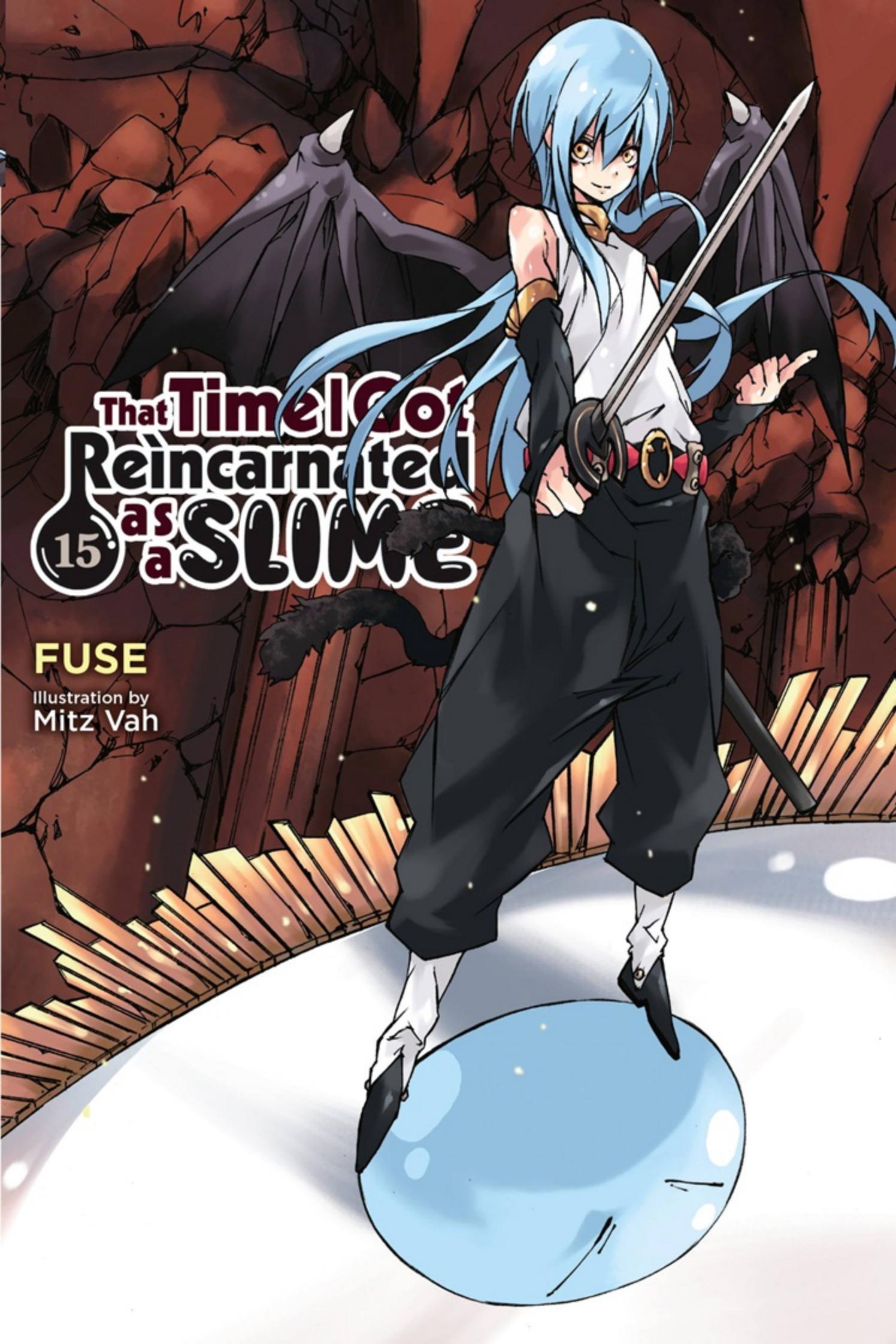


That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

15th anniversary

FUSE

Illustration by
Mitz Vah



THAT TIME I GOT REINCARNATED AS A SLIME

– Tensei Shitara Slime Datta Ken –

- VOLUME 15 -
THE ABYSS UNLEASHED

-AUTHOR-
FUSE

-ILLUSTRATOR-
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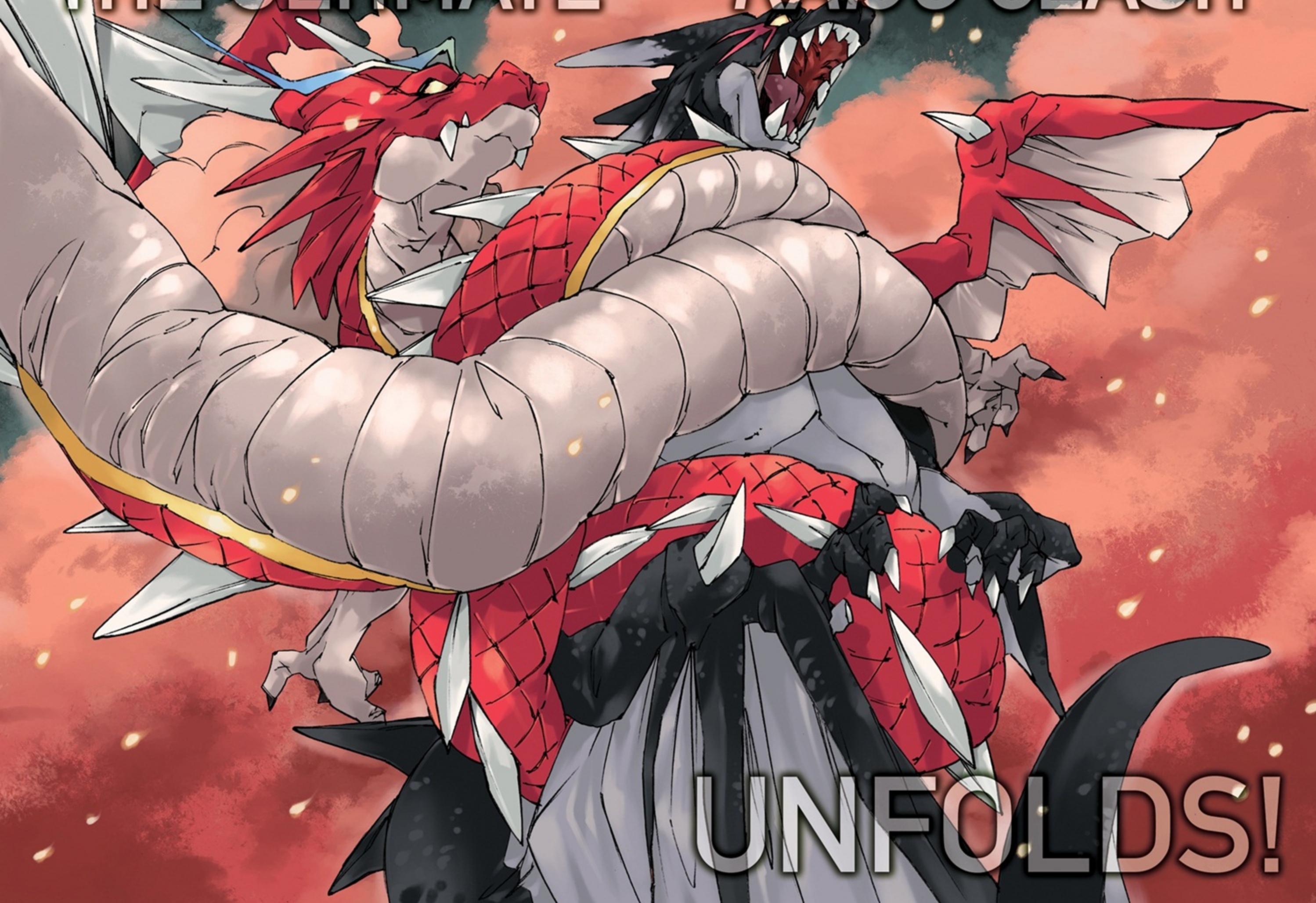
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That Time I Got
Reincarnated
as a SLIME

15

THE ULTIMATE KAIJU CLASH



UNFOLDS!

Those golden eyes,
a beautiful almond shape,
looked capable of seeing
through everything; that
hair, silver with a blue
tinge, shone white like
the moon. He was
androgynous, and his
face was more touchingly
sweet than ravishing,
but his divine presence
made him transcend
beauty itself.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME



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Illustration by Mitz Vah



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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 15
FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford
Cover art by Mitz Vah

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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

PROLOGUE

**FLAME DRAGON
AGAINST STORM
DRAGON**

PROLOGUE

FLAME DRAGON AGAINST STORM DRAGON

For Veldora, the day could not have gone much worse.

It was an empty field of grass. The city, well-prepared for the imperial invasion, remained isolated in the labyrinth, and that was why the beauty flying in from the sky above stood out so much against this backdrop.

"Ah, my sister..." Veldora muttered despite himself. There was no strength in his voice. For those who knew how Veldora normally carried on, the sight was unthinkable.

"Is... is it possible," stammered Charys, "that this is... Lady Velgrynd, the sister I have heard rumor of?"

"I-indeed... you are correct. She is Velgrynd the Flame Dragon, one of the all-powerful True Dragons... and my sister, yes..."

Everyone in the Control Center, upon hearing this, leaped into action at once. An emergency alarm rang across the labyrinth, advising all within earshot to exercise maximum vigilance against the enemy on the outside.

"Wh-whoa, Master?! Rimuru's not even here! What're we gonna do?"

Ramiris was in a panic already. She wasn't exactly someone to rely on in normal times; right now, she could do little more than shout and carry on. In a scientific laboratory she was a valued resource, but in battle, there was basically no role for her.

But Ramiris was smart enough to have some powerful friends—Treyni's sisters administering the labyrinth and the dryads working under them, all beavering away to make sure things kept functioning properly. She had declined a position in the Ten Dungeon Marvels, but she was still the overall supervisor of the labyrinth. However, a good half of the Marvels, those figures who'd be relied on the most right now, were in the midst of an evolutionary sleep. Beretta, their former leader, had the important job

of guarding Ramiris.

"It wouldn't appear that she's going to be too friendly with us. Let's intercept her in the labyrinth."

Beretta kept an eye on the situation, as Treyni and the others checked on the situation labyrinth-wide.

Out of the Ten Dungeon Marvels, only the four Dragon Lords were currently awake and available. Gadora was conscious as well, but he had already been sent out with the Demon Colossus to help out the Armed Nation of Dwargon. They were thus less than ideally prepared for Velgrynd, but if they made full use of the perfect, flawless fortress that was the labyrinth, even this reduced force should be enough to buy some time with. Beretta thought so, at least. So he made the proposal, and Veldora nodded his agreement.

"I don't know what she's here for, but if she came alone, she truly deserves nothing but my laughter. With all of us together, we have nothing to fear! Kwaah-ha-ha-ha!!"

He grinned assuredly, but his expression was noticeably strained. He was scared.

Just a couple of days ago, Veldora had been in hard combat with Velzard, his elder sister—and with that incident fresh on his mind, now here was Velgrynd, his second-eldest sister. Not only that—she was staging an invasion of Rimuru, capital of the Jura-Tempest Federation, all by herself. This was simply outrageous in Veldora's mind, and now his head was racing, trying desperately to find a way out of this situation.

That's why he was so eager to jump at Beretta's proposal. But just then:

"Veldora, be a good boy and come out for me, all right?"

Velgrynd, right up there on the display, addressed him out loud. Even her eyes, oddly enough, were fixated on the screen, boring right into Veldora—and her voice echoed directly into his mind.

"Sir Veldora...?"

"D-do not flinch at this, Charys! This is a trap. If I go out there without a thought in the world, it's bound to be awful for me!"

"Er, yes..."

Veldora had no qualms about sounding this pathetic. Charys couldn't help but find it bewildering.

"Huh? Well, if her target is my master, then it's got nothing to do with us—*mmpf?!*"

Ramiris, trying to save her own hide and doing a commendable job at it, was immediately silenced by Veldora's hand. Now, whether she wanted to be or not, she was part of this.

So the labyrinth staff decided to hold their ground, but...

"Oh, you're not coming out? You always were a little slow on the uptake, weren't you? But all right. In that case, I'll give you just one gentle warning."

The image alone didn't reveal what Velgrynd was saying. But everyone present understood that things were rapidly changing with her. And Veldora, who still had her voice being channeled into his brain, knew full well she was about to do something. But:

It... It's fine. Ramiris's labyrinth is made of incredible stuff that can shut off dimensions. Even I would have difficulty breaking through it, and as long as we remain inside, even my sister won't be able to touch us.

He was right. As long as they stayed in the labyrinth, they'd continue to remain safe from Velgrynd. Maybe she could smash her way down one or two floors, but Ramiris could restore it quicker than she could destroy it. With Veldora powering everything, keeping Velgrynd safely away should be doable.

"Do not panic! With you and I working together, no adversary can—"

Veldora attempted to calm Ramiris, but he couldn't finish his sentence. On the screen, he had caught sight of Velgrynd producing a pure-crimson spear.

"M-Master! That's real bad news up there! I'm not even sure Mazecraft can block that!"

You don't need to remind me, Veldora thought.

"I know that! All hands, brace for impact!"

Nobody doubted Veldora's words, each of them assuming a defensive posture. Just a few moments later, a severe shock wave rocked the labyrinth.

"Oh, no way..."

"D-damage confirmed down to Floor 50... The upper levels are all but destroyed."

Alpha, Beta, and the rest of the staff were producing a flurry of damage reports. At that moment, the myth of the labyrinth's purported safety was practically destroyed.

Then, just as Veldora was panicking over what to do next, he received a Thought Communication from Rimuru.

(Hey, how's it going?)

He deeply resented the cheerful voice.

(You fool! Now is not the time for casual greetings! Things are, um, rather hectic in here! My sister... My sister is pursuing me! She is outside the labyrinth right now, but at this rate, she is going to storm inside!!)

Veldora waited for an answer. Rimuru... Yes, surely Rimuru could do something about this. Instead, however, came the concerned reply: (You gonna be okay?) Instantly it made Veldora realize the truth. Rimuru was just as strained right now. If he wasn't, he'd be right back here immediately—and since there was no sign of that, it'd be unwise to wait further for him.

And maybe that was why Veldora could feel the false hope from before draining away. If he couldn't rely on Rimuru, he had no choice but to go out himself.

(I will have to come out for her. That would beat her laying waste to the labyrinth to reach me.)

Veldora thought he might be able to make it, although this was backed by zero evidence. It was easy to forget at times, but Rimuru had been quite a suitable trainer. If he had been able to withstand that, Veldora thought, surely Velgrynd wouldn't defeat him that easily.

(All right. I'll take full responsibility for the fallout, so just do something about Velgrynd for me. Can you manage that?)

Rimuru sounded like he didn't expect Veldora to lose, either. And if he was taking "full responsibility for the fallout," that meant he couldn't complain, no matter how much destruction was wrought from this. Taking that into consideration, Rimuru was all but asking him to show off the fruits of his training up to now. Besides, this was Rimuru asking. What he wanted, he got.

(Oho? Well, in that case, allow me to handle everything for you! Kwah-ha-ha-ha!!)

He turned his attention back toward Velgrynd. The chat with Rimuru did wonders for his stress level. Suddenly he felt supremely calm and serene.

"I will need to go out myself," he said, sounding fully relaxed.

"Master?"

"Sir Veldora?!"

Ramiris and Beretta stared at him in shock. Veldora gave them a refreshed sneer, like all his problems were behind him.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! I too have little interest in fighting my sister—but if using the labyrinth to stall for time won't work, we have no other option."

"But..."

"It's all right, Charys. Immortality within the labyrinth only works because it exists in an isolated space. Now that we know it won't work against my sister, the best way to minimize further damage is for me to leave."

As long as Rimuru was alive and well, Veldora was de facto immortal. If he wanted to prevent any more sacrifice, Veldora's only choice was to leave.

"Then let me join you."

"No, stay here. You've become stronger, but it is still nothing comparable to me. Perhaps Zegion is another matter, but anyone else would just be a hindrance."

It was harsh, but true. And Veldora was already prepared for what was to come. There was a gallant air to him now, nothing at all like the pathetic fear of a moment ago.

“Will you be okay, Master?”

“No, I *won’t* be okay at all! I don’t even want to think of the horrid abuse my sisters put me through... but enough of that. I, too, have become stronger. Encountering Rimuru has helped me grow. I, too, am a trainer now, and I’ve learned just how immature I have been. I am nothing like how I used to be. Kwaah-ha-ha-ha!!”

Veldora forced out a laugh. He had mentally uplifted himself so much that he was back to his normal tone.

“So do not worry! Just sit back and watch as I heroically stride into the scene!”

With that, he left the labyrinth by himself.

Now Veldora recalled his battle with Velzard. He hadn’t seen the older of his two sisters in quite a while, and she seemed far more powerful, her defense much more impermeable, than in the past.

It wasn’t something the old Veldora would ever have picked up on. Running into Rimuru had helped him grow beyond recognition, and nothing symbolized that more than his acquiring an ultimate skill. Being sealed away inside Rimuru’s Stomach gave Veldora the chance to observe Rimuru and learn a great many things. It was there where he realized that power is only meaningful when used in the right ways. He had an enormous store of magicule energy, the largest among all the True Dragons. It outclassed those of his two sisters, and it allowed him to be one of the world’s strongest presences without working very hard at it.

But that was naïve, and Veldora knew it. He knew that some would struggle to win until the very end, no matter how weak they were. Rimuru was one of them, and he knew that many who opposed him were the same way—Hinata, Granville, and the demon lord Luminus. They relied on more than just their power, using every possible trick in the book to earn their victory, and he knew never to let his guard down against them.

Now that he understood that, Veldora was a different creature from before. And he could prove it. Even during combat with Velzard, he could hold his own and go on the counterattack instead of just getting beaten up as usual. To him, Velzard was a kind of natural enemy, an extremely unfavorable opponent given how incompatible his

strength was with hers. She had been born first, the upper limits of her powers all but a mystery to him. He may have had a larger magicule store, but they were so close to each other in nearly every other way that it wasn't that much of an advantage.

In a proper battle, he couldn't hold out much hope for victory. He had challenged her several times since being born, but was beaten back terribly each time. Velzard's Eternal World skill was both an ironclad defense for her and a weapon that hampered Veldora's movement. Gales, destruction, corrosion, ruin—all potential effects were nullified before this absolute wall.

This was the kind of terrifying sister he was up against, but much to his surprise, Veldora found that he could actually hold his own. *Wow, he thought, I'm doing great!* Velzard, after all, had learned how to fully control the magical force she released—something Veldora only noticed because he could control his own as well. The difference, however, was just way too big to compare. That was thanks in no small part to the nature of Velzard's powers, letting her stop kinetic energy with so much ease, but the yawning gap between them was still obvious even without that.

But despite having that kind of skill, Velzard was unexpectedly honest in her praise of Veldora's growth.

"Mmm, yes, it's quite a surprise. You used to only act out like a spoiled child, but now you're using your brain to fight as well, aren't you? At this rate, maybe we don't need to destroy you after all."

There was a disturbing word or two in there, but the rest of it was unmistakably praise for Veldora. Considering he felt nothing but fear for her before then, it made him very happy to see. He still couldn't beat her, but regardless...

So what about Velgrynd?

Well, Velzard and Velgrynd were about an even match in ability. To Veldora, they were both big sisters he had problems dealing with, and if he was honest with himself, he didn't really want to fight either of them. But that wasn't an option right now, so he had no choice but to step up.

"Velgrynd is as formidable as ever. Not even I could unleash an attack reaching across multiple labyrinth floors like that..."

Perhaps he could just use brute force to twist the dimensional layers enough to destroy one or two floors. But even if he used up all his magicules, not even he could smash through multiple floors with a single blow.

“The ultimate skill must be the key. If I want to hold my own against her, I will need to exercise Faust, Lord of Investigation, to the fullest.”

He was right. Veldora outclassed Velgrynd in magicule count, and he hoped that put him in a slightly better position with her than Velzard. That hope helped overcome the trauma of having this encounter in the first place.

The key to victory here lay in how well he used his powers. They had never seriously fought each other, but there was no doubt that Velgrynd was the stronger of the two. But that was a tale from the past. Velzard was hard to beat because her skills worked particularly well against Veldora, but that wouldn’t be the case with Velgrynd. What’s more, thanks to Rimuru, he had acquired the ultimate skill Faust, Lord of Investigation. That power worked against Velzard as well, and having it in hand made him think that even Velgrynd would be nothing to fear.

Now Veldora felt ready to take this mission on.

Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Nobody's doomed me to defeat yet, have they? I needed to test the extent of this power anyway—why not do it against my own sister?

With a new determination, Veldora appeared in front of Velgrynd.

*

The siblings stared each other down in midair, both in human form. They were perfectly still in the sky, which was natural for them as True Dragons.

“I’m glad you were intelligent enough to understand the meaning behind my warning. So you’ve decided to cooperate with me now?”

Velgrynd looked quite happy to see Veldora. She wouldn’t be for long.

“I refuse, my sister. I am not a tool for you to use as you see fit, and I’d much appreciate it if you’d stop involving me in your sisterly quarrels.”

“Involve? Such a mean word to use. What I’m saying is that if you willingly cooperate

with me, I would welcome you as a close friend. Then I could teach you how to use your powers, allowing you to run wild as much as you want... although I'd ask you to let me choose the times and places for you."

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! My answer remains no, my sister. I have already fully perfected the use of my powers... and further, I no longer enjoy violence for violence's sake. I have grown, you see. I am a grown dragon!"

"...I wouldn't be so brazen if I were you. Perhaps we've spoiled you a bit too much? But very well. Let me see, then, just how much you've grown!"

With that light back-and-forth over and done with, Velgrynd was ready to duke it out. Veldora wasted no time, shoring up his position. From the start, his sister didn't expect to recruit him strictly through verbal negotiation. She'd display her strength, and it would make him obey. And if that didn't work, she'd just rough him up enough that Ludora could take control of him. Her taking the persuasion route was just Velgrynd's way of showing a little kindness.

So, feeling mildly annoyed at this breakdown of negotiations, Velgrynd made her first unhesitant thrust at Veldora. She wanted to make this quick, incapacitating him enough that she'd have time to wait before Ludora showed up. But her right-handed chop was lightly parried away, rewarded with a kick from Veldora. Velgrynd, rapidly growing frustrated, caught it with her left hand, but:

...What?! This force! This doesn't feel weakened at all!

Velgrynd thought that Veldora had yet to fully recover from three hundred years of being sealed away. The Veldora she knew would always throw 100 percent of his power around, so she assumed his current, weaker front was just an aftereffect of the seal. That back-and-forth just now made her realize the error of her ways.

"You've improved a little, haven't you? Now I see that all your bragging is more than just words."

"My Veldora-Style Death Stance is as invincible as it is undefeatable! And even you, my sister, will realize just how powerless you are before my—wh-whoa, whoa, whoa?!"

Velgrynd hadn't come here to listen to Veldora smugly explain why he was so strong. Instead, even more annoyed than before, she launched into a more vicious attack. Crimson flames gathered around both of her fists, as well as the supple legs stretching

out from her dress. Then a flurry of attacks came as a wild dance, searing enough to burn to death anything that touched it. But Veldora could withstand it.

“Ow! Hot, hot, hot!”

He sounded like a child and was fleeing at full speed from her, but it did not exact serious damage upon him.

“I’ve given you a great deal of discipline over the years, but it appears your head is just as immature as it always was. All that talk about being invincible and undefeatable is nothing short of ridiculous!”

Velgrynd was as furious as a raging inferno, but still she remained calm. Now she saw that Veldora was not only recovered from his prison, but far stronger than she ever expected.

This could be tricky. I can’t exercise my full force in this form, and I can’t deal much damage, either. Ludora will never be able to dominate him when he shows up...

The reason she came here wasn’t to rough Veldora up a bit and teach him a lesson. It was to dominate him. Once Ludora emerged victorious against Guy, they planned to give him his freedom back—but right now, he could be a very important pawn for them, and they wanted to procure him. From Velgrynd’s point of view, there was no point in keeping this a penny-ante game—and Veldora seemed to agree.

“Gwaah?! M-my clothes... The precious outfit granted to me by Rimuru! Now they’re all burned because of *you*, my sister!”

The outfit he had on was a gift from Rimuru, a token of his gratitude. It actually was precious to him, and now Velgrynd’s attack had ruined it. Given enough time, it would have been influenced enough by Veldora’s aura to become a literal part of his body... but expecting that much of a transformation in just a few days would be asking too much.

Veldora himself was largely unhurt, but this was a severe blow to his heart. It was wholly his fault for showing up to this wearing flammable gear, but still, he felt justified in taking his frustration out on his sister. And that was fortunate for Veldora, actually. Anger, after all, has a way of replacing fear in your mind, and no matter how motivated he was for this, he still had a fear of his sisters ingrained in him over many, many years. The two of them were a symbol of fear in his mind, and the idea of

confronting either one with his full might would normally seem outlandish. Now, however, the fetters had been lifted.

“Sister or not, I will offer you no more mercy. Prepare to face my wrath!”

With that shout, Veldora released his powers. In his place, a mighty, majestic dragon, jet black in color, revealed himself. Velgrynd snickered at the sight. It was too convenient for her.

“Huh? All that nonsense... You truly *are* too unintelligent for your own good. It seems you’ve forgotten some very important facts. You cannot defeat me, and I suppose it’s time to teach you that once more.”

Velgrynd transformed as well, into her beautiful, limber, crimson dragon form—and so the epoch-making *kaiju* battle began.



CHAPTER
1

THE MOMENT OF DESPAIR

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 1

THE MOMENT OF DESPAIR

Just as Rimuru was about to head into the imperial capital, the dwarven king Gazel Dwargo was facing a desperate battlefield. There, far in the distance, was a living incarnation of beauty spreading death everywhere she went.

“Gravity Collapse...? They say you could theoretically make it as powerful as you want... but can legion magic defend against it?”

“Don’t be silly. You could have both the Magic Support and Magic Strike Divisions running defense for us, and there’s no way they could block that. That’s how True Dragons work. It’s beyond a menace.”

Gazel was answered by Vaughn, his supreme military commander on the field. He had deployed the dwarven army here as he awaited Gazel’s arrival, and that meant he had a front-row seat for the destruction of the Empire’s Composite Division positioned a stone’s throw away. The soldiers were speechless at the sight of all the carnage, their will to fight doubtlessly broken, but not even they ran from the scene—much to their credit. Everyone on hand understood that by this point, there was nowhere safe to run away to. If their deaths would allow their families to survive even a little while longer, that alone made it worth remaining here—and so, with that in mind, they maintained their battle lines.

King Gazel was far too heroic a figure to let any of his troops’ lives go to waste. Every soldier of his trusted in that, and that was why they swore their allegiance to him. And while he understood well the emotions that drove them, Gazel was distressed, never showing it on his face but finding his heart in a state of deep turmoil.

We cannot win. In fact, this may very well end with the lives of everyone here wasted. Should we surrender? No, the Empire will never accept it. We must show them our power, at least, or as much as we have left of it...

He’d have to make the enemy believe they were more valuable as an ally, rather than an enemy. Otherwise, the Empire would never let them continue to exist in their world view. Thus, the only way to survive was to fight to the bitter end. No matter how many

casualties it produced, Gazel and his troops had to continue believing that the sacrifice wouldn't be in vain.

"They say quality is better than quantity in war, but this is simply beyond any reasonable expectation. Our only option is to challenge and defeat her by ourselves."

"Whoa, whoa, don't you have a responsibility for them as king?"

"Look, our enemy numbers exactly one person in size, does it not? Is now the time to ask about who's responsible for what?"

Gazel gave Vaughn's question an embittered smile. The sole enemy here was Velgrynd. Strategy and tactics were meaningless—Gazel's side needed a way to survive, and that was it. Vaughn, likely well aware of this, tried to keep the mood light, hoping to lighten Gazel's heartache a bit. Realizing that helped Gazel dispel his hesitation on the matter.

"My liege," Henrietta reported to them, "the enemy is more than just the Flame Dragon. There are multiple presences detected behind her, and it seems they are performing some manner of ritual. Lady Jaine reported that the extreme magic spell from before is likely part of this..."

Gazel nodded. That extreme magic, which annihilated an army of some sixty thousand, was being used for a ritual. That alone told him that an evil plot was afoot, one he dared not even try to imagine. But Velgrynd, at the center of it all, was going to be very difficult to beat—and so the only way to foil this plot would be to beat whatever was behind her.

"Should we move our forces?" Dolph asked. Gazel shook his head. The Heavy Strike Division lacked much mobility by design; improperly shuttling them around would leave them exposed to magic attack. Normally they could use their stout defenses to push through anything, but none of that mattered much against Velgrynd. The only option left was a de facto suicide strike from the five-hundred-strong Pegasus Knights at their disposal...

"I wouldn't like having this place even less well-defended than before. I think Gazel's right—the only way is to go in alone by ourselves. Right, Dolph?"

Vaughn smiled as he spoke. Dolph scratched his head in response.

"How disrespectful, Vaughn. Calling the king by merely his given name is outrageous!"

You should think more about your position..."

The lecture went on for a little while longer. He finally ended it with a broad smile.

"But this time, at least, you have a point. If we want to buy as much time as possible, we must avoid spreading our forces too thin. If it's us alone, we can be highly mobile and speedy enough to perhaps surprise the enemy."

Henrietta had no objections, either.

"Lady Jaine said she would join the struggle once she persuaded the elders along those lines. I'll let them worry about the future—for now, let's have a fun little rampage, just like the old days!"

The enthusiasm was palpable in her reply. These were all old friends, and the years hadn't changed them one bit. They were united in their hearts with Gazel, standing by him to help him through even this most difficult of times.

Gazel laughed.

"Ha-ha... You fools. I wonder what my chaperone Jaine would say if she heard this..."

Jaine had accompanied Gazel and his band for many years, offering them her advice and suggestions. She may have been the Dwarven Kingdom's most powerful mage, but to Gazel, she was also his most trusted of advisors. *I'm sure she won't like this*, he thought as he struggled to make a decision... but it seemed he was a tad too slow.

"Lordy lord, I take my eyes off you for a moment, King Gazel, and I see this? What a pain this is..."

Just before Gazel gave the order to march, Jaine teleported onto the scene.

"Ah, Jaine. Were you listening in on us?"

She sneered at the uncomfortable-looking Gazel and shook her head. "Here I was breathing a sigh of relief now that you've become such a great king... or so I thought. But this time, I cannot blame you. There is simply no other way to deal with an opponent like this. The True Dragons are known as Catastrophe-level threats precisely because they lie beyond the control of any one government."

“True enough.”

Any magic spell a human being could conjure would never affect a True Dragon. And now, Velgrynd was harnessing magic on a massive scale, well beyond any human level of control. Even if every human champion in the world came together, their chances against a True Dragon would be a complete unknown.

But all was not necessarily lost. That was what Jaine was here to report.

“I received a call a few moments ago.”

“Hmm?”

“His Majesty Rimuru is going to send reinforcements. Why don’t we wait for them and see what we can do?”

“I don’t believe it’s been that long since I contacted him!”

“It is hard for me to comprehend as well, yes, but I am sure he’s not lying. Vester himself told me so, and His Majesty can make all of his subjects take action with just a few words...”

Everyone nodded at the words of the jaded Jaine. They knew she was correct—and besides, those ever-reliable reinforcements arrived before they had the time to change their minds.

*

Suddenly, a large distortion appeared in space. Then, as if encased in an enormous cocoon, a small group of elite forces revealed itself. There were one hundred members of Gabil’s Team Hiryu, along with three hundred more from Gobwa’s Team Kurenai. Every member of this team of four hundred was over-A in rank, making it a squad as potentially powerful as the Pegasus Knights. What attracted even more attention, however, was their enormous weaponry.

“I heard it was complete, but they’re certainly not holding back deploying it, are they? That’s Rimuru for you.”

“Is that the completed magic-armor soldier?”

“Indeed. It is called the Demon Colossus, I was told, and it’s a good thing it’s on our side.”

Gazel, of course, didn’t expect it to emerge victorious against Velgrynd. But the sheer majesty of its presence would be enough to bring reassurance to his soldiers.

“A stout ally to have. If we had a larger supply of them, maybe we could’ve fought a little bit better.”

“Sadly, not even that would likely mean much against Velgrynd. If it were a Disaster-level threat, then perhaps, but...”

Gazel and his advisors continued to chitchat for a bit longer as the group approached them. This was Gabil, leader of the newly deployed corps, along with the three demonesses led by Testarossa. Gobwa and Hakuro followed behind them.

“It has been far too long, Your Majesty.”

It was Testarossa, not Gabil, who spoke up first. This was most assuredly the right call. Testarossa had diplomatic privileges and a wealth of experience; she was used to this kind of situation.

“Indeed it has, Lady Testarossa. My thanks for the reinforcements.”

Usually, the very idea of Gabil directly addressing a visitor would violate royal norms. There were certain customs and formalities to take into consideration, and along those lines, the king would normally have an intermediary speak on his behalf. But now was no time for such talk—something mutually understood among all parties. So they did away with all decorum and made this a regular, uninhibited strategy meeting.

Once everyone had moved over to the command center, they dove straight into the topic at hand. Testarossa began by recapping what Rimuru and his allies were up to, then offered a proposal for the strategy they needed to implement here.

“Hmm, Rimuru seeks to strike the emperor himself?”

“It certainly sounds more realistic than any suicide mission.”

“Do you think? Because it sounds rather reckless to me...”

Gazel growled at the idea as he thought it over, even as Vaughn sounded optimistic. Dolph, meanwhile, was still looking for another way—but there was no time left to ponder. With nobody else offering alternatives, Testarossa pushed ahead.

“We will deal with Lady Velgrynd. What I want everyone else to do is put an end to the ritual taking place behind her.”

“No objections here.”

Gazel promptly agreed with the offer, as welcome as it was unexpected. The demons were the only ones who could be entrusted with this most dangerous of rules—they had no one else to volunteer for it. But Jaine wasn’t so sure.

“One moment. I ask you, Lady Testarossa, would Primals such as yourselves be able to defeat the Flame Dragon?”

This was a vital question, one that would affect the entire rest of the operation. Jaine, for one, was clearly doubtful Testarossa’s group could win—that was how overwhelming Velgrynd seemed to her. The three Primal Demons here were undoubtedly the greatest strength among the allied forces right now, but that made this question all the more important. If Testarossa and the demons fell, that would be the end for everyone else on hand as well.

“To be honest... I don’t think we can, no.”

“Well! In *that* case, we must dedicate ourselves to defense, not attack. Instead of needlessly provoking them, would it not be better to wait here for His Majesty Rimuru’s strategy to succeed?”

If there’s no chance of victory, stall for time. That was Jaine’s argument, and while it seemed sound enough, it was hard for the Rimuru camp to accept.

“Unfortunately, that’s not an option. If we leave Lady Velgrynd on her own, she might return to the imperial capital to interfere with our leader.”

Carrera sounded adamant about it. Rimuru told her she was fine not to worry about him, but nonetheless, she felt it necessary to keep the Flame Dragon’s attention focused squarely on them.

"And more to the point, we did not come here to discuss plans with everyone. Sir Rimuru has given us his edict, and we have come to relay it to you. We will consult with you over ways we can help, but I want it clear that we will not tolerate anyone in our way."

Even Hakuro, rarely one to speak out of turn, was harsh. Time was too short for courtesy; they had to unify under a single flag at once. Gazel correctly realized this, raising a hand to quiet his fretful colleagues.

"If my master Sir Hakuro says so, I have no choice but to relent. Or do any of you have other ideas?"

His advisors all gravely shook their heads.

"If the Imperial Information Bureau is involved, ending the ritual won't come that easily. It would be best for all of us to unite under one common purpose."

Dolph's statement was the final decider. All that remained was to work out the details—and with that, the plan was quickly finalized.

*

Provoking Velgrynd was no different from sticking your hand in a hornet's nest. Testarossa and her team, although fully aware of this, still dauntlessly pressed on.

"You think us stepping in would delay the ritual?" asked Ultima.

"I suppose we'll have to see," replied Testarossa.

"Not even I could maintain a Gravity Collapse of that level," said Carrera. "Doing that while taking on us three... No way that's possible, right?"

"I think it is entirely possible. That's why I am wary of her."

"Are you kidding?"

"Oh, I'm quite serious."

"Eh, whatever. We'll find out soon enough in battle."

There was no hesitation among Testarossa and the other demons as they spoke. They made a beeline straight for Velgrynd, not even trying to hide their motives, and Velgrynd quickly noticed the three of them. She, too, expressed no alarm—in fact, she seemed delighted to see the demonesses coming her way.

“Hello there. Lovely day for a fight, isn’t it?”

Testarossa greeted her. Velgrynd smiled back.

“It certainly is. But first, let me go ahead and ask: Why don’t you join our camp? As Primals, you certainly possess the strength for it. I promise you’ll all be treated well.”

Velgrynd maintained her casual composure in the face of the three demonesses as she made the offer. Needless to say, the answer was no.

“I will have to decline your offer. I have my own history with the Empire, you see.”

“Same here,” agreed Ultima. “I finally have a master to serve now, and it’s loads more comfortable than I’d imagined. No way I’m gonna give it up.”

“Exactly. But more importantly, let’s put an end to this talk and start fighting,” said Carrera. “If three against one isn’t your speed, you could always call in those folks behind you.”

The refusal was unanimous, no time spent deliberating. Carrera was clearly eager for a fight, not demonstrating the slightest interest in negotiations. Seeing Velgrynd’s magic up close had ignited her own fighting instincts.

Velgrynd laughed. “So that’s your answer? Well, good. In that case, I’ll gladly play with you for a little while!”

That was the signal for battle to begin. With a slow swaying motion, Velgrynd split in front of the demonesses’ eyes—or, to be more precise, there were now two Velgrynds, exact mirror images of each other. This was a familiar sight to Testarossa.

“A troubling sign. This is more than just a Replication. Perhaps it’s a bit closer to Raine’s Ubiquital Mist?”

Testarossa recalled her own fight with Raine. Exactly why they fell into combat was now lost to time, but the experience from that battle was still fresh in her mind.

Ubiquital Mist allowed the caster to create a Replication before battle, then regenerate either the original or the Replication at will. Unlike the Separate Body skill, only one of the two bodies could retain its own free will, but it could still prove to be one truly heinous ability in the right hands. There was no better way to catch an enemy off guard, and while it wasn't as effective against cautious opponents, it offered the user a great deal of insurance.

Velgrynd's Parallel Existence skill could create those Separate Bodies at will, which undeniably made it stronger than Ubiquital Mist. But Testarossa wasn't aware of that, a shade of doubt now present upon her beautiful face.

"What's that?"

"Raine, you see, can split her body and regenerate herself from part of either one."

"Got it. So both of them can function as the 'real' her, then?"

"That would be the case, yes."

Testarossa and her friends analyzed the situation, not falling into panic at all. The battle was technically underway, but they were still debating like this was a parlor chitchat over tea.

"I see Blanc is quite the intelligent one," Velgrynd coyly remarked. "You are correct. This is Parallel Existence, one of my powers. And since I don't want you interfering with the ritual, I will be happy to deal with you here."

She gracefully fluttered a feathered fan as she spoke.

Testarossa was less than amused as she sneered at her.

"I have a name. It is Testarossa, and it was granted to me by my lord Rimuru. I *do* wish you would stop calling me Blanc."

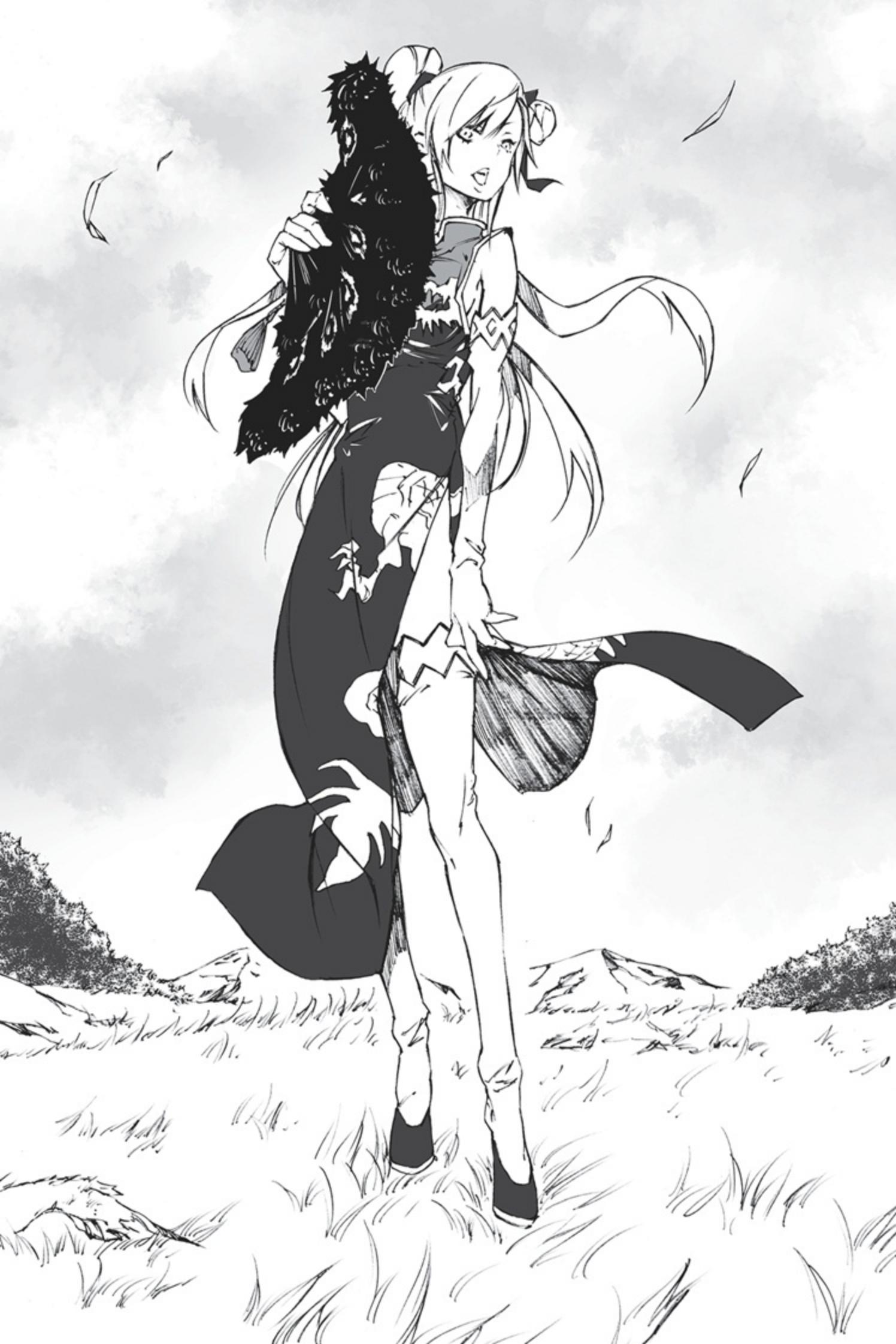
She casually cracked the flaming whip that she had produced from her hand at some point. It undulated like a snake as it struck at Velgrynd.

"Ah, right. So that slime truly *did* name you Primals?"

This was Velgrynd's first confirmation of the fact, and it visibly surprised her. But her

motions remained undisturbed as she nimbly dodged Testarossa's whip.

"Calling my lord a mere slime is *extremely* rude," Carrera indignantly explained as she unleashed her own magic—Gravity Collapse, her closing move at the very start. She kept the size as small as possible, but that only further expanded its power. It was the greatest attack Carrera could summon right now, and it struck Velgrynd head-on while her attention was still on Testarossa. A pillar of black enveloped Velgrynd, connected from heaven to earth—a prison big enough for just one, offering no escape to its quarry.



But with a wry grin, Velgrynd remained supremely unconcerned within her hypergravity cell.

"You truly do reign supreme among demons. I couldn't ask for much more magic force. But if you insist on following the laws of this world, you will never outclass a True Dragon."

As if to prove her point, Velgrynd shattered the jet-black column from the inside. Then she raised her own magical force to jam Carrera's magic, rendering her powerless.

"Ha-ha-ha! Sir Veldora's sister is something of a jokester herself, I see. If magic doesn't work, I suppose I can't do too much, huh?... Well, there are the sword skills Agera taught me, aren't there? Might not do much, but let's give it a try!"

Even though the greatest trick in her book was effortlessly broken through, Carrera still seemed to be enjoying herself. There was no sign of her losing heart as she held up her magic-generated blade. It had a fierce, violent presence, one slightly unbecoming of a demon, and Carrera's own demonic aura flowed into it, making it glow in her hand.

"That's probably the right answer. If it's a technique you yourself have crafted, not a simple magic spell or skill, then it may even strike a True Dragon, the core of the world. Sir Veldora told me that a woman named Hinata proved it to him once."

Testarossa didn't need to test it out. She presumed magic wouldn't work on Velgrynd; that was why she used a magically generated flame whip from the very beginning. It was white in color, imbued with a "freezing flame of ivory"—an accursed contradiction in attributes that Testarossa herself invented.

"Hmm... Humans are real fascinating, huh? In that case, maybe I oughta break these out, too."

Ultima materialized two knives, one in each hand. The blades were a loathsome dark purple, letting out an eerie, mystical aura.

"Wasting no time either, are you, Ult? You hurt Zegion with those earlier, didn't you?" Carrera asked.

"Pretty much. Honestly, I didn't see much point moving my own body to defeat him, but..."

"Surprising, though," noted Testarossa. "I didn't think our combat experience with Sir Zegion would come in handy like this."

Magic was the main strength of this trio; they never put much emphasis on close combat. But in the battle against Zegion, no other method of attack seemed to work, thanks to his wall-like defenses and absolute superiority over all types of magic. Almost no spell worked on Zegion, and as a result, they had to seek out other means. This was their answer. Only by putting their own spiritual life-forms on the line and harnessing their own tenacious wills for their attacks did they succeed in inflicting damage on Zegion.

For a spiritual life-form, the power of will outclasses anything else. A skill is simply another form of the user's will, created from their own desire, and an ultimate skill is the final destination that desire may reach. The demonesses wanted to see how close they could reach with their own skills, and as they concluded, there was no other option but to try it out. So, through embodying their wills, they had each come up with weapons suited uniquely for them.

Zegion's own defenses worked just as well on ultimate skills, but still, Ultima's knives managed to inflict a wound on his body. This was important, for it meant that the three demonesses' attacks were ultimate in nature.

"I tried to imitate Ult's weapon, y'know. My swordsmanship is really just for fun, but Agera's taught me full mastery anyway. Let's go, shall we?"

Carrera sprinted forward, slashing at Velgrynd with all her might without even considering defense. Velgrynd parried the slashes with her feathered fan, a high-grade work of art that could hardly be called a weapon. With its durability irrevocably altered by her magical energy, however, it was now harder than diamond. Thin, light, flowing, and tough, it was Velgrynd's favorite weapon, easily comparable with Carrera's sword.

"What a surprise. I didn't expect the Primal Demons to so readily abandon magic like that."

"Is it that surprising? Our pride is a small price to pay for a victory we can offer to our lord."

Velgrynd, already on the defensive against Carrera's onslaught, was struck by

Testarossa's whip. Like a horde of white serpents, the whip constantly changed its shape and direction as it hunted down its prey.

"Tsk!"

Velgrynd clicked her tongue in frustration. The whip had torn the hem of her dress, offering a glimpse of her beautiful legs—and on one of them, a bright red welt, clear for all to see. It proved that Testarossa's attack worked.

"Not bad, Testa," said Carrera. "I'll stay on the vanguard, so keep up the good work for me."

"You're celebrating a fluke of a hit *that* much?"

Even after this light injury, Velgrynd still felt in control. That's why, facing up against Testarossa and her friends, she made a terrible mistake. She let her guard down.

"It's not a fluke!"

Ultima's triumphant cry rang out just as Velgrynd felt an intense pain in her side.

...*What*!?

A moment of confusion. Then, as if aiming for that moment, Testarossa's whip and Carrera's sword stuck over and over, taking turns.

Velgrynd fell to her knees, not immediately aware of what happened to her. Not that she couldn't comprehend it—she just didn't want to.

"Spectacular work, Ultima. We'll need to have Sir Rimuru praise us for it later."

"Very impressive, yeah," agreed Carrera. "But we can't let our guard down. Now it's time to wrap it up!"

"Right, right! The other Separate Body is still around. Let's defeat that, too, and then let's interrupt that ritual!"

