seriously.

“Yeah, great, uh, can you get the town evacuated now, please?”

“Right on! Just leave it to good ol’ Ramiris!”

Ramiris cheerfully answered my request—and the next moment,

without a sound, our capital city of Rimuru was quarantined in the Dungeon. I had delayed this quarantine until the very last minute so we could keep pretending to be oblivious to the enemy. But now the game was over. As soon as they ignored Testarossa's advice, there was no need to hold back.

"Oh, I had a message from Treyni," Ramiris said after effortlessly wrapping that up, as if she'd just remembered it.

"Mmm?"

"Like, she detected some fishy-looking character or something, so she's gonna go greet them."

"Huh? What's that mean?"

"Well, I'm not sure I really know, either, y'know?"

A dumb question on my part. It was useless to ask Ramiris for anything in the way of details. She didn't even work for me anyway, so I had no right to complain. Besides, we kind of got her wrapped up in this war, so I was grateful she was cooperating with us at all. And speaking of Treyni…she can be pretty damn lax about things, too, come to think of it.

"Soei, do we need to do anything about our intruders yet?"

I was a little worried, so I checked with Soei.

"They will not be a problem for now, sir. All we have to do is keep an eye on the gate placed on the surface, as planned."

Well, I was glad I wasn't overthinking it, then. It sounded like a few spies had made their way in, but Soei and his Team Kurayami were making quick work of them, so I guessed there wasn't much to worry about.

Now, let's take a quick look at the labyrinth's structure. Floors 91 to 95 were now where Floors 96 through 100 used to be. The town of Rimuru on the surface had been transported lock, stock, and barrel to the lowest level, the temporary Floor 101. You had to defeat Veldora to reach this level, and common sense dictated that if things came to *that*, we'd be screwed anyway.

The *real* final defense we deployed would be on Floor 95. Floors 91 through 94 were now the Dragon Rooms, and if you got past them, you'd find yourself in the vast chamber where Veldora awaited. Behind that chamber was the Control Center we were sitting in now;

if Veldora was defeated, we could buy some time in there, put the town back on the surface, and let the residents flee under Geld's protection. It was, frankly, a desperation move, so I very much preferred if our floor bosses did their best for us instead.

Either way, we could at least be assured that the labyrinth was as defended as best as it possibly could be. Really, even if your typical army tried to break through Floor 95, it'd be impossible for them.

This being wartime, all usual Dungeon services were naturally suspended until further notice. We weren't gonna sell any more Resurrection Bracelets, of course, and the inns and bathrooms were shut down, too. Any would-be visitors would need to bring all their own food and necessities. We even planned to cut off access to the water sources every five floors, which was bound to make things a lot harder. If you really wanted to "beat" the Dungeon, it'd take you days—months, even.

In a battlefield like this, bigger wasn't necessarily better—in fact, having too big a force could really drag you down. Based on the intel Gadora and others gave me, nearly all imperial soldiers had undergone body augmentation, allowing them to go without food or drink for a week… But even so, I couldn't imagine them having an easy time in the labyrinth. We ran simulations with several knight corps from the Western Nations, but the chances of successfully conquering this place were slim to none. Even if the Empire's army was *that* much better than them all, it wasn't gonna be a walk in the park for them.

So maybe I was worrying too much. Still, we better not let our guard down. The enemy might try to sneak their way through unnoticed, and we'd have to adjust our tactics based on what they tried. But either way, our preparations were now complete. We'd already informed our neighbor nations of the Empire's movements, and I was sure they were all praying for our victory. If worse came to worst, the Western Deployment was on standby, and for everything else, they'd have to take action as the situation demanded.

Now it was time to return my attention to the battlefield.

Testarossa, regrouped with Gobta, was riding away on Ranga. The Empire's tanks were behind them, giving chase, and judging by how their gun turrets were moving, they seemed ready to fire posthaste.

"Are they all right?"

"If they're hit, probably not, but that's unlikely to happen."

Benimaru seemed intrepid as always. Wasting no time, he used his unique skill Born Leader to send orders to the First and Third Corps. The Tempest forces all began moving at once.

The Green Numbers now carefully advanced toward the enemy's rear, entering the forest and using the vegetation as a shield as they made every effort to avoid enemy detection. If they could win the fight, they'd charge; if not, they'd retreat—but until they were sure either way, they didn't intend to make any bold moves.

Gabil's Team Hiryu, a hundred-strong corps of flying raiders, joined three hundred Wyvern Riders picked from the Blue Numbers in the skies. Their plan was to try attacking the slow, rumbling tanks from the air, which I thought was a good idea, but the enemy had airpower of its own. Once that stuff reached the battle site, *that* was when the real war would begin.

Finally, Gobta's force was currently the closest one to the enemy. As long as we didn't know what those tank guns could do, staying within range of them would be a death wish. They were still a healthy distance away from the advancing tanks, but as long as we didn't know exactly what their range was, we needed to stay on guard.

That, and while I didn't think the Empire was aware of the Goblin Riders yet, it looked like those tanks were ready to shoot. Maybe they had some kinda new weapon, one not even Gadora was aware of?

Report. Based on the tank guns' orientation and angle, they are taking accurate aim. It is believed they have a sound grasp of the Goblin Riders lurking in the trees.

Huh? Uh, that's bad, isn't it?!

“Benimaru, I think the enemy has some means to locate the goblins!”

“Understood. I took that possibility into consideration, so Gobta’s force is the sole group comprising the advance team.”

I was the only one panicking; Benimaru was relaxed as ever. Apparently this was all part of the script, so I decided to trust Benimaru and watch how things went.

There were two thousand tanks in total. Five hundred of them had turned around, on patrol for the goblins, and the twenty tanks in the front row were about to fire their main guns. The one big notable difference between these tanks and the ones on Earth was that these had shorter barrels, maybe? They had been traversing the foothills of the mountain range, but they still had some thick vegetation to get through. Those short barrels probably made turning easy…or I suppose they were knocking down trees with brute force, too.

Still, ease of turning makes dense formations a lot easier to organize. All of them could turn quickly without worrying about bashing gun barrels against each other. I wasn’t sure they were long enough to provide a lot of accuracy and range, but that wasn’t for us to worry about. The fact that these tanks were in actual operation probably indicated that any problems along those lines were already worked out.

And what about Gobta’s team? Well, Gobta was already back with his troops. He looked pretty pale, but I doubted it was because he was scared of the tank squad. Perhaps he realized the truth about Testarossa, and it dawned on him how much danger he was actually in. Testarossa, meanwhile, was sitting on Ranga’s back, legs to one side as she gracefully ruffled his fur. When the negotiations were over, she apparently assumed her job was done. She did deserve a lot of credit for getting back safely like this. She could afford to knock off for a little while…but I didn’t think now was the right time for it.

As I was thinking about this, the tank guns finally opened fire. Twenty-one shells flew on in. It was hard to make out through the Argos system, but one shot fired from the command vehicle looked

different from the others. What was that…?

“Gobta, In-Shadow right now!”

“All riders, In-Shadow!!”

Benimaru left my question in the dust as he gave the order. Gobta quickly responded. Without a moment’s pause, the Goblin Riders used Shadow Motion to disappear from the scene. Immediately afterward, a rain of shells pelted the area, a storm of twenty-one lethal blasts. It was a terrifying hellscape to imagine.

Understood. The caliber of the tank guns is 120 millimeters, so the mass of the shells is estimated to be approximately forty-six pounds. Based on the distance to the point of impact and the time of arrival, the velocity was found to be slightly under six times the speed of sound. The kinetic energy of each shell is proportional to its mass multiplied by the speed of flight squared. From these conditions, the muzzle energy and penetrative capacity can be calculated. The velocity drop is inversely proportional to the cross-sectional load, the air resistance is taken into account by simulating the surrounding environment, and these figures are multiplied by the magic power factor inside the shell—

Um, I hate to interrupt you while you’re having such a ball describing all this stuff to me, but…like, I don’t even know what a stick of dynamite can do, really, so if you could maybe give it to me in beginner terms…

…Acknowledged. In specific terms, a direct hit would shatter even the great gate of the Dwarven Kingdom. Not even an A-ranked dragon could withstand it. Anyone within fifteen feet of impact would be severely damaged by concussive force, and survival for anyone ranked C or below would be out of the question.

Right, thank you. Could’ve started with that, you know… Wait. Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! That’s, like, real bad, isn’t it? That, plus there was that mystery shell mixed in with them. I began wondering if

Gobta was really all right…but my fears were unfounded.

As soon as one shell landed, the ground exploded. Then it happened again, twenty times in a row, defacing the terrain. As soon as the last shot hit the target, the space the Goblin Riders were in burst into flames, a blast of wind and a localized thunderstorm ripping the land apart. All this carnage extended across at least a couple hundred feet, demonstrating the tremendous power of the blast.

That must've been the effect of the mystery shell. It was like a nuclear bombardment. How the heck did they develop this? Of course, I could only marvel at it because I knew Gobta's gang was safe. Thanks to their instant response to Benimaru's command, they had all Shadow Motion-ed out of there.

"Glad you're okay."

"I wouldn't call myself okay, sir! The shock wave made it through to shadow space, too."

"Anybody hurt?"

"No, we're good on that. No casualties, thanks to Benimaru."

Gobta replied in his usual cheery voice. I could hear him griping about how much it hurt or something, but—ah, I'm sure he's okay. I'm not sure if Testarossa is capable of Shadow Motion, but she seems to be fine, so no need to worry about her.

For now, the big question is: What's our next move?

✳

Time to use Thought Communication to set up a conference call.

Benimaru, Gobta, Testarossa, and I were on the line. I also activated Mind Accelerate to make the best use of physical time as possible; that way, we could have a productive meeting in a matter of minutes.

(So what do we do now?)

I wanted to hear Benimaru's opinion.

(Right now, Gabil and his troops are on their way to launch a raid

on the enemy tank force. I'd like Gobta's force to move out and help execute a pincer strike on them.)

Hmm.

(Isn't that dangerous?)

(It is, but Gabil's force will serve as a diversion. Gobta's force will use that opportunity to attack. The tanks pack more destructive force than expected, but their mobility is within our expectations. We stand a good enough chance of winning.)

Bold words from Benimaru, to be sure.

Thanks to this little skirmish, we now knew that Gabil's air force could fly faster than the tank guns could turn. According to Benimaru, if Team Hiryu focused on evasion, they wouldn't be hit by any gunfire. He thought it'd be very hard to shoot them down, but…I mean, really, if *I* was flying around up there, I'd be pretty scared. Gabil, despite it all, was a pretty seriously brave dragonewt, so I didn't think he'd have a problem with it, but still.

Benimaru had a point, though. As long as you were in flight, all you had to do was get out of the line of fire, and you wouldn't take any damage. As for Gabil, well, I was sure his fighting spirit would get him through this.

That left Gobta's team.

(Uh, we're going in, too?)

(You're going to be the star of the show. But don't worry. Once you're in among them all, they'll slow down to avoid any bouts of friendly fire. So when Gabil and his force start their diversion, run as fast as you can.)

These orders sounded monstrous to me. Ogreish, if you will, which I supposed was appropriate for Benimaru's species.

(Okay, so um, you want us to keep up Shadow Motion while we're doing this?)

Benimaru shook his head. (That'll be dangerous. The enemy will likely have a variety of defensive measures in place, like monster detection and protective barriers. They might have anti-skill measures as well, so it's best not to get fancy with our tricks.)

I agreed with him on this. There was no way they enemy would keep their treasured tanks that vulnerable—it was safe to assume

there was a full defensive arsenal on them. Anti-skill barriers were a known thing, too, and if they used those on us, we were in trouble. Maybe it was actually safer to just go for a frontal attack here.

(There's a legion magic known as Interface Barrier that I am aware of. It is a magic spell that prevents surprise attacks from other dimensional spaces, but it also may potentially block the legion from moving. As Benimaru said, a head-on rush is probably the safest way to go.)

Testarossa summed up what I wanted to say very well. Gobta sure seemed convinced.

(I… I get it. If you say so, Testarossa, I'm not gonna complain about anything.)

Wow. Gobta was *so* freaked out by her. But after the way he slammed someone incomprehensibly more powerful than him, it's only natural that he'd be kind of intimidated. I was hoping—or looking forward to—um, well, let's just say that I'll keep a close eye on how their relationship pans out.

(Gobta, you should know that people are not always what they seem. Keep that in mind and please try to avoid making the same mistakes again, okay?)

You could say that to me as well, I guess. I mean, I didn't even realize what Testarossa and company were until it was spelled out for me.

(Righto. I'm real sorry about it…)

Good. Good idea, Gobta!

"What is he talking about?" Benimaru asked me outside the call.

"Oh… It's not really a secret, I guess. Just Gobta putting his foot in his mouth again."

"Ah, you mean about Testarossa? Well, he is maturing, yes, but in the most important parts of his life, not so much. It's not a bad thing for him to get burned now and then."

He chuckled at this.

"By the way," he continued, "who were the people that Diablo brought back with him? I sense a certain ominous vibe from the three girls in particular, but…?"

Benimaru had accepted them without complaint, because I had

clearly given them my seal of approval. But he was still wondering where those ladies came from, no doubt. Then again, these were Primals, real bad news in demon-dom. Maybe he was better off not knowing. On the other hand, I couldn't just keep it a secret forever, could I? It's hard for me to keep my mouth shut to the very people I trust the most. I was sure Shion didn't know and wouldn't care, but maybe I should tell Benimaru the truth after all.

"…Let me tell you about them in a bit, all right?"

Benimaru shrugged. "Indeed. Not a topic to worry about during a war." And if he was willing to agree to that, time to shift gears.

(All right, Gobta. We're at war right now. It's good to reflect on your past mistakes, but it won't matter unless you come back alive.)

(Yeah, I know!)

(Is there anything you don't understand about your mission?)

(No problems here, Benimaru. We'll move over to the edge of the forest and rush in just as Gabil launches his attack.)

(Very good. Put everything you have into this!)

(Yes, sir!)

The fright was gone from Gobta's voice. I was sure he'd be able to concentrate on the mission now. And in another few moments, our Thought Communication conference was over.

A few minutes later, the Third Corps led by Gabil attacked the tank battalion.

"Gwah-ha-ha-ha! Behold my exploits! You slow-moving bastards are no match for us!!"

Gabil was in his usual form, making a big show out of everything he did. I had my concerns about it, but that was just Gabil being Gabil.

And indeed, the tanks struggled to react immediately to his force. As Benimaru had predicted, their guns were unable to catch Gabil and his cohorts. That was largely to Gabil's credit—he demonstrated superb command, and everyone reacted to him with perfect coordination. That must have been the result of a great deal of training; while I wasn't paying attention, they had acquired some

remarkable skills in air combat.

So Team Hiryu was doing a fine job, but the three hundred Wyvern Riders were putting in a great effort, too. I guess we had managed to build up a decent amount of spare riders, too; once we procured some more wyverns, I figured they'd become a real force to be reckoned with.

Gabil was all about creating a diversion out there, but that didn't mean they weren't attacking at all. He was having the wyverns spit fireballs, providing another feint. That B-plus rank wasn't just for show on those guys; they were easily as good as the Fireballs conjured by your average sorcerer. Not enough to break through a tank's magic defense, maybe, but it was still effective against infantry. It was a nice primer on just how effective Gabil's air-to-ground strikes could be, and while the results they put up were minimal damagewise, they expertly fulfilled their tactical role.

Gobta, too, had successfully switched mental gears. There was no hesitation in his command, and he was charging straight at the tank forces with head-on, perfectly timed movements. There were five hundred tanks facing Gobta's force, with another fifteen hundred lined up and pointed toward the Dwarven Kingdom. If the Goblin Riders could get that far into their ranks, they wouldn't be able to make any careless moves.

It'd be a huge victory for us if that happened, but the imperial forces weren't incompetent, either. They'd desperately try to block them, and from there on, it'd be a battle of skill and speed. Gobta seemed to understand this, and as he followed Benimaru's orders, he used his thunderous speed to zoom toward the battalion. Not a moment's attention was paid to the muzzles pointed at them—not a hint of fear.

There was only about a hundred yards left to the front row. The Goblin Riders could run that distance in under six seconds. A few shots were fired their way, but the goblins didn't flinch, keeping up their speed. In fact, the shells exploded far away from them; presumably they were warning shots. It only proved that the imperial army was in a state of turmoil.

Not a single move was wasted among the Riders as they

disposed of the obstacles blocking their way with computerlike precision. Even now the infantry members guarding the tanks were trying to engage them, but the wolves made quick work of them.

Range: zero.

They had successfully approached the tank battalion, their primary target. There was Ranga, running in the lead, Gobta looking as manly as he could muster on his back. He gave a silent signal to Gobchi running right behind him, and Gobchi nodded back. The next moment, he split off from the platoon, headed up to a tank turret, and threw a little something inside—a glowing red jewel. This was an element core; Kurobe had manufactured a bunch of empty cores for me, and then I had Charys infuse them with flame magic. Flare bombs, you could call ’em.

But will these work…?

A resounding explosion shot forth from inside the tank, at its weakest point. If this didn’t have the desired effect, we were planning to abort the mission at once.

“Will this be okay?”

“Do not worry, Rimuru. Trust in our friend Charys!”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru, take heart. If I put in just enough magical power that it didn’t spontaneously explode, I am sure it’d be no problem to disable that hunk of iron.”

I’m sure it’ll be fine, too, but this is our first time experimenting with it. So of course I’m gonna be—

The tank exploded.

“See? I told you, didn’t I? I told you my plan was foolproof!”

I was the one who came up with this idea, you see. That was why I was so anxious about it… But if it worked, now I wanted to brag about it.

“Oh, sure, bask in it…”

“That is so like you, Rimuru!”

“I don’t need that from either of you!”

Charys was tremendously proud of himself. Benimaru and Beretta gave that a resigned chuckle. Shion and Diablo just smiled. The second phase of the operation was a success, and now the atmosphere around here was notably more cheerful.

So far, this was just a prelude. The next goal was to get deep inside of them—pay no mind to the battalion facing Gobta's force and strike the middle of their army.

The goblins ran on, striking at the infantry positioned to protect their tanks' blind spots, like a giant monster swarming across the battlefield in all directions. Their movements, shown on our big screen, had a refined beauty to them.

"Gobta's sure done it, hasn't he? Now none of those tank guns can target us," I said.

"No, we can't be too careful," Benimaru cautioned. "Depending on their commander, they may shoot at us anyway and accept any collateral damage."

That was absurd…but then again, this was war. We had to be prepared for that.

"Besides, the enemy has airpower, too. It's still too early to rest easy."

That's right, I thought, turning my gaze to another large screen. Looking at the enemy aircraft on it, I could tell they were increasing their speed. It seemed the Empire could stay in communication with them, one way or another. Once the enemy air force arrived, Gabil would be compelled to deal with them, leaving the Goblin Riders isolated on the battlefield. After that took place, it was a race against time. We needed decisive results while we could get them.

As if answering my expectations, the battle continued to progress rapidly. Gobta and Gabil were both making the most of their training, achieving real results in the first battle of this war. But something always goes wrong sooner or later. As Benimaru just said, it was too early to rest easy…



Gaster glared at the approaching goblins with a singular abhorrence.

Damn them… Thinking they can own us…!!

He felt a deep, primal resentment for them, and he promised

himself that he'd take it out on them all shortly. A few moments ago, Testarossa, her pure-white hair fluttering in the air, had put a mortal fear inside him. Not wanting to admit it, Gaster decided to instead rebuild his confidence by tearing the goblins to pieces.

No matter how fast these monsters moved, he thought, they'd just be a disruption, nothing that could damage a tank. But the explosions that roared across the battlefield shattered that idea quickly.

No?!

Gaster had to keep himself from shouting it out loud. No way could a commander show himself upset on the battlefield. He was still an able leader, and he hadn't lost his ability to make sane decisions.

"Lieutenant General, what will we do?"

"Don't panic. Look at the enemy's moves. They've only destroyed one tank, and there's no sign of any follow-up. That bomb was one of the few trump cards they have."

"Yes… You're right, now that you mention it. Otherwise, those flying lizards would be scattering them all over the field."

Gaster nodded. He thought he had kept himself calm enough to make the right decision. But this was wrong. In fact, Rimuru had prepared over three thousand flare bombs for this fight. Every member of Gobta's Goblin Riders carried ten of them, and every "flying lizard"—Gabil and Team Hiryu—also had ten on hand.

Team Hiryu hadn't used them so far because they were focusing on diversionary tactics—that, and they knew flare bombs wouldn't unlock their full potential unless used in an enclosed space. In such a space, the power of a gunpowder blast was easily doubled, and the same logic applied to flare bombs. Benimaru's focus here was on destroying tanks, not infantry, so he refused to let those bombs go to waste. The important thing today wasn't instant glory—it was making this op a success, and Gobta, Gabil, and all the monsters under their command were aware of this.

Gaster, blissfully unaware, was regaining his composure. *I must commend you for unleashing that new weapon of yours…but we will still win the day!*

He might have misread the ace up the goblins' sleeve, but he did know what they were aiming to achieve.

They ignored the left-wing battalion because their goal is to destroy this main force, right? If that's the case, we have our choice of ways to stop them!

Gabil and the lizards were certainly putting on a flashy show up there, but the tanks were protected from that with a magical barrier. The only thing to be wary of was this new weapon, and if that was the case, all they had to do was keep Gobta's force at arm's length.

"Have them deal with them in a compacted air-battle formation."

Gaster's order surprised his second-in-command.

"Lieutenant General, that's dangerous! Some of us are in close-quarters battle with the enemy. We'll be risking friendly fire…!"

"So what? If they're in the way, just blow them away with our tank guns! Our glorious imperial army doesn't need incompetent louts dragging them down anyway!"

"Wha…?!"

And with that said out loud, Gaster's associate could no longer stop him. A few tanks and a lot of infantry would get caught up in the carnage, but the battle was certain to be won…and the aide knew it. Gaster was willing to sacrifice a few pawns to win the day, and without that kind of vision and determination, perhaps being an army commander was impossible.

"Are there any legal problems with that?"

"No, sir, none."

The staff officer accompanying Gaster had no objection. Now it was Gaster's turn to shine.

"Left-flank battalion, compacted air-battle formation!"

The order came directly from him, not through any subordinate, allowing the left wing to take formation faster than ever. Ignoring the infantry overtaken by goblins, they used their remaining vehicles to block the road, then turned their guns so the tanks at the front and rear were all but right next to each other. It was a formation that defied all common sense in modern warfare.

"What? That's nuts…!"

It was only natural that Gobta was stunned. Taking advantage of

their huge size, the tanks crowded together, deliberately trying to close the gaps in their ranks. It would make it impossible for any of them to maneuver, but it worked—Gobta's forces could no longer run through the gaps between tanks.

But the surprises weren't over yet. Next, the left wing spread out in a circle, forming a barricade around the goblins. In response, half of the central battalion also went on the move, floating into the air before turning around and landing right on the backs of the frontline tanks. Now they were a wall, fully blocking the goblins' way.

Nearly a thousand tanks had linked together to form a single, gigantic fortress. There would be no destroying the central force now.

"I heard they could move like that, but I never thought they'd try something like this…"

Gobchi, Gobta's second-in-command, was similarly stunned by the scene in front of him.

"Put up a machine-gun barrage and pin them down!"

This kicked off a three-dimensional sweep of machine-gun fire. The multifaceted barrage put the stops on the high-speed maneuvering Gobta's team was best at. They were surrounded by tanks and the infantry accompanying them, and they didn't care how many friendlies this strategy killed.

"Uh, this is bad. I'm not sure we can keep going with this operation!"

Gobta grew upset. Benimaru's strategy was faltering. Seeing the imperial forces get shot by their own allies made even Gobta panic a bit.

"Nnnh… I'm sorry, Gobta. I'd love to help you, but we've got our hands full."

Gabil's force, meanwhile, was being exposed to aerial bombardment. The tank guns might not have been able to hit them, but those tanks were also equipped with machine guns, successfully keeping Team Hiryu in check.

Now Gaster, the man in command, had fully regained his composure. The difference in numbers had become a decisive advantage—and bad news often tends to come in groups.

“Sorry to keep you, Lieutenant General!”

The Flying Combat Corps, led by Major General Farraga, had just shown up. They were a hundred airships strong, and now they were Gabil’s problem, just as Gobta was facing an even more difficult situation.

“It’s about time, Farraga. It’s a dead end for them now. Now’s the perfect time to test out our top-secret magic cancelers, isn’t it?”

“Ha-ha! There’s no beating you, Lieutenant General. In that case, let’s see if we can’t get in on this.”

“We’ll share the credit today. Don’t get sloppy.”

“Yes, sir. Good luck to you!”

Gaster and Farraga, speaking on a special closed line, swore to fight together. For Gaster, he wanted to make sure this op was rock-solid; for Farraga, this was a warm-up before the main course and a way to show he could be useful in real battle. Despite piloting such valuable airships, the Flying Combat Corps occupied the lowest rung among the three divisions. In his mind, they needed to start making a name for themselves—and with him in the fray now, things were starting to look bleak for the Tempest force.

Gobta’s Riders, of course, understood the change of tides better than anyone.

“What do you say, Commander Gobta?”

“Ah, this ain’t gonna work. Let’s get outta here!”

“A good idea. With the situation changed, there is no need to force matters.”

Gobta made the right decision. From the get-go, he’d had one golden rule drilled into him: Don’t try to force your strategy, and if something unforeseen happens, retreat to fight another day. And with Benimaru, who had overseen the Riders for quite a long time, giving the retreat order, every one of the goblins realized the danger.

Even in fleeing, they all worked in unison, turning around without the slightest delay. Then they tried Shadow Motion to retreat, but:

“Gobta, the enemy is not that unintelligent. They have begun a magic-jamming operation that prevents you from engaging Shadow

Motion.”

Ranga gave the warning the moment he sensed something was wrong, but it came a little too late. Even by then, the goblins were already under the influence of the Empire’s wide-ranging magic interference. Ranga might have been able to sprint his way out of it, but the rest of his kin couldn’t. The only way out was to run.

“Everyone, head to the forest as fast as you can!”

Gobta was frantic as he shouted, and the goblin riders quickly heeded him. They had about six hundred feet of terrain between them and the woods. It’d usually take ten or so seconds to traverse, but being shot at from behind like this, it seemed hopelessly far away.

It was now a battle to retreat, and it would prove to be one filled with hardship.

Looking at the fleeing goblins, Gaster flashed a brutal smile, then quickly ordered his crew to prepare the tank gun on their vehicle.

Don’t think you bastards are getting off that easy!

They would be using the special ammunition on board; there was just one round left. Following his order, it was loaded into the gun and fired without delay.

This special round landed in the forest in front of the goblins, instantly spreading intense flames across it. The aim was to block their path, and while they could use their super-honed intuition to dodge incoming shells, there wasn’t much they could do when their route of escape was burning.

“Bad news there… Geez, I wonder if I’m gonna make it back alive?”

“You better not kid around like that, Gobta. If I’m here, we’re all coming back, got it?”

“You’re always super confident, aren’t you, Gobto? Hearing all that baseless confidence, I feel like a doofus for worrying about anything.”

“I wonder if Captain…I mean, Commander Gobta is worried, too?”

“What’re you talking about? If he is, it’s probably over what’s for

dinner tonight. That or how he'll apologize to Rigur for partying with Sir Rimuru until late."

The Goblin Riders started laughing, Gobchi and Gobto joining the mix. It was a desperate situation, but the goblins hadn't lost their usual swagger…and with his ears honed, Gaster overheard the entire conversation.

…Don't you dare mess with me. Now that you're fully surrounded, your fates are in my hands!

Gaster's heart burned with passion. But in front of his gaze, there was now a beautiful woman with pure-white hair—Testarossa. Her face looked cool, despite the blasts of hot air surrounding her, and she didn't seem the least bit threatened by the flying bullets.

And you, too. I'll never forgive you for messing with me like that! That pretty little face of yours will be weeping in terror!!

Gaster was not personally conscious of the faint, dark desires within himself. He hadn't noticed that his fascination with Testarossa was causing him to make increasingly rash decisions. So with his face evilly twisted, he made another order.

"All remaining vehicles! Fire our tank guns at the enemy!!"

The order completely ignored the safety of the remaining forces on the left flank, busy hassling the goblins—but nobody was going to argue the point with him. So the remaining one thousand tanks turned their guns around, just as the fortress wall of tanks was checking the Goblin Riders' moves. Adjusting their angle, applying anti-shock protection to withstand the force of firing at point-blank range, the muzzles of these deadly, life-reaping tanks were ready to flash in unison.

✳

Fierce battle was also unfolding in the skies, the airships launching all sorts of enhanced magic. Gabil and his team found themselves at a loss to respond. The magicule flows around them had been disrupted. The Empire's top-secret magic cancelers were affecting

Gabil just as badly as the Goblin Riders.

“Nngh… What a menace. The closer we get to those flying ships, the heavier our bodies get.”

“What now, Sir Gabil?”

“I’d like to go help the goblins, but there’s no time for that.”

They might have had the time if it was Team Hiryu alone, but they were accompanied by the Wyvern Riders as well, and they lacked real battle experience. Any wrong moves, and both Gobta’s and Gabil’s forces could fall at the same time.

“Dahhh, we have no choice! We’ll take those ships down first; we have the numerical advantage. Team Hiryu, concentrate on the enemy in front of you!”

“You got it, Boss!”

“But they’re bigger than us, aren’t they? Comparing our numbers may not matter…”

“Shut up, you moron! Sir Gabil knows that, but that’s the only order he can give us!”

There’s always one person in the crowd who can’t get the picture. But despite that exchange, Gabil and his cohorts prepared to dive right into full-scale battle with the fleet of airships.

One of the pilots aboard regarded Gabil and his force with cold, cruel eyes. This was Major General Farraga, leader of the Empire’s vaunted Flying Combat Corps. He was very capable, with a hunger for promotion to match; no officer wanted to find higher office more than he. Despite that, however, Farraga took great pains to lift up his other colleagues, striving to keep them on his side.

There was a reason for this, of course—he had been around to see the end of the Magic Division, his former stomping grounds. This Magic Division boasted immense power, once upon a time, but now it was dismantled, a relic of the past. Perhaps it was a sign of the times, but they had grown to be judged as too inefficient for warfare—that was the main reason.

People think that magical warfare is this flashy fireworks show, but in reality, it boils down to a few core tenets—analyze the enemy’s

magic and interfere with it. In the meantime, you'd activate your own magic and try to strike the enemy's army. Repeat ad nauseam.

This tended to never produce significant results, mainly because magically enhanced knights were much stronger in real-life battle situations. For example, nuclear magic (regarded as the most powerful kind out there) took around a dozen sorcerers to invoke. No one person could cast it, and the time to construct, or cast, the spell was far from trivial. Some champion-level fighters could indeed control nuclear magic solo, but at best they could engineer an explosion the size of a football field. A direct hit from this was powerful enough, yes, but armies could have the Anti-Magic Shield legion magic cast upon them, and only group magic had the power to overcome that. In other words, individual magic-casters were not expected to be active contributors on the battlefield.

What's more, while it was important to have the necessary number of casters on hand, it wasn't a case of "more is better." Every battlefield had only so many magicules to harness, and once they were used up, magic-users were essentially useless. Thus, while wizards and their kind were indispensable, they were not seen as star performers in battle.

Farraga was an excellent wizard in his own right, an art he honed studying under Gadora. He respected his teacher, honoring what he taught him, and he didn't neglect his own diligence, either. But then he realized something: With Gadora helping to modernize the Armored Division, they would soon have no place left in the military. The times were changing, and soon there would no longer be a need for well-trained casters. With the right spellgun, even ordinary people could control extraordinary magic.

And Farraga hated Gadora for it. He felt that his master was strangling himself through his own actions, but Gadora rejected his pleadings at every turn. And so the Magic Division declined to nothing.

And that's exactly why I betrayed my teacher and swore my allegiance to Sir Caligulio.

The move had earned him his current position. He took in the people who worked under him, all talented magic-casters, and gave

them a place to shine. And someday, sooner or later, the Flying Combat Corps would enjoy the honor of being called the strongest in the world. Until then, he'd happily kiss up to his colleagues and keep a low profile. That was Farraga's plan, and he kept to it with a strict discipline.

Now, finally, the perfect opportunity had arrived—an operation to defeat Veldora. The Flying Combat Corps had been chosen as the keystone of the mission. The core plan was to contain Veldora with their magic cancelers while assisting the other units. Logical support was one of their original roles, but they were exempted from it this time.

Three hundred of their airships, out of four hundred total, were on other missions, and the remaining one hundred were staffed by elite sorcerers to the limit of their capacity. It was a completely battle-focused formation, which showed just how much importance Caligulio placed on this operation.

Farraga understood well enough that he needed to succeed. *We'll perform out here and prove our usefulness. It will be a new era for us!*

He smiled to himself. Once that new era dawned, he'd no longer have to curry favor with the other officers. The tables would be turned, and nobody would be able to ignore Farraga's wishes. That was how he thought his life should be, and he never doubted it for a moment.

Compared to defeating Veldora, this isn't much of a warm-up at all, but fair enough. Those flying lizards and earthbound dogs are good practice fodder for our new weapon.

"Why should we share the credit, I ask? By the time we're done, Lieutenant General, you'll owe us big-time!"

Farraga lifted the wine glass in his hand as he shouted.

"Comrades! We have been patient until now, but that ends today! It's time to show them our true power!"

"""Yeaaahhh!!"""

The crew drowned him out.

As a sorcerer who should've been among the elite, he could no longer face the reality of the hardships he had to endure. All that

humiliation was about to be overshadowed by the glorious days to come. Every member of the crew was of one mind—and in tune with this, a hundred airships stepped up their attack.

The most unique feature of the airships was their magic-canceling engines, but they were also equipped with other cutting-edge weapons. These were controlled by magicians well versed in elemental and summon magic.

An airship's structure could be roughly divided into three sections: operations, defense, and offense. Each section was assigned a crew of one hundred, with another hundred serving as reserves, liaisons, and medics.

The operations section, needless to say, operated the airship. At least fifty people were required to keep a ship aloft, but if the fleet wanted to operate at full strength, not even a hundred were quite enough.

The defense section was in charge of the airship's defense barriers, which came in various flavors—anti-physical, anti-magic, anti-attribute, and so on. An airship's outer walls weren't particularly thick (a weight-saving measure), so if they neglected to protect themselves with magic, they'd be shot down in a flash. No crew would dream of flying without a defensive staff.

Finally, the attack division was the most important one. Each airship was equipped with magic amplifier cannons that made it easier for magicians to work together. Multiple magicians would focus their power on a magic ball placed on top of a pedestal; by casting on it at the same time, they could trigger large-scale magic much easier than usual. One cannon was in the front of the ship, and two were on the sides; there were a total of five per ship, with up to ten magicians per cannon awaiting orders and backups standing by to keep up the magical barrage.

It's worth noting that a magic amplifier cannon's power increased in direct proportion to the number of people using it. If two people were on it at once, the resulting magic force doubled; if a full complement of ten magicians worked together, it increased

twentyfold. This was a serious threat; even simple fire magic could become more powerful than a full-fledged Fireball. It went without saying just how incredible this invention was.

The airship's defenses were perfect. The fireballs spat out by the wyverns were no threat at all; their barrier even prevented damage from ramming the walls. No half-hearted attack had a chance of working, and that kept Farraga satisfied.

And we haven't even gotten to their offense.

"Our airships are the strongest there are," proclaimed Farraga, "and it's time to show their true power. Give me maximum force, and let's knock those annoying lizards out of the sky!"

Up until then, only two or three magicians had been casting spells at once. But they had done enough testing. It was time to go onstage. A spell controller, an orb nearly twenty inches wide and made of purified magic stone, was perched atop every magic amplifier cannon; channeling magic power into it would activate the device. The magicians, sitting quietly until then, lifted up their hands, and on a signal, all ten unleashed large-scale force. Lightning, icy snow, flames, vorpal blades, and all kinds of other terrifying magic blasted through the sky, amplified twenty times their average strength…and all its fury was focused on Gabil and Team Hiryu.



I had been watching the battle unfold with rapt attention, but now I couldn't help but leap out of my chair. Gobta's forces were being blown away by the impacts of the tank shells; Gabil's were falling out of the sky, mercilessly exposed to all-powerful magic. Things were intensifying fast out there, and we were starting to take casualties.

I had expected that, of course. I did, but maybe I was still too optimistic, deep down. Benimaru seemed so incredibly confident, and Raphael didn't say anything, so I naively thought there wouldn't be any problems. But that wasn't the reality. Of course it wasn't. We

were waging war, after all. There was no way we could win without taking any damage at all.

Now my lack of foresight made me feel angry and impatient. But Benimaru remained as cool as ever.

“Please, Sir Rimuru, take your seat. This was within our expectations, and there are no problems to speak of.”

His words made something blow up inside me.

“What? We’re taking casualties out there! Shouldn’t I have used Megiddo to help you guys out…?”

…No. I’d already come to a conclusion about this. Megiddo was affected, yes, but I had already decided it was pretty pointless. Benimaru questioned its effectiveness as well, and even Diablo was negative about it.

Apparently there were several reasons for this. First of all, since we had started this whole thing as a nation, we couldn’t always rely on our master, the demon lord—that is, me—to be there for us. The demon lord was responsible for protecting the monsters under his command, Benimaru asserted, but it was the duty of his subordinates to protect the country. The rest of my staff agreed. If they did not feel that Tempest was their country, and they had to protect it with their own hands, they had no right to live here.

“You don’t have to take on everything, Sir Rimuru,” as Shuna put it. I was glad to hear that, and for that matter, I agreed with it. So that was one reason.

The second was that Megiddo had a weakness, one Diablo pointed out to me.

“This Megiddo is quite a beautiful magic. It provides high power at low cost, it’s versatile, and it can be applied in a variety of situations. But once you are familiar with it, you can counter it in so many ways.”

I could have launched it from here in the Control Center, and if I did, I’m sure it’d be pretty damn useful, too. But once my trick was exposed, it’d never work a second time. As Hinata had told me, all they’d have to do is conjure up some wind and create a dust cloud or a smoke screen, and its accuracy and power would be lethally compromised. I was pretty surprised that Diablo asked Hinata for her

feedback; what an information gatherer he was. But enough about that.

Last time I took out Megiddo, I killed every single one of our enemies. The survivors—namely, Edmaris and Razen—weren't going to blab about it, so there was no worrying about information leaks. That definitely wouldn't be the case this time. There was no way we could keep the deaths of hundreds of thousands of imperial soldiers and officers quiet.

"A trump card is best always kept safe for the last moment," advised Benimaru. Magic that has such an awesome effect at first blush was best not used carelessly, he thought, and Diablo was with him on that. They were pretty convincing.

Megiddo is a super-high-temperature heat ray created by concentrating sunlight to extreme levels, and it's almost impossible to avoid once sighted. As an antipersonnel magic, it's only really an option when used at the right moment. Meanwhile, our opponents here weren't really flesh and blood; they were tanks, hulking piles of iron. I'm not saying that Megiddo wouldn't work, but I don't think it'd be too effective. Raphael calculated that it'd take a long time for that magic to destroy the tanks; to penetrate one, I'd have to increase the power—in other words, the focal temperature of the heat ray—up to tens of thousands of degrees. And since these tanks aren't powered by oil or gasoline or the like, I couldn't count on it bursting into flames for me.

If a penetrating heat ray didn't stop a tank, I'd have to plug it full of holes until it finally stopped moving, and at that point, it'd be a lot easier to blow it away with nuclear magic instead. But doing that meant having to break through layer upon layer of anti-magic barriers, and you'd have to kill off the magicians behind them first, which leads to this long, drawn-out magic battle… Tactically, it made no sense. It wasn't going to work.

So since I'd given command over to Benimaru, my job was honestly just to watch over things. That was all, really, but…

"I should go out, and—"

I was about to say that, but I was interrupted in the middle of my statement.

“You can’t. As the commander, I cannot put our leader in danger. Above all, I am concerned with the story the Hero Chloe told us. In another time line, someone out there managed to murder you, Sir Rimuru. Asking you to fight out there while knowing such a dangerous person may exist—it’s simply impossible.”

I had shared the story of this potentially lethal foe with all my officers, framing it as a potential what-if coming for us. What did they think about it? The answer was obvious from the look on Benimaru’s face.

“Currently, I would consider as a threat the commanders of the Empire’s three divisions, along with the hundred members of the Imperial Guardians serving under the emperor. There might be other hidden figures as well, and we are investigating any potential leads. Please forgive us if this sounds weak-spirited.”

It was Soei who gave me that report. He and his team were currently risking their lives to gather information—all for my sake, to eliminate this potential threat to me.

“With the enemy’s strength unknown, it is out of the question to send you, our lord, to the front lines. The operation is underway without any problems. Please, I ask you to trust in me, Gobta, Gabil, and all who serve them.”

At his bidding, I sat down in my chair. I still had this unpleasant feeling in my chest—not quite annoyance, not quite frustration—but Benimaru’s words were simply too true. He was right. If you thought about it, from the very beginning, Benimaru had been thinking about me as he carried out his plans. And not just him—Shion, too, standing behind me—and Soei by my side. Diablo went without saying, but even Shuna, looking at me all worried; they all prepared for the reality that anyone who went to battle would have to face sacrifice.

Likely, that was true for everyone on the front lines, too. They were standing out there, ready to use themselves as bait to catch a threat they didn’t even have a visual picture of yet. And even the incredibly self-indulgent Veldora was sitting quietly in the Control Center, ready to protect me if push came to shove.

It was all for the sake of protecting me, the king of this nation. The

only person who hadn't resolved himself to it was me.

Right then…

…And that is why I have to be perfect…

…I thought I heard a voice from somewhere.

Great. Are *you* worried about me, too? Well, I'm fine now. It'd be disrespectful to be so sad while all these people are so resolved. It's time for me to join them.

"…Sorry. I lost some of my cool."

Benimaru nodded at me. "Don't worry, Sir Rimuru. Victory will most assuredly be yours."

He flashed me a fearless smile as he made the promise. He was a commander responsible for the lives of his soldiers, and his face was serious to match—and hearing that, I felt the irritation, the conflict, and all those other unpleasant feelings disappear. I had long prepared for my own death, and for killing my enemies, but I tried to avoid thinking much about the concept of people dying for me. I needed to accept that. I needed to accept that it wasn't only for my sake, but for those of their families, the framework of the nation that guarded and defended them, and the fact that I was here to symbolize all that.

For these very reasons, I could never allow them to be defeated. As a symbol, I needed to act the part—I needed to put in a suitable performance. Realizing this, I resolved to begin by giving Benimaru the relaxed response he hoped for.

"Of course. I want you to tell everyone what I'm going to say. All right?"

"By all means!"

With Benimaru's consent and cooperation, I was going to transmit my will to each and every one of my people. Thanks to the unique skill Born Leader, they'd receive my statement in their minds.

"Listen to me! Crush the enemy with all your might. There's no need to go easy on them, and of course there is no need to show

mercy. Use everything you've got to eliminate the enemy as quickly as possible."

I tried my best to put my entire heart into it. Benimaru nodded his approval, the other officers smiling as well, because to them, the order meant one thing…

…the full release of the power kept under control.

Correctly understanding the meaning of my words, the monsters resumed their assignments. And thanks to that, the battlefield was about to drastically change.

CHAPTER 2

THE ASSAULT BEGINS

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



CHAPTER 2

THE ASSAULT BEGINS

All the monsters on the battlefield accepted the words of their lord and ally Rimuru with their souls, the words of an absolute ruler who accepted all their loyalty and trust. Then another voice commanded them.

"The disguise operation is canceled. Crush the fools bothering Sir Rimuru's mind until nothing remains of them."

With this, there was nothing left to bind the monsters. Joy filled their hearts, and they relied upon pure impulse to unleash their magic force. The demonic auras they had suppressed so as not to affect the town they lived in were now fully released, and the concentration of magicules around them shot upward.

There was nothing to be afraid of anymore as they let their deepest impulses drive them across the battlefield…



Gobta, too, heard the order as the shells kept raining down.

"Finally! But it doesn't look like we've achieved our goals yet. Is that okay?"

He was talking to himself, but his second-in-command, Gobchi, responded.

"Well, what's the problem? The plan was to persevere and make the opponent show off all their latent force, but at this rate, we're going to dwindle down to nothing. We have to scare them a little, or

nobody strong's going to come out for us."

"That's how it is?"

"That's how it is."

Gobta and Gobchi were having this conversation in the middle of a battlefield, bombarded by shells and shock waves. Those watching were impressed by their ability to hear, although they were well used to their supremely relaxed attitudes by now.

"If it were us, y'know, the strongest guys would jump out first, but…"

"Well, put it that way, Gobta, and aren't *you* one of the Big Four?"

"Hey! All right, maybe, but I'm still the weakest of them. Seriously, stop bringing that up…"

As they conversed, Gobta, Gobchi, and the Goblin Riders under them were seething more than ever before. Everyone was waiting for the order from Gobta to come down.

Shells rained down on regular occasions, deliberately and precisely, as if aimed at a dartboard—and they were throwing a dozen darts at once. From the beginning, the intention wasn't to score a direct hit, but to wipe them all out with the shock waves.

The Goblin Riders, realizing this, were on the move in search of shelter. A direct hit would kill them instantly, but on the other hand, anything else was survivable. Everyone here was powerful enough to rank as lieutenant in the Tempest force, meaning an A-minus equivalent in rank. Even if they were seriously hurt, a little potion would take care of it.

Based on this, Benimaru's strategy was to feign defeat. There was no need to actually lose, of course—just pretend to be in a crisis. In the meantime, the remaining troops were to block the imperial army's retreat and counterattack at once. If they waited until the tanks ran out of ammunition, the strongest people on their side would come to finish them off—Benimaru put it in the simplest terms possible.

Gobta, of course, wanted to voice a few complaints about that, but an order was an order, and he couldn't disobey it. The imperial army wasn't nearly as much of a threat as Benimaru in his mind.

I mean, Benimaru's usually a real nice guy…but when it comes to

military stuff, he's merciless. And this time, even Sir Rimuru's safety is at stake. There's no way somebody like me could speak out against it.

Those were Gobta's memories about when he was told about the plan. Convincing his Goblin Riders to follow it was a pain, but once he mentioned Rimuru's name, they stopped complaining.

All that was left was to overwhelm the enemy in the first engagement, but as expected, that was asking a bit too much. As soon as their attempted breakthrough was blocked, Gobta's force decided to stick to their original decoy role. But that's over now. Rimuru had given his statement—and Benimaru followed it up with new orders. No need to hold back. The time had come for them to unleash all the power they possessed.

(Okay, you now have permission to attack freely. The Green Numbers are Hakuro's responsibility, so they're good, but for now, I'm leaving you Riders to Gobchi.)

He sent out a Thought Communication to his squadmates, face stiffened. His tone of voice was as usual, but it had an unmistakable power to it.

(Roger that! So what are you doing, General Gobta?) Gobchi asked, shrugging. Gobta replied with a troubled-looking smile:

(Well, I can't play around anymore, either, y'know? I don't care about that Big Four stuff, but it's an order from Sir Rimuru, and I can't act like a wimp when he's watching me! I'm gonna get real serious now!)

Gobchi and the rest of the team looked into Gobta's eyes. Immediately, they knew he was serious—the kind of seriousness they almost never saw in their boss.

"Heh. I know what you're capable of. Go ahead. Don't hesitate to use it."

(Why are you acting so bossy?)

(Y-you heard that?)

(Well, it's fine and all, Gobto, but you do your best, too, okay?)

(Heh… Of course.)

Gobta gave this a tired sigh. Gobto had been on the team since its early days; they had known each other a while by now. He was

good in his own way, but thanks to absorbing a lot of unnecessary knowledge from Rimuru, he had a tendency to act all cool when it wasn't called for. Way back when, he had imitated Gobta's aide Gobchi, but now he had evolved in his own unique way. He was wearing a long black coat with two longswords that he didn't even know how to use fully. Gobta wondered if he was safe out here, but he figured that with Gobchi around, it'd probably work out.

After making up his mind on that, Gobta turned to the person he had to worry about the most—Testarossa, still sitting behind him.

(So along those lines, Testarossa, I'd like us to go our separate ways from here, if that's okay?)

Testarossa nodded, smiling. Even in the midst of these flames and concussive impacts, her graceful gestures remained intact, her military uniform still clean. Soot and dust would never stain Testarossa.

(Yes, of course. I feel the same way as you. From now, I will act not as an observer, but as an individual living under Sir Rimuru. Please do your best, all of you.)

So Testarossa got off Ranga, and with a final "Good day to you," she breezily walked away. Rimuru had attached her to Gobta as an observer, but that role was now over. The lethally dangerous demon was now on the move.

She sure is a free spirit, ain't she? a dismayed Gobta thought, but he didn't say it out loud. He had grown up at least enough to know saying that was a bad idea.

After seeing Testarossa off, he decided it was his turn.

(All right, everyone… Begin!)

(((Yeaaahhh!!)))

He gave the order to his troops, finding the response satisfactory enough. Even Gobta wanted Rimuru to see how cool he was. He liked Rimuru. He was selfish and more than a little mean, but at the same time, he was always so kind and worth relying on. He admired her. He was once just this tiny little goblin, but he had grown to a fairly famed warrior. Now it was time for him to repay that favor.

(The Riders are yours, Gobchi!)

He turned toward Ranga.

“Now it’s your turn, Ranga! Transform!!”

The shouted order was answered by Ranga, who had been lying in wait all this time. “I’ve been waiting for this moment, Gobta. Let us show our powers to Sir Rimuru, my master!”

The two fighters’ consciousnesses synched together as they released their inner magic power. The next moment, a black mist enveloped Gobta.

“Come on! Let’s go wild!”

“Yes. I’ve been holding back for so long!”

The mist disappeared as if it had been sucked into Gobta. It revealed a goblin fighter infused with a black wolf—a humanoid wolf with two ominous horns. Gobta and Ranga had Unified, and only now could they be called part of the Big Four without a trace of irony.

The moment they saw him, Gobchi and the rest of the Goblin Riders rushed out of their hiding spot.

(Don’t get in Captain Gobta’s way! He’s fighting serious now!)

Gobchi’s desperate shout expressed just how endangered the goblins were at the moment. The demon wolf’s fists, for example, were literally swatting down flying tank shells from the air. In fact, even a direct hit didn’t singe his reinforced black fur. These massive bullets, running just under six times the speed of sound and boasting incredible destructive energy, couldn’t even dent Gobta now that Ranga’s “armor” was on him. That was a by-product of Ranga’s own Multilayer Barrier, but for the unwitting imperial troops, he was nothing but a walking nightmare.

“Wh-what is that? Am I dreaming, or…?”

“You sure aren’t! It’s a monster! I can’t believe the kinds of freaks that demon lord has working for him!”

Panic was beginning to set in among the lower-ranked privates. Among the troops in the tanks—stuck together and unable to move—the fear was even greater.

With a howl from Gobta, Dark Lightning stormed down from the sky above the tank crews. One thousand tanks had transformed into a fortress, and now they were ripe targets. The dark strikes interfered with the tanks’ defensive barriers, emitting a blinding light as they did. They withstood the barrage for a few moments, but it

seemed its resistance to electricity was less than perfect. The crew inside the tanks seemed to be safe, but the infantry nearby, in formation with the tank wall behind them, suffered incalculable damage.

But Dark Lightning was dangerous not just for the shock it carried. The essence of it was even more terrifying than natural lightning.

“Ah! Hot! This has to be seriously damaging the tank’s defensive mechanism…!”

“A-all teams, evacuate! Evacuate your tanks at once!”

Although the crews were saved from being electrocuted, the heat the bolts generated were too much for the tanks to bear. Even after the first cracks appeared, the Dark Lightning wasn’t done yet. Like a living, thinking snake, it continued to bite into the inorganic metal plating, causing serious damage to the mechanical parts inside.

One after another, the tanks exploded in flames. With a thunderous rumble, they breathed their last.

In this situation, the tanks that had been linked together to form a fortress were now nothing more than death traps. The crews desperately abandoned them, scattering to avoid being caught in a lightning strike. Military command was a thing of the past for them, and they felt and acted every bit like a defeated army.

They were sure no big deal…

Gobta smiled as he observed the scene. As he saw it, the power he and his cohort wielded was more than enough to face up to this foe. That, and the enemy’s main force—the original target of this operation—no longer seemed threatening in this demon-wolf form.

He looked at the wall of tanks towering in front of him. The wall that once blocked their way was belching black smoke from Ranga’s lightning. Without hesitation, he let out a roar—a Voice Cannon—and instantly, it shattered the wall.





On the other side, he could see a line of tanks pointing their muzzles at him.

(More than enough to play with, huh? This is where we come in!)

(That's right. I'm sure Sir Rimuru will love watching this.)

Gobta and Ranga gave each other contented nods. So they began.

Without further hesitation, Gobta dived through the burned-out wall of tanks, wholly unafraid of the vast forces awaiting him. Then he ran across the battlefield with all his might. He exceeded the speed of sound, making it impossible for the imperials to follow with the naked eye.

"Just you see what Ranga and I have been working on in training! How long can you keep up with us, huh? *Dance…with Wolves!!*"

A dark gale rushed across the battlefield. With it, a destructive sonic boom slammed itself against the tank troops.

The shock wave included the magical effect of the Storm of Destruction skill. Gradually, the storm grew to a tornado, a Dragonstorm of Destruction whose well-calculated movements were honed for maximum enemy casualties. That was Dance with Wolves, Gobta's fearsome anti-army annihilator.

And with that, one corner of the battlefield had effectively collapsed.



As Gobta was beginning his rampage on the ground, changes were also occurring in the sky. It was the Third Corps, led by Gabil.

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Following Benimaru's order, Gabil and his team had been providing cover for the Goblin Riders. Once that became too difficult, they moved on to the next mission, never panicking. In other words, they were part of the same "pretend to lose" strategy Gobta was in

on.

The strategy was to make the enemy play their trump cards by maintaining a stalemate while making it look like they were about to lose. It was a pretty wild idea—but Benimaru ordered it nonetheless, not looking concerned at all, and Gobta and Gabil accepted it without a second thought. If things got really dangerous for Gabil, they had permission to evacuate—only after they helped Gobta's force retreat, of course. Gabil didn't think that would be necessary, though. After all, despite all his protests, Gobta was still smirking at the idea of executing this op.

Gabil thought he could learn a lot from Gobta's brashness, but as it turned out, they were quite similar in many ways. Even in this state of affairs, he was still looking to shoot down an airship if he could. As long as he could maintain the stalemate without too much effort, he didn't see a problem with inflicting some damage on his opponent.

That was the idea behind their aerial approach, but the enemy turned out to be stronger than he thought. Their corps' magic didn't work, and the Wyvern Riders' fireball attacks were similarly blocked. With their air dominance now gone, Gabil's team was at a distinct disadvantage.

Our role is to attract the airships' attention. If we fought with all our might without minding the consequences, it's not impossible to bring them down, but…

Yes, Gabil and the rest of Team Hiryu might have been able to break through the airships' defenses. But doing that would make it impossible to continue the mission…and so Gabil decided now was the time for patience.

Thus he followed Benimaru's orders, gladly accepting the role of a sitting duck in the air. The problem with this was the Wyvern Riders and their lack of durability. They might've been the elites from the Blue Numbers, but they hadn't evolved into dragonewts the way Gabil and his corps had. Their magic resistance was low, and if they were caught up in a large-scale magical attack, they'd be brutally shot down.

So Gabil decided to ask the Wyvern Riders to withdraw.

"Lady Ultima, I have a favor to ask."

“What is it?”

“I wish to have us continue our ‘pretend-to-lose’ strategy…but I am thinking about upping the performance.”

“Upping the performance?”

“Yes. If we keep flitting around like this, I’m not sure the enemy will ever let their guards down. Therefore, I’d like to have Team Hiryu leave itself more open to magic attacks.”

“Hmm… A very interesting idea. So what do you *really* want?”

“Well, as I see it, now is the perfect opportunity to build our resistances a little. Not even a direct hit will kill us, likely. We have plenty of recovery potions, so I thought I could put on a nice show of being battered and bruised, while we tested out our endurance against them.”

Ultima laughed out loud at this wild idea. The rest of Team Hiryu looked less than enthusiastic.

“Are you serious, General?!”

“Sir Gabil can be rather…simple sometimes, can’t he?”

“Do we have to try that right *now*? That’s what *I* want to say…”

Gabil pretended not to hear the rising complaints.

“Well, all right! I’ll allow it! Sounds like fun, besides,” said Ultima.

“My thanks to you. Now, if you could, I’d like your group to take their leave.”

He wanted Ultima, the observer, to lead the Wyvern Riders away to safety. Gabil and Team Hiryu alone would then launch a de facto suicide strike on the airships.

“If this kills me, I’m gonna haunt you in the afterlife!”

“Wish you hadn’t thought of this experiment…”

“This is definitely something he’ll be pissed about later…”

Groans and scowls were prevalent across the faces of the force, but Gabil still paid them no mind. Although they liked to gripe, their enthusiasm and excitement were still bubbling up to the surface.

So Team Hiryu decided to engage in some impromptu magical endurance training.

All this happened, by the way, as Rimuru was looking on, fretting to himself. When he found out the truth later, he almost had a conniption on the spot, shouting to high heaven at Gabil and his

aides. More than a few Team Hiryu members predicted this well in advance, but the fact that they went with it anyway indicated that Gabil, their superior officer, was maybe becoming a bad influence on them.

Anyway, this was much of the reason why Gabil and his force took so much damage from the magic the airships spat out.

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And now Gabil heard Rimuru's order in his mind.

"Listen to me!" he shouted, oblivious to how worried Rimuru was about this experiment. "The training time is over! Now it is time to turn these skies into a graveyard!"

His troops were beyond excited. Gabil himself was brimming with joy.

"Fortunately, the inexperienced among us have evacuated with Lady Ultima. It's only us here now, and it's no problem if we get a little reckless!"

This goading didn't quite get the reaction he intended.

"Reckless? I'd rather fight like hell than go through that 'endurance training' again!"

"Yeah, yeah! And it's not the first time Sir Gabil's been reckless with our lives!"

Gabil's face turned red. "Silence!" he shouted. "Just get on with it, all of you! Follow me and give me your full strength!"

Seeing Gabil embarrass himself like that made all the troops who saw it grin a little.

"Well, so be it. You guys stop fooling around, too. Let's just step up and get on with what we're told."

"Yeah, yeah. We're not about to say no to the general, no…"

"No way! Sir Gabil, give us your orders!"

Hearing that, Gabil nodded, satisfied. Then he sized up the Flying Combat Corps fighting against them and asked a shouted question.

"*Who* are the champions of the skies?"

""""It is us, Team Hiryu!!""""

The mood had changed with Gabil. His team answered up to it.

“That’s right. We have to get rid of those who pollute our sky. That is the will of Sir Rimuru! He has given his royal decree, and so you must do everything in your power! All of it. Don’t think about anything else!”

“““Yeah!!”””

Gabil’s order held special meaning for Team Hiryu. It meant far more than simply trying harder…

“Don’t let your consciousness slip away from you, all right? All troops, enter Dragon Body!!”

The members of Team Hiryu sprang up at once. This was Dragon Body, their secret weapon and ultimate finisher. Not only did it increase their fighting power to an overwhelming degree, but it also increased their ferocity, making it more difficult to control themselves. If it consumed their sense of self, they would become rampaging monsters.

They had stashed away that ability up until now, precisely because it became difficult to control all their destructive impulses. Gabil had thus invited Middray to lecture them on control training, but their success rate hadn’t been too stellar with it so far.

Still, use it they must. Rimuru had ordered them to give it their all, and so they had no reason to hesitate.

“…Dragon Mode!!”

All at once, Team Hiryu unleashed their true force. Their muscles swelled up, and the purple scales that covered them turned jet-black. They became thicker, more flexible, and several times tougher-skinned—and along with that, their heights also went up around 20 percent, taking in the surrounding magicules to construct new bodies for themselves.

With this mega-boost in mass and volume, their offensive and defensive forces had also leaped forward. They were, needless to say, incomparable to how they were pre-transformation. And as for the most important part, their consciousnesses… If they were to lose that, they’d be nothing more than pure manifestations of power, but

no one on Team Hiryu lost it. Every single one did a magnificent job keeping ahold of themselves.





This was the moment when the true force of the Dragon Warriors—the most powerful fighting corps in Tempest—came into effect.

“I want each of you to take down one airship. Can you do it?”

“““Yes, sir!!”””

“Great! Then get to it…!”

At Gabil’s command, Team Hiryu moved in unison.

Who were the champions of the skies? The answer to that question was about to be resolved before their eyes.

The members of the Flying Combat Corps, the most valued part of the Armored Division—itself one of the Empire’s three great fighting forces—were no more than pathetic, bleating lambs by now. The reason? Now that the dragonewts had unleashed Dragon Body, the special properties of that intrinsic skill had nullified their magic. Gabil and the other Dragon Warriors were now immune to everything including and up to Megiddo—itself a nature-based magic. Each one had a Multilayer Barrier and a Cancel Natural Elements spell on them, shrugging off all physical attacks and canceling both magical attacks and natural effects.

These airships mainly attacked with magic, and with the machine guns they had as auxiliary arms, they didn’t have a chance of penetrating the scales of Gabil’s force. Team Hiryu’s fighting skill ranked A-minus to start with, and having that multiplied several times over had put them well past the A wall. Even worse for them, the transformation also gave them healing skills that came scarily close to Ultraspeed Regeneration. They had tapped into enough power to make each one a high-level magic-born.

With that, the fate of the now-toothless airships was sealed. And now Gabil was making it official.

“It’s time to go! Prepare for my special finisher…”

Gabil was stronger than his peers to start with, but in addition to muscle, he also had a special-A level of magicules in his body. It didn’t hold a candle to Shion’s or Benimaru’s, but it made him as much of a force as Soei or Geld. Tapping into Dragon Body for himself had made him into a truly remarkable warrior, enough power

to even approach the former demon lords Carillon and Frey…

"…Vortex Crash!!"

A single strike from Gabil sent an airship hurtling toward the ground.

The air currents swirled around him, concentrating the moisture in the atmosphere to a single point and melding it into a maelstrom of magical power. The full brunt of this vortex was released from Gabil's spear, piercing straight through one of the airships. Its barrier, kept running by a hundred-strong staff in the ship's defense section, provided zero resistance before shattering. The airship was instantly downed.

The rest of the Dragon Warriors quickly followed suit. Although they couldn't fire pure magic power from their spears like Gabil, each used their enhanced physical abilities to charge at their respective airship. Magic no longer worked on them, and the ships' barriers provided no protection—and in no time at all, those barriers were breached, allowing them to invade the ships.

Five Dragon Warriors swarmed a ship at a time, taking no more than a few minutes to bring one down. At this point, it was only a matter of time before the entire Flying Combat Corps was wiped out.

Gabil was already getting carried away with it.

"Gwah-ha-ha-ha! Keep it up, Warriors, keep it up! And if any of you can't take down a single ship, you know what'll happen to you later, I'm sure!"

Hearing those words, the Team Hiryu members lagging behind the pack exchanged alarmed glances. There were only a hundred airships—they counted—and if Gabil wasn't gonna stop attacking, there were precious few left open to them.

"Aw, c'mon, Sir Gabil!"

"Sir Gabil's so moody, isn't he? And he's in such a good mood right now, I dunno if he's gonna leave any prey for us!"

"Knowing the general, that's way too possible…"

How would Gabil judge airships taken down by teams? Well, that was for him to decide. The rest of the force, fully aware of this, rushed to join in the attack. Now the positions of predator and prey were reversed—and so the course of the day in the sky was settled.



Going back in time a little…

The supply troops assigned to the imperial army's Magitank Force were about to face the trial of their lives.

"You've done well to keep up with me…but remember, the real battle is about to begin!"

These words were uttered by Hakuro, the man in charge of the Green Numbers. His face was cool, unaffected, but the force of twelve thousand hanging on to his words were gasping for breath. They were, after all, located directly behind the Empire's tank force, and to get there, they had to march a long, arcing path of some twenty-five miles from the Dwarven Kingdom—all while wearing heavy equipment.

It was Hakuro the Instructor who allowed this to be possible. He had trained all his Numbers thoroughly, drilling them in the art of Battlewill. Thanks to that, the Numbers had mastered a variety of martial arts—including Instantmove, letting them virtually teleport at will, and Formhide, which prevented their foes from sensing them.

These Green Numbers had deployed at the same time as Gobta's force, doing their best to reach this spot without being detected by the enemy.

"*I would like to commend all of you on your mastery of the Battlewill I taught you*," Hakuro said, face as gentle as a doting mother. His troops, seated on the ground as they listened to him, gasped anew at this, afraid of what was coming next. They had known Hakuro for a long time, and they knew if the Instructor was merciless against his allies, he was even more so against the enemy. The order he would give them with this compliment was terrifying to even imagine—and for those who understood it was up to them to execute, it was with a steely resolve that they took the foreboding news.

"Our mission is to cut off the enemy's supply lines here. It may not mean much in the grand scheme of things, but if we can destroy the

enemy's rear supply units, we can dissuade them from wanting to fight a little. There's no need to take enemy lives needlessly, but there is also no need to show mercy, either. Besides…"

Hakuro gave the battlefield a glance and smiled. And then:

"Gobta has grown to be a fine man. He is currently doing an expert job playing the decoy for us. And I want you all to perform as well as that general is!"

Hakuro's voice boomed over the distant sound of explosions. Those with no real combat experience grew more tense by the moment, overwhelmed by the sound of it all.

"All right? While you're fighting, I don't want you to think about anything else. Fail to kill the enemy, and you're the one who dies. Let the enemy go, and friends will die because of it. Those are the ironclad rules of the battlefield."

His troops were panting for breath a moment ago, but now they were silent, listening to every word from Hakuro. Their leader was imparting knowledge, so those prepared to give their everything would not find themselves mentally lost in battle.

"All life does not come equally. There is no need to worry about strangers, when compared to the lives of your loved ones. I will also remind you that these enemies are invaders. They are fools who don't even deserve the right to live. Do not be shy about cutting them down!"

With those threatening words, Hakuro hoped to quell any feelings of guilt they might have had. It was his way of showing a little kindness.

"I have trained all of you, and with that training, you can even cut down those piles of iron. Everything thrown out from them seems frozen in the air to you, does it not? Then do not be afraid. There is no one who can stand against our blades!"

Nobody could say "Er, no, they don't seem frozen at all, sir." There was no way to. If they did, he would say "You need more training!" and give them an even more harrowing ordeal than any war could give them. But while some had "little complaints" like that in their minds, no one had any complaint about Hakuro himself. He never asked them to do something he wouldn't. His words may have

been extreme at times, but it was all based on his desire as their leader to see his troops reach the same heights as himself.