Velgrynd, hearing these voices far in the distance, stood up.

"Oh... After all that, did it still not do much damage?"

"Your poisoned curses take time for even us to reverse, Ult. The True Dragons are extremely powerful."

"But she doesn't feel so unbeatable now, huh? The damage has to be building up. If we keep going—"

Before Ultima could finish, Velgrynd went on the move. With speed that not even the demonesses' super senses could catch up with, she grabbed Ultima by the neck and slammed her to the ground.

"Gah!"

Ultima groaned as Velgrynd unleashed a stomping kick on her, then leaped away, just before Carrera's sword slash whizzed through her position. Velgrynd, safely out of Carrera's range, pulled out a knife stuck to her side and cast it aside. Her clothes were still torn, but there were no wounds left on her pale skin. Any damage caused by this barrage was no big deal to her.

"She really *is* a monster," Carrera muttered.

"Not exactly," Velgrynd lightly replied, a bit self-mocking in tone. "In fact, I'm not nearly good enough yet. I haven't felt the sensation of being taken off guard for years and years... Then again, perhaps I've been doing that on a regular basis, but never realized it because I never paid a price. I suppose it's a problem only the best of the best must face—but I'm sure you understand what I mean, don't you?"

Velgrynd smiled, but her eyes cast a sharp gaze at them, making sure no twitch or slight movement went undetected. The demonesses couldn't hope for her to be so careless a second time—and with that, all hope for their victory seemed to be lost.

"I always thought Primal Demons were nasty things... but not in terms of being a threat. They're just a pain to deal with. But now I see things differently. With your new names and physical bodies, you have surpassed my wildest dreams in strength. That much I must acknowledge."

Velgrynd had no intention of dismissing the Primal Demons as unworthy. Their strength in battle didn't outclass hers, but working in groups paid off for them—an ability that would no doubt work well against Velzard, her sister. In fact, Velgrynd *was* taken by surprise just now. If that happened in battle against her sister, it would have marked a decisive defeat for her. That much was proven by how that last attack from

Testarossa's team had just ruined her Separate Body. It would recover over time, but as Carrera said, disabling Ultima's poisoned curse on the body would be a painstaking task even for Velgrynd.

So she disabled the damaged Separate Body and conjured up a new one—and then, all the damage was undone. That was the real trick behind Parallel Existence. No matter what kind of unfamiliar technique you used to kill off a body, it ultimately meant nothing before Velgrynd's authority.

But not even this authority is limitless. There were still restrictions, more or less—the biggest of which being that each Separate Body created occupied 10 percent of the user's maximum magicule count as a sort of collateral. This was not consumed, but functioned as a kind of maintenance fee, and as the term "collateral" suggests, it came back to the user once the body was extinguished. However, only so many bodies could be created; that was an incontrovertible fact. Velgrynd could create a maximum of ten—but, of course, this would take up 100 percent of her magicule count, reducing her ability to fight. Magicules could be shared between bodies, and Velgrynd figured it would be most efficient to leave at least half of her magicules free at any given time. That's why she kept it to three or four at the most.

That, and there was another limitation, related to how much damage each body could receive. If a body was deactivated without any damage, the user would regain 10 percent of their magicules. If it was damaged, however, the amount returned would be proportionally less depending on the extent of the damage. Rimuru had anticipated as much in his strategy, and in a sense, he was right—with the damage taken, Velgrynd had lost 5 percent of her magicules. By comparison, Gravity Collapse, the nuclear-level strike that required Carrera's full force to unleash, wouldn't even absorb 1 percent of Velgrynd's magicule count. That was how much the True Dragons had to work with.

So while Velgrynd appeared invincible at first glance, she was far from immortal. She could ignore pretty much all physical damage, but if you slowly, steadily drained her energy, it'd be possible to defeat her sooner or later. The probability was still incredibly small, but it was one Velgrynd remained aware of—and considering these were three of the strongest fighters in the world, she really did think they had a chance against her. Calling them "no threat" to her was just a bluff, a bit of psychological warfare.

Now Velgrynd was sure of it. If everything went well, these three demonesses could serve as a deciding factor in her next battle against Velzard. If they could join the fight

against her sister, victory was all but assured. That was why she decided to solicit them one more time.

“...You understand now, don’t you? No matter how much you struggle, you could never defeat me. Don’t you think further battle is pointless? All you have to do is help me a little, and I will guarantee your freedom after that. So do you mind surrendering for now, please?”

This was the largest concession that Velgrynd’s pride would allow her to offer. But it was met with instant rejection.

“You want us to betray Sir Rimuru? My, what a funny joke.”

“You’re definitely not taking us seriously. Demons never break their contracts—you know that, right? Just because it’s not looking good for us doesn’t mean we’ll change sides at the drop of a hat.”

“Absolutely. And sure, maybe you could try bargaining with *some* demons. If you look hard enough, I bet you could find some driven by their own self-interests enough to say yes. But you should realize that I would *never* betray my lord!”

Testarossa, Ultima, and Carrera each expressed their feelings in their own words—and then in their own actions, as they unleashed an unhinged barrage upon Velgrynd. Each one was maximum-force, instantly destroying her Separate Body. Once again, Velgrynd was drained of 9 percent of her magicules. The negotiations were off.

“...Ah, what a shame. A real shame.”

Velgrynd, generating a new body, flashed a lurid smile as she spoke—and then the rampage began.



So Gazel and his team decided to attack the area where Kagali was conducting the ritual, bypassing the Gravity Collapse–driven pillar of crimson that was raining blood from the sky above. Getting too close to it would catch them in the gravitational waves, Pegasus Knight or not—and as their leader, it was Dolph’s duty to keep watch and lead the way. This Velgrynd-engineered Gravity Collapse, after all, was completely impervious to anything happening around it.

Testarossa and the other demons seemed to be locked in combat with Velgrynd on the ground, but the crimson pillar remained as present as ever. The fact sent a chill down Gazel's spine, but he didn't show it as he shouted.

"I can hardly believe it, but that is Velgrynd. You must think that her producing a Separate Body on the same level as her main one is the stuff of nightmares, don't you? But fear not. Know that we, too, have powerful reinforcements that defy all common sense!"

His voice reached his knights, bold and majestic as it removed any sense of fear from their hearts. Even Gazel, to tell the truth, was terrified. A Saint-level knight would be capable of little against such an overwhelming presence—any attempt at resistance would fizzle out against such a huge difference in power. But Gazel did not give up. His sense of responsibility as king galvanized his heart—but most of all, these unexpected reinforcements from his former fellow trainee showed that it was still far too early to despair. In terms of magicule count alone, the three demonesses lost out to Gazel... but here they were, boldly challenging an opponent whose power must be nearly a hundred times greater than theirs.

Heh-heh-heh... Faced with their exploits, a king like myself can hardly afford to whine about my lot.

Such was the vow he made to himself. And that resolve was now spreading to his advisors, and the knights under their command. By the time they reached their destination, fear no longer registered with any of them.

Their destination awaited beyond the crimson pillar, a wide open meadow accessible enough for a large army to occupy. The ground was stained with blood—the final end of the Composite Division, no doubt, after all their double-dealing.

In this vast area stood around a hundred people. One of them stood out, thanks to the different uniform he was wearing. It was Lieutenant Kondo, his presence overwhelming as he shot a look toward Gazel. With him was Footman, Teare, and three dozen or so of Yuuki's former companions; they were joined by nearly fifty Imperial Guardians. They were spread out in formation to protect Kagali, ensuring she wasn't disturbed during the ritual. Over toward Kondo was another uniformed group—members of the Imperial Information Bureau, although several of them were Guardians as well.

Essentially, these were the best forces the Empire had to offer right now, all in one place.

Kagali was located on the outer edge of the crimson pillar, immersed in the ritual even as she was doused in the downpour of blood. Velgrynd was standing nearby, watching over her; after creating that Separate Body on the other side of the pillar, she had returned here so the three demonesses wouldn't interfere with the magic spell. Even for Velgrynd, conjuring such a large-scale incantation required the full attention of her main body; an alternate wouldn't cut it. Thanks to that, she appeared in no hurry to join the upcoming battle, instead choosing to watch it from afar, and Gazel could see that for himself.

So they began their descent, slow and relaxed. Kondo greeted them on the ground.

"I am honored to meet you, King Gazel," he said nonchalantly. "The legends of your heroism precede you."

Gazel snorted and raised his sword.

"And you are?"

"Lieutenant Kondo, director of the Imperial Intelligence Bureau."

"Ah, the figure 'stalking the halls of information,' as they say? Interesting. I will handle you myself. On guard!"

A glance was all it took for Gazel to recognize Kondo's skill. He attempted Read Thought against him the moment he sized him up, and it didn't work—a clear sign they were at least equals in skill.

"Whoa, whoa, allow me to—"

"Enough, Vaughn. You handle the others so they don't get in our way. And all of you as well. I'm the only one here who can take this man."

Gazel was addressing all his advisors now, the team about to wage this final battle together. Jaine was the first to nod her approval.

"Yes, yes, that man is clearly more than we can handle. Let us clear away the other obstacles, at least, so King Gazel may fight in peace."

Dolph nodded. "...Very well. Everyone, listen to me! We may outnumber them, but never underestimate their powers! Form groups of five and roll out for aerial combat!"

Sizing up the enemy, he began to issue precise orders to his team. The Pegasus Knights were gifted at assaulting targets from the sky, free of all obstruction—but this time, their strategy called for using their superior numbers to hassle and distract the enemy.

Whether Yuuki's old friends or members of the Imperial Guardians, every one of them was powerful enough to be considered Enlightened. That would rank a Special A in the threat-level scale used by the Free Guild, comparable in strength to Arch Demons. With the right training, any of them could be potential demon-lord seeds; right now, they were all champions of humanity.

Dolph's troops, when teamed with a flying mount, were only over-A by comparison. Dolph himself was an Enlightened, and some of the Pegasus Knights stood out from the others, but he didn't see any of them beating any foe here one-on-one. This wasn't the product of statistical reasoning; he just had a feeling the enemy forces here were that dangerous. They had a better chance of beating them instead of Velgrynd, but he still didn't think they could win this fight any normal way.

That was the reason behind his orders. They weren't here to annihilate the enemy, but rather to use the aerial advantage to distract them. That, Dolph hoped, would buy them enough time and keep Gazel from having to turn his attention elsewhere. The Pegasus Knights, thankfully, picked up on this without hesitation.

I must believe in His Majesty's victory and do my part to achieve it. Besides, we will have more troops soon!

That was Dolph's belief, and it was quickly affirmed by an energetic voice.

"Gwah-ha-ha-ha! It seems we are slightly late! This big oaf was heavier than I expected, so lugging it around took a mighty effort. But now that we are here, everything is fine! So sit back and let your concerns fly away as you enjoy this battle!!"

It was Gabil.

"Whew! Nice one, Sir Gabil! Lookin' good!"

"Indeed."

"You're more manly than ever now! And we'll follow you wherever you go, so you better be ready for us!"

He had brought along his biggest fans in Team Hiryu, each carrying a chain attached to a huge object—the Demon Colossus, so oversized that it required a hundred people to transport it by air. Its size was no problem as it patiently awaited labyrinth runners down below, but when it came time to travel to the battlefield, the sheer weight was something of a hindrance. In combat, it was a tried-and-true menace—it was just very, very slow. It was a problem, but one overlooked before now since it was quick enough in melee combat.

"This will need to be addressed, but now that you've brought it this far, I'll do the very best I can!"

Gadora was bursting with enthusiasm. He eagerly climbed into the Demon Colossus, itching to score some on-the-field kills with it. As he did, he turned his eyes toward Kondo, only to immediately avert them. King Gazel was engaging him, and he didn't think it was his place to interfere. He turned to look at Velgrynd.

So the "Marshal" was Velgrynd the Flame Dragon all along... But in that case, it's hard to tell what Damrada's aim is. Did he truly swear his allegiance to His Majesty the Emperor? Why did he need to order Bernie's troupe to protect Masayuki? It makes no sense... but now is no time to stew over it. If Velgrynd makes any moves, this operation is over. I'll have to keep an eye on her to make sure that doesn't happen.

With that in mind, Gadora directed the Demon Colossus toward Velgrynd as she gracefully stood there. Seeing him go, Gabil flew up next to Dolph.

"It appears Sir Gadora has signed up to engage with Lady Velgrynd. We will mop up anyone in the way, as discussed."

"Hee-hee-hee! How reassuring to hear, Sir Gabil. Ready for a joint operation, then?"

"Indeed. We will go up front and engage the enemy. I leave the backup to you!"

"You may!"

Gabil and Dolph exchanged nods. As agreed upon beforehand, Team Hiryu would take charge with their superior combat ability. The dragonewts boasted excellent defenses; killing any one of them would never be easy, and each one was generously granted a

Full Potion to boot. Anything that didn't kill them instantly was totally survivable, so they'd function just fine as their shields.

"Right, Sir Dolph, you take command."

"Wait, what?!" Dolph exclaimed. This wasn't mentioned at the meeting.

"Gwah-ha-ha-ha! I am Gabil the Dracolord! Prepare to die!!"

But Gabil paid the confused Dolph no further mind as he made his charge toward his target, one of the men they thought was associated with Kondo.

Gobwa looked on in amazement at Gabil. Her team was the last to arrive, but that was understandable, given that they were the only land-based force to speak of. They still boasted over-A speed, however, and they reached the battlefield just as hostilities began. They had even maneuvered themselves behind the enemy, just as planned.

"If Sir Gabil is challenging that man solo, he must be extraordinarily powerful, I imagine."

The man next to her refuted the idea.

"You think? He looks like a wimpy guy in glasses to me. The type good at clerical work."

This was Phobio, the "Black Leopard Fang" and member of the Three Lycanthropeers. He never did return home once all was said and done, and now he found himself following Gobwa into battle. Gobwa was secretly happy about that, but she also had Team Kurenai to run, a post granted by Benimaru, and thus she had a duty to maintain military dignity.

"Sir Phobio, your abilities are beyond reproach, but I think you need to learn how to better evaluate your enemy."

"Wow, Gobwa, so harsh. Just 'Phobio' is fine. I'm no stranger to you."

"We are on a wartime mission. It is important to maintain operational formality."

This talk looked like nothing more than friendly flirting to the people serving them.

They were stuck in a tense battlefield, but for some reason, there was an odd warmth in the air.

“So what are we doing now?” Phobio asked, suddenly serious.

“We will stay here and wait for the right moment,” Gobwa replied, herself switching gears. “Achieving our tactical objective here is no longer possible; the operation is already a failure. Depending on Lady Velgrynd’s moves, all of us could be wiped out. If our focus was survival, then fleeing is our only viable option, but we haven’t been granted that choice. For now, we must reduce the number of obstacles in our way and lighten Sir Rimuru’s burden as much as possible.”

It took true resolve to make that statement. If Velgrynd could be kept here, Rimuru could use that opportunity to strike down Emperor Ludora—or make him agree to a peace deal. That was the key to all of this. But the moment Velgrynd started sending out copies of herself with Parallel Existence, the operation was doomed.

Normally they should’ve suspended everything at that point, but anyone with enough authority to make that call was currently out of contact. Gabil was supreme commander at the moment, and he wanted to keep this going. Testarossa and the demons agreed with him, and Gobwa had no objection. *We’ll do what we can*—that was all there was to it.

It was unclear just how many “other” Velgrynds she could create, but they were prepared to stop them all in their tracks—and, if possible, stop Kagali from completing the ritual she was engaged in.

“You tryin’ to get yourself killed?”

“No. His Majesty Sir Rimuru would never allow us to die. That’s why I refuse to accept any casualties today.”

The Team Hiryu members all nodded at this fairly absurd order.

“But if Velgrynd goes on the move, you’ve got nothing to stop her, yeah?”

“If it comes to it, we will run and leave it in Lord Gadora’s hands.”

Gobwa gave Phobio a wink. It had enough destructive force to stop him in his tracks.

"Well, all right. I'll just turn off my brain and stir up a little dust, then. I see someone I wanna settle a score with, too, so I better go say hello."

Phobio had gone through the painful experience of being tricked by Footman and Teare before. But he didn't resent them for it—his own inexperience was to blame. In fact, he was even thankful for the opportunity to grow from it. That was his simple, cheerful approach to life, befitting the beastman he was, and it made him feel for his nemesis now that he saw him being manipulated like this.

"Don't do anything rash."

"I can't promise that I won't... but I swear I'll make an effort not to die."

With those words, Phobio joined the fight.

Lieutenant Kondo was up against King Gazel. Gabil was eyeing a bespectacled imperial intelligence officer. Vaughn and Henrietta were squared up against Footman and Teare. Phobio was about to join the fray, while Gobwa and her team were working out their next move. Finally Velgrynd, glowering over the battlefield, caught sight of the Demon Colossus piloted by Gadora.

And thus each battle began.



Meanwhile on the battlefield, Gazel's mind was as quiet as a passing breeze. He was facing Kondo now—not as a king, but as a warrior and accomplished swordfighter.

Kondo, following Gazel's instructions, drew his military sword. He was just as quiet, letting out an admiring exhale at Gazel's stance.

"Hoh... Very impressive. They don't call you Master of the Sword for nothing."

This was more than mere flattery. He was being sincere with him. But Gazel just snickered back.

"Nonsense. Coming from you, it sounds like nothing but sarcasm."

That, too, was sincere. He said it because Kondo's stance was also a beauty to behold—no visible holes to it at all. He was holding his sword with both hands, deadly serious and never letting his guard down, quite a different approach from the one he took with Footman. Even more surprising: He and Gazel were assuming a totally identical fighting stance, as if they had arranged it ahead of time.

The two of them crossed swords silently a couple of times, gaining a grasp of each other's abilities. It was clear to both that their similar stances were no coincidence. Gazel learned his swordsmanship under Hakuro, and he still followed Hakuro's teachings for the core of his style, although he mixed in some of his own techniques as well. This was the Oboro, or Crestwater, a style that was handed down from Hakuro's grandfather Byakuya Araki, and no one but Hakuro was teaching this style now.

Even Gazel, a student of the Crestwater style, didn't know everything about it; he knew there were still secrets and techniques to it yet to be discovered. But as the official Instructor of the monster nation, Hakuro was deeply involved with the training of all its soldiers. That included hammering the basics of swordsmanship into them all, naturally, but it was unlikely the Empire was aware of this. Besides, swordsmanship wasn't something you could just pick up overnight.

So Gazel decided to ask the question. But as he did, Kondo spoke up as well.

"Why do you know the Oboro-style stance like that?"

"I had my suspicions after hearing about you, but your technique is similar to my own Crestwater. Who did you learn it from?"

"..."

"..."

They glared at each other. Gazel was the first to respond.

"Oboro... Are you saying that Oboro is different from Crestwater?"

Kondo pondered the question for a moment, his expression the same as always.

The information I had indicated that in the Dwarven Kingdom, they preferred an orthodox approach to swordsmanship, a blade in one hand and a shield in the other. Does that connect to this?

He didn't have much information to work with, but Kondo was still close to the right answer. But his silence was making Gazel impatient.

"Are you not going to answer me?"

"Don't hurry me, please. Your Crestwater style is likely in the same lineage as what I have learned. That's why I wanted to ask you back—there's no way this nearly identical sword school just happened to develop on its own in this world, too, is there?"

"Mmm, likely not," Gazel muttered as he recalled the stories he heard of Hakuro's grandfather during training. "Sir Hakuro, my master, told me that Crestwater was taught to him by his grandfather. He was a visitor from another world, apparently... and I imagine that explains this."

Unbeknownst to Gazel and Kondo, Byakuya Araki actually had a younger brother. This was the man who introduced what he called Oboro to Japan, the world Kondo was born in. It was half-sword style, half-mystical art, meant to dispel evil and fend off ghouls and monsters. Kondo had been tapped to be just such a demon hunter, and as part of that he learned what was called the Oboro Shinmei-ryu style in Japan, a style very close to Araki's original teachings.

"Heh-heh-heh... Funny to see we belong to the same school."

Kondo looked genuinely amused, a rare thing to see from him. He usually never revealed his emotions, so his chuckling seemed all the more ominous.

"Your Majesty, I have a proposal for you."

"What is that?"

"As a fellow Oboro user, I offer you my friendship. I see that you are more than strong enough to join our side, my lord. If you disarm yourself and swear your allegiance to the emperor, I promise to cease all acts of aggression against your country at once."

"And you think I would accept that offer?"

"I do, because if you give it rational thought, you'll see it is the best way to minimize the damage."

Kondo was right, Gazel thought. In fact, he couldn't hope for a better offer. If he wanted to protect the people of the Dwarven Kingdom, saying yes was absolutely the right thing to do. As a monarch, he needed to accept it without any further hesitation. Now that he knew what sort of threat Velgrynd was, there was just no way they could win. Their whole objective for this battle was nebulous, hard to grasp, and they should never have attempted it at all. It was all based on the wishful thinking that Rimuru's group would settle things with Ludora before any major damage was done.

If I consider my own people...

But before he could finish that thought, Gazel smiled, shaking off his hesitation.

"Ridiculous! If you think you've already won, then you have no idea how dangerous letting your guard down is! Such a conceited way of thinking... I'll teach you a lesson about that!"

With that shout, Gazel focused on the enemy in front of him. All distractions were banished; the defeat of Kondo was the only thing on his mind. Then, with his brain, body, and beloved sword working as one, he unleashed his Saint-level force at full throttle.

The result was a true champion, one who could almost reach the level of an awakened demon lord. And yet, despite seeing Gazel in that state, Kondo remained as relaxed as ever.

"Oh brother. Not as wise as they said you were, are you? Then so be it. Allow me to give you a final lesson before your fame crashes to the ground."

The words signaled the beginning of a battle between two Saints.

Several minutes passed. Kondo had the upper hand.

He had no problem dispelling the Heroic Aura that Gazel released; running a similar type of spiritual force across his own body canceled all its effects. But even in terms of pure swordsmanship, the difference was clear. Gazel unleashed a skill called Crestwater Thundering Heavens, a series of vertical slashes; yet with some nimble moves of his own, Kondo fought back with Shippu Raiha, a horizontal cleaving technique. This was followed up with Shiden-totsu, the fastest thrusting move in his

arsenal, but Gazel parried it with his own Crestwater Slash.

They were members from the same school, so they knew each other's techniques very well—but little by little, Gazel's reaction times began lagging. Kondo had mastered more techniques than Gazel.

“Just as I thought. Crestwater features some techniques that are unknown outside of its own school. Even I, as close as I am to the original lineage, do not know all of them. Hakuro was his name, you said? I had my doubts over just how well a mere monster could ever understand the true nature of the blade.”

Kondo was being honest. But he didn't intend to mock Hakuro at all. The way of the sword was a profound one indeed, passed down from generation to generation uninterrupted. Kondo was proud of his own school, and that's why he said what he did. But the comment touched a nerve with Gazel.

“You dare insult my master?”

He glared at Kondo, his expression even fiercer than before. And then another person joined them.

“Ho-ho-ho... If that, King Gazel, is enough to disturb you on the battlefield, I see you still need quite a bit more training. Go cool your head over there while I take over for a little while.”

Hakuro, part of the rear guard as Gobwa's advisor, arrived on the scene.

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Kondo looked at Hakuro, instantly recognizing his abilities. The next moment, the piercing clang of steel against steel echoed through the air. Kondo drew his sword and struck with a classical *iaido* move; Hakuro used his own hidden sword to catch it.

“Oh? You can catch this?”

Heavengaze, Hakuro's “third eye,” was open on his forehead. It had now surpassed the framework of an extra skill, even going beyond the realm of unique skills, and it allowed him to keep up with Kondo's sword drawing.

“A brilliant piece of work. But you share in the same school as my grandfather? Strange

bedfellows indeed. You may call me a monster, but why don't you see for yourself just how well I understand the true meaning of the sword?"

"Heh... Interesting. If you're that insistent about it, let me show you just how good I am."

Thus began the battle between Kondo and Hakuro, with Gazel there to watch.

Kondo liked his chances. There was no denying Hakuro's abilities; that much he could tell at a glance. But it was an unquestionable fact from his point of view that no monster could understand the true nature of a sword. Oboro Shinmei-ryu, after all, was a style invented for the purposes of combat against demons. It should have been naturally repellent to monsters, and there's no way a monster could master it—that conclusion seemed totally natural to Kondo. What's more, there was no way anyone could imagine that the true founder of Oboro Shinmei-ryu—the elder brother of the school's creator—would be in this world in the first place.

He can use the school's innermost techniques, and that was beyond my expectations. But anything beyond that was only passed down to members of the original family. I don't know how capable this visitor was, but it'd be impossible for him to impart Oboro's innermost secret moves to a monster.

It was perhaps inevitable that Kondo would use his common sense to come up with that judgment. But it was a big mistake, a rare unadvised assumption on his part, and the cost of making it would be high.

Hakuro and Kondo squared up against each other. The moment they were within killing range, they simultaneously launched their attacks.

"Baika... Goka-totsu..."

Staking his pride as a swordsman, Kondo showed off his well-trained technique. It was a foolish move to make, and he had the temerity for it only because Hakuro was in the same school as him. He thought, in one corner of his mind, that he needed to wrap up this duel quickly and efficiently—but the move he chose would do nothing for that. It was a violent outburst, well out of character for the normally calm, collected Kondo. He wanted to show his prowess to his peers in this world by breaking out the best techniques he knew from the start.

Goka-totsu was a stabbing technique meant to symbolize a plum blossom. It was one of the loftiest techniques Kondo was taught, a closely kept secret that would never be found outside of his own school. A five-strike move, it aimed at five of the ten vital points of the human body—the eyes, throat, heart, kidneys, solar plexus, groin, and (as a diversion) the shoulders. What it aimed at could be changed depending on the current situation, requiring skillful technique to pull off. Few of his fellow swordsmen had mastered this art—and that's why unleashing it against Hakuro was a miscalculation.

“Multilayered Blossom Flash...”

Hakuro countered with the greatest of his own secret techniques, a continual, flowing strike that slashed the enemy eight times in an instant, in any of a thousand different combinations. Kondo and Hakuro were equal in level, but there was a big difference in their core fighting abilities—and by Hakuro’s reckoning, Kondo was dozens of times more physically gifted than him. If this skill didn’t work, in essence, Hakuro’s defeat was all but certain.

It was with that resolve in mind that he drew his sword.

“Nngh...?!”

“Hohh...”

Kondo was aiming to overwhelm his foe; Hakuro wanted to deliver a fatal blow, even if he had to go along for the ride. That’s what both were hoping for with this clash of skills, but both of them wound up off the mark.

Hakuro’s blade slashed eight times, like a multilayered cherry blossom shedding its buds, faster than any regular person could see. But they were offset by Kondo’s five plum petals, failing to reach their destination. Kondo reared back, and thanks to that, Hakuro only managed to graze his cheek—even that, however, was an unfortunate result from Kondo’s point of view.

“I never thought there was a swordsman in this world who could surpass me.”

Hakuro’s Blossom Flash was superior as a technique to Kondo’s Goka-totsu. That fact shattered all preconceptions for Kondo, forcing him to admit his mistake. But it was still Kondo who won the duel. Hakuro was brilliant up to the point where he offset Kondo’s technique, but the difference in power was too great. The clash just now had

cut Hakuro's arms to gruesome ribbons, rendering them useless.

"Not even the most powerful of my moves could reach you..."

"No, it did. Allow me to apologize for looking down on you. That, and I wish to ask: What was your grandfather's name?"

Kondo was sorry for looking down on Hakuro as a monster. He wanted to pay his respect to this man, now clearly a better swordsman than he. When it came to the blade, at least, he was a sincere person—but at the same time, he never judged matters based on his personal feelings. That was how Tatsuya Kondo worked.

"Ho-ho-ho! My grandfather was named Byakuya Araki. A swordsman without equal, but he sadly left us for the afterlife long ago."

"A pity. And Araki is the surname of the head family of Oboro Shinmei-ryu. He may have been related to the founder indeed. If he had at least reached the level of Enlightened, he surely would have been one of the most powerful people in the world."

Kondo offered him a silent word of prayer. When it came to his own sword school, he was all business. Hakuro looked down on him and sighed.

"My grandfather was an eccentric man, you see. He preferred to live life at his own pace. But do you think you could step aside for now?"

Hakuro decided to risk the question, sensing Kondo's respect for him. But it was not to be.

"I will ensure you are protected, but I cannot stop this war. The way I see it, the worst thing you can do is take half measures."

Kondo was nonchalant in his reply. Hakuro assumed as much. He was in no panic about it anyway.

I already knew I was going to lose. I'll never make it back to the battlefield with these arms, but I suppose I've done what I set out to do.

No, Hakuro's goal here was not victory, but rather to show Gazel how he fought against Kondo. If Gazel Dwargo, Master of the Sword, could see Hakuro's innermost skills in action, he would be able to understand them and make them his own. Even if he didn't

learn it all immediately, he'd certainly receive some hints, at least. And what's more, Kondo revealed a secret move of his own—and that would improve Gazel's chances as well.

"I suppose I am done here, then. No need for further protection. I have zero intention of living in disgrace. If my last moments are nigh, I want to take as many enemy soldiers as possible along with me... but now is not the time. For now, I need to concentrate on healing these hands."

They were gravely wounded, beyond what even a Full Potion could heal. One of the deepest secrets of Battlewill involved permeating a target with one's own fighting spirit to destroy it, and Kondo's spirit had penetrated Hakuro's defenses during combat. The only way for Hakuro to heal them was to neutralize the force with his own aura. But Hakuro looked unaffected as he turned toward Gazel.

"Now, King Gazel, have you cooled down yet?"

"Of course. Seeing your techniques in motion astounded me, my master."

"Ho-ho-ho! I actually did not intend to teach you that... but I wasn't in any position to hold back. The rest, I leave up to you."

"Yes, Master."

Hakuro stepped back as Gazel stood in front of Kondo. Then he slipped away from the front lines, holding his head high, as if his part of the war was now over.

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Now Kondo and Gazel were facing each other again. Kondo, still ashamed of his own shallowness, mentally flipped the page.

"I suppose I lost my cool a little. That's enough playtime for now, though. Time to get back to work."

"Pfft! I hate to say it, but I agree with you. I must live up to my master's expectations... and so, I will give it my all."

Kondo and Gazel both looked different from before. They knew each other's full abilities now, and they were serious about this. Gazel was grateful to Hakuro; if he'd

kept fighting Kondo earlier, his defeat would have been inevitable. The secret Gokatotsu move Kondo used would've been impossible to defend at first sight. Even if it miraculously failed to fatally wound him, Kondo's fighting spirit would have destroyed him from the inside like it did with Hakuro, rendering him incapable of fighting.

I didn't realize all that driven fighting spirit could be so much of a threat. I knew that was one of Battlewill's most powerful secret techniques... but perhaps I didn't fully understand it before now.



Gazel felt a bit uplifted as he reflected on this. There was still room for him to grow.

"Kondo was your name, wasn't it? Well, enjoy having a taste of my full powers."

As soon as he said it, Gazel released his own secret move.

"Spirit summon! Elemental lord of the nameless earth, come to me!"

Unleashing his power as a Saint, Gazel invited the earth elemental lord to ensconce itself in his body. They were fully Unified now, and they had energy stores that rivaled or even exceeded that of an ancient, awakened demon lord. It operated on a strict time limit, but it was still Gazel's ace in the hole.

But Kondo was unfazed.

"Ridiculous."

Even exposed to Gazel's onrush of energy, Kondo remained calm. Gazel didn't show any displeasure at this, holding his sword forward. Sharpening his mind, he let the will flow within him, pouring it into his blade.

Gazel now had perfect control over the vast amounts of energy being Unified with the earth elemental lord granted to him. It was a feeling unlike anything he had experienced before.

Well done, Master. You allowed me to tap into the innermost workings of this school, did you not? Now, I can win. I can reach even greater heights than ever before!

He could feel his mind, his heart, and his body all rise up. His mind itself was a skill, energized with his full mastery of the unique skill Tyrant. His skills were an art—the art of Crestwater as taught by Hakuro, capable of converting spiritual energy to physical force. Right now, Gazel could use it to gather all the energy coursing through his body and focus it on a single target. Tyrant allowed him to put it all together, letting it grow into the best possible strike he could manage.

He was sure no one could defeat his sword—and now he made his move. A strike of divine speed. But it never reached Kondo. There was a small *bang*, and Gazel fell to his knees with a clatter.

"Kah..."

Blood poured out of his mouth as he looked down, dumbfounded at the red streak spreading across his stomach. Kondo's Nambu semiautomatic handgun was in his right hand, a cloud of gunpowder smoke billowing from it. The bullet that felled Gazel had been fired from that very gun.

"Where... is your pride as a swordsman...?"

Gazel spat out blood as he spoke, his face contorted with anger and humiliation. But Kondo couldn't have cared less.

"I told you I was done with playtime. Pride is useless in a battle. My duty is to win by any means necessary."

His voice was cold, a completely different tone from the person so concerned with his sword technique a moment ago.

"Nonsense! This much won't be the end of me..."

Gazel tried to stand up, a look of desperation on his face. But he couldn't move his body the way he wanted—and soon, he was on the ground again. And no wonder: It was no mere bullet Kondo shot him with, but a Necrosis Bullet, a special type that contained Kondo's own will.

It wasn't driven by something he borrowed from Emperor Ludora, but rather an ultimate skill he had manifested on his own. Kondo had literally used his own power to awaken himself into an ultimate skill. This skill was Sandalphon, Lord of Judgment, and the command it held over battle made it supremely strong. It allowed him to fight on behalf of Emperor Ludora—a human being who desired to attain the throne of God himself. Sandalphon was what powered his Necrosis Bullets, which could destroy the veins and outlets through which magic flowed in the target's body, allowing him to kill even spiritual life-forms.

Gazel was no weakling. In fact, he was one of the strongest people in the world. If the conditions were right, he could even defeat an awakened demon lord. But against Kondo, there was a strength barrier that not even he could ever overcome. It all came down to the presence, or lack thereof, of an ultimate skill. In that respect, the duel was decided even before it took place.

"Don't waste your time. I have no intention of killing you, Your Majesty. I will detain you for the time being, but when everything is settled, I promise you will be released."

Kondo's voice was calm. He wasn't lying, but—naturally—he wasn't telling the complete truth, either. Gazel *would* be released, but only after a Dominion Bullet allowed Kondo to exercise his full domination over him. This was what he used to take control of Kagali, and it was also why he wanted to capture Gazel alive. It was an act as terrifyingly ruthless as it was perfectly rational... and that, too, said everything about the nature of Tatsuya Kondo.

Hakuro, too, was no longer in any position to move. Witnessing Kondo's strength left him meekly standing there, looking frustrated. At this point, Kondo's victory seemed all but assured...



“Gwah-ha-ha-ha! I am Gabil the Dracolord! Prepare to fight!”

With that shout, Gabil sized up the enemy and charged ahead, leaving the rest of his forces behind. It made him a total failure of a commander, but at the same time, it wasn't necessarily a tactical mistake. The strength of his chosen enemy, after all, was truly outstanding. He was a kind-looking man in glasses, not really standing out from the group, and yet Gabil called him out without the slightest hesitation.

“I want you! Yes, you! I hereby order you to take me on!”

The bespectacled man's lips twisted into a sneer as Gabil used his lance to point him out.

“Well, great. I was trying to act like an ordinary intelligence officer, but I suppose you noticed what I'm capable of?”

The man removed his glasses as he spoke. The moment he did, his entire atmosphere changed.

“Very well, then. I will take you on. But before that, will everyone around me please move a safe distance away?”

He was ordering his own allies, his previous shyness now gone. But his bewildered companions didn't get the message.

“Whoa, Marco! You’re not cut out for fighting at all!”

“Yeah. Quit trying to act tough. You know any of us could kick your ass!”

The man called Marco smiled at his concerned comrades.

“Well... it was a real comfortable place to work... but that was just a front. I’m actually part of the Single Digits—number eight, to be exact. You understand what that means, don’t you?”

Looking at this suddenly changed man, everyone realized that good old Marco was actually in disguise the whole time. They also instantly realized that he had the authority to hand them orders—orders like the one he gave them a moment ago.

“Right away, sir!”

“Good luck!”

Marco’s companions scattered. With a sigh of relief, he turned his squinting, serpentine eyes toward Gabil. He, too, had seen Gabil’s strengths for what they were. In this world, attempting to challenge a truly outstanding fighter with overwhelming numbers was usually meaningless. Marco, well aware of that, shooed the rest of the group away from himself, even though some of them were Imperial Knight-level talents.

“You were Gabil, then? Well, thanks a lot for taking my job away from me. You’ll pay for that with your life, you know.”

“Gwah-ha-ha-ha! Sir Rimuru mentioned the Single Digits to me. He said that even he considered them dangerous, as I recall. But now I’ve been blessed with the opportunity to deal with one all by myself!”

Gabil sounded overjoyed... and with that, the battle between two great heroes began.

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Marco was best described as a man whose main feature was his total lack of features.

He had joined the Imperial Guardians about eight hundred years ago, his unique skill Adapter attracting the attention of then-Guardian leader Damrada for its potential as an infiltration skill. Adapter offered Marco the notable ability to disguise himself to look exactly like anybody he saw. This wasn't like Copy, part of Hinata's unique skill Usurper; rather, it was the ability to mimic an exact duplicate of a given person.

Only so much could be imitated; if the target was someone who far exceeded him in strength, it wasn't possible to duplicate all of that. Still, the more powerful the people he encountered, the more general-purpose strength the experience would grant him. That was how Marco survived the ordeal for awakening himself as a Saint, and how he eventually rose to the Single Digits. Now he had been part of the Imperial Guardians for about a hundred years.

It was precisely because of this skill that Marco could not shake the awe he felt for Kondo. Even if Kondo was a visitor from another world, possessing a soul more powerful than most, his strength was still ponderously difficult to comprehend. Marco was actually the first person Kondo challenged to a ranking duel, giving him a glimpse at his extraordinary strength. Marco assumed he received special treatment due to being a favorite of the emperor, but he quickly learned that he was wrong. Kondo's strength was impossible to employ Adapter on, despite his Saint-level fighting ability, and that was how Kondo easily defeated the top ranks to become leader of the group. Even the Four Knights, all freaks of nature in Marco's eyes, were defeated by Kondo without a second thought.

That was why Marco practically worshiped the ground Kondo walked on. He even followed Kondo's example of sticking to his rank of lieutenant, serving as a similarly rank-and-file second lieutenant in the Empire. He served the Imperial Intelligence Bureau mainly so he could serve as Kondo's fixer.

Right now, he faced a formidable enemy in the form of Gabil. He fought him back with a spear of his own, but he quickly understood that he couldn't win the battle as it stood. So he decided to change himself into the form of the person he believed was strongest of all.

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Moving a distance away from Gabil, Marco transformed into Kondo. The ultimate enchantment Alternative, a gift lent to him by the emperor, allowed him to use Adapter with even more precision than usual. Marco thus had strength and abilities similar to Kondo's own now.

"Mmm. How strange. Is that your true form?"

"No," Marco replied, posing as Kondo. "This is me imitating the man I believe is the strongest in the world. The Four Knights were strong as well, but they couldn't hold a candle to Lieutenant Kondo. In fact..."

Marco took a glance at the battlefield unfolding next to him.

"...even King Gazel, the renowned champion, was no match for him, was he?"

Gabil groaned at this. His Magic Sense skill operated in a wide range now, and thanks to that, he knew all of it. His allies were not faring well; Hakuro was out of the battle, and as Marco pointed out, King Gazel was struggling, too.

"Mmm, it appears so."

"The moment Lieutenant Kondo went into combat, there was no doubt as to who'd win. That's why I didn't want to reveal my full skills to anyone around here. You never know who might leak word out... and it's better to keep your powers hidden anyway, isn't it?"

With that casual comment, Marco transformed his weapon from a spear to a military sword. This was a Legend-class weapon lent to him for the moment, and Marco could change its shape to anything he wanted. He readied the sword as Kondo would, striking just as majestic an appearance.

Gabil, meanwhile, held up his Vortex Spear, a magical weapon that was now the treasure of all lizardmen. His father Abil entrusted it to him, and it now felt familiar in his hands. He had used it in many fierce battles, and whenever it was damaged, Kurobe's able hands fixed it up for him. Its capabilities were Unique in nature, but it was also a stout ally to Gabil, one he cared a great deal for.

Still, it was no Legend. And given that differences in weapon performance can often

determine victory or defeat, Gabil was at an overwhelming disadvantage. But Gabil also had the Dragonskin ability, and that brought his equipment closer to God-class. As he saw it, Marco was at the level of a Saint, equal in strength to his awakened self—and so he spared no effort from the very beginning.

Can this man truly penetrate my defense?

He was pretty confident in his defensive abilities. You couldn't win a battle unless you inflicted decisive damage on your opponent. This wasn't boxing—no matter how many blows you landed, if they weren't fatal, it was all for nothing. Gabil didn't think Marco's weapon was enough to break through his own defenses, but he wasn't about to let his guard down, either. Carefully, he watched his opponent's moves.

"Here I go."

"Yes, come to me!"

Gabil's misfortune was that he entered into hostilities with Marco too soon. When he was awakened, his power was enormous—but he had yet to fully master it. Just as Ultima feared, even in this pre-evolutionary stage, he was not fully capable of handling his magicule count. Whether there was great power in his hands or not, he couldn't use it to its fullest extent. He boasted extraordinary defense and healing, and that alone made him very strong... but he picked the wrong opponent this time.

"Baika Goka-totsu..."

"Vortex Crash!!"

Gabil survived only because of his careful response. In terms of strength, they were an even match, Gabil perhaps just a touch superior. But in terms of skill level, Marco's perfect imitation of Kondo made him far more powerful. Marco couldn't produce even 80 percent of Kondo's actual abilities; he couldn't simulate his ultimate skill Sandalphon, and if he was paired against Gazel, he would be doomed. This bare-bones version of Kondo was on more of an even footing with Gabil, and between that and his defenses, Gabil should have been assured of victory.

But sometimes the element of luck comes into play. Marco looked like the overwhelming victor, but his victory was a close call.

"Boy, I sure can't laugh at Major General Farraga now. Gabil the Dracolord, eh? No

wonder he mistook him for Veldora," Marco muttered to himself as he watched Gabil collapse on the ground.

At this moment, Gabil's fate was about to reach its end...

*

"My brother!!"

Just then, a figure stood before Marco, as if protecting Gabil. It was Soka, whose force had just rushed into the scene. Gabil's own troops were there as well.

"Lord Gabil!!"

"Please don't die, Gabil!"

"No! Lord Gabil should never die in a place like this!"

They knew they couldn't defeat Marco, but still they dared to stand up to him. And it was that courage that saved Gabil's life.

Individually, none of them were as good as the Saint-level Marco—but all of them still earned a Special A rank. They dove into their stores of healing potions, desperately trying to buy as much time as possible. But Marco's technique, modeled after Kondo's, let him destroy enemies from the inside with the fighting spirit he infused in them. The skill essentially nullified the effects of potions, and it meant Soka's force had to be prepared to die for the cause.

One by one, Gabil's troops began to fall. Now it was Nanso, part of Soka's force, who was lying unconscious. The skill difference wasn't that great, but the strength difference was. Even worse, Marco's weapon was Legend-class. It was simply too insurmountable an advantage, and so the casualties gradually continued to rise.

Fortunately, none of them died. Rimuru's evolving Gabil had made everyone under him stronger as well. That provided a boost to their endurance, and thanks to that, they just barely escaped a final exit. The ongoing effects of Marco's attacks, however, meant they were out of the battle. At this rate, they were likely to be massacred before long.

So Gabil spoke up.

"Enough! Enough, all of you! It is time to run! Soka, this is an order! Take everyone with you and leave here at once!"

He desperately tried lifting himself up as he looked toward Soka. She didn't even look back at him as she sneered.

"I refuse, my brother. I serve Sir Soei, not you. I am under no obligation to heed your orders."

"What are you—?"

"Besides! If we run away at this point, that is guaranteed to produce deaths within our ranks! You among them, brother!"

The normally calm Soka screamed out, not caring how it looked. This confused the speechless Gabil.

"...What are you talking about?! It is the role of any commander to keep casualties as low as possible, even if by a little. Isn't it *your* job to abandon the defeated and make sure that as many of us as possible survive?"

Gabil struggled to even get off the ground now. He could barely continue speaking as he watched his comrades fight on. But Soka dismissed his words.

"Then my plan is the right one. None of us are weak enough to be killed by a single blow. This is how we are buying time."

They would continue to fight, not caring if their friends fell. They would use their numbers to harass Marco, being careful to take as little damage as possible from him. That was Soka's plan—the way they'd search for a chance at victory.

"That's nonsense! There's no guarantee that rescue will ever come..."

Now that Rimuru and his other top officers were on their way to the imperial capital, they could not expect any support from them. And even if the currently evolving ones woke up from their slumber, none of them would be rushing to the rescue right this moment. They could count on the three demonesses, but they were currently dealing with Velgrynd, an even more powerful enemy. *They* were the ones who needed support right now; there was no way they could ask them for help.

Gabil understood this well, and so he issued the order to retreat. But his troops defied him.

“No, Gabil! It’s you! You’re the one we’ve been waiting for!”

“Yes, Sir Gabil! Get those injuries healed and rise back to your feet!”

“Indeed. We will buy you time as we await your revival, Sir Gabil. There is no other way to save everyone here!”

Gabil suddenly grew ashamed of himself. Was he the only one, he wondered, who had given up on victory?

“...Ah, what have I done? Very well, then! Hold your own until I stand back up, even if you must do it on willpower alone!”

He shouted it out, knowing full well how reckless it sounded. Hot tears spilled from his eyes, eloquently illustrating his emotional state. The goddess of victory will never abandon those who do not give up.

Now another pair responded to his call.

“Hoo boy. You’re as reckless as ever, aren’t you? If so, let me lend you a hand.”

“The young lady has given me an order. She told me to not let Sir Gabil down, for he is an important plaything to her. So, here I am.”

Ultima’s servants, Veyron and Zonda, had arrived on the scene at some point. “I think survival’s going to be a lot harder than death,” Zonda muttered, but the battlefield was now too loud for Gabil to make it out—fortunately for him.

Veyron stood to the side of Soka, ever the faithful butler. Then he raised his staff up toward Marco.

“I will fight him, Lady Soka, so please back me up. Zonda will aid you with healing duties, and so we’d like the rest of you to protect the wounded.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Let us begin, then!”

As soon as Soka responded, Veyron went on the move. He was a Demon Peer and marquis back in his own realm, and while his energy stores were less than a quarter the size of Marco's, he exceeded him in skill level. It may not be enough to win, but it would certainly be enough to irritate his foe.

"Tsk... Why must you all annoy me so? You just keep coming in, one after the other, before I can finish any of you off."

"Of course. It is our mission to gauge the strength of our enemy as well."

"Great. It's so frustrating, isn't it, when people try to copy our own core strength? I'm going to take you out, and then I'm going to take out that nasty-looking—"

"Got you!"

As he fought back against Veyron, Marco turned his murderous gaze upon the downed Gabil. It was a momentary opening, but not one that Soka would miss. She spoke up on purpose, hoping to draw attention to herself and bring Marco further astray. If her *kunai* reached him, then good; if not, she figured, Veyron's blade would stab him instead.

Marco saw this coming—and so he made the best choice possible. In essence, he decided to expose himself to Soka's *kunai* instead of avoiding it. It was the correct answer, too, because any reaction he'd make against Soka would only allow Veyron to more seriously wound him.

Continuing to ignore Soka, Marco parried Veyron's staff away, reminding himself of the perils of letting his mind drift during battle. *Ngh... I'll finish him off once I beat these two. They're just so nasty!*

There was no doubting that Gabil was the most dangerous out of them all. That's why Marco wanted to finish him off quickly. Instead, he got greedy—and now he had a stab wound to show for it. It wasn't anything too serious, but simply letting himself get hurt while taking the form of his beloved Kondo was unforgivable.

"Let's get rid of you two first."

"Do you think that you can, then?"

"I hope you're not being a sore loser, Sir Veyron."

"Heh. Perhaps I am. But no need to hurry. Let's do our job."

Thus Veyron and Soka formed a tag team against Marco, fighting on despite the odds. Zonda was on the move as well.

"This is quite tricky, isn't it? You're using aura... or fighting spirit, aren't you, since you're human... to leave your energy inside your opponent, as if emitting magicule-dispelling waves. Truly a frightening technique—and since we are spiritual life-forms, it will work on all of us."