Now the Green Numbers were watching for their chance—the order from Hakuro to charge. Their boss was acting as a decoy, the most dangerous job of the day—a truly excellent performance, one befitting a member of the Big Four. They had all seen him, thanks to Hakuro's All-Seeing Eye extra skill, and thanks to Thought Communication, everyone down to the last member was sharing in the same insight. There was fear, yes, but more than that, the members were fascinated by Gobta's and his Goblin Riders' courage. It made them realize that now it was their turn to make an effort.

Hakuro felt his anxiety dissipate a little as he sized up his group. Its members had been thoroughly trained to deal with all kinds of situations, but there would still doubtlessly be casualties in their first battle. He did wish, somewhere in his heart, that he could've done additional training, but there was nothing more he could do. The enemy wouldn't wait for them.

Under Benimaru's plan, Gobta's force would stick to their stalemate for as long as possible. It'd be bound to make the enemy impatient, he said; the tanks didn't have infinite shells, so the rain of bullets had to stop at some point. That's when Hakuro's force would come into play. They'd hit the enemy's supply forces, seize their goods, and make it a cinch to seize these so-called tanks. As a secondary objective, they were tasked with uncovering the hidden leaders, the strongmen among the enemy…but that, they could play by ear.

Hopefully if they exist, they'll come up to me, Hakuro thought, although that, too, was just a matter of luck. *This is their first battle. If they're consumed by fear, they're bound to die. I wanted to ease those fears as much as possible, but we'll just have to see…*

For now, all Hakuro could do was pray they succeeded—and that everyone came out of it safe. But those fears turned out to be unnecessary.

"Listen to me!"

Suddenly, Rimuru channeled an order to the Green Numbers

through Hakuro's skill. Hearing it was all it took for the monsters' anxieties to be quelled. An inexplicable elation rose up among them; their bodies felt warm, as if they'd catch on fire.

"…to eliminate the enemy as quickly as possible."

Now Rimuru's words—or his orders—would be going into effect. They made Hakuro chuckle.

"I see I've worried for nothing. Did you hear that, all of you?"

""""Yes, sir!!""""

"Then let's go! Your patient waiting is over. Go and unleash your full powers!"

Before Hakuro could finish his words, the monster army rushed off at a furious pace.

Ten or so minutes later, the infantry guarding the Empire's supply teams were lined in a horizontal formation, ready to intercept the monster army. The sudden surprise attack almost threw them into disorder, but they were the elites of the Empire, and they immediately regained their bearings.

Some of the platoons used armored vehicles for transport as shields to shoot at the monsters with. At first glance, the imperial forces seemed to have the upper hand, as befitting an army with such a decisive numerical advantage. But the Green Numbers weren't intimidated. Despite being exposed to gunfire, the Scale Shields provided to the front row proved handy. Unlike a bow, a rifle shot does not travel in an arc; the purpose of small-arms fire is to suppress the enemy at close range, and as long as the front row didn't take any hits, worthwhile suppression would never happen.

This *was*, after all, still a world of swords and sorcery. With their unthinkably high lethality, guns had the power to change every tactical textbook in the land. But this world had magic, and thus a single bullet wasn't necessarily enough to neutralize an enemy. For that, slashing attacks with swords and axes were more effective than bullets striking a single tiny point of the body.

The Empire had great pride in all its new weapons, but not even they were enough to institute a paradigm shift, a full change in the

times. If not, their commander decided, it was time to break out a new weapon. So the next order came down from on high.

“Dammit! All forces, switch from rifle fire to your spellguns. Maintenance teams, join the main force and bring only the most important supplies with you!”

The standard rifle, a weapon re-created from knowledge brought from another world, was ineffective against monsters. They *did* have some success in the experimental stages, but that was only against unarmed, essentially naked creatures. But if that was the case, there was always magic.

These spellguns, wieldable even by ordinary foot soldiers, had Fire Lance magic engraved on them. That, the commander thought, would be enough to pierce through most monsters and burn them alive. Unfortunately, that supposition was beyond naive. The Green Numbers were equipped with the latest in Unique-class armor; Garm had hammered out the scales of Charybdis to create their Scale Shields, and they could deflect far more than just lead bullets…

“N-no good, sir! The enemy force is immune to magic!”

The true value of these Scale Shields was the high resistance to magic they offered. But that wasn’t the only nightmare striking the imperial army. From the skies above flew in the Wyvern Riders—the elites of the Blue Numbers—led by Ultima.

“Drop ’em all!”

With that sweetly voiced order, the ground was engulfed in flames. It was a flare bomb–based ranged attack. Not a terribly powerful one, but it had ample killing force against the imperial infantry.

But it was the sound, in particular, that sowed confusion across the battlefield. It made the support soldiers not used to fighting—mechanics, medics, and so forth—unable to keep up with the changing situation. Soon, the order to join the main force was no longer being heeded, leading to even more unnecessary casualties.

It was a relief for Hakuro to see that the battle turned out to be more lopsided than he feared.

“Hey there, Hakuro. These kids are under my command, but d’you mind if I leave ’em to you?”

“Ah, Miss Ultima? I don’t mind that, no, but…”

Hakuro gave Ultima a good-natured greeting as he watched her jump down from her wyvern’s back. The difference between his attitude with her and with his soldiers was like a yawning chasm.

“You don’t? Great, thanks so much!”

Ultima, for her part, was acting like a cute little girl begging her grandfather for a treat. If Veyron or Zonda saw her like this, they’d no doubt wonder if they were hallucinating.

They’d never tell her that, of course, but…

“Certainly, certainly. By the way…”

“Mm? What is it?”

“Well, y’see, Miss Ultima, I had a question for you. Are you close to Lady Carrera, perhaps?”

“Mmm, I dunno about calling her Lady and me Miss…but I’ll let you off the hook, Hakuro. Anyway, the answer’s simple: We *hate* each other!”

Ultima was still all smiles and cuteness, but there was something frightening about her presence in that moment. She was, as it turned out, extremely good at this feigned friendliness. She was actually brutal and ruthless by nature, and those two sides of her fluctuated so much, you wouldn’t be faulted for thinking she had a split personality. Even so, Ultima always paid due respect to those older than her, so that aspect of her went wholly unnoticed with most people.

“Oh, no? A pity.”

“Why’d you ask?”

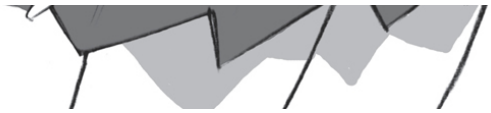
“Well, I was just, you know, wondering if you knew Agera, one of Lady Carrera’s men…”

Hakuro picked his words carefully. The demon Agera looked a lot like a certain person Hakuro knew—in fact, they were virtually body doubles. That person was none other than Byakuya Araki, Hakuro’s grandfather and martial arts teacher.

He was thus keenly interested in this Agera, but the demon himself didn’t even seem to notice Hakuro. Was it because old age

changed his appearance too much?





“Mmm, sorry, I dunno. I’m not too interested in him,” Ultima said plainly. “But if you’re that curious, why don’t you ask him yourself?”

She made it sound so casual. Hakuro nodded his agreement.

“You’re right. I suppose I was overthinking it.”

“Ah, yeah, that’s an easy habit to fall into. But you better think about that later, huh? The battle’s more important right now. You don’t want Sir Rimuru yelling at you, do ya?”

With a final word or two of thanks, Ultima flew off into the sky once more. Hakuro, watching her go, had a bit of a confused look on his face.

“Heh-heh! Ah, look at me. I keep telling people not to let distractions seize your mind in battle, but it seems I need to work on that myself! Best make up for this error as quickly as I can…”

Then he drew his blade, ready to rule the battlefield as the Sword Ogre.



Major General Farraga was stunned by the scene before him. His fortresses in the sky boasted unstoppable defense, thanks to a network of barriers overseen by teams of elite magicians, but now one of them had been shot down by a single blow from a monster.

According to an investigation conducted by the Imperial Intelligence Bureau, this was an uncommon race of creature known as the dragonewt. It essentially had the fighting power of a humanoid dragon, but what Farraga saw happen before him was something well beyond that description.

“Who *is* that freak?! What kind of bad intel did the IIB send me?!”

Were they sending him falsified intel in order to take a wizard like him down? The thought occurred to him, but not even he could swallow that one.

No, that couldn’t be. Those guys literally transformed before my eyes. Is this the morphological change seen in some monsters, like in the book my master wrote…?

It has been said that certain monster races could freely change between two forms at will—one suitable for everyday life and another geared more for battle. The dragonewts they were fighting now were an evolved form of lizardmen, with wings giving them flight and breath attacks that came in a variety of elements. They were a B-level threat as a monster, and while you didn't want to pick a fight with one for no reason, they weren't a major threat to an airship.

…Or they shouldn't have been. But *this* was different.

"What could be going on?"

Farraga turned to his aide, helplessly confused as he tried to reconcile their intel with the reality before him.

"I'm deeply sorry, sir. According to a report from the person who measured the energy values of the enemy monster, the statistics rise greatly after the transformation. They discovered that the final value is several times the standardized level for an A rating."

"Several times… So over an A? And they're completely immune to magic on top of that?!"

Despite Farraga's ranting on the subject, he didn't quite have it right. Gabil's force boasted very high Resist Magic defense, but they weren't impervious to it. A hypothetical Cancel Magic wasn't in their repertoire. It was just that the airships' magic attacks weren't strong enough to break the Multilayer Barriers protecting them.

"I hate to admit it, but from the situation at hand, I can only assume that. Our magic attacks aren't working…and the enemy's magic is shooting down our airships, our pride and joy…"

I can see that for myself, Farraga wanted to say. But he held back, trying to keep a cool head. There was nothing to fear from a flock of a hundred or so dragonewts. No matter how excellent their armor was, he thought, it couldn't be a match for the Empire's most advanced weapons. When those three hundred wyverns fled, he believed victory was assured—well, no. Honestly, Farraga felt uneasy about it. Maybe it was his many years of battle experience, but something was giving him an unpleasant premonition, and he didn't like it.

So my hunch was right, then? But for now, we need to come up with countermeasures first.

With that in mind, Farraga turned his attention to the battlefield anew.

“If we’re talking explosive growth, then each one of them’s a high-level magic-born equivalent. A Hazard-level threat or maybe even a Calamity if we’re unlucky. Do I have that right?”

“Yes, sir! That’s what I heard from our analysts.”

“Abominable. Sheerly abominable. If magic worked on them, even an A ranker could be handled well enough. So what about the one in the leader role?”

“Th-that…”

“What? What is it?”

“Ah… Sorry, sir! Allow me to brief you.”

The aide faltered a bit as he looked at the report, but one glare from Farraga, and he resumed reading it to him. What Farraga heard made him want to cringe.

“…Over ten times? Are they sure about that?”

“It’s true, sir. There were no malfunctions in the measuring devices. That particular individual has over ten times the energy of any of the others there.”

“How…?”

Farraga was speechless. Even Gadora, who had gone through the cycle of reincarnation many times to build his powers, couldn’t achieve such an absurd amount of magic force. *This* level was more along the lines of a demon lord.

“There was nothing about this particular monster in the IIB documents. He did not participate in the battle tournament the monsters held, so his fighting force is apparently unknown.”

“According to one spy we sent in,” another aide added, “this one was making a presentation about medicinal herbs at the event instead. He had some interesting things to say, but now that I think about it, perhaps that was their way of hiding a Disaster-level threat from the world.”

Farraga, listening to his aides express their opinions, concluded that it had to be true. What they saw just now truly *was* a transformation. They had kept their forces under wraps to catch the enemy off guard, and now that they knew the airships were basically

armed with nothing but magic, they revealed their true selves. *They really got one over on us*, he thought.

“Gentlemen, calm down. We’re fighting monsters here, and if we are, you all know that our victory remains unassailable. No matter who our foe is, we simply need to launch our magic cancelers at full blast, and they’ll all be pinned down!”

Dragonewts might be a rare species, and those with transformation skills even rarer, but that didn’t make them unbeatable. The airships were powerful, cherished weapons, developed for use against Veldora. Use their magic cancelers, the true showstopper among all their advantages, and not even the dragon family was worth breaking a sweat over.

Even now, their magic cancelers were in effect and covering a wide area around them, including at ground level. But they were operating at something of a trial run; only for the fight against Veldora would they be turned up all the way and focused on a single point. The bodies of monsters were made up of magicules; disrupt the magicules in the air around them, and they’d inevitably slow down. And if these disruptive waves could be concentrated in a smaller way, they could render any sort of monster helpless.

“Right away, sir!”

As his aides hurriedly sprang into action, Farraga tried to grasp the battle situation. Save for their leader, the dragonewts were forming teams of five in the air. Twenty of their airships were currently engaged in battle with them, and fewer than ten ships in their fleet had been taken down. There was still plenty of room to recover.

“Major General, we’re ready to fire. But in our current position, we’ll lose some of our own allies to the cannon blast…”

“So?”

“…O-oh. Never mind, sir.”

“Then get on with it!”

“Yes, sir!”

What would happen if you shot magic cancelers on an airship that stayed aloft on magical force? It was obvious—without the magical effect upon it, the airship would follow the laws of physics right to the

ground. The crew would be wiped out, including the magicians who looked up to Farraga, their old companion in the Magic Division. But despite that, Farraga gave the order without batting an eye.

“Begin irradiation…now!”

The remaining ships set off, circling around Gabil’s forces and the airships they were currently engaged in battle with—then, one after another, they fired their cancelers from their bows. The airships they targeted began to fall downward…along with the dragonewts in combat.

I’m sorry…but this is a necessary sacrifice.

Farraga prayed silently, eyes wide open as the fallen airships hit the ground and burst into flames. There was no way the crew, to say nothing of the demons caught up in it, were safe.

“Well done. Now the only thing that remains is the special one among them.”

“And even if magic doesn’t work on it, the shock wave and the heat are beyond anything it could take.”

“It was a great sacrifice…but a small price to pay for taking out a hundred upper-level magic-born.”

A hint of relief washed over the aides. But it was Farraga who rained on their parade.

“Don’t rest easy yet. Sacrificing your compatriots is nothing to be proud of! And we haven’t finished off that one individual yet!”

The words made the aides stiffen.

The demon lord–class individual had been frozen in the air, but its wings were still intact and keeping it in the sky. With more than twenty airships now destroyed, there was no way they could let it escape.

“If it were only the flightless Gobta of the Big Four, we wouldn’t have had any of this trouble…”

“Indeed. We, in tandem with Gaster’s tank force, could have broken down even the strongest of defenses.”

“But this guy here is pinned down by the magic canceler. If we keep irradiating him, it has to tear his body apart sooner or later.”

“We can’t be certain of that. Our analysts are still conducting observations, but the individual’s energy values are falling only

minimally.”

Hearing this exchange between his aides made Farraga feel a sudden chill in his core. *We’re exposing it to magic cancelers from over seventy airships at once, and all we can do is pin it down?! So trying to weaken him is meaningless altogether?!*

As much as he couldn’t believe it, Farraga felt this called for rethinking his strategy. This, he knew, was a whole new dimension of strength. Focusing all their magic cancelers only just stopped his movements. Maybe they could weaken it with time, but he had no idea there was another monster on the level of Veldora like this.

This guy has to be more trouble than Gobta of the Big Four… But wait!

At that moment, Farraga suddenly had a flash of inspiration. Maybe this individual here *was* Veldora, the exact target they had been looking for. The thought sounded enticingly convincing to him.

“Ah-*haaa…* If this is Veldora…then that explains the off-the-charts energy readings.”

Before he knew it, his mouth was speaking by itself. His aides had a wealth of reactions to it.

“Oh… So being newly freed from his seal, maybe he’s too weakened to even maintain his dragon form?”

“Weakened? He’s got all this power, and you call that weakened? Even his squadron had powers comparable to dragons. In fact, we’ve even tracked a few of them approaching the level of an Arch Dragon.”

“That’s right,” said Farraga. “That, my friends, is the horror of Veldora. He defeated the imperial army once before; my master Gadora told me the story. And even after being sealed away for three hundred years, he’s still *that* strong. Hard to even imagine what he was like pre-seal, isn’t it?”

His aides nodded approvingly as they listened.

“Yes, with that much power, no wonder the army of Farmus never stood a chance.”

“The major general is right. I’m pretty convinced this is Veldora.”

Most of the people in the room agreed, but some still had their doubts.

“Excuse me, Major General. According to our documents, the name of the dragonewt leader is Gabil…”

“That’s an alias, you,” said Farraga, laughing it off. “We’ve all heard about how Veldora’s power has waned after being sealed off. He’s just trying to keep a low profile until he regains his true fighting strength.”

With that much assurance, the questioning aide had no choice but to back down.

“It’s…rather unheard of for a monster to take an alias. But if any would, it’d be Veldora, perhaps?”

There were still assorted things he didn’t agree with Farraga on, but instead he forced himself to see things his way. And once word spread among the crew that Veldora was the individual they were pitted against, the officers’ faces all lit up with joy.

“It’s terrible that we lost thirty percent of our valued airships, but if that was against Veldora, it’s hardly anyone’s fault!”

“If anything, it’s a stroke of good luck. We needed to be on the lookout for the wide-ranging attack that defeated Farmus. Good thing we blocked him off with our magic cancelers as early as we did.”

Yes, Farraga thought. *Veldora’s trapped in the cancelers, unable to move. Keep draining him of his strength, and it’ll be far easier to kill him.*

Now, out of nowhere, he had completed the biggest coup of this whole operation. Slowly, deliberately, Farraga chewed on his good fortune.

“Is the output on the cancelers all right?”

“No problems, sir. Stable eighty percent.”

“How much longer until it reaches maximum power?”

“Estimated under an hour, sir. At this rate, it’s all we can do to pin him down, but little by little, Veldora’s physical disintegration has begun. I think it’ll be effective enough for us.”

“Veldora has an hour to live, then? Good. More than enough time for Gaster to finish seizing the ground war.”

His aides were excellent. Without a word, they understood Farraga’s intentions and worked with their analysts to provide him the needed updates. At the drop of a hat, they were reviewing their

operation and identifying potential problems. In an hour, they concluded, Gobta of the Big Four should be suitably routed. Fusing with that wolf monster made him a formidable force, but it still lost out to Veldora. If Gaster's tank battalion put their minds to it, it wouldn't be too hard to defeat him.

"If it's Veldora and his kin, then no wonder magic didn't work. But the goddess of victory has smiled upon us! Just sit back, relax, and the Empire's long-held dream will be granted!"

Now fully convinced, Farraga focused on rallying his soldiers' morale.



Victory was in the air across the bridge.

"Let's get some wine ready."

"Good idea. Something special this time. A nice four-hundred-year-old vintage, perhaps, please."

"Yes, the perfect wine to toast the Empire's vindication. The lees should settle within an hour."

"Very good. Let's go with that, then."

"…Oh! Can *I* have some, too?"

The beautiful girl, her long bluish-purple hair in a side ponytail, had sat herself down in the aide's seat next to Farraga.

Since when was she here?! And not just that…

She was in a full military uniform, one that didn't suit her age at all—but despite its abject formality, it only enhanced the girl's cute looks.

Farraga quickly regretted his carelessness. The sheer certainty of his victory had left him too relaxed. And not just him—all the other aides and officers on the bridge were the same. The girl must've wound her way through all those mental gaps to make her way in here.

"Who are you?!"

Where did this intruder come from? And what did she want? She

was almost certainly foe, not friend, but Farraga doubted she'd give an honest answer.

"Oh, I can't have any? Then I guess tea's fine instead. I've had a busy day as an observer, so I'm good and parched."

The rest of the bridge turned to see the mystery person Farraga was addressing. Their eyes went wide in astonishment when they spotted her. They had barriers in operation both inside and outside the ship, and nothing about this girl was detected in advance. And so there she was, sitting there like she always belonged on that seat.

"I said, who are you?"

Farraga slowly stood up and turned toward the girl. He accentuated his question by pointing a gun at her. The girl kept smiling, seemingly not threatened at all. And it wasn't a threat. Not for *her*.

"You wanna know who I am? My name's Ultima. That name's super important—Sir Rimuru himself gave it to me!"

This was Violet, the Original Purple and one of the most powerful, balance-breaking presences on the planet.

Farraga calmly observed this Ultima, trying to assess her capabilities. Reasoning conversation would be an effective means to this, he spoke up.

"Ultima? Never heard of you."

"No? Wow, you're pretty ignorant. I came here 'cause I wanted to ask some questions, but maybe I oughtta ask somebody else."

"What?"

"Look… You guys are all gonna die soon, y'know. So I want you to tell me about some stuff before that happens!"

She delivered that explanation with a sweet, innocent smile. Seeing this conjured feelings within Farraga that were difficult for him to describe. If he had to compare it to something, it'd be like when he encountered a high-ranked Imperial Guardian for the first time, those absolute presences. If anything, Ultima was putting even more choking pressure on him than that.

Are you telling me…that I'm being pressured? By this girl? I'm actually afraid of her?!

Farraga doubted his own instincts. But the fact was that if this girl

Ultima broke into an airship by herself, she had to be absolutely extraordinary. This was, no doubt, a major emergency. He guessed what she was after, then realized how obvious it was. Veldora, still held captive, was outside the observation window, a sight that symbolized the total victory of the Empire. The monsters must be absolutely frantic, and they'd likely try anything to get Veldora back.

Ultima? I can't believe I'm shuddering under the thrall of this monster the IIB knew nothing about. This must be their top fixer of sorts. A top-level monster, serving Veldora directly.

Definitely a top officer, one named only recently. She looked as human as they came on the outside, but it was impossible to put into words just how horrifyingly evil her aura was. He didn't know who she was, but Farraga, luckily, knew a monster with an aura like that. Gadora, his master, had been conducting fervent research on them.

So Farraga pointed his gun at Ultima.

"I've got it. You're a demon, aren't you?"

"Wow, good job! You're right."

Of course I am, he thought, chuckling to himself. With this level of evil spirit, she definitely had to be a high-ranking Arch Demon—one both physically incarnate and named. A true monster, through and through. The big open question at the moment was her rank.

She's definitely noble, no doubt about that. Medieval or lower would be preferred, but if we're talking Ancient, we might have some problems…? No. We can stop a demon's special skills in this space. And a demon without magic is hardly anything to fear!

Farraga began secretly giving instructions to his subordinates. His orders: to point their magic canceler at the ship's interior. It'd shut down their magic amplifier cannon, disarm their spellguns, and turn the magicians in the crew into plain old helpless people. But that was exactly what Farraga wanted. Block off a monster's magicules, and the threat was gone—and the same was true for demons, too. Just take care of that stop, and the magic a demon fights with is off the table.

If you were waging a magic battle against an Arch Demon, all the sorcerers in the world couldn't give you a chance at victory. It was much better to create a position of superiority for yourself to start

with, increasing your odds of coming out on top.

Keeping his gun in everyone's sight, Farraga surreptitiously put a hand on the saber at his waist. Then he kept talking, endeavoring to keep Ultima's attention.

"I'm surprised Veldora wrangled up a demon assistant like you."

"Huh? Sir Veldora?"

"Heh-heh-heh… No need to hide it. What other reason would you have for being here, apart from coming to your lord's rescue?!"

"Um, no? I am the faithful servant of Sir Rimuru!"

The servant of the demon lord Rimuru? Come on. She's clearly here to rescue Veldora.

No, he had never received any briefings that indicated Veldora had people working for him. Whether she served Veldora or a demon lord, that was just a triviality.

"My pardons. So you're here to save Veldora, aren't you?"

"What are you talking about? I just told you I'm here to ask some questions. Don't you listen to people?"

Somehow, they didn't seem to be on the same page.

Is she bluffing? I don't see the point of hiding it, but what the hell does she want…?

Farraga began to get a vague sense of uneasiness, as if he was wrong about something. Like he was making some kind of big mistake…

"…So what do you want to ask me?"

Ultima smiled, like she had been waiting for this all day. Then with that same smile still on her face:

"Well, how this ship works and how to control it, for one. That's pretty important. Also, the remaining military forces in the Empire. Like, how many really strong guys do you have and stuff like that—as much as you know, okay?"

Her innocent attitude felt like nothing but disrespect to Farraga.

If she's messing with me, then fine. I'll admit she's kind of a trickster, but what can one person do?

He still had his concerns, but that was how he truly felt. All their preparations would be done soon, and they had the perfect counter to deal with a demon.

Out the corner of his eye, he saw a signal that everything was ready. Their victory was now assured. Farraga regained his composure.

“Heh-heh-heh… You think I’m just going to give that to you?”

“No, not really, but I guess that doesn’t really matter. Got my tea ready yet? I’ve kinda been waiting awhile.”

“I’ve got something even better than tea for you!”

As if shaking off any remaining hesitation, Farraga pulled the trigger. The bullet flew away, signaling the start of battle—and just as it did, the magic cancel came into effect across the airship.

The weapon in Farraga’s hand was not a spellgun. It was a Colt Government 1911, a military-grade semiautomatic pistol manufactured by the Colt firearms company in the US. It was an antique, brought over here by an otherworlder, and Farraga cherished it so much that he never missed a day of maintenance on it. It was loaded with a seven-plus-one round, and its nickname of Hand Cannon came from its use of large-caliber bullets, specially made at great expense.

But this Colt was only a diversion. As a spiritual life-form, basic weapons meant nothing to a demon anyway. An incarnated demon might have felt a little pain, but that was it.

With a deft hand, Farraga released the safety and fired off its full array of bullets. He had no optimism about gunning her down with them. Only those with a death wish would look down on an Arch Demon like that…and as soon as the sound stopped, Farraga saw he was right. Ultima was seated in her chair, not a care in the world, as she lifted up her left hand and let eight bullets drop to the floor. He didn’t know how she did that without magic, but the bullets were drained of their kinetic energy, and Ultima’s hand was unhurt.

“That’s a pretty fun-looking toy you got there…but I like the one Sir Rimuru has more.”

“Oh yeah? Well, this one’s my favorite.”

The results were honestly more disappointing than expected, but they didn’t surprise Farraga. Holstering his gun, he then took out the

saber on his hip. This was a magic saber, but it still retained its powers even with a magic canceler influencing it. Using Farraga's own magic force to keep a steady flow of magicules running inside the blade, it could produce an even greater effect than a magic Aura Sword–infused blade. Magic swords worked against demons, he knew—that, and if he could destroy this physical body of hers, she'd never be able to withstand the magic canceler.

Off to the demon world with you!

Farraga was a wizard but also a talented swordfighter. He didn't go out of his way to show that off, but he was proud to say that he was as good as any famous swordfighter out there. That was why, even in this magic-blocked environment, Farraga could keep calm.

Ultima, too, remained unfazed despite the magic canceler doing its work on her. That, Farraga coldly assumed, was fake bravado, and he wasn't about to let his foe's performance fool him.

"So how's it feel to have all your fancy magic blocked?" Farraga sneered.

"?" Ultima responded with a puzzled expression.

"Heh-heh-heh… Getting impatient, aren't you? Well, this little chat is over, accursed demon!"

The air around Farraga changed, an invisible thread of tension stretched out between him and Ultima.

"Huh… You wanna go?" Ultima asked.

"Of course. What kind of dimwit would ever make a deal with the devil?"

"Dimwit? Hey, um… Are you talking about me?"

"Who else, you fool? Can't you understand that? Let me tell you one thing. You want to know who's strong in this Empire? Well, I'm one of them!"

Taking advantage of Ultima's brief reply, Farraga thrust his saber into the air. It was a master-level stab technique aimed at Ultima's heart, a true finisher that not even a magic-born could evade.

But:

"Then I'll kill you last."

Farraga heard a voice behind him. His killing blow didn't even touch Ultima in her seat—instead, it went right through the chair,

putting a hole in it. Shockingly, the girl had somehow gone from being right in front of him to right behind him. That was the unbelievable truth Farraga had to face.

“If you don’t wanna have a conversation, that’s fine. I’m still gonna have you answer my questions, though. But don’t worry. You don’t have to say anything. I’ll just take the knowledge from you myself.”

With an innocent smile, Ultima looked around at the soldiers and officers watching her. Then in a horribly chilling voice, she said:

“Okay, let’s start with you first.”

“…What?”

Farraga quickly spun around. Some kind of round mass flew past his side before slamming against the wall, leaving a stain. It was a human head. One of his now-dead aides fell to the floor, then began convulsing, as if he forgot he was supposed to do that until just that moment.

“What on…?!”

“Well, *he* didn’t know much, did he? Okay, let’s keep going.”

With that, she randomly ripped off the head of another officer, played with it a bit in her fingers for a few seconds, then discarded it. This was now a process—and one she began to repeat with a steady rhythm, leaving a growing pile of corpses behind her. Now the bridge was transformed into a hellscape of shrieking and terror.

“T-turn the magic canceler up to maximum! Contact the other ships and have them focus their sights on our flagship!”

The magicians in attendance were panicking, but Farraga’s demands brought them back to their senses. Hurriedly, they followed the orders and sprang into action.

“Is this magic canceler your new weapon and stuff? It sends out random commands to local magicules to inhibit magic casting, doesn’t it? Yeah, I’m sure that works on lots of monsters, but um… did you think it’d work on me?”

Ultima asked that question with just the most adorable head tilt. It was greeted with a near scream from Farraga:

“You’re bluffing! Don’t think you can bluff your way out of this!”

“Mmm, I dunno about that. I mean, if I was a mystic beast built up from magicules, then yeah, I feel that’d have a pretty good effect. But

don’t you think it’s kind of a waste of time to point that at me if I’ve already incarnated into this body?”

“What…?”

“Besides, *maybe* it’d be a different story with a lower-level demon, but not a high-end one, y’know? Because when we’re conscious, magic just kinda happens naturally with us, like you guys and breathing. Like this, see?”

With that, Ultima disappeared. At the same time, the head of the communications officer sitting at the end of the command deck flew off. Ultima had completed the job in an instant.

“Did you see that? All I did was move a bit, and it sent that man’s head up in the air. I was going faster than the speed of sound, but you didn’t feel any sonic boom, did you? That’s magic, y’know. And also…”

Ultima gave her hand a little shake. Her fingertips seemed to blur for a bit, as if in a haze. Then with the sound of something wet whapping into a hard object, the head of the aide standing next to Farraga burst apart.

“You see? If I *want* a shock wave, it’s easy. All I have to do is follow the laws of physics, and ta-daa.”

It was such an innocent way to calmly describe an atrocious act. She felt no guilt about it whatsoever.

“No,” Farraga muttered to himself. Now he was finally understanding her. The common sense he had spent his life developing got in the way of comprehending any of this. It was such a strange feeling, like she was speaking a language from some faraway foreign nation. His instincts refused to accept it.

Was…? Was she really an Arch Demon?

Even after all this time, Farraga was still pondering the true identity of Ultima. In terms of actual strength, Farraga was a good match for an Arch Demon—but a lot depended on age. A newborn one, he could beat all by himself. Against an Ancient one or older, that’d be too much for him, but a lesser noble Medieval in age or younger, well, he thought he had a sporting chance.

So what was all *this* about? They had this magic canceler that could keep even Veldora himself pinned down and helpless, but it

wasn’t working for them at all. And even if Ultima (as this named demon called herself) was physically incarnated, her strength was simply extraordinary. That’s what threw Farraga’s common sense for a loop so badly.

Now he understood that he had no hope at all of beating Ultima, no matter how much he struggled. So he wasted no more time playing his final move against her.

“Don’t get cocky with me, demon! Summon Spirit: Ifrit! Come to me, elemental of the primordial flames!!”

It was the most powerful of summon spells, offered only to champion-level casters. Farraga alone couldn’t master that arcane art, but with the magic amplifier cannon on this ship and fifty magicians helping out, it was now possible. Magic cancelers had only a tiny effect on spirits, which is why such a summoning could even be successful.

With a mighty roar, Ifrit materialized on the bridge, thoroughly trashing it. If the spirit was high-level enough to outrank the demon, even an Arch Demon could be obliterated. Farraga was sure of it as he turned toward Ultima.

“I’ll admit it—you’re a menace! But we’ve been studying demons for a long, long time, and we’re well prepared for them! Sorry, my friend, but it’s over for you!!”

Even with Farraga’s strained voice ringing in her ears, Ultima kept smiling. And for the first time in his life, Farraga learned just how awful a smile could really be.

You’re kidding me. It can’t be. There’s no way she can beat the Ifrit I summoned!!

The Ifrit Farraga summoned had been granted the power of fifty magicians working through an amplifier cannon. That made it several times stronger than regular high-level spirits, and whether she was Ancient or Prehistoric, no Arch Demon could ever beat him.

And yet Farraga’s fear persisted.

“Don’t get carried away just because you summoned *that* small fry. You really should’ve started talking while I was still giving you a nice, friendly smile. Now I’m gonna give you nothing but despair.”

Ah, it’s over.

That was the immediate thought, the instinct, in Farraga's mind. And the next moment, right before him and the surviving bridge crew, Ifrit, the embodiment of absolute power, froze and shattered into a million pieces. It was the elemental magic Cocytus, and Ultima had just launched it without any casting time, as simple as breathing.

"Ah, ah…"

"N-nooo! She's a monster!!"

"What was that? What was *that*?!"

The poor fools were all crying for what was likely the last time, in a state of complete panic. It was a natural reaction to have. The living personification of death was standing before them.

"Okay! Now, back to question time!"

Ultima's voice—you could almost describe it as cheery—was the last thing all those souls ever heard.

A few minutes later, a beaming Ultima chuckled to herself. She had acquired everything she wanted to know, and she was delighted with it all.

She couldn't quite glean every single piece of knowledge from them, but to Ultima, reading people's brain waves for information was a snap. She was an intelligence officer, and bringing back information was part of her mission. If she did a good job at it, she knew her master Rimuru would be pleased. *I sure hope he gives me some praise*, she thought.

Then he turned toward the last survivor in the room. This was Farraga; he was the only one Ultima had missed amid all this despair, and she sure didn't skip him out of any kind of mercy.

"And since *you* called me a fool, I'm going to give you the biggest scare of all! And I bet you'll survive it if you try hard enough, so let's see what you can do, okay?"

Upon whispering that, Ultima activated a spell. Jet-black flames the size of a fist rose above her left hand.

"Oh, oh, oh…"

Farraga recognized it: an abyss core, a kind of uncontrollable hellfire that was the by-product of activating a certain other magic…

Or maybe it *was* controllable all along, and Farraga just didn't know how. He knew that three members of the Seven Days Clergy, the champions of humankind, could manage it.

But the abyss core Ultima just conjured up was more than a level larger than the one the Seven Days could create. He might not have known how it worked, but one look, and even he could understand how much of a tactical-level threat this was.

Ultima casually tossed it in the air.

"Okay, have fun! Bye now!"

And without another word, she walked away from the bridge.

Farraga, left to himself, was stunned.

The question of what Ultima really was no longer mattered to him. As soon as he caught that abyss core, he realized he was at the end of his life. Instinctively, he understood that he'd never be able to control it—and that understanding was correct. Even his full power was meaningless against it.

The fire that had left Ultima's control expanded, multiplied, and spread forward, as if mocking his worthless efforts. Just as Ultima took off, the dark ball of fire engulfed the flagship. Then it grew even bigger, swelling to a gigantic size and triggering an explosion. It was now a Nuclear Flame, the ultimate in destructive magic, and Farraga was in the middle of it.

"Beautiful… This is it… The magnum opus of all magic…"

With a look of ecstasy on his face, he let the dark flames scorch his body. Soon, it had evaporated, letting his very soul taste the pain of being burned alive.

Master… Master Gadora… Have you ever gotten to experience this miracle?

No, he decided. He couldn't have. Farraga understood that magic canceler–driven interference wouldn't matter if it could be dominated by someone with strong enough thought waves. This beautiful destruction, the one giving Farraga such a sublime sense of despair, was all the proof he needed.

And so, biting back the despair and enormous gratefulness of

being surrounded by the ultimate in magic, Farraga's life came to a close.

Thanks to the destructive Nuclear Flame, the Flying Combat Corps led by Farraga had been thoroughly crushed. Not a trace of it was left. The superheated flames caused most of the initial damage, followed by the secondary shock wave from the explosion. The flagship itself was vaporized by a core of unimaginable heat, while the surrounding ships exploded and scattered to the four winds, their hulls turning into lethal shrapnel. The larger fragments, hurtling downward beyond the speed of sound, caused incredible damage all by themselves.

With that explosion, the outcome was set in stone. Only the very first ship to fall from the sky remained in any recognizable form. All the others were ripped apart by the chain of explosions that were the day's climax.

Thus, the Flying Combat Corps, the golden child of the imperial military, suffered the disgrace of being completely wiped away from existence well before it even caught a whiff of Veldora.



Ultima was now flying away from the flagship, her interest in Farraga now gone from her mind. She turned to look at the swelling fireball, giving it a satisfied nod. Recalling Rimuru's order to go at full power, she wondered if she should've turned it up a notch after all but thought better of it. That would have killed off Team Hiryu on the ground, so this much was just fine.

Despite the catastrophe occurring in the air, the damage to Team Hiryu was zero, as if it was calculated to end that way all along. Then again, if some of its members failed to meet their quota, they might have suffered some indirect casualties later…but that was none of Ultima's business.

What she was more concerned about was Gabil.

“What’s Gabil been doing over there…?”

Gabil had been exposed to prolonged magic canceler fire. It sounded like the bridge had mistaken him for Veldora because of who knows why, but Ultima didn’t let it bother her much. As things stood, however, he was going to get caught in the Nuclear Flame, so she really wanted him to retreat already.

She flew over to his side, as much of a hassle as she knew this would be.

“Hey, Gabil? What are you doing?”

“Ah, Lady Ultima! I’ve actually gained a new sense, you see!”

He sounded oddly boastful about it. It piqued Ultima’s interest, but evacuation took priority right now. She wouldn’t be killed by her own magic, but Gabil probably wouldn’t survive. Okay, maybe he would, but she didn’t want to take that bet, let alone be stigmatized as someone who killed her allies—and so Ultima forcibly removed Gabil from the scene.

Back on the ground, the two of them regrouped with Team Hiryu. It was finally time for Ultima’s interrogation to begin.

“So what’s this all about?” she asked, her tone firm with Gabil. Apart from her information-officer duties, Ultima was also an observer watching over him, providing both support and advice so he didn’t pull anything foolish. If Gabil failed, that meant Ultima failed, too, so it was only natural that she was harsh with him.

But Gabil was totally oblivious to this.

“Gwah-ha-ha-ha! You see, when I was exposed to that special light beam the enemy shot at me, I had a brief stroke of genius. I immediately saw that this light affected magicules, and so I wanted to experiment to see how long I could withstand it!”

I should just turn this lizard over to Sir Rimuru and have him scream at him, Ultima thought, but she held her ground and soldiered on.

“And so what’s this new sense of yours?”

“Yes, that’s the thing! All of you, come up and listen close. Sir Middray told us that our intrinsic skill Dragon Body would become

available to us for longer periods of time as we trained with it. I, too, kept myself transformed that entire time, didn't I?"

He looked around his squadmates, sneering at them. Upon hearing this, Team Hiryu exchanged glances with each other, surprised. They were all able to transform for an average of about ten minutes, and they had long since returned to their original forms by now.

"I thought that'd be a given for you, Sir Gabil, but no?"

"If you teach us this secret, can we do it, too?"

His troops began growing more and more excited. It made Ultima glance at them with cold, dead eyes. *If only these lizards could experience a little pain for a change*, she thought. She showed no mercy to her foes and little care for those below her in rank, but technically speaking, Gabil's force wasn't in her hierarchy. If he disposed of them without permission, Rimuru would fume at her. And a bit of a lecture was one thing, but when she recalled how Rimuru reacted whenever one of his people got hurt, she'd likely receive a much harsher punishment—maybe even banishment. Ultima was determined not to let that happen, so after weighing that punishment against the chance to release some stress on these lizards, she reluctantly decided to remain patient.

"It is thanks to you," Gabil told her, "that I've discovered the secret of this power. You believed me when I said I had an idea, and you bought me enough time to think it through."

"What?"

"Heh-heh-heh! No need to play dumb, for I, Gabil, can see right through you. We all thank you for giving us the opportunity to grow from our inexperience!"

Ultima never turned down a compliment. Regaining her composure, she decided to revise her assessment of Gabil a bit.

"Okay, that's enough. So what did you discover, Gabil? Because everyone else seems to wanna know about it."

She decided not to bother correcting Gabil's misunderstanding. Right now, it was more important to get this situation under control.

By this point, fighting was taking place only in localized pockets. There was the rear, commanded by Hakuro; the center, where

Gobta/Ranga were still rampaging away; and the three main enemy positions Testarossa was headed for. Now that Gabil's crew had finished destroying their air force, it was time to head off and provide support for other parts of the battle. There was no time for idle chitchat.

"I'll report this to Sir Rimuru as well, but before that, I will be as brief as I can. And all of you listen up, too, because it'll help everyone be stronger."

Gabil sternly began his explanation. It was, in essence, a way to fully control the Dragon Body skill.

As an intrinsic dragonewt skill, Dragon Body strengthened the user's body via a surge of magicules. This surge took in matter around it for its strengthening effect. More mass meant enhanced defense, along with near-immediate recovery if the user was injured. Having magicules running out of control like this meant casting magic was off the table, but they'd have no problem using breath- and other ability-based skills. As long as they could keep ahold of their consciousness, it provided enhanced strength with almost no downside.

"Now, it seems that this enemy attack has a tendency to disrupt the movement of magicules around us…and I could feel it further enhancing my powers."

"What? You mean…even beyond your current form?"

Ultima was surprised. This was an unexpected side effect of the magic canceler. Right now, Gabil had magicule energy in him equivalent to back when Clayman "awoke" for the last time. If it could be further strengthened from here, he was definitely worth listening to. The idea of magicule disruption boosting one's power to the point that they'd statistically outdo an awakened true demon lord was enough to shock even Ultima.

But there was always a catch.

"No, no, not like that. There's more power, yes, but I couldn't handle it very well. So I consciously focused myself, so I could feel the magicules running rampant in my body, but…"

But the result was that pinned-down performance he showed off a bit ago. He wasn't taking damage, but he couldn't move at all.

However, Gabil had a knack for turning anything to his advantage—and so through that experience, he learned how to more fully sense his magicules.

“That’s what Sir Middray was referring to when he talked about a state of selflessness, I think. Looking into your inner space, turning an ear to it, and then—”

“You’re taking too long! Keep it short and simple!”

Gabil’s force nodded their agreement at Ultima’s sharp feedback.

“Oh,” Gabil said, overpowered. “Well, essentially, by sensing the magicules running around wild inside me, I could send my thoughts to it. And then, wonder of wonders, I gained control over their power!”

The first impression of his men upon hearing this was that he was nuts. On the other hand, it gave Ultima food for thought. Seeing them made her realize that while it was easier than breathing for her, it must’ve been really tough for Team Hiryu. This gave her a real shot of motivation.

Wait… If I train Gabil’s force, maybe they can become even stronger?

Doing that would definitely make her useful to Rimuru. The potential for receiving praise from it was enormous.

“I know exactly what you mean, Gabil. But we can take the time to discuss this later, all right? Because right now, I really think we need to support the goblins.”

It was her way of saying this break was over. Typically, she’d report to Rimuru about how lazy they were, but after receiving such useful information from Gabil, Ultima raised her opinion of him slightly. That was why she was being so gracious here, overlooking Gabil’s erratic behavior this time.

“Ah yes, you’re right! Well, time for us to step in and provide aid, then.”

Gabil nodded happily. He still had the completely wrong idea, but Ultima didn’t see that as a problem. It was better that way for her, even, so she let them be without further comment.

“Anyone who didn’t meet their quota is going to face some thorough reeducation later, so be prepared!”

“You said it! I’ll pitch in on that, too.”

Ultima gave him an adorable smile. It seemed like a very good idea to her. And so, blissfully unaware of her intentions, Team Hiryu went back out on the field.



“Nonsense! This is ridiculous!”

At the main camp, far from the battlefield, Lieutenant General Gaster ranted, his face pale. Before him was a scene of unbelievable devastation. The Magitank Force, his pride and joy, was being tossed around by a monster wolf that had taken human form. It was a nightmarish scene; safe to say there were more destroyed tanks than intact ones by now.

Defeat was unavoidable at this point, but the battle had progressed so much faster than expected that they had already missed their retreat window. They hadn’t even been able to report the situation to Caligulio, general commander and leader of the Armored Division.

Gotta report back to that bastard Caligulio ASAP and ask for permission to withdraw…

Gaster’s sense of reason was pleading with him.

…And yet…

Even if he submitted that report, he’d likely never receive permission. The main force led by Caligulio had already kicked off their operation; if Gaster and the rest of the forces here withdrew, they’d be left totally isolated.

The Restructured Armor Corps, their main force, was being deployed in front of the demon lord Rimuru’s stronghold. They were all proud warriors of the Empire, each of whom underwent reconstructive surgery, and they numbered an overwhelming seven hundred thousand strong. They were a sure thing, absolutely certain to win, but if they knew the rest of the army had been defeated, it was bound to shake them.

Plus, the Dwarven Kingdom's army would go on the move soon. Once they did, the Restructured Army Corps could be caught between the dwarves and the demon lord Rimuru's forces, leaving the Corps surrounded and cut off from their supply lines. They could function for about a week without food, drink, or sleep, but no more. They were still human beings, and even they needed supplies.

My mission is to subdue the Dwarven Kingdom… If I withdrew from the war zone here, I'd be abandoning Caligulio and all his forces. Even if we can't win, we must at least maintain the stalemate…

But that was a questionable option. The only thing Gaster saw ahead for his army was defeat. Confusion was reigning toward the rear, and the chain of command was starting to fall apart. They were even seeing friendly fire now. Even if they kept going, it was just a matter of time before they were annihilated.

"Lieutenant General! If we keep this up, one way or the other we'll be wiped out!"

"Retreat! Give us the retreat order!!"

He didn't need his advisers to spell it out for him. He firmly agreed with them. But if it was said out loud, all responsibility for the defeat would fall upon his shoulders.

Lieutenant General Gaster was a man of impeccable personal bravery, one with a fine reputation within the military. He had never known a setback like this in his whole career, which was what made this seem so peculiar to him.

We can't retreat. If we do, His Majesty is bound to punish me. I can't ever allow that to happen! I'm the man who'll become a hero… but now all the glory's disappearing. Unless I've got something firm to prove that it's not just my fault…

The very prestige of the Empire was riding on this operation. If it failed because of him… Such was the true nature of Gaster's thoughts, something only coming up to the surface now. In fact, he was always a small-minded person, caring only about saving his own hide and not blinking at the thought of sacrificing his troops.

"Lieutenant General, if we continue like this, it'll be difficult to even rebuild our forces. We're still in control of our main force—I think we

should use them to strike the enemy in the rear!”

“There’s no shame in a temporary retreat. If we keep fighting in close quarters like this, it’s only going to cause us more casualties!”

Amid these suggestions, Gaster finally began using his head again. Lose the unit he’d been placed in charge of, and he’d never escape punishment either way. Demotion wouldn’t be the end of it—they might not even give him a trial before they took his life.

“Dammit… I’m going to be a hero. And now…all these damn incompetents are dragging me down…!!”

Gaster’s ugly nature was now bare for all to see. But his voice was then drowned out by the sound of a huge explosion. Turmoil spread across the main camp.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s—it’s an enemy magic attack!”

“Magic? N-no… Is that nuclear magic?!”

“We haven’t confirmed it yet, but judging by the scale, it has to be. But um…”

“But what? Speak up!”

“Yes, sir! The enemy’s offense seems to have easily penetrated our legion magic protecting our force from magic strikes…”

“What?! Damage report!”

“The explosion occurred in the sky, sir. We’ve lost contact with our allied airships!”

“That— That’s ridiculous! Are you saying that the Flying Combat Corps, the jewel of our entire military, is gone…?”

Gradually, in fits and starts, the situation grew clear—and now everyone realized the damage was far more serious than they imagined.

They had lost contact with not one airship, but all of them. That magic just now must’ve taken them all down. They were equipped with magic cancelers, a new type of weapon, but it was magic that did them in? It was so hard to believe.

“Retreat. Wait, no. We have to… Yes, we have to change course and gather ourselves!”

Gaster sent out the order, aimed more at himself than his soldiers. He had finally made the decision to retreat from this ghastly

situation…but that decision had already come decisively too late.

✳

A cool voice echoed through the battlefield.

“Huh? You’re not going to claim this is the end, are you? Because I’ve already told you—invade us any further, and we’ll show no mercy.”

Gaster turned his panicked head toward the voice and saw a beautiful snow-white face with a beaming smile. It was Testarossa.

“I’m a woman of my word, you know. When I visited this world in the past, I made sure I fully granted the wishes of my summoner. Rest assured, I’m going to reward you handsomely as well.”

Fear flooded Gaster’s mind. Not a petty little fear involving saving his own ass, but an endlessly churning terror that threatened the very foundation of his life, eroding his instincts.

“Y-you!”

“Oh? I wonder if you forgot about that? If so, that’s very rude of you.”

Testarossa eyed him like an affectionate mother looking down at her naughty son.

Gaster would never have forgotten. Not that much time had passed since they parted, but no matter how many years went by, her lovely white hair and scarlet eyes were too beautiful to ever forget. More than that, it was all so terrifying. Her beauty gave him an unfathomable sense of foreboding.

Suppressing his fear, Gaster tried ordering his men to attack. But there was no one to answer the call.

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to do, but your men are resting at the moment. They must’ve been pretty tired, huh? I can’t seem to get them up.”

She was whispering in his ear now. They were talking face-to-face a moment ago, but now he found her standing right behind him. He hadn’t been careless—he never even took his eyes off her—but

before he knew it, Testarossa had moved on him.

It was just too fast, and even more frightening, there was no sound accompanying it at all. Gaster's unique skill Performer allowed him to detect the movements of his opponents through sound. He could capture even the faintest of noises, things not even a trained guru could control—not just the beating of one's heart, but even the blood flowing through their veins. And yet sound was completely absent from Testarossa.

Then Gaster discovered another terrifying fact. He couldn't hear any sound from his fallen men, either. They were dead.

"Y-you… You didn't kill them, did you?!"

Gaster staggered away from Testarossa.

"Hmm?" she replied, not betraying any remorse. "Well, you know, I was a bit hungry, so I took some."

"Took some? Took some what?"

"Oh, a few souls."

Her matter-of-fact tone of voice infuriated Gaster. The anger overcame his fear, replenishing the strength in his body.

"Die, you foul demon! Mind Requiem!!"

Letting his momentum take him up, Gaster unleashed the most powerful move he could muster, scattering inescapable, murderous sound waves into the surrounding space. The special effects these waves had on the minds of intelligent life-forms caused instant death. It was one of his all-powerful finishing moves, effective even against spiritual life-forms like demons.

But Testarossa just smiled elegantly at him.

"Ah, what a pleasant tone! It'd be such a waste that you had to be human. What a pity. You have such wonderful talent as a musician, but now I have to kill you."

Her enraptured expression clouded with sadness. Seeing it made Gaster realize that his attack didn't work. It plunged him into despair. He had been fooled by her beautiful appearance, but Testarossa was definitely not human. In fact, he finally realized, she was a higher-ranked being than he had ever seen before in his life.

Maybe even more so than that rampaging wolf hybrid…

This was beyond dangerous.

Are you saying there's monsters like that all over this nation? If so, then we may have gravely misjudged our strategy from the start…

After all this time, Gaster finally began to feel some regret. Along with that, he foresaw the complete failure of the Empire's military operation. All of this…and above that, Tempest had the Catastrophe-class threat Veldora. The war was already dangerously close to being lost. There was no way they could stage a comeback.

So Gaster began to get desperate.

"Wait! I want to make a deal!"

"Oh? What kind?"

"I— I'm high-ranked in the Empire. I'm well versed in our military operation. I have classified information on me. I can be useful to you, I promise. So please, spare my life!"

Throwing all shame and outward appearances aside, Gaster begged for mercy. But there was still a glint of light in his eyes, and he was careful to keep an eye on Testarossa's response. He thought he was out of options, but right now, his ears caught the sound of several footsteps approaching.

He had an idea of who they were. They were running quietly enough that only he could notice them. Just from those footsteps, he could immediately surmise they were from the Imperial Intelligence Bureau.

If the IIB had agents monitoring the battlefield, it certainly wouldn't surprise Gaster. They were directed by Tatsuya Kondo, the one "stalking the halls of information," and he was sure Tatsuya would use every measure at his disposal here. So he decided to believe that they were here to save him. It didn't matter how pathetic it made him look—if they could buy enough time for him, he'd be saved.

His confidence in this mainly stemmed from a rumor about the IIB he had heard a while back. Among the IIB staff were people simply termed intelligence officers, operatives with first-class combat skills who were trained for operations in any environment. Their names were unknown to the public because they never joined in any ranking duels; they were affiliated with the IIB, and they never transferred out. They were, in a way, removed from the world at

large, working strictly under the mysterious otherworlder Tatsuya Kondo.

That was all just a rumor, and not a very credible one at that, but Gaster had nothing else to grasp onto right now. If these were just regular soldiers coming along, it was all over. But if they were IIB intelligence officers… Well, with Gaster's help, they could probably beat Testarossa. That was why, right then, he had to do whatever he could—even beg for his life—to buy some more time.

And the bet paid off.

"Do you sense that? You're a demon… No, an Arch Demon!"

Several soldiers jumped out in front of Gaster, shouting. He thanked his own good fortune—and when he heard the term Arch Demon, it suddenly made sense. No way his physical attacks would ever work; he was dealing with a spiritual life-form. And an Arch Demon was top of the heap among them, dangerous enough to pose a Calamity-level threat. Only a true champion could fight one off solo, and maybe Gaster would have a chance, but it'd truly be a fight for his life.

"Wh-who are you?"

Three men were now on the scene. The sight of them reassured Gaster enough that he dared to ask.

"Sir! We're from the IIB. I—"

Just as Gaster expected, they were secret agents. One of them was about to state his name, but the man in the middle—the leader, apparently—stopped him.

"Whoa! Now's not a good time to give out names."

The first man turned toward Testarossa, a concerned look on his face.

"You're no regular Arch Demon, are you?"

"It looks like she's received a physical body. Tch… No wonder she had such a faint presence."

"Lieutenant General, we'll get to names later. For now, we have to team up to beat this evil demon!"

"Yes, of course!"

Gaster had no choice but to back the leader. It was annoying to not be in charge, but right then, survival was everything.

In a brilliant display of coordination, the IIB men instantly surrounded Testarossa, using a chain made of monster hair to block her movement on three sides.

Unbeknownst to Gaster, this move was the Imperial Suppression Stance. It was the most advanced killing formation taught in the Empire, allowing a team of three people to defeat higher-level monsters—even Arch Demons.

The secret was in this chain, woven with the hair of monsters and forged from holy silver, a Legend-class treasure. These definitely weren't rank-and-file soldiers carrying it, and in fact, the members of this trio were among the greatest fighters in the Empire—knights of the Imperial Guardians, in disguise.

Davis, ranked eleventh.

Balt, ranked thirty-eighth.

Gordon, ranked sixty-fourth.

When running an infiltration mission, Imperial Knights preferred to work in groups of three. The Imperial Guardians had their own numerical pecking order, and it was customary for the smallest number to be their leader. In terms of strength, the gap between the twenties and the thirties and below, numberwise, was enormous. Those assigned number thirty or below were Enlightened, reaching dimensions beyond humanity, and they all had powers almost as strong as Saints.

And one of them was here now—Davis, who played a key role in the Bloody Shore incident. Davis's team had sealed away Blanc, that nightmarish Primal Demon, and now he was swooping in at Gaster's time of need. He and Blanc had a score to settle.

Watching the knights act as one to subdue Testarossa, Gaster cheered internally, assuming he was saved. If he kept throwing Mind Requiem her way, he reasoned, even a spiritual life-form couldn't last long. He had included physical creatures in his previous attack, but this time, he adjusted it so it only affected spirituals. That way, no matter how lofty an Arch Demon she was, it'd be impossible for her

to maintain her existence.

That's what he thought. But again, he was too naive. This strategy didn't take into account the fact that Testarossa was physically incarnated—it was meaningless to act only upon her mind, and his Mind Requiem had no hope of working.

But even before that:

"Oh my goodness, what a fond trip down memory lane. These are the people who defeated me before, aren't they?"

"…What?"

"This is so nice! I was so rudely interrupted last time that I wasn't able to eat a full meal back then. I had this wonderful meal set up for me, and just when I was set to dig in, *that* happened. Don't think I've forgotten about that."

Testarossa's voice, filled with malice, echoed across the area. Despite being blocked by the chain, she didn't sound even remotely concerned.

"No! This evil presence…!"

"Look at her… Is that Blanc, the Original White?"

"It can't be! We made so much of an effort sealing her away, and she's back *this* quickly?!"

Testarossa laughed at how upset all three were. It was so wicked of her, yet so beautiful.

"Hee-hee… Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! Ah, such lovely expressions on your faces. Fear, anxiety, and completely unfounded confidence. All you can do is pretend to yourselves, but you still haven't run away from me? You certainly do enjoy engaging in wasted efforts, don't you?"

"Shut up, demon!"

"We didn't expect you to come back, but don't forget—we've sealed you once already, remember? Boast about your victory *after* you beat us!"

"Davis is right. We're going to destroy you down to the soul this time!"

This declaration was ridiculous to Testarossa.

"You guys are so funny to me. Are you sure you should be that self-confident? You think the exact same technique is going to work

on me a second time?”

She asked the question as elegantly as could be, even as the Imperial Suppression Stance caught her in its grasp.

“Quit being a sore loser. Nobody here’s gonna listen to a demon’s nonsense.”

“Well said, Gordon. There’s no place for you in this world, demon. And if you couldn’t get it through your head once, we’ll bury you as many times as it takes!”

“Lieutenant General Gaster! Leave this scene to us, please. You and your troops should retreat!”

Davis was calm from start to finish. The Original White’s appearance was unexpected, but he still hadn’t forgotten his original purpose. He was attempting to defeat the wolf demon, the combined Gobta/Ranga. In order to achieve that, Davis intended to convince Gaster to withdraw his troops so Davis didn’t blow his cover finishing that monster off.

Not even Davis had the right to give orders to the higher-ranked Gaster. If worse came to worst, eliminating him from the picture entirely was a possibility. But with Blanc on the scene, now was no time for that. Davis had no hope of beating her while maintaining his cover—in fact, unless he got all the nearby troops out of here fast, they could all get caught up in this battle.

Gaster, unaware of any of this, was suddenly spurred back into action. He was having trouble keeping up with this situation.

Blanc? The Original White? What’re they talking about? Do—do they mean that Arch Demon? Ah, I can’t think about that now. Enough thinking about who this trio is— I gotta survive this!

Desperately slamming his brain into motion, he tried to come up with a solution. Then, in a panic, he used his unique skill Performer to order his entire army to retreat. But it was too late. The moment he had encountered Testarossa, all hopes had already been dashed.

✳

Davis, Balt, and Gordon were three nameless heroes who had once defeated a powerful demon lord. The incident was known as the Bloody Shore, when Blanc—the dreaded Original White who ruled over the demons of the east—came dangerously close to incarnating herself in this world. Ever since, the Empire's vigilance against demons had changed dramatically. Every city had its own demon control office now, and their summoning was banned by law.

If an Arch Demon was ever to physically incarnate itself, it'd require mobilizing the army to deal with it either way. If not handled property, it'd be a potentially city-wrecking disaster. Plus, this was a Primal, a very special existence among Arch Demons; their strength couldn't even be measured in terms of mere magicules.

Ever since that incident, Davis believed it was sheer good fortune that let them defeat Blanc. But at the same time, he was confident that no matter how many times they staged that fight again, he'd never lose. Why? Because he was ranked eleventh. Even the strongest champions of the outside world were no match for the *truly* powerful, those who had lived for over a thousand years in the underworld. We're talking the magic-born Razen, guardian of Farmus, and the Heroic King Gazel of the Armed Nation of Dwargon.

Otherworlders like Yuuki Kagurazaka and Hinata Sakaguchi wouldn't cut it. Neither would Thalion's Magus corps or Lubelius's Crusaders. No matter their strength, they'd always be a mere blur before the Imperial Guardians. And even among this all-powerful group, the Single Digits held a special position. Davis, being ranked eleventh, served as their assistant.

His Majesty has given us this, the most powerful of gear. With our combined powers, there's no way a mere demon could defeat us!!

Davis was brimming with confidence. Once he urged Gaster to retreat, he turned to his companions.

"Both of you, open it up! It looks like Blanc's incarnated herself, but she couldn't have stored up that many magicules yet. We'll hit her with all we got!"

"Right!"

"On it!"

Gordon nodded; Balt smiled defiantly. As they acknowledged him,

the pendants hanging from all three of their necks began to glow. The light soon became a torrent, enveloping their bodies—and what emerged from them were three warriors wearing golden full-plate mail. This was Legend-class armor, only given to the chosen ones. Imperial Guardians generally preferred their choice of weapon, but their armor was generally all the same. This was impeccable quality, handed down from ancient times; no ordinary person could even catch a glimpse of them. And now that they had it on, Davis and his companions were able to fight with all their might.

"Bad luck for you, Original White! Maybe you've gained a physical body, but that's where it ends. Meeting us here was the end of your good fortune— *Ngh?!*"

To give him a better chance at finishing off Testarossa, Davis had put more strength into his grip on the chain. Then he noticed that there was no response from it. Testarossa, whom he had sealed up inside the chain, had slipped it off like a pair of pants.

"Look, do you think I'm going to let you do that?"

Davis turned toward the chilling voice. There he saw Testarossa, whose hand was on Gaster's neck. With a dull snap, the lieutenant general collapsed. He was dead, killed by the demon without putting up the slightest resistance.

"How…?!" Davis instinctively shouted. Gaster might've been more than a little self-centered, but he was no weakling. He was a lieutenant general, and he had the ability to match—in fact, he had every right to join the Imperial Guardians' ranks. Probably just a far-flung number, yes…but even so, he wasn't the kind of man who'd go down that easy.

That…and Davis shuddered as he looked at his hands. The chain of holy silver, monster hair threaded through it; this Legend-class piece of gear had been battered to pieces. Confused frustration flashed across his face, as it did with Balt and Gordon. They had no idea when Testarossa had even moved, much less broken the chain.

And the hardship didn't end there.

"Oh, were you waiting for me? If so, I'm sorry. This man was trying to escape, so I had to give him a little punishment. If I didn't, you know, that'd be disobeying Sir Rimuru's orders. We can't have

that, can we?”

Testarossa shot the men a lustrous smile as she sized them up. Then something else occurred to him.

“Ah, right. I’ve been wondering—would you three mind not calling me Blanc, or the Original White or whatnot?”

“What…?”

“I mean, you know, I’ve got a name now—it’s Testarossa. I’d really hate it if you didn’t use it, you see?”

The statement was a peal of despair for Davis and his team.

“Wait… A name? A *name*?”

“Testarossa… Some fool gave a Primal a name?!”

“First an incarnation, then a name…”

This was unprecedented. Suddenly, their position wasn’t looking so good after all.

“We must retreat. This crisis must be brought to His Majesty’s attention immediately.”

“Yeah, I hear ya. I’ll hold her off.”

“And I’ll set up a Warp Portal—”

The trio’s teamwork was beyond reproach. Quickly dividing work among themselves, they sprang into action, Gordon already casting the warp spell. Once they did, Testarossa let out an evil laugh—lovingly, beautifully, but with a truly sinister touch.

“What’s so funny?!” Balt shouted, taking up his spear and charging at her. But Testarossa had already disappeared. Balt had no chance of keeping up with her.

“Dammit, where the hell did you go?!”

“Over here.”

A hot breath blew into Balt’s ear, filling his nostrils with a sweet, fragrant scent. There was no need to turn around; it was Testarossa.

Then he felt a cold, delicate female hand on his neck, almost chilling his soul.

Ah—aaahhhhh?!

The image of the now-limp Gaster flashed through his mind.

“I hate it when people don’t realize the limits of their abilities.”

But it was questionable whether Testarossa’s voice even reached Balt.

Crack.

Balt collapsed, a sobering look of terror on his face, and that was the end of the thirty-eighth-ranked member of the Imperial Guardians.

Davis, watching all this, experienced a feeling of panicked self-doubt that disturbed his thoughts for the first time in several hundred years.

“Gordon, hurry up! She’s killed Balt. She’s too dangerous!”

His voice was colored with fear, regardless of his intentions. Gordon nodded silently, as if he understood. His teleportation magic now complete, the circle of magic floating above the ground began to glow.

“Okay, retreat!”

Davis sprinted toward the circle as he made the order…but the spell failed to activate.

“Wh-what? Why?!”

Testarossa kindly explained it to Gordon, as if ridiculing him for being so upset: “I’m not sure what’s so strange about that. I’m not using the magic canceler wrong, am I?”

Davis and Gordon had no idea what she was talking about.

“What? The magic canceler…?”

“Wait, did you re-create it with magic…?”

She looked at them and let out an exasperated sigh.

Testarossa had been sharing information with Ultima and Carrera via Thought Communication. Among the information she obtained that way was data on the magic cancelers installed on the airships. For Testarossa, re-creating and using the technology from the data she obtained was child’s play. But such an act was well beyond the scope of human common sense, and it’d be absurd to expect Davis and Gordon to understand it.





All they did know was:

“What…? What *are* you?! Whether you’re a Primal or not, there’s no way an Arch Demon can have *that* much power!!”

Davis was shouting now, trying to paint over his own fears.

“Y-yeah! You weren’t *this* overwhelming the last time we fought! What the hell did you do to evolve this much…? Evolve?”

Davis and Gordon looked at each other. Hearing his own cries, Gordon now understood exactly what was going on with Testarossa—no matter how much he didn’t want to. The same went for Davis. Incarnated, named—and thanks to that, what kind of being had Testarossa, the Original White, become?

Testarossa gave them a bemused look, leisurely eliminating all doubt.

“Oh, how clever of you! That’s right. Now that I have a name, I’m higher level than even an Arch Demon. Have you ever heard the term Demon Peer before? It’s something completely different from an Arch Demon. A pity I need to spell it out to people before they understand, isn’t it?”

It only plunged the two of them deeper into despair.

“D-Demon Peer…”

“The second coming of Guy Crimson…”

Only then did Davis and Gordon realize the gravity of the situation. This Primal hadn’t manifested herself just for a laugh—she had a firm will, and she used it to fully take root here.

“But didn’t you lose interest in this world when you lost the princess’s body…?”

“Not quite. By the time you came along back then, my contract with the girl had already been fulfilled. *That’s* why I left, although certainly not without my regrets.”

“No…”

“Oh, I’m sorry! Were you laboring under the assumption that you could beat me? Well, silly, I think you see that’s not going to happen now.”