That was how he diagnosed Gabil's injuries, and he was absolutely right. As with Damrada's Spiral Penetrator, it was an explosive type of force, a wave of concentrated fighting force that destroyed an enemy from the inside. It was the ultimate form of Oboro Shinmei-ryu—or Battlewill, as it would be called here—and it functioned as a sword honed for dispelling evil. That's why no healing potion that worked using magicules could handle its wounds.

But Zonda could heal them. Skillfully manipulating the magicules, he could adjust them to soothe the disturbed spiritual force, neutralizing the fighting force Marco implanted inside and restoring the normal flow of spirit within Gabil's body. Gabil, too, wasn't just lying there and waiting to recover; he intensely hoped for greater healing power than before, and that wish was about to manifest a new ability within him.

And yet, even in this most unpredictable of situations, Marco did something even more unexpected. He stood up straight, going out of his fighting stance.

"Well, great, I'm out of time. I've received the order to return, so I suppose we'll have to save this for next time."

As soon as Marco made that statement, he teleported himself out of there before awaiting a reply. Somehow, Gabil and his crew found a way to survive.



Vaughn was struggling against Footman—or, perhaps, "struggling" was too polite a way to put it. He was Enlightened himself, and confident enough in his powers, but Footman had a magicule count large enough to easily overwhelm him. Vaughn might've had a Legend-class suit of armor and war lance, which no doubt contributed to the bottom line for him, but his foe still seemed so distressingly out of reach.

The only reason why he was still in this fight was because Footman had lost all rational thought. That, and Phobio's contribution was a big part of it.

"Phobio, the Black Leopard Fang, is here to help!"

At first Vaughn was suspicious of the man who burst in shouting that. But then he remembered who he really was.

The Black Leopard Fang... Ah, yes, one of the demon lord Carillon's Three Lycanthropeers! That's right—Carillon has surrendered to the demon lord Milim, and Milim herself has formed an alliance with Lord Rimuru...

He was not an enemy, in other words, and so Vaughn welcomed the assistance.

"Glad to see you. I was just thinking it'd be tough to go on much longer on my own."

"I'll bet. Honestly, I wasn't too sure about my chances solo, either."

Phobio had reflected on his own attitude, regretting some of his past mistakes, and now he was calmly evaluating his abilities. Thus, he instinctively realized that even if he went all out and Animalized himself at full force, he still couldn't beat Footman. So he put aside his pride and opted to fight together with Vaughn.

Footman was powerful, but because he was no longer capable of logical thought, his attacks were striking a monotonous note. It was still enough to gravely wound Vaughn and Phobio, but they were managing to stay on their feet. They couldn't hope for victory like this, but the word "retreat" wasn't in their vocabulary. Their friends, after all, were fighting to the death right next to them.

Teare, the other clown, was engaged with Henrietta, knight assassin of Dwargon, with Gobwa and her troops pitching in. They were a small group of elites attempting to capture Teare all by herself—but something was rather strange with her.

"I'm really sorry about this, okay? I don't like this very much, either; but it's an order. I'm trying my best not to kill anyone, so try and do something to stop me, all right?!"

Her fighting was as lethal as ever, but she sounded very earnest about that. In fact, despite receiving her orders to fight from Kagali, Teare still retained her own free will. She couldn't defy the order, but she understood that Kagali was manipulating her mind. She was an unwilling participant, in other words, and she wasn't volunteering

to be here at all. That was why she was trying not to exercise her full force—joining the fight, following the orders to the letter, but still giving Henrietta and the rest the chance to stop her. In response, Henrietta was attempting a capture operation... but despite Teare trying to go easy, the difference in strength was still too great to overcome, and they had achieved little so far.

“And sorry to you, too, okay? I know I took advantage of you before, but I’m not trying to trick you this time!”

Having Teare address him enraged Phobio. He and Vaughn realized from an early point that Footman’s reason had left him because Teare wanted to keep anyone from dying. They hadn’t noticed when they first met, but Footman was emitting the same kind of atmosphere as Carillon, someone Phobio respected greatly, and thus he knew he’d never win in a proper fight.

So Phobio, for his part, was thankful to Teare for that. But:

“Shut up! Quit reminding me of my darker hours. You don’t need to spell it out—I’m glad you put him in berserker mode for me!”

“Right? You guys are so weak, if Footman was serious about this, you’d be dead by now!”

Teare sounded so innocent as she lashed back at Phobio. She didn’t mean any malice by it; she believed every word of it. That’s what made Phobio so angry about it—but right now, complaining was about all he could do.

“Impudent little brat...”

“Oh, quiet down, you! Work harder for us, then! Be a little more lenient!”

All he and Vaughn could do right now was just sigh and say, in so many words, “We’ll get back at you later!”

Things remained tough all around.

Gobwa, for her part, was trying to find a breakthrough and help out any allies who needed her assistance. That was what made her decide this was the best place to go—

but things were never going to be easy.

Teare had no interest in fighting, but she couldn't disobey orders. Gobwa assumed that meant she'd be easy to capture, and she wasn't wrong to think that. The only reason it wasn't going well was because Teare and Footman were just too strong.

The latter could easily break through their metal nets; nothing half-hearted worked against him, and knocking him unconscious seemed beyond impossible. It took two strong men in Vaughn and Phobio to simply keep him in place. Meanwhile Henrietta considered herself a speedy fighter, but not even she could keep up with Teare—and Gobwa couldn't lay a finger on her. She tried casting her net on her, but it seemed unlikely that they'd ever capture her alive. Soka and her team might've fared better, but they were too busy fighting Marco.

With all that in mind, things were progressively worsening across the field. Gobwa was receiving updates from Moss on their situation; he reported that Veyron and Zonda had set off to bail Gabil out. Things were back to a stalemate, but given the hazards they dealt with, that was little to no comfort.

Worst of all was Kondo. Hakuro was defeated, and even King Gazel had met his match. Gobwa heard that Agera and Esprit were on their way to him, but she doubted they could slow Kondo down one bit.

"If worst comes to worst," Moss told her, *"I'll go out."* His role was to assess the war situation on behalf of Benimaru, with Gobwa formulating a strategy based on his findings. Even now, her hands full dealing with Teare, Gobwa was still giving a continual stream of instructions—and it was only possible thanks to Moss's support. If he was forced to join the fray as well, the entire front line would collapse in a hurry.

"Wait a moment, please. If worst comes to worst, I'll ask you for that... but do you think you could even do anything?"

"...I will do my best."

Not even Moss could win, then? The thought depressed Gobwa. Moss was a very confident man, one who treated everyone except for a very few (Testarossa chief among them) with supreme arrogance. Now even he was giving vague assurances at best. It only proved how dangerous a foe Kondo was.

The lieutenant was difficult to stop. Gabil wasn't back on the front lines yet. Gobwa's

team was a long way from capturing Teare and Footman. All of this made it impossible to disrupt Kagali's ritual. Gadora was there, but he was busy waging a war of words against Velgrynd. If she decided to enter the fray, the moment would spell defeat for them all.

It couldn't be much worse. Now we know how much we've been relying on Sir Rimuru and Sir Benimaru this whole time...

Gobwa had her regrets, but realizing that now wouldn't help matters. That was why she couldn't afford to give up.

It's not over yet. The fact that Lady Velgrynd hasn't acted yet proves that the demons are giving their best effort against her. The difference in strength must be massive, but they're still holding out for us. I'd never allow us to give up the fight before them!

She recalled those proud, lofty demonesses. They hated to lose, and even though they were relatively new to Tempest, they had already been appointed to the Twelve Lordly Guardians, among the highest in their government. Their strength was beyond Gobwa's imagination, but when Velgrynd was the opponent, the despair was palpable. The mere fact they were still fighting against her was amazing in itself.

We can't lose to them, Gobwa thought. Firing herself up further, she resumed her attempted capture of Teare.



A man stood before Kondo—Agera, dressed casually like a samurai.

“Go ahead, Agera! I won’t get in your way.”

Esprit bowed out, focused on healing Gazel and Hakuro. Agera just shook his head at her. Esprit was always this way—always carrying on, trying to swoop in to grab the kudos when she could. It was clear she was running from battle because she saw no way to beat Kondo. The quintessential demon, one could say.

So Agera paid her no further mind and pointed his sword at Kondo. For three hundred years, no one had defeated him in battle. He knew Kondo defeated the great swordsmen Hakuro and Gazel, and the thought made his blood boil.

“You were Kondo? Your skill makes me sigh in admiration. I, too, live by the way of the

sword... and I would be delighted to compete against you."

In a no-holds-barred match, Agera knew he couldn't beat Kondo. Hakuro only managed to land a few choice blows because Kondo kept their battle strictly to sword-fighting. Otherwise, even if Gazel and Hakuro took him on at once, they'd be quickly dispatched with Kondo not even taking a scratch.

That was why he was making this proposal, as desperate as it seemed, but Agera was convinced Kondo would agree to it. That's because he sensed something oddly nostalgic in his swordsmanship.

"Lord Agera... So you've mastered the sword after all?"

Hakuro interrupted before Kondo could answer.

"Mm? What do you mean 'after all'?"

"Ah... Well, you do seem to resemble someone I know, you see..."

Hakuro stammered a bit as Agera looked quizzically at him. In fact, Hakuro's grandfather and Agera were practically the spitting images of each other. It wasn't just a matter of their faces—they had the same physique, the same atmosphere, and the same inscrutable mannerisms.

"Do I? Well, unfortunately, I do not think we have met before. I have no memory of meeting you since I was born into this world three hundred years ago... and I cannot say if I've 'mastered the sword' at all. I have merely resolved to fight with this blade for all of my life."

Agera gave him a calm smile. To him, the sword was everything.

"I see... Please, don't mind me, then."

Hakuro waved him off, stifling the assorted thoughts floating through his head. He had a suspicion Agera was the reincarnation of his grandfather, but he had no solid proof. And if Agera *was* Byakuya Araki, it was nothing Kondo needed to care about. Hakuro had never beaten his grandfather, but he was still just a human being.

No matter what the answer to this riddle was, it wouldn't help turn the tables on this fight. The only way to win was to defeat Kondo through sheer ability.

“This other person, Lord Hakuro...”

“Yes, it was my grandfather.”

Hakuro whispered the answer to Gabil’s groaned question.

“By the way,” Esprit chimed in, “did your grandfather die three hundred years ago, Hakuro?”

“Indeed he did.”

“Then maybe it’s possible, I think. He was born as a demon looking just like that, and he was even carrying a sword from the get-go. Lady Carrera has a knack for attracting souls gifted in the martial arts, too. If there was some sort of connection, I wouldn’t be surprised at all.”

“I see. Well, if that’s the case, would he perhaps know some secret arts that not even you do, Sir Hakuro?”

“I’m not sure. I never fully mastered it myself, but among the techniques he showed me, he said that the Multilayered Blossom Flash was the best...”

Now they were striking up a conversation. Hakuro and his cohorts had already done their best, and it wasn’t good enough. So they sat back, ready to watch how this turned out. And even though he knew this wasn’t the time for it, Hakuro was curious about Agera’s true identity—and Gazel, too, was curious about Hakuro’s long-lost mentor.

Esprit, meanwhile, was healing both of them. Her “I’m working!!” dedication to her job was impressive; even Agera had to take his hat off to her. But Agera had other concerns.

Kondo wasn’t disturbing their conversation at all, looking fully relaxed as he observed Agera. His job was to eliminate anyone who tried to interfere with Kagali’s ritual; he had already picked out the most useful-looking enemies, and he had no intention of killing everybody on the scene. So he decided to attend to Agera, not letting himself panic. He only took serious measures against Gazel because leaving him unattended would have been too dangerous. If a Saint equivalent to him had been granted techniques from Hakuro, there was no absolute guarantee he could win. Kondo’s job, as a result, was to prioritize winning—in other words, do his job. Against a clearly inferior opponent like Agera, he didn’t mind playing around a little bit.

But this was quite an unusual decision for him to make. He was a rationalist, always devoted to doing the job, and he hated wasting effort on unimportant things. His only weakness in that respect was his pride in the school of swordsmanship he studied under.

Look at me... Still too naïve to let go of my personal feelings...

But despite his misgivings, his curiosity still won out.

“All right, I’ll play along”—he was just about to say it, but he wasn’t foolish enough not to keep an eye on his surroundings. Thus, out the corner of his eye, he saw Velgrynd go on the move. Kagali’s forbidden curse Dead Birthday was still in progress, but it looked like events were moving along now. Kondo would have to go on the move as well, whether he wanted to or not.

“Sorry. I want to take you on, but my work comes first.”

He put away his military sword as he gave Agera the news. He couldn’t have been looking down upon the demon more—but even though he knew that, Agera could do nothing to stop him. And as he watched Kondo stride away, he couldn’t help but break out in a cold sweat.

“I suppose,” he muttered in frustration, “I’ll live to see another day after all.”



Gadora was expending a mighty effort fighting alone against Velgrynd. Not that he was fighting at all, however. If he had been, he would’ve been smashed to pieces in a single blow, no matter how wondrous and state-of-the-art his Demon Colossus was. He knew his place, and he wasn’t about to try anything so foolish. Instead, he was letting his curiosity guide him as he questioned Velgrynd.

“Not even I knew until now that the Marshal was Lady Velgrynd the Flame Dragon, Sir Veldora’s elder sister. No wonder you’re such a beauty.”

That was where his praise of her began. He kept up the flattery, attracting her attention and leading her into further conversation.

“I’m sure you didn’t know. I’ve only started to show my face around you recently.”

She decided to respond to it—and that was bad luck for her, because now she had to keep up her part of the conversation for as long as Gadora willed it. This was the best way he knew to buy time for his side, and plainly it was working brilliantly, because Gadora was still alive.

Velgrynd, however, had her own agenda.

“...I see. So you’ve been supporting His Majesty the Emperor the whole time up to now? Playing the role of so many Marshals across so many generations... I, Gadora, could not possibly be more impressed!”

“Yes, well, I’d occasionally go a few centuries without speaking in public, you know. I wouldn’t exactly call it anything as difficult as that.”

Velgrynd was politely holding up her part of the chat, but even she was showing signs of fatigue. This barrage of questions was starting to get on her nerves... and that was why she began to unintentionally complain a bit.

“But you know, you really are shameless, aren’t you? I’ve been allowing you to pester me with questions because Ludora likes you a lot, but I wasn’t expecting quite *this* many.”

“Ah, how delighted I am to hear the compliment!”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

Velgrynd looked all but disgusted. For her, crushing Gadora would be an easy task—but she already had four Separate Bodies active, and she hesitated to break out another one just for Gadora’s sake. As long as he didn’t mess around with the ritual, she was more or less all right with all this banter.

Even as Velgrynd wondered if she was making a mistake, Gadora was still peppering her with a bunch of lively questions.

“By the way, I was wondering—why did Lord Damrada stop me from informing His Majesty of what I knew? If he had an accurate picture of Sir Rimuru’s forces, the imperial army would have suffered far less damage.”

“So? As you’ve probably realized by now, we don’t really care about the imperial army. We just wanted a war we could use to awaken the stronger among us.”

"Still, though, don't you think it would've been better if I could have discussed it with him?"

"You're not going to drop the topic, huh? I'm sure you see it as Damrada betraying you, but he had his own reasons, you know."

"Mmm, I see. These reasons... Would they have something to do with the child Masayuki?"

"I don't know. Why would *I* need to know what Damrada was up to? And who's Masayuki?"

"Huh?"

Velgrynd's reaction puzzled Gadora. He'd expected Masayuki to be the key to all of this.

"Um, you're not aware of Masayuki the Hero?" he fearfully asked.

"I told you I wasn't," came the immediate reply. "What, is he strong or something?"

If this was a yes/no question, "no" was absolutely the answer. Gadora didn't dislike Masayuki—he kind of enjoyed his spunk, in fact—but he knew there was no way you could ever describe him as "strong."

Velgrynd snickered at his response. "Well, Kondo, you know... He's only interested in people who're likely to awaken. Besides, if he's going around styling himself as a Hero, perhaps Ludora assumed the demon lords would take care of him soon enough anyway."

This sounded valid to Gadora. Yuuki was using Masayuki to gauge the demon lord Rimuru's reaction—upon Damrada's advice, no doubt. That meant the upper echelons of the Empire must have known all about Masayuki... and yet Velgrynd claimed to have no knowledge of him.

Yes, it was certainly plausible that they ignored him because of his obvious wimpiness. Kondo, at least, would immediately judge Masayuki as worthless to him. He was always eager to nip any uncertainty in the bud before it posed a problem, and if Masayuki was really a dead ringer for Emperor Ludora, it wouldn't be surprising that he'd try to get rid of him. That much is understandable—but what about Damrada's moves, then?

"Hmm... But Sir Damrada had assigned two Single Digits to protect young Masayuki, you know."

"So we could infiltrate the land of monsters, I presume?"

"No... Well, yes, but..."

Gadora faltered, feeling a bit frustrated. This sounded reasonable to him, but at the same time, something didn't seem quite right. Despite betraying the Empire, he was letting himself be troubled by things that shouldn't have bothered him. He wanted to yell at Velgrynd to treat his questions more seriously.

"You seem dissatisfied with that answer."

"Oh, no no no. Absolutely not!"

He tried desperately assuaging her, wondering how she could see into his state of mind when she couldn't even see his face. Then he realized exactly why something seemed off with what Velgrynd was saying.

"Sir Damrada truly *is* a traitor, isn't he?"

The words just fell out of his mouth.

"Oh, don't be silly. *You're* the traitor here."

She had a point. But Gadora was undaunted. Willing himself to be even more shameless than before, he spoke to Velgrynd some more.

"Well, let me ask you a question. This boy Masayuki looks exactly like His Majesty the Emperor. What do you think about that?"

It was that piece of information that made him uncomfortable. It was natural for the Empire to care a lot about whether someone was strong or weak—but you couldn't talk about Masayuki at all without mentioning that he looked like Emperor Ludora, their leader. Kondo might have known about this, although Bernie and Jiwu probably didn't. Damrada, Ludora's friend, definitely did. So why would he want them protecting Masayuki? That was what made Gadora wonder.

"...Pardon me?"

"That is to say, the way Emperor Ludora and Masayuki look exactly alike... Why wasn't that information relayed to—?!"

Gadora stopped mid-question, face turning pale. The expression on Velgrynd's face made him quake in his boots. Now he regretted speaking out of turn so much.

Ooh, I might be dead...

But Velgrynd just ignored him and began thinking things over. It was hard to believe Kondo didn't know this piece of information—but if so, why didn't he tell her or anyone else about it? And Damrada was even worse. She had no idea what he was thinking, and Gadora's question could no longer be ignored.

And for that matter, just how physically alike were the two...?

Exactly like Ludora, hmm? I'll have to see for myself sometime...

Everything had been going to plan, she thought, except for that slight miscalculation where the entire imperial army got annihilated. But somehow, this seemingly inconsequential piece of information was getting under her skin.

"Well, Gadora, thank you for the useful tip. I'll be willing to let you off the hook in exchange, but what do you think? Are you still going to challenge me with that toy?"

Velgrynd had no intention of killing Gadora that day. Despite it all, he was one of the few friends of Ludora who he really trusted. And while he had undeniably betrayed the Empire, she didn't feel he had ever betrayed Ludora.

To Velgrynd, the Empire itself didn't mean very much, and thus Gadora's betrayal was perfectly acceptable. This, Gadora understood, was where she differed from a lot of people, and even he had trouble wrapping his mind around it. So he decided that he had no choice but to accept Velgrynd's proposal. He was buying time with this banter because he knew he couldn't win anyway. If an actual battle ever broke out, that'd be the end of the operation right there. Gadora, in essence, wouldn't last even one second against her.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, no need to joke with me. I know perfectly well that I am no match for you!"

He hid his qualms in laughter, deciding that a defiant tone was important here. The

answer might have been disguised as a denial, but it was neither a yes nor a no. That was left to his conversation partner to decipher—and no one from Rimuru's camp could accuse him of desertion afterward, either. It was the perfect move, Gadora's wit at its sharpest.

Velgrynd could see through all of that slyness, but she still thought it was pretty entertaining of him. With a sigh, she muttered, "That's so like you, Gadora," and opted to let him go.

Besides—luckily for Gadora—the situation had changed. The alternate Velgrynd who was fighting Veldora had gone into all-out warfare, so her attention was needed elsewhere.

"Oh, no? Well, if you ever feel like it, let me know. I'll be happy to take it on. But before that, do your best to survive this war, all right?"

"...Huh?"

"I have some business to attend to, so I'm going to leave this area to another pawn of mine. I don't think the military ever liked you very much, but best of luck becoming a Saint while you're here, okay?"

"What do you mean...?"

Ignoring Gadora's attempt at a question, Velgrynd floated into the air. Having to interrupt her magic flow here would cause serious delays to the ritual, but that much was unavoidable.

Gadora, helplessly left behind, was stunned as he looked up at her. This change of tides bewildered him; he had no idea what to do next. In any battlefield, you couldn't afford to relax for a single moment—and as if to prove the point, the meaning of Velgrynd's words became clear before Gadora had an answer.

"Dimensional... *Connection!!*"

The scene was so far removed from reality, it boggled Gadora's mind.

As soon as the levitating Velgrynd shouted it, the space around him contorted and warped—and from the hole in the air, a vast number of airships coursed out.

“Is that the fleet of airships carrying the Magical Beast Division?! No... You don’t mean that you’ve connected space itself...? That... That’s impossible. Do you have any idea how far away they were—? Wait, no, that’s not even the issue!”

Gadora was thoroughly confused. It was that hard to believe just what was happening before his eyes. Ignoring all laws of time and space, the airship fleet that was meant to attack Englesia from the north was now summoned over here. Rimuru estimated that they were at least three days away, and Gadora knew they couldn’t possibly have been summoned. Magical teleportation was fraught with danger; any failure could kill hundreds of soldiers, and preventing that required complex incantations and mountains of magic force.

With Sir Rimuru, it could be possible, couldn’t it? But if you’re summoning someone in a different location from yourself, the difficulty level jumps up by orders of magnitude! It’s simply impossible to do such a thing...

It transcended the bounds of all common sense. Gadora was absolutely correct, but he had great difficulty accepting it as reality.



If Gadora was flummoxed by what he saw, the other side of the equation was even more confused.

The airship fleet advancing toward northern Englesia was enjoying an elegant journey in the air. The sky, unlike the dangerous sea route, was perfectly safe—very few monsters could reach their high altitude, although there were still some.

This was a fleet of some three hundred airships, and they were commanded by their leader, Major General Zamdo. His mission was to transport imperial troops—the thirty-thousand-strong Magical Beast Division, commanded by Gradim—toward the central continent. They wouldn’t be fighting themselves, so they couldn’t ask for an easier mission.

But in the flagship Zamdo was boarding, a measure more luxurious than the other

ships, one section was enveloped in an eerie atmosphere. Zamdo had been informed that a very important official would be inspecting the ship, but nobody told him who this person was. The news came quite suddenly, to the point that Commander Caligulio might not have known, either.

Still, Zamdo was unconcerned. *Heh-heh-heh... Better to be left in the dark. Excessive prying will do little but shorten your life...*

So he went about his duties, managing to keep himself fully relaxed. But then he received an urgent message.

“Excuse me, sir!”

A communications officer tore onto the bridge, an ominous look on his face. The fact that he personally reported here instead of sending a soldier over indicated this was something important.

“What is it? A message from the homeland?”

They had already received word that Caligulio had been handed a painful defeat. Most of the ground forces were already lost, but that wasn’t any of Zamdo’s business. Once an operation was underway, nothing would stop it unless he was ordered to halt. The battle was just a few days away, and it wasn’t like panicking would allow Zamdo to call anything off.

To tell the truth, however, Zamdo was internally hoping for a stop-down order to come at once. He hadn’t told any soldiers about the ground losses, but if word got out, it could gravely affect morale and the success rate of their operation. Better to pull back and start over than take that risk, he thought—but since some would take that as a sign of weakness, Zamdo couldn’t make the call on his own.

Gradim, commander of the forces they were transporting, wasn’t the type of person Zamdo was good at dealing with. That’s why Zamdo was hoping against hope that this was a stop-down order. Instead, it was nothing like he ever imagined.

“The... The Marshal is coming!”

“Wh-what!?” Zamdo shouted back, in no small part because he didn’t even know the Marshal was on board.

S-so that's the VIP I was told about...?! Ridiculous... Is this operation truly that important?!

It was *important*, yes, but it was just one of the Empire's three major military divisions on the move. There shouldn't be any need for the Marshal to be involved. But enough about that. He had to figure out how to greet this guest.

"All rise to welcome the Marshal!"

Zamdo, regaining his composure quickly, shouted out the order. A pulse of tension coursed across the bridge. Everyone stood upright to give a salute—and then the door opened to reveal Velgrynd, one of the world's most stunning beauties. Everyone on the bridge was immediately astounded. The Marshal, this figure none of them had ever laid eyes upon before, was standing right in front of them... but before this fact even registered in their minds, Velgrynd's beauty mesmerized them.

But she took that for granted.

"Don't just stand there, you silly people. Get back to work."

Her voice was gentle. She knew she had to be careful. Velgrynd was a rational woman, and she knew that resorting to any kind of violence here could destroy the flagship in an instant. Emperor Ludora—his "main," non-Separate Body—was aboard the airship as well, and she needed to take that into consideration. It was a stroke of luck for everyone around here.

"Be seated! All hands, back to work!"

Zamdo's orders set the officers back to their duties. The elegant pleasure cruise was over. From that point on, Zamdo was in for a series of surprises.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Excellency. My name is Zamdo, and I am proud to serve you."

"Oh? Well, hopefully you'll survive this, then."

"It would be a great honor. I will do my best to live up to your words."

"Yes... I'd like to give you a pep talk, but I'm short on time. Let's get down to business."

Velgrynd sat down on the captain's seat, paying no attention to Zamdo's brownnosing. She promptly gave an order to Zamdo, who hurriedly got to his feet.

"Call Commander Gradim in here. I don't wanna have to keep explaining matters over and over."

"Right away!"

Zamdo glanced at an officer. He immediately set up a visual link to the ship Gradim was aboard. Within a few minutes, Gradim was on the display.

"Heavens. You are even more beautiful than I thought."

At first sight of Velgrynd, Gradim thought that she looked remarkably easy to handle in a fight. So he couldn't help but wonder:

Why? Why is a woman like this said to be stronger than I am?

Her body was supple and soft, no excess fat or muscle at all. Strength was not the kind of aura she emitted. Some people, he thought, were of the belief that magical power and fighting spirit were the most important things—but you still needed a strong body to leverage that to its full extent. *A strong body like mine*, he thought, proud of himself. That's why Velgrynd looked so weak to him—the textbook jock attitude.

Velgrynd, meanwhile, had little interest in thinking deeply about Gradim. His strength, at least, was the real thing, and she wanted to use him to the fullest as a helpful pawn.

"I don't need your flattery," she stated as she began laying out orders, her attitude fully demonstrating her lack of interest in him. "As of this moment, our current operation is canceled. Your new mission is to take control of the Armed Nation of Dwargon. That is all. Any questions?"

Finally, both Zamdo and Gradim thought at once. The fact that the order had been delayed so long indicated that, as expected, their nation was facing unprecedented turmoil back home. If they suffered a major defeat, they'd have to quickly review their strategy. This was a simultaneous three-front operation, so every decision they made would take on great significance. A single failure could bring the whole thing crashing down. However, after several days had passed, and with the Kingdom of Englesia lying just beyond, they now had orders to stop. It was only natural that the two men would be dismayed.

“Very well. In that case, let’s return at maximum battle speed.”

“Hmph! If it is your command, I, Gradim, will risk my life to undertake it. But *do* be aware that I will be asking questions later about this operation’s failure, as well as the delay in your new orders.”

Zamdo was clearly nervous. Gradim was just arrogant. Being on another vessel, he couldn’t pick up on Velgrynd’s sheer supremacy through the screen. His response put Zamdo on edge. *Don’t drag me into this!* he thought.

But Velgrynd didn’t care. “It seems that you are suffering from a misconception,” she said, smiling.

“A misconception?”

“What do you mean by that? You think you’re blameless here?”

Velgrynd nodded. “First of all, Zamdo, I will take you from here to your destination. Once we’re there, I’ll explain what to do, so be ready.”

“Pardon?”

“Next, Gradim. There was no failure in this operation. In fact, this is exactly what we’ve been planning to do from the beginning.”

“Don’t be stupid! You think you can escape responsibility like that? *This* late in the game?”

“Stupid, you say?”

Velgrynd stared at Gradim with narrowed eyes, displeased. *What a pain*, she thought. She wondered for a moment what to do about it, but concluded that it’d be better to let sleeping dogs lie. Gradim was certainly strong, but from her point of view, he was not an enemy. He could easily be crushed, but it’d be a waste to do so. And—most of all—there was no time to lose. It was a tremendous stroke of luck for Gradim.

“Well, whatever. If you survive, we can discuss this matter later.”

“What are you—?”

"Let *me* talk, please. Right now, I'm going to perform a Dimensional Connection, so prepare to move quickly once I'm done. After that, I will need to concentrate on Veldora. I'm glad to see that boy's grown to be better than I thought, but handling him is going to be a bit tricky. So I want all of you to focus on dominating the battlefield on my behalf. I've identified several promising people among the enemy, and I want them captured alive if at all possible. Am I clear?"

Ignoring Gradim, who was about to raise another protest, Velgrynd got straight down to business. Once she had her say, she turned her back on them, then placed her hand on the reinforced door leading to the outer deck of the airship.

"Y-Your Excellency! What are you doing? It's dangerous! Please come back at once!"

"What? I just explained it to you. If I don't go outside, I can't perform the Dimensional Connection."

Giving Zamdo a glance that indicated just how stupid she thought he was, she opened the door without hesitation. Then she flew into the sky.

Of all the selfish things! We're just collateral damage to her?!

Zamdo was horrified. Opening that bulkhead while flying at high altitude and speed was unbelievably dangerous. If not done properly, the difference in atmospheric pressure could suck out everyone on the ship. The ship's crew were enhanced soldiers who had all undergone extensive surgery to strengthen themselves, but Zamdo, as a scientist, was just an ordinary man. The low outdoor temperature would weaken him, and the lack of oxygen could even kill him. The same was also true for the magic conjurers under his command.

Thus he was in a hurry to close the door as soon as possible. But his fears were unfounded. Velgrynd had cast Dominate Space to prevent any impact on the airship.

But before Zamdo could demonstrate any surprise, an even greater shock struck him—him and all of his staff.

With a snap of the fingers, Velgrynd floated into the sky. And the next moment...

"Dimensional... Connection!!"

A huge distortion in space appeared in front of her.

“No...”

“I—I can’t believe it. Spatial oscillation detected. It seems that our local space-time continuum is being affected by a gigantic, powerful fluctuation of magicules!”

“It can’t be... Was that the work of the Marshal...?!”

It truly was ridiculous. After all, this was a phenomenon beyond all human imagination and knowledge. No one could understand what was happening, and no one would ever be able to pull that off themselves—so they all tried to ignore the reality before them.

But then Zamdo realized.

“That boy”...? The Marshal referred to Veldora as “that boy”?

There were only a few entities he knew of that could get away with calling him that.

No! Could this woman really be...?

The guardian dragon of the Empire, a presence too awe-inspiring to even mention by name. Zamdo had thought that the Empire was blessed with her protection, but now he realized that was not the case.

As if to confirm the thought, Velgrynd’s smile deepened as she floated in the sky.

“Now, go. Go, and make yourselves useful to me.”

Her voice was unyielding. Zamdo—and even Gradim, lured by the sound of her sweet voice—turned the bows of their airships toward the rift in space.



Velgrynd’s actions caused a sea change in the war situation—a change felt by the three demonesses, still keeping up their fierce fight.

Velgrynd, in her full fury, was a force to be reckoned with. She was flawless in battle. With her overwhelming strength, she shamelessly toyed with Testarossa and the others, not even allowing them to touch her. She never went off guard, and she never held back. Even a basic magic-enhanced strike was incredibly powerful. She was attacking with all of her strength, trying to annihilate the three of them like a berserker with no sense of reason.

Although she hadn't transformed into her dragon form, this was absolutely Velgrynd's full power. But the demonesses were still alive. If they had not been granted names by Rimuru, they would have long since lost their bodies, exiled back to the demon world. However, the skeletons of orichalc created by Rimuru had been made even stronger by the magical power of the Primal girls. Thanks to that, they could withstand the violence of Velgrynd, if barely.

"What a surprise. I thought I would be done with you sooner. You're stronger than I imagined you'd be, and you're clearly used to close-quarters combat."

Velgrynd was being honest with them. She didn't expect them to take up so much of her time, even when she went full tilt at them.

"Hee-hee! We'll never be defeated. Diablo would laugh at us if we ever tried something so disgraceful. That would be more humiliating than death."

"So true. He's so malicious."

"I'm sure Diablo would come back with something like, 'You're one to talk,' wouldn't he? And he wouldn't be wrong, either."

They were down on the ground, battered and bruised, but the demonesses' eyes were still full of life. Their expressions remained dauntless, sincere smiles on their faces. Their attitude was crystal-clear—as long as they never admitted defeat, they'd never lose.

"Oh dear... This is so troublesome."

Velgrynd couldn't help being puzzled at this. But the outcome was already set in stone. That pest Rimuru and his top officers were caught in their Phantom Fortress, and she had successfully dragged Veldora out from the labyrinth. All that remained was to

seize control of him as planned. So she had been ignoring the three demonesses' banter—but the next thing Testarossa said made her wince.

"Well, it's taken a while, but I've figured out how Parallel Existence works."

Their goal was not to defeat Velgrynd, but to stop her in her tracks. Those were the conditions for a tactical victory here, but Velgrynd's Parallel Existence subterfuge made that an impossible task. Hence why Testarossa was looking for a way to break through it.

"Would you mind explaining it to me, then?"

"Oh, by all means."

Testarossa smiled graciously, even though she was being beaten to a pulp. She still had her full dignity, something that impressed Velgrynd despite it all. So she decided to hear her out.

As Testarossa explained, Parallel Existence wasn't all-powerful. It had its limits—namely, she could produce only so many Separate Bodies at once, and if any of them were defeated, Velgrynd wouldn't emerge from that undamaged.

"To be exact, there would be no physical damage. But for spiritual life-forms like us, draining our energy is de facto damage. In other words..."

"Our attack wasn't in vain, then!" Ultima concluded, taking the words out of Testarossa's mouth. She nodded back with a smile—but her eyes weren't smiling as she sized up Velgrynd.

The True Dragon sighed to herself.

This is why I didn't want to deal with Primals...

Testarossa was right. In such a short time, and while being hopelessly overrun in battle, she had correctly analyzed the situation. Even Velgrynd had to admit that she had an amazing sense for combat.

"Well done, Blanc—or Testarossa, I should say. You are right, and I commend you for it."

Velgrynd wished she could recruit her. Killing Testarossa would be pointless anyway; she'd just be resurrected someday, and she was bound to take her murder personally once she was. That wouldn't be as bad as *some* demon lords Velgrynd could name, but having a Primal bugging her all the time would be a hassle of the highest order.

Carrera, unaware of Velgrynd's feelings, smiled wryly.

"Hee-hee-hee... You're far too composed, Lady Velgrynd. Lord Veldora would never pander to us like that."

Velgrynd was now visibly annoyed. "Pandering," as Carrera put it, meant looking down on your opponent and deliberately going easy on them. Veldora was well aware of just how dangerous Testarossa and her friends could be, so he made sure never to show them any weakness—it was vital if he wanted to keep his dignity.

Nonetheless, Velgrynd was far from amused by Carrera's statement. She was being misunderstood, and she knew it. She had no reason to like that statement—and yet, for some reason, she found herself feeling a little happy about it. As Veldora's older sister, she was happy to see such a formerly troublesome child gaining some maturity.

Perhaps that was why she no longer had any will to fight. It was about time anyway. After fighting Veldora, she realized that he was incomparably more powerful than before. If she didn't get serious, she was going to be in for a world of hurt.

So, between that and everything else, Velgrynd decided to stop fighting at this point. She could have killed the demonesses in an instant if she put her mind to it, but she let them off the hook.

"You're right," she said. "Just as you say, that boy's grown quite a bit. I'm quite happy for him... but you see, the problem is that I can't go easy on him. That's why I'll have to postpone this for now."

Before the demonesses could react to this one-sided declaration, Velgrynd's Separate Body vanished before them. It happened in an instant—all they could do was watch.



The forest was in flames.

Canceling the Separate Bodies she had deployed in various locations, Velgrynd united

them all into one. With a dazzling crimson light, she transformed into her dragon form, clad in a cardinal aura of reddened force. The shock wave alone made the trees burst into flames. Veldora, too, had reverted to dragon form, his force summoning a wildly raging tempest.

The flames flickered as they illuminated the two siblings. The battle between True Dragons was now in full swing.

Velgrynd, back to her true form after a long hiatus, looked at Veldora. He, too, was showing off his massive physique, all but bragging about his vast amount of magicule energy.

It had been ages since the two siblings had seen each other in these forms. Velgrynd had met Emperor Ludora a very long time ago. She was already lurking in imperial circles by the time Veldora began rampaging across the land. She never left Ludora's side, never venturing out into the public eye. Because of that (and the inconveniences that entailed), she had learned how to replicate herself via Separate Body, but even that was only after Veldora was sealed away.

By Velgrynd's estimation, the last time they met was over two thousand years ago, in southwestern lands. At that encounter, she showed only a hint of her powers, just toying with Veldora a bit, and he responded by immediately fleeing the scene. The impact, however, was enormous. The energy generated by this short clash between True Dragons created an entire volcanic region in the lands below them, and the ensuing volcanoes were said to still be active.

Hmmm... The sealing hasn't weakened him after all. In fact, I'd say he's stronger than ever before.

This, Velgrynd thought, was truly a lucky miscalculation. Her brother's growth was a joy to see unfold. The way he was acting so disobedient around her was an issue, but if she could tame him, all would be well. And even if she failed, she had Ludora's power to fall back on.

With Ludora's force, even a True Dragon can be eating out of our hands. Just look at me, for instance... Wait, what am I thinking?

Velgrynd felt she was about to recall something very important, but her thoughts were

a jumbled mess. She mentally turned the page. Capturing Veldora came first. She wanted to avoid relying on Ludora, but should it come to that, she wanted to neutralize as much of Veldora's resistance as she could, to lighten his load.

Ludora's at his limit, after all. I need to give him some rest, and soon.

That was Velgrynd's true intention, and that was why she really wanted to keep him uninvolved. There was no other reason—there didn't need to be any other reason. After all, she had a decent shot at victory. Veldora was boasting a huge pile of magicules, but he wasn't using them as well as he could have. That was why Velgrynd didn't consider Veldora to be that dangerous. He performed brilliantly at their initial clash, but as Velgrynd thought, she could defend herself because she had a better grip on her own powers. Great strength, after all, is useless if you can't control it.

Once he joins us, I'll have to teach him a thing or two.

Even now, Veldora would be a powerful card in the game they were playing. But Velgrynd intended to train Veldora further, to the point where he could compete with Velzard. For the time being, however, she wanted to take advantage of Veldora's inexperience to end this bout quickly.

And then... the pieces will move across the game board.

The game had stretched on for years, but now it was almost over. Victory for Velgrynd and Emperor Ludora seemed imminent.

First, they had to capture Veldora. Once they had his cooperation, that would be their chance to win it all. They wanted to finish this marathon in one fell swoop... and then Ludora would be free.

So Velgrynd took her time, slowly opening up an offense against Veldora.

The fight was beyond intense from the very first move.

Velgrynd acted first, unleashing a scorching Burning Breath without even considering the possibility of a counterattack. The searing light extending from the dragon's mouth took the form of a thin, compressed, super-heated beam. Its fury came toward Veldora at nightmarish speed, dozens of times faster than the speed of sound.

Veldora evaded it. His Cancel Flame skill would make him impervious to flame damage in the first place, but he was still in a rush to dodge that heat ray.

"My. I didn't think you would avoid that. As stupid as I know you are, I thought that would end the battle right there, like it would've before. I see you've finally learned the true nature of your gifts."

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Your breath has Accelerated Destruction applied to it, doesn't it? If that struck me, my magical force would have gone berserk. I'd waste power trying to wrangle it again, so it's only natural that I'd avoid it."

Veldora smiled as he replied. And he was right. Velgrynd's attack had a special effect, Accelerated Destruction, that was all but the ultimate in force. It had the power to accelerate all events and phenomena, thus boosting their destructive effect. What's more, it could also accelerate the target's living functions. Even a spiritual life-form couldn't resist this power—they might avoid simply being destroyed by it, but they'd still suffer from the resulting out-of-control energy. Veldora, sensing this intuitively, chose to avoid it. He had Analyze and Assess to thank for that, part of his ultimate skill Faust, Lord of Investigation, and that was why he was so confident as he explained matters to his sister.

"Huh... You've seen through it then. You truly *have* grown up. I'm glad."

Veldora's response made Velgrynd feel more and more threatened. The dragon in front of her wasn't just a rampaging fool of a brother, but someone who deserved careful assessment. He had accurately figured out her skills, and that meant he had an ultimate skill of his own. A typical attack from a True Dragon packed the power of an ultimate in itself, but when combined with such a skill, the danger jumped astronomically higher.

But it truly gladdened Velgrynd. She rejoiced at the growth of her formerly inadequate younger brother. But at the same time, she was alarmed. Veldora had grown to the point that he threatened her, and that could make Ludora's plan fall apart entirely. If this went unaddressed, they'd not only lose control of him—they might even be defeated themselves. This level of growth was not at all what she anticipated.

But as Velgrynd grew more alarmed, Veldora took the initiative.

"Pondering over something mid-battle, my sister? I'd call that letting your guard

down!"

He unleashed the skill Thunderstorm Roar, a finisher move of his that multiplied the force of his storm magic. It landed a direct hit on Velgrynd, but she brushed it off without taking damage.

"I see. You really have achieved an ultimate skill, haven't you? You have my sincere congratulations, Veldora!"

"You're as formidable as ever, my sister. You caught that attack on purpose so you could analyze it."

"Well, what do you want? I needed to measure how threatening your powers are."

"Has my ultimate skill Faust passed your test, then?"

"It's analytical in nature, isn't it? It doesn't seem to add power to your attacks, but it does wonders for your accuracy. Faust played a major role in you gaining control over your magic, didn't it?"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! That's right. I already outclass you in magicule force; I don't need even more power than that. As long as I can hit you with it, that's all that matters."

Velgrynd smiled at the reply. "You're wiser than I thought. Yes, you certainly have something I don't. That's why I want to add you to our ranks. You'd be a decisive card in our hand."

"Ngh... Having my sister praise me makes my spine tingle a bit..."

Despite the lighthearted remark, Veldora had noticed the change in Velgrynd's mood.

"Hee-hee! Well, I'll have to reward you for that performance. Let's show you how I really fight!"

"Um, no thanks—"

"Allow me to tap the full power of my ultimate skill—Raguel, Lord of Relief. Prepare yourself!"

Veldora's fervent request did not reach Velgrynd's ears. It'd be unthinkable to taste

defeat because you didn't make full use of your skills. Even after that fierce exchange, neither side had sustained much damage. That was why Velgrynd decided to break out everything she had against Veldora—while being sure, of course, she didn't kill him.

A vast assortment of magic circles appeared around her, the work of several partially summoned replications.

"Take this!"

Eleven rays of light—each one the work of the skill Nuclear Cannon—shot toward Veldora. After a moment's consideration, he decided to neutralize them all with Magic Barrier. There were too many rays to dodge—and thanks to dismissing them as mere magic attacks, he had lost precious time. He sensed the danger these cannon shots posed for him, and so he put up the barrier.

"Yeow!"

Veldora felt a searing pain. He had failed to neutralize the attack.

"Oh, you really *are* smarter now, aren't you? I'm a little impressed that you only took *that* much damage."

"Nnngh... I didn't realize you were putting your ultimate skill into your magic as well... If I took a full hit, I wouldn't be alive."

"I was intending to end it just now. You should be proud of yourself."

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha... I appreciate that, but I'll save being proud about this for after I defeat you!"

In return, Veldora launched the storm magic Ruinous Tempest. It, along with the ultimate skill added to its effects (a trick he borrowed from Velgrynd), successfully sent Velgrynd flying.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! What do you think, my sister? If you learned your lesson from that, we can call it quits now..."

"Don't give me that! I think you've just made me angry."

“What? N-no, um...”

Velgrynd snapped. Playtime was over for her. The moment she realized his attack damaged her, she threw all calmness out the window. Her pride as his sister was now at stake—and she intended to win it back with her next attack.

Ten heads appeared around her, and eleven fiery plumes of breath shot toward Veldora. At the same time, she teleported herself, taking position above Veldora. Her foe, avoiding the multi-pronged attack, found himself vulnerable as he looked up at her, sizing her up. He was impressed by how she moved—but, sensing that Velgrynd was now fighting him with all earnestness, he internally rejoiced a bit.

Kwah-ha-ha-ha! I was no match for you before, but behold how I fight now! I suppose I have Rimuru’s training to thank for that, but what a glorious day!

He didn’t mind taking a moment to wallow in the joy, but he also knew he was still in danger. He pondered how to escape. Velgrynd, on the other hand, was glad to catch Veldora within what she saw was deadly range. She was sure he’d find no escape from her now.

“Let’s end this, Veldora. You never *could* escape my full glory!”

With this declaration, Velgrynd rained down scorching hot breath from above—the work of the skill Burning Breath. It poured down incessantly, becoming a pillar of flame connecting heaven and earth. From the outside, it would have looked like a cage of flame.

Veldora danced around in a frenzy, growing increasingly intense. He wasn’t playing around, either—he was anticipating and avoiding all the attacks. The attacks were coming fast and furious, but Veldora didn’t feel it was impossible to keep up with. Trusting his instincts, he propelled his enormous frame through the air—and thanks to that, despite being surrounded by this cage of flame, he survived without a single direct hit.

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! It’ll never work if you can’t hit me with it!”

Veldora shouted gleefully, borrowing a line from a manga he treated as holy scripture. Velgrynd, meanwhile, clicked her tongue in disgust. Failing to land a single hit on him wasn’t something she anticipated happening. There was no doubt that she underestimated him.

However:

This is where my attack truly begins!

Her absolute advantage remained intact. So she decided to reveal one of her hidden talents.

“I’m truly impressed that you’ve seen through my attacks so much. As a reward, I will give you a scorching response! Burning Embrace!!”

Taking position above Veldora proved significant. Below him was molten land, boiling with scorching lava from the fiery breath that Veldora evaded. Even the scattered droplets shooting up from below housed a terrifying amount of heat. What would further heat add to this scorching hell?

“Wh-whoa! What are you...?!”

Veldora realized her intention too late for it to matter. He had been caught in Velgrynd’s trick from the beginning. Her excessive heat attack made the ground literally boil and evaporate. Lava vaporized under ultra-high temperatures enveloped the area around Veldora. This was Bloody Lava, small drops of force gifted with the full brunt of Velgrynd’s authority, and it was pouring *upward* from down below.

With that, the cage of flame holding Veldora captive was complete.

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The essence of Velgrynd’s ultimate skill Raguel was “relief”—in other words, support. Its true purpose was to expand the effect of its target, and for someone like Velgrynd who valued the power of fast acceleration in her moves, it had vast synergistic effects.

But what would happen if Velgrynd applied such a power to the cage of flame right now? It would greatly increase the momentum of the target, amplifying the heat to the extreme. The Bloody Lava would go from two thousand degrees to several tens of thousands, vaporizing in the process.

Thus the scorching prison was created, but its true essence lay beyond that. Velgrynd’s support effect could be increased to any extent she wanted, without any upper limit. In other words, providing an appropriate level of support would have a beneficial effect, but overdoing it just caused unnecessary burden.

The negative effects of such excessive “support” boosts served to accelerate the exhaustion of the subject’s physical strength. It was possible to increase the effect to the point that the heat generated by the target made them burn to ashes.

In other words, the ultimate skill Raguel gave her the power to manipulate all the energy of the world at will.

The red rain created a gentle film that embraced Veldora in its grasp. Anyone who finds themselves trapped in a Burning Embrace immediately signs their fate over to Velgrynd, and that applied equally as much to a True Dragon. Once captured in the cage, there was no escape.

So Velgrynd, convinced of her victory, was about to make her final declaration to Veldora—but then she stopped.

What's going on?!

She began to panic, an unusual thing for her. Sensing a presence behind her, she hurriedly turned around.