It can’t be…

Davis could feel his own confidence shatter.

“I still haven’t forgiven you for interrupting my meal back then, you

know.”

“…”

“H-hey… Davis…”

Neither Davis nor Gordon were able to move. Testarossa’s crimson eyes bolted them to the ground, like a snake staring down a frog.

“…Your meal?” Davis repeated.

All he could do was keep talking to buy more time. With that precious time, he desperately tried to figure out what was happening to his body. Anything so he could have a shot at Testarossa, proud and confident in her victory.

“That’s right. That beautiful lake was bathed in enough blood to turn crimson red, but that still didn’t make me full, you know.”

“…Nearly ten thousand innocent people died.”

“Well, that’s how our deal worked. Besides, you interrupted me before I could enjoy the main course, the most important part. Now that we’re all together and everything, why don’t we take this opportunity to have you atone for your sins?”

“Youuu…!”

Testarossa was the very one behind the Bloody Shore tragedy—but to her, that regretful disaster was just a simple meal.

And it’s still not enough…?

Davis’s heart seethed with rage. Flames of justice burned through the kindling of his fear. This evil, he thought, could never be left unchecked.

“An evil like you—”

Raising the gleaming sword in his hand, Davis struggled to escape Testarossa’s binding spell. The initial results were promising; he could feel his body regaining its strength…but Davis’s despair had only just begun.

“You’re not gonna kill them yet, Testarossa? …I don’t mean to interrupt, but I think it’s time to end this.”

A cute voice, not at all appropriate for a battlefield, was heard from above. It belonged to a girl with bluish-purple hair in a side ponytail—Ultima.

Even Davis, ranked eleventh in his nation’s hierarchy, could

sense there was something unusual about her.

“Oh, is that you, Ultima?” said Testarossa. “Did I make you wait long?”

“Mm, I’ve just been taking my time with Gabil’s band, so I’m not one to talk…but Sir Rimuru asked us to give our all, so if we don’t finish this fast, he’s gonna be mad, y’know?”

“I sure don’t want that.”

“Right?”

“I just ran into some old acquaintances of mine, so we wound up chatting a bit… But you’re right. Let’s end this before Sir Rimuru gets angry.”

Davis couldn’t understand the conversation unfolding in front of him. Or really, it’s not that he couldn’t—he just didn’t want to.

No, no, no, noooo!!

Testarossa and Ultima were both doubtlessly on the same level.

Two Demon Peers…

Taking on just one of them was difficult enough. Having backup just sealed the deal. Davis’s flames of righteousness, burning hot inside him, had been painted black before he even knew it. Black with fear. The glory of being the eleventh Imperial Guardian was meaningless in front of this duo.

If it was just one Arch Demon, Davis might’ve been able to take care of it himself—but the reality of two Demon Peers almost broke his heart. He couldn’t be blamed for that; in fact, Gordon was already crouched down and sobbing. Once a quiet, reliable man, now he was behaving like a little child. Suddenly, Davis felt jealous of Balt, dying before him and all. He had passed on without even realizing the true identity of what he had been up against. How fortunate for him…

“Great idea!”

“Well, I’m sorry to say goodbye, but I have to go. I know—since we’re old friends and all, why don’t I show you the magic you wanted to see?”

Testarossa sounded as amused as ever, speaking to the stunned Davis. He didn’t know what it meant, but he did know the end was near.

From the deepest darkness, a black flame was called forth.

The flame, condensed to the size of a fist, shone on the palm of Testarossa's hand. It was an abyss core, a notoriously hard-to-control type of hellfire, but Testarossa crushed it into her hand with ease.

Laughing to herself, Testarossa whispered in a singsong voice:

"…Death Streak."

Davis's eyes widened. He didn't know what this magic was. He couldn't comprehend it. No idea. But one thing was for sure—it was incredibly evil.

"And you over there; you know Guy Crimson, huh? In that case, you know what this magic is, don't you? The same one Guy used when he became a demon lord…"

Sadly, Davis's consciousness cut out at this point—plunging into an even deeper abyss of desperation, wishing he had never known anything at all.

……

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The abyss core crushed into Testarossa's hand became a black light that shone across the surroundings. It had the property of penetrating through almost all types of matter—a dark light that never occurred naturally. When it passed through a living being, it directly affected their genetic sequences, forcibly rewriting their genes to kill almost anything it encountered.

It was deathly magic, the epitome of pure evil—but according to tradition, it existed for a different purpose. The only ones who could withstand this magic were spiritual life-forms or those whose souls had memory-retention skills. Living things who could completely reconstruct their bodies after they were completely destroyed could escape this magic—and nobody else.

Spiritual particles, the tiny matter that made up magicules, emitted a special sort of wave. This was the light of darkness itself, difficult to counteract with magic and impossible to counteract via physical means. The only way to resist them was with other spiritual particles, and thus, the only way to resist dark light was with more

dark light. No other type of protection was possible.

Exposure to this light produced a 99.999 percent fatality rate. But not even that was 100 percent—and so, extremely rarely, there were survivors. One in a million would react by turning their body into a monster and gaining new life. In other words, this magic also selected those most suitable for monster transformation, granting the victims their blessing.

It was the worst, most taboo kind of spell, this nuclear-level Death Streak. Instead of destroying physically like Disintegration, it accurately bore down only on the particles that created life memory. It was the ultimate forbidden magic, one that could destroy the very souls of people.

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And so Davis, ranked eleventh in the Empire—and Gordon, ranked sixty-fourth and pretty much just along for the ride—became the first victims of Testarossa's Death Streak. It didn't end there.

Shortly thereafter, a ferocious rampage of death blew across the land, affecting everything within a five-hundred-yard radius. It didn't distinguish between friend or foe, killing every living thing within that range, and that's why Testarossa used Magic Sense to ensure there were no allies close by before launching it. And this was her going easy. If she had cast Death Streak with all dampers removed, everything within several miles would've breathed their last.

Death Streak was just as effective against spiritual life-forms as it was to anything else, but Testarossa had been careful to activate it in a way that wouldn't affect their souls, so it was harmless to her and Ultima.

The two of them casually surveyed the results.

"Doesn't look like there's anything alive in this whole area. By the way, you did a really good job with these, Testarossa."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"These toys they call tanks, I mean. They all look in perfect shape, so we can bring them back intact and examine them more."

"Well, of course. That's why I cleaned out only the humans from

here."

"Mmm. Y'know, maybe I should've cast Death Streak, too, instead of cutting corners up there. Then maybe I wouldn't have broken up all those toys in the sky."

"True, Ult, you could say you were a bit *too* flashy there. But if we can recover that first sample that crash-landed, that ought to be enough for reference."

"…Sure. Although I sure did cause a lot more damage to them than I thought. Those toys are *so* fragile! I only meant to destroy one, but I wound up breaking a whole bunch of 'em."

"Well, so be it. Now that Sir Rimuru named us, we're both stronger than ever. We're gonna have to be more careful from now on, Ultima."

"Yeah. I feel bad about it, too. But y'know, what I'm really worried about is Carrera. I'm not sure if she knows what the word *restraint* means, and you know how much she loves flashy magic…"

"That's why she's on standby over at our headquarters. Rimuru had the foresight to assign her to that, which I was certainly glad to see."

"Ohhh! Well, *that's* a relief!"

So they merrily chatted on. They may have been misreading Rimuru in a few ways, but nobody was around to point it out to them.

"And Benimaru's a real worrywart, huh? Talking about how he thinks there are people in the Empire who can harm Sir Rimuru and all. Even asking us to go easy so we can find out who it is!" said Ultima.

"That *is* a little troublesome, yes. If all we wanted was to win, they should've just sent *us* out alone from the start. Then Sir Rimuru wouldn't need to bother with anything at all."

"Well, it was Sir Rimuru's idea, wasn't it? He even told us not to fight. I think he wanted to give Gobta and Gabil and their forces a chance to grow a bit. It'd be easy for him to just evolve them upward, but the only way to get experience is to actually *do* it, after all. Some dolt with a lot of power and nothing else is just a wimp to us."

"That's a great idea, I think. I get it and all, but…well, you know."

"At least we got to perform in the end. That's nice."

Testarossa and Ultima were enjoying themselves well enough, but as they spoke, they were also carefully gathering up the souls of all the dead around them.

The forbidden spell Death Streak had a secret—there were no known successful cases of someone turned into a monster by it. The only way it ever *would* do the trick was if you had a soul left to be transformed. But if those souls were all being harvested, as they were right then, the chance of survival went from one in a million to exactly zero. They said the devil never gave you a straight deal, and this was maybe another example of that. A great way to hide the real probabilities, though. Testarossa and Ultima were aware of that, naturally, and that was why, once they were sure there were no survivors out on the field, they declared the battle over.

Witnessing the fate of those who messed with her never moved Testarossa's heart. There was no real emotion; she treated them the same as anyone else. They had never been in Testarossa's mind in the first place, so this was only natural.

And with that, the battle with her cohort was finished.

Two departments of the Armored Division that participated in this operation—the Magitank Force and the Flying Combat Corps—suffered total defeat. With the death of Lieutenant General Gaster, the Empire had lost its local base of operations, leaving the soldiers out on the farther reaches isolated and struggling to flee. Now the only question in this battle of annihilation was how long it would last.

Gaster's Magitank Force numbered two hundred thousand servicepeople, while Major General Farraga's Flying Combat Corps had forty thousand. Without a commander, there was no way for the imperial army to request a cease-fire… And so all the imperial forces on the ground and in the air lost their lives on the battlefield.

At that moment, the Tempest side was confirmed the victors. But this didn't mean the end of the war. That was because General Caligulio, commander of the Armored Division, still had no idea about this defeat. And at that very moment, the Restructured Armor Corps—the heart and soul of the whole Armored Division—was

about to hit the road for Rimuru, capital of Tempest.

INTERLUDE

GAZEL'S MELANCHOLY

Gazel, king of the dwarves, was stunned to see the scene on the big screen in front of him.

"This… This is just…"

"My liege, your agitation is showing on your face. Don't tell me you're still that naive about this?"

"Ah, Jaine, you say that, but how else are we supposed to react? All conventional wisdom about warfare is being thrown out the window."

The prodding of Jaine, Dwargon's elderly arch-wizard, was met with a rebuke not by Gazel, but by Vaughn, admiral paladin and supreme commander of the dwarven force. It was understandable. This large screen provided by Rimuru's new technology showed warfare at its worst, projected to them as it happened. Even to the usually jaded Gazel, it was something extraordinary to witness.

"This certainly turns conventional wisdom about war on its ear, doesn't it?"

Dolph, captain of the Pegasus Knights, breathed a tired sigh.

"Not even a legion-magic barrier could block that tank's attack. Face up to that without knowing anything, and defeat is inevitable. But…while we have every right to be terrified by it, we can handle it by building trenches and earthen walls. Just like it was foretold to us…"

They all nodded. As they had concluded, one wall wouldn't be enough to keep the shells at bay, but multiple layers of defensive walls could very effectively tamp down their power. That

countermeasure was based on Rimuru's knowledge, and although the battle ended before it could be put to use, based on the power they saw in the video footage, they had come to the conclusion that this was no overwhelming weapon that rendered them totally helpless.

"Looking at the Empire's equipment, I'd say their main focus is on medium- to long-range strikes rather than close-quarters combat. It appears they've eliminated their heavy armor and are using light equipment instead?"

"Yes, I've looked into that. It seems the Empire's invented a new type of arm called a spellgun that allows even junior foot soldiers to easily wield magic. Furthermore, some of their troops are armed with guns—an otherworlder weapon, it seems. With that, they apparently think the era of close-quarters combat is obsolete."

"I can hardly blame the Empire for thinking the era of swords is over, then."

Dolph nodded gravely. These so-called guns could apparently penetrate iron armor without much difficulty—and their large tank force seemed capable even against stout city walls. It all but made a mockery of the weapons and armor that were the mainstays of dwarven industry.

But:

"We are in *our* world—and not another one," Gazel insisted. "Tactical theories that work over there are pointless if you can't incorporate the presence of magic into them—is that what you're saying?"

"Indeed I am. The spellguns are a threat, yes, but they did not match up well against their foes. Lord Rimuru has a large number of Scale Shields obtained from Charybdis. He was kind enough to give us an ample supply, but they allow us to cancel out most magic."

"Mm…"

With magic a real presence, they had the ability to defend themselves against many modern weapons, even as they neutralized the enemy's magic skills. And thanks to that—yes, they had drawn an inopportune opponent, but still—today was a disaster for the Empire. They had specialized way too much in mid- to long-

range offense, and when the enemy came too close, their abject vulnerability became all too clear. It was a major tactical blunder.

“But it all depends on who’s controlling the reins. We have to make the most effective use we can of the intel from this war, lest we fall into the same traps.”

Such was Gazel’s conclusion, but truth be told, he felt the real issue came well before that. All this talk of tactics and weapons was well and good, but they had bigger fish to fry. However, he hadn’t quite willed himself to bring it up.

His concern lay with the individual strength each of these monsters was showing. Gobta/Ranga and Gabil went without saying, but even the monsters serving under them seemed like they had grown an incredible amount. They also made extremely liberal use of recovery potion, allowing them to engage in some pretty hazardous battle tactics. Thanks to the large-scale production of the hipokute herb, a far cry from times before, they were now cranking out huge supplies of potion. That, too, had disrupted the norms of battle on this planet.

But even more than that:

“King Gazel, may I offer you a word of advice?” said Jaine.

“Don’t say it. I know.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you do. But this is something I think we must bring out in the open.”

“…”

Jaine’s words were grim. Her warning needed to be shared with everyone in the room. Taking Gazel’s silence as an affirmation, she began speaking.

“Those demon girls, you know; there’s just something off about them. The one that set the flying ships afire used Nuclear Flame, which is classified as a ritual magic. It’d be damned difficult for even me to pull that off alone. But the *real* problem is what that white-haired girl did. That was Death Streak—a forbidden spell, one deemed uncontrollable.”

Everyone listened to Jaine’s words in silence. Just in the few days they had spent together, even the casual observer would realize just how beyond the norm these demon girls were.

Henrietta, the knight assassin and leader of the Dwarven Kingdom's dark agents, had looked into these new hires brought on by Tempest. Diablo, Rimuru's close adviser, had seemingly brought them in out of nowhere. They were demons, and rumor had it that they were old acquaintances of Diablo. Rimuru explained that they were intelligence officers tasked with observational duty over their various army divisions. Gazel assumed they were much more than that, and he seemed to be right.

"I… I thought this might be the case…"

"So, my lord, do you have any idea who these girls might be?"

"Mmm… Yes. But you'd be much happier not knowing."

"What are you talking about?! After seeing such an unbelievable battle unfold, I'd be more terrified if I *didn't* know!"

Jaine was right. The fighting skills of these demons was the scariest thing of all about this day—enough so that even Gazel was staring at the screen, muttering "Are you joking?" to himself.

"…Well, I'm ready for it. If you became *that* emotional after seeing that, King Gazel, I have a pretty good idea of what it is."

The group nodded at Jaine's grave foreboding.

Gazel looked at the faces of his trusted comrades-in-arms—Dolph, then Vaughn, then Henrietta—and steeled his resolve.

"Back during that one night at the festival."

"The festival? When you were invited to the monster nation?"

"You *did* attend a secret meeting alone while you were there, didn't you? We were standing by in the next room over, but what happened then?"

"Well, I saw Rimuru's secretary…or butler, was it? You met him as well, right?"

"Ah yes, Diablo. Quite a gentleman."

"Certainly one with a threatening air about him, though. What of him?"

Everyone who participated in the Tempest Founder's Festival was acquainted with Diablo. Henrietta had been undercover guarding Gazel, so she knew the names and faces of Rimuru's top staff. Only Jaine, who was holding down the fort in Dwargon back then, was wholly unaware of what was coming as Gazel dropped his bomb.

“…According to Elmesia, Diablo is a Primal.”

“““ …”””

“W-wait. What? What did you just say, King Gazel?”

Jaine’s face paled at once as she spoke, hoping that she was mistaken about this all along. But reality was cruel to her.

“I said he’s a Primal. I can only assume he’s Noir, the Original Black. That’s the only one not previously bound to a claimed territory, and there’ve been sightings of him all over the world from before.”

King Gazel laid out the facts as flatly as he could. He sounded dignified as always, but Jaine wasn’t fooled.

“Wait! Wait, wait, wait! King Gazel, wait a minute!”

“What’s wrong?”

“What’s *wrong*?! A Primal—Noir—is working for the demon lord Rimuru?!”

“That’s right.”

“That… That’s a big problem, isn’t it?! Why were you silent about it until now?!”

Jaine was screaming at the top of her lungs. But the assault wasn’t over.

“Then… What about Testarossa…and Ultima, too…?”

“Oh, come now, that’d *really* be too much… They’re probably just old demons under Diablo or whatnot… Right?”

Dolph and Vaughn’s hopeful conjecturing was shot down by Henrietta.

“That’s not all,” she said. “Diablo has recruited several more people from parts unknown. Hierarchically speaking, they’re meant to be his subordinates—but their diplomatic attaché Testarossa, chief prosecutor Ultima, and chief justice Carrera have known each other for a long time…and all four of them seemed to treat each other as equals.”

“Whoa, whoa, are you serious?”

“Lord Rimuru’s far too loose with his legislative appointees…”

“Th-three people on the same level as a Primal? B-but we just saw two of them do *that…*”

Everybody there wanted to deny it. But reflecting on what they just saw transpire, all of them had to arrive at the truth. Testarossa’s

and Ultima's strength was massive—not even Jaine could fully estimate it.

"I told you, you'd be happier not knowing…"

""""…"""

"That is to say, I feel bad that I kept quiet about Diablo, but what would telling you all have accomplished? If he was spreading evil, that'd be one thing, but I have a firm promise from Rimuru that he'll keep him in line, and I'd like to believe my former training partner at his word. But never in my wildest dreams did I think he'd bring on *more* Primals!"

Bit late for that, everyone in the room thought. But as they all saw now, being aware of that wouldn't have changed much.

"Look, when I decided to trust in Rimuru, that's when I cast my lot with him. He's already got the Storm Dragon; it's a little late for regrets now. All of you need to settle this in your mind."

It's not that simple, but Gazel had a valid point as well.

"Well, I'll trust in you," said Vaughn. "If you believe in someone, I'm not going to complain about it."

"Yes. I've seen Lord Rimuru with my own eyes, and I agree with my lord. He deserves our trust," said Henrietta.

"I am your shadow, my lord, and I will follow you in your thoughts," added Dolph.

"*Sigh.* I trust him, too, you know. I had an audience with Lord Rimuru, even before he became a demon lord. What I'm scared of is that he'll assemble this vast concentration of forces that we can't deal with any longer… But you're right. It *is* a little late for that. If we can't deal with it, there's no point considering ways to."

Everyone nodded deeply at Jaine's words. If there was no way to come to a conclusion by thinking about it, the problem essentially didn't have an answer. They had only two choices—trust in him or not.

"Well, we'll put that topic on hold."

With Gazel's final statement, the issue was shelved.

Was this the end of the war? Not hardly.

The troops who had been looming large at the Dwarven Kingdom's central entrance were now fully eradicated, but they were still locked in a standoff with the imperial army at their East gate. There were still hints of disquiet around Rimuru, the capital of Tempest, as well.

"Damn that Rimuru, though… Even after such a huge victory, he's still not satisfied? I'd hate to get on his bad side…," Gazel grumbled.

"This may not be Lord Rimuru's will, though. There's a chance the Empire still hasn't called off the invasion because they're unaware of this defeat…"

"Hmm… That's a strong possibility."

Gazel nodded at Dolph. If the Empire *was* aware of it, they'd definitely abort the mission at once.

"And also, King Gazel," Jaine cut in, "I'm sure even the Empire is using magic to coordinate their forces. But well, you see how the situation has changed in an instant today. It's hard to believe even with your own eyes, but if you receive this report about how your army was defeated, and everyone was killed out of nowhere, you'd heavily suspect it to be some sort of enemy ruse, wouldn't you?"

"No, I'm sure I wouldn't believe a mere report, either. The Empire's General Caligulio is hardly incompetent, but I don't think he's the kind of guy who'd opt to retreat at this point. They'd treat him like a coward if he did. Those imperial fools aren't going to shoulder their lances until they taste defeat for themselves."

Jaine was right, and Vaughn was talking good sense as well. Gazel was convinced he'd make the same decision if he was in the Empire's shoes. He felt pity for the poor soldiers and officers who had to come along with him… But as the invaders, that's on them. Gazel was known as a wise king, but he had no intention of taking responsibility for an Empire currently engaging in hostilities with him. He wasn't obligated to anyway. All he could do was coldly speculate on what the future would bring.

"Out of the nine hundred forty thousand imperial soldiers who invaded the Forest of Jura, two hundred forty thousand are already lost forever. By this point, I don't think there's any questioning Rimuru's final victory."

“That’s fair, yes. It’d be pretty cute of him if he got caught off guard at *this* point… But Lord Rimuru is hardly that kind of buffoon.”

Vaughn wistfully agreed with Gazel. But the question on everyone’s mind: How much more of a sacrifice was the Empire willing to tolerate?

“We will need to keep careful records of this war, so we can use it as a lesson for the future. That, and we should remember all the more that we, as humans, must never rile a demon lord.”

“”””Yes, my lord!”””

The strength of these monsters—shattering conventional war strategy, even as its sheer depths remained untapped—was now clearly something that could approach a Catastrophe-size threat. Quite fortuitous, then, that the goal of Rimuru and his cohorts was to live hand in hand with humanity, not dominate the world.

The Empire was simply getting what it deserved, but to keep their sacrifice from going to waste, Gazel wanted to see this battle through to the end. That, and despite it all, he still had to prepare for the worst possible outcome.

If Rimuru was ever to turn against him…

…Well, he prayed that would never happen, but what if it did? What should they do? Gazel had boasted to his closest confidants that he trusted Rimuru, but by that, he only meant Rimuru as a person. As the leader of a nation, he also had to take the best measures possible to prevent hurting his people. Just because he didn’t have a good answer yet didn’t mean he was excused from pondering the question.

…That being said, taking on a Primal is a fool’s errand, and we’re not much more likely to ever defeat Veldora. My hands are tied, really…

Faced with a question far too difficult to ever answer, Gazel began to feel a headache coming on.

CHAPTER 3

BATTLE OF THE LABYRINTH

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



CHAPTER 3

BATTLE OF THE LABYRINTH

I do remember saying something like “Give your all,” yes. Don’t worry. I’m not losing my marbles yet. It’s only been around three years since I was reincarnated, even. No need to worry about that.

But still…

As I watched the big screen, I began to wonder if those words were really mine after all. Did I really say that? After all, the screen was showing my army pretty much kicking everyone’s ass out there. Which is great. Super. No problems there. But the content was just too much to watch. It was such a lopsided thrashing that I just kept my mouth agape the whole time.

Gobta was acting very cool, very non-Gobta-like, as he stormed around the battlefield and crushed tanks with his bare hands. Unified with Ranga, he both looked and raged like someone who deserved being called part of the Big Four. And Gabil, to his credit, had transformed into a real strong-looking dragon-ish kind of monster, smashing up enemy ships with some kind of crazy powerful energy reaction. And not just him—everyone on Team Hiryu had undergone transformations, too. I realized at once that this was Dragon Body at work, but since when had they mastered it so well…?

Also, that Dragon Body skill—something I left for later and never got to—I had no idea it was so amazing. It’s got a time limit, and you can only be active in it for around ten minutes, I guess… But the crazy power more than makes up for the disadvantages. It’d be suicide if you used it the wrong way, but it’s a nice little card to add to

your deck, I think.

But even Gabil and company lost the spotlight to that giant midair explosion. I don't know what the heck they did, but the enemy's flagship had a thermonuclear meltdown or something, and it took out the Empire's entire airship force with it. That surprised even me, but as a result, the Empire's airpower was essentially destroyed—every single ship crashed to the ground.

That kicked off a major offensive by the Tempest forces. With Gobta's and Gabil's forces joining up, everyone could see that we had gained the upper hand in the war. Even in modern warfare, helicopters had an overwhelming advantage against tanks—and in much the same way, Team Hiryu was mostly using breath attacks from the air, inflicting heavy, one-sided damage on the Empire's ground forces. And because they were such small targets, the tank guns weren't even a threat. Really, as long as they don't hit you, it's not worth worrying about.

The Empire didn't just sit there and take a beating, of course, They tried fighting back several times…but we squashed every attempt they put up.

The big performers in that respect were Veyron and Zonda under Ultima's command. Those two were definitely old demons, all right. They seemed to have an eye for spotting the strongest among their foes, and regardless of whether they were squad captains or regular soldiers, they only chose the most powerful…and tore them apart. Their butler and cook outfits (respectively) weren't exactly appropriate, but for the imperial troops, they became a symbol of fear.

Looking at the enemy's supply units, Hakuro was slashing away at them with his sword, offering no mercy. Apparently some of them even tried to introduce themselves first—"Goddamn you! I am ranked ninety-seventh—!!" and so on—but Hakuro's white blade made them spew blood before they could finish.

"Forgive me," he said to the bleeding masses. "Sir Rimuru is watching this battle. He has ordered us to go at full power, and thus I can offer you no mercy." That *really* wasn't how I meant it, but now I understand how much of a big deal it was to them.

You know, though… I couldn't really withdraw that order now. If I butted in at this point, it'd just cause confusion on the field. So I took the long view and decided to watch how the battle unfolded.

This turned out to be a pretty good decision. Frankly, the imperial soldiers Veyron, Zonda, and Hakuro picked off were equal to or better than paladins in ability. That, and their gear was pretty insane, even better than the spiritual armor worn by paladins—Legend class in quality. Looking at the big picture, they were way stronger than any of those guys, a fact that shocked me when Raphael gave me the results. I wasn't sure how they got this kind of equipment, but they did, and that was that.

Maybe the people granted this gear were the heavily rumored Imperial Guardians, huh? Gadora told me about them, this group handpicked from the best the Empire had to offer, including otherworlders. There were around a hundred of them, he said, and I guess the "rank" stuff they mentioned was proof of their membership. If people like that were given a chance to *really* strut their stuff, things might've been a lot more chaotic out there.

It was smart of us to take them out before they were fully ready, just like Hakuro did. Veyron and Zonda did the same, too, taking action before anyone knew what was going on. They all had a good eye for spotting the most fearsome of our foes, like they had stats floating above their heads. If all their champions had bonded together, I don't think killing them would've been so simple, but it's their fault for being careless on the field. Got a problem with that? Well, you should've gone all out from the start.

That, of course, could be said for us as well. If we showed any needless mercy to the enemy, there was a good chance they'd take advantage of it. If that happened, the damage would've been unthinkable. I refused to let us do anything foolish like hurt a friend to rescue an enemy soldier. I couldn't help but want to show a little compassion sometimes, but that would be the same as letting up because I assumed victory was in the bag. We were fighting a war here—best to keep our minds hardened and let them all do their best till the end.

So regarding the surrender I was expecting to receive from

them… Well, while I was admiring the exploits of Hakuro and the gang, something strange was going on in the Empire's command HQ.

Report. Activation of the large-scale destructive magic Death Streak confirmed. The user is the subject Testarossa.

Hearing Raphael's report, I hurriedly projected things on the big screen. There they were, Testarossa and Ultima, standing around with big smiles. Nobody else was alive. The nearly one thousand tanks the Empire had left were silenced, all the infantry deployed around them fallen. It'd have to be in the tens of thousands, I estimated. Death Streak, was it? That's one ridiculously dangerous spell…

Understood. Death Streak is a type of nuclear magic, a magical death ray that kills all living creatures. As a side effect…

Raphael was happy to analyze and explain the situation to me, but I really don't think I could be blamed for almost shouting "Don't use *that* kind of dangerous magic!!"

Ultima's nuclear blast was called Nuclear Flame, apparently, but *this* move seemed several times more dangerous. Not that Testarossa was stopping her, either, but…

Either way, the moment *that* spell triggered, that pretty much decided the match. There were no surviving enemy commanders left, and it was only a matter of time before we weeded out the remaining troops. So our battle with the Empire over on the Dwarven Kingdom side ended in a fantastic victory for us.

✳

The imperial army, which we considered to be a decoy, was

annihilated—literally wiped off the face of the earth, and not just in strategic terms, either. It was absurd. I didn't think telling them to "go all out" would result in something like *this*.

Also, Benimaru was starting to act a bit scary.

"…If *this* was the result, was there any damn *point* to my strategy in the first place?! What the hell's up with our intelligence officers down there?! You said they were under your control, Sir Rimuru, but can you explain this, please?"

Yes, I had been keeping a few things to myself. Benimaru didn't need to yell at me with a freaky smile like that. I mean… You know. Did we really *have* a strategy at all? And look, Benimaru, you're not the only one who wants an explanation. In fact, I wanna get some answers on this, too!

…But I couldn't just shout out everything on my mind, so I glanced at Veldora for some assistance. He averted his eyes. I knew this in advance, but it was pointless to rely on Veldora for situations like this. The same went for Ramiris; she wouldn't pitch in, either.

"No, um, I told you, right? Those are the new guys that Diablo recruited and brought in for us."

"I know they're Diablo's people."

No dancing around the topic, then. Ah well. So I decided to be honest and tell him everything. If it was Benimaru and Geld, I was sure that revealing that these ladies were super-freaky Primals would be greeted with a smile and a nod. Besides, Diablo was responsible for everything related to them, so if something came up, we could discuss it then.

Armed with this theory, I prepared to tell the truth.

"So uh, do you know what a Primal is?"

"A Primal?"

Benimaru didn't seem to, but Shuna, currently offering us some coffee, interrupted.

"You're referring to the Seven Sovereigns, the source of all demons? I overheard a conversation about them the other day, so I got curious and looked it up, but I was surprised to see that Diablo is one of them."

I didn't know the Primals— the origins of all demons—had such a

fancy moniker. And really, why was Shuna smiling so peacefully as she unveiled all this classified information?

The smell of coffee drifted across the Control Center, easing the tension a bit.

“Um…?” Benimaru seemed confused.

“Oh, you didn’t know, my brother? Well, it’s not just Diablo. Testarossa, Carrera, and Ultima are all sovereigns of demon-dom as well.”

“They are?”

“They are.”

Shuna’s smile almost blinded me. Faced with it, Benimaru could no longer state any doubt. And seeing him fall silent like that, I thought: *Wow, Shuna’s actually a pretty big deal, huh?* I was steeling myself to tell this horrifying secret, but having it revealed so readily was sort of a disappointment. Kinda felt better this way, though.

“Diablo, I want you to explain it.”

“Very well, Sir Rimuru. Benimaru, I must admit that I am as she says, a Primal Demon…”

I sipped at my coffee as I listened to Diablo’s speech. Mmm. Tea is great and all, but I do like me some coffee, too.

“…All right. I understand,” Benimaru said. “That certainly explains everyone’s strength, then. But if that’s the case, I wish you had told me about it from the beginning.”

“Well, you know,” I began, “I thought people would get all scared if they knew the truth. Me and Veldora are one thing, but I didn’t want you guys to have more unnecessary stuff to worry about.”

I was worried for my friends, so I kept quiet. I made sure to emphasize only that point. Let’s not dwell on how I gave them bodies and names and stuff, if we could.

“Well, *I* wasn’t afraid of them, neither!”

Even Ramiris was on my side. Hopefully everyone else wasn’t too freaked out by this…

“I believe your concerns were unnecessary, Sir Rimuru. If you have accepted them, then we all welcome them as our friends.”

“Yes, Benimaru is right. Nobody here would discriminate against others based on strength or appearance.”

Benimaru smiled as he said it, Geld preaching stone-cold fact to me. They helped me banish my worries for good. Not even Shuna had any concerns about Diablo and the rest of the demons; the fact that they were still treating each other as they always had was proof of that.

“Well, great, then. Now I feel bad for worrying so much.”

“Ha-ha-ha! You should have more faith in us.”

“Exactly. But I do have to thank you for worrying about us enough to assign Carrera and the rest to us.”

It was a little awkward, but I was glad Benimaru and Geld accepted it. But what about Gabil and Gobta and the rest? They seemed to be doing fine, as far as I could tell, and let’s hope they continue to be.

“Well, we’re all getting along well with Diablo. I’m sure it’ll be okay!”

Shion gave him her stamp of approval, not that I was ever worried about her.

“What do you mean, Shion?”

“I mean exactly what I said, Diablo.”

Shion, my first secretary, and Diablo, my second, glared at each other. Being called a Primal sounds real pretentious, but *this* was how he mainly acted. Once again, I was relieved that I had worried over nothing.

With that behind us, we discussed the day’s events a bit longer.

“I assigned Testarossa and Ultima to the field army because if the enemy had a demon lord–class threat on their side, I thought we’d be in trouble. Then, well, they put in a little *too* much of an effort.”

This was all thanks to that order I sent out, but I really didn’t expect everyone to go *this* out of control. It was just so wild, so over the top…and so *cool*, too. They just annihilated an entire enemy army, and they didn’t flinch even once.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Seems they got a little too excited and carried away, didn’t they? I’ll be sure to give them a *good* lesson about it later,” Diablo said cheerfully.

“Keep it in moderation!” I didn’t forget to add. But ah well. Diablo could take care of himself, and I was sure he’d continue educating them…again, without overdoing it.

Next up, we surveyed our damages. Just two hours after the start of battle, all the fighting was over. It looked like we had a lot of injured on our side, but as for the final damage report…

“All casualties have reportedly been fully healed!”

A cheery voice echoed across the Control Center.

All the demons who had gone into battle had been given Tempest-made High Potions, ten per person. That allowed them to immediately heal most wounds. And that even applied to people I thought were dead at first; in fact, they were only playing possum, and even their severed limbs had already been fully healed with Full Potions. They were playing the decoy role with serious aplomb, just as Benimaru ordered them to.

“I told you, didn’t I? I *told* you not to worry.”

“You sure did. And I trusted you and everyone else, of course.”

Everything went according to Benimaru’s plan. The one random element he didn’t expect, apparently, was the demons’ performance. As a result of that, despite going through a *lot* of potions, we didn’t suffer a single casualty. It was an utterly unbelievable way to win.

That being said, we weren’t totally unscathed. It seemed Gabil and Team Hiryu suffered some fairly serious bodily fatigue due to the side effects of the Dragon Body skill. I was pretty wowed by that move, but sure enough, the ten-minute time limit wasn’t the only minus. The moment battle ended, the overexertion crashed on them like a tidal wave, and they all lay prone on the ground, as if paralyzed. This wasn’t an “injury” per se, so potions wouldn’t help them. After taking in all those magicules and becoming so strong, maybe this was the body rejecting all that foreign matter out again.

This fatigue penalty seemed to apply to all of Team Hiryu, not just Gabil. But I was fine with that. Best to have them think “You should be glad it wasn’t worse” and leave them be.

It would later transpire that this paralyzing condition lasted for

around twenty-four hours, so after some debate, we decided to limit Dragon Body activations to no more than once every other day, tops. Their full strength scored them the win this time, but invoke that move at the wrong time, and it could come back to bite them. A real double-edged sword, you could say. So I advised Gabil to be very careful with that.

✳

Next we turned our attention to the Empire's side.

The Magitank Force led by Lieutenant General Gaster had two hundred thousand troops; Major General Farraga's Flying Combat Corps had forty thousand. That, as confirmed by the wizard Gadora, was the first size of the imperial forces.

But we didn't take any POWs this time. They were all dead—around two hundred forty thousand in all. What a massacre. And look, it's not that my heart didn't ache over it. But when I became a demon lord, I did it by killing twenty thousand people by my own hand. By this point, I guess I was just done making excuses.

Either way, after killing all two hundred forty thousand members of this force, I guess their souls were being "offered" within me. A little while after battle began, I started feeling the souls accumulating at a frantic pace. This must be what collecting souls from the people working for you feels like, that classic demon lord perk. Thanks to that, I had an exact grasp of just how many enemy soldiers we beat.

But…I mean, really, *this* many human souls? Because, like, ten thousand was enough to upgrade me from regular to "true" demon lord. What would two hundred forty thousand do to me?

The answer: Nothing! The moment I awakened to true demon lord, that must've been the end of the road. Makes sense. Otherwise, Guy Crimson would've been busy eradicating the entire human race, reaping souls all over the place. He kept the needless slaughter to a minimum because he instinctively knew there was nowhere higher to go from here.

That was when I received an unexpected notice.

Report. The amount of acquired souls has exceeded the set limit. It is now possible to awaken subordinates connected to you via your soul lineage. The following people are eligible…

Pretty outrageous even by Raphael standards.

Apparently, if you gave a set amount of souls to a qualified receiver, you could awaken them. I assumed capturing excess souls was pointless, but even if they didn't affect your own evolution, you could still use them to evolve the people under you. As Raphael put it, several people close to me had met the requirements for this awakening. Giving them the souls I had acquired would, it seemed, grant them the same kind of awakened strength that I enjoyed as a true demon lord.

The number of souls required was one hundred thousand. Sheesh. I didn't think *ten times* would be needed to awaken someone else. No wonder nobody else knew about this until now. Maybe someone like Guy did…but who could say? Even if he did, it wasn't like he could execute on it all the time. Besides, it's a lot easier to befriend a demon lord and have him boost you up than try to do it yourself. Maybe that was how the Walpurgis got its start—a gathering of the big bosses, a way for Guy to see who was really worthy of joining up.

But maybe there was some other reason for it. Maybe I was giving him too much credit, and he really didn't know after all; I couldn't dismiss that notion. At the very least, a hundred thousand souls was nothing to sniff at. It was killing an entire city, basically, so you couldn't be casual with it.

Anyway. As of right then, I had around two hundred fifty thousand extra souls on me, which would let me awaken two people. My pool of qualified subordinates: Ranga, Benimaru, Shion, Gabil, Geld, Diablo, Testarossa, Ultima, Carrera, Kumara, Zegion, and Adalmann—twelve in all.

…Create a soul corridor to evolve a subordinate?
Yes
No

Based on how Raphael put it, I guess I could awaken people even if I wasn't physically nearby. A soul corridor would allow my target and me to be unaffected by time and space, kind of like how Veldora and I used to be; it would also strengthen the bond between us, which wasn't a bad thing, either.

So what now?

In my case, awakening made me incomparably stronger than before. It evolved my unique skill the Great Sage into the ultimate skill Raphael, Lord of Wisdom. If someone like Benimaru could evolve to that level, then I had no reason to hesitate.

But hang on. What was the deal with that "soul lineage" thing? If I had to guess, it referred to the soul connection we had after I gave those people names. Naming a monster causes an evolution, and I definitely wasn't shy about doing *that* all the time, but I also knew it was kind of dangerous. I wasn't afraid to name with confidence because Raphael was now assessing the safety risks for me. Get it wrong, and I'd be stripped of all my power and maybe even die—that or be permanently weakened.

In my case, I had Belzebuth's Stomach, a tremendously useful skill, and I used it to store any excess magicules I had. If I was short, I could apparently borrow some from Veldora, too… But either way, Raphael managed all that, and I didn't need to worry about a thing.

So unfair, isn't it? Normally you needed your own magicules to name something, which made it no small feat. I bet that was even true for Guy. That's why so few people were really connected to others at the soul.

But as far as I was concerned, my friends were irreplaceable. I meant that, too. And I didn't mind experimenting on myself, but I wasn't gonna use my friends as guinea pigs. Raphael was recommending this option to me, so I didn't *think* it was dangerous… or I liked to believe that. But something told me this was playing with

some serious fire. Besides, I didn't even know who I should pick, and there were a bunch of other problems, too. If magicule energy was the main factor, I really thought Soei would qualify as well—but he didn't, so it made me wonder about the conditions for staging an awakening.

Everything about it was so unclear, which really gave me pause. During my Harvest Festival, there was a long period of dormancy before I evolved, known as my Initiation. There was no guarantee that wouldn't happen again this time, so I really wanted everything worked out in advance. Most of all, however, this war wasn't over yet. The imperial army's main force, some seven hundred thousand of them, was on the march toward our capital. Going on wacky adventures during such urgent times really wasn't a good idea.

So the answer is no for now. Let's leave this matter until things settle down.

✳

I ordered the goblins to go on salvage duty, collecting the intact tanks and surviving airship wreckage for me. Gabil and the dragonewts would be knocked out for a while longer, so I had the Wyvern Riders transport all the stuff they got over to the Dwarven Kingdom. I wanted them to have all the recovery time I could give them.

Instead, I sent the Blue Numbers to join up with the goblins. This was on Benimaru's suggestion; he said there was no need for them to hurry back to the capital, since even if they did, they wouldn't be in time for the final battle.

Gazel, to his credit, also asked if I needed any reinforcements. I told him we had no problems for now. The dwarves, too, were still in the middle of war. Hostilities at the Central entrance were done, but the East exit bordering the Empire was still staked out by an imperial force of some sixty thousand. Gadora identified them as Yuuki's division, deployed as a diversionary tactic…but we didn't know what

was to come, so I really didn't want to drop the ball with them.

I was sure Gazel could take care of that…and in fact, I was sure he was fully on the case that very minute. Our mission right then was to settle the score with the Empire's main force. The opening battle was a huge victory for us, but the enemy still had a force far too enormous to downplay.

In terms of numbers, we were at an overwhelming disadvantage…but my staff couldn't have been more motivated. Shion couldn't wait to get cracking, even saying stuff like "I can't let those demons hog the spotlight! I have to go out there and show them what *real* strength means!!" She sounded so *frustrated*. I almost wanted to ask exactly who was her enemy in this war.

"Aren't you supposed to be my bodyguard?"

The moment I pointed that out, she regained her composure in a big hurry. Nothing good comes from being *too* eager to fight, after all.

But Shion wasn't the only one raring to go among us.

"My lord! Ultima's been bragging shamelessly, saying our forces achieved a huge victory in the first round! Oooh, I can't wait to get my turn! Would it be all right if I went over and put in a few choice words?"

Carrera's cheeks were flushed as she flew into the Control Room. I had ordered her to stand by with the rest of the Second Army Corps, but I guess the demons were all Thought Communication-ing with each other. Her fellow demons boasting about all the murder they committed must've been more than she could stand…but I couldn't have her working solo right then.

"A few choice words?" Benimaru asked. He knew Carrera was a Primal, but he still dealt with her the same way. Maybe I really was worrying too much.

"Yes, I thought I could give them a little nuclear magic as a gift."

She said that with the most endearing smile. Jaune, the Original Yellow, sure lived up to her reputation.

"Denied!" came Benimaru's disgusted reply.

"Carrera, please be patient until further orders," Geld added. "Your actions take on meaning only when they're applied at the most critical moment."

Carrera wasn't too happy about that, but she had no intention of disobeying Benimaru. She reluctantly nodded at Geld's rebuke.

"All right. I just wanted to show you what I could do, but maybe there's a time when that'll be more effective, huh? I'll sit tight and wait."

Glad she saw things our way. It looked like she respected what Geld had to say; maybe they were a better pair than I thought.

"Ha-ha-ha! Carrera, life is about more than going on the rampage, you know. It's only when we become a sword for our leader that we can truly shine!"

"Yes, Shion, I understand you. Maybe I've been a little too hasty, huh? I'm going to go cool off a little."

Are you really one to talk, Shion? I thought. It was a nice thing to say and all, but coming from her, it sounded so unconvincing. Weren't *you* the one who wanted to go on a big rampage just now? But let's hold back on that. It'd be a bad idea to rehash the conversation when it was over now. I gave Shion a judgmental frown as Carrera left.

So morale definitely wasn't a problem.

On our side, we had the forces inside the labyrinth as well as the rested Second Army Corps. Everyone from my top officials to the soldiers deep down the chain of command seemed to be in high spirits, eager to give it their all—they must have heard my orders. The Empire, meanwhile, totaled seven hundred thousand troops. We'd never compete in numbers, but this was quality over quantity. The other side might still have had some strong characters lurking in the background, but we had one killer defense mechanism in the labyrinth.

"The key to victory is gonna lie in the labyrinth. Veldora… Ramiris… I'm counting on you guys!"

"Yes, of course. Do not fear. I'll take care of everything!"

"Right, exactly! We're all backing you up, so you just rest easy!"

Their eager replies soothed my heart.

The important thing here was how we'd avoid casualties, and

luring the enemy into the labyrinth was the best way to do that. Inside the Dungeon, we could reduce the wear and tear on our army down to zero, and that wasn't all—we could also add the monsters of the labyrinth to our forces, letting us make up for any numerical disadvantages without much hassle. Count the lower-level monsters, and the total number would add up to several hundred thousand.

"Then we'll just have to see how much the Empire believed in Yuuki's cajoling, huh?" I said.

"Isn't it the other way around? You can't trust him, and that's exactly why he's led them to have their suspicions of him."

"Ah, that *does* make a lot of sense!"

I was sure Benimaru was right. If you looked at Yuuki as an enemy, he was quite a nuisance. We might've been in a temporary partnership, but there was no way to trust him as an ally. Maybe the feeling was mutual on the imperial side?

"Someone that fishy, maybe it's safer to have him infiltrate the enemy instead of fight with him as allies."

That was an unusually accurate statement from Shion.

"At least we don't have to expend any effort worrying about whether we'll be betrayed," Benimaru added with a nod. "The imperials, on the other hand, probably don't consider Yuuki to be a complete ally. They'll be wary of him, suspicious of whatever he has to say. In other words, they don't *really* know how the sixty thousand troops by the East exit of Dwargon are going to act. The Empire might make their strike there, so we'd best tell Gazel to be on his guard."

"Knowing King Gazel, I don't think we'll need to worry. But no, there's nothing more annoying than an untrustworthy ally. If I were you, I'd be the first to crush him."

I already told King Gazel about Yuuki, and like Benimaru said, I'm sure he took all necessary measures without me checking up on him.

Our main concern should have been the Empire's main force. Even as we spoke, they were attacking from multiple sides, trying to surround us. The only thing left in our city was that huge gate, so there was no great need to panic, although we still couldn't help

being nervous.

My main concern was that they'd skip Tempest entirely and instead attack Farminus, the new kingdom established by Yohm. He had people like Razen and Gruecith around to defend it, but that nation honestly didn't have the wherewithal to wage large-scale war at the moment. We were still in the middle of providing them support as they reformed their ways, so we really didn't want it to become a battlefield. It'd be up to us to provide reinforcements, of course, and that'd really complicate matters as far as I was concerned. So along those lines, we were glad it didn't seem to be turning out that way. Regardless, we couldn't let our guards down.

If the Empire didn't trust Yuuki and instead opted to whiz right by us and into Blumund…then we'd have Geld's force attack them from the rear. It'd be easy to send the Second Corps over with my teleport spell…but we'd still have a ground war on our hands. The Second Corps would get far less support from the labyrinth, and I was sure it'd be a tough battle. We should have been able to recruit a good number of volunteers from the labyrinth, but even so, we couldn't force monsters out of there if they didn't want to go, so the numbers would have to be smaller. Besides, if we fought on the ground, we couldn't leverage the labyrinth's features at all, and thus we'd have to be prepared for serious casualties.

Ideally, we really wanted the enemy to enter the labyrinth. Bringing the battle there, in Benimaru's eyes, was both the safest route and the one most likely to succeed. If we fought on the ground, we'd lose our advantage in the labyrinth; we'd have to fight them head-on, in a level playing field. Which was how it usually was, of course, but in war, the key to victory was all in building an edge for yourself. I didn't think the labyrinth was exactly *fair* or whatever, but if we won, then hey, we were in the right.

So while (hopefully) the labyrinth would serve as the main battlefield, our basic strategy was still the same even if we fought on the ground. Job one for us was to ferret out the strongest fighters on the opposing side, and just like how we used the goblins as bait for that before, we'd use Geld's force for that this time. That common core was in each of Benimaru's proposed strategies.

Really, I guess they were doing this to protect me, their supreme general. I care deeply for all my friends here, and Benimaru and the rest put me first just as much—or even more, in fact. I didn't want them to get killed for my sake, but Benimaru's much more of a tactician than an amateur like me—he kept damage to almost nothing in the previous battle, even.

So as long as I left everything to him, I could just sit back in my chair and relax. That, and I wanted to keep trying to make people feel secure in relying on me.

✳

We had set up a large gate on the ground in order to make it easier for imperial troops to come storming in, but looking back, maybe that felt a little *too* deliberate? I, at least, was a bit worried they might think it was a trap—but my fears were unfounded. I didn't know if someone out there was granting wishes for me today, but in the end, it turned out just as I had hoped.

"The enemy's fanning out in front of the main gate!" the operator reported. On the big screen, we could see rows of imperial soldiers lined up in an orderly fashion. If Argos was presenting this to us, it had to be true, but Soei's group was monitoring them as well, so this definitely wasn't illusory magic or whatnot.

The Empire had clearly taken the bait, and all seven hundred thousand of them were on the scene, not bothering to stick to stealth any longer. Their attempt at intimidation, maybe, not that it'd work on us. We had zero intention of surrendering by now. Maybe we'd run to fight another day, but capitulation was never gonna happen. Besides, we couldn't hope for a more ideal setup.

"We've won," I muttered to myself.

"Yes," Benimaru briskly replied, "we have."

Factually speaking, indeed, we were already guaranteed a tactical victory. Once we were all in the labyrinth, we'd take zero damage—as long as we took our time, we were guaranteed to win.

Beyond that, as long as they didn't have some kind of unimaginable champion who could beat a demon lord, we had an insurmountable advantage.

"Good thing those greedy bastards let the labyrinth catch 'em."

"Very true. I thought Sir Rimuru's bait was a little too obvious, but I'm glad they took it for us."

"Yeah, well, looks like you did a good job on it, Gadora."

The enemy was now revealing their full extent to us. If they had spread them out a little more around the forest, we might've been anxious about the stronger among them hiding out somewhere. Spreading your forces thin is generally a bad idea, I think, but right there, having them all together like that actually helped us a lot. I imagined they were gonna start filing into the labyrinth soon, so really, the only question was how much of the army they'd keep on the surface.

"Well, either way, I imagine it's not strategically sound for the Empire to skip our nation. If they decide to blockade this labyrinth gate and keep marching west, that's trouble, but…"

"Yeah, if they left, say, a hundred thousand out of seven hundred thousand, that'd be enough to surround the gate easy."

Then, if the remaining forces marched over to the Western Nations, they'd have little to worry about behind them. If that happened, by the way, we'd still be able to transport ourselves in and out—but our destinations would be restricted to places we had spent some extent of time in before, and we couldn't access anyplace with space-freezing barriers over it. Practically speaking, if we could undo the seal on the entrance to the Dwelling of the Spirits (Ramiris's old haunt), we could come and go through that. Still, though, we'd essentially be trapped in the labyrinth, left helpless as we watched them overrun the Western Nations—and if it came to that, we'd have to find a way to force ourselves out and attack.

So in the end, it might wind up turning into a ground war anyway. But we couldn't avoid that, really. So before that happened, we'd want to cut down the enemy's strength as much as we could.

"Are we going to send a warning to their ground forces?"

"Yeah, maybe we can agitate 'em into deploying more soldiers

inside.”

Veldora and Ramiris had some interesting opinions on this.

“You know, there’s something to be said for that… But nah, no warning,” I said.

“No? Why not?” Veldora asked.

“You know about the words we put on the gate already, right, Ramiris?”

“Oh! Right, there *was* that…”

We had actually carved a message on the massive gate. It read:

THROUGH THESE GATES, THE WEAK ARE UNWORTHY TO PASS

So how were they gonna react to that?

“I’d love to see what they do when they read it,” said Ramiris.

“Indeed, if it were me, I’d snap and come storming through the gate. Although, I’d nonetheless keep my troops at bay,” added Benimaru.

I’m sure that was exactly what Benimaru *would* do. Trap or not, he’d totally ram his way in.

“I would pay it no mind. I am all-powerful!”

Yeah, sure, Veldora. I didn’t ask you.

“Me, I dunno… If Beretta insisted on going, then I guess I’d follow along, that kind of thing?”

Ramiris… If you’d be too scared of it, then don’t press your luck, okay? And you name-dropping Beretta is just making him snicker.

“If anyone is foolish enough to ignore that warning, they forfeit their right to Sir Rimuru’s mercy. They have no right to complain about what happens.”

I didn’t know why he was looking so gleeful about it, but yeah, Diablo was correct. This message *did* have the nuance of a warning, after all.

“Of course, if they’re too much of a coward to go through the gate, they deserve to be in this battlefield in the first place. We must annihilate them all and make them understand the folly of antagonizing Sir Rimuru!”

Shion? If you put it *that* way, then we're all gonna have to fight ourselves, aren't we? Can you maybe think a little before you provide advice in the future? You're making Geld crack up.

Really, though, the rest of my main staff were of similar minds. Super motivated, all of them, and super eager to dedicate more victories to me. Testarossa and Ultima donated a whole bunch of souls. Whether they knew that or not, everybody here seemed eager to follow in the pair's footsteps.

Testarossa—or demons in general, really—apparently have a taste for the residual emotions left in each of those souls. There are assorted ways of consuming these, but Testarossa told me she loves to see faces frozen in fear the most. That smile of hers really *is* scary. I probably would've been petrified pre-reincarnation, but by this point, well, that's how it is.

Which is fine and good for demons, but what about the other monsters? It's not like they'd know what to do with the souls they've collected. I learned about all this only a few moments ago, besides, and I'm still wondering why it's this big competition now. I'm sure it's like the spoils of war for them or something, but I *really* don't need those kind of spoils…

…Seven hundred thousand, though, huh? If we really *did* score all those, that meant I could awaken seven more people. The fact that thoughts like this were naturally coming into my mind now was frightening, but…

…No, no, no. I gotta stay firm with myself. Can't have my mind turn monster on me. With that resolve in mind, I faced the big screen.

"They're on the move."

Row upon row of imperial soldiers were now moving in formation, calmly storming the gate as if they weren't scared at all.

"Just as planned," I muttered. If at least half of them can go in for us, it'd make things a lot easier later…"

Benimaru gave this a calm smile. "I have no intention of letting even a single soldier escape. I'll go in, too, if need be."

Geld nodded. "My Second Corps has approximately seventeen thousand troops. Compare us by numbers, and it looks dire, but in

ability, we don't miss a beat. We can take advantage of the terrain to entrap the enemy."

"Great to hear. And if I burn the inner halls with my flames, anyone left standing oughtta be strong enough to put up a worthy challenge."

"I'm sure Carrera would be glad to help with that. She's been wanting to let off some steam for a while now, so I'm sure she'll be eager to exercise her skills."

"No, there's no doubting the power of a Primal. It's a tough act to follow."

Hang on. This conversation was going a lot differently than I expected. Benimaru and Geld were going on like this was already won. Real bold of them, considering how I was still a little worried about this. Carrera had become a part of their strategy as a matter of course, too; there wasn't even a shred of hesitation about tapping a Primal's power.

"That's not fair, Benimaru! If we're aiming to wipe out our foes, that's where I come in!"

Even Shion was stepping up. Yet again, she'd forgotten that she was supposed to be bodyguarding me… But then, there was no place safer for me than the Control Center. Team Reborn, the force Shion led, prided themselves in their relentless tenacity. It'd be a shame to leave them idle this whole time, so if this turned into a ground melee, I'd like to get them out there.

So…yeah, I *could* see myself giving deployment orders to Shion if she wanted them, but…

"Shion, calm down. We need to gain an accurate gauge of what the enemy's doing first. Depending on how things go, though, I may need to tap your abilities, yeah."

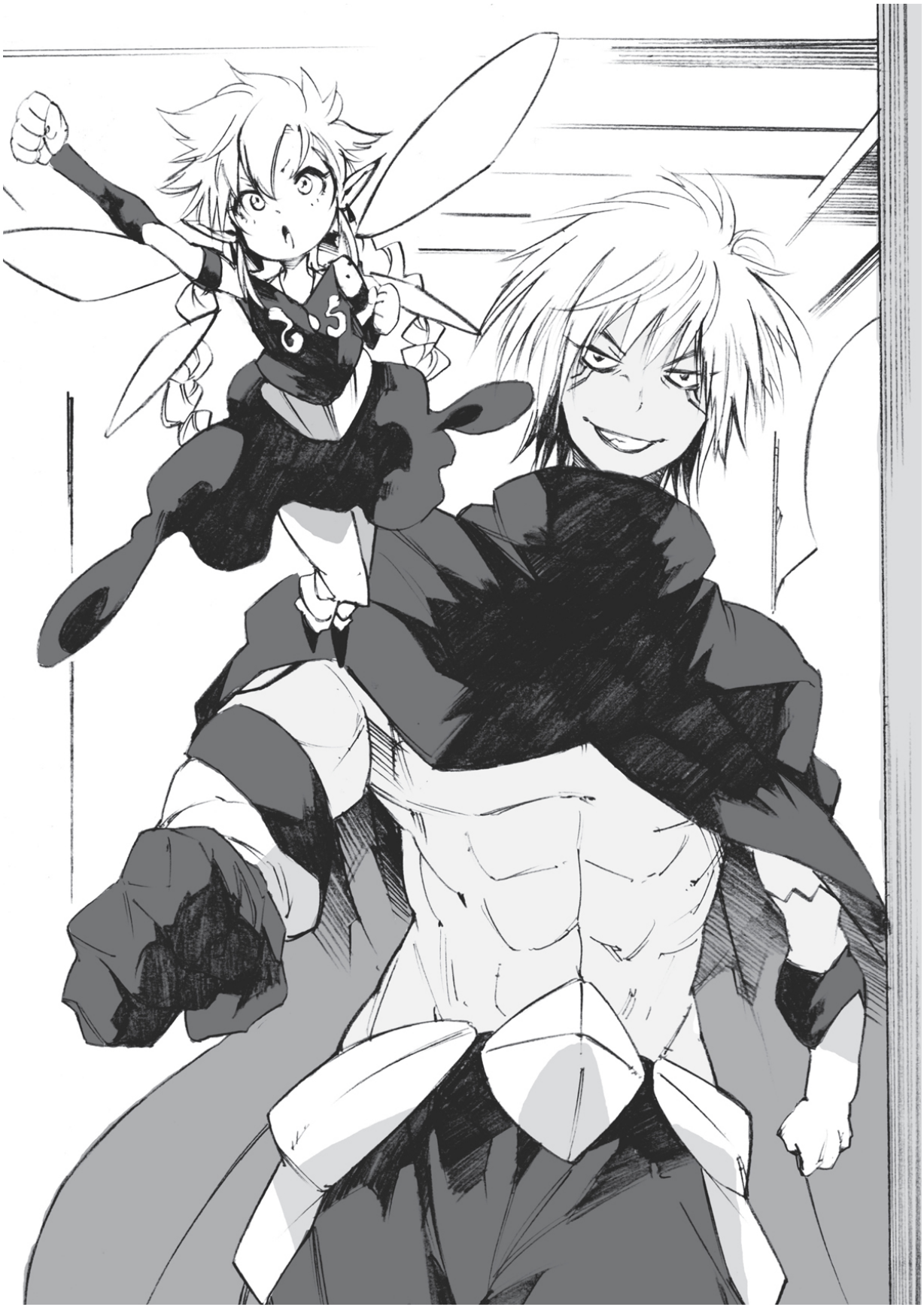
She'd have to be content with that for now.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… If Sir Rimuru needs a bodyguard, I alone can more than fit the bill."

Well, if Diablo's volunteering for that, then if things *really* get hairy, we could call Testarossa and Ultima back. They can teleport in no time flat, after all.

"If you say so, Sir Rimuru, then fine. In that case, you'll be up,

Shion.”





“Right! You can count on me, Benimaru!”

Shion beamed as she thanked him. I have trouble understanding why she loves fighting so much, but—hey, if she’s happy, then great.

“Good. In that case, Rimuru, it is time to prepare!”

“I’ll join ya, Master! Time for us to show ’em just how terrifying the labyrinth can be!”

“Quite so. And with me as your final defense, you have absolutely nothing to worry about.”

“If you’ll excuse us, Sir Rimuru…”

Brimming with enthusiasm, Veldora and Ramiris left the Control Center, Beretta following behind. The room suddenly felt a lot quieter.

For Veldora, this would be his first *real* day of work as the master of the labyrinth. I wasn’t entirely sure if he’d have a role to play here, but either way, his zeal was certainly encouraging.

“Right. Let’s see what the enemy has in store for us.”

I tried to sound as demon lord-ly as possible as I watched the rows of people marching through the gate. Everyone else nodded. And with that, our battle against the seven-hundred-thousand-strong main army of the Empire began.



Caligulio, commander of the Armored Division, smiled at the sight of things going to plan. He looked over his army with supreme confidence. One after another, his rows of elites were streaming through the massive gate. It connected to the labyrinth, no doubt, and that labyrinth was bound to bring Caligulio immense wealth.

By now, the monsters must have been in a panic over the unexpected six-figure-strong force at their doorstep. But it was all thanks to long, careful planning—and soldiers strong enough to execute on it.

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After a great deal of discussion with the main brass over their route of invasion, they decided to send the Magitank Division in first, standing out as much as they could. In addition to this, they also deployed a hundred airships from the Flying Combat Corps, their ace in the hole, so they could fight off the evil dragon Veldora if he happened to show up.

The Flying Combat Corps was also responsible for transporting the Magical Beast Division westward, with Gradim commanding them—but their journey would be chiefly over the sea, guaranteeing a safe trip. It was therefore decided that the airships wouldn't need any armaments, so Caligulio's only remaining responsibility was providing logistical support. This he planned to do by operating three hundred airships at full capacity, transporting the necessary military supplies at the same time as Gradim's force.

They had concentrated their forces in a single area mainly for the projected battle against Veldora. The other hundred airships deployed to the Forest of Jura were each outfitted with a full set of the most elite magicians the Empire boasted. With this final piece of the puzzle, their support system was fully complete, and Caligulio believed it all enough to let them take over the entirety of the West—and if Gradim's force attacked the capital of Englesia, the war would be over in no time at all.

It was a simultaneous dual-pronged operation, and Caligulio's Armored Division would play a major role. If they succeeded, they'd be putting up dazzling military results. That would grant Caligulio more power in the Empire no matter what, and the thought made it impossible for him to wipe the smile from his face.

The basic outline of this operation worked like this: The Magitank Division would make a conspicuous entrance. The enemy would latch on to them, and once they did, Caligulio himself would lead the main force in a grand display of power, attacking the stronghold of the demon lord Rimuru.

According to intel, the demon lord could apparently transport his entire capital into the labyrinth for safekeeping. It sounded ridiculous on the face of it, but it was true. All that was left on the surface was a

large gate opening up into the labyrinth. So they decided that the first thing was to surround the gate, blocking any escape routes. A handy magic canceler or two working on the surrounding space would make it impossible to magically teleport out of there. It seemed possible to completely seal off the area.

The problem here was the strength of the Armed Nation of Dwargon. One underestimated the Heroic King Gazel at their own peril, and the dwarves are known for their stoutness. They remained undefeated for a millennium for good reason, and anyone who downplayed their might was bound to be burned.

However:

There's no way we can lose. Breaking out old-fashioned antiques against two thousand magitanks? It won't even be a fight.

Dwargon's purported neutrality didn't even register in the Empire's mind. They had let the Armed Nation go unchallenged so far because they'd be a thorn on their side—but if they could win now, there was no need to pull back. With a combination of magic and science, they had built an all-powerful force based on a completely new system of combat. That, in a nutshell, was the Armored Division Caligulio led.

Gazel was a champion among dwarves, yes, but what could he do by himself? It may have been quality, not quantity, that could potentially turn the tide of battle, but knowing what he did about how destructive his tank guns were, Caligulio saw fighting with swords and magic as nothing but an anachronism. The dwarves—only capable of producing outdated, obsolete armaments—could never imagine the true value of this next-generation army… And by the time they realized it, it'd be too late. All that awaited the dwarves was a lopsided rout.

These ideas were all fundamentally wrong at the core, but Caligulio had no way of knowing that at the time. He was so happy with himself, and so assured of his victory, that he never imagined for even a moment that he'd be defeated.

And just moments earlier, the long-awaited report came in. An envoy from the enemy had paid a visit, but negotiations had broken down, and hostilities were already underway. Receiving this news, Caligulio and his team stuck to the plan and marched forward—and now they had captured the lands believed to comprise the demon lord Rimuru's stronghold.

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Caligulio, perfectly at ease, contemplated his troops.

Rather a waste to give Gaster a free shot at Gazel's head, but ah well. You can't give 'em the stick all the time—the troops won't follow you otherwise. They need a carrot now and then.

Lieutenant General Gaster and Major General Farraga were among the most capable of Caligulio's subordinates. He had no doubts that they'd fail to live up to expectations. Both Gaster and Farraga were dead at this point in time, but it'd be asking too much of Caligulio to know that.

"So have we heard from Gaster yet?" Caligulio asked one of his men.

"Not yet, sir! Not since he reportedly entered battle!"

"Ah. I'd think the dust will have settled by this point. Bit lazy of him to delay his report. He can't be having trouble over there."

"I'm afraid I have nothing else to report, sir."

"That's fine. So what about Farraga?"

Gaster's first on-the-field battle in ages must have been getting to his head. With total victory in sight, Caligulio reasoned, he must've been too focused on the fight at hand. But what about Farraga, then? He must've had a balcony view, dreamily floating up in the clouds, and he'd surely be able to give an accurate report. But the liaison officer assigned to Farraga was acting strangely, sweating profusely as he desperately tried to make contact.

"…What is he *doing*?"

This put the brakes on Caligulio's good mood. He was irked, and that emotion no doubt came out in his tone of voice.

"Major General Farraga," reported the harried liaison, "has

reportedly encountered a monster believed to be Veldora! He said he would send a follow-up once he could confirm it…"

…But nothing had come since then. Just that first report—and then total silence.

According to the communications wizard on duty, the Forest of Jura was so thick with magicules that voice transmissions could easily be jammed. That made sense to Caligulio for a number of reasons. This entire forest was created by his archenemy Veldora, and it was home to a demon lord to boot. It stood to reason, in his mind.

Deciding there was no use worrying about it, Caligulio shuffled the concern out of his mind. If they were engaged in combat, they wouldn't have time to send superfluous reports. And like the wizard said, there were more than enough magicules in the atmosphere to block incoming and outgoing magical calls. Plus, if Veldora himself was out on the field, no way any calls would make it out anyway.

So Caligulio mentally switched gears.

"Hmph! We'll have to wait for the good news, then. If they truly *did* encounter Veldora, it's perfectly natural to expect silence from Gaster and Farraga. But no point shuffling our feet over them. We've got a labyrinth to capture!"

Given the vast size of the force he provided Gaster, Caligulio didn't give a moment's thought to the idea that he might be defeated. In his mind, he had completely discounted the possibility long ago. In fact, this lack of contact could even be a good thing for him. If Farraga was engaged with Veldora in the skies above the forest, that meant only the demon lord was inside this labyrinth. He had heard stories about their Big Four and the threat they presented, but the Restructured Armor Corps would make quick work of them.