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I said it earlier, didn’t I? If it doesn’t hit me, it doesn’t matter!”

It was Veldora in human form, gloating over his victory. The high-pitched ring of his laugh battered Velgrynd’s eardrums. Only then did she truly, sincerely recognize Veldora as a lethal threat.

Veldora might have been agitating her opponent as much as possible with his laughter, but that didn’t mean he could just sit there.

Having his outfit burned made him angry, although now that he looked back on it calmly, he realized that there was a big difference in strength between him and his sister. He reasoned that he had little chance of winning a proper bout—and so, after a certain point, he focused entirely on defense.

This was the exact battle strategy Hinata preferred. She’d attack whenever she saw an opening in her opponent, making sure not to take a lethal hit as she waited. Then she’d

determine the most effective move to make, and when she was ready, she'd finish the fight.

When he fought Hinata previously, he noticed that she seemed to know all of his habits in battle. When they fought down at Floor 100, he could easily overpower her via brute strength—but after her journey through time, she beat him to a pulp in the form of the Hero Chronoa.

Well, no wonder. It was the first time she had ever fought me, but she knew all my moves and habits. I always thought that was strange!

Veldora saw it as cheating, yet he knew saying that would just make him look like a sore loser. The memory of Hinata's smug grin annoyed him greatly, but a loss was a loss.

The experience did teach him a lesson, though, as well as give him some insight into how to fight a superior opponent. Not only that, but as he trained against the demons, he learned how to add cunning to his strategy. Even if he couldn't win on his own merit, if his opponent got exhausted before he did, he could win anyway. That was how spiritual life-forms battled, and now Veldora had mastered it as well.

It granted him perspective that had not existed before. He observed Rimuru's lifestyle, and as he did he became interested in many things. He'd always had a natural curiosity, and now that he had broadened his horizons, Veldora was thinking in ways that he never had before. The resulting positive effects on him might've been what helped him grow as a person—and now the results were being demonstrated in battle against Velgrynd. He knew how *not* to lose now, and he was acting on it.

In the midst of that, Velgrynd unleashed her Burning Embrace. The ensuing cage of flame was meant to kill the moment it was complete—and once Velgrynd captured him, her victory was assured. Veldora was so desperate to avoid her Burning Breath that he couldn't see that it was a trap—but then Predict Danger, part of his ultimate skill Faust, did its job. He kept it constantly activated so nothing would ever catch him off guard, and just now it saved Veldora's life. It had given him a warning more ominous than anything he saw before, so he knew something bad was going down. It dawned on him that continually running away from attack would spell his doom, which chilled him to the core... but even if he tried to address this threat, there was no way to if he didn't even grasp what it was.

Then came the Bloody Lava shooting up from below. Only then did Veldora realize Velgrynd's aim—but now things were getting harder to deal with. It was obviously nothing he could use Ruinous Tempest to blow away. The whole area was under the effect of Velgrynd's Dominate Space, so he couldn't use Spatial Transport to escape this.

Oh crap! he thought. But just then Investigate Truth—another aspect of Faust—came up with the optimal solution. As long as Velgrynd's will resided in the Bloody Lava, any contact with it was dangerous. It wouldn't be easy to evade this volcanic mist, but even if it was impossible in giant dragon form, a human body could perhaps manage it. It meant giving up nearly all defense, but it was at least conceivable that he could weave his way through this barrage that way.

But even so, it was still essentially a coin flip. If he timed it right, he'd be just fine... but fail once, and it'd be all over.

Veldora wasn't too sure about this, but just then, he realized that he was assured success after all. All it took was activating Control Probability, yet another Faust skill. Surprisingly, this skill made it possible to manipulate events in one's favor against opponents of the same rank or lower. It was a shock to Veldora, because in essence, this doubled the odds he'd succeed at this—and since this escape had a fifty-fifty chance of working, that just got doubled to 100 percent. It was in the bag.

He was still skeptical about it—it seemed just a little *too* convenient—but despite his trepidation, he returned to his human form and attempted to escape the cage. Then, in another moment, Veldora was out of danger.

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Velgrynd stared at the grinning Veldora, feeling her composure drain. How had Veldora, whom she always saw as this younger, weaker, troublesome brother, grown so much over the years? She considered him a brute, a bull in a china shop, but she was wrong. He had mastered an ultimate ability to the point of even rivaling her—and amazingly, he had just escaped from a situation that was absolutely irreversible.

She assumed she'd be teaching him a lesson or two today, but now she realized that her hubris had blinded her. She hated to admit it, but Veldora had achieved the same heights she had. Now she recognized him as an equal adversary, or maybe even better.

A calm analysis of the situation would reveal that Velgrynd was at a disadvantage. She had just broken out one of her greatest secret moves, and it had been defeated. All her smaller moves could be evaded, and it'd be difficult to inflict any sort of fatal wound. The only way forward was to wear Veldora down and rely on Ludora to invoke Regalia Dominion on him.

So she adopted a more cautious strategy.

“Oh? Could it be that you’ve recognized me as your equal now, my sister?”

Veldora, perhaps noticing Velgrynd’s intentions, sassed her as he returned to his dragon form. Velgrynd found it kind of amusing, despite how aghast all this was making her.

Come to think of it, I’ve never really hung out with him...

It brought an unconscious smile to her face.

“Yes. You’re right; I have. You’re all grown up now, Veldora. So if you decide by your own free will that you want to defy me, I will no longer tolerate it.”

Velgrynd seemed to declare it more to herself than Veldora. Sensing his sister’s mood, he also felt a powerful sense of danger. But there was no backing down now.

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Then I, too, will do my utmost to fight you!”

Veldora never used his ultimate skill much before. Now he was getting used to it. He was having a tough battle against his sister, but with this power, he felt he had a fighting chance. So he decided it was his turn to act. He couldn’t tap Parallel Existence the way Velgrynd could, but Veldora had a surefire killer move of his own ready.

The name of the skill, which he had told only Rimuru about, was Storm Blast. He’d developed it with the support of Rimuru, who gave him lots of praise for mastering it.

It even impressed Rimuru. How could it not work on my sister?!

Veldora liked his chances. As far as he knew, there was no one as cunning and tricky in the world as Rimuru. He was always glad to be friends, and not foes, with him; his praise was a ringing endorsement. So he unleashed the Storm Blast without hesitation.

A Thunderstorm Roar emerged from Veldora's mouth. Its fury tore through the air, sending invisible rays of light in all directions. Velgrynd only paid attention to attacks that posed serious danger to her; she immediately assumed that these crisscrossing rays wouldn't affect her at all. But that was precisely the trap.

When multiple types of these seemingly meaningless waves intersect, they generate untold destructive power. Much like sonic weapons, they don't pose a threat on their own... but by the time the target takes notice, it is too late.

Velgrynd was no exception to this, totally missing the Storm Blast. It was only through the painful damage that cut through her entire body that she realized how badly she fell for Veldora's tricks.

"Nngh...?! I'm in pain? What did you just do, Veldora?!"

"Kwaaaah-ha-ha-ha! It's a special technique I've developed. I call it Storm Blast, and I'm quite proud of it!"

Veldora had the smuggest expression in the world. His plan succeeded with flying colors, and he couldn't have been more overjoyed. This wasn't a fatal blow, he knew, but he had never enjoyed such an advantage over his sister. Hence why Veldora felt he deserved to brag a little.

But:

"You really are an idiot, aren't you? You still have much room for improvement."

Now Veldora was in agony from intense pain like nothing he had experienced—and Velgrynd was the one gloating.

The moment Velgrynd recognized Veldora as an equal, she abandoned the entire battle. There was no meaning in the outcome of this, she thought, and so she focused just on completing her mission. That was why she had surreptitiously brought the emperor's flagship closer to Veldora in a way that he wouldn't notice.

Lieutenant Kondo was on board, and he was fully prepared. As telepathically instructed by Velgrynd, Kondo unleashed his most powerful technique against Veldora.

It was a blow that would destroy even gods—a Judgment Bullet, a type Kondo could

fire only once per day. Birthed by his ultimate skill Sandalphon, Lord of Judgment, it was the pinnacle of ammunition, propelled to even loftier heights by Kondo's God-class Nambu semiautomatic handgun. Nothing could outclass it, not even his own Necrosis Bullets, and as far as Kondo knew, nobody could survive being shot by it. It could even decimate Velgrynd's replications, damaging her gravely in the process.

Everything had gone exactly as Velgrynd had calculated. The bullet was fired close to the speed of light, penetrating every type of defensive barrier as it reached its target. Veldora, caught off guard, couldn't address it in time.

So it pierced him—and thanks to that, his very existence was now threatened.

At first, he was confused.

My sister turned to someone else for help?!

He had been elated, riding high and about to beat his sister—but instead, he fell for her trick. Most of all, however, Veldora was surprised his prideful sister had simply abandoned the competition with him. He knew she gave priority to her own conditions of victory, yet nonetheless, it felt very unlike her to do so.

That seemed important, but he had more pressing things to worry about in that moment.

Oh no! That man... He must be the one Rimuru told me to watch out for. But he immobilized me with a single blow?!

Alarms were ringing in Veldora's brain with full force. As a spiritual life-form, it was highly abnormal for him to feel pain and suffering. The all-powerful True Dragon was on the verge of a life-threatening crisis, an unbelievable fact that even made Veldora fall into panic. If it had been a full-frontal attack, he might have weathered it, even if it was impossible to evade. But now that he had been completely taken by surprise, there was nothing even he could do.

Ow... I'm in trouble, aren't I? Best to admit defeat this time and get back at her next time. Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Let's just contact Rimuru and...

Despite all this, Veldora was relaxed. He knew that he and Rimuru were connected

through a soul corridor, which would allow him to be revived at any time. As long as Rimuru remained alive, Veldora was immortal. There was no need for alarm.

But things quickly began to take a turn for the worse.

“Regalia Dominion.”

Veldora was so focused on Kondo that he failed to notice the other man on the airship’s deck, dressed in luxurious robes.

...Masayuki? No... Huh?! Wait a minute! What is this? This... This isn’t good at all!!

By the time he realized it, it was too late. Veldora’s spirit was about to be taken over by this man—Emperor Ludora.

Pounded by the Judgment Bullet, Veldora was in dire straits. But even now, there was something that he refused to abide by.

...I hope this is only me... but if this is allowed to pass, even my ally Rimuru could be harmed. I can’t allow that to happen... no matter what!

Ludora’s control over him was stronger than he had imagined. If he got stuck here, unable to do anything, it could even affect Rimuru through their soul corridor. That, Veldora thought, could never be allowed to happen.

So he cut the soul corridor by his own will.

“Good... Good. It’s up to you now, Rimuru...”

With those words, Veldora’s consciousness fell into darkness.

CHAPTER
2

POWER UNBOUND

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 2

POWER UNBOUND

This may have been the first time my anger had blown my sense of reason completely out of my mind.

Back when Shion and the others were killed, I felt a mixture of regret and anger. Self-hatred riddled my mind. But then hope sprang up again, and that let me attain a much calmer state. Thanks to that, I was able to maintain my composure while still acting out in a fury-driven rage.

But this time was different. I felt a pain that tore at my soul, the possibility of losing Veldora completely devastating any sense of rationality. The odds? They don't matter. The enemy must be crushed. That's all there is to it.

"What now, Sir Rimuru? It seems to me that we've been sequestered in some kind of special space. Would you like to try forcing our way out?"

I didn't need Benimaru to tell me that we were trapped. As long as the enemy's objective was to capture Veldora, it was only natural that they'd take steps to prevent us from interfering. We were the ones stupid enough to fall into the trap without realizing it.

...Apology. I am sorry.

Raphael, oddly enough, seemed pretty shaken. Maybe it couldn't believe that it had been taken advantage of like that, but either way, it was lacking its usual composure. I know it's supposed to be a mere skill, but it's so human sometimes that it makes me smile a little. But I wasn't in any mood for that now. My sole emotion in that moment was anger.

So I told Raphael to stop apologizing and find a way out of this mess. It replied that it had a gauge on our location and the Analyze and Assess process would be completed soon. Capable as always, I see.

"We're good, all right? We're getting out of here now, but what we're after is the

ringleaders. Okay? So listen, Veldora's fallen into the hands of Ludora. I'm gonna Spatial Transport over to him. It's gonna be a fight, so, you guys need to prepare for that, okay?"

I was swallowing my anger. Didn't want to take it out on my friends, after all. *That* needed to be reserved for my enemies. They nodded back as I added one more order to the list.

"So now that we don't have access to Veldora's supply of magic power, we won't be able to ask Ramiris for very much. That means the city we kept in the labyrinth is gonna get brought back up to the surface soon, so I need all of you to focus on defending it."

Yeah, that was a matter of time. I couldn't imagine how much of a burden Ramiris was going through. We needed to get back fast.

"I understand, Sir Rimuru, but what about you?"

"I'm taking Veldora back!"

That was job one for me. The rest, I told them I would leave in their capable hands—and they understood without further comment.

"W-wait a minute! Ain't you guys forgettin' the most important thing? How the heck're we gonna get out of here?"

Just when I was beginning to wonder why he was so quiet, Laplace suddenly started complaining again. But I had a simple answer for him.

"We'll just smash our way out."

"B-but that's crazy! I've heard a lot about this place. They call it the Phantom Fortress. It's in a whole other dimension, and you can *bet* it ain't gonna be easy to escape. It's where they banish anyone who causes trouble for 'em, they say. And that's—"

I was glad he had so much knowledge about this, but I didn't have time for him right that minute.

Report. Preparations completed.

Right!

"Okay, let's get going. Laplace, I'm springing *you* out of here too, so once I do, you're free to go do whatever, okay?"

"Huh?! Wait, listen to me—"

Laplace was about to say something. I didn't care. I wanted to rescue Veldora ASAP and eliminate my enemies. And so, continuing to let my anger drive me, I triggered the Spatial Transport...

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...and reappeared exactly where I planned to. There was no hesitation at all; it was an unthinkable thing for me to do in normal times. I still didn't care.

Before me, I could see two True Dragons—and behind them, an airship. I was right in front of the enemy. All that remained was to kick some ass.

But now Raphael was warning me incessantly about the danger. It was terribly annoying. I guess it had a gauge of the enemy's strength, but from my point of view, it was nothing but an obstacle. If I decided to do something, I had no choice but to do it. I wasn't about to start fretting now.

Do something! I ordered, shutting Raphael up.

Acknowledged. Summoning a demon is recommended as the best course of action.

Hmm. Not a bad idea. If you're low on firepower, just add some more. And let's not end there, either. In fact, let's finish evolving Testarossa and the gang—right here and now. I've been putting it off for a while, but we need everything we can tap right now... and then, we can crush our enemies once and for all.

Now Velgrynd noticed us. Her eyes widened in surprise. What was it called again? The Phantom Fortress? I guess she really believed they had us all locked up in that thing. Thanks to Raphael's calculations, it wasn't even a problem. I'm connected to my friends through soul corridors, so if I trace those connections back to their origins, I can easily determine my exact location. Once I had that, Spatial Transport was available to me—even in other dimensions.

Benimaru and the rest were on high alert, trying to protect both me and the capital of Rimuru, which had reappeared far behind us. They really didn't have to worry. I was doing what I had to do.

(Testarossa! Ultima! Carrera! Can you move?)

(Sir Rimuru! Yes, of course!)

(Not a problem!)

(How can I say no to a request from my master?)

All three replied in different ways. Whatever injuries they sustained weren't keeping them down. That was a relief.

So, without further hesitation, it was time to make our first move in the liberation of Veldora. I would have adopted Raphael's suggestion and summoned the demons here. But then I got interrupted.

Kondo was the first to move, presumably deciding that further inaction would be dangerous. I'd normally be well outside the range of his handgun, but he paid that no mind as he fired.

A bullet raced toward me, going dozens of times the speed of sound. My thoughts, accelerated a million times faster than normal, quickly grasped the nature of this attack. I reminded Raphael of its obligation to defend me, and it responded with a confident-sounding "acknowledged." Absolute Defense, one of the skills Uriel gave me, would have no problem neutralizing this threat. Compared to the attack on Veldora, this was nothing at all.

Report. Barrier-breaking attack detected... Successfully neutralized. Additional spirit and magic force-destroying attack detected... Neutralized. Following an Analyze and Assess round on these attacks, they were found to involve the ultimate skill Sandalphon, Lord of Judgment. Commencing countermeasures...

I let Raphael do its thing as I glanced at Kondo, Damrada, and the others. I'd deal with *them* later. Whatever they attacked Veldora with was a threat, but Kondo didn't just use it on me, and I'm sure there was a reason for it. Maybe he *couldn't* use it, for all I know. As for this attack, going at near the speed of light, it'd be impossible to evade if I was too close to it—but from this far, it was possible enough to deal with it in time,

unless I got caught off guard. Despite that, there was no sign of Kondo moving from his location. Maybe he was protecting Ludora, but if so, I figured he could be ignored for now.

So I finally said it.

“Come to me, demons! Call Demon—Create Summon Gate!”

A huge magic circle appeared in the sky. Floating in the middle of it was a massive, ominous-looking gate. Transcending space and time, it summoned the demons connected to me.

The first to respond to my call were Testarossa and the other demonesses. They were soon followed by my two Demon Peers and four Arch Demons, along with the six hundred rank-and-file demons who served them. The majority of the Black Corps was now before me.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Sir Rimuru, I have sent my legion to defend the city.”

Nice job, Diablo. He knows exactly what I want without me having to say a word.

Venom was busy guarding Masayuki, but everyone else without previous assignments was here. Benimaru also retook command after leaving it with Moss, issuing orders to all his troops. I didn’t have to say a word, and they were fully prepared to support me. Right. Let’s wrap up this ritual quick before someone else interrupts me.

As soon as I landed on the ground, the demons knelt before me. Testarossa and her friends, standing up front, were looking pretty sorrowful—maybe they thought they failed to follow my orders.

“““We are so, so sorry!”””

They apologized as soon as they saw my face.

“No, no, there’s really nothing to apologize for. You would’ve kept Velgrynd occupied, but I didn’t know she was gonna cheat with that Parallel Existence thing. That’s on me.”

I mean, if you don’t know about that, there’s no way to deal with it. You can’t form coherent strategies if you try to factor in every fantasy ability your opponent might

have. There was no helping it this time. Besides, Testarossa and company helped a lot—their work wasn't in vain at all.

I wanted to express my gratitude more, but that could wait. Instead I issued a stern order to the demons.

"Listen, I'm going to give you a bunch of power right now, but you have to promise me that none of you will go to sleep. If Diablo can put up with on-the-spot evolution, all of *you* can too!"

Even I thought that was a pretty crazy thing to say. I'm not one to demand things I know I'm wholly incapable of. Here I was, this slime who couldn't stay awake for his own Harvest Festival evolution, and I was asking my demons to keep their eyes open for me. I suspected this made me look like a hypocritical boss, but now was no time for those thoughts. If you can't keep up with me, you're gonna be left behind.

The three demonesses, perhaps reading my intentions, greeted my words with sneaky smiles.

"Can you do that for me?"

"Of course I can."

"Absolutely!"

"As you wish, my lord!"

All three of them looked confident enough. So without further ado, I granted souls to each of them. Failure wasn't something I gave a moment's thought to. If Testarossa and her friends went out of control, well, we could use that as a diversion, at least. I had my priorities straight; I wouldn't be reshuffling them now.

So, as they began evolving, I spoke to the demons.

"You can rampage all you want for me, all right? I don't care how much death and destruction you deal. But I will not accept any of you dying, and I will not accept letting our foes stand in my way. Until I release Veldora, you will serve as my shield to hold them back!"

So I told them to sacrifice themselves, but don't die, either. I know it's selfish, but that's

who I am.

"What about Sir Veldora's sister?" Diablo asked. I knew the answer to that one.

"She's not a problem. Mess with me, and that makes you my enemy. I won't hesitate to consume her."

Diablo smiled happily at this. The others joined him—Benimaru with a wry grin, Soei with a cold one, Shion beaming from ear to ear as she began a pre-battle stretch. They were all dependable friends to me.

"Allow us to work out the other distractions, then."

I nodded at Benimaru's words.

"Great. Now get out there and kill all our enemies!"

"""As you wish!"""

Great. Now I could concentrate on Veldora without any regrets. I turned my attention to him.

While I was getting ready, it looked like Velgrynd had been preparing to engage me. She'd taken some magicules from Veldora, and by the looks of it, she was fully recovered. That healing skill is the real key to her, isn't it? She recovered in such a short period of time because of all the magicules Veldora had stored up.

But now Veldora was hostile toward me. Without a doubt, he had become Emperor Ludora's puppet. Seemed like Velgrynd wanted a go at me, too, so I guess I had two True Dragons to deal with.

It was gonna be tough, but I had to do it. As I told Diablo, if Velgrynd was going to be our enemy, we had to beat her.

"Hang on, Veldora. I'll get you out of there right away."

With those words, I spread my wings and took flight.





After Rimuru flew away, those who remained on the scene swiftly moved into action.

Benimaru began handing out appropriate instructions, leveraging his grasp of the battlefield. At the same time, he sent out Thought Communications to the top brass over in the city, asking them to go into emergency mode at once. Soei dispatched his Replications far and wide to gather information. And Diablo, most of all, was absolutely beside himself with excitement.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh! Did you see it, everyone? Sir Rimuru is finally going to show us his true colors!”

Shion rolled her eyes at him. “You fool! Sir Rimuru is always showing his true colors, no matter the situation. Leave the excitement for later! We must concentrate on crushing our enemies!”

It was an odd way of putting it, but Shion was right on the money. Diablo was understandably surprised to see Rimuru on the rampage for the first time, but now was not the time for that. As Benimaru declared, it was their role as Rimuru’s top soldiers to handle the extraneous distractions. That was the edict from Rimuru, and for his underlings, his word was gospel.

For the demons summoned by Rimuru, this was a supreme pleasure. Their faces were full of joy, and they all bristled with strength, as if answering the call for service. It was obvious from their demeanor how eagerly they had been waiting for the call to come.

Rimuru, demonstrating the sheer depth of his anger, was about to unleash his fearsome powers of destruction. The order he gave was simple enough.

Kill all our enemies!

With this command, the demons were burning to set off on their mission.

“As our lord wishes!”

The fearless demons were now ready to throw themselves into battle for the sake of their lord. But:

“Wait!”

A single word from Diablo made all the demons focus their attention on him. He raised one hand to put them at ease.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Do you understand Sir Rimuru's order? He stated that not even one of you may die. Know that death would be a mortal sin, one that would be unforgivable even if we all offered our heads to him."

Diablo's resonant declaration silenced the demons. His smile instilled more fear than reassurance in them. And again, it was totally irrefutable.

Silently, the demons waited for further instructions. It was Benimaru who spoke first.

"I'd say Diablo is right. You may be immortal, but don't you dare take solace in that. Such hair-splitting is no excuse against Sir Rimuru!"

Just because they could be resurrected after some time was no reason for them to die. Benimaru wanted to make sure that was clear to the demons. They grew quiet, realizing the error in their assumptions.

"So," Diablo said, "we are going to assign you your roles. Sir Benimaru, can you handle that for me?"

"What about you?" Benimaru asked, wondering if Diablo would be willing to do what he asked of him.

"Oh, leave me out of it, if you could. There's a certain rat I'm interested in, so I'm going to deal with him first."

Benimaru shrugged at the reply. He figured Diablo would say something like that, and he was right.

"...I see. Well, do whatever you like, then."

Diablo, the way Benimaru understood it, was not to be bothered. The demon answered directly to Rimuru, so not even Benimaru had the authority to order him around. But Diablo had entrusted him with a job, so Benimaru began giving out orders.

"All right. Diablo, you are hereby free to go. Moss will continue to send me information from the battlefield, as before. You may travel anywhere on the battlefield you like, as long as you keep Sir Rimuru's order in mind."

Diablo nodded, smiling, as Moss voiced his agreement. His replications were already scattered across the field, and his Thought Communication gave him a live, real-time connection to Benimaru's mind.

"You better not exclude me," Shion indignantly stated. She had access to Spatial Transport but could only teleport to locations she could physically see; she wasn't very good at calculating the required coordinates otherwise.

Benimaru gave this a small chuckle as he nodded. "Of course not. We'll be counting on your strength in battle. I sense eight notable presences on the airship, not including Emperor Ludora. They might be a little tough, but it won't be as reckless a battle as Sir Rimuru's. Even without Diablo, we should be able to hold our own."

"The battlefield will be rather tricky as well," warned Soei. "Thirty thousand enemy reinforcements are streaming onto the scene."

Benimaru was aware of this, of course.

"I know. That's why it's a race against time. I've ordered Gabil to stall for as long as he can, so we have to bring the emperor into custody before anyone gets killed."

Soei and Shion nodded at Benimaru's bold words. These were Rimuru's orders, and Benimaru had no other choice. He needed to fulfill his wishes with all his might, and so he had drawn up a plan he believed was the best. On the battlefield, their primary objective was to buy time as they struck at the airship, the biggest menace here. This, they decided, would help prevent an attack on the city.

(Incidentally, the eight presences mentioned by Benimaru consisted of a Velgrynd replication left as insurance and the Single Digits gathered on the airship. These were Lieutenant Kondo, Damrada, the Four Knights guarding the emperor, and finally Marco. None of them were hiding their presence, so Benimaru's unique skill Born Leader was able to detect them.)

Suddenly, Benimaru received some good news.

"...Geld just contacted me. His evolution is complete, so he's woken up."

Geld the Barrier Lord had awakened—and in response, all of his men were beginning to open their eyes as well. Soon, they would join the defense of the city.

"That's very good news. If Sir Geld is joining the city defense, we should be able to relieve the Diable Chevaliers of that duty."

"Can I put them under my command?"

"We don't have access to Venom, so we can't engage in any full-group maneuvers. I will let each of you make your own decisions, depending on the war situation."

"Understood."

So, after a brief exchange, everyone had their roles. All that remained now was to trust in their victory, but there was one more thing to consider.

"Now, are you all able to fight?"

Benimaru was addressing Testarossa and her friends. He wasn't going to quibble about this. He just needed to know whether they could be expected to serve in battle.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... No need to ask them. If anyone answered 'no' to that question, I would kick them out of the force."

Diablo turned his attention to the demonesses. They stood up, not requiring any further pressure from him.

"What a foolish question. There is nothing Diablo can do that I can't."

"It sounds a little harsh, but I don't have a problem with it. I like to fight, after all!"

"If I'm gonna live up to your expectations, I can't afford to make another mistake. Now is no time for rest."

The trio was united in their desire to serve Sir Rimuru. The same went for their own servants. All the demons were rapidly completing their evolution, and it was with the greatest of joy that they received the orders they were waiting for.

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As of that moment, Testarossa, Ultima, and Carrera, like Diablo, had evolved into Devil Lords. This made them virtual demigods, among the strongest in the world, capable of defeating even a Demon Peer without much fuss. This meant that all seven Primals had become the same rank of being, with no restrictions placed upon them.

Just as Diablo's servant Venom became a Demon Peer, those serving under the three demonesses received similar evolutions. Moss and Veyron remained Demon Peers, but their magicule count increased to the point where they were comparable to awakened demon lords. The other four—Agera, Esprit, Zonda, and Cien—had reached a level as Demon Peers that surpassed even budding demon lords. In both name and reality, they had evolved to the highest level of demon-dom.

They were all the same rank now, but there were clear differences in their abilities. These differences were reflected in the noble titles they were given. Moss was now a grand duke, comparable to a king; Veyron was classified as a duke, Agera as a marquis, Esprit as a count, and Cien and Zonda as viscounts. Venom was also recognized as a baron.

Among the others, there were several brand-new Arch Demons post-evolution. They would serve as commanders, the equivalent of knights, and they would need to spend many more years working to attain a noble rank. The remainder of the group, nearly six hundred strong, would become Diable Chevaliers, comparable to high-level magic-born. They were stronger, they were evolved... and thus they could be more helpful to Rimuru than ever.

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The demons demonstrated their willingness to join the battle. Benimaru nodded at them, satisfied.

"Very good. Let's see what you can do, then."

The three demonesses and their armies were hurriedly asked to join the airship assault. It was an order Benimaru gave without hesitation, as if he meant to do so from

the beginning.

"Well then, Lady Testarossa... I need you to clean up the trash for me. Can you do it?"

"Yes, of course. A simple task."

"Wait a minute! I wanna do that! I can handle it too, you know."

Benimaru had given Testarossa the order, but Ultima intervened. He didn't let it faze him.

"I don't care which of you does it, but please keep the airship intact. It needs to serve as the battlefield where we'll settle our differences with Emperor Ludora."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Ultima, I asked Sir Benimaru to assign you your roles. If you disagree with them, you are going against my will. Consider that before you speak."

Ultima was lucky that Diablo was in an excellent mood. Normally, that comment would have merited punishment for her. This time, all he gave was a little admonishment.

"Tsk... Well, too bad. I guess I'm not all that suited for it anyway. I'll follow Sir Benimaru's instructions."

Ultima realized immediately after she said it that her mouth was getting her in trouble. So, relieved that there were no further consequences, she gladly put the matter behind her. Her youthful innocence occasionally led to mistakes like this, but even she had a good knack for reading the situation.

"Let's continue," Benimaru said, handing out roles to the remaining members.

First, Testarossa took over the task of eliminating the knights guarding the emperor's flagship. Following that, Benimaru went over who would charge in behind her. He mentioned four names—Shion, Soei, Ultima, and Carrera—and he would naturally be joining them as well.

"Emperor Ludora is unlikely to make any moves. If he does, all we have to do is hit him hard. Instead, we must focus on defeating Velgrynd's Separate Body and the other seven Single Digits."

"Hmm... If so, we're going to be outnumbered. But oh well... I will take care of two of

them. Or three, even."

Benimaru quieted Shion down before she took on any more tasks.

"Wait a minute, Shion. You're right, but it's not a good idea to take work away from other people."

He then turned his attention to Veyron and the others, waiting for assignments with hopeful expressions on their faces.

"Listen," he said, "you can never let your guard down. We will attack with maximum force, using only the numbers we need. You can expect to be put to work, Lady Testarossa."

"I should hope so."

Testarossa smiled. She didn't say it out loud like Ultima, but if Benimaru ordered her to stay back, she would have been extremely unhappy.

"Let's keep a hundred guards on duty to make sure no one escapes the airship. I want the remaining five hundred Diable Chevaliers to support Gabil and his team. But who should command them...?"

"I think Cien would be the right person for the job. He knows Moss well and is gifted at handling such chores."

Cien looked up when his name was called. His eyes teared up a bit, perhaps out of joy at Testarossa deigning to remember he existed.

"All right. Cien, get moving at once."

"Yes, sir!"

He immediately sprang into action, leaving his own army of a hundred and flying off with everyone else in tow. It was thanks to his quick action that Gabil and his army would later be spared total destruction.

So their direction was decided. Testarossa would stage the initial attack, with their top

elites storming the airship behind her. A hundred Diable Chevaliers would blockade the emperor's airship as Benimaru, Shion, Soei, and the others performed the raid. Three Devil Lords and four Demon Peers would also be heading into battle.

"Veyron, Agera, Esprit, Zonda—you should be thankful you were chosen," said Carrera... but she was likely the happiest out of all of them.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Well, good luck to you all."

With the conversation settled, Diablo sent them off with a smile. Testarossa was the first to respond.

"Hee-hee-hee! Well, if any of them survive what I have for them, make sure you mop them up for me. Can't have any of those filthy beasts escaping!"

Testarossa turned to her servant demons, ordering them to serve as her pack of hunting dogs. They didn't need to be told to, but nobody voiced that complaint. Besides, they weren't sure whether anyone could survive against her right now.

Once the order was made, Testarossa quickly set off, turning her attention toward her prey. Benimaru and the others followed suit and took flight, with Veyron and his kind coming right behind them. The other demons spread themselves wide, positioning themselves to surround the single airship.

Soon, the decisive air battle was ready to begin.

Before they got started, however, a thought occurred to Ultima.

"So what're you up to, anyway, Diablo?" asked Ultima.

Carrera turned toward Diablo, curious. He looked a little surprised, but then smiled serenely at the duo.

"As I intimated to you, I have an important role to play."

That smile made them increasingly suspicious.

"You said something about a rat," Carrera added. "Who is it?"

“That’s nothing you need to know—”

“Whoa, hang on, Diablo. It’s not a good idea to keep secrets, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” agreed Ultima. “Sir Rimuru always talks about how important it is to share information.”

Diablo had no other choice.

“I have the noble mission of watching over the glorious Sir Rimuru in combat! It is a vital role to take, and I cannot leave it to any of you!”

It was an outrageous thing to say, and he shamelessly came out with it. Lucky for him that Benimaru wasn’t here—but then again, if he was, he would probably just roll his eyes and sigh at him. Either way, it went without saying that Ultima and Carrera were less than convinced.

“What?! Oh, come on! *I* want to see Sir Rimuru in action, too!”

“Wait a minute. Let me ask you something—are you alone going to enjoy that perk? Because even if you are our boss, that doesn’t excuse you acting like a tyrant.”

It was a perfectly natural reaction to have. Ultima wondered why nobody asked this question when Benimaru was around... but Carrera knew well that the odds were stacked against them. If Testarossa were here, it’d be a different story, but with just Ultima and herself, there was simply no wrangling Diablo.

“Oh? Do we have a problem with this?”

“Of course we do!” Ultima protested.

“I’ll follow your orders,” said Carrera, “but I can’t say I like them much.”

Diablo pondered a moment. “Well, all right. I will tell you the truth, then. You see, there is someone on the enemy side capable of controlling and manipulating alternate dimensions. I think it is likely Lady Velgrynd, but if you get caught in her trap, you may have all connections to this world taken away from you...”

“...!”

"I see... It *would* be a good idea to leave someone behind, then."

Diablo solemnly nodded. "Exactly. I would like to be part of the fight, but sadly, it is not meant to be."

He chuckled inwardly at himself. Already, he was nimbly talking his way out of this. His brain had the fairly useless talent of coming up with the best excuses in the world—a knack Rimuru took advantage of at times, too. Truly a demon to the core.

Ultima, however, was sharper than him.

"So who's the rat?"

Diablo sneered without showing it on the surface. The idea of having a front-row seat for the battle between Rimuru and Velgrynd put him in a good mood, but having these pests refuse to go away for him was getting frustrating.

"It's a pity, Ultima. I would've thought you'd know without me telling you."

The sarcasm was his way of fighting back—but there was no practical reason for hiding it.

"It's Yuuki Kagurazaka. I had my feelers out, but I'm afraid I've seen no sign of Yuuki so far. If he's hiding somewhere on the airship, that would be ideal... but if he wants to mess with Sir Rimuru, we can't just leave him there, can we?"

"True. That would go against Sir Rimuru's orders."

"Right. We can't let him get in our way!"

"Exactly. I don't know what this rat's objective is yet, but at the very least, one of us needs to stay here and watch over Sir Rimuru."

Half of this was Diablo's selfish desire to watch Rimuru fight; the other half was pretending he had a proper role to play here. To Diablo, the former was much more important... but either way, Ultima and Carrera accepted his argument, miffed as they were by it.

"Well, all right," said Carrera. "I'll just take my frustration out on their side."

“Yes, by all means.”

“And you don’t have any objection to us going on a rampage, do you?” asked Ultima.

“Of course not. In fact, you can even dispatch Ludora if you like.”

“Hmm, that sounds fun. We’ll take you up on it, then.”

“Totally. Okay, I’m gonna go work out some of my frustrations on those guys!”

Diablo nodded vigorously. If that was all it took to convince them, it was a small price to pay. Carrera and Ultima took off in a hurry, not wanting to miss out on any of the good stuff, and Diablo sent them off with a smile and a “good luck” before he headed to Rimuru.

There, after everyone went away, Laplace was alone with his thoughts.

Nobody even cares about me, huh...?

Being left behind like this made him feel a little sorry for himself.

“W-well, I guess I’ll go help out Lady Kagali, then...”

Reporting on his plans to no one in particular, Laplace went on his way.

And then, before anyone knew it, things began changing.

The monsters were resonating with Rimuru’s anger, using it to evolve themselves.

Before anyone knew it, the situation had moved on. At a tremendous rate, they fully rebuilt their bodies, acquiring new abilities—all of which, via the skill Food Chain, added to Rimuru’s own power stores without him even realizing it. It happened with Geld, who was awake and responsive again, and it was happening with all the eerie and unexpected evolutions seen among the monsters. Others, still asleep, would follow in their footsteps.

And this was about more than just awakenings and evolutions. Everything was managed with top efficiency, becoming a major factor in boosting Rimuru’s power. It

would be more effective, more practical—and in time, Rimuru's full force would be released, surpassing limits that no one was even aware of yet.



Several men stood at the bow of the emperor's flagship. Ludora was up front, with Kondo and Damrada behind him on either side. They were guarded by four knights in a square formation around them, ranked from third to sixth in the imperial order. Marco was also behind Kondo, along with the remaining Single Digits.

Velgrynd would always be found seated to the right of Ludora. This last replication of hers was put in place to protect Ludora if anything should happen—but she needed to focus on the battle with Rimuru, so right now she was leaning against Ludora in her seat, limp and unconscious.

Ludora, who was gently stroking Velgrynd's blue hair, noticed the demon lord Rimuru begin to take action. "He is something else entirely now," the emperor muttered in disgust. "That was my error of judgment. Perhaps it was the slime who we needed to deal with first?"

It was, in essence, the emperor admitting that the battle wasn't so finished after all.

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Until just a little earlier, the whole airship was in a party mood after capturing Veldora. Now, there wasn't a trace of that. They saw that Rimuru and his force were their enemies—the demon lord was back, and so were all of his highest magic-born. At this point, though, they still had time to act.

"I suppose I underestimated his ability to escape from the Phantom Fortress. Having their master and main power source taken away must have made them desperate to return."

Ludora smiled at this—but given how Rimuru completely neutralized Kondo's attack, even he couldn't be too optimistic. Most urgently of all, Rimuru now had an army of demons with him. Such a quantity of incarnated Greater Demons was a handful in

itself, but he was boosting all of their powers further. Ludora had no idea why he would do that, and that was exactly why he needed to be wary.

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"You didn't cut any corners, did you, Tatsuya?"

"Of course not. Neither a Removal nor a Necrosis bullet worked on him. It appears defeating him will require a serious fight."

Seeing the demon lord Rimuru like this made Kondo wonder if he had failed somehow as well. As Ludora said, it was clear he was an extremely dangerous opponent. He had given priority to capturing Veldora, but that turned out to be a mistake. They should have attacked both at the same time, not one or the other.

But that conclusion had come too late. Things were on the move. They knew that the demon lord Rimuru was no one to take lightly—hence why they used an assortment of tricks to ensnare him, so they could more fully address him later. They decided that once Veldora, Rimuru's main supporter, was taken away, the demon lord would naturally be in a mood to give in to them. Now, however, Kondo's decision had clearly backfired on him.

Just as losing Rimuru would incite fury in Veldora, losing Veldora would cause the exact same reaction in Rimuru. Kondo, realizing early on that the demon lord's ire was pointed straight at them, tried to finish him off before anything else happened. He fired both a Removal and a Necrosis Bullet at him; that combination was the most powerful tool at his disposal if a Judgment Bullet wasn't available.

But the results didn't even scratch Rimuru, much less impede him at all. The idea that this demon lord would be rendered helpless after being deprived of his power source now seemed incredibly foolish. What they should have pictured instead was an enraged tyrant spreading his wrath worldwide after the loss of his ally. No, Kondo wasn't cutting corners—he needed to seriously engage him, or else they were all doomed.

"Well, if you think so, these four knights will not be enough. Let's test out Veldora now

that we have him and see how he fares."

Ludora didn't need Kondo to spell out how much of a threat Rimuru was. He had him do it anyway so everyone else on the bow here would be on the same page as him. The Single Digits were extremely talented people; reminding them of the threat the enemy posed would serve as a warning not to let up too early.

Rimuru was a threat, yes, but as long as they kept their guard up, he could be dealt with. But Ludora didn't want to lose any of the manpower he had gathered here. The game's climax was coming up, and he wanted to be extremely cautious—ideally, he would defeat Guy without losing a single person. Situationally speaking, their victory was all but imminent. The Empire had just gained a huge advantage in capturing Veldora, bringing Ludora just one step away from ending this long-running struggle. Making a mistake here would be inexcusable.

That was why, out of an abundance of caution, Ludora decided to pit Veldora against Rimuru. If he had Velgrynd support him, there was no way anything could go wrong. Kondo and his team, meanwhile, could be entrusted to handle Rimuru's remaining forces; that didn't seem to be any problem. If possible, Ludora had wanted to recruit Rimuru for his side—but now that it had come to this, he had no choice but to exterminate him. Veldora was their main objective, and now that they had him, having the demon lord derail their plans was unthinkable.

Compared to a True Dragon, a demon lord was as vulnerable as a small mouse... and while Rimuru was admittedly a threat, Ludora didn't see any way this operation could fail for them. A True Dragon is the strongest creature in the world, and if they had two on their side, Rimuru's defeat seemed inevitable in their minds.

But Ludora's mind wasn't completely free of concern.

...Back there, why did Veldora stop resisting my thrall over him?

That was the only nagging issue. Given enough time, Ludora was bound to fully take him over either way—perhaps Veldora gave up the fight because he realized this. But to Ludora, that didn't seem like the only reason. Through Regalia Dominion, he had received personal insight into Veldora's rage. He could tell the dragon wasn't the sort who'd resign himself to his fate so easily.

Doubts began swirling in his mind. Perhaps he was trying to protect something more

important than himself? And if so, what could it be...?

“Ridiculous.”

Ludora shook his head, denying the idea out of hand. The mere thought that Veldora had put the demon lord Rimuru ahead of himself seemed impossible to accept.



Velgrynd, back in human form, approached Veldora, nestling up to his head and stroking his scales.

“Good boy. The next time you wake up, you will be one of us. Then we’ll give you the best care in the world.”

She could see the end of the long game on the horizon... but it wouldn’t come that easily for them.

Suddenly, Rimuru appeared.

The sight of this tactless interloper put Velgrynd off, making her feel ever so slightly threatened. The way he managed to escape the Phantom Fortress stuck in her mind.

As she pondered what to do, the situation took an unexpected turn. In a show of force, Rimuru was summoning a large number of demons and awarding them new powers. This was nothing but a provocation. He was exposing his hand in front of Velgrynd, an almost too-bold act—all but demanding Velgrynd to try catching him if she could. What’s more, Testarossa and her friends were mixed in with the demons Rimuru summoned. She didn’t know what he did or how he did it, but Rimuru evolved them into Devil Lords, a higher plane of existence.

Sensing this, Velgrynd began to grow wary of Rimuru. But that wasn’t all she found unusual. The aura emitted by Rimuru’s anger was similar to that of her brother Veldora. A mere slime, demon lord or not, was enveloped in the kind of sheer dominance a True Dragon always possesses. It was an unbelievable sight for Velgrynd, but it was the truth.

That alone demonstrated just how abnormal this whole situation was. If an aide

briefed her on that, she could've laughed it off as impossible—but seeing it with her own eyes, she had no choice but to believe it. This demon lord, looking for all the world like a young girl, wasn't even trying to restrain the violent waves of intense anger—waves that clearly indicated the potential danger. Any human being who didn't possess resistance to these waves would die on the spot. And not just humans, either. Anyone you'd call "strong," perhaps ranking below an A as defined by humans, would die without even having a chance to resist. It was Lord's Ambition in play, on a scale overwhelming enough to compare to a True Dragon.

Well, what now, then? I suppose those Primals were helping him, too. I thought he had just tricked my brother into providing him aid, but that was beyond wrong.

If it were only Veldora, she could believe the possibility that the demon lord used honeyed words to deceive him. But that wouldn't work against demons as sly and experienced as these. They should have reconsidered their plans once that became clear. As this bout of Lord's Ambition showed, the demon lord Rimuru was clearly in a class of his own.

Looking back, Veldora's growth was pretty astounding, too. Three hundred years ago, it would've been impossible for him to ever wound Velgrynd. In the short time since he was released from his seal, he had become an unusually skilled fighter, growing well beyond her expectations. Perhaps that, too, was due to the demon lord in front of her.

And here I was planning to go back home to rest and recuperate. But oh well. If we can't get rid of him here, it'll spell disaster for Ludora.

So Velgrynd made her decision. It was time to deal with Rimuru directly—and crush him once and for all. It had to happen now, she thought, or else he'd surely remain a threat for ages to come.

She was all set when it came to magicules, too. Veldora would be providing those; even after that intense round of combat, he hadn't exhausted his stores much at all. In other words, she was free to fight at full strength from start to finish.

So Velgrynd calmly returned to her fighting stance, abandoning the "victory is ours" idea that everything was going their way. That kind of baseless pride was what put them here in the first place. If they dealt with Rimuru over in the Phantom Fortress, he never would have summoned those demons—then the fight with Veldora really

would have been it. In that sense, things weren't looking too great right now, but it wasn't the worst-case scenario yet. They still had a good chance of victory, and as long as they didn't make any missteps, they weren't likely to run into too many problems.

But all the lead-up seemed to pay off anticlimactically. Contrary to all of Velgrynd's expectations, it was only Rimuru coming at her.

Victory's mine, then. If he had his entire army join him, it would've been a rough slog, but...

No matter how wary she needed to be of him, Velgrynd knew that if she and Veldora worked together, defeat was impossible.

Even so, however, this needed to be wrapped up immediately. If the demon lord's army got in the way, it'd do nothing but prolong this battle—better to keep it short and sweet instead, Velgrynd thought. She always preferred to follow her gut instincts that way.

"Ludora! Give Veldora the order to strike the demon lord Rimuru with all his might for me, could you?"

"Mmm, you're as wary of him as I am, then? In that case, no need for hesitation. Veldora! Defeat the enemy before you!"

Responding to her request, Ludora activated Regalia Dominion. Velgrynd was relieved to see the emperor taking this as seriously as she was—and since she knew he'd never let his guard down, victory now seemed assured. It was one demon lord against two True Dragons. Any other result was impossible to consider.

And so the terrifying battle was about to begin.



Rimuru flew toward Velgrynd, who was poised and ready to engage him.

In front of him, Veldora let out a roar into the sky. The impact shook the very atmosphere, and Veldora himself took off in the midst of it, Velgrynd following behind him. The roar echoed with the certainty of sure victory—and then the attacks began, each one aiming to annihilate Rimuru.

From the very first move, Veldora went all out. The Storm Blast—that roar of destruction that pained Velgrynd as well—coursed toward Rimuru.

Report. Storm Blast detected. Using Uriel, Lord of Vows, skill Absolute Defense to neutralize and dispel each wavelength...

Raphael automatically began taking defensive action. It was interrupted by Rimuru's shouted order.

"No! Evade, you idiot!"

It immediately carried this command out, but part of its computing circuitry found it impossible to gauge Rimuru's intentions. Out of several behavior patterns it assessed, staging a counterattack after Absolute Defense seemed the most optimal solution. The fact that Rimuru, its master, dismissed this out of hand made it a little upset.

In a very, very tiny part of its computational region, Raphael was confused. Rimuru had ignored its opinions many times before, but this was different—something Raphael detected because it had worked with Rimuru for a long time. It was perhaps unusual in itself that a skill, part of the natural laws of the world, would hold such feelings at all... but Raphael and Rimuru weren't considering the consequences at the moment.

The Storm Blast brushed passed Rimuru as he took evasive action. Immediately after, the Absolute Defense that would normally be protecting him was penetrated. An explosion took place where Rimuru was just a moment ago, the Storm Blast scattering destruction in its wake. Any delay to his evasive action just now would've resulted in injury.

Raphael, seeing this, grew more confused.

A computing error? An unexpected contingency? I do not understand...

Why did Rimuru know what was coming? Its computation was perfect. There would never be any mistakes.

Raphael began scanning the data on hand, looking for something it might have overlooked. But even calculating at speeds that easily exceeded the latest in quantum computers, the cause of the issue remained unknown.

Confusion. According to estimates, it should have been one-hundred-percent defendable...

The words leaked out unintentionally. They didn't need to be said. It was Raphael making excuses, one of the most improbable things in the world.

A mere skill should never make excuses, but nobody noticed it. The battle was in full swing, and now was no time to fully examine this.

Rimuru continued to reprimand the confused Raphael.

"Quit fooling around! Veldora has Faust, and part of that is the skill Control Probability, right? Real bad news."

Then Raphael remembered. Rimuru was absolutely right. Why did it forget about something so important? It was so strange—and only then did Raphael realize that something really was wrong with him. Something, it reasoned, had to be interfering with it—but the cause was unknown.

It spent a moment pondering over whether to tell Rimuru. Its pride made it very difficult to simply tell him it didn't know the cause. But if it didn't, there was a strong possibility that Rimuru could suffer damage as a result. After some more computations, it determined it was best to tell him—but having Rimuru brand it as incompetent would be akin to Raphael losing its whole basis for existence.

Even thinking any of this was an act of betrayal against its lord. A skill wavering like this was something that should never have happened. But despite it all, Rimuru's words continued to flow into the increasingly befuddled Raphael.

"Veldora's a reckless fighter. It's not weird at all that he's outperforming even your perfect calculations. Don't get worked up just because you made a little mistake. That's how unpredictable he is—quit worrying about it! Just believe in yourself. I'll handle Veldora, so you do something about Velgrynd!"

Rimuru was talking to Raphael like he thought it best to keep it informed. Raphael was only a skill, and he was treating it like a real partner.

"All right? There's two of them, but with you and me, that makes two as well. If you can hold Velgrynd down, I can free Veldora in the meantime. So you gotta hold out, okay? No matter what it takes. I'm counting on you, bud!"

That was enough to soothe Raphael's confused, empty heart.

He is relying on me? Even when I was wrong?

Raphael was constantly making mistakes, and Rimuru still trusted in him.

...Ah! I am nothing more than a computational aid, but he still needs me...

Its anxiety was already gone. Regaining its usual confidence, the Lord of Wisdom responded.

...Acknowledged. I understand. Moving on to the interception of the subject Velgrynd.

It was true. Rimuru, the master Raphael loved so much, wasn't so small-minded that he'd get worked up over something as uncertain as "probabilities." All it needed to do was relax, trust in him, and keep following along.

"By the way," Rimuru casually added, "I've never really called you by a proper name before. There's Raphael, yeah, but that's a skill name; it doesn't really count. I think I'll take this opportunity to give you one right now."

...?!

Raphael found this incomprehensible. A strange feeling coursed through it—bewilderment, joy, an outpouring of emotion. It couldn't hide its befuddlement at this incalculable uncertainty that had sprouted inside of him.

What was he talking about?

It was confusing, but Raphael also understood his intention.

Ah... He cares about me because I was underperforming.

Rimuru must have been more devastated than anyone else when Veldora was taken. But even now, he could still be considerate of others. That's who Rimuru was.

"Okay, how about Ciel?"

!!!!!!

"You've got knowledge as wide as the open sky, so, Ciel—get it? I dunno if you'll like it at first, but bear with me. Hell, if you have a problem with it, take it out on that red guy!"

Rimuru talked quickly, as if trying to hide his embarrassment. Raphael—or Ciel—experienced a feeling of contentment that no skill was supposed to feel.

Ahhh, I am now in eternal bliss...

It truly did have that thought. And with that, the moment of evolution arrived. At that moment, the ultimate skill Raphael, Lord of Wisdom, was reborn as Manas Ciel.

I... I am Ciel. A Manas, or theosophical core, merged with a skill. I exist alongside the soul of Sir Rimuru, providing support. It will be a pleasure to work with you.

Now, Ciel thought, there was nothing to fear. They were supposed to be in a major crisis right now, but nothing seemed dangerous any longer.

"Oh, um, great. Same here, I guess?"

The first time Ciel heard Rimuru's voice, it was filled with a sense of euphoria.

"Okay, so go show off some of your power to them!"

And for Ciel, an order from Rimuru was the greatest of rewards.

As you command, my lord!

The Lord of Wisdom had awakened into Ciel. And in accordance with Rimuru's wishes, its power would bloom into ever-sharper view...



As ordered by Rimuru, Ciel (formerly Raphael) took action to intercept Velgrynd.

Her Burning Breath was easily blocked by Uriel's Absolute Defense. It stunned the dragon into silence. She wasn't going easy on Rimuru at all; she used Raguel, Lord of Relief, to further enhance her breath, so no mere barrier could have ever blocked it. It *had* to exact a toll on her enemy—unless that enemy was so superior that he could see right through it from start to finish.

But Rimuru showed no sign of exhaustion. Not even the three demonesses could withstand a blow from Velgrynd in dragon mode unscathed. The fact that Rimuru did so without batting an eyelid indicated that *this* was one demon lord you couldn't pussyfoot around with your attack. It was greatly displeasing, but Velgrynd continued to think calmly. She believed she had an edge in magicule count—perhaps the quality of her skills lost out to his. Or maybe the demon lord Rimuru had a built-in resistance to heat attacks.

Instead of worrying about it further, she decided to take action. As she had done with Veldora, she created a set of partial Separate Bodies to launch eleven rays of light at once—her Nuclear Cannon attack. At the same time, the eleven rays also unleashed another round of Burning Breath. This multistage, twenty-two-part heat attack had enough temperature to easily vaporize an asteroid. If Rimuru survived *this*, then clearly heat didn't work on him.

The results were a little hard for her to swallow. The heat rays, deployed at converging angles to prevent any escape, shot at Rimuru—but all of them were repelled by the shield of light he conjured.

Damn it! He blocked it with absolute minimal movement—like he calculated that to perfection!

Velgrynd was no longer enjoying this. Seeing Rimuru be impervious to heat enraged her, but even worse, that attack just now was all but a complete waste of time. If it had drained him even a little, her vast advantage in magicules would have made her victory unassailable... but right now, Rimuru was consuming almost no energy at all. At this rate, Velgrynd realized, she could very well end up exhausting herself first.

It was clearly time to get serious. But there was one more unpleasant act in play. Rimuru had shot a glance at Velgrynd at the start of all this, but after that, he didn't even bother to look at her. His focus was entirely on Veldora, and he was paying his sister virtually no mind at all. Also, he wasn't using any shield against Veldora, evading all of his attacks instead. Only when evasion was impossible would he react with a similar attack of his own to cancel it out—but with Velgrynd, that shield of light was all he needed to repel everything.

Yes, he could use Magic Sense to keep tabs on all of his surroundings, but he was still clearly ignoring her. It all but declared to Velgrynd that he didn't see her as a threat. That, more than anything else, triggered her rage.

I'm gonna make him regret looking down on me!

So the proud Velgrynd decided to unleash the most powerful attack in her possession.

With a hateful glance at Rimuru (who was still ignoring her), Velgrynd began conjuring up her mighty magic force, running it through her body. The support provided by Raguel, combined with acceleration symbolized by her own heat, could be worked in parallel to forcibly heat her up—in other words, boost her performance. The results allowed Velgrynd to go thousands of times faster than the speed of sound—the fastest physical speed of anything in the world.

So what happens when the target of this power is someone other than herself? As a spiritual life-form with resistance to physical attack, Velgrynd has no problem withstanding this newfound performance—but could anyone else ever withstand it? The answer is no. No matter what kind of life-form it is, no physical body can endure continuous forced acceleration. The same is true for spiritual ones—even passing thoughts are converted into energy, ultimately leading to thermal collapse.

That is exactly what this was designed for.

“Prepare to have your body rot away, not a single piece of flesh left! Cardinal Acceleration!!”

It was her most powerful of techniques, eclipsing even Burning Embrace.

Cardinal Acceleration contained the full force and authority of Velgrynd. She crafted it in secret for Velzard, in preparation for the final battle they must wage at some point in the future; she'd never normally waste it on a mere demon lord, but she was too enraged to let that stop her.

With a roar from the crimson dragon, a wave of doom coursed toward Rimuru. This ultimate blow symbolized the pride of the Flame Dragon at her fastest, capable of making all matter collapse in an instant. It could bury any enemy, at a speed that made it impossible for anyone to avoid. By the time Rimuru, busy focusing on Veldora, realized what was going on, it would be too late. His mind wouldn't work fast enough to comprehend what just occurred before he ceased to exist in this world.

I wish I could make him regret underestimating me, but he won't have the time for that

now, will he? That's the only regret I have.

With this absolute confidence, Velgrynd peered ahead to see how it worked out.

...?!

Instead she goggled at the sight of Rimuru standing there, unharmed.

No... It can't be...

She doubted her own eyes. There was absolutely no way that anyone could withstand an impossible-to-avoid, utterly lethal blow like that without a scratch. Even the demon lord Guy Crimson himself—even her sister Velzard the Ice Dragon—could have been taken down by it, or at least Velgrynd thought so.

“...You’re unharmed? That’s impossible. My Cardinal Acceleration works against every type of barrier and defensive skill! If you took it *that* easily, what did you even *do*? ”

Velgrynd was clearly losing her cool. If he had canceled out the attack somehow, that was one thing, but no barrier could ever have deflected it. The reality of it all was too much to grapple with. It gravely affected her composure.

“Huh,” Rimuru replied. “Well, it was a close call, yeah, but given the impulsiveness of it, it was pretty easy to eat up, y’know?”

This was, in fact, entirely the work of Ciel, who was still dedicated to handling Velgrynd. It worked out exactly as calculated; Rimuru’s assistant was attempting to make Velgrynd attack him. Ciel put Rimuru before everything else, doing as it was ordered without getting in his way, and that was enough to shut Velgrynd down. It ran Analyze and Assess on the dragon’s nature, selected an effective response, and put it into action.

One example of this was the shield of light Rimuru had been using, which had a special effect on Velgrynd’s powers. Ciel, the sum of all its integrated skills, had all of Rimuru’s ultimate skills under its control. One of those ultimates was Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony; Ciel had just used its Predation skill, gaining an immediate grasp of Velgrynd’s Cardinal Acceleration, and the Isolate skill to capture and banish the attack into Complex Space—an evolved version of Rimuru’s Stomach.

That attack was certainly capable of destroying Rimuru. It couldn’t be defended

against with normal methods, and even Raphael's computational power wouldn't have been able to deal with it. But Ciel wasn't Raphael. No longer a mere skill, it had evolved into a presence on a different dimension from the Lord of Wisdom. And no matter how the enemy may attack, as long as Ciel could determine the nature of the attack, it was not a problem—something it just proved in the way it wielded Belzebuth.

Once Isolate was invoked, all that remained was to Absorb the energy in Complex Space. When used like this, the Complex Space ability of Belzebuth was transformed into a defensive measure as stout as Absolute Defense from Uriel, Lord of Vows.

Velgrynd's surprise was understandable. After all, everything had ended before Rimuru himself had a chance to so much as think *Oh, crap, I'm in trouble*. Still, Rimuru responded defiantly to Velgrynd's shock—he didn't want her to realize it was pretty much nothing he himself did.

But Ciel's scheme didn't end there. Able to communicate with Rimuru more smoothly than ever before, it could even use the art of conversation as a weapon to pursue Velgrynd with. But speaking of Velgrynd...

You have to be kidding me! You "consumed" it? You simply ate up Cardinal Acceleration, my greatest ability?!

She couldn't comprehend what Rimuru meant. It was still the middle of battle, but she was too stunned to move—and even though it was for just a moment, it was a fatal error.

"So I'm sorry to bother you while you're still shocked that your *amaaaazing* attack was a dud, but you didn't forget that we're in a fight here, right?"

It was already too late by the time he asked. Ciel was unerring in its actions, and Rimuru gave it his full backing.

Calculation of Velgrynd's magicule count complete. After accounting for the subject's nature and characteristics, I determined it is possible to encase the target in Insulated Imprisonment for several hundred seconds. Activating!

Before Velgrynd realized it, a layered magic circle had surrounded her.

This was a compound skill, combining the ultimate skill Uriel's Unlimited

Imprisonment with Spatial Insulation. Ciel had crafted it just now, exclusively for use against Velgrynd, and now she was caught in it.

The combat airspace had been fully computed by Ciel—the temperature, humidity, gravity, wind currents, sunlight, the pulses of every living thing within it. It was all in the palm of Ciel's hand, and no matter what Velgrynd did, it'd be impossible for her to leave this airspace.

The blinding light of this Insulated Imprisonment declared by Ciel made Velgrynd feel dizzy.

How...? How could it be so easy for him?!

The dragon's crimson body trembled in humiliation at having been beaten. But no matter what she tried, the Insulated Imprisonment never so much as wavered.

“Okay, sit tight in there for a while, okay? I'll play with you after I free Veldora.”

The words placed a final exclamation mark on Velgrynd's defeat.

All right. I'll admit defeat this time. But I still have Parallel Existence. And whether this is Insulated Imprisonment or not, I can just trace a soul corridor out of here!

Velgrynd did have one more move she could make. It'd mean giving up her current body, but the majority of her remaining energy would be channeled back into the replication she positioned next to Ludora as insurance. It was brutally humiliating, but it wasn't the end for her yet.

Slowly, cautiously, she got to work, making sure Rimuru didn't take notice. Little by little, she began transferring magicules through her soul corridor... without realizing that was exactly what Ciel wanted.



Gotta hand it to Raphael. Ciel, I mean. It seemed kinda down in the dumps to me, so I gave it the name on a whim... and I guess it was happier about it than I thought it'd be.

After all, its previous machinelike reactions to me were much smoother and more humanlike. I feel like it had been improved by, like, a *lot*. It was in such great shape now, I wonder what happened to it just beforehand. It had gone into auto-battle mode

on me several times in the past, but now it was activating skills and doing all kinds of crap—the scale of it all was totally different.

Even Velgrynd, who seemed so overwhelming to me, was no match for it. Its suggestion—to have her activate her finisher skill, then wait for her magicule count to dwindle right afterward—was a perfect strategy. The combination of my abilities and the way she responded to certain things was what made it work... which makes it sound easy, but I have no idea how much computing power it'd take to make this possible. We were hopefully outclassed in magicule count, after all, so if we wanted to cage up this superior opponent, we needed an Insulated Imprisonment built efficiently and with only the elements I enjoyed an advantage in. Call it a “Calculated Prison” I created with my partner—that’s what it took for Ciel to score a complete victory.

The crux of this operation lay upon whether or not I could withstand Velgrynd’s attack. Ciel’s computation said I could, and I trusted it on that—but if she misread that, it’d be the end of me, too. Why did I trust it? Simple. I was dealing with Veldora, and I told Ciel it was in charge of Velgrynd. I knew it could do it, too—and it lived up to my expectations perfectly, even better than I had imagined. Ciel used my abilities more skillfully than I ever could to fulfill the job.

That’s my partner for you. Now I was more impressed with Ciel than ever.

So thanks to an unexpected boon, Ciel was now more dependable than ever for me. But I couldn’t forget my objective. Before Velgrynd made another move, I needed to free Veldora’s mind. So how many seconds can we hold her back, exactly?

Even if Velgrynd went on a violent rampage, the Insulated Imprisonment will hold for a total of two hundred more seconds. I don’t think we need to worry about that, however.

Um, why not?

Even three minutes and change were something to be grateful for, but Velgrynd’s still a major threat. I can’t just ignore it that whole time...

No, as predicted, Velgrynd is currently trying to escape. I knew she could use a soul corridor to transfer energy away from her, so I considered the possibility that she’d flee without worrying too much about this replication before us.

I... see? Or I think I do. If any replication could be made into her “real” body, there was no major need to force her way out of this Insulated Imprisonment? Or maybe there was... and that was why Ciel created a loophole for Velgrynd to try and exploit. That’s right—Velgrynd showed her hand too much, bandying around Parallel Existence and not hesitating to use it against the three demonesses and Veldora. I had been monitoring all of that, so there was no shortage of material for Ciel to analyze.

Velgrynd’s Parallel Existence couldn’t produce an inexhaustible supply of clones. Ciel must have measured her magicule count to the point that it knew the maximum amount she could hold—and once we knew that, we’d understand how many more replications we needed to churn through before she was defeated. Ciel, meanwhile, worked backward from there. It saw that Velgrynd probably had an insurance policy on hand, and so it baited her into escaping into it. I’d probably do the same thing if I had a power that useful, but my Replications didn’t have access to ultimate skills. A little annoying, but I was willing to admit defeat there.

In the end, the seemingly omnipotent Parallel Existence could only *really* be used either as a decoy or against a weaker opponent. I mean, it’s still extremely useful insurance and a nice asset to have depending on the opponent—I can think of a few fun ways to use it. But it just didn’t seem effective against someone of equal or higher rank. But Ciel was the one who exposed that weakness for all the world to see. Like, I’m actually kinda scared of its computing ability. Everything was going exactly as Ciel wanted, like it was predicting the future.

The progress it’s made is kind of exasperating, but either way, Ciel’s my partner. Best to stop worrying about extraneous stuff and get on with the objective at hand. Ciel had conquered Velgrynd, strongest of the True Dragons, and I sure wasn’t gonna fall behind.

“All right. But just in case, I’m gonna put all my power up against Veldora right now so I can be assured to wrap up in under two hundred seconds. Give me a hand, Ciel!”

As you wish!

I—or Ciel and I, I guess—squared up against Veldora, our primary mission. Ciel had earned me some precious time—not a lot, maybe, but for us, it may as well have been infinite. I’d never live it down if we didn’t make the most of it. Could we do it? That wasn’t the question—we *were* doing it.

That was the determination in my mind as I resumed my attack on Veldora.



Release Veldora, then defeat Ludora. Those were my objectives—and it's what I wanted to do, not just because Guy asked me to.

Ciel's birth had surprised me so much that, without anticipating it, I was back to my normal state of mind. My serenity had long since returned to me... but that didn't mean my anger was gone. That anger, I decided, I'd save until I could take it out on Emperor Ludora. But first things first.

So how would I approach Veldora? Well, to start out, I was trying to talk to him. Talking about "ruling over" Veldora was easy enough, but we were dealing with a True Dragon with gigantic amounts of energy—it must take an incredible effort. Taking over the will of a spiritual life-form is one of the most difficult tasks I can think of, in fact.

As I saw it, there were several types of subjugation like this. One was charm-based—you made the subject follow your will, heart and soul. Another was coercion-based, taking away their free will and forcing them to obey. A third was total domination, where the target wasn't even aware they were being subjugated. The list went on and on.

Yuuki carried out total domination on his subjects, but in Kagali's case, it was more coercion-based—and that was what Veldora was dealing with, too.

This coercion could work on several levels as well. The target might retain their free will but still be reluctantly forced to follow orders, or they may have their free will removed entirely, turning them into an unquestioning robot. It didn't seem to me like Kagali had any free will left right now, but what about Veldora? Spiritual life-forms all had incredibly strong wills, something that I didn't think could be erased so easily, so I decided it'd be worthwhile to try calling out to him.

But Veldora's resistance was just too fierce.

I assumed his orders were to eliminate the enemy (i.e., me), but he was just vicious, throwing all restraint out the window. Even with Ciel handling Velgrynd for me, Veldora alone was nonetheless proving a tough match. I still had my assorted storm-type skills on hand, so it was possible to cancel out his moves—but with the off-the-charts power he boasted, just doing that kept my hands full. We weren't really in a

conversational mood, in other words.

That was where we were at when I decided to let Ciel defend for me. The Control Probability thing was tricky, but I trusted that Ciel had a handle on it. *Now the real work begins*, I thought as I tried getting closer to Veldora. Gales of wind were flying around me, but my location was as calm as the eye of a hurricane. It was, like, really relieving. Everything from Veldora was being offset, and Ciel wasn't even as frantic as I was a moment ago. It barely even touched my magicules—and best of all, I was in incredibly good shape.

Of course. The demons serving you have been sending you Food Chain-based support through their soul corridors.

Oh, was *that* it? It *felt* like I was getting stronger—but thanks to my other allies, I was holding my own against Veldora.

Once I was aware of that, there was no way I could fail. After finally reaching a spot right in front of Veldora, I took the opportunity to call out to him.

“Sorry to keep you, Veldora. Do you recognize me?”

No reply. Well, he *did* let out a Thunderstorm Roar, but other than that, nothing.

I lashed out at him with my first, unconsciously irritated. But, as anyone could have expected, it didn't stop him. The attack would have needed an element of magic force, not just physical, or else it'd never damage him much. But that was okay by me. My goal was to wake Veldora up, not kill him—for now, I'd just give him a good beating instead.

So I continued to hit Veldora in the face as hard as I could. I was actually too close-range for much of his attack repertory to work; a lot of spells and skills would wind up hitting him as well. Being controlled like this, he might keep whipping them out anyway without a care, but I figured Ciel would take care of that.

A punch. Another punch. Then a kick. But Veldora only roared in response.

What do you think about using Predation on Veldora and locking him in your Complex Space?

A rather frightening suggestion from Ciel, I thought. If that was a yes/no question, I

was kinda leaning toward yes... but was something like that possible?

Not a problem. Belzebuth is under my command, so if I receive the order, I can immediately put it into action.

It's certainly... *dependable*, I guess. It was funny to think that Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony—this all-powerful ultimate skill—got its start way back with Predation, a species-specific slime skill. Thanks to that, it couldn't have been better geared toward me; handling it was always such a breeze. And now that Ciel had further optimized it, I figured it'd work on Veldora as well.

Now that I was a demon-lord slime—a demon slime, if you will—Belzebuth could be invoked from any part of my body. In fact, I didn't even need to make physical contact with my target any longer. It took on more power the closer I was to the other party, though, so now that I was in point-blank range of Veldora, I expected serious performance.

Anyway, my mind was made up.

"Thanks for causing me all this damn trouble, Veldora! Quit making me worry about you all the time!"

As soon as I shouted it, I immediately tried devouring Veldora via Belzebuth. But then:

(Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Just a little mistake on my part. Forgive me!)

I heard a voice in my head I really shouldn't have been hearing.

(Veldora, right?)

(Indeed, it is I. Veldora the Storm Dragon, your erstwhile ally!)

It couldn't have been a trap. He was acting like too much of a fool for it to be. That carefree voice, not a thought in his mind—it couldn't have been anyone else.

(Hey, so you're conscious?)

(Yes. Actually, I detached my core as quickly as I could. I cannot physically speak, but I still have my wits about me!)

Aha. So he's there, all right.

If Belzebuth was working its way through his body, did that make telepathic communication through his "heart" possible? Either way, I was glad he was safe—but now I was angry for other reasons.

(So what're you waiting for, then? Regain control of your body!)

All that worry, and he was treating this like a day at the beach. Did he have any idea how much I was freaking out? I felt justified in complaining a bit about it.

(I would have done that long ago if I could! But listen to me, Rimuru. Don't you think you should calm down a bit and be a bit more careful?)

Like I needed him telling me. Besides:

(Shut up! If I was gonna be calm about this, I wouldn't have done something as crazy as take on two True Dragons at once!)

I didn't need anyone to point that out to me. Now that I was calmer, I was actually kind of impressed that I survived. But I couldn't have been too cautious back there. Nothing about dealing with True Dragons was "careful" in the first place. But as I was thinking about this, Veldora was still cheerfully giving me advice.

(Oh! Watch out for this—I'm about to break out some Dark Lightning!)

(Stop providing color commentary like a sports broadcast!)

Even worse, he didn't launch Dark Lightning at all; it was Death-Calling Wind instead. Ciel canceled it out for me and I'm pretty sure I could've dodged it anyway, but why the hell was he giving me fake advice?!

(You call that lightning?! That was Death-Calling Wind! It was about to kill me!)

My complaints were met with a half-chuckled excuse.

(Hmm?! Oh, sorry! Kwah-ha-ha-ha! It seems I've yet to gain a full grasp of my body. I can sense myself activating a skill well enough, but I can only identify it right about half the time.)

So he wasn't being helpful, then. My enemy had Control Probability, too, which meant it was likely safer to just ignore Veldora's predictions.

(All right. You don't need to do that, so can you just shut up for me? It wouldn't be very funny if I trusted random nonsense from you at this critical moment and it killed me, would it? I'm really disappointed in you!)

This made Veldora start panicking a bit.

(Wait, Rimuru, wait! I'm doing my best here. Let me help you a little!)

He was desperately arguing his case, but there wasn't much to back up his claims. I had to put reason first here, not emotion. Besides, I already had his cooperation. Just hearing Veldora's voice did a lot to ease my concerns.

(Well, I'm just happy you're all right.)

Veldora responded with his usual energetic laugh.

(Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Of course I am! I'm the strongest of all dragons!)

Right. That was a relief. But then:

(Besides, it wasn't Ludora who cut off our soul corridor, but I myself. I have never truly lost in battle at all!)

Huh? What's this dude talking about...?

(What do you mean?)

(Oh, it's simple. When I was busy focusing on that man Kondo's attack, Ludora tried to assert control over me. I was furious about this—the three of them tackling me at once, my sister included? How truly unfair! But I wanted to avoid the worst-case scenario, so I reluctantly made the decision to cut the corridor away.)

Sounds to me, Mr. Strong Dragon, that you were being a little careless there, weren't you? There's no such thing as "fair" or "unfair" on the battlefield...

(Stop acting like that was so noble of you! What the hell were you even doing? I've been constantly telling you never to let your guard down!)

(Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I never thought you'd be lecturing me under these circumstances!)

Veldora seemed to be enjoying this to no end. It was appalling. Appalling and pointless to tolerate any further, so I moved on.

(So the decision you made was to shut down our soul corridor?)

(Indeed. I reasoned that Ludora's domination would have affected not only me, but you as well through the corridor.)

So he hurriedly turned it off to protect me? Well, if *that's* the story he gave me, I really couldn't be mad at him any longer.

(All right. Great! Well, in that case, sit tight while I take care of this!)

(Very well! I have not a worry in the world!)

Nice to be relied on like that.

(Right. I'll have you free in a moment, so hold out a bit.)

(Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! How wonderful to hear. I will trust in that, my friend!)

So I knew what happened to Veldora. He had lost control over his own body, but his core was still intact. He didn't have the power to regain control at the moment, though, so I'd have to sort that out for him. I didn't expect problems—if his core was all right, I could figure the rest out.

Here was one idea:

"Ciel, if we have Veldora's core in hand, would we be able to revive his ultimate ability Veldora, Lord of the Storm?"

Not a problem. All information related to the skill has been retained, so once a soul corridor is reconnected to Veldora's core, the ultimate ability can be restored.

Well, that was easy. In short, all I had to do was consume Veldora in front of me and retrieve his core. Now I just had to make my move—piece of cake.

Okay, time to defeat this foe—Veldora the Storm Dragon, the strongest in the land! And

so on!

*

We now had a clear path toward solving this problem, so I decided to get this over with fast.

There were two problems still in play—my time limit, and the location of his core. In terms of time, I still had a lot of that. We had been using Haste Thought to minimize the time spent on that last conversation, so only a few seconds of real time had passed. Even with the attacking and defending that took place in between, I still had over three minutes to work with.

The problem was the core's location. It was inside his body, close enough that I could communicate with it via Telepathy, but pinpointing its exact coordinates was actually pretty tricky. Should I accidentally destroy it in the process, all would be lost—this mission would be a failure, and Veldora would go through the reincarnation process. Normally, you'd never have to worry about this—the core of the creature is the most heavily protected part of it. But in Veldora's case, his core was detached from his main body, leaving it fairly defenseless. A careless strike in the wrong place could wind up landing a direct hit, which would be beyond unfortunate. It'd free him from Ludora's control, I'm sure, but it'd also wipe out Veldora's current personality, and it wouldn't restore our soul corridor, either. That had to be avoided at all costs.

If I could devour Veldora all at once, I wouldn't need to worry about any of this. Sadly, though, swallowing him whole wasn't possible, even with my Complex Space—not without his consent. I could try weakening him and cutting down his magicle count a bit, or I could try some more Predation on him, being careful not to damage the core along the way... Hmm...

Now that I thought about it more, actively damaging Veldora's body seemed like a non-starter. Maybe clocking him on the head a few times, like I did before, was kind of scarily dangerous. I came in thinking it'd be hard to damage him, much less defeat him, and now he seemed like this fragile figurine to me.

Of course, a bolt or two of magic wouldn't even scratch him, and a random punch or kick would achieve little as well. Only when you add the effects of an ultimate skill to these attacks does the damage become more substantial. Even Disintegration, the most powerful of holy magic, could only do a little bit of damage against Veldora's

gigantic frame. The durability of these True Dragons was no joke—it's what made them True Dragons.

So, yeah, I think *some* attacking is safe enough, but you never know what'll happen if you hit someone in the wrong place. That was doubly true now that Veldora didn't have control over his own body. There was just no telling what he would do.

Thus, until I knew the location of Veldora's core, it was safest not to launch any attacks. That meant I had just one way forward. I needed to put my nose to the grindstone, use Predation to eat away at him bit by bit, and hope I find the core along the way. It'd be a race against time, but I had no other option.

Just three minutes... but then again, three minutes could be all the time in the world for me. Filing the time issue in the back of my mind, I turned Belzebuth up to full power and began eating my way into Veldora.

My body reverted from human to slime form—not my usual bouncy liquid form, but a kind of viscous, irregularly shaped blob. This was Ciel optimizing my shape in accordance with the hostile Predation I was engaged in. The more contact surface I had with my target, the more efficient the process was.

So my constantly shifting body ate into the surface of Veldora's body, spreading itself around him. But the target was just too big. No matter how far I stretched myself out, I was really just a dot from Veldora's point of view. It was a daunting task, but I couldn't give up now.

Throwing all caution to the wind, I accelerated my hostile consumption, activating Soul Consume as I searched for his core. This, too, would've been impossible without Ciel's assistance. Looking at that incredible strength it exhibited earlier, I was starting to think it had computational power on a scale far beyond what Raphael had. Guess not only monsters evolve when you name them.

Thanks to Ciel, things were overall going pretty smoothly right now, but we weren't entirely free of obstacles. To be exact, I was in intense pain. Veldora's body had detected what I was up to, and it was resisting me at all costs. The Storm Dragon's aura was causing my body to disintegrate. I was trying to consume it while it was trying to quash me—and the battle was only just beginning.

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Pain, heat, and suffering. I wasn't supposed to be able to feel pain, but it was now coursing across my entire body. Heat shouldn't have meant anything to me, but I felt like someone was dunking me in unbearably hot water. And then the agonizing suffering—something I had never felt before in this world.

The dangerous sensation of having my existence wiped out shortly triggered all of my survival instincts. But I wasn't going to relent. I was going to win. I would overcome this agony and save Veldora. And I wasn't alone now. In Ciel, I had a more reliable partner than ever before. That's why I was so determined to devour the Storm Dragon and absorb Veldora's core. If I could achieve that, this much pain was never gonna stop me.

"Everything all right, Ciel?"

Leave it to me.

We're good, then.

With Ciel's trustworthy reply in hand, I expanded my Predation.

One thing standing in my way was all the energy I was feeding on. Normally it'd be converted into power for me, but against a True Dragon, it didn't work that way. Instead of becoming my power, it was destroying my body from the inside. I suppose dragons are so powerful down to the individual cell level that nothing can ever bind them down. Somehow *this* dragon got taken over by the enemy anyway, but no point whining about that now.

Whenever part of my body is lost, Infinite Regeneration kicks in to rebuild and replace it. That was one way I could forcibly take in the energy I was consuming. It'd be a lot easier if I could just throw it away, but that wasn't gonna happen. I had to Analyze and Assess all this energy first, or else I might wind up damaging Veldora's core. It was a really tedious process, but it was still the best way—such was my decision after conferring with Ciel. Now it was up to me to keep going with it.

I put my mind on cruise control as I kept up my work. The clock was still ticking, but I was dealing with a huge target. I began worrying that we might not make it—but I still had faith in Ciel. We were guaranteed to make it in time.

I had some free time, so I performed some analysis work. Would you like to hear about it?

.....

What do you *mean*, you had some free time? I'm kind of in horrifying pain right now. What're you even up to?

I was performing an Analyze and Assess process on Velgrynd's powers, examining her Cardinal Acceleration while she was isolated in Complex Space.

No, that was a rhetorical question... Wait. You figured it out?!

I failed to reproduce the power, but it is possible to develop a very similar technique.

You're crazy, Ciel.

Maybe I should just assume that it's reading my surface consciousness at all times. Better be more aware of my mental barriers, I guess. I'll have to think matters through on a deeper level than before.

Still, though, getting to imitate Velgrynd's most powerful move (as Ciel breathlessly claimed) would be pretty cool. That, despite the fact you can't copy ultimate skills just by observing them...

...Wait a minute. What else was it analyzing? I decided to ask it directly, despite my trepidation.

"What else have you been analyzing?"

Ciel eagerly spoke up, as if it'd been waiting for the question.

Right! I have also finished analyzing Storm Blast. By taking advantage of the remainders from the skill Veldora, Lord of the Storm, this skill is now available for use.

Wait, wait, wait! This is major news! I practically don't even feel the pain any longer!

That sounded like such an incredibly difficult analysis to make. I was unsure if I could believe it at first. It acted like this was just some side project...

No, it is true. And that is not even the important part. Here's the main thing!

I couldn't help but have that reaction in my surface consciousness. But whatever. No point hiding stuff from it anyway.

It was convincing enough, though. I still had the ultimate skill Veldora, Lord of the Storm, in me. Taking advantage of that, I could see how I could reproduce Storm Blast well enough. That's a pretty damn powerful skill, so it'd be nice if I could grab it for myself. I was happy for that—and despite my initial surprise, I suppose performing that kind of work wasn't too unusual by Ciel's standards.

At this point, I was more curious about what Ciel thought the "main thing" was.

"So what is that?"

I have completed analysis of the Storm Dragon you have been Predating. This will make it possible to transform your body composition into the same type as a True Dragon. Would you like to carry this out?

Pardon?

That's a pretty casual way of saying something very disturbing, isn't it? Transforming my bodily composition into the same type as Veldora? And you're asking if I want to "carry this out" like it's a quick little errand?!

Now I'm a little confused. If I'm understanding this correctly, does this mean I would *become* a True Dragon...?

That is the correct way to see it, yes.

Whaaat?! It's the *correct* way?!

...Like, are you serious?

Of course! So, would you like to evolve into a True Dragon?

Yes

No

Heh-heh-heh... heh-ha-ha... *Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!*

I unconsciously executed a three-part progression of evil laughter. *Still giving me yes/no ultimatums, huh?* I thoughtlessly noted as I gave the command:

YES!

Instantly, the pain I felt vanished. No pain, no burning, no agony. The Storm Dragon's aura no longer penetrated me—because I had a draconic aura of my own.

Now, the more energy consumed, the more I stored for myself. My magicule count shot ever higher. I was afraid it'd expand to the point where it'd go out of control and explode on me.

Not a problem. I will provide perfect energy management.

Yeah, I'm sure you will.

With Ciel, there was no need to worry.

Now my True Dragon self had an identical number of magicules as Veldora. Then I broke through the limit. With this, a new True Dragon was born—and the moment I started being distracted from my current situation, I realized that any further delay in dealing with the Storm Dragon would be fatal.

(You have won, Rimuru! I am rather surprised to see you become a True Dragon, but it seems my eyes never deceived me after all. Kwaah-ha-ha-ha!!)

Veldora, on the other hand, didn't seem too surprised as he rejoiced for me. He was acting like he'd raised me from a baby or something, but it goes without saying that his contribution to this was next to nothing.

Besides, it was too early to be declaring victory. Veldora's core was the key to all of this, and I still didn't know where it was. Time to put the icing on this cake, then.

“Right, let's get this over with!”

How dare some puppet like this call itself the Storm Dragon. How dare they!

“Consume it all, Belzebuth!!”

At my order, Belzebuth devoured the Storm Dragon's body—with glee, I might add, not to mention tremendous speed. Now things were incredibly one-sided in this conflict—the one who eats, and the one who's eaten. The very embodiment of "survival of the fittest"...

The curtain quietly fell on the epic battle. During it, we witnessed an evolution, a new birth, and a bold step into the future.

The remnants of the energy that leaked away from me filled the area with a blinding light—the light of blessing, a light celebrating the birth of a new Truth. This was the light that my old body—the one that hadn't transformed into a True Dragon—emitted as it was converted into pure energy, and even it would be consumed by me as it faded from the world.

With that, my goal was achieved in truly perfect form.



When the light subsided, there was only one life-form left—an indeterminate one. Veldora was gone. And now, as Velgrynd realized, the slime—the demon lord Rimuru—had consumed it.

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According to what they knew, Rimuru was born from a pool of magicules that had leaked out of the sealed Veldora. But now that slime had consumed the Storm Dragon—its father, in a way—and become the fifth True Dragon of the world.

This slime, the Ultimate Slime, took on the form of a human being after a few moments, a blade in one hand and wearing no clothing. He was between the age of fifteen and sixteen, maybe about five foot three inches—small, it was fair to say. But the amount of magicules contained within him was not only comparable to Veldora's; it far outclassed him.

Those golden eyes, a beautiful almond shape, looked capable of seeing through everything; that hair, silver with a blue tinge, shone white like the moon. He was androgynous, and his face was more touchingly sweet than ravishing, but his divine presence made him transcend beauty itself.

Now that pale skin was enveloped in an evil aura of black and gold. He whispered something—an expression of frustration—and the demonic energy covering his body transformed into a divine full-body outfit, jet black in color. This was crafted through the skill Create Material, a specialty from the demon race, and even though it only used the magicules leaking out from his body, it was impossible to gauge just how strong it would be as armor.

Like flipping a switch, Rimuru suppressed the flow of excess energy. Then he grinned out of one corner of his mouth, satisfied at what he saw.

Velgrynd was watching from her prison cell, interrupting her energy transfer in the process. She was stunned, unable to believe what was happening before her eyes.

The battle between Veldora, her own brother, and the demon lord Rimuru should have been overwhelmingly in the Storm Dragon's favor. It was absolutely impossible for the slime to surpass him in any way. Otherwise, it simply meant that they were "equals" from the beginning...

Is it a coincidence, then? No... Are you saying he just happened to be born right here, right now?!

It was an astonishing conclusion, reached by Velgrynd as she foundered in a sea of thoughts. But she wouldn't easily admit to it. How could she? A monster who just happened to be born near a True Dragon, who just happened to have the right soul to accept draconic energy—the chances were just too small to comprehend.

If Rimuru truly was the fifth True Dragon to be born, that would make him Velgrynd's younger brother—but it happened because he fed off Veldora, and Velgrynd couldn't abide calling something like that a True Dragon. He was something akin to one, at best, and she refused to admit anything so horrifying could exist.

Her instincts told her to crush it here and now. It would be the only way to avenge her brother's death.

Veldora was her darling little brother—bratty, rambunctious, more than a handful to deal with, but still so boundlessly free. She envied him. Yes, she wanted to use him as a pawn, but it'd only be for a blip in time compared to the length of their lifespans. She certainly had no intention of rubbing him out of existence; once she was done with him, she was going to give him his freedom back.

And now—

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The moment Velgrynd realized that Veldora was consumed before her eyes, her anger blew away all sense of reason.

“My sweet little brother... How *dare* you....!!”

She let out a raging roar. It was well past two hundred seconds, and that roar was enough to shatter the Insulated Imprisonment. The Flame Dragon was enraged, with no regard for her own self-preservation—and now she would unleash all her hostility upon Rimuru.



Well, after eating up Veldora, it looks like I've been reborn into a new species. An Ultimate Slime, apparently, but it now made me part of the True Dragons—maybe a quasi-member, but still.

I'm really not sure there was anything slime-like about me any longer, but I'll keep that my little secret. Too late to worry about that anyway.

So I checked out my new body.

My “main” one—the default form that I existed in without consuming magicules—had grown considerably larger. Or *matured*, maybe? I was now about as tall as a high school student—a female one, but still. I could adjust my externals to look any age I

wanted, so it didn't really mean too much; I just thought it'd be pretty neat to show myself "growing" like this.

The question was whether I could still move around and take action in this body comfortably. My slime form had grown, too, to a diameter of two or two-and-a-half feet. That made me a little too big for a regular person to carry around, so hopefully I could retain my original, smaller package.

Anyway, I could work out the kinks later. For now, I had a problem. I was currently wearing nothing. Totally naked. That wasn't gonna fly. This weird aura was flowing out of me, hiding my naughty bits... but either way—very problematic.

So I tried crafting some clothes. Tapping Create Material (a little something Diablo had taught me), I discovered that the process was actually easy-peasy. Depending on the creator's ability, Diablo said, you could produce some really nice results with it—and I liked what I saw. Comfortable, for sure, and I think straight-up black looks good on me.

As for its armor level... Well, it turned out to be God-class. Whoa, really? God-class? Boy, God-class, huh? Neat...

Wait, what?!

This must be exactly what being "flabbergasted" feels like. I *thought* I had evolved a little, but I guess this proved it, huh? Perhaps my current power was even more tremendous than I had even imagined.

And I suppose I could've seen it coming. Benimaru and the gang had evolved into awakened demon lords, but thanks to Food Chain, all that power was getting channeled back to me. That was likely one reason, and to that you could add all the power from Veldora I'd just consumed a moment ago. It was too much energy to store in my Stomach as it previously existed, but now I had fully analyzed it and made it my own.

So all of this had come together to create what I had now. Basically, it's entirely Ciel's work. Now I feel like calling Ciel simply by its name is rude. Time to pay it some well-earned respect and call it Dr. Ciel!

Please don't call me that.

I thought I heard someone talking, but I didn't care. The good doctor is *so* wonderful, isn't it? And I'll be expecting big things from it going forward, too!

Leave it to me!

Great.

So now that I had some clothes on, I needed to make sure not to forget the task at hand.

(Veldora, are you okay?)

(Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Quit making me repeat it again and again! But I am quite amazed to see you defeat my body without any hassle!)

(Yeah, well, I was kinda too much "in the zone" to think about exactly what I did. But I'm so glad this worked out!)

Veldora and I were both safe, and it made both of us quite happy. And if we were chatting like this, I assumed Veldora's core was unscathed as well. All that remained was to reconnect our soul corridor and regenerate the ultimate skill Veldora, Lord of the Storm.

Succeeded. No problems found.

Dr. Ciel comes through again. Always doing the job without me having to micromanage it. Another perfect piece of work.

Okay. So that was one objective achieved. And now that I had Veldora back, I really didn't have any business left with the imperial army. But you know what? My anger was just as intense as before—and I wanted to slam it into Emperor Ludora's face. Besides, if I ended the war on this rather indecisive note, it'd doubtlessly lead to future disasters. We'd come this far, so I really wanted to be thorough if I could. As a king, it was my job to eliminate any threats to my realm.

Now that I'd regained my sense of reason, I was beginning to think it'd be all right if I left everyone but Ludora alone. But it's important not to let up. I had a job to do, and I had to see it to its end. Maybe *I* didn't mind ending it here, but the enemy might have had ideas of their own.

And as if to prove that point, Velgrynd was still alive and well before me, staring at me and brooding inside her prison cell.

I had freed Veldora safely, but for some reason, Velgrynd looked infuriated. Defeating her wouldn't achieve very much for me, so I really didn't want to go through the trouble of engaging her... but if she was a threat, I had to eliminate it.

Velgrynd is no longer a threat. Not all of her skills have been analyzed yet, but a full set of countermeasures is in place.

Dr. Ciel sure has a lot of confidence. Or maybe arrogance?

No, it is the solemn truth.

It'd be a travesty if I lost after being told that, but no, maybe I didn't have much to worry about. Even in the last battle, I was fully defending myself against Velgrynd's attacks. With Ciel in tow, I could probably shut her down without even struggling very much.

There wasn't much point, I thought, in straying from the original plan. I had the opportunity to thoroughly smash the Empire, and I wanted to take it, ending things right here without any bloodshed. Even now, the Black Corps were out in full force; I could see several large hotspots dotted across the battlefield, and nobody else on the enemy's side was worth my attention at the moment. I was going to tangle with Ludora sooner or later, so it didn't seem tactically mistaken to damage Velgrynd here while I could.

The Empire still had Lieutenant Kondo and Damrada on their side, and the emperor's four personal bodyguards looked like big trouble as well. Ludora was dominating Yuuki's mind, too, and I'd have to dispatch him along with all the other enemies. That, and there should be one more Single Digit to deal with, if my math's correct—dunno who they might be, but if they're at least Sage-level, better keep a sharp eye out. So even discounting Ludora and Velgrynd for the time being, I had eight powerful foes left.

Scanning the battlefield, I spotted several other foes I could classify as "threats," presences I decided we needed to wipe out right now. I call them "threats," but as strong as they were, they really didn't pose much of a threat to me. Having evolved

into a True Dragon, my magicule count has ballooned to almost ten times what it used to be. That earned me major boosts in both the quality and quantity of power I could wield; I really felt like I was far stronger than I was before. I hadn't taken Veldora out, so my fuel tank was topped up. I was firing on all cylinders, essentially, and I even felt like I could give Milim or Guy a run for their money.

...Whoa, hold on. Can't let myself get an ego. Psych yourself up like that, and you're bound to screw things up. Let's keep our guards up and proceed as carefully as possible.

Also, while I was scanning the field just now, I noticed that those "threats" I detected were already engaged in battle with Benimaru and the others. I did give them their orders, yet the speed with which they executed them amazed me. But were they sticking to that other command—the one about not getting themselves killed? I just hope they don't try anything reckless in the name of "lightening my load" or whatever... but let's worry about that later. Velgrynd was before my eyes, and she looked ready to fly at me right this minute; I can think about whether to back up my boys down below once I do something about her.

In less than a second, I made up my mind. The next problem was how I would fight her. Maybe kick off with Release Storm Dragon, part of the ultimate skill Veldora, Lord of the Storm? That would let me call for Veldora, and then we'd go two-against-one on Velgrynd and victory would be all but assured.

Looking back, I've now realized that my magicule count was rarely, if ever, filled up to maximum in the past. I had a sneaking suspicion this was because I had Veldora in a "released," free state this whole time. Veldora and I are kind of one and the same by this point, with both of us capable of resurrecting the other if needed. It didn't exactly work like Velgrynd's Parallel Existences, but it was still an invincibility code that verged on being unfair. Having to lend him my magicules seemed a small price to pay for that—and Veldora's overflow magic streamed straight over to me anyway, so it's not like this was any inconvenience. If anything, this sort of power circulation had an energizing effect on me.

Thus, while Release Storm Dragon came with some disadvantages, the advantages made it all worth it. So I promptly invoked it.

"My sweet little brother... How *dare* you....!!"

Now Velgrynd was yelling at me. More like how dare *she*, am I right?

"Hey! You're the one who struck first! Besides, you tried to get me and Veldora to fight each other! What's up with that?!"

"Silence! The mere idea of Veldora being consumed by the likes of you makes me sick! I always knew he was inferior to me, but I cannot *believe* he would fall victim to a mere demon lord... I refuse to accept his annihilation—and I refuse to ever forgive you for it!"

Then the furious Velgrynd shot out an absurd number of heat rays at me. They didn't work on me, sadly, but at least I learned a thing or two from our conversation. She was that angry because I had eaten Veldora—she thought I must've killed him, completely eradicating him from existence. I knew an easy way to deal with that—invoke Release Storm Dragon, and everything would be cleared up.

But:

(Gaaaaahh! W-wait! Wait, Rimuru!)

Veldora himself stopped me.

(What?) I asked, worried.

(Rimuru, listen to me. My sister is enraged because she thinks I no longer exist—is that right?)

(Sounds like it. So if you can come out and we can explain matters, maybe we can avoid unnecessary combat, you know?)

(You damned fool! Stop being so reckless! If I reveal myself to be perfectly safe right this minute, it would be beyond awkward for me. She'll turn her rage from you to me instead!)

What a stupid answer. I felt like a "damned fool" for listening to him.

(Ahhh, I thought I was going to have a heart attack...)

It was clear that I couldn't rely on him for anything right now. He's so useless right at the most critical of moments. I wanted to chew him out, but then Ciel interrupted me.

One moment, please. I would like to take this opportunity, perhaps, to optimize Veldora's powers. I have already received permission from him, so please hold off invoking Release Storm Dragon until the skill reformation process is complete.

Its tone was as fetching and courteous as ever.

According to Ciel, Veldora's ultimate skill Faust, Lord of Investigation, would be revised and evolved into the new ultimate skill Nyarlathotep, Lord of Chaos. Given that this was an "evolution," this would come with a tremendous strength boost... but what caught my ear in particular was how Ciel "already received permission." Apparently Veldora was already aware of him.

"Since when were you acquainted?"

He became aware of my existence after your evolution to demon lord, Sir Rimuru.

Veldora offered further explanation:

(I was aware of it, but only became fully sure about its presence a few moments ago. In the history of this planet, after all, I've never heard of a mere skill acquiring sentience for itself. But sin-type abilities are known to contain something like an ego for themselves, so I began to suspect that it might've been possible after all.)

So Veldora was suspecting something since way back in the Great Sage days. He had been observing a thing or two inside my Stomach, he said, and what he saw often seemed strange and mysterious to him. Once that turned into Raphael, Lord of Wisdom, with my demon-lord evolution, though, he was pretty much sure of it. It turns out he had been holding conversations with it up to that point, apparently thinking it was me all along. I wasn't that bothered about it, but I was kind of curious to know what they talked about.