So without further hesitation, Caligulio's eyes turned toward the labyrinth.

Before him lay a clearing—a vast one, big enough to house a large city. Near the middle of it loomed a huge gate serving as the labyrinth entrance. Magic-based probing revealed no traps or other

threats. It was a simple gate, just waiting for Caligulio's force to challenge it.

The words carved into it—THROUGH THESE GATES, THE WEAK ARE UNWORTHY TO PASS—told Caligulio that his strategy was right all along. *Hiding everything from us because you're too afraid we'll plunder it all, eh? Pretty cheeky thing for a bunch of monsters to do.*

Looting in the name of "supply procurement" was something any nation was afraid of. Securing enough provisions to keep an army fed was always a challenge, especially to one as large as the Empire's. Taking the enemy's supplies was always an effective tactic, too.

Well, tough luck!

Caligulio laughed at the monsters' shallow intelligence.

His soldiers, having been enhanced via surgery powered by magic and otherworldly science, could work at full strength without food or water for a week. A single one of the nutritionally balanced energy bars they carried with them provided enough sustenance for a day's worth of activity. Twenty were included in a soldier's standard equipment, and their consumption rate was as previously calculated. Each soldier had been given a refreshed supply, and they'd have no problem keeping themselves sustained without plundering the enemy's food. These portable, lightweight energy bars made logistics infinitely easier for the Empire—and potable water, the other piece of the puzzle, could be conjured up via magic.

So no problems whatsoever. By their calculations, their elite soldiers could stay active within the labyrinth for up to twenty-seven days if need be. The enemy might've pinned their hopes on their vast army running out of supplies—the biggest weakness with any force this size—but they were about to learn just how naive they were.

"Think you've won because you've cut off our supplies? Think again, fools."

Caligulio gave the thought a mocking laugh. It caught the attention of one of his staff officers, a man of noble birth trying to latch on to Caligulio's coattails.

“Ha-ha-ha! Ah, my good Caligulio, don’t be so mean to them! The demon lord Rimuru began this entire campaign by making a mistake. He misjudged our Restructured Armor Corps so badly that he sent out his greatest asset, the evil Veldora, to meet them. And now, the next thing he knew, he’s being surrounded by these teeming masses of champions!”

“Well, I can’t blame him for making that move. Bait or not, it *is* quite a large force over there.”

“Exactly. I can certainly see why he’d want to pit his maximum war power against them.”

Hearing the officer chatter egged Caligulio on further.

“Hmph! Call him a demon lord, call him what you will, but I think it’s clear just how out of his league he is! I’m sure he’s all curled up in a corner of the labyrinth somewhere right now, shivering from head to toe!”

Scoffing at the demon lord’s low intellect, Caligulio and his team couldn’t have been more confident of their success.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You’re absolutely right. Now all we have to do is drag this demon lord out and have Commander Caligulio chop off his head. Then he’ll become a demon lord–slaying hero!”

The noble officer never wasted a chance to flatter his superior. Caligulio didn’t mind it much.

The first step, as he saw it, was to seize this labyrinth and use it as a foothold. Establishing a military base here would help maintain their momentum, no doubt, as they pressed on and overran the West. If they didn’t hurry, in fact, Gradim and his Magical Beast Division would conquer and pillage the West from the north side, and he really wanted to be out of the Forest of Jura before then.

But no need to panic. If things turned out that way, his list of accomplishments in this campaign wouldn’t be *quite* as long, but there was no need to quibble. Defeating Veldora the Storm Dragon was the Empire’s long-held desire for ages, and if they could achieve it, any other badge of honor was insignificant by comparison. If they took the head of Rimuru on top of that, Caligulio would undoubtedly become the greatest achiever of this entire war.

And the rest of his staff were just as assured of their victory as he

was. This was a force of seven hundred thousand, after all. With a force that size, none of them could even think of defeat.

“We can make this area our camp once we build a barrier around it. Once that’s done, they can start marching in. The labyrinth will never know what hit it!”

“We’re on it, sir.”

“Fine. Proceed as planned, then.”

There were no objections. Things weren’t urgent enough that anyone wanted to create trouble for themselves being contrarian. Gradim could have his glory over in the West if he wanted it—that’s what everyone here agreed on. For now, the major prize was all the money and goods they’d be able to score in the labyrinth. Greed had won the day in their minds.

It was a pretty simple plan, really—just overload the labyrinth with sheer numbers and strip the whole place bare. The fact that nobody objected to it was proof positive that greed, and the potential for instant profits, was already blinding them. Being so assured of victory, Caligulio and his team weren’t bothering to hide their desires any longer. Whatever share of the labyrinth’s booty they got, it was bound to make them fabulously rich.

And so their conquest of the labyrinth began…and with that, the poor oblivious soldiers joyfully descended a staircase they would never climb back up again.

The labyrinth never refuses anyone who comes for it.

That applied even if the invading party didn’t respect the rules. But the safety was already off on this loaded gun, and what awaited them beyond was the labyrinth as it truly was—a living hell beyond anything anyone had ever experienced.



In one of the deepest rooms of the labyrinth, there exists a secret

conference room not even Rimuru knows about.

Gathered within its vast confines were the rulers of the maze, people who usually didn't come together very much. The fact that they were all here right now indicated just how vital they considered the topic of discussion.

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The meeting was chaired by Beretta, Ramiris's aide/representative/gofer and general manager of labyrinth affairs. Seated in the four cardinal directions were the labyrinth's four Arch Dragons—the Fire Dragon Lord, Frost Dragon Lord, Wind Dragon Lord, and Earth Dragon Lord. In the middle was a round ebony table, currently seating the following individuals:

- "Nine-Head" Kumara, guardian of Floor 90
- "Insect Kaiser" Zegion, guardian of Floor 80
- "Insect Queen" Apito, boss of Floor 79
- "Immortal King" Adalmann, guardian of Floor 70
- "Death Paladin" Alberto, Adalmann's advance guard on Floor 70

These comprised the so-called Ten Dungeon Marvels, and they were joined by three others: Gadora, the old, sharp-eyed wizard, was seated next to Adalmann; meanwhile, Bovix and Equix, co-guardians of Floor 50, sat huddled at one lonely corner of the table, aware of just how much they stood out among all these titans. They both once thought they could beat any opponent who came their way… But now, seeing the very pinnacle of the labyrinth before them, they realized just how stark the difference was.

It made them squirm uncomfortably in their seats, but that wasn't the only reason they were cowering a bit. The real reason: Everyone in this chamber had a bad habit of incessantly squabbling over who was the strongest among themselves. They were clashing over the issue now, in fact, weighing down the very atmosphere as if it were

warped apart by some strange force. Gadora, despite being the new kid on the block, was an active participant in the debate, making Bovix and Equix realize all the more exactly how they stacked up by comparison. As they saw it, some foes were just too insurmountable to ever beat. And given that these were two former rivals who fought each other for a literal century, it showed just how much of a presence Gadora struck around here.

Beretta and the Dragon Lords didn't join in this competition, but they had no motivation to stop it. If that was what they liked doing, then "Fine" was their attitude. And whether they intended to or not, that only spurred the debate over who was strongest among the Ten Marvels.

Adalmann's promotion in floor rank, following direct praise from Rimuru, was still fresh in everyone's minds. It instilled a new enthusiasm in everybody present, all of them believing they were the most useful among the guardians. This was especially true among the Marvels tending the deeper floors, since they frankly didn't see much action during regular Dungeon operations. Any chance they had to strut their stuff, they seized.

Even Gadora, the new guy, was eager to be of service to his old friend Adalmann. If he could make an impression with his performance here, he believed, it'd work wonders to ensure a position for him. Adalmann, meanwhile, wanted to work even harder for his beloved Rimuru than he already had. He wanted to be awarded even higher levels, and on that score, the other guardians were nothing but obstacles—not enemies, no, but definitely in the way. Alberto followed Adalmann's lead with this, but in his mind, he, too, had a desire to improve his fighting performance and make himself a household name. Despite appearances, he was surprisingly ambitious.

Apito and Kumara, the two female Dungeon Marvels, had (to say the least) a strained relationship. Kumara, in particular, guarded Floor 90 and thus almost never received a chance to perform in public. Apito got an opportunity to tangle with the paladins before, and Kumara was intensely jealous of that, leading her to treat this as much more of a battle than it really was. Apito, for that matter, was

pretty competitive herself, refusing to back down a single step from her rival. This put them at odds over pretty much anything and everything.

Zegion, meanwhile, acted like he was above the fray, and realistically speaking, he *did* stand at the pinnacle of the labyrinth, the target of everybody's envy. Whether he asked for it or not, he constantly got dragged into the debate.

Thus, to sum up, things were kind of acrimonious among the most powerful denizens of the labyrinth. But did they truly hate each other, deep down? The answer was no. Their goal, in the end, was to prove they alone were the best, not to try to kick everybody else down. There was a lot of jealousy but a lot of respect, too. They might have fought a ton, but there wasn't any real hate involved. Every one of them saw each other as diligent rivals, nothing else.

……

……

…

Despite the crowd sharing this meeting hall, it was surprisingly quiet right then. All eyes were fixed on the main seats in the table, currently unoccupied. They belonged to Veldora, king of the labyrinth, and the great Ramiris, its creator. They had been called to the meeting two hours ago, and while there was much carrying on between the Marvels earlier, they all quieted down once Beretta showed up.

"Sir Veldora and Lady Ramiris will arrive in a few moments. Please remain quiet as we wait for them."

Beretta sat down at his chair.

"Chairman, can I ask you a question?" said Kumara, and Beretta nodded back. "Why are we gathered here today?"

"For the reason you're all imagining, I presume. We need to discuss how we will dispatch the foolish army attempting to invade the labyrinth."

Everyone fell silent. They were all aware of the situation. Nobody told them exactly what this meeting was about, but they had accurately guessed its purpose already. Maybe they had been jockeying with each other for position before, but with the imperial

army at the door to the labyrinth, hostility toward the enemy had replaced their competitive spirit. What did it mean to make an enemy out of the labyrinth? They were all of a single heart now—they needed to make their foe fully understand the answer.

A heavy tension filled the hall. And then:

“Heya! Sorry for the wait!”

“How nice of you all to gather here!”

Ramiris and Veldora appeared, upping the fervor in the hall that much more. It delighted Ramiris even further as she addressed the crowd in an unusually serious tone of voice.

“Today we’re facing an unprecedented crisis—a kind that hasn’t been seen since the labyrinth’s foundation! So I wanna hear some of your thoughts, people!”

That was the signal for things to begin.

Kumara reacted first.

“Hmm? Well, isn’t it obvious?”

She could barely wait to express her thoughts, but Apito beat her to the punch.

“We kill them all.”

The two glared at each other.

“So are you going to leave things for *my* level this time, Apito? You got to play with those paladins for so long, you *have* to be happy by now.”

“What are you talking about? Lady Hinata is one thing, but the Crusaders were all so weak that I had one of the most boring times of my life!”

A different kind of tension ran through the hall. Veldora, oddly, stepped up to defuse it.

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Stop fighting, you two. And worry not! This time, I will give you all a chance to wage battle. From what I’ve heard, they think that the deepest level of the Dungeon is merely Floor 60. Considering we’ve advertised a hundred floors from the beginning, I find it simply absurd, but here we are. Can you believe that?”

No! everyone thought.

Veldora gave them a nod. “I thought it would be fun to play along with those expectations… But really, it seems too much trouble to me.”

“Yes! Exactly!” Ramiris agreed. “Like my master said, it’s too much trouble to wait for them to get past Floor 50—not just for us, but for our foes, too.”

“Indeed. There are currently seven hundred thousand soldiers jamming the area around the gate. I’ve been instructed by Rimuru to lure as many of them as possible into the labyrinth…”

“But making such a huge crowd navigate that entryway is gonna take *forever*, won’t it? Honestly, you have to wonder why they brought so many folks along! So instead of that, we decided to divide up the enemy, one thousand soldiers per floor, and then repeat as necessary!”

Luckily for Ramiris, the Empire’s soldiers were matching in neat, well-disciplined rows. This allowed for smooth entry into the labyrinth so far, but this was clearly going to take a lot of time. If the first few rows got in a fight, it’d interrupt the entire flow, and then there’d be no telling how long it would take to cram everybody in.

“How does that sound to you? And if you get a lucky draw, you might even wind up facing a real strong opponent or two!”

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Who knows, indeed? One of them might be the grave threat to Rimuru that Benimaru has been searching for! I think he’s far too worried about that for his own good, but if you can find the man, that’ll be a feather in your cap.”

Ramiris and Veldora made all eyes in the room sparkle. To the labyrinth guardians, the Big Four serving Rimuru were the targets of intense admiration. Benimaru, in particular, was Rimuru’s closest friend and most trusted confidant; everyone wanted a chance to fight him someday. Veldora might have said *No, no, I am his stoutest of allies* if anyone brought up Benimaru’s name, but they didn’t, so things continued smoothly.

“So…we all have a chance, then?”

“Well, if that’s the case, I have no complaints at all.”

Apito and Kumara immediately seemed to patch things up with each other. They weren’t alone—everyone else was driven by similar

motivation and ambition.

“All right,” intoned Adalmann, “does that mean we can do whatever we please with whoever enters our territory?”

“Exactly!” replied Ramiris.

Now everyone was treating this more seriously.

“They’re still filing in right now,” she continued, “but I’m just gonna connect them straight to Floor 41 for starters. Once a thousand make it in, I’ll move on to the next floor down, so be patient! Bovix and Equix, I’ve got another job for you two, so I’ll brief you on that later.”

Jealous glances shot toward the pair at once, making them tremble with anxiety. Now they were huddled down closer than before, trying their best to get through this social awkwardness. It’d be far better, they both agreed, if they could just fight those foolish invaders instead of facing up to this.

But Ramiris paid them no mind.

“So the idea here is to spread all these troops out and take ’em in at each floor. We’re talking one hundred thousand people total from Floors 41 to 50; one hundred thousand from Floors 51 to 60; one hundred thousand from Floors 61 to 70; one hundred thousand from Floors 71 to 80; and one hundred thousand from Floors 81 to 90. Then maybe, like, we can have each Dragon Lord tackle ten thousand at once? And if we get any *more* comin’ in after that, I can stash ’em in the higher floors, too!”

Thus the labyrinth would house a maximum target of five hundred forty thousand invaders at once. Ramiris wanted this number to be at least three hundred fifty thousand, if possible.

Last, but not least:

“Now, the one thing I don’t want you guys to forget is that these are one-time rule changes to the labyrinth. Each Dragon Lord chamber has been expanded to ten times its initial size, and I’ve switched the floors around as well, so if they make it past Floor 90, they’ll be plunging right into those Dragon Rooms. But that’s not really important. What *is* important is that I’ve changed the conditions for ‘beating’ this labyrinth!”

Ramiris did a little dance in the air to accentuate her point.

What kind of conditions were these? Well, for starters, once you went through the main gate at the surface, you couldn't go back out until you beat the labyrinth. Beating it, in this case, was defined as defeating Veldora, so the Empire would have to deploy pretty much everything they had to stand a chance.

In order to gain the opportunity to face Veldora, however, a would-be invader would need to collect ten keys, passed out to each of the Ten Dungeon Marvels. If you wound up starting on Floor 80, you'd have to backtrack to earlier floors to defeat the requisite Marvels.

The moment they heard this, the Marvels immediately perked up. Even the Dragon Lords situated behind the table rumbled their approval.

"In that case, we really *do* all have an equal chance."

"You're right. It's a race to see how many we can hunt down!"

Many among them were already out for blood.

"Heh… Hopefully I can find someone worthy enough to lift my sword up against."

"Don't be cocky yet, Alberto. All we must think about is laying waste to our divine enemies."

Master and servant were brimming with spirit. But others among them were meditating in silence over this. In their own way, everybody in the chamber was in high spirits for the upcoming battle. Gauging them, Beretta—the overseer of the Marvels, more or less—spoke up.

"So, Lady Ramiris, regarding the matter I asked for your assistance with…"

"Ah, right, right. Yeah, Rimuru gave it the go-ahead, so let's see how things unfold with it, okay?"

"Thank you very much. In that case…"

After that quick exchange, Beretta stood up and surveyed the Ten Dungeon Marvels.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Lady Ramiris has assigned me the title of Dungeon Master. I would normally share this title alongside my duties as chairperson of the Ten Dungeon Marvels, but…"

Beretta saw that overseer job as a bunch of garbage dead-end work and little else. Ramiris thought having *ten* Marvels sounded

better than *nine*, so he got tossed in to fill up the ranks. The job, as one would expect from Ramiris's birdbrained ways, changed from day to day. Sometimes it was little more than being Ramiris's gofer, which—to put it bluntly—was not his cup of tea.

Treyni, despite having roughly the same position, seemed far more valued by Ramiris than he ever was. A lot of that was because Treyni *never* lectured Ramiris about anything… And Beretta couldn't see what was fair about that, either. Besides, Treyni pretty much did whatever she pleased, too, jetting off on these mystery trips out of nowhere (although gaining Ramiris's advance permission for them).

It was a real problem for Beretta, who secretly grumbled over it quite a bit. Regardless, he was still named one of the Ten Dungeon Marvels, whether he liked it or not. He really wanted to give that position over to someone else… And now the perfect opportunity had arisen.

"…I think I would like give my position to whoever puts in the best performance in this battle."

The Marvels had to resist the urge to whoop for joy. Even Bovix and Equix were filled with ambitions not quite in line with their talents, hoping against hope that they could join the Ten Marvels. Unfortunately, their ambitions were shattered by the next thing Beretta said.

"For this current battle, I will provisionally grant Sir Gadora my position in the Ten Dungeon Marvels. Given Adalmann's attesting of his powers, as well as his own knowledge, both Lady Ramiris and I have no qualms about this appointment."

Gadora, facing this sudden announcement, was surprised but calm. Given how long he had lived, he was used to situations like these.

Yessss! This is my time to shine! And if I put in an eye-catching effort, I won't be "provisional" for very long at all!!

Gadora had always been an aggressive man. He had to be, or else he couldn't hone the right-place-at-the-right-time knack he used to navigate the world for so many years. And Gadora knew his place, too. His steely eyes told him just how powerful the Ten Marvels were. Some were lower or equal to him, while others were so far above

him that even making a comparison was ridiculous. He'd never be appointed overseer of the Marvels if he let those titans be—something he understood well enough—and so his goal was merely to gain membership to start.

"I will humbly accept your offer!"

"You will? Thank you, Sir Gadora. It helps me a great deal."

Gadora and Beretta had a real you-scratch-my-back, I'll-scratch-yours moment. And while still temporary for now, that was the last change made in the lineup before the Empire war. Beretta was out of the Ten Dungeon Marvels, and Gadora was in.

"Oh, yes! I'm just as glad you're taking the offer, Gadora. I'll be assigning you to Floor 60, with the Demon Colossus boss, and I hope you'll make good use of that one!"

Everything wrapped up without a hitch. They had already discussed all this with Rimuru, and they had decided to put Gadora to the test on a trial basis. Gadora had already been helping with Ramiris's research and so forth, so he didn't need much convincing to accept the job. In fact, to him, being entrusted with the demon lord's Demon Colossus was a real dream.

"Great! In that case, shouldn't we give Gadora some kind of nickname, too?"

"Oooh yeah. Any ideas, Gadora?"

Being asked this out of the blue, Gadora had nothing to offer.

"Well, let's see…"

Is this really important? he couldn't help but think. The Empire was already invading labyrinth space. They really needed to take up defensive positions ASAP, something everyone must've been thinking (if not saying out loud). But the big bosses didn't seem too concerned about time and were treating this like just another chat.

Heavens… My hat goes off to them. Emperor Ludora is a great man, too, but I fear he's no match for this group. But given the labyrinth we're in and the Storm Dragon we're with, I suppose it's only to be expected…

Gadora was truly impressed. He was never one for loyalty, but seeing Veldora and Ramiris—and most of all Rimuru, so adept at manipulating those two—he couldn't help but feel a sense of awe.

“How about the Rune Master, then?”

“Ooh, how catchy!” Ramiris gushed.

“Yes, is it not? When push comes to shove, I always have the right answer! Kwaaah-ha-ha-ha!!”

There was no possible way Gadora could object.

It seemed like everyone had their orders, but Ramiris still had one thing to announce.

“Oh, oh, right! I had a real important role for Bovix and Equix!”

The two of them almost leaped out of their chairs, still nervous about what they’d be asked for.

“Wh-what role is that?”

“What would you like us to do?”

Their nervous questions were greeted with a matter-of-fact reply.

“So I’m gonna have you two stand by on Floor 30. You can use the bosses there however you like, so if you see any invaders trying to escape, wipe ’em out for me, all right? I set the resurrection point for your bracelets at Floor 30, too, so even if you get killed somehow, no worries! Do your best up there!”

By the sound of things, Ramiris assumed this would be easy work for them. All they could do was nod their agreement. They were motivated, yes, but more than that, they were anxious. If they didn’t deliver at a time like this, they feared being abandoned for good. If they put in a half-hearted effort, they could be fired from this most prestigious of positions. They exchanged firm nods, promising they wouldn’t let that happen.

The boss of Floor 30 was an ogre lord, ranked a B-plus, along with his five minions. Following orders from the A-ranked Bovix and Equix, they were all bound to become a great team. Gadora, despite being so new, had readily accepted his appointment into the Ten Dungeon Marvels. Given they had been part of the labyrinth far longer than him, they couldn’t afford to embarrass themselves here.

That, and the two of them realized something else. Even if part of the imperial force *did* make it past Floor 30, there was still no escape for them. That held even if they climbed all the way back to Floor 1. They’d just have to turn back, and along those lines, Bovix and Equix’s assignment was extremely low stakes, come to think of it.

And they both also realized that losing to those soldiers meant getting killed however many times it happened—an unpleasant experience.

“Well, let’s do it. We’re guardians, too. And if we can earn some recognition for our exploits, we’re bound to get a promotion!”

“Yes, you’re right, my brother. No need to take turns or hold back this time. Let’s crush our enemies with everything we’ve got!”

“We’ll crush every single fleeing imperial soldier we find!”

“We will! And I promise we’ll live up to your expectations, Lady Ramiris!!”

If their backs were against the wall, the only place to go was forward. Their anxieties instantly vanished, the two of them burning with enthusiasm.

Now everybody had their assigned roles.

“Rimuru has asked us to lure as many imperials into this labyrinth as we possibly can! And if we wanna do that, you’re gonna have to show these guys a good time, to some extent! Got it?”

They all nodded, understanding. Everybody saw what their role was—for day one, at least, they’d keep quiet and watch how the enemy moved. Then Ramiris, giving them all a satisfied look, dropped one more bomb on them.

“Good, good. Well, good luck, guys! And by the way, Rimuru said he’ll be watching this battle. We’ll be deciding who’s the next overseer based on this, but it’s a good chance for all of you to show off, okay?”

Everyone’s faces turned dead serious.

“…Sir Rimuru will be watching?”

Even Zegion, silent until now, felt the need to gravely ask the question. It really surprised Apito. The Insect Kaiser was a taciturn individual, rarely speaking at all. Apart from his loyalty to the demon lord Rimuru, Zegion was interested in little besides strength.

“Um, y-yes. Rimuru said he’d be observing the whole thing, okay?”

The unanticipated pressure made Ramiris stammer a bit. Not

even she had the opportunity to see Zegion talk much. Her surprise was only natural.

“Zegion, there are no lies in Ramiris’s words. Rimuru has a great curiosity about the strength of his labyrinthine ranks. That is why he trusted you all enough to give you such a major role in this war.”

Veldora, following up for the flummoxed Ramiris, saw Zegion as an excellent student, one he had been training in combat for some time. He was stronger than even Charys, who had been with Veldora for a very long time, and if the conditions were just right, he could fight evenly (or better) with Veldora himself. He was, in essence, too strong. Nobody in the labyrinth except Veldora could handle him—and that’s why he was so excited for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“…Ah. Sir Rimuru, watching us… This is so emotional for me. I’ll be sure to show him just how much I have grown.”

“Hee-hee-hee! Of course! He said he was expecting a lot out of you all, so let’s give him a big surprise!”

Ramiris might have been giving them an innocent smile right then, but deep down, she was merciless. Being a self-styled demon lord, she wasn’t afraid to abide by “survival of the fittest.”

Everyone who enters the labyrinth—including Empire soldiers—is presented with a set of rules. After each person is confirmed to be a willing participant, they are then asked—directly to the instincts in their mind—whether they’re okay with never leaving unless they beat the Dungeon. Would they see it as a threat or a warning?

But even if people heard that and thought *Oh crap, I’m in trouble*, nobody seemed to be turning back. They all filed into the labyrinth like ants to sugar, dreaming of the fortune and glory inside—and at that moment, Ramiris ran out of mercy. Without reservation, she welcomed all of them as her enemy…and soon, the soldiers of the Empire would discover the true nature of this labyrinth. The fear it caused.

“Let us dedicate this victory to Sir Rimuru,” muttered Zegion as he left his seat.

With that signal, everyone was on the move. Visitors would soon start arriving at the hellscape, and they had to wait for them.



Column by orderly column, the soldiers of the imperial army were marching down into the Dungeon, their movements methodical and without fancy frippery. Each had a safety belt around their waist, connected front and back so each column stayed around ten feet away from each other. In addition to these troops, there was a separate designated combat team, not connected by ropes and able to move freely around; when not engaged in a fight, they held on to the main force's lifelines. With enough sheer quantity, no labyrinth was ever going to be a problem. They had prepared everything well in advance, and this entire force wouldn't have any issues getting lost as they marched onward.





Satisfied with his handiwork, Caligulio's mind turned toward all the riches he was set to gain shortly.

This maze is mere child's play. The problem is all the monsters that live inside…

Not their strength, per se, but the time they'd have to spend dealing with them. Their preliminary intelligence indicated the labyrinth ran a total of sixty floors, but they hadn't received confirmation on that yet. At least one rumor pegged the actual number at a hundred, but the other officers had dismissed that as unrealistic—a bluff.

Still, the deeper the floor they reached, the more valuable the treasure they'd be bound to discover—and most importantly, the purer the magic crystals they were likely to find. That alone made this a very attractive offer, but the deeper you went, it seemed, the stronger the local monsters would become. That, Caligulio thought, had the potential to become a big hassle.

Well, once we find out exactly what kinds of monsters we'll encounter down there, we can figure out how to subdue them the right way. That'll make for more efficient hunting, too.

Stroking the beard he was unduly proud of, Caligulio had made his conclusion. Seeing the well-trained soldiers spread before him, their grand majesty a symbol of the Empire's authoritative power, this labyrinth hardly seemed like a threat at all.

They had all undergone training to simulate the style of battle that would likely unfold down there. Practitioners of spirit magic would map out the path ahead, and then the special-ops teams would disarm any traps. The combat team would then dispatch the local monsters, then the cleanup team would scavenge for salvageable materials and magic crystals. The lead member of each column was responsible for overseeing this entire process from start to finish.

Once all the treasure was gathered, it would be sent rearward by the soldiers tied to each other, all the way back to the entrance gate, where the platoons standing by there would take it to the nearby command HQ. Linking soldiers together like this would allow them to quickly handle any unexpected changes in the process; if something came up, the soldiers were carefully trained to retreat at once in

order to report to their superiors.

Caligulio's plan worked extremely well…at first. But then something strange happened in there. After approximately one thousand soldiers went through the gate, all contact was suddenly lost.

"What should we do, sir?"

What happened to the soldiers? It was unclear—but judging by the surgically clean cut on the rope, someone must have been messing with spatial links in there.

We were briefed on that—the labyrinth can change its structure at times. But they said it happened once every twenty-four hours at most…

It troubled Caligulio, but he didn't let the brigade of soldiers stop. For a while longer, he allowed the storming of the labyrinth to continue.

What they later found, after some more observation, was that the labyrinth changed structure with every one thousand people they put in.

…Wait. Not quite.

"I see… It looks like the enemy's welcoming us with open arms."

"…? How do you mean, sir?"

"Simple. I'm sure it doesn't suit them much if the labyrinth's crawling with people. The stairs we see there don't lead to the second basement floor but likely to some other floor instead."

"Really?! They can do that…?"

Caligulio gave his surprised staff officer a *Well, what do you* think, *doofus?* look and a bit of a snorted chuckle.

"Well, I'm sure they can. This *is* a demon lord we're fighting, remember? If they can't pull that off on their home turf, they would have been destroyed ages ago."

He had predicted what would occur in the labyrinth with decent accuracy so far. From the soldier chatter before they lost contact, there was no indication that anything unusual was going on. It didn't seem reasonable to think that something had just *happened* to them out of nowhere.

"Besides, we lost contact once exactly one thousand people

came in. What do you make of that?”

“Hmm… Yes. That’s very insightful of you, sir.”

With a nod of acknowledgment, Caligulio considered their future plans. Even in these early stages, they had already retrieved a few bits and bobs of treasure—finely made personal accessories, for example, or weapons and armor made of magisteel. It was all top-notch stuff, and what’s more, the magic crystals they harvested were similarly high in quality, producing energy with unquestionably high efficiency.

If they halted the invasion now, the fates of the two thousand people in there already would be all but sealed. Best instead to stick with the original plan and keep pushing all their masses of people inside—that was Caligulio’s decision.

“They’re trying to threaten us—trying to make us give up on conquering this labyrinth so he can buy some more time. Expecting some reinforcements from Dwargon, no doubt.”

“Heh. Laughable, isn’t it? Because by now, those reinforcements must be…”

“…Exactly. Stopping now is exactly what the enemy wants us to do. Make sure everyone’s aware of that!”

“Yes, sir! Continuing with our primary objective to conquer!”

Caligulio was satisfied with this. The enemy tried to trap him, and he was sure he saw through it. And weighing the potential profits from the treasure against the lives of his soldiers, he decided to ignore any lingering uncertainties in his mind.

That moment alone decided the imperial army’s fate.

A day had passed since the invasion began. The march had continued day and night, and by now, some three hundred fifty thousand soldiers were in the labyrinth.

Like clockwork, they were being sent to different locations every time a thousand new soldiers came in. Apparently those soldiers taken to very certain floors were still able to bring at least a part of their bodies back outside the spatial rift, and the kinds of treasure they were still ferrying back was constantly changing. Nearly none of

it was low quality, and there were even a few weapons with strange, concave holes inserted into them—some kind of new enemy weapon, perhaps.

There was no better indicator of just how panicked the enemy was right now. They would doubtlessly have retrieved these weapons if they had the time to. If they didn't, it was proof that events had hurried them along involuntarily.

They're all but putting out the welcome mat for us, and now that push has come to shove, they're finding themselves in trouble. So foolish.

Using the labyrinth to attract people from surrounding nations, he thought, was a pretty neat idea. But not being able to handle matters right at this most crucial of moments made the whole thing seem shoddy to him.

So while Caligulio had at first been openly derisive of the demon lord Rimuru and his team, now that a day had passed, he decided to halt the onrush and see how things unfolded. The soldiers around HQ were thus allowed to take breaks in shifts. Really, they could have kept going, but suddenly Caligulio was feeling uneasy.

"It's three hundred fifty thousand troops in there so far, right?"

"Yes, sir! Half our army has invaded the labyrinth."

He might have been losing contact with them every thousand troops, but so far Caligulio's predictions were correct—not much later, he got a report that soldiers inside the labyrinth had made contact with the ones who went in first. Now the Empire was gaining momentum. Everyone was on edge about the missing troops, so knowing that their comrades were safe in there came as a relief to everybody on-site. They had been hiding their anxiety before now—getting worked up about every little hitch would make you an embarrassment to the Empire—and the good news energized everyone all the more. They had nothing to fear now, and the speed of the labyrinth incursion was accelerating.

Thanks to all that, now a good half of their entire army was sucked into the Dungeon. But:

"We've put hundreds of thousands in there, but they still haven't fully plumbed the labyrinth…?"

“Not even I thought it was this vast, no.”

“Sixty floors… I thought each floor shrank the farther down you went.”

“That’s what we heard, sir. I think they’ll reach the lowest depths before too long, but…”

The plan called for the imperial army to conquer the labyrinth long ago, but things hadn’t turned out that way—and the problem was, once they stopped throwing new soldiers inside, that de facto meant they lost contact with everybody already in the labyrinth. Reconnecting with the advance forces in there meant a pretty vast quantity of treasure was coming their way, but that caravan had been halted as well now that the invasion was on hold.

“And not one person who went inside has come out yet?”

“N-no, sir. Apparently the labyrinth must be fully ‘beaten’ before anyone can get out…”

“Yes, I heard about that. Everyone who went in had a question run through their heads, didn’t they?”

“Correct, sir. But while the conditions are clear enough…it seems that before they can slay the king of the labyrinth, they have to defeat the guardians who are defending ten keys…”

“Ah. And we haven’t beaten those yet?”

They had an answer. But it wasn’t the one Caligulio was looking for. The “king of the labyrinth” was likely to be Rimuru, and if killing him “beat” the labyrinth, that was exactly what the Empire wanted… or should have wanted anyway. Instead, all they had done was stop sending in follow-up troops, thus cutting off contact with everybody inside.

“Do you think a force of three hundred fifty thousand can beat the demon lord?”

The staff officers were at a loss to answer. But it didn’t take them long to drum up their previous vigor.

“The blunder the Kingdom of Farmus made, I believe, is that it ran into Veldora. If it’s just the demon lord Rimuru alone, we should have enough resources to beat him.”

“I agree with him, sir. We have a great number of over-A troops in this initiative. Good news should be coming our way, in time.”

His staff, seemingly relieved that they were apparently on the same page as each other, rejoiced loudly over their assured victory. But Caligulio just couldn't shake off his unease.

"All right. First, I want contact made inside the labyrinth. Send in a liaison team and have them try out all our comm methods."

Accepting the order, they went through the checklist of imperial communication protocols they had handy. None of them worked. Magical calls, telepathy; nothing elicited a response.

By this point, the staff officers were having trouble kidding themselves any longer. Their hearts, bursting with visions of all the booty the labyrinth was about to give up, were now down in the doldrums, faced with a suddenly unforeseeable future. Having no contact with the inside was starting to seriously affect their mood—without any idea of the battle situation, they couldn't even adequately perform their jobs.

"In that case, sir, we'll resume the invasion once we reorganize our ground troops."

"Right." Caligulio nodded. No matter how this turned out, they needed to send *someone* to check on the situation. If they kept them on ground level, there was no way to check on what was happening down below. The large gate remained wide open, showing no signs of closing up; nothing had changed with it since first discovery…and yet the moment people stopped filing through it, nothing at all could be sensed from beyond the entrance archway. Even the steady flow of goods from the inside had cut off—and partly thanks to that, the command HQ was starting to become an uncomfortable place.

Two more days passed.

"Why aren't we receiving any further reports?"

"With every thousand people being taken to a different place, sir, it might be hard for them to find troops who found themselves deep in the labyrinth."

"Are you telling me the labyrinth's *that* vast?!"

"You don't think…?"

"What?"

"You don't think they've all been defeat—"

"Shut up, fool! Lost your nerve, haven't you, huh?!"

“Calm down. I think this was the demon lord Rimuru’s plan all along. He wanted to make us suspicious, paranoid, and force us give up on his labyrinth.”

Now, unlike in the early stages, only a thousand troops were allowed to enter each hour, out of an abundance of caution. At that rate, however, it was hard to retrieve any new information at all, to say nothing of treasure. Thus, the first day saw three hundred fifty thousand soldiers march in; the second day saw one hundred fifty thousand more; but on the third day, only thirty thousand were allowed passage. This left the number of imperial forces on the ground at one hundred seventy thousand total.

“Would it be wiser to conserve our numbers at this point?”

“Hmmm… I’d hate to play into the enemy’s strategy, but it may be unwise to cut our forces any further, yes.”

“We did send supply teams into the labyrinth; that’ll extend the operational time frame of our troops. Perhaps we could toe the line and see how things unfold for the next, say, twenty days?”

“Rather a passive approach, don’t you think?!”

“Perhaps, but we still haven’t made contact with Lieutenant General Gaster or Major General Farraga, either. They might be in the middle of intense combat, or maybe…”

Several intelligence units had gone down as well. None had returned. Trusted friends and dedicated imperials were now completely out of touch.

“It’s because the magicule count’s too high in here. What other reason would there be?”

Caligulio was assertive about that, at least. He didn’t want to see morale go down any more than it had—but the atmosphere around the place was already very unsettled. There was an indescribably eerie silence throughout, and every person on the scene had long since begun to foster ominous premonitions.

Even their commander, assertive as he was, felt the same way. He still had one hundred seventy thousand soldiers here—but turn that around, and you could say there were *only* one hundred seventy thousand left.

Perhaps I’m making a terrible mistake…

Now the doubts were coming clear as day into his mind. The towering gate before them seemed incredibly creepy to him now, contributing to his anxieties. And the fates of all those who cared to cross it into the labyrinth? Caligulio would learn about them all very soon.



Labyrinth Floors 41–48

The exact fate of the imperial soldiers who entered the labyrinth varied widely depending on the floor they were dumped into. Those put between Floors 41 and 48 were, by and large, the lucky ones. It housed some pretty tough monsters, but we were still talking in the B-ranked range, nothing for these surgically enhanced soldiers to sweat about.

Things proceeded very quickly with their advance. These were all extremely capable soldiers, ranking at least a C-plus by adventurer standards, and their skills were first-class. A group like that would never panic when faced with monsters.

So the troops kept marching in an orderly line, their affiliated combat team taking protective action a little behind them. Setting up base points at each corner, they made sure every passage was clear before proceeding, following training as their numbers filled up the floor. In less than a day, they had discovered both the ascending and descending stairways.

In this mission, the top priority was to kill the demon lord with the full brunt of their strength. Plundering the treasure on the earlier floors would be left to other troops or saved until everything else was over. Once the stairs were fully occupied by the combat teams, the invasion continued.

Near the stairs was a room whose door had been sealed shut. A sign reading REST STOP was nailed to it. It was exactly how their intelligence described it, with the exception that the door refused to

budge.

“It’s not opening, sir. It’s likely been disabled.”

“Hmm. I’m sure. Can we break it down?”

“Guns and magic did nothing to it, sir. I think it’s safe to assume it’s as indestructible as the labyrinth corridors themselves!”

The captain nodded at his reporting soldier. This was natural; nothing worth being surprised about. Maybe they could try a magitank gun on it or some kind of large-scale magic, but that could compromise the safety of everybody else in here. A nuclear magic spell would lead to untold casualties. So as originally planned, the captain decided to keep making their way straight down the labyrinth. A human-wave strategy, basically. Not being able to use the rest stop irked him to high heaven, but he accepted it.

“Report up top for me about this. And tell them the invasion’s going smoothly.”

“Yes, sir!”

Being isolated down there, kept to a force of one thousand, unnerved him at first. But getting downtrodden by this would make him unworthy of being an imperial officer. So the captain decided to continue the attack, and this turned out to be the right answer, for after a while longer, they managed to rendezvous with another team.

This floor was much larger than expected, but thanks to help from an elementalist and a surveyor, they were proceeding at a rapid pace. The magic crystals dropped by the monsters they slew were high quality, and they were finding excellent treasure from the chests they discovered. The people who took the stairs down reported back to say that they were close to completely conquering Floor 42. Cheering could be heard across the halls—the Empire would never be defeated.

On the second day, they completed their search of every chamber on Floor 41 and journeyed onward to Floor 42, joining up with the team they previously made contact with. There, at breakneck speed, they headed for Floor 43—and before day three even began, they were just a few steps away from reaching Floor 48.

It was beyond all expectation…but Floor 49 would be a much different story.

Labyrinth Floors 49–50

“Ah, aaahhh, there’s something on my neck?!”

“I’m sinking! I—I— My legs are melting…!”

“H-help! Help me! I can’t get my hand out!!”

It was pandemonium.

A moment’s inattention, and the slimes came. Everywhere, from here to the other side of the floor—tons and tons of slimes. Slimes, slimes, slimes, slimes, slimes. Take a break for a moment, and slimes fell on you from the ceiling. Turn a corner, and slimes would scatter and destroy entire platoons. Slimes on the wall, slimes on the floor. Weapons and armor were laid waste to, soldiers rapidly losing their stamina.

“Dammit! Haven’t they made it through yet?!”

“Sir, there’s a monster presence across the entire floor, so our magical detection isn’t working very well. In addition, it seems to be highly resistant to physical attack, so basic strikes aren’t working on them!”

“Yes, and they proliferate at an unbelievable rate! Pain doesn’t seem to register with them, so they don’t even flinch at our attack!”

A single slime was hardly any concern, but when they were *this* gigantic, burning one to death suddenly became a massive effort. They were proving much more troublesome than expected. And while they didn’t have to retreat yet—thanks to the reinforcements who arrived every few hours—they were losing time fast and failing to post up the results they wanted.

In the end, they didn’t have the floor entirely explored until the end of day three. Only when more soldiers from higher floors came down were they able to human-wave their way over the crest.

Then, on Floor 50, they encountered a literal pile of the wounded. The passage resembled a dark, dank, gloomy cave, the sounds of battle ringing in their ears.

“Dammit!” came an enraged shout from beyond. “Those monsters revived again!”

Ahead of the group, a gigantic snake, like a living embodiment of

darkness, had wriggled its way into the passage, growling as it blocked any forward progress. It was a tempest serpent, and the Empire's regular-grade magic and gunfire couldn't even put a dent in its armor-like scales. Even if you wanted to take a sword to the serpent, its Poison Breath had a reach of well over twenty feet, bathing the target in a deadly mist before they'd ever come close enough.

"Bastard! These narrow passages were practically made for these creatures!"

"We could go around it if we had enough space, but there's no way to do that here."

"Can we get a magizooka ready?"

"Negative. We just fired it. It's got two hours left to recharge."

A magizooka was a new type of magical weapon, one of the most powerful types of portable offense the world had seen yet. Unlike spellguns that ran on magic stones, these ran on charged magic, using magicules taken from the atmosphere. The spell tucked inside them was the elemental magic Airbuster, which compressed atmospheric air before firing out in a series of concussive blasts. Easily aimed and not reliant on combustion for its force, it was an ideal piece of magic for inside buildings and other closed spaces—and it packed enough of a punch that just carrying one could earn you an A rank.

The problem with a magizooka, though, was the intense amount of energy it consumed. That's why it was designed to be rechargeable, but even in the magicule-laden atmosphere of the labyrinth, a full recharge took three hours. Usually, that'd be fast enough for most purposes, but here, that still wasn't enough.

"Whoa, are you kidding me? So these monsters are regenerating faster than we can kill them?!"

The tempest serpent was clearly unique. There was a ring placed around its neck, giving it a presence that set it apart from other monsters. Most important of all, though, no matter how many times you beat it, it'd come back within three hours. In other words, no matter how many times they captured this floor, the battle would start all over again once enough time passed. And worst of all: No part of

this floor was safe from the creature.

But that still wasn't all.

"Ah, ahhhhh, there's one over here, too!!"

The sound of warfare began echoing from another passage. No, that was not the only tempest serpent—in fact, they had confirmed the presence of at least ten. A tangled web of serpents, each ranking an A-minus in terms of danger, was dominating an area uniquely built to take full advantage of their characteristics.

It was, simply put, a den of black snakes. Typically, the tempest serpent and its reserves would serve as the boss monster of Floor 40. For this emergency, though, they had all been deployed at the same time on this floor.

In the end, reinforcements from the upper floors came in to give them some better arms to work with. Only then did they have enough magizookas to take on all the tempest serpents at once—and only late into the night of day three did they finally subdue them all.

"Right. We need to stay on this floor and watch for any more potential regenerations. Evacuate the sick and injured to the upper floors."

"Yes, sir!"

So the imperial army took this opportunity to reorganize their forces inside the labyrinth—and with that, they stepped forward into an even greater hell.

Labyrinth Floors 51–60

Floor 51 featured a modern-looking passageway. The Empire had already gained control of this floor by the looks of things, and they could see soldiers at every corner. All the signs of fierce combat strewn about suggested that this was another hairy floor to tackle.

One of the unit captains tried to make contact with the people on the field.

"What's the situation?" he asked the guard sentry, trying to keep quiet enough not to wake the resting soldiers.

"It's a mess. We really underestimated this demon lord."

“What do you mean?”

“The traps on this floor are awful. The path you see us guarding every corner of is the correct way—don’t even try to venture outside of it. I think we’ve destroyed most of the traps, but there might still be some activated ones out there.”

“All right. By the way…”

The captain asked for details he could report to his superior officers. The story he was told involved a large number of chemical weapons, the likes of which not even the Empire made use of. There was a tasteless, odorless gas that damaged the eyes and throat; showers of neurotoxins and corrosive liquids; large, vicious traps that ensnared lots of people at once. The soldiers all thought this sort of thing was the exclusive domain of Empire, and that made it seem all the more threatening.

“From this floor on, you won’t find any monsters. Instead, there are these damned magicule-powered golems roaming around. It looks like they’re self-repairing, too. It took forever to fully dismantle them.”

“That sounds real tough.”

The captain wanted to talk about how tough he had it, too, but kept silent, urging the sentry to go on.

“Yeah. The injured and exhausted are resting down on Floor 55. Make it there, and you’ll be able to eat in safety, at least.”

“Thanks. So where’s the front line at the moment?”

“The front line? …According to a story I just heard, it’s on Floor 60. It sounded like a joke to me, though. If we reported it up top, they’re gonna think we lost our minds down here. It’s crazy, but do you still wanna hear it?”

The captain had to nod at the sighing soldier. “Yes, please.”

“You’re sure? Well, okay, then. Supposedly, on Floor 60, there’s this giant humanoid weapon ruling over the place! And as for its strength…”

The more he heard, the sillier it sounded. That was how sublimely grand it was. Even an entire army of A-ranked warriors, apparently, couldn’t find a glimmer of hope against the guy. Its entire body was made of magisteel, making it impervious to swords and guns, and it

had a permanent barrier as well, so not even magizookas worked on it. They had exhausted all options, and that was the latest the guard knew of.

“Also, apparently this giant golem talks, and get this—it sounds exactly like old Lord Gadora. It’s totally unbelievable—and I’m supposed to *report* this? This is way above my pay grade…”

Despite the guard’s valid complaints, the captain still felt obliged to report to his commanding officers and ask for their judgment.

“We’ll have to go in. I’ll have us aim for Floor 55 first. We’ll discuss our future plans there.”

“Yes, sir.”

In a situation like this, the captain knew that his boss’s reply was going to be yes and nothing else. He had no alternative ideas, nor any other concerns with the plan. But this was kicking the can down the alleyway. They’d need a solid answer before long—but the word *retreat* simply didn’t exist in the imperial dictionary.

“You’re going? Yeah, I’m sure you are. Well, good luck, but before you go, I forgot about one other warning. We’ve confirmed the presence of five special monsters in the area. Keep an eye out for them.”

“Special monsters?”

“Yeah. Nobody’s successfully beaten them yet, as far as I know. They’ve got to be uniques, I’m sure of that, and they’re nasty. They’ve killed several of my comrades already.”

They were a red slime, a golden skeleton, a deathly ghost, a heavy suit of living armor, and a small but powerful dragon. This vicious band was apparently patrolling the halls around this set of floors, a highly unusual presence among the herd of golems. Encounter them, the guard warned, and you were as good as dead.

The survivors from the upper floors took that advice to heart as they moved on. It would be just a bit longer before they knew what was waiting for them. Deeper and deeper they went, incessantly and in strict formation, not knowing of the killing fields awaiting them.

Labyrinth Floors 61–70

"What? You still haven't won yet?"

"I'm sorry, sir! Looks like we failed to achieve a breakthrough again…"

Hearing that report threw all the soldiers into despair. Floor 70 was home to a massive gate, a sort of boundary between this one and the great citadel of death.

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Pushing their way through the swarms of undead monsters, the imperial soldiers swaggered across the labyrinth. It was going well at first—at *first* anyway.

All the monsters that appeared were of the undead variety. Get used to the stench of rotting meat, and it wasn't anything an imperial soldier would have much trouble fending off. The first thousand troops sent here managed to establish a base of operations, and after meeting with others, they decided to continue the invasion downward. Losing contact with the surface was a painful blow, but they weren't completely isolated. More would arrive when the time came, they decided, and so it was not a major problem.

So like a raging torrent, the troops stormed down the floors. On day one alone, they had explored and mapped out most of the terrain between Floors 61 and 69.

Floor 70 was the problem. For some reason, this floor was a large, hilly area, one where all the vegetation had withered away. It was the eerie remains of a battlefield, with a hint of death in the air, and at the far end of it loomed a massive gate, similar in size to the one up on the surface. Made of bones, it was located in the middle of a wall that surrounded a fortified city. Why was this in a labyrinth? That was the question on everyone's mind.

Apart from this gate, there was no other entrance into the city. There were no drainage pipes, no service gates, none of the other facilities you'd expect to be required for regular life. It made sense.

This city was occupied by the lifeless—the immortal undead—and on day one, its gates remained firmly shut.

They tried to destroy the walls, but they proved tenaciously thick. Any section they destroyed, the undead would come swooping out to repair it, so the demolition work proceeded slowly, if at all. Even coming close to the wall exposed them to the armed Skeleton Archers up top. It was too much trouble to attack in small numbers, so the Empire forces decided to wait for reinforcements.

On the morning of day two, the imperials now had over ten thousand troops on hand—and just as they were about to begin their attack, the large gates opened soundlessly out of nowhere. Behind it awaited a hideous-looking wight king. It was a skeleton—but was that the right word? Its pure-white bones, polished to perfection, shone in the light as it spoke fluently to the soldiers.

“Welcome to my kingdom Deathtopia. I am Adalmann, the Immortal King. Our preparations for the feast are complete. Now, it is time to enjoy ourselves. Let us begin!”

Immediately after Adalmann introduced himself, an oppressive wave rushed over the army. This king was served by a band of unholy death knights, along with a death dragon that still loomed in all its majesty, long after life had escaped its clutches. Its evil roar was unleashed with enough sheer force to flatten the entire space—and then, from the sky, the death dragon landed just past the gate. The deadliest of dragons, the king of the mountain when it came to undead, had now bared its fangs at the imperial army.

And that wasn’t all. Once the large gates fully opened, the legions of undead swarmed out from inside. Massive armies of death knights, themselves led by a set of Death Lords, came crawling out one after another. The soldiers lined up in front of the gate were immediately thrown into confusion as the battle suddenly began.

This death dragon was an A-ranked monster, a fearsome adversary that required careful advance preparation to take a whack at. Its attribute was “undead,” meaning that it could not be defeated unless its soul was directly attacked—and as proud as the Empire was of its great war power, if their foe was impervious to their attacks, they were helpless.

“G-get back! We can’t just go slashing at random— *Hrrkk!*”

“Dammit! We have to fight fire with fire here…”

“No! He regenerates faster than he burns!”

“You have to get out of here! If you don’t, its miasma will hit you and rip your spirit apart!”

The army was in chaos—and as if to laugh at them, the dragon’s jaw opened wide.

“Look out! That’s— *Aghh!*”

“Brrrt…”

“It’s…my bodyyy! It’s *rottinggg…*!!”

The death dragon’s Zombie Breath rained down from high above, bathing all its earthbound targets. The majority of them failed the resistance check and promptly stopped living. And that wasn’t all, for those contaminated by the dragon’s miasma became zombies themselves, readily obeying the orders of their superior beings. In this case, the “superior being” would be the wight king in the area—in other words, Adalmann. All the casualties the Empire took from the miasma were inversely proportional to the rise in Adalmann’s strength.

And that wasn’t the only tragedy for the imperial force. Even those who managed to escape the death dragon’s rampage weren’t safe, for now the death knights spurred on their death horses as they chased down the would-be escapees. In the blink of an eye, the Empire’s numbers were decimated—and in less than an hour, the force of ten thousand was wiped out.

The devastation would be passed on to the rest of the army by the few people who survived—and now the battle for Floor 70 was in full swing.

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From day two onward, the imperial army made many attempts to break into Floor 70. The first one ended in painful defeat; the second and third saw similar results. Nothing was going their way, and the overwhelming threat of the death dragon was just the start of it.

Although their numbers were only in the low thousands, the death

knights experienced no death, no fatigue, no exhaustion. They earned an A-minus rank as a threat, and their regenerative skills kept them going no matter how many times they were beaten down. The Death Lords commanding them must have been on par with the best warriors the Empire could offer. They surpassed them in quality, even, and their army's ability to carry on fighting through untold damage far overcame their numerical disadvantage.

On top of that, Adalmann had the Death Paladin Alberto working under him as part of the Ten Dungeon Marvels. Even the imperial elites on the ground here couldn't find a way to fight against this army of immortals.

"…But that will end with *this* offensive. I expect great things from you all!"

A colonel with the imperial army had just wrapped up his speech to his soldiers. He was part of a group from the upper floors who arrived here on day four; they, along with the combined existing forces, were about to wage total war.

The Empire wasn't incompetent, of course. There were all kinds of ways to deal with an undead enemy. If you had a marauding army of zombies out to kill humankind, holy magic was an all-purpose go-to. Humankind had committed sizable resources to researching and demystifying the principles of this holy magic, and the Empire had succeeded in developing techniques that had a similar effect as offering prayers to a higher being. People well versed in these techniques had been gathered from across the labyrinth and assigned to the units here on Floor 70. They'd provide resistance to the dragon's evil miasma and penetrative power against the "undead" attribute. That was the crux of this operation.

The imperial army was now in formation atop the hilly terrain, numbering seventy thousand in all. Adalmann's forces, meanwhile, numbered less than forty thousand, and even that was accounting for all the zombie reinforcements he'd won for himself over the past few days. The Empire had a clear numerical advantage, and now every member of their force believed that victory would be theirs at long last.

Then the decisive battle began…and the king made his move.

“Think you’ve outsmarted me? Think again. Extra Skill: Holy-Evil Inversion!”

The Immortal King had perfect control over all his forces, down to the end of the line. Once his power reached across his entire network, their weakness to the holy attribute was no longer an issue. The Empire, wholeheartedly relying on that weakness, would soon realize just how off target their scheme was…and how massive their ensuing defeat would be.

With that defeat, the imperial soldiers’ wills were broken. The survivors were driven to despair, frantically fleeing toward the upper floors. They completely forgot about the conditions for beating the Dungeon; the only thing left in their minds was the thirst for life, the urge to survive.

Labyrinth Floors 71–79

The soldiers dropped off at these floors were instantly forced into a never-ending battle against swarms of insects. The onslaught was incessant; unafraid of death, they continually attacked, not letting up for a moment.

For the troops sent here on day one of the labyrinth invasion, the first twenty-four hours against these swarms were a sobering experience but not a truly fearsome one. Building their base in a passageway they gained control of, they immediately stepped up to take countermeasures.

These insects, dozens of times larger than regular ones, were not only terrifying sights; they packed a punch, too. Let your guard down, and you’d be eaten alive in a matter of seconds—keep your cool, though, and you’d realize that each individual one wasn’t *that* strong. Plus, if these swarms never stopped attacking, that meant the potential for magic crystal harvesting was enormous. It was all prime quality, too, lighting up the faces of every soldier.

This is no big deal, they thought. A regular adventuring party would have no way to take a break down here; their fatigue would

build up, and sooner or later they'd stop giving 100 percent. But these soldiers didn't have to worry about that. If a skilled army wanted to conquer these floors, a bunch of bugs wasn't going to stop it—even if you counted each individual insect, the Empire still outnumbered them. They could also work in shifts during battle, always keeping themselves in perfect battle shape.

So the force gradually expanded its network of bases, smoothly proceeding along. They were given no time to relax, but in a way, that was the only real issue.

The rewards they reaped, on the other hand, were massive. This insect paradise was lined with all kinds of hidden rooms—caves hidden in trees, dark caverns, and so on. They often housed powerful monsters, but they also had treasure chests, and their contents kept the soldiers constantly smiling with glee. One of them had just found a dagger inside the last room's chests, a pricey-looking number done up with gold and silver. It was a capable blade, too, its sheen belying its magisteel make. Weapons with magisteel cores were expensive enough, but the blade's pure magisteel, well, that'd make any rank-and-file soldier beam.

During the briefings, these soldiers were told that any magic crystals and other items recovered were the property of the military. However, smaller items like this dagger would very likely be overlooked—all their gear would be inspected later, but considering the soldier carrying this blade had to defeat the boss guarding it, it was very likely he'd get to keep it. His comrades eyed him enviously, but at the same time, they were all expecting it to be their turn next. If it wasn't for the chance at little side benefits like this, none of them would keep standing here, swatting giant flies the whole day.

By this time, they were also collecting quite a lot of magic crystals. Crystals of this purity were usually scarce finds, but the monsters here dropped them like they were going out of style. The soldiers were laughing all the way to the bank, as it were, and at this rate, they were likely to rake in the bonuses.

From what they heard over the grapevine, it was pretty much the same deal up and down the floors. The section crawling with undead was a real disaster, though—you couldn't plunder anything from

those guys, but they were a notch harder to kill. Meanwhile, the return on investment these bugs offered was second to none. The treasure they uncovered was more than satisfactory, at least, and everyone there was under the happy delusion that they'd be rolling in dough once they were back.

Things started going awry on day two. One soldier realized that when, before his wide-open eyes, the head of his buddy walking next to them was suddenly rolling by itself along the ground.

"Yeah, so when we get back, we're gonna have a wild night at—Huh?"

His buddy's head had what could only be described as a puzzled expression as his glassy eyes looked up at the headless corpse still standing above. His soundless voice stopped midway, his mouth still open as blood spurted out like a fountain, raining all over his comrades.

"Wh-whoaaa!!"

The soldier screamed. The sudden catastrophe that befell the person he had just been talking to was too much to comprehend at first. But even that soldier was lucky, because he was chosen as the next victim before his brain could comprehend anything else.

His head fell with a thud, and like the mute corpse he was next to, the man quickly expired. They died on Floor 79, a place full of flowers in dazzling bloom; one had thought of it as a safe zone until now.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee… It was worth waiting a day for this. All this prey's come right to my doorstep. Thank you so much for coming! Now it's time to let us kill and feed off you."

The voice was clear as day—an attractive one, booming across the entire floor. It spoke the words of a queen, for it belonged to Apito, the Insect Queen and boss of this floor. Her beautiful voice was converted into thought waves that reached every corner of the area—and to her faithful servants, they had the timbre of an order.

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Apito led a swarm of army wasps, a group of murderous insects nearly a foot long whose super senses could catch their human prey no matter how well they hid. Their small, transparent wings functioned as fearsome, high-frequency rotor blades, letting them easily perform irregular high-speed maneuvers. They were the “silent killers” of the insect world, sneaking up on you at the speed of sound.

Excellent dynamic vision wouldn’t mean anything against army wasps. Without exceeding the intrinsic limits of the human body, it’d be impossible to so much as detect them. The extra-skill combination of Hasten Thought and Ultraspeed Reaction were the bare minimum requirements to keep track of their movements. Just one wasp was classified as an over-A disaster.

Incidentally, in the Western Nations, the sighting of even one army wasp caused the authorities to issue a state of emergency. It’d be immediately reported to the top echelons of each nation’s military, who would then form a posse of senior-level knights—including the Crusaders, if possible. It would become a large-scale cleanup operation, featuring knights cornering wasps with holy barriers and weighing them down with weakening and slowing magic spells before doing them in. Even with that strategy, at least some casualties were always a given—that’s how fearsome a monster they were. If more than one was uncovered, meanwhile, that dramatically increased the danger even more.

So how many were under the Insect Queen’s control?

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The number of army wasps carrying out Apito’s orders easily exceeded one thousand. And so before long, the wholesale slaughter began.

Anyone who might’ve thought *Yeah, I can take ’em* was doomed. Even if they were A-ranked powerhouses, unless they had achieved a certain level in their fighting skill, they were little removed from a rank amateur. If you couldn’t react to an army wasp’s speed, all that

awaited was certain death.

And so it took less than ten minutes before all the imperial soldiers gathered on this floor were killed.

Labyrinth Floors 81–90

Let's be frank about it: Day one was just a little warm-up. All the surviving soldiers thought so. Their comrades were gone—all killed by monsters that had the strength of demons or ancient gods. But they weren't the only ones ruing their fates. The same tragedy was playing out on other floors. Everyone was now locked in a desperate battle, forced to fight powerful enemies at every single floor…with no chance of victory.

Floor 81 was a paradise for magical beasts, strutting around with their powerful bodies and forming great herds. But these were still dumb brutes, and an imperial soldier could defeat one of them with ease. On average, the strength of each individual ranked a B or higher probably, and they usually appeared in groups of three to five. That had the potential to surprise an unprepared soldier, but not enough to get anyone killed.

So they found the stairs before long, quickly meeting up with the thousand-strong force thrown into Floor 82. Not a bad day's work overall, they felt. It might take some time, but with a few days to work with, they ought to have this whole thing conquered before long. Then day two came, and the arrival of a certain new adversary changed everything.

On Floor 82, a dense jungle from end to end, was a sentient ape who spoke the humans' language. It was called simply the White Monkey, and it controlled both the wind and the sound, calling forth mighty storms as it flew across the sky. Its beautiful white pelt shone attractively across its supple physique, and the way it ran unfettered across every inch of the battlefield was so fetching that it almost created the illusion of watching a rehearsed performance. Its unique form of combat, using a mix of martial arts and a club in its hand,

was paired with a seemingly never-ending array of aerial killing techniques. Add to that the vorpal blades it shot in all directions, and the White Monkey was one of the most dangerous magical beasts in existence.

In very little time, the White Monkey had used its sorcery to bring the imperial army to the brink of destruction. Then, after an hour of this rampage, it left like the wind, shouting “I’ll be back!” as it did. The regular raids from this simian menace would begin two days later.

One after another, soldiers and their comrades fell. They had fought with every bit of the pride they held as imperial subjects, but they had all been defeated. The sniper team’s shots were blocked by the Monkey’s storms; spells that affected its strength or status were blocked by its sorcery. Spellgun-driven magic wasn’t strong enough to overcome its wind barrier. That only left close-quarters combat, and even the best the Restructured Armor Corps had to offer were just being led around by the nose.

They were being tossed about by the White Monkey like children—and then, whenever time was up, it would simply leave. The reason? Simple: It was waiting for more imperial soldiers to show up.

At first, they ferociously resented being toyed with like this. Now they just wanted this ape to go away. Now there were less than a thousand survivors, and one soldier among them wondered how much longer he had to live. He just couldn’t understand how it came to this, no matter how much he thought about it. Then he spotted a white figure. When did the gears start to go out of sync…? Before he could find the answer, a dark curtain fell over his vision.

Floor 83 featured an expansive grassland with good visibility from end to end. There were pitfalls and other bush-league traps set up, but they posed no obstacle at all. The weather was fine, the faces on the marching forces bright. But on the night of day two, the Empire suffered staggering damage.

The moon had just shifted from waxing to full, and now it framed a lofty, high-minded rabbit in the air. This was the Moon Rabbit, the master of gravity, and its attacks made no distinction between friend

or foe—but here it didn't need to worry about the former. Although its powers depended on the moon phase, the Rabbit was capable of turning heaven and earth upside down even during a new moon.

Now the imperial army was at the mercy of this crushing super-gravitational force. But it wasn't over. Night would come again, soon enough—and in three days, a full moon, the night when the Rabbit's power was strongest…

Floor 84 was an intricate maze of cobblestone alleyways. The soldiers walking them seemed pale.

"W-water, I need water…"

"No dice. I can't reach our supply team. You'll have to hold out."

"Shit! It's only been three days, but I'm so damn thirsty… I can't eat without any water…"

This surgically enhanced soldier was crying about his uncontrollable thirst. It was a hard scene to believe. But it wasn't his fault. Because the Empire was confident in its ability to create drinking water with magic, they had supplied each soldier with only enough to fill their canteen. A portable food supply, the higher-ups felt, was much more of a priority.

Now it was this army's downfall. The air on this floor was filled with some kind of toxin, and there wasn't enough evaporated water in the air to magically collect. This situation was only discovered on day three, when some soldiers began to fall ill. Plus, in a particularly nasty turn of events, antidote magic didn't work on this poison. No matter how many times they tried to undo the toxin's effect, it just kept leaking into their water supply.

They could breathe normally, at least…but before much longer, they were going to face some serious attrition. Even now they were having frontline soldiers collapsing from the pain, exhibiting high fevers and black spots on their skin.

"We got another one! He's lost too much strength. He needs treatment…"

"Dammit, we've got no medics in here! Any healing magic?"

"It's not having any effect…"

And so more and more of their comrades fell—and every imperial soldier who was there to see it wondered if they would be next.

Now tiny monsters were running around at their feet in the midst of all this. They were black-furred mice, not even two inches long, and they seemed so trivial that the soldiers paid them no mind. That was a serious mistake, for the mice were the very source of all this. In fact, they were the minions of the Black Mouse, the floor boss—the plague monarch spreading a dark, foul illness.

The soldiers had made a terrible mistake. So distracted were they by the powerful magical beasts trotting around that they totally ignored a little black mouse they could've crushed with one step. These servants of the Black Mouse were thus free to spread their germs with abandon.

If someone with Shinji's restorative skills was here, maybe they could have disabled the trap placed on this floor—but sadly, no such handy doctor was present. Magical healing tended not to work very much on illness; it was meant more for physical injury, although certain other spells were better honed to deal with particular diseases. Boosting a patient's physical strength didn't matter much if the root of the disease wasn't cured; injury and disease, after all, required two completely different schools of treatment. If you needed someone who could totally cure a disease, well, there were only one or two holy magic practitioners of that caliber per nation. They were rare treasures, and barring special circumstances, they'd never serve in military combat.

Death spread its tendrils across this floor as well.

Floor 85 was dominated by a royal tiger, patrolling the thick deciduous forest that was its domain. The magical beasts that roamed freely on the other floors were completely under this tiger's thrall.

This ruler was the Thunder Tiger, a big cat that controlled lightning. While the Empire thought it had the upper hand before it showed up, this perceived advantage didn't last long. Put rapidly on the defensive, they were forced back to their base by the stairway.

The forest belonged to the monsters, and despite being literally cornered to one edge of it, the soldiers continued their struggle…

Floor 86 was a desert occasionally dotted by oases. The sun shone brightly, the temperature rising every minute it was in the sky; when it left at night, the cold chilled to the bone. The temperature difference was so great that it sapped the strength of many soldiers before battle even began.

They assumed the climate would be their greatest enemy here—and while they weren't wrong, they weren't exactly right, either. The real trap here was the oxygen in the air.