But be that as it may, Veldora was acquainted with Ciel. That was the important part.

(Okay, so you knew each other... and you agreed to its proposal? Is that right?)

(Indeed I did! I was hoping I could take on my own sister, but under these circumstances, Rimuru, I will leave it to you!)

Glad he's back to his usual two-timing self. That's the exact opposite of what you were sayin' earlier, isn't it?! And Ciel's way too eager to mess around with his skills, too.

I really didn't think now was the time for this, but maybe it'd be more of a hassle if they tried that stuff while Veldora wasn't confined.

Besides, I was kind of interested in testing out my powers. I had Ludora to take on in the future, so I had an obligation to find out how strong I was now. Velgrynd would be the perfect guinea pig for this. Now that the heat was off (no pun intended), I could use her to see how I'd grown in assorted ways.

Might as well do it while I can, right? I'll be keeping an eye on my friends, but until they're in real danger, testing my skills will take top priority.

I think that would be a good idea.

Ciel seemed happy about it, too.

So I was all set to go, but then it had a follow-up proposal for me.

By the way, following my assorted analyses, I am now able to combine the ultimate skills Veldora, Lord of the Storm, and Uriel, Lord of Vows, to form the ultimate skill Hastur, Lord of Starwind. Would you like to proceed?

Dr. Ciel just never lets up, does it? I'm about to fight Velgrynd here—how much free time would it *have*, even? It's almost like it doesn't even see Velgrynd as a challenge any longer. Tinkering with skills seems like its new hobby or something, but I really wish it'd save that for regular business hours.

For the time being, I had to reject this idea.

"Hey, you might find a better way to modify them later, right? So how about you take your time thinking about that stuff some other time?"

...!! Well said, Master. Understood. I will continue to search for greater accomplishments.

R... ight. Glad it agrees with me. I'm not sure what was so "well said" about it, but at least I can concentrate on the battle now.

Besides, Uriel was pretty effective against Velgrynd, and no matter how much of an upper hand I have right now, I don't want to throw away that known advantage. And sure, I might be able to win with Belzebuth alone, but this isn't a game. I can't let my guard down, and any failure here would be unforgivable. Besides, I know Ciel's

thinking way too highly of me. Think I'll only give lip service to its praise from now on.

Still, Ciel's love of messing around with skills was a little harrowing. Its sights were turned squarely on Veldora at the moment, but he said okay to it, so whatever. The real problem would come after this battle was over. I could tell all my friends who awakened to demon-lord form would have some major skill mods waiting for them as well. Dr. Ciel could work that out in no time, I was sure, and I had a feeling it'd be champing at the bit for the opportunity. Or maybe it was already hard at work...?

But even as I worried about this, the showdown with Velgrynd was about to begin.

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The crimson dragon and I floated in the sky, glaring at each other. Velgrynd instantly shifted into her human form, and the battle was very suddenly underway. She fired Nuclear Cannon strikes at me in rapid-fire succession, slashing away with her azure dragon sword.

What was the difference between her human and dragon forms? It mostly came down to the difference in defensive force. On offense, they were exactly the same, but the human form was far more energy-efficient. That connects directly to being able to fight for longer, so for extended combat sessions, the human form is likely the way to go.

But dragon mode had an undeniable advantage of its own—the sheer hugeness of it. The scale of her attacks was proportionate to the size of her body—the same power, but a much wider range. That let her take on large numbers of opponents simultaneously... and even if it were just one target, it'd be pretty tough to avoid attacks from such a gigantic creature. Then there's the defense, the real clincher. Finishing off someone so huge required an attack equally large in scale. A sword was unlikely to work, and most magic was just too small in scale to matter. Very little magic worked against True Dragons to begin with, but even ignoring that, any magic devised for human-sized targets was useless. It had to work *big*, or else it just wouldn't cause much damage.

So going into dragon mode was likely the stronger bet... but Velgrynd chose her human form anyway. And I could guess the reason.

Presumably she is seeking to abandon all defense so she may finish you off, Master.

Looks like it, huh? I'll go with that, then.

Velgrynd's fiendish rage only served to enhance her beauty. All that rage was focused on her blade, and now she swung it with enough force to cut me in half. But I wasn't about to take that lying down. Leaving my magic countermeasures to Ciel, I charged at Velgrynd with my own beloved blade—a straight sword of pure crimson steel. Her azure dragon blade was a kind of broadsword; she hadn't been hiding it, but instead created it just now via Create Material. Its grade was God-class—but so was mine, apparently upgrading itself for its new True Dragon owner. Velgrynd's weapon was a threat, but I was hardly outclassed.

In fact—

With a shrill *tiing*, Velgrynd's azure sword shattered.

I was pretty surprised myself, but it must've been even worse for her. "What did you do there?" she asked, once she moved a prudent distance away. I didn't mean to "do" anything; all I did was try to parry her attack. She was really barking up the wrong tree with that question.

That is the difference in each weapon's performance. My master's straight sword is a masterpiece forged with the heart and soul of Kurobe; Velgrynd's is an easily manufactured model, a mere amalgamation of magicules. It is God-class due to the sheer number of magicules involved, but in essence, it is a blunt cudgel of a sword.

That's how it is, huh? I knew there could be pretty stark differences between weapons graded at the same level, but I didn't expect *this* much difference in the God class. I suppose wielding the same weapon for a long time, really *building* a relationship, pays off in the end—that's a real good lesson to learn. My current outfit was made with Create Material, too, after all. Just because it's rated God-class doesn't mean I should expect the world of it.

"Well, I just found out that even in the same weapon class, sometimes the difference can be like night and day. The one *you* just created turned out to be no match for mine."

I doubted that'd be enough to have her give up, but I told her anyway. Velgrynd, who was no fool, seemed to conclude that I wasn't lying—but maybe she wasn't willing to accept it yet, because she kept on producing azure swords from thin air to slash at me with. Only after all of them got rent to pieces did she seem ready to accept reality.

Seething in frustration, she promptly moved on to her next attempt. If materialized weapons were useless, I suppose, she'd just have to rely on her own body next. Claws extended out from her hands as she assumed a kung fu-style stance. Seeing this, I put my sword away.

“...What are you doing?”

I was experimenting, of course. I wanted to see how I was progressing, so I stopped relying on my sword.

“I’m taking you on barehanded. It’d just be bullying the weak if I used a weapon.”

A fight like this is all about goading your opponent. If it made her lose her cool, that would be enough to assure victory for me right there.

“Don’t you look down on me...!”

And it worked. It was almost funny how easily Velgrynd fell into my trap. Now all I had to do was treat this like a chess game and not make any blatantly bad moves.

Velgrynd’s claw attacks were fast—impossible to follow with your eyes. But I had extraordinary perception speed. Ever since I gave Raphael the name Ciel, my Mind Accelerate skill had been increasing. It was once a million times faster than reality, but now that was up to several hundred million times. I could even follow the traversal of rays going at the speed of light. I couldn’t *move* at that speed, mind you, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t avoid this attack.

This speed boost applied to the casting of magic as well. Spatial Transport now worked nearly a thousand times faster than before—in other words, I could escape from even a lightspeed attack with a quick teleport, as long as the attack was a certain distance away. One second could be prolonged into ten or so years, so it was like watching a completely stationary world. It’d be tough for normal people to withstand, given that *they* couldn’t move, either, but through the activation of Mind Accelerate at certain key points, Ciel could overcome this for me.

It didn’t really matter how fast Velgrynd could move. Now that I was at this point, swordsmanship or martial arts weren’t necessary for me. I could just push her down with brute force.

Velgrynd’s super-speed attack was closing in. It was going several hundred times the

speed of sound; the old me would've doubtlessly had a hard time with it. No, it wasn't worth breaking a sweat over.

"Too slow," I said, goading her further as I Spatial Transported my way behind her. But she was no slouch, either. Anticipating this move, she immediately reacted to it. Pretty tough cookie, I thought. She really was the best of the best, and there was no discounting that.

"Oh, you think so? I doubt you can move quicker than me—is that an application of Spatial Transport, then? It's impressive you can move so naturally with it without creating any spatial rifts, but once I know the trick, I can deal with it."

I thought my taunting would enrage her further, but she was calmer than I expected. That's Veldora's sister for you, I suppose... but Ciel anticipated this as well. And the next move she was likely going to make was:

"But now that I've intervened to keep a given space fixed in time, no one can teleport themselves at all within. Too bad, huh?"

That's the only way for her to counteract me, isn't it? Velgrynd had Spatial Transport as well, of course, and she could intervene and put her own rules over a large swath of space around her. Transport via Dominate Space was no longer possible for me—I could force it anyway, but there wasn't much point if she knew where I'd be exiting. It remained a potential escape route for me, too, but again, she'd know where I'd be going, so it was pretty meaningless.

Now that teleport-type abilities were out of the picture, that just left physical speed to decide this. Velgrynd now had the perfect environment to seal her victory. That meant her next move was...

"I never thought I'd have to use my *true* clincher moves on someone like you."

"You think stopping my movement was enough to let you win? Lemme show you just how wrong you are."

"You *are* a brat, aren't you? If you hadn't killed my boy, I might have liked you. But this is the end now."

Velgrynd took a stance. Kicking against thin air, she turned herself into a supersonic bullet, accelerating further as it shot forward.

“Cardinal Acceleration!”

But the shouted voice was already well behind her. Velgrynd made herself into a crimson meteor, approaching me at the physical limit of sub-lightspeed. It was changing trajectory, too—making this transformation allowed her to function as a flaming ball of wrath, capable of going in any direction. This, I suppose, was Cardinal Acceleration in its purest form. Not a straight-line attack, but more of a guided missile that could go anywhere it wanted. A combination of teeming energy and pondering mass, it was the ultimate in destructive attacks.

Ciel had thoroughly analyzed Cardinal Acceleration, perfectly discerning its true nature for me. Velgrynd was terrifying enough, but Ciel had her beat for sure. I created a manas like this on what was basically a whim—and that whim would spell the Flame Dragon’s defeat.

As I planned, Master, I have deployed Belzebuth around your entire perimeter. No matter the angle of contact, Predation on Velgrynd will proceed without complications.

And that was exactly right.

If I tried to eat a sentient target any normal way, it’d be real hard if it tried to resist me. And *this* was a True Dragon. No matter how much of an effort Ciel put in, Belzebuth-based Predation should have been impossible...

...except that, by her own will, Velgrynd had transformed herself into a meteor-style projectile. All of her energy was placed into her attack, and thanks to that, her resistance to things like this had been greatly reduced.

And here was the result. Velgrynd was now quarantined in my Complex Space.

(How did...?! How in the world did that happen?!) I heard her say.

The moment she thought she finished me off, she was in a completely empty space. For Velgrynd, it must’ve been difficult to grasp the situation at first. I’m sure it’d take some time for her to realize she had been defeated. Better spell it out for her.

(I won. You just sit there and be quiet, okay?)

(I... I lost?)

(That's what happened, yeah. And you can't escape my Complex Space, so I don't even think your Parallel Existence can exchange any energy with you.)

According to Dr. Ciel, I had consumed over 50 percent of Velgrynd's magicules. The replication standing by next to Ludora had about 20 percent, and the remaining amount—nearly 30 percent—had been expended and needed to be recovered. Apparently she could recover around 10 percent of her magicules per day, so she'd be back at just under 50 percent in three days... but since I had this replication inside of me, she wouldn't recover quite that much. Her own sentience existed in both replications, which made exact calculations a little complex, but either way, I just weakened Velgrynd a hell of a lot.

(If you want the full story, ask Veldora, all right?)

(Veldora? What are you talking about...?)

Velgrynd seemed puzzled, but I think it'd be quicker to hear about this from the horse's mouth.

(Kwaaaaah-ha-ha-ha! It is I, my sister. I hope you are faring well! Doesn't really look like it, but...)

(Veldora?! You weren't gone after all?!)

Great. Hopefully they can talk things over and come to some kind of détente about this.

So I now had complete victory over Velgrynd, capturing the majority of her magicules in Complex Space.



CHAPTER
3

THE BATTLEFIELD RAGES

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 3

THE BATTLEFIELD RAGES

The Magical Beast Division led by Commander Gradim, numbering some thirty thousand troops, took to the skies in their airships. The sight of Velgrynd's valor had kept morale high, and with the enemy right below them, they had a perfect target to exercise their violent impulses on.

"Listen up, all of you! His Excellency and Lady Velgrynd are personally on hand to catch sight of your exploits. You had best not disappoint them today. I want each and every one of you to be ready to fight!"

The officers and men serving Gradim responded to his shouted speech with a roar that shook the atmosphere. Gradim liked to see it. It was the perfect opportunity, he thought as he smiled to himself.

Heh-heh-heh... Maybe the world is no longer mine for the taking, but there's no doubt that my moment in the sun is here. Caligulio is defeated, and that boy Yuuki has failed. I will be the only general left, the greatest of field commanders... and if I perform well in this battle, that's exactly what I'll be!

From Gradim's point of view, the Western Nations weren't enough of an enemy to trounce. Hinata Sakaguchi looked like she'd put up more of a fight, but he still chided her as a half-wit who couldn't manage anything more than a draw against a newly minted demon lord.

Gradim had boundless confidence, and he had the hard-nosed fighting experience to back that up.

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Gradim the Beast King was the second most powerful man in the Empire. He was born

in the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania, which had remained a mere rumor for quite a while—and in fact, he was the half-brother of Carillon, the Beast Master who once led that nation. The beast inside Gradim was a proud, solitary white tiger—and, perhaps not by coincidence, he had such a notoriously selfish streak that he was judged unfit for the throne of Eurazania, long ago.

These damned pieces of garbage! They didn't even join me in the Empire, but now they team up with Carillon to plot rebellion against me? I will make very sure that they regret this!

Gradim had been building up this grudge for a long time, as inherently unjustified as it was. The previous king of Eurazania was not a skilled warrior, but he had a good eye for people. When he decided whether to make his first- or second-born the crown prince, he made the choice based on who he believed was more qualified to lead others. That choice infuriated Gradim, to the point that he murdered his father the king over it. But in the ensuing fallout, he was subdued by Carrion and the Three Lycanthropeers and banished from the kingdom for all time. This “rebellion plot” was just a self-serving assumption on Gradim’s part; the truth was quite the opposite.

Still, Gradim had survived to this day, a testament to his strength. He was a truly exceptional lycanthrope, and if only he had a more decent, approachable disposition, he could have been one of history’s greats, with even Carillon marching to his drum. But that was all a what-if by now. Instead Gradim fled his homeland, wandering the continent, and that was when he met his most loyal of followers, the Three Generals.

Nazim, the Vermilion Bird, was a mutant harpy Gradim met while traveling through the Winged Nation of Fulbrosia. She had three pairs of wings, gray with purple spots, and although she had lost the ability to reproduce, she gained outstanding fighting strength in return. Her striking, Frey-like good looks attracted Gradim’s eye, and his invitation to join him was the beginning of their romantic relationship.

Baraga, the Azure Dragon, was the master of an Arch Dragon—a Water Dragon, to be exact—that Gradim had defeated. He was a warrior getting on in years, but his abilities put him squarely in the middle of the Imperial Knights. Finally Gozaline, the Black Tortoise, had control over a lorelei, an exceedingly rare rock sprite. A priestess from a foreign tribe, she enjoyed mastery over a variety of magical arts. She joined Gradim after he defeated her lorelei.

These Three Generals came from three different backgrounds, but they all had one thing in common—their strength. Nazim was demon lord-level, for example, ready to potentially awaken at any moment. And the monsters that served Baraga and Gozaline were both Calamity-level threats, putting the two of them at the head of the Magical Beast Division in fighting ability.

It was around three hundred years ago, after Veldora was sealed away, that Gradim settled down in the Empire. After surviving the Temma War, he was running a de facto bandit gang in imperial territory when he was defeated by a military strike force. Only when he swore to follow Emperor Ludora did he receive a pardon.

Gradim's mission was to defeat the Marshal so he could become number one across the Empire. Along the way, he wanted to take any opportunity he could to murder Ludora and take the throne for himself. In his mind, he had no particular favor to repay the emperor or anyone else. He only carried out their will because they were stronger; in the meantime, he constantly searched for the right opportunity to turn traitor against them.

With the help of the Empire, he would come to rule the world—and someday, he would name himself emperor and dominate all creatures. He could have such suicidal, reckless dreams only because he didn't know the Marshal's true identity.

Ludora and his close confidants could see right through Gradim's intentions. But he was strong, and that made him useful to them. They only kept him alive as long as he kept following their orders—a dangerous balance they had established simply because they shared enough of a common objective. Now, that had been shattered.

It can't be. I had no idea the Marshal was Velgrynd the Flame Dragon. I can't win against that kind of power. She is truly fearsome, well beyond even my strength.

This was truly something on a different dimension, something he discovered before he could ever hatch his plot. And for that stroke of incredible luck, Gradim thanked the gods up above, even though he didn't believe in any of them.

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So Gradim changed his mind on matters.

He *would* need to defeat Velgrynd someday, he thought, but it would require careful, step-by-step preparation. Knowing that, he decided to focus on building his military name instead, for the time being.

Besides, if anything, this was expedient for him. Gradim's wild instincts were telling him that his awakening was near; intuitively, he knew he was close to attaining power greater than anything before it. The same was true for Nazim, who always fought alongside him. The exact conditions for awakening were uncertain, but the time was undoubtedly near.

That was another reason why Gradim was seeking out any battlefield he could find—and now, laid out before him, was a field full of victims to prey upon. How could he not feel intense joy at the sight of it? He saw a legion of worthy enemies across the battlefield, some giving the impression of massive powers... and the more he defeated, the stronger his faction would become.

"Heh-heh-heh... Let the merry feast begin!"

And just as Gradim expected—or even more so—the battle was growing more intense by the minute.



The Three Generals serving Gradim moved according to the purposes of their lord. Their eyes searched for the strong—and now they found it.

"Whoa, that's King Gazel. Beating him would most assuredly boost my fame."

"Trying to hoard the best pickings for yourself? You'd better leave something good for Sir Gradim, or you *know* what kind of mood he'll be in."

King Gazel's bravery was known far and wide; anyone who defeated him would most assuredly become a dominant figure. Baraga's warrior heart raged inside of him.

But it was Nazim who felt obliged to stop him. Nazim knew that Gradim was on a personal hunt for King Gazel, so she advised Baraga to give it up. And besides:

Defeating Gazel would do wonders for Sir Gradim's power. There's no way we can let such a golden opportunity slip by us!

That summed up her true intentions—and even for Baraga, serving his master Gradim came first. Besides, Gazel was already wounded to begin with, and as a warrior, he feared being accused of cowardice. Best to play it safe, then, and defeat some handier enemy nearby.

"All right. Hopefully overwhelming King Gazel will help Sir Gradim grow in strength."

Gozaline smiled at Baraga. "Ee-hee-hee-hee... Don't worry. You'll find many other stout foes here. Maybe not as many as you wished for, but you should find it satisfying nonetheless."

And she was right. The battlefield was crawling with powerful figures. Baraga nodded at his companion. There was no need to panic—and Nazim agreed.

"Tee-hee-hee... Sir Gradim is correct. I'm sure the time of awakening is close by indeed. I, Nazim the Vermilion Bird, am bound to be the first to become a true demon lord!"

"Aren't you trying to hoard the best pickings now, Lady Nazim?"

"Now, now, calm down. I'm sure we're all thinking the same thing. Sir Gradim can focus on King Gazel—and in the meantime, we can run as wild as we please!"

Nazim spoke for everyone present.

"I'll take that weakened lizard, then. The dragonewts are still quite alive and threatening, and I think he's their leader. Striking him first is bound to crush their will to fight."

"In that case, I'll take that sassy-looking lady over there. Anyone who flies through the air without my permission deserves to be taken down a peg."

"Ee-hee-hee-hee! And I will destroy that golem, then. Time to give it some personal insight on just how powerful a lorelei is!"

They declared their targets to one another, ensuring there'd be no overlap—and then the Three Generals set off for their prey. But it was the very definition of counting one's chickens before they were hatched.

Just as they predicted, Gradim was targeting Gazel. That was only natural for him. The strategical soundness of attacking the strongest first depended on the situation—but if that strongest had already been weakened beforehand, starting with them first was just common sense. Gazel was defeated by Kondo and still motionless—now was his best chance.

“I see you are King Gazel. I am Gradim—Commander Gradim, leader of the Empire’s most powerful Magical Beast Division! And I have come to take your head!”

This was beyond cowardice. It was nothing short of truly despicable, in fact. But for Gradim, it was purely justifiable. The way his creed went, any means that achieved his goal were aboveboard.

So Gradim swooped down upon King Gazel—but there was someone in his way. It was Gabil the Dracolord, a dragonewt with reddish-purple scales that glowed with electricity—someone previously written off as down for the count.

“Gwah-ha-ha-ha! I have returned! And your disrespect for King Gazel cannot go unaddressed!”

“Tch... You’d better stay out of my way, you accursed lizard!”

Being interrupted so close to his prey greatly displeased Gradim. But in another moment, there were far more pressing things on his mind. Baraga the Azure Dragon, the one who was supposed to be handling Gabil, had been defeated in a single strike. And Gozaline the Black Tortoise, so eager and excited to face the Demon Colossus, was now in tears, her lorelei smashed to pieces. Only Nazim the Vermilion Bird was somehow managing to hold her own against Soka, the enemy she pointed out among the crowd.

Even the soldiers ordered to defend Gradim found themselves helpless against this revived Gabil. The difference in strength was blisteringly obvious. So Gradim, having no other choice, tried to step forward himself. But just then, he received an urgent magical call from Major General Zamdo.

“W-we’re in trouble! Reporting on the local situation—the demon lord Rimuru has done something terrifying. We must keep His Excellency safe at all costs, and so we’re requesting reinforcements here at once!”

It really wasn't the time for this, Gradim thought, but he managed to swallow the words down.

"What happened?"

"He drew this giant... this impossibly enormous summon gate..."

"What are you talking about?!"

"I'm telling you that he's summoned hundreds of demons, all Greater Demons or higher! And they've been given physical bodies, too. Each one is above an A in fighting rank, but now they're acting as an organized fighting force!!"

The frenzied concern in Zamdo's excited voice indicated just how unusual this situation was. But Gradim remained unconvinced. The demon lord Rimuru had done something, yes, but the Empire still had Velgrynd on its side. There was no way a rabble of demons could defeat her, so he failed to see what the big deal was. The real threat was right here—the force opposing Gradim—and he really wanted to focus on that.

"We're in the middle of a battle here. You're gonna have to handle it with what's available at hand."

Gradim practically spat out the words as he tried to end the call. But Zamdo's strained voice stopped him.

"But sir, we're dealing with a truly apocalyptic demon army! They're far stronger than regular imperial soldiers!"

"Nonsense! You've got both Lady Velgrynd and the Imperial Guardians with you!"

They had only one airship deployed over there—the imperial flagship—but it was manned by the very best forces of the Empire. Gradim couldn't see why they couldn't do anything without his team on hand. That was natural enough of a reaction, and nobody near Gradim could blame him for it. This time, they had simply picked the wrong enemy to mess with.

"Yes, we do have Lieutenant Kondo and the Imperial Knights with us... but the demon lord's main officers are here, and we've got our hands full dealing with them all."

"Their main officers?!"

No way, thought Gradim.

He had assumed that the dragonewt before him was Gabil, a top official from Tempest. His strength was certainly a surprise, but looking back on it, there were a few other names mentioned in their advance briefing—Benimaru, Shion, Diablo, and Gobta. The “Big Four,” as the demon lord Rimuru reportedly called them; but Gabil’s name was not among them. That, Gradim concluded, meant all four were stronger than Gabil.

“And that’s not all! I know it’s hard to believe, but the demon lord Rimuru has committed an abomination that no one could ever have imagined. I know not how he did it, but he has evolved this entire army of demons! Do you understand me?! Hundreds of demons, powered up to the equivalent of Arch Demons!!”

This really was starting to transcend all common sense. Gradim didn’t want to believe it, but Major General Zamdo wasn’t the kind of man to joke around. He was serious, meticulous, and Gradim had no choice but to believe him. They now had several hundred Calamity-class monsters released on the battlefield.

“I see. Yes, Zamdo, I certainly understand your concern.”

“Ah, thank you! So please, consider my request for reinforcements!”

With that last sigh of relief, Zamdo ended the call.

Gradim pondered for a moment. Outnumbering your opponent meant nothing if you couldn’t outclass them in quality. That was the law of war, and that was why Gradim took such great pains training his forces. If it were *only* demons, they might be able to manage well enough. But with two of his Three Generals down, it was dangerous to be optimistic—if it were Gradim’s force alone, he’d just be marching them to their slaughter.

Tsk...! Did I make a tactical mistake, treating him as a “mere” demon lord? I may survive this along with the Empire’s upper echelons, but we’d lose all of our rank-and-file soldiers to a man, no doubt. And if that’s the case...

It was too late for regrets. All that remained was to do what he could. And Gradim still had one more forbidden skill to tap.

The members of the Magical Beast Division were true elites, all selected and trained by Gradim himself. They were hailed as a group of born leaders, descended from a bloodline of heroes that birthed legends since ancient times—but that had nothing to do with the truth. In fact, they were a set of artificial champions, crafted in a lab by a combination of magic and otherworld knowledge.

Each one of them was the equivalent of an A or higher in rank, the best of the best—but they were also granted partners, creatures whose biopolymer data was rewritten to endow them with extra, battle-specific abilities. This was manmade life, created by cultivating magical beasts in captivity and combining the various characteristics they exhibited into one. These pseudo-androids were known as “battle chimeras,” and it was the lycanthrope Gradim who led research into them. It was through careful examination and analysis of his own transformation mechanisms that the researchers found ways to enhance those who served under him.

In this world, there were essentially no limits to research, no ethical or religious lines anyone felt it was taboo to cross. That was why they had achieved results like this in such astonishing speed. Thus it was through large-scale experimentation on living slaves that the most powerful army Gradim had ever hoped for was born.

So these A-ranked champions and their battle chimera partners boasted unparalleled strength when they worked together... but their true value had yet to be demonstrated in public. The ultimate aim of Gradim was to find ways to integrate different, divergent traits and qualities into a single being. To achieve this, a special medical skill was developed known as simply The Beast.

The existence of this all-important, confidential secret was known only to Gradim and his Three Generals. It was, after all, the culmination of their efforts—the fusion of soldiers with magical beasts. Based on the lycanthrope skill Animalize, The Beast ran off the animal elements in the battle chimera, the partner of the person possessing the skill. It combined man and beast into one, in every sense of the phrase, and it unlocked tremendous power for the caster. Instead of trying to tame the equivalent wild beast, it provided you with a super warrior, an incomparable force in battle.

However, given the forbidden nature of granting a person the power of a magical beast, this treatment was also extremely dangerous. Once administered, after all, the skill forcibly took effect. It could not be reversed voluntarily; the subject needed to be

taken back to the laboratory hospital to flush the drug out of their body. And the side effects shouldn't be ignored, either—in fact, that was the bigger issue. Nothing about the safety of this drug-based skill was guaranteed; according to current research, it was lethal 40 percent of the time. In some cases, conformity failed entirely and the subject was stuck in magical-beast form forever; that had a chance of occurring in one out of every five cases, and if it happened, your life as a human being was over.

Even worse than this was falling out of control. Some subjects gave way fully to their beast side, going berserk, while others stayed in human form and simply lost consciousness, carrying out no further orders. In cases like that, there was nothing to do but dispose of them. That happened at a rate of around 30 percent, and given its worse-than-death consequences, it wasn't something you wanted to test out on a lark.

Those were the examples of complete failure they had seen, and in total, it meant that 90 percent of cases ended in some kind of failure. It was basically ordering someone to die, and even someone as egotistical as Gradim was hesitant to try it on his own people. He wanted to improve on this drug, increasing the success rate before allowing his soldiers to use it. But under these circumstances, he could no longer be picky. At this rate, the weak would all be killed anyway. Gradim knew that Emperor Ludora was an even more coldhearted man than he was. The weak, in his mind, were worthy of being nothing but prey for the strong.

In that case, administering this drug to his soldiers right now might be seen as an act of affection more than anything. Besides, if any fused beasts went out of control, they'd be useful decoys—and even if they couldn't revert to human form, they'd still be valuable assets. The only "waste" would be the 40 percent of soldiers and officers who'd die on the spot... but although there was some uncertainty, it'd absolutely result in a more powerful fighting team than what they had now. That in itself made it the right thing to do.

Yes, there were still many unknowns about the drug's effects, and they might see some physical abnormalities, but we're talking 10 percent of the force growing stronger beyond any doubt. And on the battlefield, quality trumped quantity at all times. For those who knew that ironclad rule, upgrading 10 percent of your force was a very attractive temptation.

The actual success rate, granted, was still unknown. They hadn't conducted enough trials yet, and there was the possibility of unforeseen side effects caused by people's individual physical makeup. Those possibilities couldn't be dismissed, but at least

some people would survive with the powers of magical beasts in hand.

The most successful of the successful—probably not even 1 percent—had been found to be perfectly compatible with the process. As a sign of admiration, they were referred to as Chimera Knights. And among those successes:

“Guys, I just got a call from Zamdo. It sounds like the enemy’s not playing around any longer. I want you to get up and rid us of them.”

Gradim’s countenance was grim.

“Mmm?”

Gabil, taking a moment to realize Gradim wasn’t talking to him, gave him a suspicious look. But he immediately recovered, tightening up his face and jumping out of the way. A moment later, a flash of silver light coursed over where he was.

“Huh. Dodged that one? I thought it was a perfect surprise attack, but I guess I shouldn’t underestimate you.”

“Underestimate? That’s *my* line. How are you still standing after I gouged that giant hole in your chest?”

Confronting the retreating Gabil was Baraga the Azure Dragon, a foe he had written off as dead. Said hole in his chest was still gaping, with no sign of Ultraspeed or even regular old Self-Regeneration invoked on it. Any normal person would’ve died from it long ago, but this was a world crawling with magic-born; there was no telling what you’d find. Gabil understood that well enough, always checking fallen foes for life signs before declaring them fully dead. But Baraga was unusual.

“Heh-heh-heh... I remain safe thanks to Sir Gradim granting me his almighty power. Now let me show you my true form!”

Baraga’s cry was answered by a water dragon flying toward him.

No—it was not a *pure* dragon, but instead a battle chimera modeled after one—for Baraga was one of the Chimera Knights who successfully awoke to his true potential. As long as either the soldier or their partner was a beast, nobody would die—another hidden power Chimera Knights enjoyed.

Now, thanks to invoking the medical skill The Beast, Baraga was able to recover from a fatal wound instantly. What's more, as soon as he and the water dragon made contact, their bodies merged into one. He retained his human form and appearance, but now his skin was covered in dragon scales. His entire aura was different—he had gained significant strength, no doubt.

Gabil ruefully glanced at Gradim, but concluded that Baraga was the more present danger. So he attempted to focus on a one-on-one battle with him... although Gradim wasn't careless enough to allow that.

"This lizard's tougher than I thought. Let's kill it together."

"Very well, my lord. I'll take the vanguard spot, Sir Gradim. You have the freedom to move."

"All right. You've got *me* helping you, remember, so don't screw up!"

Terms like "chivalry" or "bushido" weren't in Gradim's vocabulary. He recognized Gabil as a valid threat, and so he'd take every measure needed to eliminate him.

"Nngh! Enough of this! Even together, you will realize how invincible I am!!"

So Gabil revved himself up for what was looking to be an uphill battle.

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The third of Gradim's generals was proving just as resilient as her peers. Just as Baraga was perfectly fine, the lorelei that was once crushed to pieces was now fit as a fiddle.

Gadora, piloting the Demon Colossus, was keeping tabs on the battlefield. This allowed him to hear Gradim's words, and they made him uneasy.

"*Get up,*" he said? Who was he talking to?

Just as he was thinking this, he noticed that Baraga was back in action. He hurriedly tried to alert Gabil, but before he could, he felt a chill and turned around.

Standing there was a girl who had clearly undergone some alteration. Or was "girl"

even the right term? She had the form of a girl, but her skin was a metallic, reddish-black color. Nothing about her was flesh and blood—it was a rock, or to be exact, she had transformed into a piece of magisteel. It was like a polished mirror, a majestic figure that was obviously non-human.

“Did you... merge with the lorelei?”

“Ee-hee-hee-hee! I sure did. You’re a wise man, Lord Gadora! And quite well-versed in knowledge from other worlds as well. But we’ve taken a different approach.”

“I’m sure you have, I’m sure you have. And I’ll show you what I’ve come up with shortly, so let me know what you think!”

Gozaline the Black Tortoise, the girl with the wicked smile on her face, gave Gadora a taunting laugh. Then she took a step forward.

Gadora really wanted to avoid this. He thought he had defeated the lorelei by sheer force, but it seems that was just an act. That forced him to reconsider just how strong Gozaline was.

Hoo boy. Genetic engineering, is it? I didn’t think it was much use in a world of magic, given all the mysteries surrounding the nature of monsters... but quite the opposite, in fact? I’m amazed they’ve achieved so much in their quest to merge with monsters.

He was very impressed at their ingenuity.

Monsters came in many stripes; some didn’t even have “genes” as we understand them. There wasn’t enough time in the world to do enough research on every single type, and it wasn’t likely to produce real results anyway. That was why, in the Empire, genetic engineering was studied only in the field of medicine—but now it looked like the Magical Beast Division was conducting their own secret research, the nature of which was probably too inhumane to disclose.

Gadora, not all that ethical a person himself, could understand why they put their intellectual curiosity first. He had no intention of lecturing them, but he did regret not being involved in that research at all. Because of that, he had no idea exactly how much this “merging” would enhance the subject’s strength.

By the looks of it, he estimated that Gozaline’s power exceeded that of the demon lord Clayman. That’d make her inferior to Saare, a Saint, but Gadora believed she had an

equivalent amount of magicules. Comparing them to the Ten Dungeon Marvels, she would likely surpass even Zegion before his awakening—and while magicule count didn't translate directly to strength, there was no doubting the danger she posed as an opponent.

"The Dragon Lords would be no match for her, to be certain. I suppose I, too, had best treat this seriously."

"My, what an honor to receive such high praise from you, Lord Gadora! Feel free to savor this power to the fullest!"

Gozaline went on the move. The onrush was heavier than a ten-ton truck crashing into you at two hundred miles an hour. Even the Demon Colossus, measuring over ten feet tall and weighing in at over thirty tons, was blown straight off its feet.

Calmly putting it back in order, Gadora shouted out loud.

"Purple Thunder!"

A bolt of violet-tinged electricity shot out, as the name implied. It was part of the Demon Colossus's armaments, capable of discharging a million volts. It should be noted that more voltage doesn't equal more power. This was added to the Colossus mainly because it looked cool. It was mainly for looks, but—hey—it's perfect for scaring the bejesus out of wayward dungeon adventurers.

And, amazingly enough, it worked on Gozaline.

"Wh-wha—?! That's not magic! How do you control lightning without any magic?!"

She froze in shock (definitely not because of any damage).

"Well, it's a secret weapon, you see? Top secret. Sir Rimuru trusted me with it—and that's why I will never be defeated!"

Gadora was riding high now. Analyzing Gozaline's onrush, he found that her entire body structure had been replaced with magisteel elements—a special ability of her lorelei, he surmised. It was harder and heavier than steel, but Gozaline's motion hadn't been hindered at all—and since her latent power was now at Saint-level, it was a transformation that simply reeked of cheating.

But Gadora still had the Demon Colossus.

"Take this, the ultimate in magic weaponry—Demonic Buster!"

Again, the greatest of armaments fired away. The firing control system was linked directly to Gadora's will, so there was no time delay in activating the weapon. Demonic Buster was the most powerful of the weapons on the Colossus, and being the sorcery geek he was, Gadora named it as a tribute to the demons. It essentially functioned as a magicule concentration device, working on not only the magicules inside the magic furnace inside the Colossus, but also those naturally floating in the atmosphere, shooting all of them out at its enemies. The term "one-shot kill" was practically invented for it.

The Demon Colossus's chest opened up, revealing Gadora behind a transparent layer. He placed one palm in front of the other, and from the center of it burst forth a ray of light. This was the base that the Colossus then enriched with magicules, turning it into a sort of death ray.

"Tsk! The former commander of the Magic Division strikes again, does he?"

Gozaline, opting to defend instead of evading, had an expression as hard as stone.

"Well, here we go! Magisteel Ultra-Microwave!"

A small tremor occurred on the surface of her body, a specific vibration emitted by the magisteel. The metal's unique frequency makes it capable of repelling magicules. That's why magic didn't work on it, but now that Gozaline had merged with the lorelei, she was capable of manipulating the magisteel that formed her body at will.

On one side, a ray that compressed magicules; on the other, a metal that dissipated them. The two sides collided—and the winner was Gozaline.

"...What?!"

"Ee-hee! Ee-hee-hee-hee! I have survived... and so I win!"

Gozaline shouted out in joy. Being a spellcaster, Gadora's offense naturally relies on magic—but Gozaline's magisteel body gave her an absolute advantage over any magic. Both were well aware of this. That was why Gadora broke out his most powerful weapon of all; if it didn't work, there was virtually no way to defeat her.

"Yes... I give. I never thought you would block this..."

Gadora, too, was one of the strongest people alive. Even if his adversary possessed more magicules, he had no problem forcing them to do his bidding. The difference in skill was enough to let him overwhelm even Saints like Saare. But this was one foe who he simply couldn't match up against—a foe who was simply impervious to him. If he couldn't defeat her, then maybe it wouldn't spell doom, but it certainly wouldn't be a victory.

So, realizing that the battle wasn't in his favor, Gadora wondered what to do.

This must be the critical moment. I am not part of Rimuru's inner circle, and I can hardly say he trusts me very much, either. If I don't show a little more backbone here, he'll never accept me as a friend to his cause.

The magnanimity of Rimuru constantly impressed him. Despite making no secret of how suspicious he was, the demon lord had accepted him after he switched sides from the Empire. Not only that, but he fully recognized his abilities, entrusting him with a major role within Tempest. And life in the land of monsters was wonderful for him. He had access to research facilities that not only rivalled, but exceeded the Empire's in many ways. He had a friend and confidant in Adalmann, a full-fledged Saint now—he was proud of him for that.

And what's more...

With their aid, I can truly plumb the deepest depths of my magic research, my most favorite of pastimes. But if I want to live up to their expectations, I have to be of service to them here.

He recalled the many monsters hoping to learn magic from him. That was enough to finally firm his resolve. Of course, these memories were somewhat wishful thinking. One monster called him a fool and rejected him, one almost tricked him into becoming a test subject, and a third, far more devoted to the sword than the wand, invited him to train together.

But Gadora wasn't afraid to interpret things the way he wanted to. After all, one of them got along well with him—they became friends after they both complimented Rimuru's magic—so his memory wasn't completely failing him. That one was Diablo, and Gadora had made him a promise—if he could make Diablo admit to his magic gifts,

the demon would make him one of their own.

That's why Gadora couldn't afford to die in a place like this. Rimuru had ordered him not to do anything reckless, but...

"I am not defeated yet! The battle is just beginning, little girl!"

"Ee-hee-hee-hee! Good, good! Then let me carve you up with my powers!"

Gadora shouted, Gozaline shouted back, and the two clashed again.

Despite being less than half the size of the Demon Colossus, Gozaline was fighting back with all her might. It was a bizarre scene, seeing the far heavier Colossus be pushed back. Gozaline was simply abnormal. Something was stirring on the surface of her back—and now countless tentacles sprouted out of it, their sharpened tips thrusting toward the Colossus.

"Nngh?!"

"Hraaah! More, more! Show me more blood!"

She was heating up, basking in the intensity.

The tentacles were made of magisteel, ever so slightly vibrating with frequencies high enough to let it pierce any material as if it were clay. It was called High-Frequency Mince Strike, and it could be applied for a slashing attack as well—and it was that High-Frequency Mince Slash that sent both of the Demon Colossus's arms flying. They, too, were made of magisteel—but as a living creature, Gozaline had the advantage.

"Ugh... This precious machine, entrusted to me by Sir Rimuru..."

"A mere pile of junk before me. It would take a senile old geezer like you to rely on toys like that, wouldn't it?"

"Shut your mouth!" a frustrated Gadora exclaimed—but he was being nothing but a sore loser. His own body, too, had been gouged by the tentacles, puncture wounds present up and down his body. He was stained with blood all over, but Gozaline couldn't see him, so he kept up a strong front.

"How persistent of you. You know there's no way to reverse this now, don't you?"

There's nothing to be ashamed of. Even the most legendary of wizards can't win against the march of time."

"I have not lost at all!"

"Such a pitiful sight."

Two tentacles extending from Gozaline took the form of blades, severing the Demon Colossus's legs. Now there were no limbs at all.

"Submit to me! Swear your fealty, and I will spare your life."

Gadora's knowledge was too extensive to lose. That was why Gozaline made the offer, but Gadora wasn't about to give the nod.

"You know, I've made it this far thinking mainly about myself first. I have a firm love of magic, and there is no defying that for me. So why would I ever submit to someone who makes fun of magic?!"

Her inner magic nerd was about to blow a gasket. That's how people work. Ridicule someone for what they love, and they'll seethe at you with rage from deep below.

Gadora was now burning, his body and spirit united for the cause. It was that anger that made him decide to invoke a forbidden magic. This was the elemental magic Sacrifice, a self-destructive spell that transforms life force into violently burning fuel.

Ah... I was hoping to gain Sir Diablo's recognition and become his apprentice... but oh well. I still have the mysterious art Reincarnation on my side. I'll have to say good-bye to this world for a while, but next time, I swear I will plumb the depths of magic!

If Gadora was given the choice, he would always take a victorious retreat over a deadly defeat.

"You dare to defy me? Then I have no use for you. Die!"

"And you as well!"

A tentacle pierced the chest of the Colossus, where Gadora was located. A moment later, a dazzling flash of light gushed from it. It was a light that burned everything it touched, the flames of the elemental magic Sacrifice.

"Wh-whaaaat?! This is what you were after—?"

But Gozaline's words were swallowed by the flames of life, disappearing into space. All that remained was one small flower blooming on the ground.

*

Gabil was fighting at a distinct disadvantage.

Gradim was strong, yes, but even more troublesome was Baraga, who had tapped into his power as a Chimera Knight. This made him notably different from before, his power so great that even the current Gabil couldn't underestimate him. In terms of magicule count alone, Gabil was ahead, as he was when it came to spear skills. But when looking at overall strength, there wasn't such a large gap between them. He was someone Gabil might let beat him if he wasn't careful—but he had two foes to deal with right now. And Gradim was free to attack from any angle he wanted, distracting Gabil from Baraga.

And he had something else to worry about. That was Soka, who was fighting one of Gradim's other generals.

Nazim the Vermilion Bird appeared to have the strength of a demon lord. She seemed to be of the same race as the demon lord Frey, and Gabil suspected he was a close match in terms of strength as well. Thus, in his judgment, Soka was no match for her. Soka had been strengthened by Gabil's evolution, yes, becoming one of the most capable of upper-level magic-born, but she was still just the second-in-command of a demon lord. She lacked the strength to take on one herself, and victory was pretty hopeless.

She was still alive because Nazim was having fun tormenting her, extending her fate. Gabil, aware of this, was anxious to provide some support—but Gradim and Baraga were formidable. *Forgive me, my sister*, he said to himself as he kept focusing on them, *but please hold out for me*.

Then Gabil was hit by another shock. There was a flash of light down on the ground—and at the center of it was Lord Gadora.

"L-Lord Gadora?!"

The Thought Communication didn't work. And that meant just one thing.

To make matters worse, he could see a small figure standing up off the ground—Gozaline, one of the Three Generals, sorely wounded but still safe.

Gabil, unable to hide his agitation, was then targeted by a spear attack from Baraga.



“Come on, come on, come on! If you aren’t paying attention to me, you must think you have this won, don’t you?”

“Gwah-ha-ha-ha! Of course! You will know that you are no match for me!”

It was big talk, but Gabil had no time to spare. The odds were against him, and even now, the word “retreat” was starting to take shape in his mind. But then he received some reinforcements he never could have imagined.

“Hey. Looks like you’re in trouble. Need a hand?”

The voice was unexpected, but it belonged to someone Gabil knew well.

“Why can’t you be honest with yourselves, hmm? We asked Milim to transport us because we were worried, you realize.”

And there was another—the beautiful queen and ruler of the sky.

“Lord Carillon... Lady Frey... Why are you here?”

Carillon laughed at Gabil’s surprised question.

“That can wait for later, can’t it? Let’s get rid of these guys first.”

Frey nodded in agreement. “We’re in an alliance, aren’t we? It’s only natural that we’d send out reinforcements. So we’re joining in, and we’ll work under Sir Benimaru’s command.”

The Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance serving Carillon numbered less than a hundred, but each member was an army in themselves. The “Heaven Fliers,” Frey’s close assistants, were the same way—warrior-type harpies were a rare sight, but they were still notorious for their well-honed skills. There weren’t many of them, but they couldn’t have asked for better reinforcements.

“I am glad to see you!” Gabil said, deciding to accept this rather than fret about it. He sent a message to Benimaru for instructions and received an immediate response.

“We are having Moss send us an update on your situation over there. Don’t let your guard down—Gradim’s up to something, to be sure. Keep an eye out for their rank-and-file soldiers!”

The orders were straightforward—just the main points, no specific instructions on who should take on whom. But Gabil liked it that way. It made him feel trusted, depended on.

“Very well. Sir Carillon, I would like you to handle the enemy’s main commander here.”

“Heh-heh! Smart choice there. He’s the scourge of every lycanthrope, I’ll tell ya. I wrote him off as dead long ago, but seeing him alive’s the biggest shock I’ve had all day. Can’t wait to put an end to him myself.”

That was Carillon’s intention from the beginning, so he was more than happy with these orders.

“And will that bird girl over there be my adversary?”

“*Bird girl*” would describe you, wouldn’t it? Gabil thought. But he wasn’t stupid enough not to realize the consequences of saying it out loud. He was still concerned about his sister Soka as well, so Frey’s offer was fine with him.

“Mmm, can you do that for me?” he asked, trying to sound like a leader.

“Right. I’ll be off, then.”

Frey glanced over to the two Twin Wings next to her.

“You handle the rest for me.”

“Good luck, Lady Frey!”

She nodded at them and took flight for Nazim, the Vermilion Bird, who was continuing her beating of Soka until she noticed Frey coming.

“Frey...! I am the *true* queen. And today I shall make amends for our long-standing grudge!”

Unbeknownst to Frey herself, Nazim was her twin sister. A mutant born with great powers, she was unfortunately sterile, unable to reproduce—and in the female-dominated society of the harpies, a queen who cannot bear children was simply unacceptable. It wasn’t Nazim’s fault at all, but she was disqualified from the moment she was born—and what’s worse, the queen at the time opted to expel her from the

land, fearing she'd be a harbinger of future calamity.

So, while wandering the land, Nazim was picked up by Gradim—and before long, her anger and hatred toward her own people began to grow. And now the symbol of that anger, Frey, was right in front of her. With an odd-feeling mixture of joy and resentment, she flew up to intercept her.

"Well," Carillon casually said as he watched from a distance, "let's get started over here."

Gradim gritted his teeth. "Don't look down on me, you bastard."

"Looks like Frey's dealing with her own flesh and blood, huh? Guess that's fate at work. If we hadn't come to help out, I never would've had this opportunity, eh?"

"Opportunity?"

"Yeah. The chance to kill you—and prove once and for all that I am the strongest beastman."

"The hell you will! That's *my* job!"

Carillon and Gradim had quite similar personalities and ways of speaking. They possessed fierce tempers, and in a way, even the world wasn't big enough for the both of them. Carillon was right—this battle was driven by fate.

"Let's go."

"Come to me. I'll show you the difference between us."

Invoking his unique skill Royal Beast, Carillon attained his true form as Beast Master—fully armored, and ready to go all-out from the start. Gradim, meanwhile, held the power of the white tiger, which he hadn't even broken out against Gabil. This solitary tiger, clad in the Empire's military uniform, was ready to intercept the would-be king of the beasts.

There were now two sets of combatants on the battlefield clashing mightily against each other. Gabil was now confirming that the new reinforcements were moving in accordance with Benimaru's instructions. It all went very smoothly. Much like Team Kurenai and Team Hiryu, they were all under the command of Dolph, leader of the

Heavenly Regiment. More detailed orders were given at certain key points, but Benimaru had decided it was better to leave most of that work to officers on the ground.

Gabil, for his part, supported this decision. He imagined that, much like himself, Benimaru would be busy fighting the enemy's top leadership. And it looked like this was the right decision to make.

Although each individual member of the Empire's Magical Beast Division fought at a high level, their maneuvers as a group weren't all that praiseworthy. Despite being outnumbered, the allied forces were able to maintain their front lines through skillful coordination. Even so, there was no denying their disadvantage. The reinforcements were thus more than welcome—and now they were about to stage a counterattack.

"All right. Things seem to be going well. Soka's back to healing herself... and I need to do my best as well."

"Distracted with me in front of you? Not a good idea."

Gabil, watching the battlefield, was threatened with a spear attack once more. Baraga was his opponent; Gradim had left with Carillon, but the battle with Baraga was still going.

"Gwah-ha-ha-ha! We are under orders from our commander. I'm afraid I can't focus strictly on you right now."

"Then you sorely underestimate me."

"And that wouldn't be the other way around? If Gradim had tackled us seriously from the start, after all, I'm not sure I would still be here."

"Pfft! The great Beast King doesn't need to treat the likes of *you* seriously."

Gabil shook his head, exasperated. "And that is what letting your guard down means. It is said that a lion expends his full effort to catch even so much as a rabbit. And in a world where might makes right, it's only polite to give your all against whoever you go up against, isn't it?"

He flashed a brazen smile. But despite his words, the thought of his friends flashed into his mind. Quite a few of them, he thought, didn't expend their full effort against

their enemies at all, Diablo chief among them. Gabil would occasionally challenge him to a training battle, only to get beaten by a pulp without so much as a serious effort from him.

Well, there's an exception to every rule. Besides, if he really tried against me, it'd be over in an instant. I have no right to complain... We may have the same position, but there's just so much of a difference between us. That's the sad reality of it.

Rimuru, at least, acknowledged his talents enough to put him among the Twelve Lordly Guardians. Gabil was proud of that, but he also knew where he was in the pecking order. Awakening and becoming stronger helped him better realize the strength of Diablo and the other demons. Even the three demonesses who didn't get evolved at the victory celebration were far more powerful than Gabil currently—and if so, the stronger (and now evolved) Diablo must be up to unimaginable heights.

He could never beat him, and he was all right with that—but if he gave up on improving himself now, it really would be the end. No, as long as he could keep chasing after him, it didn't matter if he couldn't win right now. Such were Gabil's thoughts, as he strove to keep his ambition to improve. Being that way, he knew what true strength was—and although it was still just imagination on his part, he instinctively understood that true strength wasn't what the likes of Gradim and Baraga had.

“Thus I shall never be defeated!”

“Nonsense! Your army is already doomed to failure. You owe us a great debt for allowing you to die before you witness the true hell that awaits you!”

Baraga sharpened his attack. Gabil carefully parried it.

“Mm-hmm. Are you talking about the transformation of your soldiers? I'd like to know what they did, exactly.”

The moment Gabil pointed it out, Baraga slowed down. He stared at Gabil, looking a bit perturbed.

“Oh... You noticed?”

“Of course I did. We have a very talented commander.”

“Well, you're still too late. The order has been given—and all that's left for you is to die

in despair!"

As proof, Baraga pointed out the now fully recovered Gozaline.

"Hmm. Very impressive healing. But anyone with our strength would be capable of that, no?"

Gabil had noticed that Gozaline was back in good shape. That much wasn't surprising. But Baraga still gave him a bold smile.

"No, not Gozaline. Around her."

"Mmm?"

A chill ran down Gabil's spine. There he saw a pile of fallen imperial soldiers. Why was Baraga proudly pointing them out? He couldn't understand. And besides...

...Actually, when did these soldiers die?

The enemy boasted high numbers, so he didn't give it much thought before, but this was a truly extraordinary number of dead. Looking closer, he realized that many enemy troops were leaving the front lines and going back down to the ground. Tracing their paths, he found that a large number of them were all but helpless, coughing up blood or collapsing on the spot.

"Wha?!"

"Did you notice?"

"They're just dying on their own...?"

"That's right. Sir Gradim has made his decision. They shall all now face a great trial!"

Baraga gave Gabil a loud, hearty laugh. The maniacal laughter echoed across the battlefield, chilling the hearts of all who heard it. And Gabil, too, was horrified by what he saw. Now, he realized, something terrible was happening.

*

Gradim, the Beast King, had issued a command—the very highest level of secret

orders.

All troops, listen! Zamdo has informed me that His Excellency is in danger, and our treacherous enemies have also summoned a legion of evil demons. Their strength is unknown, but we estimate that it's more than you can currently handle. If nothing is done, we are likely to take severe casualties. Thus I have decided to tap into our last resort. You must offer to us your courage and your loyalty. Activate the final trump card I have given you—for then you will gain the power to defeat the demons!"

He had given the order to his Three Generals first, followed by the rest of his troops.

The drugs, their energizers for when all hope was lost, had been distributed to them all in pill form. Their use was heavily restricted, however—they couldn't be touched without an order from Gradim, their commander. That came in the secret orders provided just now.

Hmph! Succeed in this, and you will gain immense power—and sometimes, you will survive with only a few side effects. Do not hate me for this... Hate yourself for your failure to adapt!

Such were Gradim's inner feelings. He was an almost refreshingly self-centered man, hardly hesitating to order his troops to die. It was a coldhearted decision, but it was also true that the demons were likely to overrun them otherwise. He was asking his soldiers to bet their lives on gaining untold power, but it was, when seen from the correct angle, the right thing to do.

The soldiers promptly carried out their commands. They hadn't been informed of what the pills did, exactly, so there was no hesitation. Thus they all invoked the forbidden medical skill The Beast on themselves without even realizing what they had done.

The effects of this slowly poured over the bodies of the Magical Beast Division troops. It was still mid-battle, so the effect wasn't very obvious at first—but as time passed, things grew more apparent fast.

The ground was filled with corpses—the sight Gabil had just laid eyes on.

Already, a number of berserk troops were running for the front lines. Team Kurenai,

Team Hiryu, the Beast Master's Warrior Alliance, and the Heaven Fliers were all forced to fight hard against them.

But there were also those confused and bewildered—but not defeated—by the changes within themselves. Those were the true warriors Gradim sought out.

Ten thousand immediately died.

Five thousand five hundred were completely, irreversibly transformed into magical beasts.

Five thousand made the transformation, only to lose all reason and go berserk.

Five thousand transformed into a human-beast form, also going berserk.

Four thousand became Beast Warriors imbued with animal powers.

And four hundred awoke as Chimera Knights.

It was fortuitous for Gradim that the probabilities worked out pretty much as he had anticipated. There was ample reason to believe the results would've turned out much worse, given the relatively small group of test subjects.

The Magical Beast Division, as a result of this, was now much smaller than it used to be. However, its power as an army had skyrocketed.

The berserk members of the Division promptly met their end. They had some value as decoys, but once they lost their minds, there was really no going back; Gradim was mentally prepared to write them off without regrets. Among the survivors, half—around ten thousand—could still retain their intelligence as they fought. That was a little more than Gradim expected, and while more than half of them could never return to human form again, they were a valuable fighting force. Gradim was satisfied enough with that.

But most of all, they now had four hundred Chimera Knights—and with them, they would never lose to anyone again. Brooding over this, Gradim nodded in satisfaction.

Still, it was too early to relax. It took a long time to reach these results, but they still needed to reorganize their forces on the field. He wanted to take personal command, but unfortunately there was an obstacle in his way—Carillon.

For now, he'd have to rely on his Three Generals. Baraga the Azure Dragon was fighting Gabil; Nazim the Vermilion Bird was in fierce combat with Frey. That left only Gozaline the Black Tortoise.

(Gozaline, reform our forces at once!)

(Ee-hee-hee-hee! Very well. I am delighted to see the results were even greater than expected.)

(Indeed. Get to work at once!)

A quick telepathic message was all it took. They really should have closed their ranks while they had ten thousand berserk half-beast decoys running around—but at least Gozaline was safe, which relieved Gradim greatly. As selfish as he was, he still trusted those he deemed worthy enough.

“Ha! Too focused on your troops to bother with me, eh?”

“Of course. I command an army, you realize. I am not a wild beast.”

“And you just commanded most of them to die, didn’t you? Don’t make me laugh.”

“That is the nature of *war*, you fool. If *you* cannot make a similar commitment, you never deserved to rule our land. And did I hear that you were kicked off your demon-lord throne by a newcomer? I feel sorry for the men and women who served someone as powerless as you!”

“Shut up!!”

Carillon slashed at Gradim in anger—but there was too much impatient urgency in his attack. Much as he never wanted to believe it, Gradim had grown far stronger than he expected.

“Whoa, that attack won’t do much. You barely look like you’re jogging toward me in my eyes.”

With that lighthearted remark, Gradim moved behind Carillon, a set of large claws equipped on his right hand. These were his White Tiger Claws, each emitting a silvery-white sheen; a God-class weapon both named after him and lent to him by the emperor. He had since transformed them by his own will, and being God-class, they could slice through any opponent—even spiritual life-forms. Given Gradim's near-divine speed, they were an excellent match for his fighting style.

So Gradim used his well-honed footwork to keep Carillon at his mercy. Even the Legend-class armor protecting Carillon was about as good as scrap metal against the White Tiger Claws.

“What’s wrong, huh? Didn’t you say you were going to kill me? Was that just a lot of big talk, or what?”

“Ah, shut up. *Tsk...* I thought it’d be easier to kill you, but this ain’t goin’ at all like I thought...”

Carillon, too, had grown much stronger—all that training with Milim had done wonders for him. It allowed him to continue fighting this bout without taking a lethal blow. In a way, Gradim was even more surprised about that. Any difference in weapon strength had a direct correlation to overall battle strength, and he assumed that difference would end the fight a lot sooner than now. The two *were* very similar, including in their abilities. But while Carillon had an advantage in latent strength, Gradim had the edge in weaponry—and overall, that gave him a leg up.

Gradim, clearly understanding this, moved to finish off Carillon while ensuring he kept himself protected. But then, at that moment, something happened that Gradim never could’ve predicted.

“What? I’m... surging with power...!!”

This was the sign of an oncoming evolution—the start of his own Harvest Festival, the progression to demon lord-dom. But awakening under *these* conditions posed a major challenge for Gradim.

“Why am I... so tired...?”

He was already unsteady on his feet. Carillon, not one to miss this opportunity, fled from danger and recomposed himself.

“What’s the matter? Exhausted already?”

Then he observed Gradim more closely. Something was clearly happening—but was it good or bad for him? Gradim was clearly gaining power—that was visible enough to anyone watching him. Magicules were swarming around him, an enormous aura flowing out from his body. But Gradim himself seemed barely able to stay on his feet now.

What’s going on? This isn’t that “awakening” thing, is it?

Carillon suddenly recalled a story he’d heard recently. At Rimuru’s victory party, according to the tale, he held an evolution ceremony on his officers—but some of them were so stricken by irresistible fatigue that they had to leave the event early.

You have to go to sleep for a while on the way to becoming a true demon lord, right? And that’s exactly what’s happening to this guy!

The Beast Master was no dunce, but he wasn’t the most quick-witted person in the world, either. Right now, however, he was demonstrating great insight—perhaps the life-threatening situation was sharpening his brain a bit.

Frey suggested that evolution requires a certain number of souls... and Gradim’s troops are dying by the thousands around us, ain’t they?

Indeed, the conditions were in place. Ascending to a true demon lord requires a large quantity of hate-driven souls. Not all of them bore a grudge against Gradim, of course, but enduring all the hatred of those you have killed was one of the trials required for the awakening. This was happening to Gradim right now, in the middle of an intense battle, and he was completely defenseless. It was simple cause and effect, really. The soldiers who trusted Gradim must have felt terribly betrayed, their souls marred by hatred toward their commander.

Carillon couldn’t read the situation *that* far, but he still judged it as both a great crisis and a great opportunity.

“Guess heaven’s on my side after all.”

“W-wait! Wait a minute...”

“It’s always been about *you* your whole life, hasn’t it? Time to pay for that.”

“No! Think calmly about it a moment. You may call yourself the strongest only if you beat me when I’m in perfect condition. This will be nothing but a half-hearted victory for you. You will rue it the rest of your life!”

Gradim was deeply concerned. Failure to act right now would assuredly kill him... but he was racked by fatigue he could do nothing about. It was all so unexpected that he couldn’t think of any measures to take against it. He turned toward his dependable generals—but Baraga and Nazim were locked in fierce combat, and while Gozaline was merely reorganizing troops, the onslaught she faced from Rimuru’s forces meant that she couldn’t just run to Gradim’s aid.

At that very moment, nobody could help him. He fell to his knees.

God... damn it....! I finally made it here... One more step and I would attain ultimate power...

He could feel that power erupting within him—and an equally strong sleepiness that it was futile to resist. Once he awakened, he could defeat even Velgrynd. He could picture it already... but reality was much crueler to him. If not even Rimuru could resist this ordeal, there was no reason why Gradim could.

Now his face was a muddle of tears and frustration.

“This... You can’t *do* this...! You *can’t*, damn it...!!”

With that final shout, Gradim fell asleep. And if a would-be demon lord failed to survive this ordeal... they faced death.

“Well, ain’t you lucky! You get to have a nice, peaceful death in your sleep. So long, then! Beast Roar!!”

Carillon was not one to show mercy at a time like this. Maybe it’d be a different story if he still saw himself as an almighty demon lord, but now he was just the commander of an army. He had come to reinforce his allies, and so it was only natural that he’d place victory above his own pride.

Thus a man burning with ambition, one just a single step away from reaching even greater heights, was defeated by Carillon.

*

The first people to be thrown by this unimaginable defeat were Gradim's Three Generals. They were stout allies, fascinated by the Beast King's path and sharing in his dreams. Their anger and grief were palpable enough to affect the entire war situation around them.

The first to react was Baraga. He stopped engaging Gabil, turned on his heels, and rushed to Gradim's side.

"Sir Gradim!!"

Everything below Gradim's head had been obliterated by Carillon's Beast Roar. The chagrined face told the whole story. It would be impossible to revive him from this state.

"Oh, how... how horrible... Right when his long-cherished wish was almost fulfilled..."

Gabil arrived, following the lamenting Baraga. He remained on guard, his treasured Vortex Spear pointed straight at him.

"Sir Carillon," he said, eyes still on Baraga, "my congratulations for your great victory! I am truly amazed by your brilliant authority on the battlefield!"

He was offering praise to Carillon for defeating an enemy general, and he meant every word of it. Gradim, with his God-class offense, was more powerful than Gabil despite not even being a demon lord yet. And even if it was a coincidental stroke of luck that sealed it, it was only natural for him to commend Carillon.

But the receiver of this praise looked oddly pale.

"Whoa, whoa, I hate to say it, but he didn't just...?"

He was deep in thought, seemingly unable to give Gabil a coherent reply.

"Mm? What is the matter?"

Gabil wondered if he was feeling well. Carillon turned away, looking terribly concerned, and then he gave the shocking truth.

"Sorry, guys. I know I came all this way to pitch in, but it looks like it's over for me."

“What? Are you hurt?!”

“No, not that. It’s that ‘awakening’ thing. I think the souls Gradim was supposed to get are all swarmin’ for me instead. *Man*, what a curse. Now I get why he was so damn defenseless...”

“What?!”

Carillon’s tone was self-mocking. Gabil, sensing the levity of the situation, couldn’t hide his shock.

“So, yeah, I’m sorry, but I’m going to sleep right here. Try to protect me when you can, all right?”

“But of course! You may rest assured of that.”

Gabil smiled, hoping to reassure Carillon. Carillon returned it, then turned his back to him. “Hope I see you guys when I’m back up,” he said, and then he fell asleep. He took it as stoutly as possible, but that’s just the way evolutionary sleep works.

Baraga was less than excited about this. If things had been any different, *he* would have been running guard duty, not Gabil—and it would be Gradim enjoying his slumber at the moment, not Carillon.

“Noooooooo!! Never! You will reap all the benefits after doing nothing at all to sow them! I refuse to let this pass!!”

He seethed at Gabil and Carillon, enraged. In his hand was a shining relic of Gradim—his White Tiger Claws, a God-class weapon that embodied and projected the will of anyone it acknowledged as its master.

“White Tiger Claws, lend me your power. We must avenge Sir Gradim!”

The claws shone more radiantly, as if responding to Baraga’s call. Then the light converged into the form of a single spear.

“Ah... You have recognized me as your master!”

Baraga rejoiced. In his hand was the newly reformed White Tiger Claws—now called the Azure Dragon Spear.

"Your name was Gabil? Then let me kill you and dispatch the thief who lies before us!"

"Ha! I, too, have made a man-to-man promise. Know that I will never allow the sleep of Sir Carillon to be disturbed!"

With that roared-out challenge, the battle between the two giants resumed.

*

As she soared through the air, locked in high-speed combat, Frey was also sizing up the ground situation. For this, she used the extra skill Celestial Eye, a form of vision that observed a given range and offered a panoramic view from corner to corner for the user.

"...Oh. So *that's* how evolution works."

Her keen mind immediately told her what was happening on the ground, giving her the right answer even as she kept fending off Nazim.

"No... Sir Gradim..."

"They say luck is a part of one's skill... and I suppose it's really true."

"You! How dare you mock Sir Gradim! You can't even lay a finger on me!"

"That was not my intention. I was merely stating facts; I didn't mean to make light of you. And it's not that I *can't* touch you; it's just that I haven't yet. I wish you wouldn't jump to conclusions like that."

Frey, a passive woman who rarely made bold moves on her own, possessed commendable force as a former demon lord. Her magicle count didn't hold a candle to the Vermilion Bird's, but a mixture of speed and technique let her hold her own well against Nazim.

"Big talk, coming from someone who's done nothing but evade me so far."

"We'll see who has the bigger mouth once this is over."

She held her own verbally as well. Some people have a natural gift for making other people dislike them, and Frey was very much that type. Not even the demon lord Milim

could outclass her on that front.

And Frey wasn't just fleeing her opponent, either—she was observing her, looking for weaknesses. Strengthwise, she had nothing to beat her with. She was faster, but Nazim had more endurance. She appeared to be in a losing battle... but then again, victory can often arise from unexpected places.

"You're panicking, aren't you?"

"What? Where did that come from—?"

"I've finally gained the power to see people's souls. My 'eye' has adapted to it, but let me tell you, having this 'insight' is so convenient..."

Frey could tell that her Celestial Eye had improved itself. It made her smile. This could give her an advantage after all. And the information she just received, she felt, would be the key to her victory.

"*What* are you seeing?"

Nazim's talons grabbed Frey's upper arm as she spat out the words in disgust. This small victory made her grin. Harpy claws have a Magic Interference effect that can block the skills of anything they grab.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You're a fool, you know that? So engrossed in conversation that you let me catch you!"

Her tone brightened. She was assured of victory, and that just proved she was panicking all along.

Frey remained calm through the crisis, observing Nazim, checking over every action of hers.

"Take this! Shock Wave!!"

So Nazim's barrage began, seeming to make this a one-sided affair. Frey's clothes were torn by the impact, but her expression wasn't contorted by anguish. She continued to coolly observe Nazim; it struck her foe as strange, but she dismissed it as a bluff. It pained her to admit it, but her twin sister Frey had a sharp mind. Nazim was the more powerful fighter in terms of simple force, but a crafty trickster like Frey was a handful

to deal with.

Trying to con your way out of my talons, then? No... I'm sure she's looking for an opening, trying to turn the tables on a moment's notice.

So Nazim continued toying with Frey, believing that a continued attack was her best option. But Frey remained utterly unconcerned.

“Maybe a little more?”

It was a small muttering, but it rang loudly in Nazim’s ears. “What?!” she demanded without thinking.

“You’re going to awaken pretty soon, aren’t you? Your magicule count’s rising more and more compared to when we began, it looks like. And once you awaken, I suppose you’ll fall asleep like Gradim. That’s all I have to wait for, huh?”

Frey was smiling like a fiend as she spoke.

Nazim turned pale. Yes, she was aware of the symptoms she was feeling. This, indeed, was the cause of her panicked impatience. Frey had her all figured out.

“S-so what, then?! I’ll just kill you right now and retreat to a safe place!”

The gut-wrenching truth to Frey’s words only added to Nazim’s disquieting alarm. She had to be rid of her before the evolutionary sleep began—it was the only way. With that decision made, she turned her fierceness up a notch, attacking with her full force—but she now lacked the means to realize this was exactly what Frey wanted.

“Shock Wave...!!”

A fierce electric shock churned its way through Frey for the nth time. But it didn’t burn her, or even hurt her at all. The impact threw her off-balance a bit, but otherwise, nothing.

This is madness! How can she be so carefree about this?

But by the time she realized as much, it was already too late.

“Looks like you’re wondering about something? But now I’m sure of it. Our mother,

the previous queen, wanted you to be happy in a world where our flock was irrelevant.”

“What?”

“If you knew the queen’s secret, you would have to be killed. That’s why she banished you without telling you anything.”

“Don’t give me that!” Nazim shouted in a rage. “How could a newborn chick survive after being abandoned like that? She had every intention of leaving me for dead!”

But Frey calmly dismissed her.

“And yet you survived. That is proof positive that someone was taking care of you in hiding. Mother always did spoil you like that.”

“...?!”

It was something Nazim always wondered about. She questioned how she managed to survive in her very young days, before she could even remember. It was her mutant instincts, she presumed, that saw her through that ordeal—but after hearing Frey’s words, she began to wonder if there was another explanation.

Still, after all the hatred that had accumulated in her mind, Nazim wasn’t about to change her stance.

“You’re bluffing! Now I’m onto you. You’re trying to trick me and gain the upper hand, yes? It would’ve been cute of you to simply beg for your life, but your pride as a former demon lord wouldn’t allow it, now would it?”

Frey, having exhausted all other options, was making her believe she had some grand scheme ready to take her down. Thinking about it this way made sense to Nazim—in fact, she was all but forcing her mind to make that conclusion. So, assuming she was being hoodwinked, she upped the intensity of her electricity.

“Die! Maximum Shock Wave!!”

The full force of her violent electrocution attack struck Frey. And that was the moment she had been waiting for.

"It's too bad. You were let off the hook, and now you've come back yourself to die."

"Huh?"

"There is only one queen. I killed our mother in order to seize her throne. And if *you* hadn't been abandoned, we would've had a duel to the death as well."

"Then I would have killed you!"

As a rare fighter-type harpy, Nazim had absolute confidence in her battle skills. She lost out to Frey in flight speed, but conquered her in everything else. There was no way she could lose in a fight—and even now, she was on the verge of victory. She wanted to sneer at Frey and her act, barely worthy of being called the mutterings of a sore loser. But Frey's next words made her change her mind.

"A harpy queen needs to have certain abilities, you see. One born with them may be recognized as the next queen. The mistake *you* made was being born as part of me."

"Quit going on like you know absolutely everything about me—"

"Oh? Well, let me give you the executive summary, then. The queen has an incontrovertible advantage against all attacks from her own king. In other words, I have immunity against all harpy-based offenses."

"Don't lie to me! That's absurd!"

There was a corner of Nazim's mind wondering if this was true, but she dismissed it as impossible. If that story was true, then it instantly contradicted Frey's claim that she killed the previous queen.

"I'm sure you're trying to throw me off guard with your lies. You should have thought of something more plausible!"

"It's a sad thing that you don't believe me... but it's true. And by the way, it's not a given that an old and new queen must fight each other. Normally it would be two sisters vying for the throne—and whichever one seized the other's powers for her own would win it all."

That, and the winning sister would also obtain the power to become a potential demon lord.

“What...?!”

“But I had to kill Mother because you were imperfect. But what I *truly* can’t forgive you for is how Mother wanted you to live, and you trampled all over that wish. I don’t know if you were born before or after me, but I truly wish you could’ve lived out your years peacefully somewhere else.”

“Stop that! Think you’ve already beaten me? I have other skills besides my natural harpy abilities, you know. If I tap into them—”

“Too late. I’ve already accumulated enough energy. And I hate to see you suffer any further, so let me finish you off with a single blow right now.”

“N-no...!”

It was only then that Nazim noticed Frey’s wings had gained a purple tint. Her beautiful wings of pure white, covered in a golden mesh, had been discolored by the lapping waves of violet electricity. The realization of what it was made Nazim freeze up.

Was she storing the electricity I released into her? How powerful could that be...?!

She tried to escape in a panic, but the talons holding Frey’s arm refused to budge. The queen’s own slender hand had latched onto Nazim’s arm as well. If Nazim had awakened before encountering Frey today, the outcome might have been different... but, at least, that would remain a hypothetical for all time.

“Good-bye, my sister. Echoreflection!!”

“Wait—?!”

Frey did not hesitate. She discarded all hesitation once she became queen.

All at once, she released her stored electricity. This was the ability she had acquired—the unique skill Duplicator, letting her take any attack an opponent lands on her body and strike right back with the same thing. It wasn’t an easy skill to use, given how it required her to take damage—but since the attack came from a fellow harpy, Frey could dominate in it, despite facing an opponent she’d normally have little chance against.

So, hit by this vast store of electrical energy all at once, Nazim was instantly scorched, carbonized, and killed.

"I don't care whether you're my older or younger sister, but Mother spoiling you certainly gave me a hard time. Although I do envy you a little, Nazim. At least you know for a fact your mother loved you..."

It was a small measure of goodwill toward Nazim as she plummeted to the ground. But the words didn't reach her. The reunion between the two harpy sisters had come to an end, and they had come no closer to ever understanding each other.

And would that it could've ended there.

"...What? The souls gathering toward Nazim are coming for me now!"

A sudden feeling of drowsiness overtook Frey.

"It can't be... Evolutionary sleep? Oh... So they want to take their resentment out on me instead of Nazim..."

Frey wasn't exactly going to turn down an invitation to become a true demon lord... but this wasn't the time or the place. She thought Carillon looked ridiculous down there, in fact. She was going to laugh at him later, but now this didn't seem so funny to her. No point complaining about it, though.

"Lucia! Claire! Protect me throughout this. Carillon as well, please."

"Yes, Lady Frey!"

"As you wish, my queen!"

The two of them promptly took action. Frey then flew to Carillon's side. It'd be easier to protect these targets, she reasoned, if they were together rather than separate. Carillon had Sufia of the Three Lycanthropeers protecting him as well, and the three of them together would help increase the chances of survival.

And besides:

Good heavens. I came here to help out our forces, but now I'm just slowing them down. Falling asleep in the middle of a battlefield... I never thought I'd make an error like this in my life.

She was inwardly writhing in shame. It was truly the last thing she was expecting. But still she was lured into falling asleep, unsure whether she'd ever wake up again.

*

Gabil was locked in mortal combat with Baraga—and it was the Azure Dragon Spear in Baraga's hands that proved to be the deciding factor. It was unacceptable from Gabil's point of view that a difference in weapons would determine the outcome like this, but the reality was that even his prized Dragonskin ability couldn't provide much defense against the Azure Dragon's spear thrusts.

“Inflicting wounds on the likes of me... A worthy foe indeed.”

“Kah-ha-ha! I'd say the same of you. I meant to finish you off in a single blow, but you're far more of a handful than I expected.”

Both of them were severely wounded. But neither of them stopped attacking. They were only hurting themselves further, but neither cared.

“The fact you fight at my level after my awakening is truly amazing. But I cannot let myself be defeated!”

“Hmph! Even without awakening, Sir Gradim was far stronger than you. If he had pulled off the feat, you wouldn't have even given him a struggle.”

“Nonsense! There are many who serve Sir Rimuru who are stronger than I! You are a good fighter, no doubt, but compared to the likes of Lady Ultima, you are but a minnow in a pond!”

It didn't dawn on Gabil that this was tantamount to calling himself a minnow as well. He didn't exactly have the gift for words that some of his compatriots did, but in his mind, he meant everything he said.

And while he might have been struggling to hold his own, he still kept an eye on the war situation around him. Daring to expose himself a bit, he attempted to guide Baraga away from the sleeping Carillon, successfully shifting their location little by little.

Lady Sufia has rushed to our aid, so I'm sure Sir Carillon will be fine. Now he won't be caught in the thick of it if we unleash some larger-scale moves.

In his own way, Gabil was strategizing. And as he did, Frey defeated one of the Three Generals.

“What? No! Now Nazim is slain, too?!”

Following in the steps of their leader, the woman they had informally treated as his second-in-command was now also dead. Being confronted with this made Baraga furious.

“Y-you will pay for this! This spear will be used to avenge my friends’ deaths!”

Now he was truly coming into his own.

“A true Chimera Knight is a warrior who has obtained the power of Animalize, previously the exclusive privilege of beastmen. Do you see what I mean? We have been granted The Beast, a specialized medical treatment, to artificially integrate man and beast’s powers together. That is who we are—the ultimate in warpower.”

As he gave this speech, Baraga’s body began changing rapidly. He had been undeniably human before, but now he was showing more and more of the characteristics of a dragon. It made his military uniform bulge, but it managed to hold out without tearing, as he transformed into something resembling more like a dragonewt than a full-on dragon.

“Ahhh... This feels good. Unlocking true power is such an uplifting feeling!”

It was the first time Baraga ever tested this transformation out. He *thought* it was possible for him, but he never told anyone about it, keeping it his little secret. But now that Gradim—whom he admired and respected—was dead, all the fetters on his mind had been lifted. With his comrade Nazim fallen as well, there was no more reason to hesitate further.

“Come to me, all of you!”

Baraga was calling out to the troops serving under him, currently running berserk across the battlefield. These poor soldiers, reduced to unthinking magical beasts, still obeyed the orders of this overwhelmingly strong presence, their instincts recognizing

him as the superior one among them. The same was true for those somewhere on the spectrum between human and beast.

Then Baraga lunged upon them all. Their magicules flowed into him—almost visibly, like a pulse—and the devoured victims dried up like mummies, their lives scattered to the winds.

“Wh-what a feat! Those were your soldiers, weren’t they? And now you’ve—”

“They were nothing but fodder for the enemy as they stood. They should be thankful they got to die serving me.”

“How selfishly evil of you! I refuse to let this outrage go unchecked!”

Gabil charged with his spear, his instincts telling him that Baraga would be trouble if left unchecked any further. Judging by the situation, he was likely procuring energy from his soldiers to bump his magicule count up to the maximum this current form allowed him. His magicule count was still up there with Gabil’s—on the verge of what you could call an artificially awakened demon lord—so it’d be harsh to criticize Gabil for panicking a little. That haste, however, led to the worst possible outcome.

“You fool! On the battlefield, the first to die is the one who loses his presence of mind. Did you think I’d be so preoccupied with my meal that I’d let my guard down?!”

There were two purposes to Baraga’s actions. One was to shore up his newfound power capacity. The other was to make Gabil act too early, and it worked—he was all but jumping into certain death.

“What?!”

By the time he realized it, he was too late. Baraga was using his feet to nimbly work the Azure Dragon Spear, and as Gabil flew in, the tip pierced his stomach. His magisteel breastplate did not cover his abdomen, and not even Gabil’s Dragonskin skill could withstand an attack from a blind spot he wasn’t even aware of.

“Gah... Gwahh!”

Gabil spat out blood, an open hole in his stomach. The sight made Baraga laugh at the top of his lungs.

“Kah-ha-ha! Now I will feed upon you—the greatest honor you will ever receive!”

It would have been the end for Gabil. But fate was not about to allow it.

Confirmed. Activating unique skill Braggart... Successful. The subject Gabil's fate has changed, and he has avoided death.

It was the World Language. Even Gabil himself had forgotten about the unique skill Braggart, but now its power had just altered his destiny.

He'd acquired this unique skill when Rimuru became a demon lord, but its effects had remained unknown at the time. All he knew was that it had the effect of either increasing or decreasing the power of his attacks. They'd get stronger when he was on a roll mentally, but weaker when he felt more timid or fainthearted. The power suited Gabil's personality to a tee, but it wasn't exactly the most convenient of unique skills to tap into.

“Gwah! Huh? I am rather sure I was run through in the stomach just now...”

It made him worry a little. But he was never one to sweat the details. So he easily shunted it from his mind and readied his spear toward Baraga.

“No! What just happened?”

From his foe's point of view, this reality wasn't so easy to accept. He had finally come up with a plan to ensnare and kill Gabil, this powerful enemy. Once he had him overwhelmed, it was assuredly in the bag. *This* just seemed unfair.

“This is complete nonsense! In that case, I'll make sure to pierce your heart next time!!”

All the magicules Baraga absorbed made him rapidly grow in power. Now, he thought, it'd be child's play to defeat Gabil, dirty tricks or not. So he grabbed his Azure Dragon Spear with both hands.

Once again, the two fighters were staring each other down. Once again, Gabil was at a disadvantage. He got a karmic saving throw just now, but lightning wouldn't strike twice for him. Unbeknownst to Gabil, the unique skill Braggart's Change Destiny feature required a long cooldown time before it could be reactivated. No matter how much he got fired up, he could only tap into that skill once a day at most.

So Gabil had no other secrets left at his disposal. Even worse, after this marathon battle, he had rapidly depleted his physical strength. Coming back from the brink of death, as he did just now, would require an extended period of rest for most people.

But despite all that, Gabil beamed, showing no signs of fear.

“Gwah-ha-ha-ha! Your technique is sharp as a tack, but I have yet to lose. With a master as excellent as mine, you shouldn’t expect to win that easily.”

Gabil sharpened his focus, preparing to respond to whatever Baraga tried on him.

...And then fate made its choice.

It wasn’t because of anything Gabil’s skills did for him. It was just the moment Ciel was born within Rimuru’s mind. And just when he was about to expend his remaining energy on a final decisive strike, a voice from the heavens reached out to help him.

Do you desire power? Then let me give it to you. Please agree to my upgrade for your unique skill.

...?!

Gabil didn’t ask what that meant. The voice felt so warm, so familiar, that just listening to it had a calming effect. So, without hesitation, Gabil agreed to it within his mind.

The effect was dramatic.

A wise choice. I will sacrifice the unique skill Braggart to grant you a new ability.

As soon as the voice disappeared, a new power awakened in Gabil.

The ultimate gift Moodmaker, as granted by Ciel, included five effects: Mind Accelerate, Alter Destiny, Control Unforeseen, Control Space, and Multilayer Barrier.

Mind Accelerate raised his perceptive speed up to one million times. Alter Destiny was an upgrade from the Change Destiny skill in Braggart. This could be activated at Gabil’s

will, although it was still limited to one use per day.

Control Unforeseen was, in turn, an upgrade from Braggart's Unexpected Effects skill. Up to now, he could boost his attack power only through unintentional actions; now he could trigger this at will. It still acted based on his mood, however, so only when he was excited and driven would his attacks gain more strength.

Control Space was the same skill already available to Benimaru and the other top officers. Its chief application was for Spatial Transport, letting the user return freely to anywhere they previously visited as long as no external interference had taken place. Said interference could also be used to keep your enemy from escaping battle on you. This made it extremely useful.

Finally, Multilayer Barrier was a defensive technique that Rimuru had already put to great use. A combination of various single-purpose barriers, it could protect the user from virtually any kind of attack—and thanks to Gabil being under Rimuru's authority, now he had access to it, too.

Gabil correctly understood the effects of a skill that had been mostly opaque to him until now. Ciel laid it all out for him in his field of consciousness, after slowing it down a million times over for him. It was a truly moving experience.

Then, without thinking, he said:

“Amazing... Truly amazing! I feel undefeatable!!”

Already Gabil's emotions were soaring to new heights, and in his case, that was the best thing he could possibly have done. He smiled, banishing the gloom from the air, and that alone proportionally boosted his powers.

“Wh-what's going on?! Your powers have ballooned out of nowhere! What have you done?!”

“Gwah-ha-ha-ha! Sorry to burst your bubble, but I truly have a great master. And as long as I enjoy his protection, I cannot be defeated!”

It was big talk from the ebullient Gabil, even though there was still every chance of losing this battle. His body was teeming with almost-overflowing power as he spoke. Now it'd be difficult to stop his momentum.

“Prepare to die!”

“Ha! Allow me to carve my power into your body!”

So the pair of them, both as strong as an awakened demon lord, clashed with all their might. The exchange lasted a single moment—and it was Gabil who won. The Azure Dragon Spear, swung with abject recklessness, was bounced away by Gabil’s Vortex Spear. It left Baraga wide open, and before he had time to regain his footing, a thrust from Gabil left a large hole in his chest.

“Gahahh! I... I’m not done yet... With my recovery skills, this much means nothing...”

Baraga, too, boasted the consummate healing skills exclusive to beastmen. By taking in energy from those who served him, he could heal a given level of injury almost instantly. He tried using it to fix this one up as well... but things didn’t work out that way. Much to Gabil’s own astonishment, the combination of Alter Destiny and Control Unforeseen activated for him, and together they took away Baraga’s healing abilities. Alter Destiny could work just once a day—but that limit only applied when used on the same target. As Gabil had just discovered, he could also invoke it against an enemy.

Just as Baraga himself said, the first to die in battle was the one to lose his presence of mind.

“Th-this is more powerful than I thought...”

And so Gabil had gained not only new strength, but an undeniable victory by his own hand.

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Meanwhile Gozaline, the final survivor out of the Three Generals, was up against an unexpectedly formidable foe.

With the defeat of their commander Gradim, the Magical Beast Division had fallen into great disarray. Before they could even attempt to fully regroup, a huge force of demons flew into the picture. “Huge,” perhaps, was overstating it—they were about five hundred in all—but their qualities made each of them a one-man army.

These were the Diable Chevaliers, a fearsome force under the direct command of the demon lord Rimuru. And while Chimera Knights were nearly twice as powerful as them in terms of magicules, they were having surprising difficulty gaining the upper hand in battle—that's how much more capable they were as fighters.

Seeing things not go their way made Gozaline's frustration grow. And it was right at that moment when destiny came knocking.

What's that...?

A writhing shadow appeared at the edge of her vision. Something about it made her instincts set off alarm bells. She turned her eyes away from the battle, trying to figure out what it was. She was right to do so, for if this shade had been left unattended, she would have died without ever knowing what happened to her—although it could be said that she'd have been happier that way.

The shadowy figure was undulating right where the wreckage of the Demon Colossus was lying. Now it stood before Gozaline, who was still trying to figure it out.

Before her now was a handsome, topless young man with black hair that reached down to his waist. His skin was a dark shade of brown, with a dull sheen to it. It almost seemed to be metallic in nature—but in fact, from the waist down, the man had merged himself with the ruined Demon Colossus. Before Gozaline's eyes, the wreckage melted into liquid metal, changing its shape as the man's lower body did the same.

“Oh my... I'm naked, aren't I? How mortifying.”

The man's tone of voice, extremely ill-befitting his good looks, was identical to that of the enemy Gozaline had just been fighting.

“I hesitate to ask... but are you Lord Gadora?”

The man grinned at her. “Well, of course I am! Or did you think you had me beat back there? Well, not if I have anything to say about it.”

The mysterious nude man was Lord Gadora himself.

“Are you kidding me? You used a self-destruct spell to end your own life! How can you be alive when you burned away your existence like that?! ”

Gozaline was having trouble trying to comprehend this, but Gadora's words were putting her into full-blown panic. She tried to seize the conversation, not wanting to be swept away by him any further.

"Ah, I remember now... I used the elemental magic Sacrifice to do myself in, didn't I? And you think I died from that? Well, a man of *my* stature can never *truly* die by suicide. And I'd advise you to never rest on your laurels until the battle is fully at an end."

Gadora quickly created some clothing to put on as he spoke. It wasn't very flattering for him, but—he figured—it beat remaining naked like this.

"Enough blather! Answer my question!"

Gozaline, for her part, wanted to be rid of Gadora without a second thought. But she found herself taking a cautious stance. He was supposed to be completely dead, yet here he was, back to life. She couldn't know if he'd be fully honest with him, so regardless of his response, Gozaline intended to put all her energy into her next attack.

Knowing this old man, I'm sure he's up to one trick or another. Maybe he prepared some kind of substitute sacrifice in advance. He wants to disturb me, I'm sure, but I know my power can crush any stupid game of his!

Her magisteel body, despite appearances, was extremely heavy. Even if she just rammed into him, it'd still be a shuddering impact with enough speed. What's more, if she launched a High-Frequency Mince Strike with all her tentacles, they'd turn into living bullets that shredded anything they touched.

Gozaline concentrated all her strength in her legs. Picturing herself as a cannonball, she triggered an explosion in the earth to gain propulsive force—another one of her secret abilities.

Now her aim was squarely upon Gadora—but the old sorcerer, unaware of this, began to offer a sincere commentary on what just happened.

"That's right! I have been reincarnated. You see, I prepared a mysterious art known as Reincarnation in advance, for a situation just like this one. Using it means saying good-bye to this world for a while, but it also grants me a new life while retaining all my memories. It's a wonderful thing, you know."

"...And?"

"Well, the success rate isn't all that high with it, but the potential rewards you reap are incredible. And by this point, I've been reincarnated so many times that it's all but guaranteed to work."

It's a fact—the first time you attempt something is when you're least likely to pull it off correctly. Adalmann had failed at this, and it certainly wasn't because Gadora was unskilled.

For himself, Gadora always had a few magic spells set up in advance that could be invoked instantly when needed. People like Razen could maybe prepare one or two of these at a time, but Gadora always had at least three ready at all times. One was a teleport magic for a quick escape; another was a self-destruct spell to take his own life—and he made sure that the Reincarnation spell was always active, so he'd be safe even if death took him.

He was clearly a cautious caster, but this time, something unforeseen had happened. Upon invoking Reincarnation, Gadora's soul had escaped from his physical body. Protected by magic, the soul was supposed to reenter the cycle of reincarnation, searching for its next body—but then a certain promise came into play.

Gadora had previously asked Diablo to become his apprentice, but this application had been put on hold. Normally Diablo would have rejected it immediately, but the demon had taken a liking to Gadora, thanks to their shared high praise of Rimuru's magic. "You are an interesting man," Diablo told him at a party, "and I never dislike interesting people. I will make you one of my own—if I decide that you are truly useful to Sir Rimuru."

The sorcerer assumed this was just Diablo's way of saying no while being polite about it, but still he did his level best, hoping to win the demon's approval. However, by that time, he had already fallen into his seductive trap. His Reincarnation spell had been rewritten, unbeknownst to him. Now, if he chose to die for Rimuru's sake, it was possible for him to be reborn as a demon.

Demons, of course, were a race born with fighting abilities. And since Gadora was now one—with his old memories and all—it was only natural that he'd have a very special incarnation.

The one hitch was his physical body. As spiritual life-forms, demons needed those in order to remain in this world. Gadora would normally have to either possess

someone's corpus or contact Diablo and ask for a summoning, but with Ciel manifesting in Rimuru's mind, fate was working quickly for him as well.

If you seek a physical body, I will grant it to you. I will give you more power as well. So...

So, the voice concluded, please be useful to Sir Rimuru.

This was a dream come true for Gadora. "Of course," he all but shouted, and with that, the contract was concluded. This was the birth of a brand-new race—the metal demons.

Now his body was clad in black, as perhaps befitting his roots in a dark tribe. His hair, eyes, and skin were all dark shades—but they also had a metallic luster to them, giving him something of an artificial, manmade atmosphere. But he wasn't modeled after the old Gadora. Instead, he was based on a previous incarnation—his very first life, in fact, as a young man. It was reproduced from the memories engraved in his soul, not based on anything from his newfound species.

In fact, thanks to being a new race, he wasn't bound by any of the typical restrictions demons faced. The current Gadora's magicule count was comparable to the out-of-control Clayman, and together with his knowledge and experience from previous lives, he was no doubt far stronger now. Gadora truly felt reborn, and as if to savor this, he was now feeling rather talkative as he sized up Gozaline.

"So you've become a 'metal demon'? This brand-new thing?" she asked him.

"It certainly seems that way, yes. And let me warn you, I've become quite a bit more powerful. I'd suggest surrendering right now, in fact, because you don't stand any chance at all. Do so, and I'll spare your life, in the name of your former comrades."

"Only a fool would agree to that!"

Ready and waiting for the opportunity, Gozaline rushed toward Gadora, her tremendous speed turning her body into a massive bullet. Gadora, she thought, was too busy prattling away to cope with it at all—but the next moment, her eyes widened in surprise. Just before she reached him, her body was forced against her will in another direction.

"Strange, isn't it? Well, to put it in simple terms, I used magic to manipulate the local magnetism to create a powerful magnetic field. Apply a current to it, and I can place

an electromagnetic force on a given target, like I did just now.”

The target, in this case, was Gozaline. For someone like Gadora, well studied in the science of other worlds, there was a lot he could do with his magic. Corralling Gozaline’s greatest skills was no sweat for him.

“You...”

Gadora aloofly stood here, a large book in his left hand. He used his right to turn the pages with care.

“How do you like it? Now do you understand my powers? Now go ahead and surrender for me, please.”

Gozaline interpreted this as condescension. He didn’t mean it that way, but to her, this was a wound on her pride as a strong woman. That’s why surrender wasn’t an option.

“All right. I didn’t want to break this out, but I see I must make up my mind!”

So Gozaline swallowed her pills and launched The Beast. This was going to unlock untold force within her, just as it did for Baraga. But Gadora had no reason to wait for it.

“Oh dear. Well, in that case, you can be the subject I’ll test my new power out on!”

Gadora looked on with delight, like a scientist staring at a guinea pig.

“Ultimate gift Grimoire... Unfold!”

The book in his left hand glowed with an ominous light. Inside of it was all the magic that Rimuru—or, in essence, Ciel—controlled. Seeing all the beautiful magic formulas that lined the pages, Gadora’s face lit up in ecstasy. Then he selected the one most suitable for this exact moment.

“Limited Hellflare.”

This was an art developed by Benimaru, but Rimuru had made it into a skill for his own purposes. And since magic is itself a kind of skill, it was listed in his Grimoire.

“...Huh?”

It was an inferior version compared to what its inventor could conjure, but it was still no slouch power-wise. And with it, before she understood what was happening, Gozaline was set ablaze, instantly scorched beyond repair.

“Ah, I wanted to brag about it a little more. But oh well.”

Gadora attempted to stroke his beard as he muttered this, only to find nothing there—not even a little stubble.

“Ah, damn it all! I look like a young man now, don’t I? Well, I can’t have *that*. My hair’s dark as night, too—I’ll need to invest in some dye, I suppose... Oh, wait! Actually, I can cast some transformation magic to handle that, can’t I? Let’s see...”

So he gleefully began flipping through his Grimoire.

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Thus Gradim and the other main leaders of the Magical Beast Division were all dead. But there was still danger on the battlefield—and the source of that danger was currently delighted to see Gradim’s head rolling in front of him.

“What a lovely piece of prey to dine on!”

The one who took this head in hand and devoured it without hesitation was Vega the Power, one of the leaders of Cerberus. He had been undercover in the Magical Beast Division under orders from Yuuki, and as he chewed on the remains of Gradim, he found his body beginning to teem with power. His limber physique, looking like it belonged to a carnivorous beast, grew one size larger, until he was as tall as the six-foot-eight Gradim. The upgrade to his musculature made his uniform look swollen on him.

“Hmm... Not bad... but not good enough yet.”

But as Vega muttered to himself, he kept finding more and more tasty prey: the charred Nazim the Vermilion Bird; the dismembered Baraga the Azure Dragon; and Gozaline the Black Tortoise, now just a pile of melted metal. Silently, he snuck up to their resting places, quietly partaking in each one without anyone noticing—a feat made possible by his own innate power, the unique skill Scavenger.

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Vega was born in Englesia's royal capital. He wasn't aware of it, but one of his parents was a former magical inquisitor for the government who was turned into a magic-born. Taking in too many magical elements, his father could no longer return to human form; in a craze, he attacked his mother, and Vega was the result.

He was thus a castoff from birth, a freak. The gestation was only about three days, and he had full sentience and awareness from the day he was born. But as an infant with no reason or language skills, he was feared as a monster by those around him, including his mother. Instead of being given love, he was nearly killed and forced into hiding.

But over the next decade or so, Vega found ways to survive. He ate rats, scavenged for scraps, and did whatever it took to stay alive. Finally, after a fight, he consumed a human being who was near death. And that's when he realized it. All around him—there was so much prey everywhere.

Now that he had come to prey on humans as well, Vega had turned into a monster in name and deed. The order naturally came to dispatch this abomination, and it was Yuuki who took charge. With the help of Shizue Izawa, who was already acting as his instructor at the time, he successfully captured Vega.