The Winged Snake was here, and the domain it ruled over was the air. Controlling its composition—reducing the oxygen level to zero, for example—was like taking candy from a baby. And when the soldiers assumed the temperature difference was something they'd get over after some rest, that was all it took to ensure a peaceful passing in their sleep for every one of them…

Floor 87 was, for some reason, a vast mountain range. The tranquil views reminded many soldiers of their families back home; if they let themselves reminisce for a moment, they could bask in their happy childhoods and envision lovers they dreamed of seeing once more.

It took just under five days for them to become fully relaxed. That was partly thanks to the low monster rates around the peaks; unlike many other floors, it was difficult to maintain alertness.

And that was why they never noticed that the guards on duty had fallen asleep, never waking up. They only seemed awake thanks to a hallucination in their own minds. This was the work of the Sleeping Ram, a peace-loving soul that, with its gentle invitations, had reaped the consciousness of all the soldiers without a drop of bloodshed. The Sleeping Ram's illusory hypnosis lured them all to sleep—a sleep they would never awaken from.

Floor 88, a forest bordering a great river, was home to a bird of

raging flames.

Strangely, this fire never spread itself to the surrounding trees. It could only burn those who were hostile to it—and when it did, it went on forever, never fading.

This was the Fire Bird, the master of the flames, and it served as the floor boss here. This Fire Bird and the other avian creatures that served under it quickly burned all the invading soldiers to a crisp.

Floor 89 was a maze made of mirrors. Nothing organic played a role on this floor; it was immaculately maintained, with every mirrored surface polished to a fine sheen. All the reflections on the walls, of course, complicated the maze further for the intruders, and the mirrors themselves were unbreakable. Why? Because they were created with a secret spell from a single monster—the Mirror Dog, flitting across every reflective surface.

Running freely among the mirrors, it toyed mercilessly with the imperial army. It existed within the mirrors themselves; mirrors that bounced all magic back to the casters. This made it hard to so much as catch the Mirror Dog in action—and as it reflected itself more and more, multiplying to seemingly infinite numbers, the pitiful prey were all devoured.

At every level, vicious floor bosses were on the rampage. Each had been granted an environment best suited for their traits, allowing them to demonstrate their abilities to the fullest.

Still, the imperial army tried their hardest to resist. Sometimes, they were even able to defeat these bosses, cheers erupting across the floor whenever they did. But they came right back to life, again and again, and that truth frightened them more than anything else.

The situation on the other floors was much the same, as the rumor mill had it. The realization broke the soldiers' hearts, as it made continuing the fight seem utterly pointless.

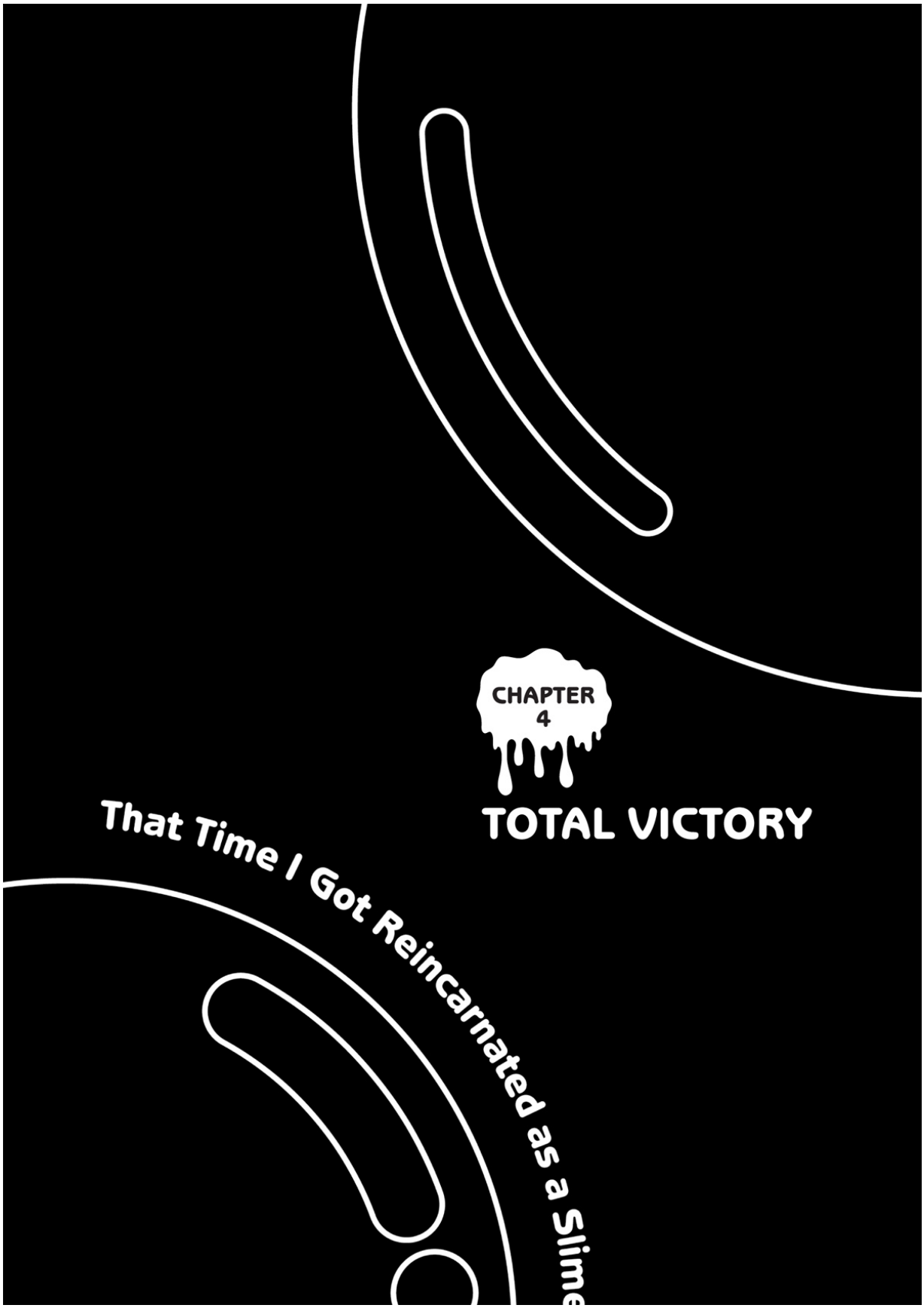
And as for the most desperate among them all…

The monkey, rabbit, mouse, tiger, snake, ram, bird, and dog were

all mystic beasts, the Eight Legions serving Kumara—nothing more than her cherished pets. Each one was a transformation born from one of her tails, and their respective abilities were granted by Kumara herself. When all eight came together—that was when Kumara took her full form.

She was no longer a child, but one of the world's most beautiful women: Nine-Head Kumara, guardian of Floor 90 and the master of these eight mystic beasts. And now a group of foolish, pathetic victims were coming her way. They were nothing but food for Kumara—thus the death toll within the labyrinth climbed that much higher.

Five hundred thirty thousand imperial soldiers invaded the labyrinth. Just a few days later, the number of survivors dropped to zero.


CHAPTER
4
TOTAL VICTORY
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



CHAPTER 4

TOTAL VICTORY

A full week had passed since the labyrinthine invasion began. One by one, the gate took in all those Empire soldiers—and still it remained silent.

Caligulio had to bide his time seething to himself over the unannounced news, the undelivered reports. That frustration was his body's way of disguising the fear his instincts were manufacturing for him. Even at this late stage, he still had no contact with the other troops—and on top of that, all contact with the rest of the labyrinth was gone. At first glance, they seemed completely isolated behind enemy lines, which unnerved Caligulio.

"No one's returned yet? *Still?!*"

There was no answer to his ranting—and that, in a way, was the best answer they could give him.

Both Caligulio and his staff officers knew the situation wasn't looking good now. On the first day, they had sent squadrons of soldiers inside on multiple occasions, and they had brought intel on the labyrinth back for him. Nobody could get back out, but they could still initially communicate with the people inside, at least. Compiling what they relayed to him, he was able to get a rough idea of their status.

Upon entering the labyrinth, soldiers were required to confirm that they wished to remain inside. Once they did, they were presented with the conditions for beating the labyrinth:

DEFEAT THE TEN MARVELS WITHIN AND COLLECT THE TEN KEYS IN THEIR POSSESSION. DOING SO WILL GRANT YOU THE RIGHT TO CHALLENGE THE KING OF THE LABYRINTH. DEFEAT THE KING, AND YOU WILL HAVE BEATEN THE LABYRINTH.

They all thought it'd be easy at first, but now they had to admit it was a bad decision on their parts.

According to the information they managed to gather, the labyrinth contained at least fifty floors. Troops coming in would be transported to different floors in turns, a thousand at a time. That allowed new soldiers to eventually reach out to those who entered earlier, but these contacts didn't begin to happen until over fifty thousand soldiers had stormed in.

Given the repeated sorties over three days, there were probably going to be fifty-four or so floors down there. The report from Shinji's party, as given by Yuuki, stated that the labyrinth contained sixty floors, but it had become clear fairly early on that this intel was shaky at best.

After all, the strength of the monsters inside was far different from what they had heard. Shinji's claim that the wight king was the boss of the labyrinth pretty much destroyed any shred of his credibility. The wight king's floor was discovered on day two, judging by the reports, and apparently he was but one of the so-called Ten Dungeon Marvels. Some among Caligulio's staff still feared that the rumors were true…but either way, nobody was smiling now.

"Even for our finest elites, it must be a great challenge…"

"Indeed, sir. If we don't do something, I fear this entire invasion might end in failure."

Caligulio shuddered. This was not acceptable to him. "Mission failed" was easy enough to say, but it translated to the deaths of five hundred thirty thousand imperial soldiers. Those were granted to him by Emperor Ludora, and every single one of them was a valued asset—there was no way he could simply abandon them all.

But they were still just seven days in. They had plenty of time before their scheduled limit; they must've still been fighting away

inside the labyrinth. All Caligulio could do was trust in that and wait. That should've been the right option, but Caligulio—really, his entire staff, too—felt they were traversing a path straight to failure like this.

It was the Ten Marvels who made them think this way. Currently, the imperial soldiers had obtained four of the "keys" mentioned in the rules—specifically from the four Dragon Lords, who would apparently revive themselves again and again if beaten. As for the remaining six Marvels, however, nobody on the field had any idea how to even hurt them.

That was certainly true for the wight king, but even the Death Paladin by his side was a menace. Then there was the queen of the insects, the mistress overseeing a pack of magical beasts, and the attacking golem nicknamed the ghost of Gadora by the troops. And they didn't even know the identity of the tenth and final one at all.

Unless they could defeat these six, beating the labyrinth was a pipe dream. And both Caligulio and his staff unanimously agreed that it simply wasn't possible with the fighting force currently in the labyrinth.

"At this rate, we could put everything the Empire's got in there and achieve nothing."

"Indeed, sir."

"That would be a waste of resources. It'd also affect our defenses here on the surface."

So what were they to do? There was only one answer. They'd have to conquer the labyrinth the way it was always *supposed* to be conquered—with a small team of elites. But if that was their option, the question became who they would pick for the job.

After stewing over it for a little while, he decided to gather the best people who remained among the surface forces, a total of one hundred men and women. Only those who were truly elite (or at least, powerful and ready to show it) were recruited.

Sitting in the front row was an elegant-looking gentleman, wearing a neatly starched uniform despite being in a military field camp. This man's name was Minitz, a high-ranked major general. Caligulio trusted him more than anyone else, making him his pick to command this operation.

Next to Minitz was a man smoking a cigarette, looking like he was pondering the sheer futility of life. His fearless gaze, as if staring down his prey, and his well-kept beard instilled a sense of awe in anyone who encountered him. Fortunately for him, he also had the talent to ensure that he never betrayed the expectations of anyone who challenged him.

This was Colonel Kanzis, a true champion with countless glorious achievements to his name—most notably, the notorious Operation Mystic Sweep, which he had personally commanded. He always kept a dignified demeanor, perhaps a sign of his supreme self-confidence; even when dealing with superior officers, he never showed a hint of fear. Very few people warned Kanzis about this, and they had no right to—he reported directly to Minitz, and Minitz tolerated his attitude well enough. Caligulio had his thoughts about this, but not to the point that he'd complain about one of the Empire's most famed heroes. He left Kanzis's handling entirely to Minitz, so if Kanzis went out of line here, there'd be no one to stop him.

Among the rest of the group of one hundred, Lucius and Raymond stood out in particular. They were both otherworlders. Lucius possessed the unique skill Fusionist, letting him set off highly explosive attacks that were the talk of the imperial army. Raymond, on the other hand, had the unique skill Combatant. As a former martial artist, this was basically his old job taking skill form—it made him a first-class fighter, mastering any weapon, fighting style, and Art he had learned in this world.

Those were the four most famous names, but the others were also walking armies of their own. They all ranked at least an A, and even among the Empire's illustrious ranks, each was a one-in-ten-thousand talent. These one hundred people alone could destroy the knight corps of entire nations, and now Caligulio was entrusting the entire operation to this set of champions.

"All right. You understand the situation?"

They all silently nodded. Some—like Kanzis, of course—smirked at the question, but most were earnestly listening to Caligulio's words.

"Our comrades in the labyrinth are currently awaiting relief. In

order to leave, we must satisfy all the conditions, and that includes defeating the demon lord. My Armored Division is the strongest in the Empire, and I know they're up to solving this most difficult of tasks. But ah, there is no time to waste!"

The labyrinth was not the kind of place you could overrun with human-wave tactics. Caligulio understood that now, although he could never honestly say so, lest he torpedoed his army's morale. So he embellished things a bit as he spoke.

"You must defeat these so-called Ten Marvels and retrieve the ten keys they possess. That will apparently give you the right to challenge the demon lord himself. This is exactly what I expect you do to. The demon lord must be taken down!"

That was the mission he gave to the best the Armored Division had to offer.

"We accept, Lord Caligulio. The demon lord is no enemy of ours, for we are the glorious army of the Empire. Now it is time to prove that to you!"

It was Minitz, highest ranked among the group, who answered on the division's behalf. With a graceful bow, he promised complete victory for his side, and no one around him had a single discouraging word. These were the brave heroes who would challenge the demon lord in his own domain.

But they were ignorant, and that ignorance was what kept them hopeful. They were unaware of the dangers the labyrinth held. Now would have been the perfect time to retreat—but it was too late.

Caligulio's decision had simply come too late. The battle inside the labyrinth was already over. Nobody was left alive. But not realizing any of that, the chosen heroes marched into this dreadful labyrinth in the highest of spirits.



After being enthralled with the big screen for a fairly extended period of time, we had finally decided to take a break.

I just… I dunno. I guess I saw this coming. The Empire definitely ignored the warning on the gate, that's for sure—and in epic fashion, too. In fact, they sent even more soldiers into the labyrinth than we anticipated.

"Amazing. Better than I ever thought it'd go."

Benimaru nodded at me. "Indeed, and none of them were strong enough to cause particular concern. The Ten Dungeon Marvels must truly be that powerful, yes, but perhaps this *is* going to be easier than I thought."

Even so, he wasn't being careless. In fact, his attention was already back on the surface.

"Looks like there's some more movement," I said.

"Yes. I think they're selecting a group this time, rather than relying on sheer numbers. I wish they could have reached that conclusion sooner, though. Then maybe the labyrinth forces would've had more of a struggle…"

"Well, hang on, it's still turned out real good for us, hasn't it?"

"Yes, true enough. But when things go this well, I suppose I can't help but feel uneasy…"

That's not exactly what I wanted to hear from Benimaru, but based on his attitude, I imagined he saw all this as a foregone conclusion.

But I think I saw the problem. He wanted the Empire to try harder so *he'd* have a chance to join the fray, didn't he? I guess I kinda understood that feeling…or maybe not… No, I mean, if I did, I'd turn into a battle maniac like all these guys, right?

I'm not like Benimaru and the rest. I'm satisfied with these results. Besides—like I've said tons of times—in this world, quality counts for a lot more than quantity. This specially selected force must have been the enemy's main war power. There was a decent chance they could beat the Ten Marvels individually, so now was no time to be playing around. Our objective was to thin out the enemy forces, and we certainly succeeded there. The Empire had one hundred thousand or so troops left, and in terms of size alone, they were now winnowed down to a point where the Western Nations could handle them solo.

You know how it is. It's like at the gambling table: having your opponent win big at first, then taking advantage after they lose sight of when to fold. You're picturing yourself as such a winner that even if you lose big later, you're suckered into believing you can make it all back. Even if you know it's a logical fallacy, it can be really hard to stop, you know?

That was exactly what happened to the Empire this time, and thanks to continually deploying their forces in there, their army was now well past the point of no return. For us, that was great—mission accomplished.

I was super happy with how well everything had gone so far, but we still hadn't achieved our secondary mission—finding the most powerful members of the imperial army. There were a few decently strong individuals, but nobody who looked like they could take me down. Still… I dunno. The Rimuru who Chloe talked about in her story hadn't become a demon lord. His strength was probably about where I was when I lost to Hinata—sorry, *tied* with Hinata.

But either way, I didn't detect any real threats here so far. Maybe that guy with the Legend-class weapon Testarossa killed? Maybe Davis, that eleventh-ranked dude, had a shot at doing me in—again, not the current me, but the me from back when I fought Hinata.

In the end, I had to conclude that this threat to my life hadn't quite shown up yet. There was no point stewing over it, so I put the topic on hold.

What I was really curious about right then were the thoughts of the enemy commander. If the situation was this dire for them, I'd think they would opt to retreat, normally. What could he be thinking?

Understood. Since communication is cut off with the rest of their forces, he likely lacks adequate awareness of the current situation. Presumably, they are clinging to a nonexistent hope to bring them victory.

Wow, way to lay on the sarcasm, Raphael.

That sounded legit to me, but in that case, maybe we were

winning the information war a little *too* much. If their commander had a proper grasp of the situation, maybe he would've retreated a lot sooner.

Negative. If you do not hit an enemy thoroughly when you can, you will leave behind enmity that may come back to haunt you later. There is no need to show mercy to the intruders.

Yikes. Rough. It was brutally rational and ruthless, but it seemed like the right answer, too. If we left a sizable enemy force behind, the Empire probably wouldn't give up on its ambitions—but if we kept hitting 'em hard, we could probably avoid further war, at least for the time being.

Maybe it's best to do everything halfway instead. The enemy has families, too, right? Their next of kin are bound to be sad about this.

…Ah, but if we're thorough with making them realize their own stupidity here, maybe that'll help deter future wars. Maybe it's not the good-guy approach, but in terms of eliminating little flare-ups in the future, it's the right thing to do. Bit late for *that* now, but still.

Regardless, unlike Raphael here, I have kind of an indecisive streak. If the enemy flees, I let them do what they want; if they come back to attack me, I crush them. I'm letting the other side take the initiative with decision-making, and maybe that's a little naive of me. It's something I'm aware of, but honestly, it's just part of my nature, and I don't think it'll be fixed too easily. I really don't *want* them to attack me, deep down—the least amount of trouble in my life, the better.

As I internally whined about this, Ramiris sent me a Thought Communication.

(Got a moment, Rimuru?)

(Sure, sure. This is Rimuru. I'm open.)

The tone of her voice suggested it was nothing urgent. What could it be?

(Right, so um, another hundred or so are coming, right?)

(Looks that way, yeah. Real strong ones this time, too.)

(Mm-hmm! So the Ten Marvels just sent me a couple of requests.)

Ramiris laid them out for me.

Request number one was proposed by Gadora. Apparently he knew a couple of the people in this elite group: Lucius and Raymond, both otherworlders. He wanted a chance to talk with them and maybe have them defect to our side.

Request number two was from Kumara. She recognized another familiar face, but unlike with Gadora, this guy wasn't an acquaintance so much as a target for revenge. This was the very person who had destroyed the Mystic Village that was home to Kumara and her friends, then sold the young Kumara (she was already nearly three hundred years old by that point, but still) to Clayman. I had no idea some bastard that vicious was working for the Empire. Eesh.

So those were the two requests. Now, what to do about them?

"What do you think, Benimaru?"

"Well, the human-wave approach is a good shortcut to victory, but it's not exactly pretty. I realize there's no such thing as a 'pretty' or an 'ugly' war, but I think we're safe in granting Gadora's wish. If he gets them to join us, then great; if not, it won't hurt us very much."

Seemed legit to me. It'd help us spread the enemy around, besides. I'll let Gadora reach out to that pair, then. As for Kumara:

"No one seeking vengeance wants to be stopped in their quest."

Benimaru putting it *that* way sure made it sound heavy. And come to think of it, hadn't Kumara been under the thrall of Clayman's Demon Dominate skill? If the man who brought her to that fiend was back here at the labyrinth, it was only natural that she'd be out for revenge. They say that nothing fruitful actually comes from revenge, but personally, I think it can bring closure. If you've got a lot of mixed-up feelings, it's better to let them all out and free yourself, isn't it?

(Okay, Ramiris, you've got my approval on both.)

(Oh, great! Thanks so much, Rimuru! You're soooo understanding!)

(We'd like to get the enemy spread out anyway, so why don't we

do this? You can send Lucius and Raymond over to Gadora, and Kumara can have that, um…)

(The bearded dude! We don't know his name, but he's sure got a nasty face, doesn't he?)

Something told me Ramiris was *really* favoring Kumara here. But I was with her on that.

(Yeah, send him over to her. And tell her I said good luck!)

(Okay! I'm on it!)

So I accepted the requests. Now, where should we send the rest of the Empire's elites?

"I think that man over there is the commander. I'd suggest we give him to Apito to execute, Sir Rimuru. Alone."

Benimaru could really stand to phrase things a little more lightly. Wasn't he just talking about fighting "pretty" and "ugly" and stuff? I was amazed he was so eager to aim for a murderous strategy like that. But…yeah, I'd accept it.

(Also, Ramiris, that well-dressed middle-aged dude over there is the commander, I think, so can you send him alone over to Apito?)

(Him, huh? Taking away the commander so the whole team loses cohesion, eh? Great idea, Rimuru! I tell ya, you come up with the dirtiest tactics!)

…Pardon? Why was *I* the bad guy now?! And here Ramiris, completely ignoring my surprise, was remarking about how devious I was.

(And as for the other hundred-ish… You wanna just let 'em at Adalmann?)

(Roger that! My Dragon Lords all lost, but everyone else put in a real big effort. Let's have 'em keep up the good work right to the end!)

She seemed a little peeved about it, but I couldn't help her much with that. The Dragon Lords just didn't quite have what it took to deal with a rushing army. Unlike with the other Dungeon Marvels, they resided in large arenas with lots of floor-type debuffs—great for hassling small parties, but if you had an army that could share information with each other and take countermeasures, that killed the advantage in no time flat.

Considering those circumstances, I still thought they fought pretty well. We may have had four keys taken, but the remaining six Marvels remained unbeaten. Hopefully we'd see them keep that up.

(Sounds great! But whatever you guys do, don't let your guards down. There's a chance they've got some really dangerous folks in there.)

(Oh, we'll be fine, we'll be fine! Besides, everyone's itching to go hard now that they know you're watching. And we've always got Master Veldora as king of the labyrinth, right?)

Good point. The idea here was to collect ten keys and beat the "king of the labyrinth," after all. I found it hard to imagine Veldora taking a dive, so at least we could always rely on him.

(Right, right. Okay, best of luck out there!)

(You got it, Boss! See yaaaaaa!!)

With that excited farewell, Ramiris shut off the Thought Communication. Just a little bit more effort now, I supposed, and we'd be done. I turned my eyes back toward the big screen again, excited to watch the final battle.



Lucius and Raymond sat down on the stairway, breathing hard as they drank some water. The reports indicated that there were never monsters on the stairs, and while it'd be dangerous to take that for granted, it seemed safer than anywhere else, hence why they chose that for a resting spot.

……

……

…

Being summoned by Commander Caligulio and ordered to enter the labyrinth elicited no complaints from them. Just like Shinji and his band, Lucius and Raymond were otherworlders picked up by Master Gadora. He had kept them fed and protected back when they didn't know right from left in this world, and they owed him a debt of

gratitude for that.

But now Gadora was missing. He had led a special team on a mission to the territory of the demon lord Rimuru. He had come back once, although none of the other team members did; he told Yuuki they had been killed in battle. Then, not long afterward, Gadora himself vanished. There were a couple plausible rumors going around that Gadora had ventured back out to rescue his teammates. Those who knew Gadora's personality found that a little farfetched, but if it was true, they couldn't ignore that.

Besides, the people who joined Gadora—the ones said to have died in battle—were all very well-known to Lucius and Raymond. They were Shinji Tanimura, Marc Lauren, and Zhen Liuxing, and they had all become good friends after traveling to this world. Their deaths were hard to swallow, but the fact was that they hadn't been seen in the Empire since. They had been sent to investigate the labyrinth, and Lucius was sure something happened between them and the demon lord Rimuru. It was reasonable to think that they tried taking him on, then died in the effort.

Some of the otherworlders like him were sad to see Shinji and his friends gone. Lucius and Raymond were no exception, and many others expressed their sorrow as well. Being from the same place had a way of instilling this sort of solidarity like that. Besides, Shinji was something of a leader type, a kind young man who never abandoned those in need. He could be a bit insensitive, but a lot of people looked up to him.

Lucius and Raymond both owed Gadora. They also wanted to find out if three close friends of theirs were safe. So after some discussion among their peers, it was decided that the two of them, having the most combat power out of their group, would go undercover on this campaign.

They immediately proposed the idea to Yuuki, who promptly rejected it. "It's really dangerous to act right now," he said. "All kinds of things are getting jumbled together, so I'd keep laying low if I were you. I can't go into details, sadly, but I'm sure Shinji and his friends are fine, so…"

If Yuuki called it dangerous, it must *really* have been dangerous.

But not everyone was willing to accept that. If their fates remained uncertain, some Empire otherworlder was bound to take matters into their own hands and take off for the Forest of Jura solo. And if it was gonna come to *that*, they all figured, they might as well send the combat specialist of the gang first, so they could deal better with whatever came along. Lucius was originally going to act on his own, but Raymond wound up joining him; they both secured transfers from the Composite Division to the Armored Division to join this operation, and neither of them told Yuuki about it.

With those motivations in mind, both Lucius and Raymond were waiting for Caligulio to give them the order sooner or later, and yet…

……

……

…

"Y'know, I'm startin' to think going in was a big mistake."

"Yeah. Maybe. I didn't think the opposition would be *this* strong."

They had both been dropped into Floor 59. They were originally going to be tossed right into Floor 60, not that they were aware of that—but there was a chance this duo was hiding their true abilities or that they were someone else entirely disguised as these two, so they wanted to test them out first. (This was the strategy proposed by Rimuru—or Raphael, really—and Ramiris accepted it, although she remarked about how oddly wary a move it was.)

So the pair were exposed to intense combat all across Floor 59. There was a litany of variable lasers, sonic cannons, and various other science-driven weapons. Isolation doors would come crashing down on them, locking them into rooms pumped with tasteless, odorless poison gas. All these weapons crafted in the lab on Floor 95 (currently Floor 100) had been implemented on Floor 59—and the icing on the cake was the attack golems.

These were based on materials Rimuru retrieved from the Puppet Nation of Dhistav, as discovered in the ruins of Amrita. After extensive research, they had re-created the ruins' extensive defense systems, all of which were being put into thorough use here. Weapons that didn't even need to be turned on at 10 percent to wipe out the imperial soldiers were now being used to test out Lucius and

Raymond.

It was an offensive like none before, and the two of them had to expose all their deepest inner skills to survive. Raymond kept point, buying enough time for Lucius to unleash his killer blows. Lucius's Fusionist skill did what it sounded like—it could mix materials and extract energy from them, and when used right, it could unleash attacks akin to nuclear magic. Gadora had discovered that skill and taught him how to harness it; that old debt of gratitude was still on Lucius's mind as he fought.

The battle itself, luckily, ended in an overwhelming victory for them both. Despite all the destructive force they were faced with, neither the golems nor all the advanced techie weapons could finish them off. The sheer numbers, though, were absolutely off the charts. Breaking through all these traps was a huge challenge for just two people, and Lucius couldn't be blamed for being so exhausted after a single day of work.

"Hey… So what now? Wanna go on?"

"You kidding me? We've only made it down one flight of stairs. We need a plan for this, or else it'll be way too dangerous to take on that onslaught again."

"Yeah. But we ain't got no other choice, do we? The moment we walked in, we got separated from the group, so…"

Raymond was right, and Lucius knew it. But there was nothing they could do. Proceeding on would be dangerous, yes…but was there any better option available? Going up instead of down sure didn't guarantee they'd ever escape the labyrinth—besides, if that question when they came in was to be believed, it was impossible to leave anyway until they beat this thing.

"It's totally impossible to beat this labyrinth…"

"Yeah. Maybe if we had more time…but like, even if we did one floor a day, it'd still take at least a month. And if we take that long, we're definitely gonna run out of food."

That was the main problem. Lucius and Raymond hadn't undergone imperial augmentation surgery, so they needed to eat regularly. Water they could manage themselves, but they had just two days of food on them—and if they kept running into floors with

no monsters like before, they couldn't rely on monster meat to supplant their diet, either. At this rate, lasting even three weeks was out of the question.

It was just one day after they went in, and already things were starting to look hopelessly bleak. But they weren't giving up. They had come here because they wanted to find out about their mentor and friends. If they were going to give up and run at this point, they never would've volunteered for this in the first place.

"Hey, you think they can trust these things they gave us before we went in?"

Lucius pointed at his neck as he asked Raymond. This item was something Caligulio had given them before this operation, a prototype made at their R & D labs—a replica of the revival item Gadora had brought back. The commander told him that if he died in the labyrinth, this thing would resurrect him, although Lucius didn't believe it.

"How can I trust him on that? And even if it *does* work, where's it going to revive me?"

"Yeah, 'cause if you wake up on the spot, it's gonna be right next to the monster that just killed you. They didn't test *that* part out yet, did they?"

"Nah. They want us to instead. But why a necklace, though? Didn't he bring back a bracelet?"

"Guess it shows how far the Empire's lagging on that tech."

This was, in essence, a knockoff made on a rushed timetable, so it wound up a little larger than the original was the explanation given to him. It only added to the sheer distrust. Who'd ever want to put their lives in the hands of a shoddy imitation?

"This, you see, I can only give to the truly special ones. And I firmly believe that you two are worthy enough to be entrusted with this!"

Sure, Caligulio had framed it as something special, but turn it around, and he was basically admitting they had no idea if it worked. They didn't make any for the rank-and-file soldiers, so it was up to them to see what would happen. Maybe they could trust it more if they had some experimental data or something, but involuntarily

testing subjects like this was ridiculous.

“Well, at least *I’ll* find out what happens when you die first.”

“Oh, man, don’t even joke about that,” replied Raymond, ever the realist. “No way *I’m* gonna rely on this anyway. Besides, don’t the Resurrection Bracelets this is based on run on the power of the demon lord Ramiris? If we try using a fake based on something we basically shoplifted from her, isn’t that gonna piss her off?”

Lucius shrugged his agreement, his thoughts largely the same. To them, the conclusion was obvious. They had to act as if resurrection wasn’t at all possible. All they could rely on were their own strengths.

So they stood up, sarcastic smirks on their faces.

“You ready?”

“Yeah. If we’re here ’n’ all, might as well go all the way. If it doesn’t work out, at least we’ll be forgiven for it.”

“You think? Like, maybe Shinji would just laugh it off, but *her*, you know…”

“Don’t even start. I just managed to forget about her, too.”

“Sorry, sorry. I’m more scared of her than I am of this labyrinth.”

“Whoa, don’t spill your guts just because she ain’t here, man. You’re right and all, but…”

“Right? I can’t believe how insensitive Shinji can be. All that enthusiasm pointed his way, and it goes right over his head.”

“Totally. But that’s Shinji for you. And her, too, like…”

“Yeah. He’s a good guy. Maybe he’s survived all this, even.”

“Yeah. He had to.”

They both smiled. Even in these dire straits, they still held hope in their hearts, and they knew the path they had to take. So still smiling brightly, they started down the stairs, not even knowing what awaited them.

And then:

“H-hello there, Lucius…and Raymond, too! Listen, there’s something I’d like to discuss with you!”

“Yeah, something really good, y’know? So hear him out.”

“…Yes. Give him a chance.”

Encountering Shinji, Marc, and Zhen—the targets of their rescue op—immediately past the stairs made Lucius and Raymond freeze on the spot.

“Ah, it seems they might be a tad shocked. Well, allow me to ask you as well. Will you listen to what I have to say?”

A familiar voice boomed out from the gigantic golem looming before them. It was undoubtedly Gadora, the one Lucius and Raymond owed their lives to.

“Are…? Are you alive?”

“And…like, can you explain this, man?”

And so the battle of persuasion between the two sides began. It would take just a little more time before the two thoroughly confused would-be heroes saw things Gadora’s way.



All told, the job went surprisingly easily…and surprisingly successfully, too. Even Shinji’s gang, who announced previously that they wouldn’t join the war, volunteered for this particular mission—and thanks to them, the two sides reached an agreement with hardly any trouble.

Lucius and Raymond were apprentices of Gadora and friends to Shinji’s gang, but after that workout up on Floor 59, Lucius was the clear standout. His skill was just off the charts. All it took was a little tap on something in his hand, and it’d trigger a small explosion in front of him—one with nuclear-level force but limited to just a tiny range. The smallest motions seemed to let him produce the most amazing results.

The unique skill Fusionist let him transform matter itself, fusing it with other matter in the process. This let him, for example, throw a pebble or something at an enemy that caused the foe to blow up on impact. Even if a barrier of some sort warded off the pebble, it’d still explode the moment it hit the ground. It’d be neat if he could ricochet shots for situations like that, but since the “pebbles” Lucius preferred

were small enough to flick with a single finger, that was a lot to ask of him. Besides, having a pebble ignite on *this* target and not *that* one was also tough to manage.

Still, this was one evil skill. Get the timing wrong, and he could easily end up burned. But Lucius had thoroughly researched. Exactly what kind of research, nobody besides him knew, but he certainly seemed to have perfected his craft.

Raymond, as his partner, demonstrated superb combat skills. His shield, meant to symbolize his own fighting spirit, was just as impressive; the way he used it to block all frontal attacks was a sight to behold. It even deflected the shock waves from Lucius's explosions without complaint. As a team, they meshed really well.

So these were the real things, no disguises or whatever. They weren't under any sort of mind control, and it seemed they really were here to find out what happened to Gadora and Shinji's gang. They both seemed pretty trustworthy, and honestly, I was glad they were on our side. Now that they were on board, I'd have them work under Shinji's group for a while as a kind of training period. I didn't think we needed to worry about them betraying us, but it was just a precautionary measure. Once I saw how they did, I could upgrade them to the same status as Shinji and the others.

So all was well on Floor 60. But what about Floor 70?

Around a hundred people were huddled together in that hilly wasteland—confused at first, but a day later, they were calmer. They had pitched their tents on a hilltop with a good view, and a few of them had been sent to scout the area. There was no sign of any immediate offensive; clearly they were being very cautious. Their composure was quite impressive, especially considering we tossed their commander on an entirely different floor. These truly *were* heroes head and shoulders above the rest, I supposed.

"I thought they'd be more upset about this, really…"

"Oh, this is about what I'd expect. They've established a clear chain of command, so they can maintain order even if they lose their commander."

Benimaru, unlike me, was pretty indifferent about it. A disjointed chain of command makes it impossible to carry out any sort of mission. Any force needs someone in charge, after all, and I can sympathize with anybody who wants that role clearly defined. But wasn't this just a hodgepodge of heroes who'd never worked together before? If they could get themselves organized *this* quickly, then hats off to them, I guess.

"Are we, uh, good in that respect?"

"Of course. Gobwa is always around if I'm not, and she has many fine people under her as well. Tactical theory is a required subject for all members of Team Kurenai, so any one of us could feasibly serve as commander."

Whoa. Nice confidence there. I never learned any of that. When did *they*?

"Ah. Well, great. So if they aren't making any moves right now, what's up with them?"

I decided to leave our chain of command in the capable hands of Benimaru and our other corps leaders. There was no point in me worrying about it, so I brought the conversation back to our current reality—the army camped out on Floor 70.

"For now, they're likely investigating whether there are any survivors on the other floors. Along those lines, I'm afraid it's hard luck for them. They might've found some on other floors, but there won't be a trace here."

Benimaru sounded almost like he pitied them. That made sense to me, too. I knew there were no survivors among the imperial army in the labyrinth, but they had to be down here in part to find their friends. I could understand if they wanted to track down survivors to help beef up their ranks. We all knew that was pointless, though—and in the meantime, it wasn't much fun to just sit and wait for them to do something.

"Should we have Adalmann attack them?"

Shion nodded at my casual suggestion. She must've been getting pretty bored, not to mention eager to kick some ass—but as long as we had ample forces in the labyrinth, she still had to bodyguard me here. She understood that, of course, but she still wanted to get this

over with and join in the battle outside, I'm sure.

"Hmm… Well, I doubt we'll get anything more on them by watching them like this, no…"

Benimaru chuckled at Shion's reaction as he said that. Then I sent an order to Adalmann, who promptly responded.

"Behold my grand actions, my master!!"

Huh. Sounded like Shion wasn't the only one itching for a fight. Adalmann had his forces at the ready for the Empire, too. They had certainly enjoyed a long streak of victories, and it sounded like they wanted to keep the momentum going and round things out with one final victory.

"Okay, best of luck!"

"Yes, Master!!"

That bit of encouragement was the one signal he needed. Like a raging current, Adalmann's army opened the gate and set off.

One hour later, we were greeted with a fairly astonishing sight. There were only three survivors left in the imperial force—but only three survivors on *our* side, too. Adalmann, Alberto, the death dragon, and that was it. So now it was three on three.

The other hundred or so had already fought the undead forces, killing them but losing their lives in the process, so there were no reinforcements for Adalmann's side. His regular army of undead would revive themselves in three hours, though, so I figured victory was in the bag by then.

But:

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… What an interesting person."

"Yes, very impressive fighting. I'd love to take a crack at him."

That was some rare praise from Diablo and Shion. The enemy had some real winners among them after all—three, even. One was a dashing swordfighter, currently locked in combat with Alberto. One was a beautiful wizard, matching Adalmann blow for blow in a magic battle. Finally, one was a burly warrior, holding the death dragon back all by herself.

They had some familiar-looking glowing armor that they

summoned out of nowhere, so I assumed they were in with the Legend-class dude that Testarossa killed earlier. They were all of the same design, so they must've belonged to the same organization.

"That swordfighter is fiendishly strong. An even match for Alberto, I'd say," Benimaru remarked.

Alberto and the dashing man were exchanging god-tier blows at a level one almost never saw. Both fought with sword and shield, and both were definitely making a good fight out of this. Like Benimaru said, an "even match." In fact, the guy seemed even stronger than the one Testarossa beat; maybe he was higher up in that ranking of theirs.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… I think Adalmann's faith in you is slipping. Failing to keep up with someone like *that* in magic…"

"No need to be so harsh, Diablo. That armor protects him from magic of all elements, whether holy or evil. It's no wonder Adalmann's at a disadvantage."

Shion's commentary was correct. Adalmann had the skill Holy-Evil Inversion, but that Legend-class armor was just totally cheating. In terms of resisting magic, it offered almost complete protection, and you'd need something as powerful as Disintegration to take it out—a spell in Adalmann's wheelhouse, but his opponent wasn't letting him break it out. He was trying to use some smaller magic to leave his opponent open and strike him there, but I think both sides were thinking the same thing there, and so it looked like they'd be struggling for a while to come.

But I definitely couldn't forget about the last guy, either. A real piece of work, him. I mean, he was taking on a death dragon all by himself.

In *his* case, it seemed like he had abandoned any hope of actually winning. The death dragon's regenerative abilities were so impossible to counter, he knew he didn't stand a chance of offing it entirely. So he continued humbly fighting on, trusting that his companions would see themselves to victory. Really, if it wasn't for that behind-the-scenes effort, this would've been over long ago. The death dragon was too much for even Soei to defeat, so if this dude was decently keeping his own against it, he was more trouble than I

thought.

“So how do you think it’ll turn out?” I asked. Everyone replied in different ways.

“Alberto is the superior fighter, but given his gear disadvantage, he’s going to lose this battle.”

“Adalmann is trying to grab victory too quickly. If he could approach this with a cooler head, he would have won by now, but as is, he lacks much of a decisive factor. If Alberto is defeated in the meantime, he’s going to be overwhelmed fast, I think.”

“There is no such thing as defeat! Only victory shall be ours!!”

That all made logical sense, except for Shion. Benimaru and Diablo had similar opinions; they both saw Adalmann and Alberto losing. As for Shion… Well, I guess she was attempting psychological warfare or something? That sounded more like a wish than an opinion to me.

“Okay, so we’ll lose this round? Is that trouble?”

“Well, even if they do lose, we still have the other Dungeon Marvels on hand. Besides, *I* can beat them, so we should be just fine,” said Benimaru.

“Of course!” Shion added. “And I can beat them, too, so please don’t worry, Sir Rimuru!”

Benimaru sounded really confident, so I figured we’d find a way out of this. Shion, meanwhile, was Shion. I’d have liked to ask her for some evidence to back that up, but I doubted she’d have an answer. It was certainly in character for her, so I was glad for all that spirit anyway.

“There is no need for concern, Sir Rimuru. Among the Marvels, we still have Zegion, Sir Veldora’s disciple. As long as he remains in the game, I believe you have nothing to be bothered about.”

Diablo added a “keh-heh-heh-heh-heh” at the end for effect. It was rare for him to offer praise to other people. It reassured me a bit. Maybe everything *was* going to be okay.

As we spoke, the match seemed to be approaching its climax. I was hoping maybe they’d find a way to win if they were given more

time, but unfortunately, the enemies must've had that same thought.

"I was hoping we could push right through you, but apparently now when you die, you can boast in hell about how much you riled me up!" the dashing man shouted at Alberto.

Did he have some kinda secret move he was keeping under wraps until now?

"Before you die, allow us to introduce ourselves. I am Krishna, a knight of the Empire—the seventeenth-ranked Imperial Guardian!"

"I am Reiha, ranked ninety-fourth."

"I am Bazan, ranked thirty-fifth."

Ahhh, so they *are* Imperial Guardians. Gadora told me about them, but they really did have a great lineup, I guess. The man Testarossa beat was ranked eleventh, but I really thought Krishna was a better fighter than him—maybe your number wasn't directly correlated with your actual ability. Given how Reiha acted a lot more upper-crust than Bazan, I think my hunch was correct.

But back to the battle. After that pause to give out their names, Adalmann's side seemed to have rallied a bit. I thought it'd help them get back on track, but sadly, no dice. Krishna versus Alberto was the decider here, especially once Krishna broke Alberto's Cursed Sword. Broke—or shattered? Maybe more the latter. It was a huge difference in weapon performance.

That Cursed Sword was a fine piece of work from Kurobe, you know. It was the best weapon Alberto could wield, although no average person ever could. But he was pitting it against a Legend-class blade.

Krishna's fighting style, it seemed, involved waging extended combat to gradually damage his opponent's weapon until he had a chance to smash it fully apart. Hindsight is twenty-twenty and all, but at least we learned a bit about his strategy for the future.

With the loss of his weapon, Alberto was defeated—and with his stout partner gone, Adalmann was now at a disadvantage. He proved surprisingly able to hold his ground, pulling off some brilliant defensive maneuvers you wouldn't expect from a rearguard fighter, but soon he was overpowered and brought to his knees. Now it was three on one against the death dragon, and before long, he was

gone, too.

If Alberto's sword didn't break like that, I'm sure it would have turned out differently. It's absurd to expect a magician to compete against a warrior in physical combat, so I'm gonna pin the blame for this on him. In fact, I should praise all of them for drawing out all their enemy's inner workings for us.

In the end, though, things worked out as Benimaru and Diablo predicted. The enemy now had two more keys, but no helping that now. The opponent put up a good fight, and they deserved to be applauded. So Krishna's three-person party dealt us the first truly bitter defeat of this campaign.

Well, we can do a postmortem on that encounter later. Let's move on.

The big screen was now displaying a dual simulcast of the battles on Floors 79 and 90, and in both cases, they seemed to be reaching their climax.

Kumara, I have to say, was *really* taking this to extremes. I suppose she was out for revenge against that bearded guy, though, so it only made sense.

Apito, on the other hand, was duking it out in another surprisingly close match. I'd put her strength as about the same level as Hinata's, but without the magic—and if this guy who looked like the commander was fighting on an even keel with her, he had to be *good*. Real lady-killer, too, I bet—but absolutely on par with Krishna before.

So how would it turn out? We all had our eyes glued on the big screen, watching with bated breath.



Major General Minitz, dressed in his most prized of tailored suits, strolled through the labyrinth.

The design of his outfit was the same as any regular officer's, but

the fabric was different. Every thread of it had been carefully selected, with magic force woven right into the cloth. A single suit would cost as much as a colonel's annual salary, but it offered luxury on a level even Minitz would be satisfied with. Elegance, in a word, was what Minitz was all about—and that was what made him so dissatisfied with his current situation.

War was supposed to be fought with overwhelming force, intimidating the enemy and aiming for victory without a fight. Sacrificing lives was out of the question—and if your own troops were making that sacrifice, that called your commander's competence into question. It was precisely because of this that Minitz had declared this operation a failure before it even began.

However:

"Well, I suppose it's the curse of the servant class, not being properly able to state the obvious out loud…"

Even with that complaint, Minitz smiled boldly. He usually didn't receive much attention, as Kanzis serving under him had a tendency to hog the spotlight, but Minitz himself was one of the imperial army's greatest heroes. Just because it went against his fashion sense didn't mean he was soft enough to abandon a war.

"…This Rimuru character, though… He *does* enjoy making life difficult, doesn't he? And I suppose anyone would if they had the chance… But sending me, the commander, alone to some random place? Now our small gathering of brave men and women might be scattered and picked off, one by one. I'm sure Kanzis will find a way to survive, but…"

Minitz was talking to himself, not caring who heard him, and in spite of all the vitriol, he looked pretty content. It was the first time in a while that he felt his heart soar like this. Not once in his life had he ever felt exposed to so much danger. Typically, his rank ensured he was rarely, if ever, allowed on the front lines. He was an upper-class nobility, not some upstart, and once he retired from the military, he'd have an even loftier career track than Caligulio waiting for him. He already had enough connections in politics that he had built up his own faction among the government's lawmakers.

The reason someone like Minitz was still in the military was

simply because he had a deeply instilled passion for fighting. He loved to see blood, and now that he had this opportunity, he could go wild to his heart's content. It was easy enough to take the tension off his face.

He had been transported to Floor 78, one above the floor controlled by Apito. This was meant to help with analyzing Minitz's abilities. So he pressed along through the empty field, swatting away the insect swarms as he searched for the stairs leading down.

"I just hate bugs… Just the sight of their legs flitting around all over the place disgusts me. I've got to get out of here, posthaste."

With that arrogant remark, Minitz swung his hand over to his side. That alone summoned a mighty gust of wind, breaking down hundreds of insects into dust.

That was Oppressor, his unique skill, and it was a pretty straightforward one. From psychological oppression to physically crushing matter, it affected everything in his line of vision. There was no way to escape it—anything caught in its grasp was turned into scrap, organic or not. He didn't even need to do that theatrical arm wave, either; just a glance could destroy most anything. The power had made Minitz undefeated in battle up to now.

"These guys are pretty fragile, aren't they? I'm hardly seeing any resistance at all here. *So* boring. Wish they'd try a little harder for me."

Literally nobody could stop Minitz. He ran into a swarm of over-A insects on Floor 78, but he killed every single one of them. They were no match at all for him; it was over in an instant. Truly, he was invincible, and if you had that kind of power, you'd probably be just as arrogant as him.

In a few hours, Minitz found the descending stairwell. Figuring they led to deeper floors, he decided to take a leisurely break atop them.

The leather bag slung around his waist was a fancy (and expensive) magical tool. From it he produced a hot, freshly prepared meal to enjoy. The bag also contained a magic-warding bedding set, tent included, allowing Minitz to sleep as soundly as a baby. To him, this labyrinth wasn't even a fun diversion.

The next day, he casually strode into Floor 79—and there, he'd finally meet a worthy enemy.

The attacking army wasps, "silent killers" as they may have been, were mown down in an instant by Minitz. No matter how tricky the monster he faced, as long as he could lay eyes upon it, the jig was up.

"Heh… The monsters here are no match for me, either. What a disappointment!"

Minitz's bold words were enraging someone else on the floor. It was Apito.

Given his knack for catching enemies no matter how they snuck up on him, Minitz clearly had a keen Magic Sense ability. In which case, there was no point setting any more army wasps on him—and so the queen herself came on to the scene.

"You're acting well beyond your abilities, human."

"Oh, am I? Can *you* put up a bit of a fight, then? Because you don't seem too different from the rest of the bugs here…"

He stepped upon the mounds of wasps on the ground as he spoke. It made Apito's rage amp up several degrees further.

"You're dead."

"I'd like to see you try."

And so the fight was on.

Minitz began with a casual approach, giving Apito no credit at all. He wasn't being careless; it's just that he thought Oppressor could easily smash this foe to pieces. It didn't take long to realize how naive this idea was.

Waves of interference poured over Apito as she entered his eyesight, placing intense pressure on her. This was actually an invisible gravitational force, one Minitz could arbitrarily apply to surrounding matter to give the pull force direction. Using this force—on par with the kind a massive star exerts—he could apply pressure from any direction he pleased, manipulating the pushing and pulling forces to make any object explode or implode. The only way to oppose it was to have a body strong enough not to be affected or to

release some kind of directional force that could cancel out the forces acting upon you. Minitz had never run into anyone who could do that—and therefore, he was invincible.

It was with that absolute confidence that Minitz unleashed his skill. But the scene he was rewarded with wasn't exactly what he expected.

"…Hmph! Too late?"

Minitz had successfully shattered only the afterimage of Apito. It wasn't that the queen had stumbled upon the true nature of his power; she did, however, notice the directional nature of it. If she moved quickly enough, she surmised, she could escape its area of effect—and it worked.

"Heh-heh-heh! Just as I thought, then. Now, can you keep up with my movement?"

Apito kept going faster and faster, making it hard for Minitz to effectively attack her despite his keen Magic Sense. But if anything, this inspired Minitz.

"How interesting. This would be so *boring* otherwise!"

Unleashing his abilities to the fullest, Minitz established a force field around himself, walking forward in order to block Apito's way. The queen was forced to fall back. The passageways in this labyrinth were a good five yards wide, but attempting to slip past Minitz would get her caught in his force field.

"Ngh. Nasty."

"That's what *I* was going to say!"

Neither side gave an inch.

After extensive training from Hinata, Apito's moves were sharp and refined. She could even make the paladin captain sweat trying to keep up with her moves—but it didn't mean much if she couldn't come close enough to Minitz to attack. If she ever stopped, she was instantly in danger—one exposure to his pressurizing waves, and she was bound to pay for it.

Maybe making myself known wasn't such a good idea after all. If we could retreat back to my royal chamber, I'd be able to fly around much more freely. I don't know how long this man's stamina will hold out, but if I'm going to find a way to win this, I have to drag him back

there.

Apito's mind was thus made up. There was no shame in retreat here; Apito's basic policy was always to greedily aim for the win. And Minitz didn't mock her at all when she ran away. Realizing it was a strategic retreat, he cautiously gave chase. No need to hurry. Better to conserve his strength, rather than overreact here.

Heh-heh-heh… Battle must always be done with a certain elegance… But if someone's going to lose, better to struggle in vain than give up the fight.

Minitz sensed something beautiful in Apito. Unlike the other monsters, *this* was someone who fought with true grace. It's only natural for a fighter to choose a battlefield advantageous to them. He'd never chide her for that—in fact, he was grateful she was doing everything she could in this fight. So he came after her, never underestimating her, always thinking about how he could hunt her down.

They eventually arrived at a large, wide-open space, a chair placed atop a dais on one end.

The queen's throne, I presume? Well, fine, then. A fitting place for you and me to settle our score.

He was ready and willing to take the enemy's offer— *But please*, he arrogantly thought, *just make this entertaining for me*.

"Right. Is the game of tag over now?"

"Yes. By my name as Apito, the Insect Queen, I will do my very best to entertain you here."

"Sounds enjoyable. I am Major General Minitz, and I am here to kill you. Ready for round two?"

With that bit of bravado, Minitz accelerated. He was taking a wait-and-see approach with his moves before, but now he was serious. He couldn't surpass Apito's speed, but he still wasn't falling behind her at all. But it didn't faze Apito. Rising high into the air, she laid on even more speed, making Minitz look like a fool.

That, too, was within Minitz's expectations.

"No you don't! You should never underestimate my power!"

The shout came after he released it. From the very top of the dome-shaped space they were in, an invisible force field descended,

trapping Apito. Controlling the gravity within, he kept her flat against the ceiling.

“Gnh…?!”

Minitz snorted at the distressed Apito. “Heh-heh… Oh, does it hurt? Well, I’d like to crush you to death right now, but you’re a little too strong for that. Any ordinary monster would’ve been easily flattened at this distance, but…”

He came closer to Apito. His power varied depending on the distance away from him, but as he approached, the pressure kept getting higher and higher—easily enough to crush someone as tough as her. Now that Apito was in his sights, he no longer had to unfold his power in every direction. Focusing it all on her, he was practically guaranteed a quick victory.

That was a trickier fight than I anticipated, but I guess she was nothing special after all. Although, she did entertain me. I suppose I could repay her with a painless death.

Minitz wasn’t a fan of tormenting his foes. All he wanted was the rush of the fight and the thrill of the ensuing victory. That was why he wanted to show some mercy to Apito, out of a sense of pure goodwill. But:

“Don’t count me out yet, human! I told you I’d give you my *very best*!”

With that shout, Apito—surely suffering under the pressure—flew back into the air. Her wings were torn, her arms and legs bent in odd directions, and from antennae to stinger, she looked like a wreck—but her will to fight hadn’t faded in the slightest. She, too, wanted victory more desperately than anything else.

“Sir Rimuru is watching this battle, too. No matter how pathetic I look doing it, I must expose my enemy’s skills, at least!”

“Heh-heh-heh… How funny. You think you can expose my power? You’ll be dead long before that!”

Once again, Minitz generated a force field covering himself. With his powers of repulsion and attraction, he could drive away anyone who tried to approach him, keeping them planted to the ground. This was his approach to finishing off Apito, but Apito wasn’t going to stay down forever. Soaring up faster than Minitz could perceive her, she

kept her distance, trying to avoid being caught in his waves. Having no way to attack him was terribly frustrating, but his opponent didn't have infinite stamina. The limit would have to come sometime, and Apito was just waiting for that moment.

Would Minitz get exhausted first, or would Apito run out of steam first? Thus the battle of endurance began.

Things only started changing several hours into the contest.

Following Hinata's teachings, Apito tried every possible means of attack. Her broken limbs now gone, she continued to desperately fly around on her torn wings, searching for some kind of opening from Minitz. She shot poison stingers at his blind spot; she vibrated her wings to unleash razor-sharp shock waves; she summoned her army wasps to attack him from all directions—all so she could find something to weaken Minitz's power of interference.

What that did was completely wipe out her army wasps. They might have been lower in caste than her, but Apito still summoned them herself. It was impossible not to be disappointed… But even so, she kept on making them continue the suicide attack.

Thanks to all that, Minitz was hardly unscathed. The expensive suit he had been wearing was in pitiful shape. All his elegance was stripped off, revealing the increasingly desperate evasive maneuvers he was taking.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee… You seem tired."

"…You too. Honestly, I'm surprised you've held out this long."

"Didn't I tell you? No matter how pathetic I look doing it, winning is all that matters."

"And I agree…except *I'm* the winner here!"

Both were showing amazingly contrived stoicism. They were both so utterly exhausted that they could barely keep standing—but despite that, they still boasted their strength to each other.

"You've got a lot of strength. I'll admit that. But you're not completely flawless. Let me promise you this—with my next attack, you're going to die!"

Apito, floating in midair, made that declaration to Minitz. Her face

was stained with her own blood, but she made the statement with a beautiful, radiant smile.

Squinting at her, Minitz's lips curled upward. "I look forward to that. In that case, let me promise *you* that my next blow will make all your pain go away."

Neither had much strength left. If they both wanted to end it with the next shot, that indicated just how little stamina remained within either of them. So they went back to full speed, not thinking at all about the consequences.

Apito's plan was to anticipate which way Minitz's pressure waves would go and change her trajectory just before they hit her, landing a bruising tackle right before he could react. Minitz, meanwhile, anticipated this. The question in his mind was: How much did Apito know about his remaining power? Could she really see when his invisible pressure waves would be launched? If she could, he'd have to change his response.

In the end, Minitz decided to believe in himself. There was no way she could see through all that. And at that moment, the battle was decided.

The instant Minitz released his power, Apito changed direction—not based on his waves, but on her own intuition, just as Minitz predicted.

I win, Minitz thought, smiling.

I'm dead, Apito thought, doing the same.

Her attack had been predicated upon her death from the very start.

"It's over, Queen Apito!" Minitz gleefully shouted. And the moment she felt the invisible surge of power enveloping her entire body, Apito opened her mouth wide and attempted to launch her final move. This was Queen of the Needles, a barrage of all-powerful poison needles she would only release upon the risk of death. They were created not from mystical, magical force, but from a part of her own body, making them tough enough to easily pierce magisteel. Enough of these, fired at point-blank range, ought to penetrate Minitz's force field—was the conclusion she made.

Minitz's own force compressed her body in the meantime, even

as the needles stabbed through his defensive force field. The decisive moment was here.

The end result was a double knockout. Although unhappy about failing to score a complete victory, she was still more than satisfied that she had done her part. Death, after all, was not the end—the labyrinth would resurrect you as many times as you wanted. So Apito disappeared from her throne room, awaiting her imminent rebirth.





Once he saw she was gone, Minitz decided to rest quietly until his wounds healed. That attack just now had shattered his heart, but he was still alive. This still wasn't enough to kill somebody like him; given enough time, the wounds would heal. Being able to throw himself into a battle like none before had filled that shattered heart with indescribable joy.

What an excellent fight that was. I only wish I could have tasted more of it. Then I could have proved I was the strongest…

Still basking in the aftermath, he found he was yet unsatisfied. If anything, his instincts were begging him to fight someone even stronger. Only through challenging and surpassing his limits, he thought, would he ever grow stronger.

Then, like an answer to Minitz's prayers, something strange happened. A booming voice echoed across the chamber.

"…Excellent fighting."

The voice had the timbre of a champion, one who had made many of the worthy bow down to him before.

"My name is Zegion. You now officially have the right to fight me. If that is what you desire, come to me."

Minitz opened his eyes again, as if guided by the voice. A dark vortex had somehow appeared in front of him.

Are you going to entertain me? If you do, then it'd be rude not to take up the offer…

His body still needed healing, but Minitz nonetheless shot to his feet, not even flinching. Without a moment of fear, he headed off to accept the invitation.



Once, there was a hidden settlement known as the Mystic Village. It was said to be one of the world's secret paradises, a place where spring was everlasting.

But not any longer. It was overrun by the imperial army twenty years ago, and now it had been wiped off the map entirely.

Recalling that fateful day, Kumara almost lost herself in rage. She had been so helpless then, and thanks to that, she lost her mother and her friends.

Her great mother was a mystic creature, a monster with power comparable to a demon lord's. But she was a calm, gentle soul, and she never showed any hostility toward humankind. The kings of the magical races who treated humans as enemies collectively called themselves mystic lords, a force different from the Ten Great Demon Lords and just as much of a threat to humankind—but that had nothing to do with the Mystic Village. Magical races and mystic races were not at all the same thing, and mystic lords were merely the tribal kings of species unknown even to most others.

But humankind—or the Empire anyway—must not have been willing to accept the existence of Kumara and her kind. So the Mystic Village went on the sacrificial chopping block, a demonstration of the Empire's military might aimed at its own subjects.

The Mystic Village was on the border between the demon lord Clayman's domain and the Eastern Empire. The area between the foot of the mountains on the Dhistav side and the forest on the imperial side was home to a hidden entrance to another world. Boasting the blessings of the forest, the produce of the mountains, and an eternally mild climate, it truly was a comfortable place, living up to its touted name as the land of everlasting spring.

Being on the border, the inhabitants carelessly assumed they would never be attacked—the Empire and the demon lord Clayman had forged a secret nonaggression treaty. This peaceful situation eliminated their sense of danger.

Suddenly, armed soldiers attacked the Mystic Village, giving them no warning at all. The warriors defending the village could offer little resistance, and all their comrades were killed. Kumara's mother, the previous generation of Nine-Head, lost her life with them. She had power but never liked to fight—and despite being human, there was no way she could defeat a trained, professional soldier.

And there was no forgetting that man.

"Your name is Kanzis? Of course I remember it. The name of the man who took my mother and everyone else's life…," spoke the

vindictive Kumara.

The bearded man with the loathsome smile was an enemy so hateful that killing him wouldn't bring Kumara peace.

As a reward to Clayman, Kanzis offered Kumara, the young child of Nine-Head he had captured alive. All the village's treasure was stashed away in their own pockets. They told their subjects that the threat of the Mystic Village was now over. This "threat" was a criminal act of the aggressors' own making. In order to prove the danger of the Mystic Village, they rounded up some nearby residents and merchants and brutally killed them. And at the end of the day, the frightened imperial subjects treated them like heroes…

It was Clayman, of all people, who told Kumara about everything going on behind the scenes.

The more resentment Kumara felt toward a human being, the more powerful she became. It boosted her mystic power, and with that, her "rank" as a monster. Being such a valuable Nine-Head mystic beast, she was regarded as a great asset by Clayman—and so she survived, as his pet.

Just as Clayman predicted, Kumara's grudge ballooned over the years—and with it, her power. He even made her the thumb of the five fingers, as his top officers were called.

Then fate took another turn for her, and she was picked up by Rimuru. With him, she found out what happiness was, her emotional scars healed by contact with the children he helped out… And right at that point, she met her mortal enemy once more.

"I'll kill you. I will use every bit of my might to kill you where you stand…"

With that whispered oath, Kumara waited for Kanzis's arrival.

Colonel Kanzis, on the other hand, didn't seem fazed at all to be thrown into a spot in the middle of nowhere.

He was a self-made career military officer, a symbol of the meritocracy the Empire prided itself on, and it was with a single fist that he rose to his current rank. He never thought twice about getting involved in evil deeds; in many ways, he was the embodiment of

career ambition. Even the whole Mystic Village affair, in his eyes, was a legitimate move to strengthen his position and power. For the greater peace, a small sacrifice was insignificant. He didn't feel guilty about it at all, seeing his actions strictly as a necessary evil.

But despite any lack of conscience he had, there was no doubting his abilities. If he actively participated in the ranking duels, he'd definitely be selected for the top hundred. But Kanzis wasn't, strictly because he had no interest in joining the Imperial Guardians. His own interests would always come ahead of his loyalty to Emperor Ludora—and above all, Kanzis had a commanding officer he trusted with all his heart.

That man's name was Major General Minitz. He was an equal to Kanzis in skill, and he was the first to scout him out and push him to the top. Kanzis's goal in life was to bring Minitz to the upper echelon of the military, then take full control while serving underneath him. It was a dream he worked hard to achieve, and that was why he thought this invasion was such a perfect opportunity for him.

Caligulio's blundering in the Forest of Jura was clear to everyone; he'd face severe punishment for it, no doubt. The groundwork for that moment was laid by him in Minitz, a secret conspiracy whose goal was to unify support within the Armored Division around them instead. If he could rescue the hundreds of thousands of soldiers stranded in the labyrinth and win their loyalty, that'd vastly increase the membership in his faction overnight—and once that happened, Caligulio would become redundant.

"Heh-heh! Don't make me laugh. You think anyone would let you climb to the top of the military through political maneuvering alone?"

Kanzis sneered at his superiors. They weren't here anyway, so he felt safe enough doing so. Then, mind free of all concern, he set off to search for his surviving troops.

After about a day of that, Kanzis began to think something was amiss. Ignoring the fact that this "labyrinth" had entire forests and deserts inside it, he couldn't find a single other human being anywhere—or for that matter, a single monster. Every floor he journeyed through was eerily quiet, the sheer undisturbed stillness making it seem silly to expect a battle around every corner. Kanzis

wasn’t the sort to let up because of that, but his Predict Danger skill wasn’t giving him anything at all, filling his mind with anxiety.

“Hmm… Seems like they’re trying to catch me off guard. Maybe they’re concentrating their forces somewhere?”

Kanzis’s insight was impeccable. He was exactly right.

“Ha-ha-ha! Well, I’m glad to be receiving such a royal welcome! In that case, allow me to bask in it, then!”

His boldness really was his greatest asset. He began sprinting ahead, making a beeline for the descending stairs, certain he could kick aside any trap in his way. His speed left the wind trailing him, a single stride bringing him several yards forward, and that let him reach the stairs in short order.

A few hours later, Kanzis found himself at the gates of a vast mansion, an opulent structure that seemed designed to intimidate all would-be visitors. Without a sound, the gates opened—and the battle began.

✳

Kumara, in all her courtesan-esque beauty, greeted her visitor with a ghastly, hair-raising grin:

“Allow me to welcome you.”

Kanzis responded with a smile. “Well, thank you very much. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you. You’re the little fox from way back when, aren’t you?”

“You remember me? I’m greatly honored.”

“How could I ever forget? Your mother played an instrumental part in my rise to fame.”

Sparks flew between the two of them—literally. The violent clash between mystic spirit and fighting spirit created physical tension heavy enough to trigger electric surges.

“You are shameless!”

“Ha-ha-ha! So you were fine all along, then? Although, I suppose that’s only because I sold you over to Clayman. You ought to thank

me for that."

"…I'll kill you," Kumara barked back with another surge of murderous rage.

As if in response, the White Monkey appeared, opening with a flurry of club strikes at Kanzis to demonstrate his majesty as leader of the eight creatures under Kumara's control.

"So you're a mystic survivor, then? Well, let me show you something interesting!"

As soon as he said it, Kanzis summoned a monster with no advance casting—another simian, this one covered in dark fur.

"You… You're one of my mother's servants…?!"

There was no doubt about it. It was one of Kumara's mother's tail beasts.

"You see? There's a sight for sore eyes, huh? Here, take him on for a while."

The Dark Ape was a kind beast as well. Kumara remembered playing with him as a child. But now that familiar old ape was baring his fangs menacingly.

"You've forgotten about me?!"

Kumara's voice didn't reach him. With a high-pitched screech, the Dark Ape overwhelmed the White Monkey.

"Don't bother. That monkey's become *my* loyal servant. He doesn't remember a thing about you."

Kanzis took a cigarette out of his pocket, uninterested in joining this fight himself. Lighting it and taking a drag, he gave Kumara a bemused smile.

"What did you do to the Dark Ape?"

"Hmm? Now, what's *that* supposed to mean? Do you suspect me of something?"

He seemed to be mocking Kumara. Realizing Kanzis had no intention of taking her seriously, she let her anger drive her to the next step.

"Moon Rabbit! Black Mouse! Come on out!"

Two more of Kumara's tails transformed. Now it was three against one, putting the situation back in her favor—but only for a moment.

"Dark Rabbit, Dark Mouse, you're up."

Kanzis summoned mystic creatures to match Kumara's. Now she couldn't even hide her astonishment.

"No…"

"Oh, surprised? But then again, so am I. I never thought a kid like you could ever summon three tail beasts at once. Clayman must've trained you very well."

Kanzis's tone of voice indicated he still thought of Kumara as a fool. He couldn't have been more confident, and there was a reason for that—the magical beasts he summoned were stronger than the eight at Kumara's disposal.

"Ah, but enough of this. Let's end the playtime here, shall we?"

With that, Kanzis added more creatures.

"No! The Dark Tiger—and the Dark Snake, too!"

Each one of Kanzis's dark summons was stronger than the equivalent from Kumara. It was no wonder. These were, after all, the loyal bodyguards of the previous Nine-Head, Kumara's own mother. A single tail beast was incredibly powerful, and now there were five. Their formerly calm, gentle temperaments were gone; their maniacal instincts were fully unleashed.

At this point, Kanzis thought he had as good as won. No matter how much that fox kit Kumara had grown, he assumed that three tail beasts at once was about the best she could do. Even her own mother maxed out at controlling five at once, and she was a fox spirit who had lived for thousands of years. How could Kumara, with only centuries to her life span, ever produce *that* much force?

That's why he felt safe in his arrogance.

"If you want, I'd be happy to keep *you* as my pet now. You're cordially invited to switch sides, from the demon lord Rimuru to me. Do it, and I'll spare your life."

It was more of an order than a negotiation, one based on the absolute certainty of his own victory. But that was a fatal mistake. Kumara was furious, her smile growing ever deeper and ever more beautiful.

"How amusing. If you've made me this angry, you must have come prepared for the consequences, didn't you?"

No answer was needed.

Kumara immediately unleashed all her tail beasts at once, producing the full array of eight. The Thunder Tiger, Winged Snake, Sleeping Ram, Fire Bird, and Mirror Dog came out, completing the entire ensemble.

“What?! Eight of them? You…”

It was the first time all day Kanzis demonstrated any alarm, but even then, it was only for a moment. Quickly regaining his composure, he flashed a fearless smile.

“Well, I commend you for your surprising growth… But we still have the strength advantage.”

“Silence!”

“Ooh, scary. In that case, I’ll say no more, then. In fact, the next thing I’ll do is strip you limb from limb. You’ll make lovely decorations for my room.”

The negotiations were over—and so the battle of eight against five began.

Although Kumara’s ensemble had the numerical advantage, their opponents were elites who had served her own predecessor for untold numbers of years. The sheer amount of magicule energy inside them was unparalleled, as was their experience. The White Monkey and its friends were far from weaklings, but their dark counterparts were more than powerful enough to counteract being outnumbered.

As time went on, Kumara’s beasts began to be pushed back. But she didn’t give up. And some careful observation of Kanzis revealed something. Each of the magic beasts Kanzis summoned was quite powerful solo—and while they had fully lost their memories, they still seemed to retain their sense of reason, reacting quickly to Kanzis’s instructions. In other words, if she could beat their commander in Kanzis, that might give Kumara a chance to win.

Besides, she still had one more trick up her sleeve. Once she brought all eight tail beasts back to herself, she could take her true form—and by her judgment, that’d give her the edge of Kanzis and his team. It was thus with little to no panic that Kumara carefully judged her situation.

What about Kanzis? Although it looked like he was on top of his

game, he was actually pretty close to the edge of his limits. There was a good reason why he was commanding all these dark beasts. He had a secret power as well—the unique skill Looter.

This skill had no power on its own; it required something to build on. Kanzis first stumbled upon it as a child. He had gotten into a fight with a friend over some petty issue, and to get back at him, he killed his friend's pet dog. After that, he was able to summon a dark incarnation of the dog anytime he wanted.

That alone was only slightly useful in a fight, but the true value of Looter actually lay elsewhere. He discovered it not long after he joined the army, fighting against guerrillas on the Empire's far-flung frontiers. Whenever he killed one of them, he was able to summon "darkness" just as powerful as his victims. That's when it dawned on him—he could only call upon those he killed by his own hand. The more he killed, then, the stronger he got.

But there were limits. This wasn't a cumulative deal, where you were as strong as everyone you killed in your life; it only let you tap the dark powers of the greatest adversary you ever took down. It let him perfectly re-create the appearance and skills of his victim—a versatile trait, useful for disguising himself in undercover missions. But even then, there was only so much "darkness" Kanzis could handle summoning at once. If there wasn't, he could likely control entire armies by himself, but sadly Looter was apparently too dependent on Kanzis's own life force for that.

Kumara had accurately guessed that was the case, and even with her current disadvantage, she was not particularly concerned.

"Now I can tell—you've reached your limit, haven't you?"

"And what if I have?"

"I don't know how you've taken control of the Dark Ape and the rest, but that's not an issue. I'm going to kill you anyway."

That was her analysis of the situation.

Their respective band of servants were evenly matched in strength, but neither of the commanders were in the fray. If Kumara took on Kanzis then and there, he wouldn't be able to give orders to his dark creatures—and in terms of magicule energy, Kumara far outclassed him.

“Don’t worry, now. I’m not going to make this easy for you.”

Upon saying that, Kumara disappeared, only to instantly reappear behind Kanzis’s back. Then she swiped at him, attempting to slash his neck with her claws.

Kanzis reacted in time, privately admitting she was right but still maintaining his detached attitude.

“You sure *are* scary, huh? If you were going to grow *this* much, I should’ve killed you twenty years ago.”

“Silence!”

“Heh-heh-heh… Now, now, don’t be so angry. To make up for it, why don’t I show you something real interesting?”

Kanzis laughed at her. It was true that his Looter skill could summon only those he had killed, and there were limits both to who it summoned and how much of its power Kanzis could personally tap. But there was still one more trick to it, and without a moment’s hesitation, he revealed it to Kumara.

“Have you ever wondered why I sold you to Clayman? Why I let go of you despite how much of a powerful asset I knew you’d be? Well…”

It was because he had already gained immense power—far more easily than he ever would trying to tame and raise Kumara.

Banishing his dark beasts, Kanzis summoned a single large beast in their place. This creature was the source of his strength, the reason he didn’t need Kumara at all.

“Th-that figure… Mother…?!”

Before her was a dark fox spirit bearing five thick tails and four thinner ones. She was the master of the Mystic Village, but she looked so ominous now, the kind of visage she had throughout her life gone without a trace.

“Haaaa-ha-ha-ha! You guessed it! It’s your mother. And now that she’s under my command, she’s able to handle and unleash all her violent forces with abandon. It’s amazing! Wouldn’t you like to see it?”

Kumara’s mother possessed a gentle nature that caused her to show mercy to her foes, an act of charity that came back to bite her. Even with the powers of a demon lord, she chose a modest life

hidden away from the world, interacting with it only when absolutely necessary. That was Kumara's predecessor, and now, by the hand of Kanzis, she was going to unleash her true powers.

"So you dare to make a mockery of the dead, too…?"

"Not mockery. Respect. I'm going to put her powers to good use. You should thank me for it."

The dark Nine-Head summoned by Kanzis flared with rage as it saw Kumara. There was no emotion in its eyes—Kumara was merely the enemy, nothing else.

"Mother…"

"Kill her."

Heeding the order, Nine-Head went on the move. The next moment, the full force of the combined dark beasts lashed out at Kumara's own team.

"Winged Snake! Mirror Dog…?!"

The two that reacted a moment too late were seriously injured by the blow, returning to Kumara in tail form. That's how powerful it was. Her group clearly didn't stand a chance.

"Ha-ha-ha! What do you think? Pretty neat, huh? And that power's exactly why I never needed you. But looking at the number of tails you have, you might even be better than your mother. You may lack experience still, but I can help you make up for it. Heh-heh-heh… Now I'm glad I kept you alive. If I can obtain you here, I'll have even more power in my hands!"

Kanzis rejoiced. Defeat wasn't even a concept in his mind. With an ally as strong as Nine-Head and his own augmented body, there was no way he could lose to a little fox—he was convinced of it. In fact, he even considered Clayman to be beneath him. Kanzis had planned to dispatch him once he fully tapped Nine-Head's powers, but then the newcomer demon lord Rimuru went and killed him first. Maybe, Kanzis joked to himself, Clayman wasn't any great shakes after all. But Kumara had just revealed she could wrangle eight tail beasts at once! And while their inexperience made it hard for them to beat anyone alone, with time and maturity, there was no telling what they could accomplish.

And that's why I'm so lucky. I'm going to kill this girl here, and

then I'll douse her in my own power!

That, in turn, would power up Kanzis even further—and some upstart demon lord shouldn't be any kind of match for that. With that thought driving his imagination, he began his attack.

Kumara, just standing there, shook her head and muttered to herself.

"If I lose my cool, I lose it all…is how it went. I must have forgotten Lady Hinata's lesson."

Then she looked at the man and beast slowly approaching her.

"Everyone, fall back."

Answering the call, her tail beasts vanished into balls of light that were sucked back into her. Then her nine tails began to glow with a mesmerizing radiance. The man and his beast were already just in front of her—but Kumara was in no hurry. Her tail beasts might be inexperienced; that much she was willing to admit. But she herself was not. She had an excellent teacher, along with a hardworking group of diligent friends. It was a wonderful environment for Kumara, and it had done wonders to refine her.

Kumara gently stopped the sharpened claws and well-honed knife approaching her with both hands.

"…?!"

"Y-you…?!"

"I haven't given you my name yet, have I? I am Kumara…"

"Y-you have a name…?!"

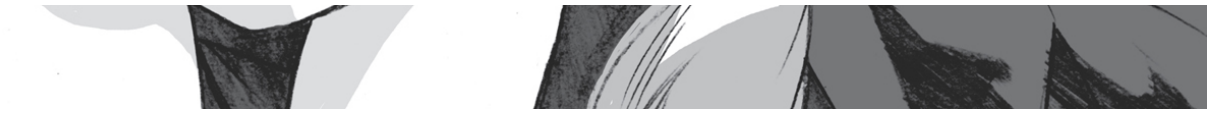
"…Nine-Head Kumara."

The claws shattered; the knife snapped in two. Hurriedly, Kanzis reared back as Kumara gave him her bewitching smile.

"But no need to remember it. I was going to give you a slow and gruesome death, but that would too much for us to bear. So…"

Before she could finish her words, the dark beast crumbled to pieces. Kumara's hands had torn the previous Nine-Head limb from limb.





“You’re kidding…?!”

The astonishing scene made Kanzis yelp. The greatest tool in his arsenal was vanishing before his eyes. Unlike a traditional summon, Kanzis’s Looter skill merely formed “darkness” using a corpse as a base. As a result, once he lost a beast like this, he could never recall it again. He had looted her, and now Kumara had just taken her back.

“Y-you…”

“If I was stronger, perhaps we could have tormented you more. But alas, it ends here.”

“W-wait…!!”

She had no more patience to listen to Kanzis’s nonsense. His pleas fell on deaf ears.

“Farewell.”

And with that final word, Kanzis’s life span came to a close. Kumara’s Nine-Tail Slash commenced, ripping through him from all directions, and he was cut to shreds and killed in a heartbeat.

This was Kumara, a woman with ravishing beauty and a ruthless, tough-as-nails will. While she may have longed for what she lost, she had no lingering regrets. Death, she understood, was death, something that could never be taken back. And that was exactly why she had to be sure nothing more was taken from her.

The Mystic Village was gone forever, but now Kumara had a home to return to. And in this moment, the most important thing was that she stepped up to keep from losing that as well.

“I wanted to give you all a chance at revenge… But you will have to forgive me.”

Still, the revenge was done. Her mother would never be revived, but now her dignity was. Kumara smiled. She was satisfied with this.



Someone was quietly meditating.

A streak of gold ran across his jet-black exoskeleton. A swordlike

horn extending out of the center of his forehead shone a ruby red. The crimson compound eyes underneath it never shut; he continually took in information from his surroundings, processing it in his brain.

The exoskeleton was modified—more like tinkered with, really—by Rimuru, his master. That master's own cells, along with a healthy dose of magisteel, had helped to reinforce the parts he'd lost; now they felt familiar to him, like they were always there. They had come to possess unparalleled performance, combining strength beyond diamonds with the flexibility of a living creature—one could call it adamantite or organic magisteel. It had become a suit of natural armor for him, easily Legend class.

But his strength didn't issue from that exoskeleton. The real essence of his power came from his instincts, insatiable in their pursuit of battle. And now a new prey appeared before him.

Everything was going his way. He was the absolute monarch of this labyrinth—Zegion, the Insect Kaiser—and among the Dungeon's most powerful guardians.

And now a thought crossed Zegion's mind.

He believed that those who confirmed their desire to be here were qualified to fight him. That was why he sent the summons—his invitation into this dark space. Anyone who reached his floor was lucky indeed, for they could die with the dignity of a human being and the pride of the world's strongest.

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At the bottom of the stairs leading to Floor 80, there existed a room where people could rest. There was no door in the entryway; the room was wide open, in order to show there were no traps inside. And on the far end of it was a flashy, incredibly ornate door… which led to the boss chamber.

The dark vortex that Minitz walked into brought him to this very

room. It was dimly lit, housing some comfortable chairs, a table with fruit and beverages, and a few other practical necessities.

Minitz wasn't the first visitor. A few others had arrived before him. He gave them quick glances, trying to remember if he recognized them at all. Before he could do anything beyond that, a few people who were conversing in their chairs stood up.

"Major General Minitz! You're still alive! I am from the twenty-sixth division of the Restructured Armor Corps—"

"Halt. This labyrinth is no place a buck private or noncommissioned officer could survive for very long. That much I know well enough already."

Minitz raised a hand to stop the man from identifying himself. He knew the names and ranks of all the high-end officers by heart, but the three people before him were completely unfamiliar. That could only mean one thing.

Even over-A rankers would have their hands full surviving in here. No matter how many gathered together, they'd likely be helpless against the magic-born insect Minitz just encountered. Only a handful of human beings in history had broken through that wall, attaining literally superhuman abilities. Thus, although Minitz didn't know this trio's faces, he could guess who they were.

"Yes, sir! You're certainly right. My name is Krishna, ranked seventeenth among the Imperial Guardians."

"Bazan, ranked thirty-fifth."

"And Reiha, ranked ninety-fourth."

"Ah. So you're with the Imperial Guardians, then? Infiltrated our army to monitor the operation, I assume?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not sure how wise it is to give me such an honest answer, but very well. Right now, we need to talk about what's past that door."

"We were just discussing our possibilities now, sir."

"Good, good."

Minitz pressed them more, as if it was only natural his prediction was correct. He wasn't exactly a fan of this unwelcome surveillance in his force, but survival was job one right now. Rank or position didn't matter here; strength did. Instead of questioning why Krishna

and his band were here, Minitz decided to concentrate on more fruitful topics of discussion.

“So what happened to everybody else?”

“Well, sir, we were all sent to the floor where the wight king was reported to be.”

Krishna answered for the trio. Minitz raised an eyebrow, asking him to go on.

“There were ninety-six of us in all—our commanders were taken away from us—and we were forced to do battle against the king of the undead. I’m…afraid we’re the only survivors.”

“Unbelievable,” Minitz spat. “Our groups were all one-man armies, capable of making sound decisions in battle without direct orders. Even if they weren’t quite as talented as you, they were the best the Empire had to offer!”

This hundred-odd group had been tasked with rescuing the rest of the imperial forces. Even the rank and fileers among them were over-A menaces, so they could be prepared for anything that happened down there. The ferocity of Minitz’s tone showed just how hard their deaths were to swallow.

“He was a fearsome monster king, sir. And the undead knight guarding him was an elite-class swordfighter,” said Krishna.

“Apart from us three, they killed everyone on that floor. If you want to criticize us for not revealing our identities earlier, I don’t have any defense for that. But we’re talking about an undead dragon, an undead sword master, and the king of the dead himself. It’s a miracle even *we* survived, sir.”

Bazan interrupted Krishna and Minitz’s conversation. His speech was tinged with anger; this whole experience seemed to be a regretful disappointment to him, and it was clear he meant every word he said.

“You’re being rude to the major general, Bazan.”

“But, Reiha…”

“No, no, I don’t mind. This is a dangerous labyrinth. We need to work together to survive, regardless of rank.”

So Minitz offered them his full cooperation. If this trio was all Imperial Guardians, he couldn’t have asked for better assistance.

Now was no time for bickering.

"I'd be overjoyed to take the offer, sir."

Krishna knew Major General Minitz of the Armored Division well. That wasn't a surprise, given his position in the Imperial Guardians, and there was no reason for him to turn down the offer. All four of them silently nodded. Whatever happened after they left this labyrinth, they could think about when that time came. That was the common understanding they now had.

"So how did you get here, sir?" Krishna asked Minitz.

"I had to face off against a swarm of army wasps."

"*Army* wasps…!"

The quintessential lethal monster. So dangerous that they weren't even well-known among the general public, since the army took action so quickly to quash any that were discovered. Any hapless citizen who *did* come to see one usually lost their life as a result, so the army wasps remained largely off peoples' radars.

"You took on such a dangerous foe by yourself, sir?"

"I haven't seen any other colleagues since I came in here. In my case, after I defeated the army wasps and the queen magic-born who led them, I heard this voice calling me over…and the next thing I knew, I was here."

"Ah, I see…"

Krishna was deeply impressed by Minitz's casual explanation. If a queen wasp had been transformed into a magic-born, its power was beyond all imagination—equivalent to a low-end demon lord, in all likelihood. Taking out such an opponent, along with her entire army of monster insects… It was a clear show of strength, and it did a great deal to relieve the trio's anxieties. Krishna was too nervous to notice until now, but Minitz was wounded all up and down his body, the large hole in his chest providing ample evidence of how fierce the battle was.

"Are you all right?" Reiha asked.

"You're asking that *now*?" Minitz laughed. "I had potions with me. I'll get my stamina back once I rest a bit longer. But what route did you guys take to get here?"

Minitz still had the initiative here. They were all treating each

other as equals for the moment, but the sheer force of personality from him still made Krishna's team follow his lead.

Under his guidance, they all shared whatever information they knew with each other. Putting it together, they found that the labyrinth likely had an amorphous, transformable structure. This reality was so different from their prior intelligence that they had virtually no baseline to work with. They were essentially groping their way through the labyrinth's passages, and their future wasn't looking too bright.

"What the hell's going on in here anyway? Because *we* faced off against the boss of Floor 60 from the briefing, didn't we? Why didn't the demon lord Rimuru have us enter this labyrinth from the first floor?" Bazan demanded.

It would have taken much more time to navigate this maze then. If he just wanted them to exhaust themselves, Bazan reasoned, that would've been the best way.

"Simple," Minitz replied. "You heard the rumors about this place, I'm sure. If you have the bracelet on in here, you can come back to life if you die. But what if that applied to the monsters as well?"

"Ah…"

Bazan just groaned in reply, Krishna and Reiha bitterly mulling over Minitz's words.

"Instead of making us eat up time working our way down, they'd be able to eliminate more of our forces by letting great masses of us in at once…?"

"And once you're in, you can't get out. It's virtually lining us up to be cut down, isn't it?"

Minitz nodded. "That was the sort of confidence he had in this labyrinth's strengths in wartime, of course. I had suggested to Lord Caligulio that we should address this, but he replied that we could just occupy whatever space the dead monsters were sent to for revival and kill them again. It seemed reasonable enough at the time, so I had to back down."

It was a bitter pill to swallow, but looking back, that was a crucial error of judgment—one that made the Empire deploy more than half a million soldiers. Sending troops right in, one squadron after

another, was the most foolish approach they could have taken. And it never would have happened if they hadn't misjudged the demon lord Rimuru and the abilities of those who served him.

"So were you able to find any other survivors?" Minitz asked the trio.

"Well…"

That alone told the whole story. As of right now, they could only assume that they were the sole ones left alive.

"It's not that I can't believe it—I don't *want* to believe it," said Bazan. "If we ever make it back to the surface alive, we'll have to retreat ASAP."

"It'll enrage His Majesty, no doubt, but we're left with no other choice," agreed Krishna.

Nobody disagreed with that conclusion. With that decided, they had to start addressing the current situation.

"By the way, what's going on with this room?"

"We didn't detect any poison or whatnot in the food and drink here," Reiha told Minitz. "I'm not about to accept charity from the enemy, but it seems clear they meant to extend us a helping hand."

"And that door… Push or pull, it won't budge a bit, but do you see the numbers on top of it? Before you showed up, we were just talking about how it looked like a countdown to us."

Beyond the door on the other side of the room, there seemed to be a thick, unspeakably evil presence wafting through the cracks. And just as Bazan noted, there was indeed a number above it. It was clearly marking time, and currently it read 200. That likely meant the door would open in just under three and a half hours—shockingly, the exact amount of time Minitz thought he needed to regain his full strength. Minitz let out a weary sigh. That couldn't have been by chance.

"It looks like the enemy wants us to fight when we're in tip-top shape," he said. "I don't know if they'll give us a *fair* fight, exactly, but they want us to heal, at least."

"Are they going to make us take the challenge one by one, or a couple of us at once, or what?" Reiha wondered aloud.

“Either way, they sure must be confident of their own strength,” said Krishna.

“Pretty cocky move to make against a major general and the killers of a wight king,” added Bazan.

“Well, let’s take the offer. Kanzis will be here before long, I imagine, and the more time we can buy, the better.”

“Fair enough,” said Krishna. “And the more forces we have, the better, too. If Lord Kanzis is joining us, maybe we’ll find a way out of this labyrinth after all.”

“Right. And we have seven keys in our possession so far. I’m sure you have one of these, too, don’t you, sir?” Reiha mentioned as she took out a medallion with ten crystals embedded in it. Seven of them were currently glowing. The medallion must have been the key that allowed access to the king of the labyrinth.

“Of course. We need to beat the Ten Marvels to access their king. By the time we came in, four of their keys were already ours.”

“Yes. And it seems not just the wight king, but his bodyguard as well—they both counted as Marvels,” said Krishna.

“They did? Then if Kanzis wins his battle, we’ll have eight by the time we challenge this floor and at least nine afterward. Kind of a pale shadow of a hope at the moment, but at least it’s a way forward.”

If they could get a ticket back to the surface right now, all of them swore they’d never venture back in. That’s how horrible this labyrinth was. But that wish wasn’t about to come true. Unless they beat whatever was ahead, they were never getting out of this place alive. They had prepared for this the moment they went in, which now felt like a whole lifetime ago.

The only thing left for them to do was push on.

So Minitz and his newfound comrades rested as they awaited Kanzis’s arrival. If they wanted to improve their chances, they needed to ease their fatigue as much as possible. Nobody touched the refreshments on the table, whether it was safe or not. They all snacked on their energy bars instead, replenishing their stamina for what might be the last time. This was now a matter of survival.

When three minutes remained on the countdown, Minitz stood up. He checked his medallion, only to find there were no newly glowing crystals on it. His shoulders drooped.

“…I fear Kanzis might have lost.”

They couldn’t wait any longer. Reinforcements were not coming. Minitz abandoned the naive expectation that any would. Calmly assessing the situation, he gave precise instructions to his teammates.

“Right. It’s time. Let’s finish up prep.”

The Imperial Guardians silently nodded back. Taking out their pendants, they each chanted a short password.

“““Release!”””

Without missing a beat, torrents of light surged out of each pendant, and the trio was armed and ready. They numbered three Imperial Guardians, alongside Major General Minitz of the Armored Division. There might have been only four of them, but right then, they were the absolute best the Empire had.

With this lineup, reaching the end of the labyrinth wasn’t a dream. That was what everyone there had to believe.

So the fateful moment arrived. The countdown progressed all the way down to zero, and when it did, the door before them opened.

Everyone was ready for this. Without further hesitation, they went through the doorway, throwing themselves into the all-or-nothing battle for survival.

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Beyond the door was profound darkness, a place of pure black where no light shone. Reiha hurriedly activated Floor-wide Light, an elemental magic useful for illuminating one’s surroundings. What it revealed made the entire group gasp.

They were in a vast wasteland piled high with the corpses of imperial soldiers. At the very top of the tallest pile, a single monster was sitting cross-legged in meditation. It was Zegion. He wasn’t

seated directly on the dead but instead was floating ever so slightly in the air, proving that he was highly trained in the magic arts.

“Welcome, brave fellows.”

The voice was low but clear. Every word he uttered seemed to swell into an overpowering presence. Now Minitz was convinced. This monster was the one who coaxed him here. It had to be the demon lord Rimuru himself.

He couldn’t help but ask.

“Are you…the demon lord Rimuru?”

The briefing he read through said Rimuru was a slime by species. But so what? If he was a slime, he could change into any form he wanted. And more than that, this monster was emitting an absolutely overwhelming amount of energy—Lord’s Ambition, they called it. This, he thought, was all the proof he needed that this was a demon lord before him.

But the question was met with a scathing rejection.

“You dare mistake…the likes of myself…for Sir Rimuru, the greatest of demon lords…?”

“What?”

Furious rage filled the space. The seething reply made Minitz realize he just committed a terrible mistake.

“My name is Zegion. I am merely one of the Ten Dungeon Marvels, nothing more. And all of you ignorant, wriggling fools deserve nothing but death.”

His words were plain, but his burning rage was palpable.

“There is only one way for you to survive—by beating me. Throw your very lives into this fight and resist me with every fiber of your being!”

That was a pretty arrogant thing to say in front of the Empire’s greatest champions. But there was not a hint of condescension in his voice. As Minitz and his team realized, Zegion was simply stating the truth as he knew it—and the only way to prove him wrong was to show him their might, just as he said.

“Time to go all out,” Minitz told the three Imperial Guardians.

“Yes, sir.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You got it.”

And so the mayhem began.



Damn. *Really?*

That was my true, unvarnished impression.

Benimaru and I were staring at the big screen in utter amazement. The scenes shown on it a moment ago, from inside the labyrinth, were now black…and that indicated that the last of the imperial troops inside were dead. The battle was over…but the enormity of what we just witnessed had left us all momentarily speechless.

“Dude… He’s stronger than you, yeah?”

That was the only thing I could begin with.

Benimaru scowled, perhaps a bit unwilling to admit it. “There is a…small chance…that is possible.”

Wow. He looked *super* crestfallen. He followed that up with a barely whispered “But I strictly mean that there’s a nonzero chance, you see,” but—c’mon, man, just admit it. Be a little honest.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… I attempted to fight Zegion myself. He has a fearsome sense for battle, a built-in advantage over demon opponents, and resistance to nearly all base-level magic. He truly *is* Sir Veldora’s disciple prodigy. I might have even lost myself if I wasn’t paying attention. You are not *truly* defeated until you *admit* defeat, after all.”

Diablo was smiling, taking the “I didn’t lose, we were just practicing!” approach with Zegion. But this really wasn’t a laughing matter for me. That was the case for Razul, too, wasn’t it? High-end insect types seemed to be kind of the natural enemies of demons, and I’d say Zegion was among the most powerful who ever existed. (I should note that Testarossa and her fellow demonesses also challenged Zegion in the past, and *they* hadn’t won against him yet, either. Diablo just *loved* seeing Testarossa frustrate herself against

the dude, I'm sure.)

But hey, if those three could fight evenly against Zegion, that still made them pretty damn extraordinary. After seeing the fight I just did, that was the only conclusion I could make. But let's take a quick look back.

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The battle in the labyrinth ended largely as expected. Earning those two otherworlder defectors was a nice bonus, and Kumara had notched a truly laudable victory over in her domain. Pity about what happened to Adalmann's crew and Apito, but—well, given who they got paired with, that was the luck of the draw sometimes.

By the way, it turned out someone was calling all these strong dudes to gather in his chamber, even giving them time to fully heal themselves before the battle. Yep, that was Zegion. Anyone in the labyrinth he saw as worthy enough, he used Control Space to all but drag them over to him. Pretty amazing senses on that guy. He must've been observing every battle in the labyrinth as he was meditating down there, and he didn't make a move until each one was over, gathering only the strongest survivors over to him.

It was just the craziest thing to do. If he lost after this, he'd look like the biggest dumbass in the world, and I was *sure* it'd get brought up at the next Dungeon Marvels meeting. Nobody complained about it, though. Losers don't get the right to complain, maybe… But more than that, everyone recognized that Zegion had the strength to back up this act. We also had word that Veldora even gave it his personal stamp of approval— "*Let him do as he pleases*," he had said.

From Benimaru's and my point of view, the focus really should have been on setting the stage for a sure win. If he let the enemy heal itself, then lost because of some miscue…

…Well, that was my worry, but now there were only four foes left in the whole labyrinth. Now I wondered if I was ruining my demon lord rep by micromanaging and complaining about insignificant matters.

By this point, I had long decided to indulge Zegion's selfishness.

Besides, he was helping us gather a ton of useful battle data. I also wanted to see how he acted once he got *real* serious in battle, so I just let him do as he pleased.

The result was an absolute steamrollering. In a word, it was overwhelming.

Bazan, the brawler who fended off that death dragon single-handedly, was the first to act. From his initial blow, he struck Zegion with his full power, a sword strike that seemed to shatter the earth itself. But Zegion batted the blow away with his left hand, deliberately trying to avoid impeding his opponent's motion. The gentle push on his sword threw Bazan off-balance, keeping him from launching into a combination strike.

Zegion wasn't about to miss that opportunity. At once, he advanced straight up to the guy, planted his right leg down, and drove his right fist into his opponent's armor. I didn't even want to know how much power was in that fist, really… And the results indicated that it was as hard as a Legend-class weapon. The shining armor was shattered, and with that, Bazan's life was forfeit.

This all happened less than three seconds after battle began.

Losing a teammate that suddenly must've been too difficult to parse at once. Reiha, the wizard, just stood there blankly, and it was pretty clear what would happen if she acted like *that* around Zegion. If anything, she had it good, getting to die without any pain or fear. A single chop of her adversary's bare hand was all it took to cleave her in two.

Seeing her collapse to the ground, Krishna—the winner over Alberto—screamed in horror.

"Ah, aaaahhhhhhhhh!! You killed Reiha! Die, you monster! Dimension Cutter!!"

His anger pouring into his fighting will, Krishna unleashed the skill at near-divine speed. Dimension Cutter was a slashing move, one that could slice through any defense—even across dimensions. Without a spatial-control skill like my Dominate Space, it'd be impossible to counter. It was all but unstoppable, a true "sure kill" if

there ever was one in battle.

But it didn't work on Zegion.

"Ha. Pitiful."

The air began to twist around him.

Hang on. Wasn't this Distortion Field? Like, part of the Absolute Defense tools offered by Uriel, Lord of Vows?! Whenever *I* used Absolute Defense, I always seemed to blow it for some reason, but Zegion apparently mastered it.

"Sir Rimuru granted me this technique," he told the shocked Krishna, "and it renders all attacks futile!"

Um, I don't remember teaching him that…?

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That was *you*, Raphael?

And Zegion's Dominate Space ability had gone way beyond unique-skill territory. It's just as good as mine by now. No wonder he could fight toe to toe (maybe even better) with Veldora if it was strictly a martial arts contest. I could certainly see how he could block Krishna's strike with it.

So it felt like Krishna's team was pretty much doomed by now, but:

"Krishna, listen!"

The fancily dressed dude with them—Minitz, I think his name was—called for Krishna.

"This is a foe beyond anything we've seen before. I'll slow him down, so do everything you can to finish him off!"

Apparently he hadn't given up on winning yet. I'll have to admit, as an enemy, he was a decent one.

Now Minitz was raining his power down upon Zegion. We already knew about the unique skill Minitz had—Apito's defeat wasn't in vain at all. He had Oppressor, which let him mess around with localized gravitational force, and he wanted to use it to focus gravity on Zegion and restrain him.

But alas, it didn't work on Zegion. All he had to do was warp the

space around him to manipulate the flow of gravity the way *he* wanted it. It kind of surprised me—I never thought about using it that way.

Like, since when was Zegion so freakishly *strong*? That question in my mind was growing bigger and bigger. Also, why the heck was Raphael even able to teach stuff to Zegion?

Understood. You may have perhaps forgotten, Master, but you have given him part of your own body. Subsequently, you are now connected by a soul corridor.

Oh, right. He was about to die, and when I saved him, I *did* give him part of my body, didn't I? But wouldn't that apply to Apito, too?

Understood. The difference lies in latent talent. The subject Zegion's physical specifications are beyond any measure, and thus I was able to give him a full super optimization to my satisfaction. As a result, he has acquired abilities similar to you, Master.

The job it did on Apito was amazing enough, but that still didn't satisfy Raphael, I guess. It was happy enough with the job it did on Zegion, and honestly, it was a little hard to fully grasp what that meant.

And what the hell's a full super optimization? Did he turn him into a superhero or something? This was all so new to me. So Zegion was basically a little masterpiece put together by Raphael in its spare time? Looking at it that way, no wonder he had turned into such a freak of nature.

That's Raphael for you—always taking everything to extremes. It's done it again, this time behind my back. Now, in Zegion, we had a battle-focused magic-born with the ideal fighting form, further honed via Veldora's intense training. There was no way any ordinary person could ever take him on.

And as expected:

"Dimension Ray!"

Zegion opened up his right hand and carelessly swung his arm down. That's all it took to cut through the local dimension—or space itself, I suppose. This was another phenomenon you had no chance of resisting without the ability to manipulate the space around you.

The two imperial fighters immediately reacted, but that alone wouldn't help them. Krishna tried to cancel it out with another Dimension Cutter, but it failed, and he was cut in half. The difference in sheer muscle was bleedingly (pardon the pun) obvious.

As for Minitz, he set up a jamming force field around himself to try to block the dimensional slash… But that, too, was just pointless struggling. Against twisting, slicing dimensional space, virtually no physical ability or phenomenon could do much of anything. The look of surprise on his face was really hard to describe, but if I had to, I'd say it was the face of someone who just tasted defeat for the first time in his whole life. So he set off for the afterlife, likely not even given the time to admit defeat.

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So less than a minute after battle began, all the challengers were dead. And well, that concluded my lecture on how incredibly goddamn strong Zegion was. The leaps and bounds Kumara made surprised me enough, but that was nothing compared to our insect friend here. For all I know, he might even outclass me by now.

Like…oh, man. I think he's starting to overstep the bounds of life itself or something. He's become a truly transcendent being, hasn't he? Stronger than even Hinata when she's fighting for real. By my calculations, even Apito could rank up there with Carillon or Frey strengthwise, but I don't think Apito could last three minutes with Zegion. The moment he got serious, the fight would end instantly. It's hardly even a fight with him, even. It's just a one-sided massacre.

Why did I even put someone so powerful in the labyrinth? Because aren't his talents kinda going to waste down there? …But then again, this *is* a secret weapon, isn't it? Something I could never afford to unleash to the open world.

Still, though… I knew there were lots of powerful people hiding

out around the world, and I didn't think I let my guard down at all… but I had no idea there was so much off-the-charts strength right under my nose the whole time. Like, I always *thought* they looked pretty strong, but this was far beyond my imagination. Truly, there's no fathoming the mysteries of the world.

But enough about that. We've got other things to reflect on right now, don't we?

Thanks to this, I learned the hard way that leaving things up to Raphael can result in some pretty zany nonsense. Now wasn't the time to whine and moan about a little hard work. We were gonna need to have a long talk later to see if it had done anything else I ought to know about.

Still, even with those thoughts in mind, I was relieved that the battle in the labyrinth ended without major incident.

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And so out of the more than seven hundred thousand troops who participated in the ground invasion, we had finished taking care of five hundred thirty thousand.

This was practically genocide, I know, but for me, all it meant was that I had gained over half a million souls. That meant seven hundred seventy thousand in total, and *that* meant I could now evolve seven of my top officials. Once the remaining ground battles were wrapped up, I'd need to consider who to give the nod to.

And as for that ground battle, we weren't letting our guard down yet.

"Now the imperial force numbers less than two hundred thousand troops. That's a pretty big army, but it seems tiny compared to before, huh?"

"Indeed. Two days have passed since their final deployment into the labyrinth, but no moves since then. We don't see any signs that they're ready to send any more down. Of course, if the enemy commander keeps prodding the labyrinth after all *this*, he'd have to

be beyond incompetent."

Benimaru was right, I suppose. With all the strength they lost, I doubted they'd be kicking any more soldiers through the labyrinth gate. Now it was our turn to confront them instead.

Without any over-A rankers on their side, the enemy force was nowhere near the juggernaut it used to be. It was a big army, yes, but we could probably take them on easily. I *thought* we could anyway, but—ah, there was always something to worry about.

"So now what? The other side's still got us beat in numbers *and* quality, right? If we hit them with the Second Army Corps, that's going to cost us casualties no matter what, won't it?"

We could just hole up in here and wait for them to run out of food. That could earn us victory unscathed. With the food stores we have in the labyrinth, we could duke it out for another year. Cultivation was possible to some extent down there as well, and if push came to shove, we could always ask Ramiris to give us more farmland. That would be the firm, cautious approach, I think.

"Well, we've already cut off the enemy's supply lines," said Benimaru. "Strategically speaking, we've got the upper hand. Now that we've come this far, it's really more cleanup duty than anything —"

"*Hmph!* As you said earlier, you're not going to let the invaders leave alive, then?" Shion cut in. "That's just what I hoped to hear from you, Benimaru! What valor!"

Shion's interruption made Benimaru snicker. Apparently, she was right.

"No, it is best not to let the Empire harbor any more useless ambitions. It's all the more reason why we need to kill all the intruders."

Benimaru was starting to sound like Raphael now. Annihilating the majority of the imperial army wasn't enough to satisfy him; he was committed to killing every single one of them without prejudice, just as originally planned. He's *so* merciless, isn't he? And at this point, I saw no reason to oppose him.

But… I mean, I was ready for that. I was sure the Empire's subjects would hate me for all this, even if just out of spite. I just

hoped it didn't give us a bad rap with the Western Nations…

Report. I have a suggestion I would like to test.

Oh?

Sounded like Raphael had a plan of its own. The fact that it didn't just tell me about it first thing let me know that maybe my friend wasn't too confident it would work.

Is this something we could do right now, then?

Negative. It will require time and preparation, so it is better to attempt after the war is over.

Okay.

Certainly, I didn't want to start any more wacky experiments during wartime. I didn't know what Raphael wanted to do, but either way, *I* was the one who'd have to execute it. We could talk about it later.

I turned my attention back to Benimaru. I had accepted his proposal to kill them all, but my only other important request was that there be no casualties on our side.

"But is that even possible without anyone dying?"

"If we in your officer corps come out to battle, Sir Rimuru, I'm sure of it."

Confident as ever. And Diablo, Shion, and even the typically calm Geld were nodding eagerly at Benimaru's assessment.

"Okay, so what exactly will you guys do?"

Benimaru began explaining.

"First, Sir Rimuru, we cannot leave you unguarded."

Everyone nodded their agreement.

"Do you have to be *that* careful? I mean, we killed everyone in the labyrinth except for Lucius and Raymond."

We were still treating them as prisoners of war for now. They didn't seem likely to betray us, so we didn't throw them in jail or anything. They were on standby on Floor 60 just in case, kept under

Gadora's supervision; he had been showing them the battles on each floor of the labyrinth to help stave off their boredom. That included recordings of the two of them as well, but what amazed them the most was how each of the labyrinth guardians fought.

"You see now? You were smart to join my side, weren't you?"

"You were, right? You oughtta be grateful."

"…At least thank him for giving you three meals a day."

"Hey, c'mon, guys. We went down the same road they did, remember. We should know how they both feel."

Gadora and Shinji's gang were all helping prop up their spirits, even. I didn't think we needed to worry about anything with them.

Now I wondered if any imperial forces snuck into our capital city before the war began.

"Soei, were there any intruders in town?"

"We've already taken care of them."

Yeah, I'm sure there were—but if that was the answer Soei had, the problem was already in the distant past.

Report. We have successfully eliminated every single person who entered the labyrinth. Only one individual, the subject Krishna, was confirmed to have used a Resurrection Bracelet, but since he is currently outside the labyrinth, he will no longer pose a problem.

Oh, so Krishna survived? He was a pretty strong dude, sure, but if Raphael had already kept tabs on him, I had nothing to worry about.

"Yeah, well, I guess the labyrinth's safe now, so I suppose I can relax a little bit, huh? Besides, those Imperial Guardians like Kanzis and Minitz—people in *their* class would be stronger than me before I became demon lord, right? From what Chloe told me, I hadn't evolved into one in her time line, so it wouldn't be a shock at all if they killed me, would it?"

In that scenario, Diablo wouldn't be there for me, either—I hadn't summoned him by then—and Veldora wasn't fully revived, so even folks like Zegion would be their pre-evolved selves. In terms of war power, we'd be *way* weaker than we were now—it wasn't even a

comparison. If the Empire attacked us in that situation, it wouldn't be strange at all if we were too helpless to resist and I kicked it.

…That is not possible.

No, I really think it is, y'know?

Like, I get how much of a sore loser you are, Raphael, but that's a *really* petulant thing to say. Besides, you were still just the Great Sage back then.

…

Heh. You lost *that* debate, huh? My first win in a while.

Not that there's a winner and a loser in this kind of argument, but still.

"Yes… Perhaps you're right, Sir Rimuru."

Benimaru agreed, although he didn't seem to like it much. But Shion refused to accept it.

"No! There was no possible way you could be defeated!"

There was, actually. History proves me right. Well, *that* history anyway. We're on a different one now, but with someone like Shion, trying to debate theoretical time lines is an exercise in futility.

Giving up on that fool's errand, I got us back on topic.

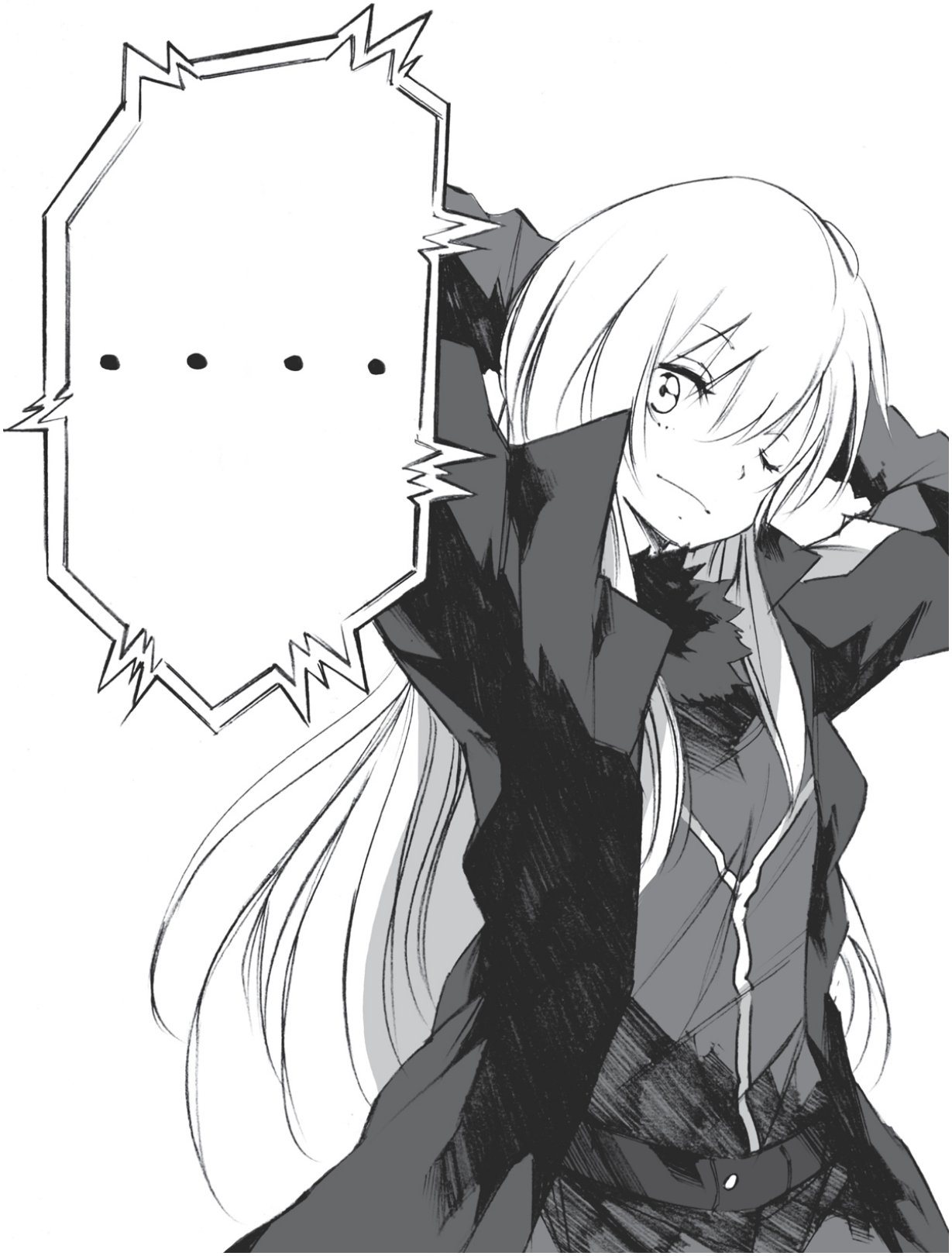
"…Well, there's no point debating it now. The key takeaway here is that the Empire had a lot of strong dudes in it. They might still have a bunch left, too, so we're all gonna have to remain careful. And I appreciate your wish to keep me guarded, but I don't want you guys getting hurt because of it."

The labyrinth seemed more than safe enough by this point. And when it came to the ground war, I thought the sooner we put that behind us, the better. That was why I said that, but my phrasing had a *lot* more power than I thought.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… If that's what you say, Sir Rimuru, then I will gladly go out to fight as well. Allow me to end this battle in a single instant!"

“No trying for a head start, Diablo! I’m not going to give up this opportunity to have Sir Rimuru see my treasured troops in action for the first time!”

“Please, my lord, wait! Testa and Ult have been given chances to shine, but I haven’t been given anything yet. That’s so mean! Please, deploy me as well while you’re at it!”





Diablo, Shion, and Carrera (who had just flown in through the doorway) were all making a huge fuss about going out there to fight.

“You three…”

Even Benimaru was taken aback. Geld was laughing about it, too.

“All right, all right. I’ll stay here, so you guys can handle the final battle for us.”

In the end, Benimaru agreed to let Diablo and the others go to war.

✳

With that question settled, now we needed a workable strategy.

“Let’s take a look at our numbers. Our main force is my Red Numbers, totaling thirty thousand, along with seventeen thousand elites from Geld’s Yellow Numbers and Orange Numbers. In terms of quality, they’re probably all on par with the remaining imperial troops, and I’m connected via Thought Communication with their commanders and captains. They’ll be able to take flexible tactical action out there, so if we restrict their zone of activity, that should let us fight evenly with them or better. How many people are among your ‘treasured troops,’ then?”

So forty-seven thousand in all? And they averaged a B-plus in rank, which was more than sufficient. But they’d be going up against an Empire force almost four times as large. No matter how much of an operational advantage we had, defeat seemed pretty likely to me…

“Ten thousand. And by the way, only those who kept up with my training remain on the team, so you can treat all of them as ranking at least a B-plus.”

This was Shion’s elite guard—or her fan club, as we usually called it. It was something of an enigma, an entity set apart from Team Reborn that was captained by Daggrull’s sons. Apparently, it was bigger than I thought.

“There’s really that many of them?”

Like, *man*, it sure grew while I wasn't paying attention. I knew that Gobzo was a member, but I could only imagine what kind of other clowns were in there.

"There are, Sir Rimuru! I've been secretly training them to serve as a worthy elite guard for you!"

Hmm… They're *your* fan club, aren't they? Not mine. But whatever. The more reliable allies we had, the merrier.

"But even this leaves us at a dire numerical disadvantage, so I'll be expecting a lot out of all my close officers here. First, we should confuse them with a large-scale skill, then strike them when they're open. They won't just sit back and watch, of course. Assuming they advance upon us, the first question is who should tackle them first…"

Usually, Benimaru would have been taking that role, as far as I knew. A wide-ranging attack like Hellflare would be perfect for the job, but unfortunately, Benimaru had to stay here and guard me. So who else, then?

"Isn't this where I come in, my lord?" Carrera asked.

Hmm. Yeah. She *did* seem qualified. I glanced at Benimaru. Our eyes met, he gave me a small nod, and with that, I decided to give Carrera her wish.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh! I think I can—"

"Right, Carrera, it's up to you. Use some of that flashy magic of yours to teach the imperial force a lesson they'll never forget!"

"Absolutely, my lord! You can count on me!"

Oh, was Diablo about to say something?

"Sorry, Diablo, what were you saying?"

"N-no… Keh…heh-heh… Keh-heh… It was nothing of importance. But good for you, Carrera."

"Oooh, I'm *sooo* happy!"

I could almost see the sparks flying between Diablo and Carrera. Was he about to nominate himself or something? If so, then my apologies—but did Diablo have that kind of large-scale magic at his fingertips? Surely he had to. I guess being around me all the time like this was driving him to show off as much as possible. Now I felt just a little bad for him.

Hopping out of my chair, I transformed from slime to human form

and stood before Diablo. Placing a hand on his shoulder, I tried to sound as persuasive as I could.

“Sorry about that, Diablo. You know, I was actually hoping you might volunteer to kill off the enemy commander for me!”

“Huh?!”

Diablo’s lips curled into a grin. He looked happy—*really* happy. Great, then.

“Like, there still might be unknown menaces in their army, right? It looks like the Krishna guy from before managed to resurrect himself, for example, but it oughtta be easy for you to trace him.”

Given his stalker-ish behavior from time to time, I bet Diablo was good at that kind of thing. “Of course, Sir Rimuru!” he replied happily. Aha. I knew it all along.

“Yes, it is still possible that powerful fighters lurk within the Empire. If we want them to come out of the woodwork, we’ll need to show off our full powers right here, on this battlefield. Carrera, Diablo, I’m counting on you!”

“I swear I’ll do my best, my lord!”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… A direct edict from you, Sir Rimuru, makes my heart soar with excitement!”

Well, super. Carrera was glad to be playing a part, and now Diablo was all motivated again. That oughtta make it easier for Geld and the rest to do their jobs.

“Now, make sure you keep the other troops intimidated enough so nobody interferes with Carrera’s magic. If someone *does* try to mess with her, Shion, have your troops deal with them.”

Benimaru, taking over for me, began rattling off his orders. I was sure I could safely leave the rest to him now.

“As for the formation, I’d like Geld up front and Shion using hit-and-run tactics, as we discussed. We’ll count on the Red Numbers to provide pursuit duty, but as for who’ll be in charge…”

They needed someone who could connect via Thought Communication to Benimaru and immediately execute his will as needed. Thought Communication could also be used to relay orders to every ally on the field, but any mistaken action out there could end our life. A commander who could make little corrections as needed

was absolutely vital. I think Gobwa could handle that job nimbly enough, but maybe him giving orders to Shion and Geld was asking a bit much?"

"I think that Gob—"

"One moment!"

The door to the Control Center burst open, interrupting Benimaru. There we saw Momiji, representative of the chief of the tengu. She was also Hakuro's daughter, so she was pretty close with everyone in the room. But giving her such easy access to the Control Center, after we tightened up security so much…

"Um, Lady Shuna was gracious enough to let me in."

Aha.

Shuna had been handling lots of small details for us this whole time, bringing us meals and preparing tea, and I guess Momiji had been helping her out. Fair enough, then. Let's hear her out.

"As Benimaru's wife, I think it is time for me step up and take his position on the field!!"

"What are you…?!"

We couldn't just have *anyone* take Benimaru's place here…but Momiji would be fine, wouldn't she? She had the power, for sure, and her temperament was such that she wouldn't let Shion or Geld give her cold feet.

"Well, why not?"

I opted to accept the offer.

"Indeed, I would gladly welcome Lady Momiji as a worthy ally!"

Shion didn't seem to mind, either. She knew that Momiji was Hakuro's daughter, so she must have been treating her with a soft touch.

"I'm for it as well. The Red Numbers are a meritocracy of worthy magic-born. Instead of Team Kurenai going it alone, I would much rather ask for help from our tengu friend."

Geld was on board, too, and nobody else seemed to be voicing any disagreement.

"Well, unless there are any concerns, you mind if I let your fiancée take this job, Benimaru?"

"N-no, but…"

Oh, is he against it? Yeah, maybe he doesn't want his future wife out fighting in wars.

"Ah, worried for your wife?"

"Well, yes… Wait, no!"

Darn. I almost got him to admit it. But he wasn't off the hook yet.

"Benimaru!"

With a loud bang, the door flew open to reveal Shuna, standing up straight and admonishing her brother.

"Lady Momiji has been preparing your meals for the past few days, I'll have you know! All she wanted was for you to have a good meal, so she asked me to teach her how to cook. That's such a gallant thing to do, and I don't want that to go to waste!"

"She… She has?"

"Yes."

Momiji nodded. I had actually noticed this. Compared to Shuna, the meal quality wasn't *quite* up to the usual standard. That's why I felt it was perfectly fine to give Momiji her wish.

"But kitchen work and battle command are two very different—"

"Benimaru!"

"Ugh…"

Benimaru can't resist his little sister, either, huh?

"This is your fault for being so indecisive in the first place, you know. No wonder Lady Momiji is so anxious. If you're a man, you need to make it clear who you love already!"

Yes. He did. I was curious which one Benimaru would choose—Alvis or Momiji—but then again, was now really the time for that? I honestly began to sympathize with him. If I were him, I probably wouldn't want this talked about in front of everyone, either.

"No, Lady Shuna. Victory is something I must seize with my own hands!"

Now it was Momiji making the emotional declarations. Yow. Now Alvis had a huge disadvantage. Momiji was clearly doing a better job laying the groundwork. Was this battle over?

But just then:

"You won't get away with this."

Alvis, of all people, showed up, slipping right out from behind

Shuna.

“I have just arrived now with reinforcements from Eurazania.”

I didn’t ask for any, and I’d heard nothing *about* any…but in Alvis’s hand was a letter from Milim. It contained a single sentence: *Do your best!* Hmm. Who was it meant for? Pretty open-ended message there.

But hang on. How did *Alvis* get inside the labyrinth?

“Lady Milim provided the magic. You developed it for her, didn’t you, Sir Rimuru?”

Ohhh, right. Milim had gotten telepathic permission from Ramiris to send military forces directly into the labyrinth, huh? That was a pretty reckless decision on Milim’s part, but then, anything was possible with her.

So now we had a force of twenty thousand led by Alvis—not just lycanthropes but also a bunch of harpies, reportedly. A few choice representatives from the Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance were even along for the ride.

Even Benimaru had to give this a resigned grin. As long as Milim’s will was involved, there was absolutely no way we could send Alvis’s troops back home. Besides, if I did, Momiji would never, *ever* give Benimaru a moment of peace.

“All right, all right. Momiji, I’m giving you my force. Take care of it for me.”

“With pleasure!”

She looked happy—and with that, the battle between the two women began.

“I hope you don’t drag me down at all.”

“Hee-hee-hee! What kind of talk is that, hmm?”

I was already picturing the sparks flying between them. Was this really okay? I was a little concerned about that.

✳

So despite all the interruptions, we had a general idea of who we

were going to deploy. I should note that Alvis's reinforcements were completely dependable fighters. We were still at a numerical disadvantage, but I think this gave us a lot more wiggle room. Geld would be in the front row, Momiji taking up the rear. The cavalry, so to speak, was on the wings—Shion on the right and Alvis on the left.

This all helped me relax a little, but we still had a battle to fight. Pulling myself together, I sent the orders for each division to head out.

Shion and Geld, waiting for this moment all week, immediately sprang into action. Momiji followed suit, and suddenly the Control Center was busier than ever.

On Floor 95, currently serving as Floor 100, there was a vast open space—not enough of one for military training, but if we were just housing troops, it would suffice. With that in mind, the members of Geld's Second Army Corps and Benimaru's Fourth Corps were put on standby in and around Floor 100. They'd be coming down in about an hour, so I decided to go out and give them a little morale boost—that, and they needed my teleportation magic to get them down here anyway.

"Sir Rimuru, do you have a moment?" Soei whispered into my ear as I prepared to set off.

"What's up?"

"I've just received word from Moss that signs of battle were detected in the direction of Blumund. After an investigation, we found that Lady Treyni is engaged in battle with someone."

"What?!"

Come to think of it, I hadn't seen Treyni for the past ten or so days. She mentioned going out to "greet" someone, and she hadn't been back since. Was she fighting this whole time, then?

"I'm sorry, Soei, but can you go and help her out a bit?"

Soei seemed to hesitate for a moment. Maybe he worried that this kept me too unguarded. Everyone *really* worries too damn much around here. They didn't have to be so touchy all the time, you know? Benimaru was still here, and if something came up, we could always tap the Ten Dungeon Marvels. I was a lot more worried about Treyni than myself at the moment.

After exchanging glances with Benimaru, Soei nodded. If Benimaru was here with me, Soei must've been willing to accept my orders. I was glad but also a little irritated. Was he *that* concerned about me? Like, I know I was killed once, according to Chloe, but I'm evolved now. I'm a demon lord.

…But that's the equivalent of "I'm retiring in a week," isn't it?

Still, there was no point being all anxious. If something popped up, I was sure Raphael would let me know anyway.

"Very well. I will leave at once."

"Thanks."

Soei promptly disappeared. His Instantmove skill was as brilliant as usual.

If Treyni had been fighting all this time, her opponent must have been at about her level. Once Soei joined in, I was sure victory would come soon after. It *did* bother me, and I'd have loved to know who she was fighting, but my hands were tied at the moment. I had to finish the fight in front of me first.

One hour later, a massive number of magic-born were crowded together on Floor 100's vacant space. As soon as I showed up, everyone stood still and quieted down. It was a little scary, frankly, how under control they were. Morale was high, and motivation definitely wasn't a problem.

"Um… Right! Soldiers, this one battle is all it will take to drive the imperial army out of our federation. Our goal here is total victory, and I want every single one of you to come out alive and share the glory with us. That is all!"

Not to sound modest or whatever, but I really suck at speeches. It'd be nice if Raphael could just write 'em and read 'em out for me, but that's the exact kind of time that it starts pretending not to hear me. I tried my best to convey my message in my own words, and surprisingly, the magic-born seemed to accept it. From what I heard later, it received praise from both the old guard and newer magic-born in their army.

"Y-yeaaaahhh! Sir Rimuru's speech was amazing!"

"I can die now. I've got no regrets left in life!!"

"You idiot! Dying means you've been killed!!"

They told me this was the talk around the army later, but I wasn't aware at the time, so I just took all those silent rows of troops and teleported them to the ground floor.

✳

Well, things were pretty darn lonely down here again. Shion and Diablo were out fighting this time, so it was only Benimaru and me now.

"We can win, right?"

"No problems there, no. I didn't see any movements from the imperial soldiers, but there's a flurry of activity among the leadership, it looks like. That straggler Krishna must've reported on events in the labyrinth. If I were them, and he told me he was the only survivor, I'd be out of there in a hurry… Well, I wouldn't put us in this situation in the first place, but you understand what I mean."

His classic fearless smile was on his face. I had to agree with him. Being out of contact with my people gets me nervous enough as it is, so I probably wouldn't let it happen unless we came up with some countermeasures. To be honest, I wasn't expecting this plan of ours to be nearly as successful as it turned out to be.

"No matter what it is, it never pays to be greedy, huh?"

"Indeed. War and looting go hand in hand, but it's forbidden in *our* military, at least."

Excellent. In war, the side to lose their composure first usually loses, but once your desires get stoked a little bit, it's easy to get too heated up. We took advantage of that habit in this campaign, and it worked scarily well. It's a good lesson for us, too—better not fall in the same trap they did.

We were on our way back to the Control Center, discussing this, when a possibility occurred to me.

"Hey, you and I are the only ones here, right?"

"Yes."

“Well, if—*if*—there happen to be any enemies still hiding in the labyrinth, they’d never let an opportunity like this go to waste, would they? What do you think of that?”

“Oh, come now. There’s no way anyone could time a move so precisely like that.”

Yeah. I was getting too suspicious. Even Raphael had signed off on the labyrinth’s current safety. Being paranoid all day would accomplish nothing, so I decided to leave the thought at that. Continually dredging up the same thoughts in your mind is a great way to make yourself anxious, after all. But I just had a bad feeling for a little while…

…?

Like, you know. It’s not that I doubt Raphael. I just couldn’t help but wonder if it overlooked something.

Understood. All potentially suspicious subjects have been identified.

Yeah, that I trust in. But what if it’s someone I know really well? Like Elen’s gang, for example. I trust all of them, so if they ever betrayed me, I’d suffer a whole lot for it.

But these were still all just what-ifs. There was absolutely no reason for Elen and her friends to turn traitor; we’d built up a lot of trust in each other by then. I could firmly say that they were perfectly fine.

But how could we assume that the same’s true for everybody else, too?

…

I knew my staff officers were fine. Folks like Mjöllmile were cutting out sleep to give their all for me. There was no way I could start

doubting him.

Apart from them, I supposed there were the people I'd gotten to know outside my own government—the assorted visitors who'd come to stay with us since the Founder's Festival. For example…

"Rimuruuu!"

I saw a group of people coming from Labyrinth City. Oh, no way.

The guy waving up front was Masayuki, someone I knew well, and he had two others with him—a warrior and a wizard. Jinrai and Bernie, right? I think those were their names. Those two still kinda held a grudge against me, so we hadn't talked much.

"I sincerely doubt it, but you don't think Masayuki might start targeting me, do you?"

"Oh, no. That's *really* worrying too much, I would say."

"Yeah."

Benimaru dismissed the concern. *I* sure didn't wanna start suspecting Masayuki. And by the way, hadn't Gadora mentioned that Masayuki was the spitting image of Emperor Ludora or something? …Nah. It had to just be a goofy coincidence.

Understood. After careful examination of the Empire's history and other assorted elements, the chances of the subject Masayuki and Emperor Ludora being the same person are zero percent.

Right. Of course.

Feeling a bit relieved, I called out to the guy, "Hey, Masayuki. Something up?"

"Something up? Kind of a lot, man! You naming me an army leader out of nowhere has given me a *ton* of trouble! Even the vampires were asking me if they could temporarily join in—I don't even know what to do with them. And there's just been a huge amount of activity down here, you know? Everyone in the city's starting to ask what's going on."

Having so many volunteers at once, Masayuki explained, made it hard to deal with them in any organized fashion. And us sending out an army like I just did must've made all those volunteers clamor for

some action of their own. I didn't think he was exaggerating at all—the disheartened look on his face told me that much. Plus, if Masayuki was trying to trick me, Raphael would've warned me about it long ago. So nah, no point doubting him.

"Well, most of the volunteers are still staying in the towns they live in, right?"

"Yes, but…"

The city of Rimuru, formerly on the surface, was now evacuated to the Dungeon's provisionary Floor 101. The sun and stars were as visible as always down there, so a lot of people were surprisingly oblivious to current events. The war was already underway, but some citizens must've thought we were still in a standoff at some distant vista.

The twenty thousand members of the Volunteer Army were entrusted with maintaining security in the city during this state of emergency, but thanks to the pervading calm across Floor 101, they didn't have much to do. Masayuki himself, however, was still *real* busy, it looked like.

His main problem at the moment had to do with the researchers living in Labyrinth City. They were primarily meant to be office staff, but most of the people Luminus sent were Calamity-grade threats in a fight. *Overcomers* was the term for them, apparently, but they all had a lot of free time on their hands. Many had come to directly speak with Masayuki to see if they could get a little action in this war, like it was some kind of fun carnival. Bacchus, sent in from the Crusaders, and Jiwu, one of Masayuki's old party companions, were currently soothing them over, he said—but they couldn't keep them under control forever, so he was begging me to do something about it.

Maybe, the paranoid part of my mind told me, they were trying to instigate Masayuki into starting some big commotion so they could come after me. It was possible, but if so, I really thought they would've taken action earlier. That possibility didn't seem too likely, either. I really *am* thinking too much. Deep breath.

"That sure does sound rough…"

"Yeah, doesn't it? So please, lend us a hand here!"

“Don’t worry. This war’s gonna be over real soon, so just keep giving ’em the runaround until then, okay?”

“No, no, you can’t just make it sound easy like that, Rimuru…”

Masayuki kept complaining, a hangdog look on his face. But nobody should underestimate my ability to ignore serious problems tossed in my lap. This sounded like a lot of trouble, and I just didn’t have the time to get involved. All this paranoid doubting had tired me out, and I really wanted to get back to my Control Center. Then Shuna could pour me some tea, maybe prepare a slice of delicious cake, and all would be well.

“You’re trying to run from me, aren’t you, Rimuru?!”

“Ha-ha-ha!”

“Don’t ‘ha-ha-ha’ me!”

Okay, maybe this was a pointless argument—but I was demonstrating a master class on giving people the runaround. Masayuki should really learn from this so he can reach my own lofty heights. That was what I was hoping for, and that was why I was currently shoving him away from me.

“If that’s your only business, I need to get back, all right?”

“You’re *positive* the war’s going to end soon?”

“I’m hoping to wrap it up today, actually.”

“Well, we haven’t done anything, so it hardly even seems real at all, but now you’re really fighting…?”

I could empathize with that. That’s kind of my ideal, not letting the general public know at all.

“Pretty much, yeah. So take it easy, okay?”

With a grin, I did my best to convince Masayuki to see things my way. That oughtta solve the problem. Now to duck back inside and enjoy some strawberry shortcake—

“Whoa, whoa, wait a sec! Masayuki’s lookin’ out for you, so I’ve been holding back, but we haven’t given up on defeating you, all right? And now you’re forgetting all about that and trying to take advantage of him? What kind of a joke is this?”

Just when I thought the problem was solved, a new one arose. Jinrai, a man I assumed was just along for the ride with Masayuki, chose this moment to pipe up.

“Aw, c’mon, that was just a misunderstanding. Take advantage of you? There’s no need to make it sound so disgraceful…”

I attempted to make excuses but wasn’t doing a good job at it. I *was* trying to take advantage of him, after all. But then I received some unexpected backup.

“Jinrai! That’s out of order. Rimuru’s working so hard for everybody in town right now!”

Now Masayuki was trying to appease Jinrai. Thanks, man. I’ll let you have some cake later! And as I flashed him a grateful smile, Jinrai immediately stopped complaining. I’m sure he wasn’t happy about it, but at least he was tolerant enough to bottle it up. He was a lot more mature than his face suggested.

So that was the end of it. Or so I thought. But life’s never that easy.

“No, Jinrai’s right, Masayuki! Heroes and demon lords are fated to clash with each other. So quit holding back forever, and let’s just take this guy down as soon as we can!”

Bernie, usually observing from a step behind, chose *this* moment to get all worked up. With a sigh, I pondered how I’d calm him down.

“If *you* won’t do it,” Bernie continued as he began casting a spell, “then *I* will!”

Cut me a break, I thought. Then things got serious.

“Holy Field!”

You’re kidding me, I almost caught myself yelling. That spell was extremely tough to handle, much less solo. I knew Bernie was an otherworlder and probably decent at magic, but I didn’t think he held sway over that kind of advanced holy stuff. Like, was he even serious—?!

Murderous intent detected. The subject Bernie is an enemy!!

Then I finally realized what was going on.

I thought it was impossible; I kept trying to believe that I was worrying too much about it. But the enemy was right here, in front of me, the whole time.

And then someone moved even faster than I did. There was a clear, high-pitched *tiiiing*. It was caused by the collision between Benimaru's sword and Bernie's blade of light.

"Bernie, what are…? You can fight with a sword?!"

Jinrai was evidently surprised. It must have been the first time Bernie wielded a sword in front of Jinrai and the others, which meant he had been hiding it from his supposed friends for who knows how long.

"Pfft! I'm not stupid enough to reveal my hand *that* easily!"

The look on his face said it all to me. If he was gonna do this, he wanted to throw every skill he had toward the effort.

"Dammit! So you tricked both me *and* Masayuki?!"

"Tricked? Stop making it sound so mean. I just used you to get closer to the demon lord."

"Y-you *used* us?"

"Yeah. Masayuki was a helpful connection. Thanks to him, I've been granted a golden opportunity. Much appreciated!"

He was crossing swords with Benimaru, but Bernie was chatting with Jinrai like they were chilling at the bar. I was listening in as well, so maybe I shouldn't talk, but it looked like he was hiding one hell of a lot of skill.

"Benimaru, let me help you—"

"No, I'll take care of him. Keep a close eye on our surroundings, Sir Rimuru."

I was about to join the fray, but Benimaru stopped me. Trusting him to his word, I stepped up my vigilance.

Even in the midst of this, Bernie and Jinrai kept talking.

"Masayuki was just a 'connection' to you?! D-don't give me that crap!"

"Come on, like *you* never thought of it that way. You know he's really not strong at all, right? He's just bluffing his way through life."

That made the blood drain from Masayuki's face. Oops. Busted! But I probably shouldn't joke, because this was a life-or-death situation for him.

Then Jinrai surprised me all over again.

"Well, so what? I don't care if he's bluffing or not—Masayuki's an

incredible man! He's never failed us—not even once!"

Oh, he knew? I guess he saw the guy for what he was after all… A bluffer, yeah, but definitely a lot more than that. I should probably rethink my opinion of Jinrai, although Masayuki was giving *him* a hurt-puppy-dog look now.

Bernie, it seemed, wasn't a fan of this reaction.

"Pshhh! So you knew, and you still stuck with him? And you actually *respect* this total loser? Don't make me laugh!"

The irritation was glaring in his raised voice. But I was the really annoyed one here.

"What's so bad about bluffing? *I'm* bluffing my way through *my* life, too!"

"R-Rimuru…!"

"Well, aren't I? I used to be an anonymous face at the office. I wasn't living in some world full of Heroes and demon lords, but I still tried my best every day, because I had no other choice! And I wouldn't want oblivious idiots like you to laugh at *me* about it!"

Masayuki silently nodded.

"Y-you…" Jinrai glanced at me. Even he was looking a little confused now. I kept going.

"I mean, isn't it obvious? If I don't keep telling myself that what I'm doing is right, I'd never be able to be king of this realm or whatever!"

Fired up from shouting, I walked over to Masayuki's side—slowly, so I didn't alarm Bernie while he was crossing swords with Benimaru.

"Everybody's doing their best just to keep living, you know. That's why I'm doing what I can to create a world where we can all live happily together. Masayuki's done a lot to help out with that. He's done so much for me! And I'm *not* gonna sit here and allow you to make fun of him!"

I stood in front of Masayuki as I admonished Bernie. Hearing that, Jinrai deeply nodded. So did Masayuki.

"Bernie, were you planning to use me like this from the beginning?"

He spoke directly to Bernie, his past panic now vanished without a trace.

“That’s what I said, didn’t I?” Bernie replied, keeping his distance from Benimaru—who, in turn, was in front of me, sizing him up. Under the effects of the Holy Field, Benimaru wasn’t able to tap his full powers, so instead of trying to finish Bernie off in one fell swoop, he was taking more of a wait-and-see approach.

“Did Yuuki order you to?”

“Huh? …Oh. Right. Heh… Well, I could explain all that to you, but what’s in it for me?”

He was still lording it over us, but at least he was still talking. Maybe, with the Holy Field in place, he had no doubts about his superior position?

Negative. He has some sort of aim in mind… Data confirmed. There is another subject who is a member of Masayuki’s party. After searching for data on this subject, her presence was not found in the labyrinth. However, there is no record of her ever leaving it. This is…

Raphael was spitting out data with frightening speed. Judging by how it wasn’t bothering to organize any of it for me in advance, it must’ve thought this was a pretty major emergency.

If I recall, there was one more member of Masayuki’s gang—Jiwu. She was helping Bacchus smooth things over with the overcomers…

Confirmed. A mass murder has occurred in the laboratory on Floor 100. The subject Bacchus and several overcomers have been slaughtered. Their souls have been put in protective custody as an emergency measure—

That’s serious news!

I wouldn’t know about Bacchus, but each overcomer down there was supposed to be an over-A monster. It was really hard to believe she could kill so many of them in the tiny sliver of time since she left Masayuki’s side. Defeating an overcomer taking pains to defend himself was an extremely difficult task for anyone—they all had

Ultraspeed Regeneration and an artist's palette of other special skills. With Benimaru's firepower or Zegion's incredible evolution, I could see it…but no way any of the other Dungeon Marvels, Kumara included, could pull that off.

And that wasn't the only issue. If we weren't receiving any response from Jiwu at the moment, that couldn't be ignored. I mean, Raphael was keeping tabs on every single thing going on in the labyrinth, wasn't he? If he couldn't find her inside the labyrinth, that meant Jiwu was—

(Mr. Tempest!!)

That voice reached my mind a split second before the Thought Communication came along. The next moment, I used Mind Accelerate to slow down time for me. Did I respond first, or was it Raphael? Either way, it wound up saving my life.

"Die!"

A black flash of light closed in on my chest.

Someone, probably Jiwu, had taken a shot at me from what seemed to be a perfectly concealed hiding place. I had fallen on the spot and rolled away, putting aside all dignity and royal personage, and that helped me escape that deadly blade.

It was all thanks to that warning—one issued by Chloe, the little girl, who was wearing a mask. She was back to her old habits with that "Mr. Tempest" stuff, but there was no time to poke fun at her about it.

Really, this was a pretty bad situation. I had been doing my best to keep a watchful eye on the surroundings, and Raphael was staying vigilant as well. If she had managed to get through that security net, there could've been only one way. The assassin must've had an ultimate skill, too.

I had finally gotten my eyes on the assassin just now, and it was definitely Jiwu. Her face was expressionless as always, but the atmosphere she presented was a total one-eighty from before. She was cold—and sharpened. It wasn't an exaggeration to call her a whole other person.

"What a surprise. You've been tailing me in secret?" Jiwu said to Chloe.

Her assassination attempt had failed, but Jiwu wasn't upset about it. She pointed the black blade extending from the pendant in her hand at Chloe.

"If you're all going to fight out in the open like this, of *course* we're going to notice."

"You're a talented little girl, aren't you?"

"I don't need *you* telling me that. And I'm not a little girl!"

With that, Chloe transformed into an adult woman. She took out Moonlight, the God-class rapier, and focused it straight at Jiwu. Now we were graced with the presence of Chloe the Hero, in all her masked glory.

"Pshhh! We had the perfect chance served up, and you just had to ruin it. Way to blow everything, Jiwu!"

Bernie clicked his tongue at Jiwu.

"I'm sorry," she calmly replied. "I was trying to make sure nobody interfered with us, but I didn't realize there was this ambush going on."

These two are definitely acquainted. They must both be assassins, quite skilled ones, sent by someone who wanted me dead. Both an even match for each other, too—which meant Bernie might very well have an ultimate skill of his own.

He glared at Benimaru as Jiwu and Chloe raised their swords against each other. I was standing in front of Masayuki and Jinrai, protecting them as I saw what unfolded.

"Well, no helping it now. If we've blown our cover, there's no reason to hide our full abilities, either."

"I agree with you on that. We need to rub these enemies out as soon as we can."

Bernie and Jiwu focused their strength into the pendants that were the sources of their weapons. They reacted by shining even brighter than before. It looked familiar to me.

"Ah… So you're both Imperial Guardians?" I said.

Once he was fully equipped, Bernie nodded his assent, rolling his eyes as he did.

"Guess you've already started fighting my compatriots, huh? But you better not shuffle me in with the other Imperial Knights."

He wasn't kidding, either. In fact, he seemed to be hiding some pretty extraordinary abilities.

"Enough chitchat. Let's just kill them already."

Jiwu had a unique set of armor on as well—its design was similar to what I saw before, but this set was jet-black, with a sheen like lonely stars floating in the darkness.

Legend-class armor, I assumed, and probably just a hair's width away from God-class.

Bernie had the same gear. His armor was yellow in hue, but performancewise, it was on par with Jiwu. And I was sure the skills of the wearers were similar to the specs of their armor.

"Jiwu… You feel that way about me, too…?"

The forlorn question from Masayuki was greeted with a cold stare. "Of course. I only protected you because that was my mission," Jiwu replied.

It was a frank, direct statement, nothing more to it than that. And if I could recognize it as such, I couldn't imagine how much it hurt Masayuki. I really wanted to offer him some condolences, but now wasn't the time.

"Benimaru, watch out! She's super strong. I'm positive she's hiding an ultimate skill."

"An ultimate? You mean beyond a unique? Will it take more than hard work and perseverance for me to survive, then?"

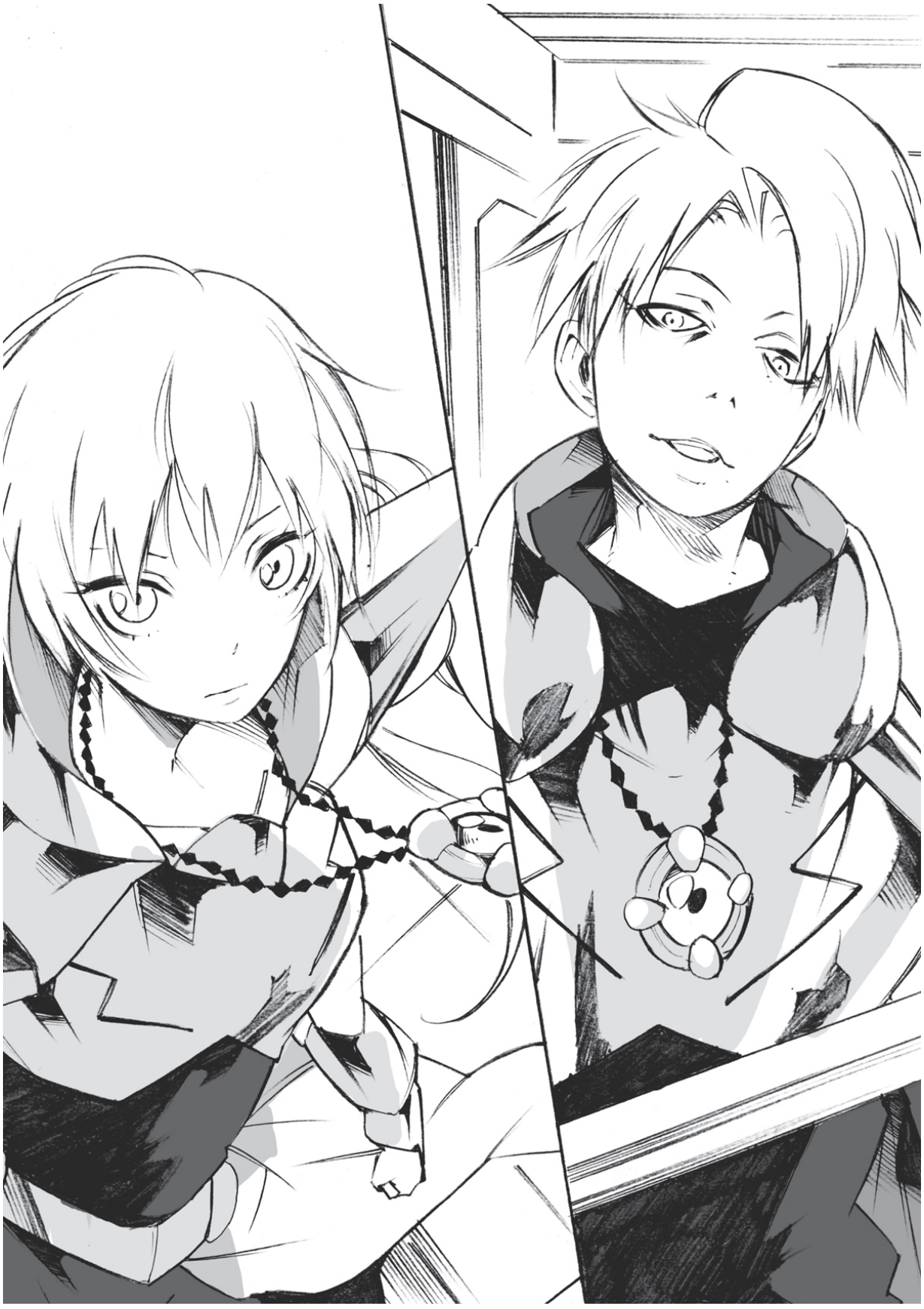
"Yeah, honestly, I don't think you can win."

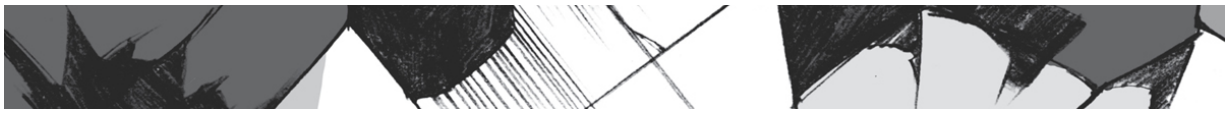
"Goodness. If you put it *that* way, Sir Rimuru, it's all the more depressing."

That was my pure, impartial evaluation, but Benimaru just gave it a wry grin. He still seemed pretty chill about this—maybe he had some ideas of his own? Ultimate skills could only be defended with other ultimate skills. That was the absolute law of it, and I didn't think there was a way to get around that—but then again, this *was* the labyrinth. Even if worse came to worst, neither of us was going to die, so I decided to let Benimaru handle his own affairs.

The same applied to Chloe. I mean, she's basically the most powerful Hero in the world. She totally overwhelmed Veldora, even, and that was *without* an ultimate skill. Admittedly, that was more the

out-of-control Chronoa than Chloe, but either way, she's got tremendous skill in a fight. Plus, now she *does* have an ultimate skill —Yog-Sothoth, Lord of Time.





I really didn't see her losing to Jiwu. If there was any concern, it was over whether she could actually control Yog-Sothoth, I suppose. So just for extra insurance, I sent an order over to Raphael.

Acknowledged. Beginning analysis of the enemy's possessed skill.

That should work, right?

Thus, for now, I decided to watch the battle unfold, preparing myself to step in at any time if need be.

✳

Bernie was the first to react.

Grasping his pendant, he funneled his strength into it once more. Then the pendant itself morphed, changing shape and turning into a spear.

"I've never shown you this before, but spear combat's actually my specialty. Let me give you a little show before you die."

After contemptuously declaring that to us all, he dropped down low and readied himself for combat. Then, without any spellcasting, he invoked some magic on his spear. This was Thunder Rain, a lightning-type magic—a ranged attack, essentially, but all its energy was focused entirely on that spear. Pretty neat move, for sure, but not as much of a threat as I was imagining.

Benimaru fought back, infusing Dark Flame into his own blade. The black flames entwined themselves around the crimson sword, giving off an enigmatic sparkle. Another fine move—one that put him so high among the monster hierarchy that his command abilities seemed like just a nice bonus in comparison.

Then they both acted simultaneously.

I thought Bernie was only a magic-user, but his spear skills were incredible. All that bragging earlier really *wasn't* just for show. Still, though, I was able to follow his movements with ease. What

bothered me, though, was that Predict Future Attack still hadn't activated for me. Which meant…

Report. The subject Bernie's skill is preventing any interference.

Ah, I thought so. There was probably some kind of block on Jiwu, too, that prevented me from keeping up with her moves earlier. Both of them might've had a skill that protected them from any outside interference, which was pretty helpful for them…but what interested me more was what other sorts of skills they might have.

Benimaru and Bernie were waging a pretty even battle. I saw no distress at all on Benimaru's face; he was keeping up with Bernie just fine. Bernie, meanwhile, was starting to look a tad irritated. Benimaru had more core strength, and that was giving him an edge. With the difference in equipped battle gear, I still thought this was Bernie's fight to win, so I could get it if he was frustrated.

"Got some fight in you, huh?"

"*You're* certainly a disappointment."

Benimaru's reply made Bernie visibly scowl. That must've been an affront to his pride, because now he was glaring at Benimaru like he'd killed his parents.

"How's a monster get off saying *that* to me? You gonna keep saying that once you get a taste of this?"

With that shout, Bernie spun his spear around and attempted to get out of Benimaru's range. Keeping himself both defended and at the ready to strike, he stepped back in order to attempt a finisher. But Benimaru wasn't about to let him. He easily closed the distanced at once, expertly anticipating his moves.

It was quite a sight. I knew Benimaru had been doing a little clandestine training of his own lately, but I had no idea he had grown to *that* level… If you asked me, I'd say his skills were even better than Hakuro's now. I mean, I thought Alberto was pretty fly with a sword, but there was no doubt in my mind that Benimaru surpassed him. And the way he controlled his Dark Flame! He wasn't letting that stuff sweep him away at all. It was truly his own to handle, and I was

amazed by it.

The unique skill Born Leader granted him complete control over his own power, and you couldn't not have been impressed by it. I asked him not long ago whether Zegion was stronger than him, but looking at him perform now, I wasn't so sure who was on top of whom any longer. Depending on how things went, the goddess of victory could've smiled at either one of them.

"W-wow…"

"Lemme just tell you right now, trying to fight power *that* strong's just suicide, all right? And Rimuru's even stronger than *that*, so maybe try not to mess around with me so much going forward, okay?"

"S-sure thing, Masayuki…"

I could hear Masayuki and Jinrai talking behind me. From their perspective, Benimaru and Bernie probably looked like a bunch of vague blurs in the air, jumping around in unpredictable directions. I'm sure they could tell how awesome they were anyway, but too bad for them, I guess.

Personally, I had been using Uriel's Absolute Defense to protect them both from any stray bullets—or I suppose, stray explosive shock waves. But that was actually a lot tougher than it seemed. Bernie's ultimate skill was applying itself to all his attacks, so if I wasn't careful, he could absolutely bust through Absolute Defense. I mean, it was really Raphael's problem and not mine, but still.

But enough about the pair behind me. I was more concerned about how Benimaru's fight would turn out. Apparently Bernie's finisher required him to be a certain distance away from his target to work. He'd been trying to push Benimaru away from him for a little while now, no longer trying to hide his frustration. Benimaru, meanwhile, was the very picture of calm composure, coolly cornering Bernie and ever so gradually starting to land real wounds on him. At this rate, I thought his victory was just a matter of time—but that turned out to be wishful thinking.

In the face of Benimaru's onslaught, Bernie found himself thrown off-balance. That momentary opening allowed Benimaru to slash him down with his Dark Flame–infused blade. That should have been

fatal, but Bernie just smirked at him.

“You can’t beat me!”

His face was bright as the sun, as if being cornered up to now was just a front—like he’d anticipated all this, or that we were all dancing in the palm of his hand, even. It was clear what had happened. Only an ultimate skill can counter an ultimate skill, and thanks to this ironclad rule, Benimaru’s attack was canceled out.

Now Bernie was the victorious one, while Benimaru’s face twisted in frustration. He must’ve thought that if his unique skills didn’t work, his baseline swordplay would… But reality was crueler than that. His sword *did* reach Bernie, but once again, his armor blocked it, preventing the blow from being fatal. Even worse, whatever damage it *did* deal, Bernie promptly cast recovery magic to heal up.

At this rate, the only way for Benimaru to win was with a killing blow. He was the better swordfighter, but Bernie had the ultimate skill, making this an extremely uphill battle for him. He was—really, for the first time I knew—in a really tough situation, and before long, Bernie had him on the defensive.

✳

As Benimaru was put in that tight spot, Chloe was facing an unexpectedly tough bout of her own.

In terms of sheer ability, Chloe was by far the best—but Jiwu, a specialist at striking her foes’ weak points, didn’t even try to wage a typical swordfight against her. She was also doing things like putting up isolating barriers to keep Chloe from calling for backup or conjuring up toxic dark mist to blind her—all these things to help give her a situational advantage.

That sort of thing wouldn’t work on the masked Chloe, but with Jiwu so intent on escaping her at every moment, she was having trouble catching her. Jiwu kept running away; Chloe kept chasing her; and the result was a very prolonged battle.

…But hey, unlike Benimaru, Chloe’s got an ultimate skill, right? If

she was more powerful than *I* was, I didn't think she was about to lose to Jiwu. So I didn't pay them particularly close attention, assuming that everything was cool with Chloe, but apparently things weren't gonna go that easy. By the time Benimaru was thrown on the defensive, Chloe was facing some real trouble as well.

"You sure love scampering away from me, huh?" she said to Jiwu.

"Of course. Your sword's too dangerous. I have a hunch it could penetrate my defenses."

Jiwu was cautious. She was facing an unknown in Chloe, and she kept her head as she tried to deal with her. Chloe's Absolute Severance was a unique skill, but for some reason, it boasted so much power that you could feasibly call it an ultimate if you wanted to. Maybe Jiwu was just being modest when faced with its power, but no, a Legend-class suit of armor definitely wouldn't stop it. She even dealt damage to Veldora with it, so I'd have to say that Jiwu was taking the right strategy here.

"You know running around all day won't beat me, don't you?"

"I can't deny that… But that's not the problem. I'm not here to win; I'm here to protect Bernie. And once he kills that ogre, we're both going to kill you next."

I wasn't about to take that sitting down, but then Jiwu started to get *real* tricky with me. Every time I tried to join in the fray, she'd start lobbing attacks at Labyrinth City behind me. The quarantined capital city was safely ensconced behind Masayuki and the others, but if any magic landed on them, I couldn't guess how much damage it'd cause.

Even worse, Jiwu was asking for Bernie's assistance.

"We've got too much unexpected trouble, Bernie. This woman's a lot more dangerous than I thought. She's too much to deal with alongside the demon lord Rimuru at the same time, so I want to play it safe. I need you to help me attack Labyrinth City to keep him from intervening."

"Understood. I'll give you a hand when I'm able."

With Bernie joining in the potshots, that immediately doubled my burden. Masayuki and Jinrai had Resurrection Bracelets, so they'd be fine even in the worst-case scenario… But Labyrinth City was

packed full of unwitting citizens. This was meant to be a safe space for them, and they wouldn't all be wearing bracelets at all times—the adventurers evacuated in here would've each had one, but not your average goblin on the street.

So now I had to not only keep the guys behind me safe from stray magic blasts; I also had to deal with Jiwu's and Bernie's harassment. All their attacks on the city were of the ranged type, so I could just swallow it up with Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony, and that was that, but now I no longer had the free time to help Chloe at all.

Like, seriously, man.

Good thing, then, that Chloe came here in time to help us out. If it were just Benimaru and me here, we might've been defeated long ago. After all, Benimaru was only barely able to stave off Bernie's attacks. One false move, and he might be overwhelmed by them entirely, making it hard to keep his foe from attacking the city. The edge he had in absolute ability was what allowed him to keep this battle going, really. A single direct hit from Bernie's onslaught would instantly kill him, but Benimaru handled it all with a calm, studied demeanor. The tables might be turned skillwise at the moment, but I still thought Benimaru deserved a round of applause.

Still, though… I thought of all these guys as little more than roadies for Masayuki, but they had some wild hidden abilities. In a way, the fact that they had deceived me for so long showed just how good they really were. Even Luminus didn't give these guys the time of day when she met them at the festival. I guess I can't blame myself—okay, Raphael—for overlooking them, too.

Regardless, I'd say we were in a pretty dire situation right now. In addition to everything else, my Thought Communication with Ramiris was cut off, so we were now forced to overcome this assault all by ourselves. And I guess Chloe could sense my anxiety, because she chose that moment to take a gamble—and that led to an unforeseen blunder.

"If that's how it is, time to pull something out of my sleeve."

If she had something to get us out of this situation, I'd really love to see it right about now. But for some reason, I had a bad premonition about it.

For a single moment, the world went dark on me. All movement stopped, and I felt like someone had tied me up with rope. Unable to comprehend what happened, I realized I had experienced this feeling some time before. It was when Guy and Chloe were fighting, I think…

Report. The subject Chloe Aubert's life energy is confirmed to be falling. She appears to have failed to control her skill.

This was how having time stopped felt, I realized. Just as I did, Raphael spat out a warning—and then I noticed Chloe was back in child form.

"Whoa! Chloe?!"

"Oh, no way! This power's too inefficient for me to handle right now—"

"I told you it was too hard to control for long periods of time!"

I didn't know what happened, but it was clear Chloe's "trick up her sleeve" failed big-time. Even worse, it also gravely compromised Chloe's ability to fight. I guess she couldn't fully control Yog-Sothoth after all. She seemed to have it pretty well mastered in the last fight with Guy, but I guess that was mostly Guy's own power at work, with Chloe simply responding to it. That was still impressive enough, though—if she wasn't able to move in that time-stopped world, it would've been a one-sided whipping Guy dealt to her.

But a practice battle is different from a real one. It looked like Chloe *could* still stop time for a moment, but it consumed a vast amount of energy. The proof was all in her current child form.

See, this is exactly why using untested powers on the spur of the moment like this is such a problem! It'd be a completely different story if she had full control over Yog-Sothoth, but not even Raphael had completed its analysis of that move yet, so it was a bad mistake to count on a miracle there.

(Yo! Chloe! You okay?)

(I might be in a little trouble. I can go back to my original form, but it'll take a while before I'm my usual self again…)

She sounded frustrated through the Thought Communication. But at least things weren't completely dire. Chloe wasn't out of the battle permanently, which was a great relief.

"I don't know what you were struggling to do, but you're wasting your time. You can't even figure out your own strength? You're even more of a shambles than I thought."

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, that's just who she is. *You* were just being too careful, Jiwu."

Jiwu and Bernie exchanged chuckles over Chloe's mistake. But just then, a voice boomed in my mind like a message from the heavens.

Report. Analysis of the enemy's skills complete.

Damn! That was *fast*!!

It still hadn't wrapped up Chloe's Yog-Sothoth yet, but Bernie's and Jiwu's ultimate skills were apparently a piece of cake by comparison. I would've been satisfied if we could have narrowed them down to a specific family of moves, even, but this was a happy miscalculation on my part.

So what's up? Lay it on me.

Report. The subjects Bernie and Jiwu share a great number of similarities in abilities, to the point that they can be considered virtually identical. Unique skills are just that—skills borne from one's personal individuality—and ultimate skills are born when a unique skill is brought past its set limits. But the fact that both of their skills are so similar indicates that—

…Are you saying Bernie and Jiwu *borrowed* their power from somebody?

Affirmative. The possibility is believed to be very high.

I see, I see.

You know, I was thinking this was a little unnatural, too. If you want an ultimate skill, like, that's not the kinda thing you acquire with some half-hearted backyard effort. Even Hinata was stuck at the unique level with her arsenal, and overcomers like Granville and Luminus hadn't awakened any ultimates, either. I don't mean to sound like a prick, but these aren't the kind of clearance-rack abilities someone at Bernie's and Jiwu's level could just pick up out of nowhere. An ultimate skill borrows a lot of its characteristics from the person possessing it—and while both were showing great obstruction and concealment skills, neither was using their power for anything beyond that. I was on the lookout this whole time, thinking they were hiding something—but it looked like they weren't.

Affirmative. They are demonstrating absolute superiority over magic and unique skills, as well as complete concealment of their own powers. These are the powers that have been loaned to the subject Bernie and the subject Jiwu. Calculating backward from their energy levels, neither are in any position to exercise more powers than these.

So I was correct when I figured there was nothing left?

You never do know how things will turn out until they're over, I thought as I looked at the smiling Bernie and Jiwu.

(Benimaru! Chloe! I found the secret to their power. They're nasty opponents, but they're not unbeatable. I've got an idea along those lines, but—can you guys hear me out?)

They both agreed without a second thought.

(Of course. If I could get a good slash in with my sword, I'd have won this long ago… But he's a defensive specialist, and it's incredibly annoying.)

Benimaru must've been prepared to keep fighting like this for a long while to come, in order to keep himself from losing. Just keep your eyes on the prize; don't let your opponent's moves faze you. Diablo and Shion were bound to return sooner or later, and they

could go on the counterattack then. That's my Samurai General, all right—calm no matter the situation and totally reliable.

(I believe in you, too, Rimuru! I wanna make up for that mistake, so if you have a winning plan, I'm game for it, no matter what!)

Chloe was up for this, too. Unlike Benimaru, her fight was one she could've won if she wasn't in such a hurry. Absolute Severance could've penetrated Jiwu's defenses, and in a one-on-one battle, the assassin would've been no match for her.

Still, this was a good lesson for her. Now we all knew how inexperienced she was with her ultimate skill, but that was something she could work on in the future. I'm sure that's gonna work itself out with practice, so for now, I had to focus on ending this battle.

(Okay, here's the deal. I want to get Benimaru and I connected with a soul corridor. That way, I can lend him some of my powers.)

(I'd be glad to borrow them. It's somewhat embarrassing to ask for your help here, Sir Rimuru, but anything beats being defeated. I promise I will bring you victory.)

Benimaru gladly agreed. That was typical of him—practicality always came ahead of pride. Besides, if our opponents were tapping into borrowed power, too, I didn't see any reason to be ashamed of it. Pound for pound, Benimaru was definitely the better fighter anyway.

With that in mind, I applied Absolute Severance to Benimaru's sword. This boasts pretty much the same performance as Chloe has access to. It's essentially the reverse of Absolute Defense, so both might be canceled out when clashed against each other, but against Bernie, this oughtta work well enough.

So that took care of Benimaru. Now for Chloe.

(Chloe… Chronoa… Listen to me. If you can keep on buying time for us, Benimaru's gonna beat Bernie, I promise. After that, here's how you'll deal with Jiwu…)

For her, we'd take the opposite pattern. Chloe was back in adult form, but far from her usual self strengthwise. It was better to take a safe approach with her to ensure we could seal the deal. She merely had to survive until Benimaru won, and all would be well. That was my idea, but:

(Whoa, wait a minute! I'm not about to lose here or anything! If it's one-on-one, I'm positive we can win!)

(She's right, Rimuru. Yog-Sothoth kind of fell through our fingers there, but if we get serious with this battle, we're not gonna lose.)

Chloe and her alter ego were both eager enough. I expected that from them, so I was hardly surprised. So I decided to make another suggestion.

(Okay. Then I have one condition.)

(What?)

(Use Yog-Sothoth one more time. I want this victory to be perfect for you.)

(…Huh?)

(Like, you can stop time for a really tiny little bit, but it's too short to work on Jiwu, right?)

It seemed to me that Chloe was in full control of her skills, as long as she didn't go all reckless with them. When I said "really tiny little bit," I couldn't tell exactly how many seconds that was, but it probably wouldn't be enough time to hunt down Jiwu and her ultimate skill. That was why she went over the limit like she did… But next time, she oughtta be just fine.

(I'll help you out this time, okay? I'll help with the calculations and stuff, and you can try it again.)

(Well, if you say so; I'm not complaining…)

(You're going to open your computational domain to us? We ought to be able to control it then, definitely.)

Chloe and Chronoa said yes to the offer. They looked a little anxious still, but…um, so was I. This was Raphael's idea, after all—can you blame me for wondering if this would actually work?

Guess I'd believe in the dude. It had to have an inkling this would work out, so I had to just trust Raphael and act accordingly.

Then Chronoa raised another issue.

(But I'm still not sure there's enough energy. I can get into combat form, but I haven't recovered enough to stop time yet. Even if your aid makes it more efficient, the current Chloe won't be able to use the skill right at all.)

I was kinda wondering about that, too, actually. I knew I was

planning to lend them my power and stuff, but would that suffice?

Affirmative. It is not a problem.

Good. Nice to get a firm yes there. I'm sure it's got some kind of great plan, so I'll stop bothering it for details.

(That won't be a problem. If you don't have enough, I'll back you up.)

Or Raphael would anyway… But it's not worth explaining everything here, so I'll just take this opportunity to look way cool instead. That was enough to secure Chronoa's agreement.

(All right. I'll sign on, then. Time to show these two what they've got coming.)

So we had a plan. It was time for the counterattack.

✳

Benimaru changed his offensive style. Until now he had been using a "static" sword stance, but after being granted Absolute Severance, he switched to a "dynamic" style. Static—or *sei no tachi* to borrow the samurai parlance—is a sword technique where the attacker allows their opponent to make the first move, with the focus on counterattacks. In other words, you're parrying whatever comes at you instead of actively seeing chances to attack—a kind of offense-defense combo. The dynamic style, or *dou no tachi,* concentrates more on offense than defense; you're basically trying to attack and win the day with a single strike, overwhelming your foe and never giving up the initiative.

This change in styles definitely registered with Bernie. Surprised, he went on the defensive. Now the tables were turned once more, but at this point, he still looked relaxed and in control.

That, however, vanished in an instant. Bernie was so in control only because he was confident—and all evidence so far backed him up—that Benimaru's sword wouldn't work against him. But all that

was in the past.





Failing to keep up with the flurry of slashes and strikes, Bernie left himself open—and the fatal blow was aimed right for that moment.

"That—?!"

I wasn't sure if he was gonna say "That's crazy" or whatnot, but either way, that strike hewed straight through Bernie's torso and chopped him in half. Continuing with the same motion, he arced his sword's trajectory upward like a curving river, separating his head from the rest of his body—hence why Bernie couldn't finish that last voiced reaction before his death.

Man. Talk about overwhelming—Benimaru totally knocked that out of the park.

"Y'know, if you went with *that* momentum from the start, you could've won easy, couldn't you?"

"No, if I tried to do that, I would have broken my weapon. That armor was no joke, I thought, so I tried to avoid putting too much strain on my sword. It was a very awkward way to fight for me."

That was "awkward"? Because he sure looked pretty majestic out there. I will agree that "dynamic" suits him better than "static," though.

Now I was absolutely sure Benimaru outclassed Hakuro by now. He was a better physical specimen to start with, but now his skill level was about the same as Harkuro's or higher. Once he gets serious about fighting, he's just incredible. I mean, not one minute after going on the counterattack, Bernie was dead.

Chloe, meanwhile…

(Ohhh, I knew we wouldn't have enough energy!!)

Chronoa sounded pained as she tried to trigger the skill. But right after that:

Report. There is no problem.

That calm voice was accompanied by the sound of an agonizing *"Arrrrgghh!!"*—or at least it felt that way in my mind. What was up with that? I had the sneaking suspicion that might have been her,

actually—in fact, I was sure of it.

Hearing it sure made me feel depressed. It was just so pathetic. I hadn't done anything bad, exactly, but I was the one causing it. Maybe it *is* my fault, then? I'm gonna have to treat Chloe to some pudding and apologize to get back on her good side.

But anyway, that was the end of our energy problems. The next thing I knew, the world stopped—and Jiwu was reduced to a pile of dust.

So yeah, that was how we beat Bernie and Jiwu, but now Raphael was taking a more forlorn tone with me.

…Report. The subject Bernie and the subject Jiwu are confirmed to be alive. I had forgotten about the existence of the Resurrection Bracelets.

Huh? Ah, no biggie.

Pretty rare for Raphael to make a careless error like that, though. In fact, this may very well be the first time ever.

"Oops. I should've broken their bracelets while I had the chance," I said.

"They weren't wearing bracelets."

"Yeah. I had my eye out for those, but they didn't have any on."

Oh. Guess Benimaru and Chloe were being a lot more careful than I was, remembering the bracelets and checking to see if they were there. Maybe *I* was the careless one here. I sincerely doubted that Raphael simply overlooked them, so I guess Bernie and Jiwu got one up on us.

"Ah, about that…"

Masayuki, who had been quietly watching this the whole time, suddenly spoke up.

"To tell the truth," Jinrai said for him, "we all kinda saw you as the enemy, so we never really took those bracelets of yours seriously. Like, we weren't gonna look a gift horse in the mouth or anything, but…"

He flipped up one of his pants legs—and amazingly, I saw him wearing a Resurrection Bracelet on his ankle.

“Um, yeah, that’s the bracelet…,” I said.

“I know. But like, whether we trusted it or not, it’s still a magical item, right? So we figured it’d work just as well no matter where you put it on. Bernie suggested it as kind of a little ‘rebel’ thing we could do.”

Apparently Bernie had anticipated this outcome enough that he took steps to address it. Benimaru was scratching his head in frustration, and Chloe was seeming pretty pouty, too—I was sure she looked disgusted under her mask.

Given the situation, I really didn’t think Raphael could’ve done anything about this. I mean, Jiwu’s barrier isolated us from the rest of the world, so we couldn’t talk to Ramiris. I think I could’ve telepathically communicated with Veldora, but I doubt I could’ve explained the situation to him with much accuracy. Besides, if you thought about how much work Raphael had to do there, it was just mind-boggling how much parallel processing it was up to. Granting Benimaru Absolute Severance, helping Chloe/Chronoa with Yog-Sothoth, maintaining my own Absolute Defense, analyzing Bernie’s and Jiwu’s abilities… The list goes on and on. Given all that, who among us could’ve predicted that a bunch of idiots would put Resurrection Bracelets on their ankles?

“Well, no helping that, I guess.”

“Indeed. Let’s just forget about it. I’ve already assessed their strengths, and I’m positive I would win a rematch. If someone like me challenges them, that might be a different story… But I’m sure we can find a way.”

That was Benimaru’s conclusion, so he and I both decided to drop the matter.

✳

Anyway, Bernie and Jiwu were out of the picture. Not being able to

off them for good was a blunder, but Benimaru, Chloe, and I promised each other we'd forget about it, so it didn't really count, right? Masayuki and Jinrai looked pretty shocked about their friends' betrayal, but I was sure they'd do their best to recover. I thought about this as I watched them trudge back to their jobs assuaging the vampires.

The war was still going on. I felt kinda bad for those two, but frankly, I didn't have time to worry about them. So I decided to let Chloe take care of them, and then Benimaru and I went back to the Control Center. *Now* the labyrinth should be free of all hostile elements.

But just as I thought that the final ground battle was all that was left to handle, we discovered that a few people were in the room already.

"Oh! Rimuru! You sure gave me a scare, y'know! We fell out of contact!"

"Indeed you did. I was far from worried, of course, but I did want to complain to you about it a little. Ramiris insisted we come down here, too, so we hurried—I mean, we walked on over to check up on you."

Ramiris looked concerned. Veldora was being pompous as ever. He was currently whining about how I stole his energy out of nowhere, but it was so obvious that he was seriously worried about me. He's cute that way, isn't he?

So, Raphael, can you at least ask for a bit of permission before borrowing Veldora's power?

…? That is behind us now, so it is not a problem.

Behind us? You haven't been using his energy on the sly for a while now, have you? If so, Veldora sure must be used to it—but either way, I've done him wrong. I'll have to get him some snacks later, and maybe a few new manga volumes, too.

"Sorry I worried you guys. Still, Veldora, I can contact you from pretty much anywhere, so if I get in trouble, I'll be counting on you."

“You can, Master?”

“Oh! …Ah-*hem*! That’s why I told you not to worry!”

Ramiris was awestruck. Veldora, probably hiding his embarrassment, decided to act all high and mighty as he changed the subject.

“But enough about that. If you’re fine now, can you go listen to those guys for a bit?”

Following Veldora’s gaze, I found Treyni, Soei, and a suspicious-looking man tied up with rope. I noticed that the first two were there before now, but what was up with that other dude? Treyni was currently chugging some fruit juice, looking utterly exhausted but otherwise unhurt, so I let her be. Instead, I glanced toward Soei, hoping he’d clue me in.

“Well, once I reached the site Moss told me about, I found this man fighting Treyni. His name is Laplace, and he’s a nemesis of ours.”

So it was Laplace under that rope? He looked pretty beat up, but not dead, at least.

“Why is he still alive?” Benimaru asked coldly. He wasn’t even trying to hide his murderous rage, which was rare for him.

“I tried to kill him, but he kept insisting he had something important to talk to you about, Sir Rimuru.”

“That *has* to be a trap,” Benimaru replied, taking out his sword once more. The moment he did, the limp Laplace leaped up like a caterpillar. Pretty nimble move, as silly as it looked. I couldn’t help but let out a couple laughs.

“W-wait a minute, man! Stop laughing and keep your people away from me!”

“You’d better watch your tone…”

Now Soei was raging, too. But that was still nothing compared to Benimaru, who was moments away from cutting the guy in half. I stepped in to calm him down for the time being.

“Calm down, all right? We’re in the middle of a truce with Yuuki, remember? If you brought him all the way here, we could at least hear him out.”

Soei nodded at this. Being able to keep his moral compass

straight despite his rage showed just how patient he could be. Benimaru, realizing he was wrong, put his sword away.

“So what’s your story?”

“Damn, you guys are *super* scary. That gal over there refuses to listen to me, and she’s gotten *way* stronger since last time, too. The other dude’s a little more sensible, but his eyes are just *so* cold, y’know? And that one—”

“Huh?”

Don’t start with that, Benimaru. You’re revealing too much of your old self there. Clearing my throat, I tried to steer us away from this gloomy atmosphere.

“So anyway, Yuuki asked me to give you a message!”

Laplace, reading the tea leaves correctly, signaled his appreciation to me as he began explaining why he was there. He could’ve just done that to begin with, I thought, but I lent him an ear anyway.

“…And that’s the long ’n’ short of it. So basically, you guys better keep an eye out for Bernie and Jiwu, got it?”

“…”

“…”

Benimaru and I looked at each other in silence.

You could’ve told me a little bit earlier, dude.

According to Laplace, Yuuki has a guy named Damrada working for him. He’s one of the head bosses of Cerberus, a secretive crime ring. After a tip from Gadora and a little investigation, it came out that Damrada was suspected of attempting to assassinate Gadora, although Yuuki hadn’t given him any such order. I say “suspected,” but it was almost certain, actually.

Having made that judgment, Yuuki reviewed Damrada’s past actions, and in the process, he discovered a few more suspicious things. This led him to believe that Masayuki’s party members, people arranged for him by Damrada, might have had some kind of ulterior motive. In a rush, he assigned Laplace—who was just back from another mission—to relay the message to me.

As Laplace’s story unfolded, Treyni began to look visibly paler over time. Now I knew full well why Laplace hadn’t told me the news

earlier.

“Well, if that’s what the story is, you gotta give it to me sooner, all right?”

“I tried! I told her over and over again that it’s really important! But she was all ‘Ooh, I’d never trust you’ and all that! Never even gave me the time o’ day!”

“It’s—it’s because you’re so fishy, all right? And besides, I still bitterly recall the last time you escaped me, so I was determined not to make the same mistake again.”

“Well, you kinda used a little too much force, lady! I kept shouting at you about how this was work-related stuff, and I’m super serious about it, but it was all ‘Wah, wah, shut up, I don’t care what you say’! You didn’t listen to one word from me, did you?”

Seeing this ugly argument unfold before me answered all my questions.

“So you’ve been fighting this entire time?”

“Yeah! Like, *eesh*, cut me a break…”

Laplace looked seriously disgruntled. By this point, “this entire time” would’ve been a good ten days or so. I’d be a little sullen about it, too, I think.

“I— I’m so deeply sorry!!”

Realizing how badly she’d jumped to conclusions, Treyni apologized to me, her face bright red. But would any of us here blame her for it? If you asked any of us to trust Laplace a little bit more, we’d think you were out of your minds. I mean, he’s *still* acting all fishy. I don’t think you should judge a book by its cover, but he’s constantly up to one suspicious caper or another. You’d have serious problems if you ever trusted a villain like him.

So maybe she made an honest mistake, but I’d never blame this one on Treyni. Benimaru, inches away from lopping his head off a moment ago, looked incredibly uncomfortable, as did Soei. I’m rather surprised he put up with Laplace long enough to bring him here, actually.

“Well, what’s done is done. Let’s just stop worrying about it and let bygones be bygones, all right?”

It was in the past now, and I didn’t want to keep it on my mind. So

let’s just talk our way out of this. I had a battlefield to focus on, and there was no telling what would happen up there until the end. With this in mind, we turned our attention to the big screen.



A visibly annoyed Caligulio was waiting for a report.

It had been two whole days since he dispatched a hundred of his best men and women into the labyrinth, and he was no longer hiding his frustration at the fact that he hadn’t heard from them. Well, not frustration, actually. He might’ve looked miffed on the outside, but on the inside, his heart was filled with anxiety.

He had decided to attack the labyrinth after being dazzled by visions of big money and tons of magic crystals. He still didn’t regret that. If they wanted to keep their backs protected, they couldn’t have simply ignored the demon lord’s domain. So Caligulio rejoiced as he saw all the treasure being taken out of the labyrinth, more than even he had imagined.

Looking back, however, it all seemed like the demon lord Rimuru’s trick. Caligulio realized that now, and he cursed his own cowardly ways—but at the same time, he began to fear that the demon lord would defeat him, and he’d have no way to block this.

“God dammit! Is there any report yet?!”

His staff couldn’t count the number of times he had bellowed that so far. Nobody had an answer for him, but now a murmur could be heard from outside the camp.

“What’s going on? What’s happening?!”

Caligulio’s question was answered by a private who came rushing in.

“Reporting, sir! We have just rendezvoused with troops from the Magitank Force!”

What? Caligulio thought. No matter how nimble and rugged those magitanks were, there was no way they wouldn’t hear any sounds from them before they arrived. There were no messages about this

at all, so the state of their allied forces was still an enigma. Given all that, he had a bad feeling, and it was growing by the second.

And then his fears came true.

“We’re back, sir…”

The woman who entered Caligulio’s field tent was a fetching young lady who looked out of place on a battlefield. She was actually Misha the Lover, one of the three bosses of Cerberus; she was ordered by Yuuki to carry out a scheme to ensnare Caligulio, and so she was participating in this operation. She really *was* chief of staff for the Empire’s Armored Division, however, serving Caligulio with decent enough competence.

But she was assigned to the Magitank Force for this op, a move Caligulio made for her own safety. It wasn’t a deployment Misha was very happy with, given that her mission here was to monitor Caligulio’s movements. Unfortunately, she was in no position to protect it, so she pretended to be grateful for the favor as she kept reporting back to Yuuki. These reports, of course, included the crushing defeat of the Magitank Force, and after that took place, she carefully left the field, making sure no monsters found her, and regrouped with the main force there.

“Misha! You’re all right?”

“Yes, Sir Caligulio.”

Misha gave him a bewitching smile. Even with her stained, dirty uniform, her beauty hadn’t faded one bit. Seeing her was a relief, but Caligulio hadn’t forgotten about his duty.

“So what happened to the rest? How long will all of them rendezvous with the main force?”

He spoke quickly, peppering her with questions.

“Please, sir, just one minute. There’s no point in panicking now.”

“Huh? What do you mean—?”

“They’ve been wiped out.”

“Huh?”

“The Empire’s proud Magitank Force, along with a hundred of its elite airships, have all been reduced to ashes.”

The bewitching smile was still on her face.

“That can’t be… What the hell are you talking about?”

Caligulio smiled in disbelief. Misha remained silent—and her silence forced him to believe her.

“They’re really all wiped out?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So the only surviving members of the Armored Force are the people here right now?”

“That would be the case, sir.”

Hearing this, Caligulio hung his head. The rest of his staff followed suit, their faces pale. Their invasion was now a complete failure. Even if they managed to conquer the labyrinth here, countless thousands of soldiers had lost their lives, and there’d be no way to escape the blame for it. Emperor Ludora would never forgive Caligulio and his staff.

“What should we do?” he whispered. The staff had no answer—but then Misha spoke up.

“We should retreat.”

“What?”

“I had a quick look around earlier. It looks like you’re not having much luck in the labyrinth, either. I suppose labyrinths are meant to be explored, not invaded by vast armies.”

“Did that Yuuki boy say that?”

“Yes, sir. He said that only our elites should be unleashed into the maze.”

“Ridiculous! I’ve *sent* our damn elites in…!” a furious Caligulio shouted back at the calm, polite Misha.

He was right. In fact, just two days prior, he sent in the best forces he could think of, alongside all the elites in the Restructured Armor Corps, proud to be the Empire’s strongest force. There were over half a million people down there. They couldn’t have possibly hoped for anything better. All those elites would no doubt congregate in the labyrinth, and even now, they must have been marching for the bottom. Caligulio believed that. If he didn’t, his heart would’ve been gripped with fear.

Still Misha was relentless.

“But even after swallowing up the most elite members of our force, the labyrinth is alive and well. And yes, it’s possible that

there's still a battle going on inside…but we have no way of finding out what's going on, and it'll be difficult to send yet more reinforcements, won't it?"

"Enough."

"All you can do is wait for our allies to leave the labyrinth alive, right?"

"I *said* enough! Listen, Misha, you have nothing to worry about. The higher-ups have been given necklaces that can resurrect them. As long as you're wearing it, if you die in the labyrinth, you'll be resurrected outside of it. And the fact that nobody's come out yet proves the invasion's going just fine!"

Caligulio knew full well that this was a rather optimistic view. But as the general in charge of the full force, he had no choice but to resort to it right now. However, Misha's pursuit didn't end there. Unlike the other staff, Misha had enthralled Caligulio. Even if she riled him here, she was confident she'd be allowed to do whatever she wanted.

"But you haven't confirmed that the prototype necklaces actually work yet, have you? Sir Yuuki said that if the bracelets were generated by someone's special skill, it'd be impossible to make a copy of it."

That silenced Caligulio. There was no way he could tell his troops to die for the sake of this experiment. Just like Misha said, he had been sending his comrades without having a firm idea if the necklaces worked. They were just meant as an insurance policy if something went awry, and Caligulio understood that. But Misha was right, and he was wrong.

You can't lead an army division through strength alone. Strength is needed, yes, but nobody too incompetent to read the current situation correctly could ever hold that position for long. But Caligulio never believed there was such a thing as a structure that over five hundred thousand elite troops couldn't conquer. This was a formidable force, one that could reduce multiple large cities to ashes. Even in the worst-case scenario, they should've been able to destroy the labyrinth and escape, he thought.

And that wasn't all. Many people had already died, he knew. If he

decided to abandon his fellow comrades inside the labyrinth, Caligulio's name would be forever enshrined as the incompetent general who oversaw a historic defeat. He started this campaign with nine hundred thousand troops, and now it was down to below two hundred thousand. There was no way he could do something as terrifying as retreat like this.

It was only at this point that Caligulio realized he had thoroughly underestimated this demon lord. He only saw the Storm Dragon as a threat; to him, the demon lord Rimuru and his forces were nothing but an opponent to be overrun and crushed. He hadn't spotted the enemy he was supposed to be fighting this whole time. It was a fatal blunder, but it was too early to give up. Hope in the form of Minitz was still there for him.

"Calm down. I trust Major General Minitz more than anybody else on the force, and he's in the labyrinth now. I'm sure he'll bring back some intelligence. We can wait for the results from him first—"

But Caligulio was unable to finish.

"No, you should withdraw immediately, sir."

This unsolicited advice was offered by a man who had suddenly entered the tent.

"Who are you?!" one of the staffers demanded. Caligulio looked at the intruder, wondering what the guard sentry was up to. He appeared to be fine, but the blood on his uniform was troubling. Nobody in this tent had been involved in actual battle, so it was possible he was a survivor of another unit, or a—

"My name is Krishna, Imperial Guardian number seventeen and one of the force of one hundred who entered the labyrinth two days ago."

Everyone present was astonished, Caligulio included.

"Y-you're an Imperial Guardian?"

"Why is the emperor's personal guard here?"

The staff were disturbed. But Caligulio lived up to his reputation, quickly regaining his composure.

"That's not the question! Krishna, was it? Can you begin by telling us what's going on?"

With a single shout, he calmed the situation down a notch.

Krishna thanked him with a nod and hastily briefed the tent.

“The one thing I have to say is: That labyrinth’s no joke. I’m not sure this will mean anything to you, but Bazan, ranked thirty-fifth, and Reiha, ranked ninety-fourth, are dead. Major General Minitz died before my eyes, sir, and I don’t know for sure, but I think Colonel Kanzis is dead, too. There are no survivors left in the labyrinth right now; you can be assured of that!”

Everyone listened in stunned silence. Caligulio wanted to rant and rave about how much of a lie this was, but Krishna’s eyes were dead serious. His whole body indicated he was telling the truth. Besides, he was a familiar face to Caligulio; he remembered Krishna as one of the people he sent out two days ago.

So he was resurrected? Did he have a Resurrection Bracelet, then? A real one, not an imitation? Then it’s safe to assume it’s really him.

Caligulio tried to think calmly, despite the fact that he wanted to be furious.

Gadora had submitted two Resurrection Bracelets to the government. One was analyzed by their technical bureau, which helped them create replicas, while the other was presented to the emperor. Being loaned one of those replicas was probably what allowed Krishna to come back to life. It confirmed that Resurrection Bracelets actually worked—and also that their copies didn’t work at all.

In other words, every one of their men and women in the labyrinth had been wholly annihilated. Over five hundred soldiers, dead. The sheer enormity of that fact turned Caligulio pale.

But Krishna wasn’t done yet.

“Also, the one who killed me wasn’t the demon lord at all—or even one of the Big Four who serve him. It was a magic-born whose name I’ve never even heard of before. He was part of the Ten Dungeon Marvels, as he called it, but he was a level above anything I’ve ever seen.”

Anyone who was in the Marvels had fighting ability comparable to or higher than an Arch Demon. But even among all of them, the demon who called himself Zegion was on another dimension—

enough so that Krishna saw full well how little chance he had to win.

“I’ll say this one more time—we have to retreat. There’s no shame in that. Please, you have to step up and make the decision that’ll save the troops we have left!”

Krishna’s ardor made the officers tense up. His words were undoubtedly true. Everybody’s gut feeling was telling them there was no time to lose.

“…Not the demon lord? They have Arch Demon–level monsters just bumping around in there? They’re *that* strong? How is some upstart demon lord capable of having so much *power*?!”

Caligulio lost his patience and began ranting. His staff officers took that cue to begin shouting as well.

“We have to retreat this instant! This isn’t only our fault. The IIB was negligent as well!”

“Exactly. We have to help the survivors escape before the demon lord Rimuru makes another move!”

Everybody was expressing their opinions now. Usually, they wasted hours arguing with each other, but on this occasion, they had unanimous agreement. Each of them instinctively knew they were in danger.

Finally, Misha spoke.

“I forgot to report this to you, sir, but it wasn’t the dragon Veldora who drove us to destruction. It was someone else’s nuclear magic that dealt the fatal blow. Twice, in fact. It was magic on a scale that could easily defeat any legion magic. The one who cast it is a threat, yes, but that’s not my point. The point is…”

Nobody needed to hear it. Everyone understood already. Veldora, the Storm Dragon, was still waiting for them ahead.

So Caligulio made his decision.

“Gather the troops! We’re changing course. For now, we have to turn around and go back to our nation!”

He called it a change of course and not a retreat mainly for his own sake. He knew it was just semantic nonsense, but if he didn’t phrase it that way, the anxiety was likely to crush him. No matter how foolish it sounded, he didn’t care, as long as it got them out of this place. His staff all agreed on this, and they were ready to carry out

the order at once.

But the decision came too late. The situation was starting to evolve, soon to become a raging torrent that would sweep in and swallow them all up. The fate of the imperial army was already set in stone.

✳

As if to cancel out Caligulio's order, a low, clear voice echoed across the tent.

"I cannot have that. My boss says he will not allow you to retreat."

The man put all the frenzied activity in this command tent to a halt. All eyes were on the tent entrance, where there stood a man in a foreign costume with a weapon called a katana at his waist. His white hair, speckled with gold, was pulled back and tied into a single knot, and he had a long white beard and a wrinkled face—but his sharp eyes and straight, clean posture made him seem ageless.

"Who are you?" Krishna asked, stepping forward.

"My pardons. My name is Agera, and I have been sent by my master, Lady Carrera, as her messenger."

This was Agera. Rimuru, being the peace-loving demon lord he was, had decided to send out an envoy to hopefully accept the enemy's surrender. Few expected the Empire to offer it—in fact, more of them were saddened to potentially lose the opportunity to kick some imperial ass. But Agera, one of the few among them with actual common sense, insisted that this was the true way of a warrior, so Geld granted his permission for it. Momiji had no objections, either, and so he was ordered to act as military envoy.

This was also, however, meant to help buy time for the Tempest army to get ready. Whether the imperial forces surrendered or made a last-ditch stand, they didn't care much—but running away was not allowed. Everybody who participated in this invasion must be punished—that was Rimuru's decision. Agera respected it, and so he had no intention of letting Caligulio off the hook here.

One of the staff officers spoke up to him.

“A messenger? By your ‘boss,’ do you mean Rimuru?”

Agera’s expression turned grim for a moment.

“How dare you refer to my stately leader strictly by his given name. Such arrogance! I hope you will reflect on that affront in the afterlife.”

The moment he stopped speaking, the head of the staff officer who asked the question fell to the ground. No one present realized for a moment that Agera had drawn his sword. Even Krishna, who was closest to him, couldn’t react in any way.

With his single sword, Agera now dominated the scene. As everyone fell silent, he began to list his demands in a clear voice.

“Now that it seems everyone is ready to listen to me, I will give our terms. Disarm yourselves immediately and surrender. If you do, you will be kept alive, I assure you, as our slave. If you choose to defy us, that is fine as well—we will decide your fates with our valor instead. I will wait one hour. If you wish to surrender, you may do so at any time before then.”

With that, Agera turned away.

Caligulio’s brain was working hard, trying to figure out the best plan of action. Hoping for a Hail Mary, he decided to negotiate with Agera.

“Wait! Er, I mean, excuse me. I’d like you to wait a moment.”

“Yes?” Agera stopped and looked back at Caligulio.

“Sorry. My name is Caligulio. I am the leader of this army and chief of this operation.”

“Ah. And what do you want?”

Agera’s mission here was to buy time, so he was in no hurry to go back. He wasn’t particularly interested in hearing Caligulio out, but he decided to anyway. Seeing this reaction, the commander put all his hope in reasoning with him.

“Sir Agera, you said earlier that you’d accept us as slaves if we surrendered, but could you perhaps reconsider those terms? The idea of slavery is simply too cruel to bear. I’m afraid I cannot accept that condition.”

The sudden plea startled his staff officers. But no one voiced any

objection. Everyone understood how weak their position was, and everyone knew this negotiation was their best hope for the future.

Taking advantage of Agera's silence, Caligulio continued his one-sided conversation.

"You can obtain victory for yourself without having to fight us when we're at our most ferocious. Instead of making us slaves, would you be able to let us go for now? We'll pay you reparations, of course, and we promise to refrain from any further invasion. No, actually, more than that! I would like to return to my homeland and appeal to the emperor to form an alliance with your nation! If you and the Empire join forces, it'd be a trivial matter to rule the world. I'm sure it'd put your leader in an advantageous position over the other demon lords, and I don't think this is a bad offer from the demon lord Rimuru as well. Believe me, we will never forget a favor. What do you think? Could you perhaps allow us an audience with His Majesty the demon lord Rimuru?"

Caligulio was desperate. Looking at how things were right now, the invasion of Dwargon and the labyrinth were both abject failures. Everybody involved with both operations was dead. The only survivors were the less than two hundred thousand people present here. They had blown this invasion royally, no matter how you looked at it—even Caligulio had no choice but to admit that. He admitted it, and he wanted to make sure that those who were still alive could return home safely. It was the only way he could take responsibility for this now.

After having his say, Caligulio waited for Agera's response. He knew this offer was a little convenient for his side, but it didn't mean they had zero chance. Their numbers might be significantly culled from before, but a little under two hundred thousand is still a very large army. They couldn't have been any smaller than the demon lord's forces, and having them all fighting for their lives in a frenzy couldn't have been what the demon lord Rimuru wanted. And unlike the labyrinth, on the ground, you couldn't come back to life if you died.

That's why this proposal, which granted them a complete victory, really *should* have been worthy of their consideration. At the very

least, it wasn't the kind of offer Agera could respond to right now. It'd definitely have to be conveyed to the demon lord Rimuru, and if he could be brought into the loop, that's when the real work would begin. Maybe he wouldn't let everyone off the hook, but at least some of their forces might have a chance to escape.

Including Caligulio, he hoped.

If they want to make slaves of us, they're probably not intent on taking our lives. It's rare to see such leniency from a demon lord, but maybe that'll help us this time. We could always buy back the rank-and-file soldiers later. I'll need to return home and inform His Majesty about this.

Caligulio wanted to save his own life… But more than that, he wanted to save as many soldiers as possible. That, and he wanted to bring accurate intelligence back to the emperor. Those were his true intentions, deep down.

He had grossly underestimated the enemy's war power, and it led to defeat this time, but in a sense, it was totally unavoidable. With their gigantic forces, he was positive they could have seized Dwargon, Tempest, and the Western Nations, even if they had to fight all three at once. He was absolutely sure of his victory, and this was the result.

It was impossible to imagine a story as ridiculous as the demon lord Rimuru having not just one but several Disaster-grade monsters serving him. Caligulio's downfall might be inevitable after this fiasco, but any further sacrifices could very well destroy the entire framework of the Empire. Better to retreat, then, and bet on their future reconstruction—even if it meant abandoning his pride. Caligulio may have been greedy, but he wasn't incompetent, and that's why he offered this proposal.

If the demon lord Rimuru wants me alive, then so be it. I'm sure somebody will bring the required intelligence back to Emperor Ludora. And once they do, this defeat will finally take on meaning…

Caligulio was prepared to sacrifice himself for this negotiation. But it was all too late.

"Do you think you are in a position to state your conditions at this point? The moment you rejected Lady Testarossa's mercy, your fates

were all sealed. Your choice is to resist or obey. Take your pick."

That was Agera's reply. And with nobody else able to move, he leisurely took his leave of the tent—but not before adding one more thing:

"And don't think about running away."

"What'll we do?" Misha asked Caligulio, who was standing there stunned.

After a moment of silence:

"…We have no choice but to fight. All our lives belong to the emperor. Perhaps we would survive longer as slaves, but we could hardly face His Majesty if we have to accept such humiliation!"

It was with a quiet determination that he made the decision.

"But we have no magitanks and no magic cancelers. It's going to be a tough fight, don't you think?"

"I don't care. Survival's no longer the goal. Our mission is to bring back all this information to the emperor. All of you have to escape this, no matter how many soldiers have to be sacrificed."

"…?! P-please, sir, wait a minute!"

"Wh-what do you intend to do, then?"

"Isn't it obvious? We'll show these monsters our pride as imperial soldiers!"

The desperation finally made Caligulio abandon his selfishness. Here and now, he regained his pride as a pure, noble soldier. Seeing him change his stripes, his lieutenants and staff officers followed suit.

"Nobody would be shameless enough to leave you alone and run, sir."

"That's right. Nothing like a little last-ditch effort for some excitement, eh?"

"We're not guaranteed to lose yet! Now's when the Armored Division will show its true colors!"

They all raised their spirits, boosting their morale as they did. Misha alone heaved a sigh.

"In that case, I'm going to run away. I'm not admirable enough of a woman to go along with all of your death wishes."

She waved her hands in the air as she did, all but relishing playing the villain. It made Caligulio smile bitterly.

“Thank you. I know you have links to that kid Yuuki. Tell the Empire just how incompetent I was. Don’t leave out a single detail.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, smiling back. Nobody was going to stop Misha. Everyone knew that getting out of there was never going to be easy for her.

“Let me appoint you guards—”

“We’ll take that role, if we could.”

Before Caligulio could finish, two figures appeared in the tent. They were Bernie and Jiwu, freshly escaped from the labyrinth.

“Single Digits…!” Krishna shouted.

“Oh, Krishna? Good to see you again. Staying here’s just gonna get you killed, you know. You wanna join us?” Bernie asked.

Everyone fell silent. A Single Digit, one of the strongest forces in the Empire, was predicting defeat for them. It spoke volumes about the severity of the battle that lay ahead.

“…No. I will stay with Lord Caligulio.”

“Oh, no? Well, I’ll tell His Majesty everything you did, then. You will die a glorious death in battle, not like some gutter rat. Give it all you’ve got. It’s bound to be worth doing.”

Bernie’s words echoed heavily across the tent. Jiwu silently agreed with him. Then, taking Misha along, they quickly withdrew from the scene.

Those who remained were prepared to die.

“There’s no need to stick to that envoy’s time limit. We’ll strike them with maximum force before the enemy’s ready!”

Caligulio’s order reached all the way down to the bottom rungs in an instant. Everyone went on the move, hurrying along, ready to give their all in the final battle.



“…Ah. They’ve decided to fight, then?”

Geld shot a respectful glance at the imperial troops who had started moving en masse. Neither he nor anyone else on his side were certain of their victory yet—on the contrary, they were at an overwhelming numerical disadvantage. Letting their guard down was out of the question. Letting anyone lose their lives against this wounded tiger was unthinkable.

The role of Geld’s Second Corps was defense. They’d take the front line and protect their firepower in the rear—that should have been enough to achieve victory. The dwarves excelled in this tactic, building a wall of forces and unleashing powerful offensive magic from beyond it. It was simple, straightforward, and perfectly suited for Geld’s team.

The Fourth Corps would be in charge of providing that firepower, and right now it was led by Momiji from the tengu.

“Victory for our master!!”

Already she was delivering a charming little pep talk to her forces. Taking this side approach in her quest for Benimaru was quite a bold strategy. In time, she thought, it’d help break the ice between them—and before he knew it, they’d be an established couple. Benimaru may very well have already lost to Momiji at the strategy phase, Geld thought—but then, maybe Benimaru didn’t mind so much. If he did, he would have done something about it long ago, or else he wouldn’t be much of a Born Leader after all.

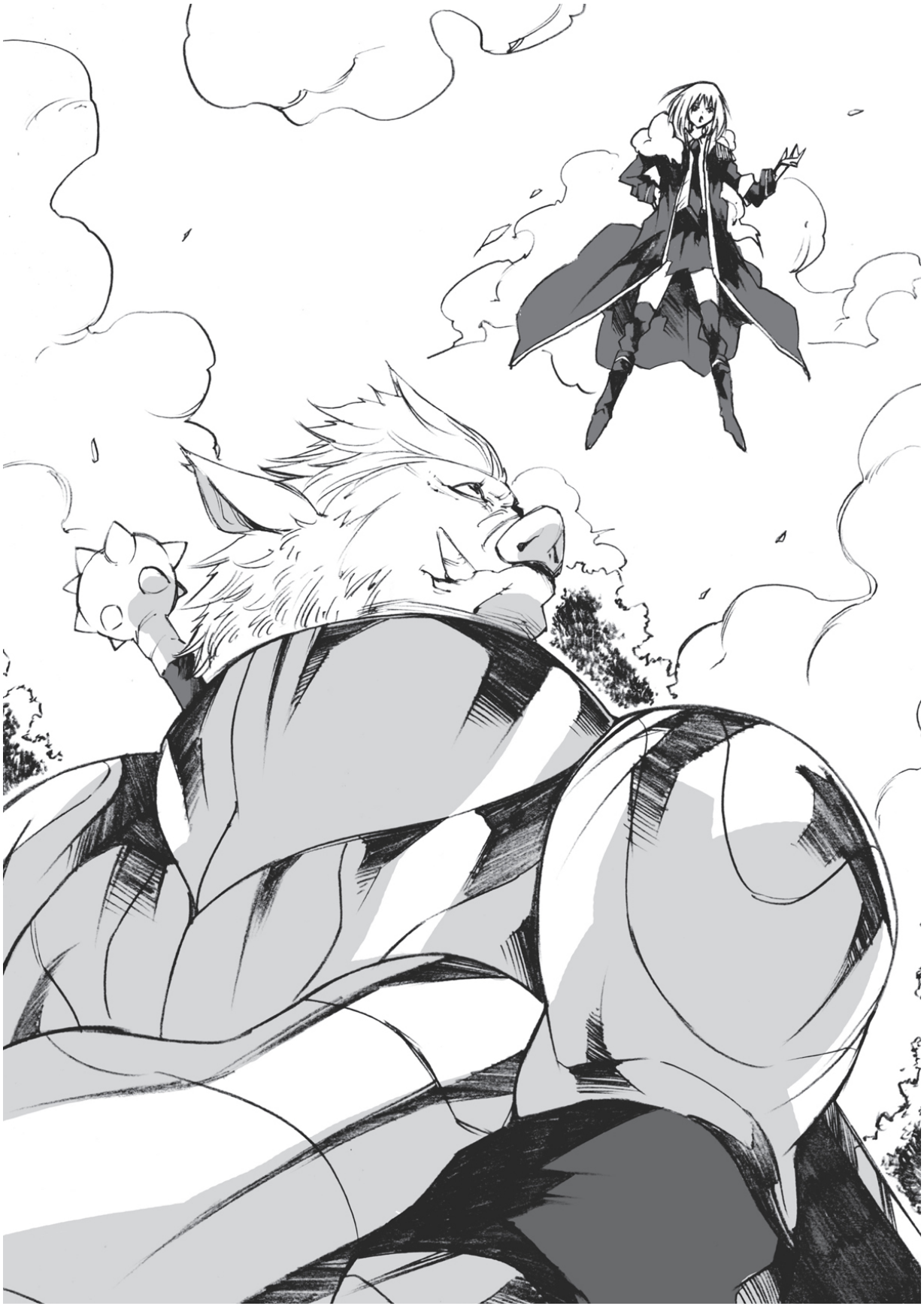
The problem, Geld supposed, was that Benimaru had too many girls with a thing for him. Everyone knew about Alvis, of course. The competition between her and Momiji was so fierce that it had become pretty notorious among Rimuru’s staff. There was really no telling at this point if Momiji would emerge as the winner, in the end. And now Alvis was rushing in to reinforce the Tempest army, which undoubtedly left Geld at a loss over who to root for. *I better keep my nose out of this*, he thought. *Inevitably, someone’s going to end up disappointed, so…*

It was very non-warrior-like of him, but either way, he took his mind off the subject and checked again for any flaws in his forces. The rear guard was fully prepared to support the rest of the group,

and their methods of attack were all at the ready. Momiji was leading the main force, with Shion commanding her own unit and Alvis overseeing the reinforcements. Coordination between them wouldn't be a problem—not with Benimaru around.

As long as I do my part, we won't lose.

Geld's defense was truly ironclad. The elites of the Yellow and Orange Numbers totaled seventeen thousand in all, and these fighters were all completely protected by Geld's unique skill Protector. On top of that, Kurobe's and Garm's armor had beefed up their defenses to the point that not even cannonballs could fell them.





As if that wasn't enough, Gourmet—Geld's other unique skill—had a Stomach that was accessible by the entire armed force. If anyone got hurt, they could be healed magically through that via the support troops to the rear, and if someone was seriously messed up, they had instant access to as much healing potion as needed. A large supply was always kept in Geld's Stomach, in case of emergency—not just for this war, but at all times. Rimuru kept it fully stocked for just that purpose. This potion wouldn't go bad or anything inside the Stomach, either, and so the army had permission from Rimuru to deplete the stockpile as much as needed today.

From the standpoint of logistics, a unit that could replenish its supplies on the spot without having to move an inch would put any commander's mind at ease. In a way, the monster's own bodies were building a stout barrier for them all.

There's no way they could lose, Geld thought. *But after that…*

He looked at the sky. There, he saw the figure of an officer named Carrera who was assigned to his unit.

If she's got enough power to make Sir Rimuru count on her, I'm sure gonna be looking forward to this.

The final battle was almost here. Geld, nearly beside himself with excitement, continued to quietly wait for the opening bell.



Carrera was idly floating in the sky, within Geld's line of sight. She had been assigned to the Second Army Corps with her two companions, but they were operating separately for now. Rimuru had given her the honor of being on the vanguard force, and the warrior Geld had graciously accepted the trio, advising them to act as they pleased. He seemed like a very nice person, and Carrera felt they'd be getting along excellently before long.

Rimuru had given Carrera a secret order to protect Geld as well. She didn't know for sure, but she guessed that Testarossa and Ultima received similar orders. If anyone on the Empire side was too

much for his chief officials to deal with, the demons would keep those foes occupied and buy time for their side—that was their real mission.

That wasn't the case now, however. Now that they were in a lead position among the forces, there was no reason for the three of them to stay together. In fact, given the wall Geld and his forces had already built up, Carrera and her friends had nothing to do, really.

For now, the first priority on Carrera's mind was figuring out how to best annihilate the enemy. So there she was, in the sky, just about to unleash a nuclear magic spell.

"Whoaaa, wait a second! Lady Carrera, what did you just try to do?"

Agera, just back from his envoy errand, hurriedly came up to stop her. The hard-nosed old veteran Caligulio saw was nowhere to be seen—in front of Carrera, Agera was nothing but a hapless, long-suffering servant. He had rushed back here because he had a premonition that something bad was about to happen, and it turned out he was right. The way he could detect subtle signals predicting Carrera's actions showed how developed his keen intuition had become over many years of working for her.

"Oh, you're back, Agera? You know, I've been thinking about a few different things, but I honestly think I need some practice. I don't want to mess up when it's time to *really* fight!"

She wanted to fire that off while nobody was around to nitpick at her about it, but being interrupted didn't seem to bother her at all. It was clear evidence that this behavior was pretty much par for the course.

"Practice, you say?"

"Right, yeah. I'm just triggering a nuclear explosion in the sky, so it'll look kind of like a big firework, y'know? There might be some residual heat that burns up the ground a little, but no biggie! What do you think? That won't be a problem, will it?"

"It's excellent, my lady! A perfect idea! Well done, as always!"

The girl who accompanied the smug Carrera was now giving her effusive praise. This was Esprit, a demon on roughly the same social caste as Agera. She looked like a cute little girl, but one with a

terrifying personality—in fact, it'd be no exaggeration to say she was the worst of Carrera's underlings. But she had the power to back it up, so even Agera had trouble dealing with her. Typically, as servants, he and Esprit would be sharing in the same hardships, but Esprit indulged all Carrera's impulses so much that she wasn't much of a bulwark at all. Never once had he ever tried to admonish her; whatever Carrera did was fine with her. Esprit left all the difficult, awkward lecturing to Agera while continuing to be Carrera's top bandwagoner. This meant that Agera did all the labor among them, which made for a less than healthy working relationship.

To him, Testarossa (a sensible girl who was pure evil) and Ultima (who was in constant pursuit of further brutality) were just as bad as Carrera. But simply *being* evil wasn't the problem. Even Carrera, who always did everything turned up to eleven without worrying about the collateral damage, was a troublesome lord to serve in Agera's eyes. Spreading mayhem, then saying "Oops, that kinda caused a lot of damage!" afterward, didn't strike him as funny at all. He just couldn't bring himself to laugh along with her.

On the other hand, his colleague Esprit didn't mind Carrera at all, thanks to having such similar personalities. Agera envied her for that.

"It's not excellent at all, you! Keep your mouth shut!"

The long-suffering Agera yelled at the irresponsible Esprit about it. Then he turned to Carrera and began to explain matters carefully, as if talking to a child.

"…Listen, Lady Carrera. I just visited the enemy camp as an envoy, right?"

"Right, yeah."

"And it's a rule on the battlefield that you're not supposed to make any moves until the time comes."

"What? It's just practice!"

"Practice or not, you still can't do it!"

Agera's boss Carrera was like a runaway train with no brakes. Stopping her required a mammoth effort. Her power was just so overwhelming that it made her tough to control. She had been making a regular habit of agitating the demon lord Leon on a daily

basis, shooting nuclear magic off to provoke him. It didn't turn into a war thanks to Leon being coolheaded, but if it was any other demon lord, the fallout would've been massive.

But whenever Carrera had her fill, she'd just go back to her home in the demon realm. She was looking for momentary kicks, so she never placed much importance on winning or losing fights. Even if she ever lost, she would've just disappeared from the scene with a big smile on her face. *She* wouldn't think she'd lost, so it wouldn't damage her or make her feel any remorse. That's who she was, and before now, Agera was at a loss to figure out how to teach her some common sense.

Not now, however.

Up to this point, there was no one who could give orders to Agera and his ruling-class companions, the top-ranking demons of the realm and the most powerful as well. That was doubly true for Carrera, who could make even those ruling classes do her bidding—even offering your opinion to her was done at your own risk. Carrera only allowed Agera to serve her without being rubbed out of existence because she liked him.

Now, though, Carrera herself was not serving the demon lord Rimuru. Agera believed that, in order to win Rimuru's favor, Carrera had best start to learn a little patience—that, and using her head instead of acting on impulses. To achieve this, he needed his boss Carrera to learn a little common sense. If Carrera could learn and master Tempest's assorted legal rules and regulations, Agera thought, then he really hoped she could act more considerate in her day-to-day life, too.

Then maybe my hardships would be eased a little…

With that modest wish in his heart, Agera made a daily effort to offer Carrera the frank advice she needed. He was always on the lookout for a good opportunity to lecture her, and while it might look like an old man berating his granddaughter, he didn't care about that. Now, he thought, was his chance. He needed to be understandable and concise—tough when dealing with Carrera, who was easily bored and never listened for very long to others.

But then, as Agera earnestly explained the customs of war to

Carrera…the imperial army suddenly went on the move.

“Hey, Agera, you gave them a lot more time than *that*, didn’t you?”

“I did, yes…”

“Okay, so while I was listening to all your boring trivia, the Empire’s gotten a leg up on us?”

This unnerved Agera for two reasons. Carrera didn’t understand the concept of “going easy” at all, but get her mad, and her outbursts usually led to massive meltdowns. If the brunt of that anger was pointed at Agera, he’d have to give up on living. But he was also mad at the Empire for ruining this lesson on the rules of warfare he was giving her. This reckless action on their part—akin to a betrayal—made him angry for the first time in quite a while.

“Lady Carrera! Leave that old man alone and let’s teach a lesson to those idiots who can’t even keep a promise!”

Esprit flashed a look at Agera that screamed “I hope you’re happy now, asshole!” then pointed toward the Empire to draw Carrera’s attention. Geld and his army were going into formation, and headed their way were nearly twenty thousand troops marching in an orderly fashion. From the air, the soldiers who seemed to fill Carrera’s entire field of vision looked like a fat hog ready for the dinner table.

She nodded, smiling.

“That sounds good! You won’t stop me, of course—right, Agera?”

The terrifying tone of the question indicated that any attempt to stop her would result in murder. But Agera’s reaction wasn’t what she expected.

“Yes… I did tell them to wait an hour, but I did not say they couldn’t attack in the meantime. I suppose I am to blame for this misunderstanding.”

“So what’ll we do?”

“Well, if someone is that eager to die, it’s the duty of any warrior to intercede on their part. No need to go easy. I think you’re quite safe doing whatever you like.”

Agera was fully ready for this. He might’ve been a gentle, decidedly un-demonic demon, but anyone who mocked his master or broke their promises to him would face his almighty rage.

“Great. This is so thrilling! See, that’s why I love you so much.”

He'd never stop Carrera now. Realizing this, she let out a gleeful laugh.

"Okay, let's get started. Let's teach them what happens when they try meddling with us!"

"Yes, my lady."

"Coming right up!"

And so the battle broke out. And the Empire had no idea that their own actions were akin to signing their own death warrants.

"All right… How about a rain of nuclear spells for starters?"

"Oooh, I like that! It's like planting tulip bulbs in the ground, except they're mushroom clouds!"

Sometimes, when you offend someone who's usually mild-mannered, they can react with shockingly severe retribution. The Empire was about to find this out the hard way.

"No, no, that's still too little. Lady Carrera, remember what our master told us, please. He told you he wanted something massive that'd scare the Empire out of their wits."

"…Mmm?"

"Wouldn't combining our full forces together be the best way to adhere to our master's wishes?"

Carrera's eyes opened wide. It made sense to her. Agera's words were indeed correct—and now Agera himself, usually busy snipping at Carrera to keep her from running wild, was telling her not to hold back. It was a deeply moving experience for her.

"Oh, Agera, you finally understand! And you're right. I think I've been setting my own limits too much lately. Your words just woke me up! …Right! Let's show them what we've got! I have a big spell I've never quite pulled off before, but it's time to debut it to the world!"

Carrera was motivated. Motivated—and going all out like never before. Agera, regaining his composure, began to say "Uh-oh" to himself, but it was too late for that now. She was already focusing on the spell she was casting. Esprit was giving him a "*Now* what?" look, but at this point, all he could do was wait and see what happened. If his boss went out of control and got angry at him later, well, he could think about that when the time came.

With that in mind, Agera decided to sit back and enjoy this. Even

he was a demon, after all.

In the end, the imperial army that had begun to march ahead was destroyed by an attack from above.

They had multiple legion magic–driven barriers over them, further magic defenses provided by state-of-the-art equipment, a force populated by soldiers who all had high magic resistance of their own, and all manner of holy blessings applied to them. And all those measures were utterly powerless in the face of the large-scale extinction magic Carrera unleashed.

This was Gravity Collapse, a type of nuclear magic. Boasting the most force among all the spells in its family, Gravity Collapse required both precise magic manipulation and an enormous amount of magicule energy. If the abyss core at its foundation was left unattended, it'd balloon in size until it triggered a Nuclear Flame—but in the forbidden Gravity Collapse spell, it was instead suppressed and compressed to create a super-gravitational field—in laypeople's terms, an artificial black hole. This supercharged local gravitational field, created by the adverse reaction from the planet's own magnetic fields, then crushed anyone caught inside into the size of a pebble.

Needless to say, the effect on the imperial force was pretty tragic. With no advance warning, gravity suddenly began to flatten them; the troops were all pulverized, unable to bear even their own weight. Marching on open terrain proved to be their downfall; there was no way to escape the eyes of the demon. Over four-fifths of the force of nearly two hundred thousand was trapped within the magic's sphere of influence.

They were all currently on the ground, unable to move, but the real essence of this spell was just beginning. A storm of magical force began to blow upon them, affecting only the precisely defined area Carrera designated. It was an inverted storm, like nothing that anyone had ever seen.

The hyper-compressed space soon reached its breaking point, and in another moment, all its energy was focused on a single dot in

space. Then it imploded—and the planet was greeted with an extremely miniature version of a supernova. A jet-black pillar connected the surface to the heavens—the earth, sand, and dust that had been swept up to the stratosphere by the huge explosion, as if Carrera just opened the manhole to hell.

It was no type of magic that should ever be used while standing atop a planet. If she hadn't taken the time to define a precise range for it, the entire Forest of Jura would've become a charred wasteland. And nobody in the imperial army ever had a chance of being resistant to it. The nuclear magic Gravity Collapse is an all-attribute attack, encompassing all magical and physical phenomena. Thus, most troops caught inside were smashed into dust before even realizing what had happened.

Carrera was satisfied with this blast. What she wasn't so satisfied with was Agera, who was already back to his usual habits. He was the one who encouraged her to do it; where did he get off, trying to complain about it now?

Still, Agera was expecting nothing quite on *this* scale. He *did* think it could wind up being trouble, yes, but not even he realized that Carrera had so much power. But dwelling on it at this point was a waste of time. The long-suffering Agera's troubles had only just begun.



Geld smiled. This was *awesome*. Yes, he figured she'd be pretty strong, but Carrera's might was simply unimaginable.

"Sure didn't expect her to pick off that many with just one blow. Now none of us will have a chance to show our stuff."

He sounded a touch sullen about it, but Geld didn't really mean what he said. The imperial army was in a state of chaos, but there were still over twenty thousand survivors, and they were all in a mad rush for Geld's army, trying desperately to escape the carnage. They

were no longer heavily outnumbered, but now wasn't the time to let their guard down. Geld understood that well enough. After witnessing the horrors of death firsthand, all those troops were doubtlessly going to fight within an inch of their lives. The pressure they'd lay on should never have been taken lightly.

But Geld was unfazed. And perhaps thanks to their commander's calm demeanor, all Geld's forces, right down to the lowliest buck private, were at attention and sizing up the enemy.

"Shields up!"

Once the enemy was within spitting distance, Geld issued the solemn order. The Second Corps responded in perfectly choreographed order, and in the next moment, they became a wall that would allow nobody through.

The fierce clash of army against the army came the next instant—but despite that, Geld's forces didn't retreat a single step backward as they engaged with the Empire. Even after that, Geld's wall didn't break down at any point along the line as it pushed the imperials back.

That was how the final battle began. Now it was Shion's turn to make a move.

"Let's charge them. I want to slaughter every last one of Sir Rimuru's foes!!"

Shion's elite guard, led by Team Reborn, roared their approval. At once, a good ten thousand magic-born of all shapes and sizes began to act on their own discretion. These were Shion's most die-hard fans, trained by the woman herself, and being commanded by Team Reborn allowed them to largely do as they pleased.

They were a sizable army, and in a fight, they were good enough to turn heads. Shion's extra skill Mortal Fear united them with Team Reborn, making these ten thousand magic-born a legion of marauding knights of terror as they slammed into the Empire. Mortal Fear fanned the enemy's fears, sapping them of their will to fight. The effects were tremendous. The enemy, no longer able to tap into their full abilities, left themselves exposed, open, and ready for Team

Reborn to trample all over them.

Wearing matching sets of bluish-purple armor forged by Garm, Shion's forces rampaged across the battlefield. To the imperial army, the mere sight was nightmarish—but three giants among them, each exuding a ridiculous large aura of dark energy, caught most of their attention. Their own aura had assimilated with Shion's Mortal Fear, turning them into living incarnations of violence. They were, of course, the three sons of the demon lord Daggrull.

But the rest of the guard wasn't about to be undone. Taking full advantage of their resistance to death, Team Reborn focused on keeping the enemy's attention. As they did, the other magic-born would dispatch the exposed foes—that was the basic strategy, and it let them steadily cut their numbers without taking any damage.

Gobzo was among them.

"Ooh, my head's gettin' itchy…"

Despite his casual observation, there was a stab wound in his head from when someone stuck a sword in it. The way it closed up, bit by bit, was gruesome to see if you weren't used to it.

"Way to keep at it, Gobzo."

"Yeah, if *I* took that blow, it would've killed me, huh?"

Gobzo had grown a lot—enough that his troops were truly impressed with him.

In the meantime, three cyclones began to form on the battlefield, one of Daggrull's sons in the eye of each one. It was from those landmarks that the Empire's left wing began collapsing.

Members of Shion's elite guard weren't about to miss that chance, and now the imperials were being pushed back at breakneck speed. Even the Empire's troops, desperate and running on pure adrenaline, were no match for them. The two sides were more or less evenly matched in terms of individual combat ability—but one side was far better trained than the other, and in terms of skill level, the elite guard had a clear upper hand.

What kind of training did it take to make this happen? Somewhere along the line, Shion's troops had transformed into an amazingly well-honed, specialized combat force.

As Shion was making a name for herself on the right wing, the imperial army was facing even more trouble on its own right side.

“N-no! Why are they here—? *Urgh!*”

“The Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance?!”

“No, I don’t wanna die— *Grnnh!*”

The Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance troops were serving as reinforcements, alongside the other magic-born who served Carillon. They all owed Rimuru a great favor, and now they were exercising their full powers to pay it back.

“That’s one hell of a monster.”

“It is.”

Zol, the elephant beastman, wholeheartedly agreed with Alvis’s muttered remark. A magic spell like none they had seen or heard of before was deploying before their eyes. An ominous pillar, connecting heaven and earth, had just reduced more than a hundred thousand imperial troops to dust. Even now, its violent fury was battering the landscape, never diminishing.

With that blow, victory was now assured. The only remaining question was whether the enemy had any true champions left hiding in their ranks. They wanted to know, and that was why they refused to let the enemy escape in this fight. Alvis, fully aware of how openhearted and generous Rimuru could usually be, was honestly shocked at how thorough they were with this policy—but at the same time, she believed this was how a demon lord *should* act.

“Well, we rolled in with twenty thousand troops, and it looks like they’re overwhelming them anyway. We can’t exactly call it paying him back if it’s going to be like this,” said Alvis.

“Ah, as if we could ever repay him in any true sense.”

“True enough. Well, we shouldn’t sadden Sir Rimuru, at least. Dying here is out of the question. Do everything in your power to ensure nobody’s hurt.”

“You heard him, everyone. Take your pride serving the Beast Master and do everything you can until the bitter end!”

The Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance answered Zol’s roar with one of their own. Not a moment later, the beastfolk began their march on the imperial army’s right flank.

By this point, the trend was abundantly clear. Magic was rampaging across the rear, and they were being overrun on their left and right sides. The imperial army had little option left, apart from waiting for their foes to surround and exterminate them.

Momiji eyed the situation, her eyes cold. Her head was calm, but her heart was burning fiercely.

“It’s about time now. Allow me to ignite flames of compassion to relieve our enemies from their suffering.”

With that whisper, she sent a signal to Gobwa. The moment she did, the Fourth Army Corps breathed in unison, summoning their mystic force. The order cascaded across Team Kurenai via Gobwa’s Thought Communication—and as if in response, the mystic force created by everyone streamed across the army, harmonized in beautiful fashion. It was Momiji’s job to give all this power a conduit.

“Are you sure this will work?” a slightly worried-looking Gobwa asked.

Momiji laughed the idea off. “If I’m to be Sir Benimaru’s wife, how could I *not* be capable of this much?”

There was an unshakable confidence in her attitude. Her plan, in essence, was to gather this mystic force into a single presence, then lob it straight at the enemy army. It was a simple, unadorned strategy, but if she failed to unify that force correctly, it might trigger an unintended explosion that could damage Geld’s force on the front line. Gobwa’s unease was natural, but in the face of Momiji’s confidence, she commented on it no further. Momiji had been entrusted with this army as Benimaru’s substitute, and to doubt her would be the same as doubting Benimaru.

“All right. I’ll leave that to you, then. Are you ready to begin?”

“Yes. This won’t be as powerful as the vicious magic Carrera cast, but it should be enough for the remaining forces. I’m going to finish this with one blow.”

Then Momiji’s once-in-a-lifetime mystic spell made its debut.

“Let us bloom a red lotus that softly, gently envelops our enemy. Mystic Crimson Heaven!”

It was a red flower blooming in the sky. Its first objective was to rapidly burn through oxygen, draining it from the air at ground level

and leaving the enemy incapacitated. The second objective was to rain down the flames of compassion, its temperature high enough to render targets unconscious before it could inflict pain. The third objective was to ferret out the strongest among their forces. If anyone could withstand this attack, they'd have been classified as strong, naturally, making this mystic art a great way to weed out the time wasters.

So the blooming flower fell upon the battlefield—and at the end of it, nobody was left alive.

"Oh? Well, *that's* a letdown."

"It was to be expected, perhaps. The last group to enter the labyrinth was far more powerful than any before it. They might have been the best elites the Empire had to offer."

"Seems like it. Now all we have left is the enemy's command HQ."

"I'm sure that's been taken care of by now. Besides…"

"Oh, right. Carrera's servant was heading over there, wasn't he? And I'm certain nobody at the HQ could be a match for him."



Caligulio had received a stream of desperate reports. He really didn't need them. The catastrophe was happening right before his eyes, and the only silver lining was that, since it happened so fast, they were able to die without feeling any fear or regret. Meanwhile, the survivors of that fearsome magic had fled back to the main camp with terror in their eyes. Having experienced the soul-crushing horror firsthand, they lost all trust in the Empire, cursing their own foolishness. There was no time for fancy speeches as the staff officers shouted for retreat—but at this point, survival was impossible.

How did this happen? Should I have chosen enslavement instead? No— Where did I even go wrong in the first place?

He tried his hardest to cease his looping thoughts but failed. Once again, he looked out at the desperate battlefield, considering

whatever possible strategies he could take by now. There was nothing—no saving grace that he could ever come up with at this moment.

And more to the point…

"No… What's that? What is *thaaat*?!"

Caligulio was tossed into a crucible of fear and confusion. Magic that heinous was beyond what he was capable of understanding. How could you take tens of thousands of soldiers protected by layer and layer of anti-magic resistance and kill them all like you'd squash an anthill? Nearly two hundred thousand troops were utterly destroyed with just one blow, and it'd only be a matter of time before the rest were wiped out.

"M-maybe…"

"Maybe *what*?!"

"It… It's still a theoretical magic spell, but I know about one that interacts with the gravity of the planet. It's likely the most devastating magic in the nuclear family, but it requires an enormous amount of energy to activate, and every step requires exacting control…"

"…Gadora told me about it once. Gravity Collapse, right?"

Yes, Caligulio had heard about it. It was a spell that was still under research, merely a theory at this point in time. No example of it had ever been observed before, and even with otherworldly knowledge, research was at a standstill even in the theoretical phase. This tactical-level magic had the power to annihilate entire nations, not just battlefields. But as far as Caligulio knew, they had concluded that it'd be impossible to ever conjure it in real life.

But here it was. Executed in perfect fashion—by a single monster.

Now the term *demon lord* struck Caligulio's brain with a palpable sense of fear. *Have we meddled with someone who we never should have meddled with?* he asked himself.

"I admire your knowledge, sir."

The matter-of-fact tone of one of his staff officers brought him back to reality.

"But it's *theoretical*!" he shouted back in frustration. "We were boasting about how we could slaughter Veldora if we made it work!"

"Indeed, sir. That's how powerful that magic is. It's practically

limitless.”

At some point, the staff officers had polarized into two separate camps.

“It was from…from a monster? Just one of them could perform a magic that massive…?”

Some were in a state of panic…

“Astounding. Ah-ha-ha-ha! I’ll write a research paper on this when I get home! Now we, too, can get our hands on that spell!”

…and some were babbling at each other like madmen. One side had lost the will to fight; the other had lost their grip on reality.

At this point, the Empire’s command HQ was no longer functional. Nothing in the world could be done in the midst of these horrifying circumstances. But nonetheless, Caligulio was in command. He was responsible for the lives of what soldiers he had left. Throwing in the towel was the one thing he could never do…but the situation was no longer conducive to ordering a retreat. Counting the crazed troops who fled the front lines, there were less than two thousand men and women left in the main camp. They were chaotic, disorderly, and even if they somehow made it out of there, they were all doomed to be slaughtered.

Power. Power was the one thing Caligulio wished for right now. If you have power, all is forgiven—the iron rule the Empire always stuck to. Only through the overwhelming power they had was it possible for them to subjugate the whole world. But if you didn’t have power, you were doomed to face a tragic end—something that was obvious, given Caligulio’s current situation. As one of the three commanders at the top of the Empire, he was proud to be one of the world’s great power brokers—but now he finally realized it was all an illusion.

I can’t believe how powerless I really was. How incompetent. How weak. I had no idea I was such a miserable peon, constantly being exploited…

He couldn’t help but lament his fate. Fortune, fame, and everything that came with them were worthless in his current circumstances. When you got into *serious* trouble, there were far, far more important things you needed at hand.

“I wish I had power…”

Large tears spilled from Caligulio’s eyes. Nearly a million soldiers, people who believed in the glory of the Empire and the commander who led them, were dead. The impact of this undeniable truth was devastating him.

“R-reporting, sir! A huge flame was observed in the sky above the battlefield. Based on the amount of heat it generated, we believe the chances that anyone on the ground survived it are hopeless—”

“It’s over,” Caligulio’s first officer muttered. “The Empire’s been completely defeated…”

The rest of the staff fell silent. Even the ones trying to escape reality a moment ago were stunned, as if waking up from a dream. They tried to face the reality that awaited them, but their brains refused to accept it.

“…Let’s offer our surrender. Whether they’ll accept it is a gamble, but there’s a chance they’ll find us useful. At this rate, we’re all going to be killed anyway. I think it’s our only chance for survival, but what do you think?”

Better to be enslaved than dead. That was the thought behind this officer’s proposal, although he worried it was coming far too late. Nonetheless, Caligulio decided to accept the offer.

“…Right. Yes, it may be pointless, but let’s try to negotiate. At the very least, if we can turn the enemy’s attention toward us, that’ll give Misha and her comrades a better chance at escaping.”

Even if this battle ended with them all dying, their defeat would still have meaning if the Empire received the information they learned. That thought alone made Caligulio reluctantly agree. It was uncharacteristically modest of him, but his heart had long since been shattered.

Admittedly, thanks to this, he was able to think once more about the best course of action in this situation. If he had gained this state of mind earlier, it would have made him a master general for the ages, no doubt. It took him fully abandoning his greed and vanity to accomplish, but at long last, Caligulio had regained his original, latent intelligence.

But the decision came far too late. Any hope for Caligulio and his

staff had long since disappeared.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Surrender? Ooh, we can’t have that now, can we? I’m afraid you’ll have to deal with me for a few moments.”

Diablo, who had actually been in the tent for some time now, was dressed in his usual butler’s uniform, a smile on his handsome face. The moment he saw the demon, Caligulio realized the sheer difference in power between them. Now that he had regained his calm judgment skills, he wasn’t going to throw away his life for the sake of trivial pride. Negotiation came first now, so he had his guards lower their swords. That was undoubtedly the right thing to do. Any attempts at a fight were futile.

Out the corner of his eye, Caligulio spotted Krishna, cowering and intoning “I can’t… I can’t…” over and over. Just like the commander, he must have immediately recognized the overwhelming difference in strength. Internally praising himself for making the right decision, Caligulio decided to identify himself first.

“My name is Caligulio. I am the commander of this operation. May I ask your name?”

“Oh? How polite of you. My name is Diablo, loyal servant of the demon lord Rimuru.”

Diablo loved giving people his name. He couldn’t look more cheerful right now.

Caligulio took a moment to think. There was little chance they could beat Diablo, even if everybody in command HQ jumped him en masse. The sheer demonic energy they sensed was denser than that of the greatest of dragons, an aura of utter supremacy that outclassed even that of the demon lord Clayman, whom Caligulio was acquainted with. Plus, Diablo came here without giving away any hint of his presence. He had infiltrated their HQ without showing any sign of the supreme aura that oozed off of him now.

But despite such an absolutely powerful presence before him, Caligulio’s mind was tranquil. *This is an opportunity for us. It sounds like he won’t accept our surrender, but he* is *willing to negotiate. If we can buy enough time, maybe we can keep this dangerous man at bay for long enough.*

And that would offer more safety for Misha and the other escapees. But that hope was doomed to fail.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Are you trying to stall for time, perhaps?”

“What?”

“Several of your people fled from here, and you’re serving as decoys for them. A truly excellent example of self-sacrifice, but I’m afraid it’s not going to help you. You see, I’ve already taken care of them.”

Diablo laughed. When a demon comes up to you, he’ll never let his prey go—and Diablo just proved it. Out of empty space, he produced two corpses and dumped them on the ground.

“Are those the Single Digits?!” a shocked Krishna shouted. They were the bodies of Bernie and Jiwu.

Intense fear ran through the command center. Krishna wasn’t the only one left speechless. Everybody in the tent knew what the defeat of not one, but two Single Digits meant. There was no beating Diablo. And not just that…

N-no… In that case… In that case, our deaths, and the deaths of all those soldiers… It’s going to be all for nothing!!

A deep despair struck Caligulio.

“Draw your swords! Intruder! Kill the intruder!!”

The guards responded to the second-in-command’s frenzied shouting. Unlike Krishna, the armed sentries knew nothing about Diablo’s strength, reacting without realizing just how reckless they were being.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… You lowly worms think you stand a chance against me?”

Diablo laughed in their faces. But Caligulio’s aide was undeterred.

“Silence, demon! There’s still over a thousand warriors surrounding you. Powerful or not, what can you do by yourself?!”

He was trying his best to mask his fear with rage. But Caligulio didn’t move. He wanted to scream at his assistant to stop, but he couldn’t even open his mouth any longer. His aide thought a thousand against one were good odds, but they weren’t, and he had to tell him, but he couldn’t…

Now Caligulio thought he understood what strength was. What Emperor Ludora wanted from them all. A single powerful figure can triumph over a million-strong army. The extreme, unthinkable magic they just saw was proof of that. And if they had even one monster capable of killing two Single Digits, the entire Armored Division was easily crushable this whole time.

And if he needed any more evidence:

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… I’m afraid those words came a little too late. The only ones still alive in this camp, you understand, are all inside this tent.”

The aide didn’t understand what he meant for a moment. But Caligulio didn’t need to open a tent flap to know what must’ve happened. It was too quiet outside, something that had been nagging at him for a little while now.

Diablo snapped his fingers—and then the entire tent was blown away, letting the occupants examine the scene outside.

It was a field piled high with dead bodies. The soldiers had all passed, as if sleeping on top of each other—as if someone had silently extracted their souls from each of them…

That’s exactly what happened, Caligulio realized. *Diablo took their souls. He didn’t let a single one resist him.*

And now, once again, the tragedy played itself out before Caligulio’s eyes. Another snap of Diablo’s fingers, and Krishna and the others toppled over.

Waves of despair and sadness crested across the commander’s heart.

“Nn, nhh… Aaahhhhhhhhhhhhh…!!”

He screamed, shedding tears of blood. And right after that, his body was so saturated with emotions that he exploded.







Diablo had no reason to allow any enemy soldiers to escape in the first place.

After receiving the order from Rimuru, Diablo merrily strode onto the battlefield. Following the signs of Krishna that he had detected, he discovered the enemy's command tent and took a look inside. Then he was accosted by Bernie and Jiwu, but since he had no intention of letting any Empire soldiers escape, he quickly opted to deal with them on the spot.

They were much stronger than he thought.

Well, well, well… Even with my unique skills tuned to maximum, these two remain unaffected? But it appears their powers are borrowed from someone else. They are unbalanced, you could say—I doubt they've actually awakened to any of these abilities. And if they haven't, I can still work with this.

Despite his slight puzzlement, Diablo was still reliably in command from start to finish as he dispatched the two Single Digits.

Misha, who came over in a hurry once she saw what was going on, quickly revealed that she was working for Yuuki. Rimuru had a tacit agreement to fight alongside Yuuki, and Diablo would never go against his will, so he let her go free.

But were those ultimate skills they had? I still resent how much Guy bragged about his to me long ago, but perhaps this is worth investigating…

Diablo was never one to shy away from any chance to become stronger—and here, too, he abandoned all self-restraint. If he found something effective, he'd take advantage of it; that's how the demon was. But despite this newfound interest in ultimate skills, he didn't lose sight of his mission.

Returning to the Empire's camp, he easily made his way inside, invoking End of the World to take the lives of anyone he saw. He worked quickly, indiscriminately, and without any hesitation or

concern as he slaughtered them all.

Caligulio was now screaming in front of Diablo. It made the demon chuckle a bit.

The commander had now surpassed all limits of the human body. Maybe he had the potential to do this all along. By this point, he was well past Enlightened, his energy growing higher and higher.

Awakening out of sheer despair, eh? It looks like his sense of guilt is bringing him to a higher level. And that makes him much more worthy to fight me.

For most of his existence, Diablo had little interest in gaining strength. But now he thirsted for it—all so he could be a helpful servant, or tool, for Rimuru, the lord who he served. In his mind, a tool was meaningless unless it could prove its usefulness to its master. Needless tools had no value in existing, as far as he was concerned. That was why Diablo never fielded any of his own servants. He always preferred to live alone, rather than put up with a bunch of incompetents below him.

Along those lines, Diablo never forgot his own ambitions to become stronger, more capable. And fighting someone as strong as this was an opportunity like none other for him.



As Caligulio heard what seemed like a distant scream, he awoke. Power coursed through his veins, a ferocious power like none he had ever experienced. Overwhelming, he thought. The answer, despair, and terror from having his friends killed became the key to shattering his own limitations—and this, right now, was exactly what Emperor Ludora was anticipating from him all along.

He actually said it to Caligulio in person once: “*I have high hopes for you.*” Caligulio had never forgotten that day. He thought His Majesty meant that he’d become an army commander and serve the Empire with value—but he misinterpreted the emperor’s words.

This was it. This was it the whole time. His Majesty, Emperor Ludora, wanted me to awaken!

And when he realized that, he understood. Everything that had happened to him up until then really *was* meaningful.

Caligulio was no longer just Enlightened—he had become a Saint. Every cell in his body blended together, his spirit surpassing his physical form. He could easily tell that his body was being remade; transformed. The power was tremendous, on par with an awakened demon lord. And now that he was awakened to it, he realized just how incompetent he had been until now. Not just him—everyone. With *this* now at his fingertips, the entire Armored Division seemed like a bunch of cheap toys. The Empire's military, as it stood now and before, never had a chance of beating Veldora, nor any demon lord.

"I—I was such a fool…"

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… You're exactly right."

"But now… Now I swear I'll make up for all my mistakes!"

The moment he shouted that, a shining suit of divine armor wrapped itself around his body. It was God-class armor, handed down from the time of ancient gods and gifted to him from the emperor. Only the Marshal and the three commanders were allowed to use this armor, which served as proof that its wearer ranked among the Empire's very best. Now, at long last, it had recognized Caligulio as its true master.

"You'll pay for this, demon! I'm gonna mow you down!"

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… It would hardly be fun otherwise."

The two sides glared at each other, and the final battle began.

Exercising the limits of his power, Caligulio sent out a full-throttle strike to start. His fist, protected by a gauntlet, was a deadly weapon in itself, capable of smashing through almost any material in this world. The tip of his fist exceeded the speed of sound, not even leaving an afterimage as it traversed the realms of mythology. The shock wave it produced shattered any physical being's defense, destroying its very molecular bonds—and the spirit inside his fist

could pass through the heart's barrier and damage one's astral body, letting him kill any spiritual life-form.

Caligulio knew Diablo's name. He was one of Rimuru's Big Four, and his real identity was an evil demon. That, and—incredibly enough—the report he saw claimed he was now a Demon Peer, something that existed only in legend before. He had previously scoffed at the Imperial Information Bureau's investigations, but he could believe every word of that dossier. If two Single Digits challenged Diablo and died, that made him a truly fearsome adversary.

But all his fear was now gone.

He's a horrible demon, I'll grant you that—but now I can take him. With this power, I can defeat anything—True Dragons, demon lords, even Heroes!

If you awarded a score of one to a person of average strength, the physical ability of someone designated A rank would be at least ten. For a high-ranked magic-born, it was close to a hundred; for an Arch Demon, they'd notch up 140. A demon lord would probably be at least three hundred, and while a True Dragon was impossible to measure, estimates pinned it at over a thousand. Now, Caligulio realized, his own power was in the quadruple digits as well—a world that only a Saint could ever reach. And that wasn't all. He was wearing God-class armor, mythical gear whose energy was comparable to his own.

It was more than enough to be able to destroy a Demon Peer. He was convinced of that, and it wasn't hard to see why.

"Hmm… A tad disappointing."

But his killer fist was lightly brushed away by Diablo.

"No!"

"Oh, do you have a question?"

"Why—why are you still unharmed?!"

That one blow should've been able to destroy any demon. Seeing him unscathed was simply ridiculous. He refused to accept it.

"Why? It's simple. You don't have the skill level required to handle that power."

The awful truth was delivered as casually as the day's weather.

“The skill level?”

“Yes. It’s quite a pity for me, too. It was too early for you to fight. If *this* is how things are, the duo from before were more powerful. They both boasted ultimate skills, albeit borrowed. If you had awakened to this power sooner than now, this would’ve been a much more exciting battle… But alas.”

Fruit needs to ripen before it tastes sweet. Diablo was lamenting the fact that he picked this one off the tree far too soon. But all this was an insult Caligulio was too loath to admit.

“God dammit! Don’t you belittle me, you demon bastard!!”

He could shout all he wanted, but the situation was already grim. Caligulio understood that. He knew he couldn’t beat the demon in front of him.

But what piqued his curiosity was the secret of the Single Digits’ power Diablo just inadvertently revealed. They were the strongest fighters in the Empire, handpicked by Emperor Ludora—and the emperor must have been the one who lent them their ultimate powers. Diablo described them as borrowed, not acquired through personal effort, and that was exactly why they didn’t work on him.

If you didn’t have insight into the essence of power, and how to make it your own, then all the strength in the world was meaningless. It was as true for Caligulio as it was for the dead Single Digits. As Diablo put it, he was fighting too soon—a reality he couldn’t deny, no matter how much he wanted to.

“Aaarrrrggghhhh!!”

There was no winning this. He knew it now. But even so, he’d still try with everything he had. He had to retaliate, at the very least, or else all this was for naught. He had to deny that at all costs, and so he challenged Diablo to a truly reckless battle.

But by now, it barely even counted as a fight. For Diablo, who had correctly assessed Caligulio’s current abilities, it was little more than a procedure. Even the God-class armor and all its mighty force couldn’t be fully utilized by Caligulio as he stood now. The armor had accepted him, but they still weren’t at a heart-to-heart level of communication yet. God-class gear had a will of its own, and there simply wasn’t enough time to build a relationship and have this

armor truly recognize him as its true master. A tool only had meaning if you could use it well; there was nothing sadder than a tool without a user who could bring out its full potential.

So Caligulio, the last surviving member of the imperial invaders, was defeated, unable to even make Diablo fight him seriously—and with that, his soul was reaped.

EPILOGUE

THE DEEDS OF A DEMON LORD

Caligulio awoke to a warmth gently enveloping him.

Wh-where am I?

He had trouble remembering what he was doing before he came here. Panicking, he looked around, only to find himself resting in a somewhat large chamber.

Joining him was a young girl with bluish-silver hair, maybe twelve or thirteen years old and working on something with an angelic smile. Gazing at her from the side, he saw her holding her hand out above someone who was lying on their back. A dazzling light shot from her palm, pouring down upon the line of familiar-looking people on the ground.

Is that Krishna? No… Krishna was killed before my eyes, wasn't he?

The haze instantly dissipated from his mind as all his memories came back. They were at war, invading the land of monsters.

Caligulio hurriedly shot up, attempting to shout something. But then he lost the ability to speak. Amazingly, the dead Krishna gently opened his eyes and looked right at him.

"…?!"

Just like Caligulio, Krishna seemed pretty confused about where he was. His eyes followed the silver-haired girl around, unable to parse what was happening. She kept up her mystery work, apparently not noticing they were awake.

Bernie and Jiwu were lying in front of her now, and next to them were Caligulio's staff officers and aides.

What's going on…? They were all killed, too…

In his clouded mind, Caligulio tried his best to calmly analyze the facts presented to him. But there was just no comprehending this. They were all dead; he was sure of that. Their chests weren't heaving up and down—they couldn't have been breathing. But when that girl put her hand over them, they magically came back to life, one after another. There were a dozen or so imperial officers gathered in this room, and before long, she finished treating them all.

Once she did, the girl gave a little satisfied nod and turned toward Caligulio.

"Hey. You awake? How're you feeling? Can you remember your name?"

Her voice was casually unconcerned, but Caligulio didn't mind. Her charming looks were one reason, but the sheer presence she projected told Caligulio that any resistance was verboten.

Still, he could not give her a reply. Neither could anyone else; they all kept their mouths shut, completely lost to what was transpiring. Even the Single Digits Bernie and Jiwu were listlessly staring into space.

Now the girl sensed that something was amiss with Caligulio. "Oh, did I mess something up?" she asked, looking troubled. "I'm pretty sure the spell went off without a hitch…"

From that, Caligulio realized they had all been subjected to some kind of magic. But what type?

…No. It can't be. That's ridiculous. Completely impossible. But…

But his body felt just fine.

…Wait. There *was* one thing off. The power that once flowed in him, practically bursting at the seams after he was awakened, was completely gone. All he could comprehend was that something awful was happening.

"…I'm sorry, are…? Aren't we dead?"

That gingerly asked question must have helped the rest of the group clear their minds of any cobwebs. The light returned to their eyes as they sensed just how abnormal this situation was. They had all been murdered by a demon who called himself Diablo, that much was certain. The demon had no reason at all to keep them alive,

either. That’s why Caligulio was wondering why he was breathing right now.





“Oh, you remember now? Can you tell me what your name is?”

“Y-yes. It’s Caligulio.”

Then a possibility flashed through his mind. Perhaps this girl might have saved Caligulio and his staff from that life-or-death situation. But was that even possible? Rescue from that hellhole was all but inconceivable. That demon was beyond powerful, ripping Caligulio up like a paper doll after he acquired that ultimate force—to say nothing of the Single Digits over there.

Nobody could beat a demon like that… Nobody except for the Heroes he had heard rumors about.

“Um, did—did you save all of us, perhaps? What—what happened to that evil demon?”

He finally dared to ask it. Then:

“You’d best watch your tone around Sir Rimuru.”

The booming voice was familiar. It was exactly like the one that belonged to that bloodcurdling demon. But an even more pressing issue was how he just mentioned Rimuru, the name of the demon lord Caligulio had set as their primary objective.

Now Diablo revealed himself to them all. A paroxysm of fear made Caligulio tremble, but the girl stopped the demon.

“Um, I think some of you might have the wrong idea about everything, so let me explain. Yes, you are all dead. All the troops you led are dead, too, and I sincerely doubt there are any survivors. So it’s not like I saved you guys or whatever. I *did* bring you back to life, though.”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Truly an impressive, unheard-of spell. I won’t ask you to thank him for it, but you should at least be awed by Sir Rimuru’s sheer greatness.”

“…Huh?”

Caligulio could do little more than grunt at this incomprehensible explanation. But nobody was laughing at him.

“Can you quit with that act, Diablo?”

“My apologies. I simply want to spread the word about your magnificence to these poor, ignorant masses—”

“Yeah, and I’m telling you I don’t *need* you to!”

Nobody in the room had the energy to interrupt this little act. But

after a while, the girl smiled at Caligulio.

“Anyway, looks like your memory is fine. Glad that whole ritual ended up working out.”

“U-um…”

“Okay, let’s start from the top. I’m Rimuru. The demon lord Rimuru. I’m kind of the king around here. Nice to meet you!”

Caligulio froze. So did all the other recently resurrected. As his brain parsed the words, and their meaning slowly dawned on him, his eyes opened fully, staring straight at the girl in front of him. This little girl was Rimuru? The enemy Caligulio and his fellows saw as an obstacle who must be eliminated? Part of the Octagram? *That* Rimuru? And judging by the context, Rimuru appeared to be the one who brought everyone back to life. This was Rimuru himself, smiling adorably, looking nothing like the sketches that were circulating.

But there was one other problem.

“Um, if I could ask you something…?”

“Hmm? What is it?”

Caligulio, despite his trepidation, soldiered on. “So you brought us all back to life?”

“Yep. That’s right.”

“How…how *could* you?”

“Well, the procedure’s kinda hard to explain, but like, your souls are—”

“No, no, I don’t mean *that*! I mean how could you revive us when we’re your sworn enemy?”

“Oh, is that what you meant?”

The girl—the demon lord Rimuru—looked a tad relieved. “It’s simple,” she blurted out. “The war’s still on, but you’ve all fallen into my hands. You’re my pawns now!”

And that’s why she brought them back to life? Caligulio stared blankly at her, unable to grasp her meaning. The demon lord Rimuru revived them? Who? *Us?!*

Astonishment, confusion, and fear filled his mind. The same was true for all the others who were recently revived in the chamber. And it would take quite a while before the dust settled.



I left the confused Caligulio and his gang in their room, full of all the real important folks from his army—the supreme officers who led the imperial invasion. Like I told him, I brought them back to life so I could use them as pawns—and yes, it was Raphael that offered up the idea.

……

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…

Raising the dead…

Ever since Shion's death, Raphael had been busying itself analyzing the structure of souls. Now it seemed like it was well on its way to figuring out almost all the principles.

Whether it belongs to a human being or a monster, all souls have a set quality and quantity. It is composed of matter known as data particles, and through managing and applying certain forces to them, it's possible to control life and death to some extent.

The souls of plants and animals house only a very tiny amount of energy. Human souls, meanwhile, have tons and tons. We've already confirmed that a certain amount is given to everyone equally, and the ability to fully hardness that soul energy leads to the manifestation of soul powers—or what we call special skills. This data, engraved in your soul since birth, is the source of those powers.

So is the data written directly onto this energy? Not exactly. First, there's the ego, a set of amorphous wavelengths within the soul, and the group of data particles that surrounds it. This is known as the heart, and that's where all the data is stored. The crystallized energy that covers this heart is what we call the soul.

Our pseudo-souls were developed as a receptacle for the project of this very heart. Hearts housed within pseudo-souls like this have no energy of their own, but they do have egos. Without the power in one's soul, the owner of the soul cannot use any skills, but they *can*

take action with their egos.

So the way I revived Caligulio and his friends was by using pseudo-souls to substitute for their real ones. Basically, I took their souls, plucked the “hearts” out of them, and transplanted them into the pseudo-souls, along with the bare minimum amount of energy necessary to keep them going.

……

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…

There was some concern about the success rate for this operation, but it looked like everything worked, which I was glad about. But it wasn’t without its problems.

First off, it weakens you a *lot*. Which, yeah, of course it does—I took all their soul energy out. I’ve taken their souls, and there’s no real reason for me to give them back, and I don’t see how they have any right to complain about it.

So thanks to that, they’re no longer able to invoke any skills. Even if skill data was written into their hearts, they can’t use it at all without enough soul energy. From now until the natural end of their lives, they’ve got no hope of learning or using a single skill.

It’ll also affect their magic-casting abilities, but that at least is something they oughtta be able to improve with practice. Once they get the hang of it to some extent, they’ll be able to tap into magic without using any soul power. Magic *is* a skill, but it’s also an art, and that means it’s possible to invoke it with the magicules in the air instead of those in your body. So arts are still available to them, as long as they train themselves enough to earn them. Unless they rely on their skills for everything in their lives, I think they’ll bounce back just fine.

So yeah, they can get superstrong again if they want to, but the quality of the energy involved isn’t what it once was, so they’re gonna hit limits sooner or later. Bear in mind, I only developed the pseudo-soul as a toy to help us play around in the labyrinth a little. I don’t want anyone to start expecting miracles from it.

Still, it worked well enough this time. I didn't revive them for their own sakes but rather to prevent any hateful rumors about us from circulating. Whether you'd call them rumors is debatable, I suppose, but regardless.

I mean, if they attack us for their own selfish reasons and die as a result, that's their fault and nobody else's. I don't have any obligation at all to resurrect them… But again, I don't want to give myself a bad rep around the world. It'll also save me from being hated by the average imperial citizen any more than necessary.

Good thing Raphael's experiment worked, though. And since they're all back to life and everything, I'm gonna have all these fancy higher-ups take responsibility for everything they did. They're under Soei's supervision right now, in fact. Also, I should note that despite being alive again, it's still on a temporary basis at best. I'm willing to grant them a certain degree of freedom, but if anything comes up, we can trace 'em—no sweat. They'll never be able to escape us.

So enough about them for now. I'm trying to get my work done as quickly as I can. Caligulio and the others were the test subjects to see if this procedure worked, and it did. Now it's time to scale it up.

Before me lay the corpses of approximately seven hundred thousand imperial soldiers. We were inside the labyrinth, in Adalmann's Floor 70 domain, just in case something funny happened.

I had collected as many bodies from the battle as I could, going out on the field and teleporting them all down here. Gobta, Geld, Gabil, and the assorted floor guardians joined me in the effort.

The corpses laid out here were all the ones who could still be revived. The imperial forces who deployed in front of Dwargon's East gate were still there; that standoff remained ongoing. The nine hundred forty thousand who invaded the Forest of Jura were all killed in battle except for Misha, Lucius, and Raymond. Of these, over two hundred forty thousand were sadly unsalvageable. One reason why resurrection magic is said to be impossible is because you can't re-create souls from thin air, but thanks to Testarossa and

the other demons, we had these souls in safekeeping. As long as we had their bodies handy, we could resurrect them, but…

…well, not all of them had bodies left. Ultima's Nuclear Flame kinda vaporized a lot of them, Testarossa's Death Streak scrambled the DNA of a bunch of others, and Carrera's Gravity Collapse turned a whole slew of people into piles of ash.

And even if we had a body, sometimes it still wasn't possible. For one, if someone died because of sheer terror, the ego—the most important part of the body—was trashed and long gone, so we couldn't do anything for them. Kanzis, killed by Kumara, was one example. I guess the fear literally broke his heart at the edge of death, so there were no data particles left in his soul. Not even Raphael could restore those, sadly, so there was nothing I could do for the guy. But that was fine. I wasn't planning on reviving the likes of Kanzis anyway.

So as I said, two hundred forty thousand soldiers of the Empire were permanently dead… But hey, it was gonna be *all* of them originally, so they really oughtta count their blessings. I felt sorry for those who wouldn't make it back, but sometimes that was just the way the cookie crumbled. I wasn't an omnipotent god, you know. I couldn't create something out nothing.

And…really, I don't regret a thing about this. I *do* think the three demonesses went way too far, for sure, but this is war. If we let up too much and got burned because of it, it'd be so incredibly stupid. My people are the only thing that really matter to me, and if I have to weigh them against strangers I know nothing about, then I won't hesitate to protect my people first. I'm not gonna go around like some saint, saying we should show compassion to invading enemies. If I was *that* much of a namby-pamby dolt, I'd be in no position to step up when we really *did* take damage.

That's why I shouldn't be concerned about the ones we can't bring back to life. We shouldn't… But still, I've got this indescribable sense of sorrow for them. I guess I've still retained my values from living in a nation as war-free as Japan all that time. It's not regret, for sure, and I don't think what I did was wrong…but it's still not something I'm used to. I just can't help but think it'd be nicer if we

could all just live happily and peacefully without anyone having to die.

But still, I'm never going to show mercy to anyone who invades my domain. In fact, I'll make it a point to terrorize them to the hilt. I suppose it'd be hypocritical of me to pray for those souls… So instead of the dead, let me say a silent prayer for those we're able to bring back to life instead.

Sacred Birthday—deploy.

Caligulio and his staff, fresh out of their recuperation room, looked shocked at the scene before them. At this rate, I wasn't sure they were gonna get any sleep. Not my problem, but…

Anyway, let's get this over with. All the bodies have copied pseudo-souls installed in them. This is kind of an emergency, so I might as well make the most of my copies. It's the only quick way to secure enough pseudo-souls for them all.

Their bodies were now restored and in clean, decent condition, thanks to Adalmann and his squad of advanced holy-magic-casters. They worked tirelessly for the sake of these enemy soldiers, and I was incredibly grateful to them. Of course, Adalmann doesn't need to sleep anyway, so I think he put in the biggest effort of all. Honestly, I think it tired him out more than fighting in the battle. He really deserved some credit for that.

So all these clean bodies had pseudo-souls installed in them. I'm making it sound like a snap, but it goes without saying that it was only possible thanks to Raphael's staggering computational power.

Next, I performed the Secret Art of Implantation, a sort of cousin to the Secret Art of Revival. I wasn't regenerating a soul here, so I didn't require nearly as much energy—but identifying every single individual body took a tremendous amount of computation. Raphael, once again, handled this—I was doing essentially nothing. Just standing here, really, meditating and leaving everything to that guy. The way he checked genetic information on the bodies against our soul records to instantly identify people was so amazing, I really *should* start calling it Professor Raphael. It was just so bizarrely

complex, something I could never possibly imitate.

But to Caligulio and the others watching from the sidelines, it must've looked like I was doing everything myself. At some point, they started kowtowing to me—like they were worshipping me or something. You *know* that makes me feel super uncomfortable, right? I wish they'd stop doing it. You've *so* got the wrong idea about me… But until this Sacred Birthday was over, I couldn't stop to complain.

So over the course of a single day and night, the Secret Art did its stuff while I awkwardly squirmed under all the attention. The result was the successful resurrection of around seven hundred thousand soldiers.



Floor 70 was lined with rows and rows of simple tents full of food for the revived soldiers. Even the most confused ones after their resurrections were now calm, and everyone was quietly concentrating on their meals, as if they were digesting their very lives.

They were enjoying a stew-like entrée—basically a bunch of veggies and meat cooked in a large pot—and it was hot and hearty. As the chaos subsided, and the soldiers came to accept their new reality, the soup left an impression on them that was difficult to put into words.

Caligulio was among the defeated soldiers, now feeling much less tense. He hadn't even noticed his hunger until then—but as he basked in the feeling of the moment, he slowly realized, over and over again, that the demon lord Rimuru killed him and everybody he knew in the army.

Now, however, they were alive…although Rimuru called it a temporary life.

"Don't worry; you'll all be able to live out a perfectly average life

span. You can fall in love, form a family, have children; whatever. But just remember: We've put some restrictions on all of you to keep you from doing anything bad to us! The curse on your souls will ensure that you're never able to act against us again. I hope we're all clear on that."

That was part of the speech he gave once everyone calmed down. But Caligulio was sure that curse wasn't necessary at all. Who would ever dare to repeat such foolish behavior a second time?

The disaster with Veldora several centuries ago left a deeply instilled sense of fear in all who witnessed it. But even if the dragon leveled a city and killed everyone in it, such a disaster could easily be replicated by human hands, too. Maybe that was why, despite this palpable fear, nobody thought that it could ever be conquered by some other, greater fear. Or maybe, if there were more initial survivors, that fundamental sense of fear could have been spread more, turning it into more of an inviolable thing… But that'd be the end of it.

This time, though, there was no mistaking matters.

I was once dead, but now I've been brought back to life.

…By the hands of an ungodly demon lord.

Bearing witness to such a ridiculous miracle, not a single person among them would ever dare to defy him.

We…no, I…was far too foolish.

It was a reminder that we all had gotten too big for our own good.

Or was that really even a demon lord in the first place? Caligulio's doubts went that far. Krishna, meanwhile, was already worshipping Rimuru like a god only one night post-revival. Even now, he was watching him go around, eyes rapt; it was sheer idolatry. Of course, Caligulio was the first to worship him, so he wasn't one to talk…

This "temporary life" the demon lord spoke of turned out not to be a problem, either. Yes, they had lost nearly all ability to fight, but not enough so to make life too difficult. They could still defeat monsters,

at least up to a certain level. Maybe their powers were now insignificant to someone like the demon lord Rimuru, but to Caligulio and his companions, a few of them still had strength that'd rank close to an A.

They couldn't use skills, and magic was proving to be tricky for them, but they still had their well-honed bodies. Plus, they'd be allowed to live out their natural life span until they became old and decrepit. That, Caligulio thought, was good enough—and that thought was shared by all seven hundred thousand of his comrades present.

With all the gratitude and awe going around, there was no way anyone would dare rebel against the demon lord Rimuru. It was a complete, utter, heartfelt defeat. Everyone wanted the fighting to just stop already. The Empire's invasion was now over, and it ended in a complete failure.

AFTERWORD

Great to see you for the first time in a bit. This is Fuse.

Volume 12 had no afterword to it, so it really *has* been a long time, hasn't it? I'm not active on Twitter or anything, which makes it feel that way all the more. I do try to keep my author page on the web novel site syosetu.com updated, advertising the stuff I'm up to and so on, but I'm not sure that a lot of people know about that page. If you're interested, please check it out—I usually try to post some new info around the release dates for new volumes!

Now, let me talk about the story for a moment.

As I'm writing this afterword, the synopsis for Volume 13 has already been released and posted around. It says stuff like "a devastating bloodbath at the hands of Tempest's mighty forces," but what's up with that? Aren't these blurbs meant to, you know, advertise the crisis the protagonists are facing and stuff? And then the heroes overcome it, and it's way cool, et cetera, et cetera. But here we have a "bloodbath." There are no stakes, no drama, just the hero kicking tons of ass…

…Wait a minute. Maybe this is all reverse psychology, and our heroes are facing serious trouble up ahead! I don't think it'll work out like that, but boy, who knows where the truth lies, huh? You'll just have to see for yourself in the next volume!

✳

Now for an announcement! This was advertised in Volume 12 so you may already be aware of it, but *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime* is going to receive a televised anime adaptation!

Having this thing I wrote as a hobby get turned into print books, then a manga, and then an anime… As the original author, I'm simply overwhelmed with emotion. I only made it this far because of the support everyone's given me—it's thanks to all of you that this work's able to exist! If you've become a fan and think it's a fun and exciting series, I couldn't be happier.

Thanks for continuing to support *Slime*!!

←READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT!

Armageddon in Tempest

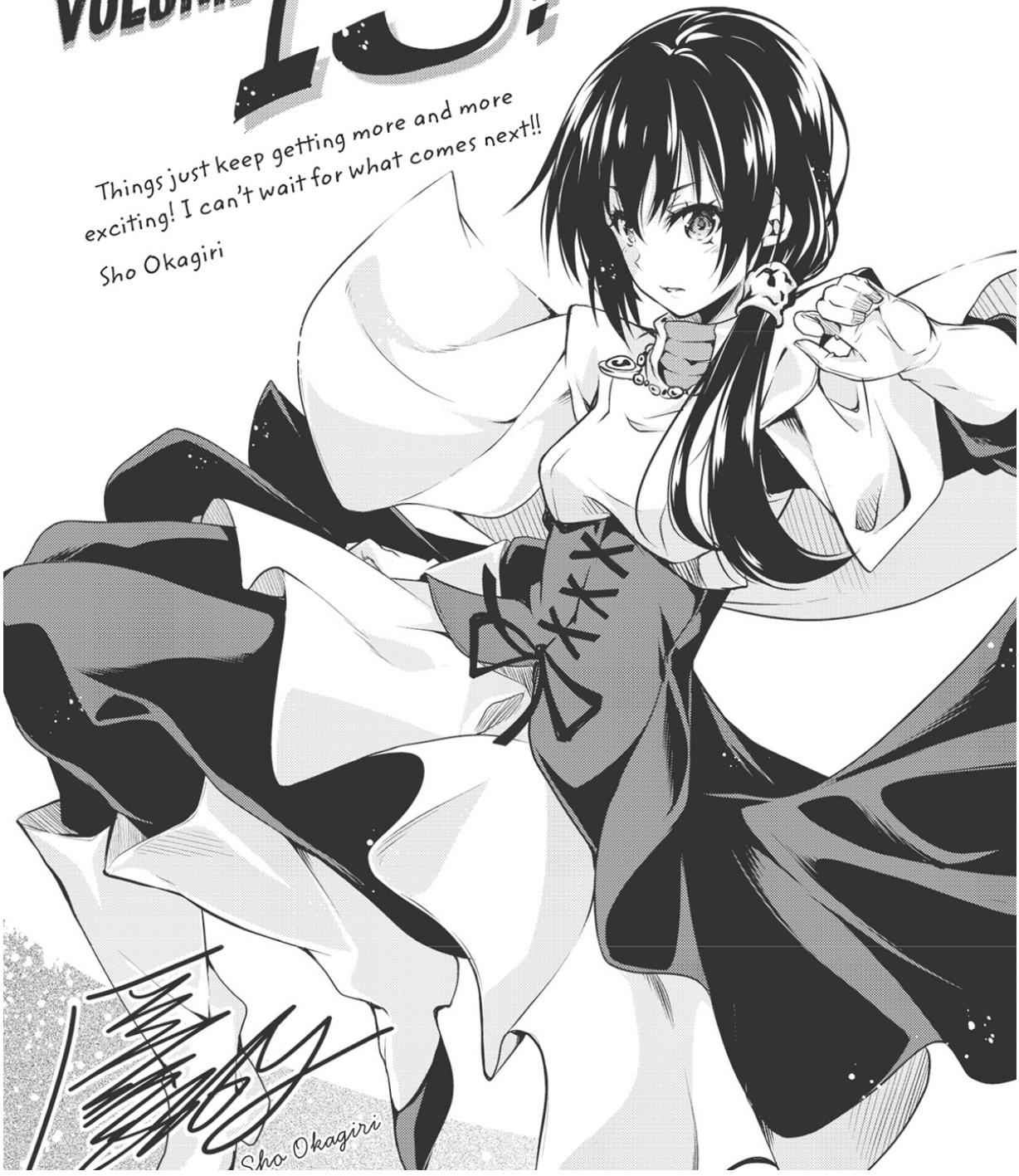
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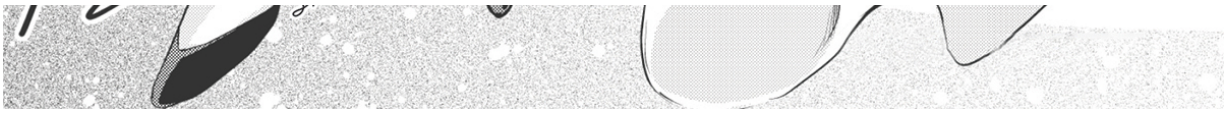


VOLUME 13!

Things just keep getting more and more exciting! I can't wait for what comes next!!

Sho Okagiri






That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime
Here's to Volume 13!
CONGRAT-ULATIONS TO FUSE!
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