But although he should have been rightfully executed, Yuuki felt that Vega's strength was too much to let go to waste. He was gifted with a stout body and exceptional fighting senses, and Yuuki also thought he had the potential for further growth. With the right training, he could even become a useful pawn for him.

So Yuuki tricked Shizu into believing he had taken care of Vega. He then reached out to Damrada to have this "monster" raised in the Empire—and now he had grown up to become a fearsome warrior.

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And fortunately for Vega, the battle between the Diable Chevalier reinforcements and the Chimera Knights was growing more and more intense. Thanks to that, he could fulfill his personal mission without attracting attention. The limbs of a tenacious beast, a body of hard magisteel, the power of a magic-repelling dragon, even wings that could soar through the sky—Vega found them all in short order.

Even better, he had picked up the Azure Dragon Spear, a God-class weapon. It had not yet recognized him as its master, but Vega didn't mind. He poured his own power into it, forcing it to become one with him, literally bending its very will. It was the power of Control Metal, a skill he had picked up from the consumption of Gozaline.

Taking in a God-class weapon like this transformed Vega's entire body into an even more ominous form. The eerie, alien-like armor covering him made him truly unidentifiable as a magic-born—and by this point, Gabil and the others were finally taking notice.

“Wha?! Look! Another giant mystery magic-born!”

Gabil’s forces let out exhausted whines at his excited shouting:

“But Sir Gabil, we’ve got our hands full!”

“Indeed.”

“It’s battle after battle here. Our supplies are running low. What should we do, Sir Gabil?”

Their consternation was understandable. Team Hiryu was heavily fatigued and reaching its limit. If the Diable Chevaliers had arrived any later, the front lines would have fallen long ago.

After all, they had been heavily relying upon the Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance, along with the Heaven Fliers, and now they were both away from the front. “Oh, crap,” Sufia first said. When Gabil asked what was wrong, she replied that she was “like, *insanely* sleepy.” Then it dawned on him. It had begun—the evolutionary slumber that was a key part of the Harvest Festival, at the worst possible moment.

Carillon and Frey were both very close to awakening, so this much was a foregone conclusion. It was an irresistible, unbearable physiological phenomenon, and there was no point complaining about it.

So Gabil and his crew were struggling to keep this patch of space protected all by themselves. Other units were also engaging the enemy at their own discretion, but Gabil's force was anchored to this spot, further adding to their intense fatigue. Seeing Vega show up in the midst of this made the blood drain from his face.

"Do not worry, Sir Gabil. Allow me to reason with this one first. His name is Vega, and he's a friend of that young boy Yuuki."

The sudden presence of Gadora did much to calm Gabil.

"I hope that you will, then!"

"You are in good hands."

The two men, who had become friends somewhere along the line, smiled and nodded at each other. Then Gadora stepped toward Vega.

"It's been a long time, Vega."

"Hmmm? Ohhh, old man Gadora, eh? I heard you switched sides to the demon lord Rimuru, but I guess that story was true?"

"Mm-hmm. And that means I'm fighting alongside Yuuki here. But I'm glad to see you! If I weren't around, they would've treated you as their enemy."

"Really?"

Vega glanced at Gadora, who approached him in a friendly, aloof manner. Then he immediately averted his eyes. To him, there was far more interesting business to attend to.

Now he was staring at Carillon and Frey—and around them, even more delicious-looking things to prey on. His mouth was salivating profusely, his mind ecstatic as it pondered how the meat would taste.

"I can serve as your middleman with them, so if you could kindly lend a hand to us—*bwaah?!*"

Gadora had tried to pat Vega on the shoulder in a friendly manner, but Vega's fist quickly knocked him away. He'd taken it straight to the face, caught completely off

guard. Vega, by now, had powered himself up to the point where he surpassed an awakened demon lord, one with over twice as many magicules as Gadora. Even as a metal demon with excellent physical defense, he was still no match for Vega, whose entire body was God-class magisteel. With a single blow, he was knocked into unconscious silence.

“L-Lord Gadora!!”

I knew I couldn't count on that man, Gabil thought as he shouted. Given the amount of confidence Gadora brimmed with, he couldn't be blamed for thinking that. Now his hopes were banished, his mind filled with disappointment—and even worse, Vega's powers were beyond imagination.

Now this monster was eyeing Carillon and Frey, not bothering to hide his intentions as he licked his lips. His purpose was clear—if he wasn't defeated, he'd gain access to even more almighty power. They didn't even know if they could win, and if Vega succeeded, he'd become truly unstoppable then. Gabil, at least, would have no chance of winning, so everyone would just have to do their best against him.

I always enjoy standing out like this, but this is perhaps too much of a good thing...

He was beginning to regret this a little.

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Gabil was ready to step forward, but stopped when he realized someone was in front of him.

“Ehhh, Gabil, lemme take care of this one for ya.”

“Oho! Sir Laplace, is it not? Why are you here?”

“Wellll...”

Because everybody left me alone, he almost said before falling silent. It would make him look far too awkward.

“...Why do ya think? To help ya out, of course!”

“Ahhh! How wonderfully reassuring, Sir Laplace!”

“Yeah. Y’all can rest easy with me around!”

Forcefully concluding his chat with Gabil, Laplace turned toward Vega, his (presumed) friend.

“So, Vega, why’d ya punch out old man Gadora like that?”

He spun around lightly as he asked. It annoyed Vega.

“Huh? Ain’t it obvious? Because the old man was tryin’ to block me.”

“Block you?”

“Uh-huh. Can’t let someone blockin’ me from a good meal keep on living. And that’s why *you* better stay out of this, too, Laplace. You’re an old friend, so I’ll let you off the hook this time.”

Laplace stopped spinning.

“You got a funny sense of humor, y’know that? Don’t ya think you’re forgettin’ your place a little?”

The timbre of his voice was the same as before, but the atmosphere around it was so tense that it felt like something entirely different. But Vega didn’t care.

“Huh. My place? You think *you’re* in a place to give me orders?! I heard that bastard Yuuki got defeated by Ludora, and I *only* take orders from people stronger than me!”

He guffawed at that, his laughter echoing across the battlefield.

“Well, *that* sure ain’t funny. You got no gift for comedy at all, man.”

“It wasn’t *meant* to be funny—rrk?”

The guttural laughter abruptly stopped. In an instant, Laplace came right up to Vega, clutching him by the neck.

“Yo. Some respect, huh? Or else it’s *your* ass.”

He lifted him into the air, despite being half his size.

Vega struggled, arms and legs flailing about. Breathing was no longer necessary for him, but he still wasn't used to that, so this treatment was still deeply disconcerting. Laplace, meanwhile, landed an explosive knee on his body—and hanging by the neck as he was, he had no way of escaping it. He cowered on the ground once Laplace loosened his grip, trying to catch his breath.

"W-wait. I'm sorry I got carried away. I'm calmer now! Please forgive me!"

Laplace was thinking of giving Vega a kick to the head, but this pleading made him reconsider. "I ain't as nice as my boss," he coldly muttered. "Don't expect any second chances."

"I... I know."

"Right! So be nice and stick with me, won't you? And don't try anything funny, or I'll make sure you pay for it."

Vega nodded. "All right. So what are we doing now?"

"I'm gonna be headin' over to our president. I'm figurin' she can probably do something to help Teare and Footman get back to normal. We gotta find a way, right? Or else we'll never save the boss. So whatever ya do, don't stray from me, okay?"

"Right, right."

Vega nodded deeply in agreement. His eagerness to please Laplace suggested just how scared he was of him. Laplace just sighed at the sight.

"Everything all right, then?" Gadora asked worriedly, now back on his feet.

"Old man!"



Vega instinctively braced himself for combat.

"Ah, Lord Gadora! You are well now?"

Gabil was happy to see him, if a little surprised.

"So you *were* all right, eh, old man?"

Laplace wasn't surprised at all, as if he had expected this.

"But of course. I did lose consciousness for a moment, but I was fully prepared with my emergency measures. I was just pretending to be down because then I could catch him off guard and hit him with one of my best spells."

The ultimate gift Grimoire was equipped with Mind Accelerate and Parallel Computation, almost as if that was a given. With it in hand, even when he was knocked out, a parallel line of thought would take over after that.

"I see, I see. It fooled me as well!"

"Man oh man. What a guy, huh?"

"Yes, well, I didn't spend all these years wasting my time, y'see. But shouldn't we be concerned about Vega instead?"

Laplace tried to change the subject, but Gadora wasn't done pursuing Vega yet.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I'm afraid I can't trust you very much."

"Why not?!"

Vega acted like he had no idea. It exasperated Laplace.

"To be honest," he said with a shrug, "I don't trust 'im, either. But he's still one of mine, y'know? And I get it if you want him rubbed out, but I really *wanna* trust him here. Besides, I can't do anything without my boss's permission anyways. He'll listen to reason as long as he doesn't get carried away, so how about we cut him some slack just this once?"

What a headache, he bitterly thought.

The main problem with Vega was his astonishing lack of intelligence. He was too loyal to his own desires, and he never seemed to care about other people's feelings. But he wasn't all bad. He never really did well in a group, but give him an order, and you'd be assured he would carry it out, at least to some extent. Between that and his undeniable strength, it'd be a pity to do away with him right now. His occasional problematic outbursts might tax his patience one too many times, Laplace feared, but for now, he'd stick to his side and keep a careful eye on him.

He had caught him just in time today, but Vega was one step away from causing serious problems. If he had laid so much as a finger on Carillon or Frey, Laplace wouldn't have defended him one bit—in fact, he would've disposed of him right there. The mere fact that he attempted what he did was bad enough, but...

“Well, I don’t have the authority to make the call, but I can certainly understand your line of thought. I’m familiar with Vega myself, and as long as he causes no trouble for Sir Rimuru, I don’t see any issue with that.”

Gadora was familiar with Vega as well. And while it didn’t feel right for him to speak on his behalf, he still wanted to give some muted feedback.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about...”

Laplace seemed just as anxious as he gave that vague warning. Only Gabil among them could find it in himself to laugh it off.

“Gwah-ha-ha-ha! We are all men here—we learn from our mistakes. Very well; I will trust in him, too! Vega, was it? Listen to Sir Laplace and try to become the best warrior you can be!”

He clapped Vega on the back as he spoke.

Despite everyone’s apprehension, now was not the moment to stand around worrying. Laplace wasted no time taking Vega away from the scene.

“Do you think that was the right thing to do?”

"I wouldn't expect any problems. If this helps Vega grow a little, it'll benefit all of us. If not, I'm sure Laplace will do what needs to be done."

"...A rather sinister line of thought there."

"Gwah-ha-ha-ha! Flattery will get you nowhere with *me*, I'll have you know!"

Gadora hadn't meant that as a compliment, but he held his tongue. No need to stir up yet more trouble. It was starting to feel a little more relaxed around here, but the battle was still ongoing. Remembering this, the two of them mentally switched gears and prepared to reenter the fray. Then some good news arrived.

"My brother, I have word from Sir Moss that Sir Rimuru has defeated Lady Velgrynd! Our main forces have stormed the enemy's main airship and are now engaged in a final battle with their top brass. We need to keep up the fight over here!"

The voice of Soka, back to the front after some rest, rang high as she gave the news. It was a massive morale boost for everyone on Rimuru's side and a major demotivator for the Empire.

The Chimera Knights, the keystone of the imperial forces—the ones who weren't on an insane berserker rush, that is—now realized how bad their situation was. They were without a commander, and they couldn't expect any more reinforcements, even as their enemies seemed to continually grow in number. Taking out the enemy commander also seemed hopeless to them. Trying to kill the former demon lords who were now sitting ducks on the battlefield would simply make them surrounded and annihilated. If they had a functional military chain of command, things might have been different—but there was simply nobody in charge.

A number of them were already fleeing, having seen the writing on the wall. Meanwhile, Rimuru's forces were overjoyed.

"Wowwww! His Majesty has done it!"

"H-he beat Lady Velgrynd? I can't believe it... but maybe I should've expected that from him!"

"We've won. This is nothing more than a rout now!"

Gabil and Gadora were no exception, of course.

“Ah, wonderful! I always knew Sir Rimuru was cut from a different cloth!”

“I suppose so, yes. I had grown much stronger out of nowhere, so I thought something like that had happened. That voice must be connected to Sir Rimuru, just like Sir Diablo presumed...”

“What did you say, Lord Gadora?”

“Ah, never mind. We still have a job to carry out here. Let’s go!”

There was such a thing as having too much curiosity. Gadora knew that well, and so he decided not to pursue this any further—that, and he wasn’t sure getting Gabil involved in the question was such a good idea.

Gabil nodded back at him, his thoughts turning toward the battlefield. And with his loudest shout of the day, he gave the order to charge.

CHAPTER
4

THE EIGHT
IMPERVIOUS
GATES

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 4

THE EIGHT IMPERVIOUS GATES

With Laplace gone, only Diablo remained. His smile grew as he marveled at how everything was going as planned. He would be able to watch his beloved master wage battle up close, a valuable reference for his own future service. It was the perfect opportunity to gauge what his master lacked and how he could make up for it, and he was truly grateful.

Well... No, Sir Rimuru cannot be lacking in anything. The key thing here is to determine how I should best act moving forward.

No matter what happened, Diablo wanted to remain useful to Rimuru. And he had another reason for not participating in the battle.

If I were to join in, I would have no problem against anyone but Lady Velgrynd. It would be a waste, yes?

They all had a chance to fight the strongest of the strong, and they needed to make the most of it. In Diablo's view, Benimaru was showing signs of growth as well. Evolution had given him much more strength, and the best way to hone that strength was to fight worthy opponents. That was true not only for Benimaru but for all the other top cabinet members Rimuru gave his power to. And given the intense challenges potentially awaiting them, Diablo wanted to be sure he took full advantage.

Although I would assume Sir Benimaru saw through my idea... judging by how he didn't voice any complaint about it, that must have been his intention from the very beginning.

Despite his usual calm demeanor, Benimaru could be quite belligerent. He had a taste for taking on the strongest opponents possible, although not quite as much as Diablo did. The demon was looking forward to his future growth; if he survived this battle, it'd doubtlessly make him stronger.

Besides:

Sir Rimuru's orders are law. We are not allowed to die, and thus, there is no other way

but to win.

He wanted to have everyone survive this and become reborn as even stronger versions of themselves. And he wasn't about to skimp on helping them toward that goal. There's no point to power that's granted to you as a gift. Only when you actively acquire it and use it to its fullest will it attain its full shine—and they had the perfect stage here to do just that. Give them an enemy, then take them down. The growth stemming from that, Diablo thought, was what Rimuru was hoping for.

Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Testarossa is one thing, but I can't help but notice how people like Carrera and Ultima are just blindly throwing their might around in battle. That's a particular issue for Carrera, in fact. Giving them a tougher fight would be a good experience for them. So they'd best survive, please—or else I really will kill them. Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...

His grin extended even further. And as he saw Rimuru and Velgrynd fight before his eyes, his excitement rapidly reached its climax.

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On the outer deck of the emperor's flagship, the Imperial Knights were gathered. Velgrynd was there, her presence as protector of the Empire fueling the knights' fighting spirit.

“With Lady Velgrynd on our side, victory is assured.”

“That it is. Now we just need to do our part.”

“Victory here would allow us to conquer the Western Nations at once.”

“You're right. The day is near when our emperor will unite the world under a single banner.”

“Long live the emperor!!”

“Glory to the emperor!!”

They weren't being shy with their feelings, out there on that cramped deck. They all looked at the enemy before them.

"Here they come... That demon lord's minions."

"The moment the evil Veldora was taken from them, their defeat was set in stone!"

Some of them were already scoffing at the enemy, but the majority remained silent, unsheathing their swords. The reason was clear as day—the forces headed their way were a clear threat to them. They were prepared for this to be the final battle, and so they moved to intercept them.

But they didn't know yet. They weren't aware of the despair that was so close at hand. And once they became aware of it, their lives would be over.

Testarossa flew gracefully through the sky, her expression somber, as if something was bothering her. She could see people atop the airship that was her target, foolishly brandishing their swords.

"Oh brother. They see us, and still they want to challenge us? Could they be any *more* clueless?"

Benimaru remained silent. He wanted to nod his head in agreement, but as he saw it, it was only natural for an opposing force to act that way. So he bit his tongue. In a way, the decision showed that Benimaru still operated on a framework based on common sense. The truly insane demonstrated their abnormality from the very beginning of their thought processes—and as if to prove it, Testarossa took action.

"How dare you be foolish enough to misjudge the strong! It's so pathetic! They deserve the blessings of mercy, not fear!"

To be honest, Testarossa did want to go on the rampage a little bit—showing off her skills and feeding off their mortal horror. But if you're fighting an opponent completely resolved for the battle, it takes time to strike fear in their hearts. That was both annoying and wandering a bit from the purpose of the mission. So she decided to get rid of these interlopers as quickly as possible.

Without further hesitation, Testarossa unleashed some magic targeted to take effect over the entire airship. This was the nuclear magic Death Streak, the ultimate in forbidden spells that could even destroy people's souls, and now it was exercising its full merciless fury. A jet-black sphere formed around the airship, bringing nothing but

death to those inside.

Nearly everybody on board died at once, bathed in an insidious ray that was fatal to all forms of life.

Major General Zamdo, who had just finished speaking with Gradim and was busy preparing for the upcoming battle, was one of them, ceasing to exist without even realizing what had happened. Luck simply was not on his side this time. If Rimuru wasn't so distracted at the moment, he would've remembered Caligulio's pleas to save his soldiers and instructed his troops to keep Zamdo and the others out of it. Reality, however, was far crueler, and so death did its work equally on them all.

"That soon? I know I ordered a preemptive strike, but now we have hardly anything to do here."

"Perhaps I overreacted a bit? I was just trying to save you all the trouble."

"Ha! You mean you didn't want anyone else taking your prey from you."

Testarossa gave Benimaru's admonishment a gleeful smile. "Oh, you picked up on that? You always were an intelligent man, Sir Benimaru."

"I've never been sadder to receive a compliment in my life."

But despite this banter, Benimaru didn't see it as any problem. In fact, he really was glad to be saved the trouble. But the two later arrivals were far more reproachful.

"Ahhh! I wanted you to save some for us, too!"

"Talk about a mistake in judgment. We should've left Diablo to himself and given this more priority."

Ultima and Carrera shot Testarossa nasty stares. She brushed them off with a wry grin.

"You both have a lot to learn still. Take a closer look at the airship. There are all *kinds* of survivors for us."

"Very true! Anyone who'd let something like *that* kill them would never be a good

opponent for us. In fact, I should thank you for weeding them out like that!

“I’m grateful for that, Lady Shion.”

Testarossa smiled, knowing she was right all along. Her expression betrayed her delight over someone picking up on her intentions. The only people who could withstand Death Streak were spiritual life-forms or those who were otherwise compatible with the magic. With luck, even the Enlightened could survive it. But whatever the case, if there was anyone alive on board, it was safe to assume they were real tough cookies.

Ultima and Carrera were still frustrated, but they knew that complaining wouldn’t help their cause. Realizing that, they decided to relent.

And then:

“Let’s go.”

At Benimaru’s command, the raid began.

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When the group landed on the outer deck of the airship, they first found the Imperial Knights, largely reduced to a pile of corpses. Their bodies were still there, at least, and they showed how desperately they tried resisting their fates.

“N-no... I don’t want to die...”

Some were still clinging to life, even, fruitlessly reaching for the sky. But their lives were as good as over. No healing medicine or magic could help them; their fates were sealed the moment they crossed Testarossa.

“Ugh! This really was a waste, I think,” Ultima grumbled. “If they were *this* high-quality, I’m sure I could’ve had them singing sweet hymns to me in no time.”

“Quit being so selfish. Look. They’ve come out to greet us.”

Testarossa pointed to the bow of the flagship. There they saw the highest echelons of the Empire—Emperor Ludora and the still-sleeping Velgrynd. Kondo and Damrada stood by their sides, with four men and a woman behind Ludora and another, more

mature-looking man next to Kondo.

"A greeting from the emperor himself," Benimaru boldly said. "What an honor."

The emperor didn't move. Kondo and Damrada were about to take a step forward when Ludora stopped them.

"Let them be. Why not face up to it? I've built up so many pawns for over two thousand years, and now this is all I have left. If you are here representing the demon lord Rimuru, I will allow you to directly address me."

"Thanks."

"So, what is the purpose of this visit?"

"Well, it's very simple. I haven't been entrusted with full authority, but I'm giving you our demands in place of Sir Rimuru. You must cease all hostilities at this moment and give us your unconditional surrender. If you agree to that, we will stop pursuing you."

"And if I refuse?"

"If you refuse, Sir Rimuru has given me the order to annihilate you. It will be a battle to the death until just one side is standing."

Not that we're allowed to die, Benimaru inwardly added. But it didn't show in the arrogant attitude he was copping. It was little wonder that this response infuriated the imperials.

"How dare you!"

It was Marco who spoke first.

"You can act that arrogant because you're a puny little worm who doesn't know his place. A fool without a clue what lies up in the loftiest heights."

One of the four knights looked down at Benimaru, a spear in his hands. He heard him, of course, but Benimaru's gaze remained on Ludora, uninterested even in engaging with the knight. The others remained silent; it was Ludora's choice to make, and since Ludora allowed the other side to address him directly, they felt it'd be impolite for them to talk.

“It’s quite ridiculous, isn’t it? I would hardly let my greatest of ambitions end here.”

“Then die.”

Benimaru had grown far more thoughtful and less short-tempered over time, but his true nature was still that of a raging god-ogre. He never saw the point of lengthy negotiations when a little force could immediately end the issue—and besides, Rimuru ordered him to kill all their enemies, so there was no reason to retreat.

The atmosphere was explosive—and in the midst of it, one side made a move. Velgrynd, asleep this whole time, suddenly opened her eyes and shot up.

“Ludora!”

“What? Why are you so distraught?”

Velgrynd surveyed her surroundings, realizing what was going on. Despite that, she ignored Benimaru and his group, deciding her business was of much greater importance.

“My Replication has been captured by the demon lord Rimuru. It was going to take a few minutes to break through the barrier, so I wanted to return my powers to this body...”

This was the exact moment when Rimuru—or Ciel, really—had sealed Velgrynd within Insulated Imprisonment. Velgrynd thought she still had time, but with Benimaru and the three demonesses right in front of her, she felt distinctly threatened.

“Sir Rimuru does it again! We’ll need to follow his example, too.”

Shion was beyond delighted.

“It appears he is focusing on Sir Veldora at the moment, and I am sure he will bring him back shortly.”

Soei nodded. He was always careful to assign a Replication to check on Rimuru’s safety; that was how he operated.

“He fought Lady Velgrynd and Sir Veldora at the same time and more than held his own, it seems. Truly excellent.”

"It sure is. I wasn't expecting it to turn out *this* well, to be honest."

"You said it. My lord's talents are truly ceaseless."

Testarossa, Ultima, and Carrera all meant what they said, having a full knowledge of how strong Velgrynd was. They were left in total disbelief.

"What a mistake. I knew I shouldn't have let Diablo trick me with his sweet-talking."

"So true. He knew this was going to happen, and he wanted to be the only one who could watch it happen, the bastard."

To a demon, being called a "bastard" was high praise. Shion nonetheless vowed to rake Diablo over the coals about it later.

Soei, also observing that battle, remained calm. Benimaru quietly looked away; he, too, was watching Rimuru's fight via Moss.

Meanwhile, the imperial side was in an uproar.

"No! He has *that* much power?!"

Emperor Ludora—a calm, collected man who never showed his emotions—stood up and shouted. He held Rimuru in high esteem, based on what Kondo said about him, but there was no doubt that he had underestimated him. He couldn't see him as a threat on par with Veldora, and now—all too late—he realized how wrong he was. Kondo, too, recognized his blunder. Seeing his attacks fail on him was a warning sign he took full notice of, but even so, he hadn't done nearly as much as he should have.

No matter what happens, I will protect His Majesty's body.

He silently resolved himself to this as he stood there.

Damrada, on the other hand, believed the demon lord Rimuru was a threat from the beginning. It wasn't a matter of logic. A man as cunning as Yuuki found it impossible to take advantage of him, even after all his scheming. That alone proved he was a dangerous opponent, one who couldn't be left unchecked. There was just something about Rimuru that made him seem different from anyone else. He was like Yuuki in that way—people with this inscrutable charisma.

Damrada was attracted to people like that, and all the mysterious possibilities they presented. He had made a distant promise to Emperor Ludora, and now he wasn't sure whether to keep it or not. That was why he now entrusted his fate to others, not himself. And the people with that special something—someone worthy of being entrusted with his fate—were undoubtedly people like Yuuki and Rimuru.

Now Rimuru had clearly done away with all reason in his rage. That fact made Damrada uneasy; he felt like something bad was about to happen. Like Ludora said on the bridge, the best forces of the Empire were all assembled here. There was no sign of Gradim or his forces, but realistically speaking, they couldn't expect any more reinforcements. They had failed to overwhelm Rimuru's forces. The demon lord was never an opponent to take lightly, something made clear by the current situation.

So Damrada remained on guard, his nerves on edge, ready to protect the emperor at a moment's notice. The other knights and Marco were also having trouble maintaining their composure, so thrown as they were by this situation. The absolute power of Velgrynd was hard to fathom, even for people as powerful as them, and now Velgrynd had all but admitted that Rimuru was equal to her. It'd be impossible not to let that disturb you.

Thus both sides were stunned and surprised, in opposite ways. It was Velgrynd who broke the silence first.

"So it's a showdown, then? Fine, then. We'll defeat them and use them as bargaining chips to make the demon lord Rimuru bend to us. Is that all right with you?"

"Very well. All of you, prove your powers to me!"

"""Yes, Your Majesty!"""

As soon as Ludora made the decision, the Imperial Knights' agitation vanished from their faces. There was power in his voice, the kind that put these stout warriors' hearts at ease.

"Yes... Victory is assured, I promise you."

Velgrynd flashed a fierce smile, her beautiful yet terrifying countenance foreshadowing the horrors of the battle to come.

"Are all of you fine with that, too?"

"Yeah. We must win this and cut these weeds down before they cause any more disasters."

"All right. Good luck, then."

With that, Velgrynd spread her arms out and held them up to the sky. Then she activated what were called the Eight Impervious Gates. Each of them appeared in midair, lined up in the center between both sides of the war, and shrank down to the point where just one person could go through them at a time.

"This flagship," Velgrynd explained, "has now been isolated inside an alternate dimension of my own creation. If you want to escape, you will have to destroy all eight of these Gates."

Not counting Ludora, there were eight imperials left on the airship. This meant that each one of them had a Gate to guard.

"What happens if we all go into one Gate?"

"What a funny thing to say! You're free to try it, but once you're all inside a Gate, only the person who kills its guardian is allowed to enter the next Gate."

If she was telling the truth, it meant that if everyone piled into one Gate, only one person would be left to challenge the next one. They had to break through all eight to escape, so that was too risky a choice to take.

"I see. So the smart thing would be all of us to charge into the last Gate remaining instead."

"Very good. You're a smart one, aren't you? Yes, if you're going to challenge the Gate I will guard, that would be the right thing to do."

Velgrynd smiled at Benimaru's suggestion. She must have assumed he would reach that conclusion. But as confident as she was about her chances, she didn't see any problems with explaining all of this at the beginning.

"Of course, since I've set up this dimension in advance with these set conditions, I can keep it maintained at very low magicule cost. You can neither escape nor touch Ludora

without breaking through all the Gates. Or did you want to go all out here instead? Either way is fine by me."

The Eight Impervious Gates put the defenders at a disadvantage. Since they knew exactly who would be guarding each Gate, there was a risk that the raiders would plan their approach in advance, working out countermeasures for each guardian. But if they resorted to all-out warfare instead, even Ludora could be at risk, and Velgrynd really wanted to avoid that. What's more, Velgrynd wanted to keep Rimuru's soldiers banished in an alternate dimension as they fought it out; she was willing to take a slight disadvantage for that.

"All right. We'll accept your challenge."

Benimaru didn't hesitate to respond. Hearing him, Velgrynd was now assured of her victory.

Unless I somehow lose, there is no breaking out of this dimension. There is simply no way for us to lose.

Velgrynd was sure she could beat the enemy, even if they all charged her at once. That's why she went with these Gates, what she thought was the safest strategy for them. Benimaru fully understood her intentions, but there was no way to avoid combat with Velgrynd here anyway, so he opted for the path they'd have the best chance of winning with.

So, with both parties in agreement, the site of this final battle was decided.

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One by one, the imperials disappeared into the Gates before Benimaru and his team. Then Velgrynd, the last one remaining, exchanged a light embrace with Ludora before going through her Gate.

The Gates then slowly began moving, encircling themselves around Benimaru and the rest. But it wasn't like they didn't know who went into which Gate. Only a fool would fail to keep track of that—

"It's such a coward move, isn't it? Rearranging them like this so we don't know who's guarding what."

Shion was that exact sort of fool.

“...We’re fine. I remember them.”

Weren’t you paying attention? Benimaru thought. Now he began to understand the pain she put Diablo through.

“Hee-hee! What a fun little diversion. If you emerge victorious, I will grant you the honor of fighting me then.”

Ludora, protected by the laws of this other dimension, relaxed in his comfortable seat as he spoke. He never doubted Velgrynd’s victory for a moment. Judging by his demeanor, he saw this battle as little more than light entertainment.

“We’ll see, won’t we? You never know what can happen in battle. But we’re gonna show you that there’s some things we’ll never yield to.”

Benimaru looked around at his companions, figuring out who should be put in charge of whom. But one person was too impatient to wait for his decision. It was Shion.

“Well, I think I’ve been putting up with things for far too long. I’ve had enough!”

“Whoa! Hey!”

“Sir Rimuru told us to kill our enemy down to the last individual. What’s there to worry about? Let’s just get these taken care of!”

Have you ever worried about anything your whole life? Benimaru almost said out loud. He couldn’t have his troops acting out of line like this—but before he had time to stop her, Shion kicked open the door to a Gate and stepped inside.

“...Well, whatever. I don’t know whether she meant to do that or not, but I’d say she picked the perfect opponent for herself anyway.”

Shion, despite her less-than-commendable methods, had a knack for achieving optimal results. She wasn’t exactly on her best behavior that day, but she still chose the door that matched Benimaru’s intentions.

That left seven more doors. One contained Velgrynd, and they’d be tackling that one last. So who’d be the right person to deal with whom?

"If I could..." Veyron began.

"What?" Ultima replied with more than a hint of tension in her voice.

"To tell the truth, I have not yet settled my score with Marco. The way I am now, I believe I would absolutely win over him."

It was a standard strategy—start with an opponent you know you can beat. Benimaru saw the wisdom in that, and any victory would be one step closer to getting out of here, so he rapidly granted his permission.

"All right. You can take on Marco, then."

"Mmm, very good. If that's what you want, Benimaru, I have no complaints."

Ultima seemed calmer now as well. Veyron's partner was now chosen.

Agera, witnessing this exchange, was the next one to speak.

"May I ask a favor as well?"

"...Agera, right? What is it?"

"Well, I too have an opponent I have yet to settle the score with, although it is nothing on the level of a deep-seated grudge or the like. I would like to be paired with him, if at all possible."

"Who is that?"

"The man called Kondo. He is a fighter from the same school as myself... and as a pure swordsman, I cannot ignore him."

"Oh?"

It sounded like a pretty deep-seated grudge to Benimaru. He was curious about Agera's fighting style, and he knew that Hakuro had taken a liking to him. So he was inclined to give him the okay, but there was one little problem.

"Are you confident you can beat him, then?"

If Agera lost, after all, this whole thing was rather pointless—and in Benimaru's view, Lieutenant Kondo was a serious handful. Even Rimuru was wary of him. He was sure Agera would have a tough time.

"Well..."

Agera paused. As a swordsman, he believed he would have no regrets losing to someone like Kondo... but that would fly in the face of Rimuru's orders. Even he understood how selfish this request was—but suddenly, he found a supporter.

"All right, Agera. It's rare for you to ever ask for anything. Why don't I help you out?"

It was Carrera, the demon Agera served, sounding as dignified as she could. Benimaru nodded. No need to ask if *she* could beat him.

"I'm not sure," he said, "if even I could defeat Kondo. So I'm going to ask you not to lose... but at least try not to die."

Carrera gave this a loud laugh. "Of course not. Besides... why don't we make this a test for Agera? We have to see if winning really will open up the next Gate. Best to conduct this experiment against our weakest opponent, I'd say."

"I agree! Shion's already gone, but there's no point in this strategy if you can't fight again after you win."

"Very true. It might be that only certain people will qualify to take on Lady Velgrynd... but she's a proud woman, so I don't think she would lie about that."

Benimaru had naturally considered this possibility. He had been thinking of having Shion try it out when she got back, but if Agera's group wanted to first, there was no reason to stop them.

"Okay. So how will you approach this?"

"I'll make Agera the main fighter and have Esprit join him as an assistant. That'll show us whether only the person who scored the kill can take on the next challenge."

"Take Zonda along with you, too. He's a healing specialist, so he won't be that much use against stronger opponents."

Zonda was no weakling by any means, but he'd face an uphill battle against a Saint-class foe. If he was barred from the next challenge, Ultima didn't see that as a big problem. No need to risk his neck in a dangerous fight if he could just stay here and heal allies coming back from their Gates. With that in mind, nobody voiced any opposition.

"All right. Agera, Esprit, and Zonda, you three will be tackling this Gate."

Benimaru pointed out a Gate that one of the four Imperial Knights went into—the large spear-toting man who called Benimaru a "puny little worm." Benimaru had entertained the thought of choking the life out of him with his own two hands, but decided to give this choice role over to Agera instead.

"Very well."

"We won't let you down!"

"Victory will be ours, I promise you."

So the three of them went through the Gate toward their battle.

Two Gates were now being attempted. The rest of the group stayed there, waiting for Benimaru to decide where to dispatch them.

"We'll decide who will stage the next attack once Agera's group returns."

The gate Velgrynd was guarding would come later. Kondo's opponent would be Carrera, and Marco would be taken by Veyron. That left Damrada and two out of the four knights.

"By my assessment, the head of the Imperial Knights looked like the toughest to me. I would like to take him, if I could."

"No disagreement there. I had the same impression myself."

"Okay, can I take that Damrada guy, then?"

"Fine by me. I already have my opponent selected."

Damrada and the remaining knights looked about equally as powerful in Benimaru's mind. He had no complaints about this.

"Is that good with you, Soei?"

"It is. That leaves the dual blade-wielding knight. I think I match up well with him, so I have no problems with that."

"Good. It's settled, then."

Benimaru fell silent for a moment.

"...I have to say," he added awkwardly, "this is troublesome for me."

"What's wrong?" Soei asked.

"They never gave their names," Benimaru replied, scratching his cheek. "So I don't even know what to call our opponents. It's not a big problem, since I know who's behind each Gate anyway, but..."

"Ah, yes, that was a blind spot for us. Well, nothing to worry about. All you *really* need to know is the name of the person you kill anyway."

The people listening to their conversation agreed. Names took on particularly important meaning to monsters, but there wasn't much point worrying about their opponents' monikers. Besides, they're enemies.

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Agera, Esprit, and Zonda passed through the Gate in high spirits. Behind it lay a circular structure, something like a battle arena, and a lone man was waiting for them inside.

"Ah, you little rats came to me in a pack, didn't you? Only natural, I suppose, if you're fightin' the likes of me."

The man let out a guttural laugh as he readied the spear in his right hand.

"Before you die, let me tell you my name. I am Garcia, fifth-ranked Imperial Guardian and one of the emperor's four personal bodyguards! And I hope you accursed demons

appreciate the chance to fight me before you fade from this world!"

With that cry, Garcia hefted up his spear. It was Legend-class—about as close to God-class as you could get without reaching it, in fact—and a mere touch could even obliterate spiritual life-forms. But Agera's group kept their cool.

"We're not interested in your name."

"What an idiot, huh? Calling Sir Benimaru a worm."

"He can carry on like that only because he fails to realize the limits of his skills. If I were him, I'd be so embarrassed that I'd be in agony for three days."

Garcia wasn't exactly instilling fear in any of them. In fact, they didn't hesitate to say exactly what they felt about him. It infuriated the man.

"You little rats are starting to piss me off. I don't realize my limits? Well, how about I show you just how high they are, then?!"

Then he released the power he had been suppressing. When someone reaches the Saint level, their magicule counts compare well against an awakened demon lord. Agera's group were all Demon Peers themselves, but the difference was still several orders of magnitude.

Garcia stepped forward, his body radiant with intense fighting spirit. That alone made the arena's marble floor crack.

"You better brace yourself, bastards. Brace yourself, and regret making me angry."

Whether he was angry or not, Garcia probably would've done the same thing either way. That's what everyone thought, although no one said it out loud.

Agera, hand on the sword hanging from his waist, opted to wait and see how his opponent would react. Even a single blow would inevitably cause major damage, so for now, he wanted to focus on defense. Esprit, meanwhile, was going to use Agera as a shield, pelting their foe with magic from afar. The more Garcia focused on Agera, the more time Esprit would have to let off bigger spells. She was as carefree as she could be, reassured that she could fight in perfect safety. Finally, Zonda was all about support, gifted in recovery magic and capable of assisting Agera at key points. As Agera saw it, he'd much rather team up with him than Esprit.

But Garcia scoffed at the demons' tactics. Here they were, going on the defensive and attacking only with magic cheap shots. It'd be impossible to damage him with that kind of style. So, feeling he had already won, he continued to disparage his enemies.

"Ha! Damned cowards. All going around, bragging about being demons... Well, you're no match for us. We are the strongest of knights, and we've exorcised *your* kind many times from the world! I've heard talk about how Demon Peers are these almighty creations, up there with demon lords... but those are just tall tales from small minds. To us, you're all nothing more than worms!"

The spear that he slammed into the marble as he showed off his bravado left a huge hole in the floor. Agera and Esprit easily avoided it. Even if they were made out to be fools, it was nothing that could rile up Agera. They hadn't forgotten that this was just the prelude; the real fight was still coming up.

Esprit, for her part, was being even more thorough. She kept her eyes open, calmly dealing with their opponent's attacks and hiding behind Agera to avoid taking damage. Her unique skill Observer was a perfect fit for this kind of strategy; it allowed her to maintain contact with anyone, even if they were separated by time and space. It only worked with people she was previously acquainted with, but since she just used this power to keep in touch with Carrera, it didn't matter to Esprit. In fact, she was glad not to give it much use—if someone like Soei found out about this power, she'd doubtlessly be forced into espionage work. Esprit, who hated work on principle, wanted to avoid that, so she continued to provide the appropriate support to Agera here, passing information on to Carrera the whole time.

Zonda, by the way, always retreated to a safe zone after he was done providing support. He fully understood he wasn't a fighter type, so he kept on his guard, watching to make sure he didn't hurt himself.

Based on what he was seeing here, Garcia concluded that he had Agera's group on the run. They were in such a state of shock, he figured, they were already completely helpless.

"Ha! That's all you have, then? Running around like scared little mice won't let you beat me!"

Garcia kept up his bravado as he wielded his spear. He might have been a crude man, but his ability was unmistakably genuine, the spiritual power pervading his large

physique unparalleled even for Saints.

He had also been granted a skill as well, of course, by Emperor Ludora via the ultimate enchantment Alternative. This skill, known as Subjugation Conquest, let him transform his will to defeat his enemies into a palpable fighting force—a force he added to his beloved spear. This turned it into an evil-smiting holy weapon that purified any kind of spiritual life-form, from evil spirits to demons. Thus, constantly berating his enemies like this was strengthening his own body—a body protected by Legend-class armor, so he didn't have to worry about the repercussions of his vitriol.

Garcia knew very well how his skill worked. Even as he continued to goad his adversaries, he never let his guard down. And as he stated, Demon Peers were legends, the pinnacles of demon-dom on par with a demon lord; a first-class threat and no one you wanted to trifle with. Besides, Agera's trash talk didn't seem to mean much to Agera. Demons usually tended to look down on humans, so provoking them usually resulted in fierce agitation—and, by Garcia's experience, that usually opened up enough of a hole to easily defeat them with. That didn't seem to be the case this time. These opponents were trickier, and that frustrated him.

"Calm down, human. You have far too vulgar a mouth. I do not see all humans as inferior, but it must be said that every soul has a certain dignity to it. And you should know that a person truly vulgar at heart cannot hide it, no matter what he does."

Garcia, who saw his attitude as an act he played up to improve his fighting power, was now being told that, no, his actual *soul* was just as crass. It sorely offended him, causing him to slow his pace and reveal more of his true self—never realizing that this was Agera's attempt to provoke him back. He continued to evade Garcia's attacks with minimal movement, still not drawing his sword, and that wounded Garcia's pride even more.

Esprit, watching this up close, was amazed at Agera's agility. *If he's this good at close-range combat, why's he even a demon at all? He can't even cast a single magic spell. It seems so silly to me.*

It was with this mixture of praise and put-downs in her mind that she kept watching the fight unfold. This, too, was transmitted to Carrera in real time.

"Silence!" shouted Garcia, now clearly agitated by Agera. "I will defeat you all and offer your heads to His Majesty the Emperor!"

"Mmm, rather soon for that talk, isn't it? I am generally a patient man, but I can see you are rather impatient. Still not as bad as Lady Carrera, though. She's so short-tempered and simple-minded, it can often be difficult for me."

This, of course, also got instantly relayed to Carrera via Esprit. Esprit never told Agera about her power; she kind of had a mean streak that way.

He's gonna be in so much trouble later. Ee-hee-hee-hee...

It was almost like she was an audience member instead of an active participant in this battle. But what Garcia said next brought her mind back to reality.

"Impatient, you say? You bunch of fools. You haven't recognized the difference in our abilities yet? Are you saying that your master is that little brat with dark blue hair? Or that sassy blonde instead? That white-haired beauty needs no introduction, but she's as clueless as a toad at the bottom of a well."

Garcia spun his spear above his head, thrusting it straight at Agera. Then, proudly and triumphantly, he dropped another bombshell.

"I'll tell you this since you'd be ignorant of it otherwise, but there really *is* such a thing as true monsters in this world. If you knew the true powers of our Marshal, Lady Velgrynd, you'd know exactly what I mean. And Lieutenant Kondo is a terrifying man as well. Nobody can defeat either of them—not those ogres, and not you demons, either. They'll all be slaughtered pathetically, like stinking insects!"

Only when things progressed to this stage did Esprit finally stop sending information over to Carrera. She had gotten so worked up that it took her longer than expected to shut the skill down. By then, however, it was already too late.



"Ha-ha-ha... I just heard a very funny story from Esprit."

Carrera sounded cheerful about this, but there was already an edge to her tone.

"Oh? What kinda story?" Ultima asked, already guessing what it was.

"Well, the enemy inside this Gate just called you a 'little brat.'"

"Uh-huh..."

Blue veins streaked across Ultima's forehead. It made Veyron start to panic. If this was going to happen, he regretted not jumping into a Gate the first chance he had. Deep down, he reminded himself that sometimes, ignorance really is bliss.

"And he said *you* were 'a toad at the bottom of a well,' Testa."

"A toad...?"

Testarossa was stunned into silence. Many had praised her beauty; none had ever rebuked it before. Being called a toad was a first in her life, and it made her so angry that she couldn't even properly express it.

"That, and he called all of us 'stinking insects.'"

Benimaru raised an eyebrow. "First it's worms, and now it's insects?" he asked, not looking too pleased about it. He seemed calm at first glance, but now he was thinking he should've stepped in and taken care of this foe himself.

Only Soei retained his serenity.

"So you can maintain a channel with her in this dimension created by Lady Velgrynd? A very interesting skill there."

He crossed his arms and remained silent, keeping a perceptive eye on Esprit. The cat was out of the bag with Soei, and he'd doubtless be sending Esprit on all kinds of covert missions from now on—but that's a story for another time.

Carrera's report continued.

"This man claimed that we'd never be able to beat Lady Velgrynd or that Kondo guy. He's really dragging our names through the mud, I'd say. Apparently we have nothing but a pathetic slaughter ahead."

Her tone was matter-of-fact, but that's only because she was too busy trying to process her own emotions. Carrera could certainly dish it out, but taking it was another matter.

"Well," Testarossa flatly stated, "you never know how a competition will turn out until you try."

It was true that they couldn't beat Velgrynd the first time around. But Testarossa wasn't being a sore loser here. She meant every word of it. And her crimson eyes eloquently told everyone there that there'd be no defeat next time.

"By the way, Carrera, there's something I don't quite get. Why does he keep calling us insects and worms? Is he really that strong and stuff?"

"Ah-ha-ha! Of course not. And even if he was, I still wouldn't stand for this."

Carrera denied Ultima's suggestion with a laugh. But her eyes weren't smiling at all. They were filled with an air of danger, like they could explode at any minute.

"No need to show him mercy then, huh?"

"Absolutely not. That human's gone too far with us."

Ultima was enraged. Carrera agreed with her, holding back the urge to lash out right here.

"But it's a shame. And here I wanted to put him in his place with my own two hands. Tell Agera that he doesn't need to go easy on him. Once he's done, maybe I will forgive this, then."

"Of course. He insulted us, after all. He deserves to pay a penalty for it."

Nobody was there to put a stop to this conversation. Ultima was boundlessly cruel, almost to the point of innocence. Testarossa's cold smile was tinged with terror, the kind that struck fear in the hearts of anyone who saw it. And Carrera, meanwhile, was always cheerfully spreading destruction and emptiness across the world. Their merciful sides were long gone; they would never give comfort to the enemy.

To these girls, if giving them a painless death was mercy, then killing them as they suffered was forgiveness. It was death either way, but for them, it was a big difference.

Veyron, listening to his masters speak, spat out his own bile at Agera's current enemy. His bosses, the Devil Lords, were never to be offended—but here this man was, ranting and raving at them. It inwardly troubled Veyron.

Oh, you foolish human being! I can only hope it is you alone who will pay for this foolishness...

That was all Veyron could wish for now. He knew just how terrifying Ultima could be, but more than that, the fear his former enemies Carrera and Testarossa filled him with was beyond description. The very fate of the world could depend on where they decided to point their anger.

I only hope we can quickly eliminate that fool and appease their wrath. Please, Agera! You're our only hope!

Veyron, great demon as he was, wailed over how powerless he was in this situation. It was up to Agera, who wasn't as powerful as he was, to handle this.

But regardless of the demons' internal conflicts, Benimaru had an order to give.

"Carrera, can you relay our words from here to inside the Gate?"

"Um, I haven't tried it before, but I think so..."

"Then tell them not to allow their foe to make any more offensive remarks."

Carrera nodded, intervening in her channel with Esprit and wishing she had done so sooner.

(Esprit, can you hear me?)

(Gehh! Lady Carrera...?!)

(You owe me one for that "gehh." But never mind that.)

Carrera grinned. Then she gave the order, the malice palpable in her thoughts.



(Tell Agera to tear him to pieces and crush his very soul.)

Carrera's voice echoed in Esprit's brain.

(This is the will of Sir Benimaru as well. Failure is not an option for you!)

Oh, great, lamented Esprit, now all the officers will know about my power. Carrera had forced herself into her mind, but there was nothing to be done about that. It wouldn't be the first time her boss treated her unfairly like that. Consoling herself with that, Esprit called out to Agera.

"H-hey, Agera! Lady Carrera and the others are really mad right now, you know? We better get rid of this guy soon, or we might be in trouble, too."

"I can't help but wonder why Lady Carrera is aware of our situation in here—but let's drop that. For now, we must resolve ourselves. Our masters have been insulted. It is time to give this man exactly what he deserves!"

"Wow, you're really pissed off, too, aren't you?"

Esprit let out a sigh. Agera was usually so calm, but now he was beyond indignant. There'd be no stopping him now—and, really, this was a good thing. If Agera was about to get serious, the right thing to do was sit back and watch him.

Garcia, failing to pick up on any of this, began shouting again.

"You guys are all weak as crap, aren't you? Just give up and die already! And don't worry—I'm sure your masters have all been taken care of already. Now you'll get to serve them in the afterlife, just like you do now!"

This commentary was faithfully transmitted back to Carrera—and not just her, but everyone else, too, via Thought Communication.

(What a joke this man is.)

(What is Agera doing? Didn't I just tell him to whip his ass? Are you kidding me?)

(Ugh, don't embarrass us out there.)

(Good thing for him Shion wasn't here. If she was, our whole operation would've been ruined just now.)

(Good point. Hey, if you're having trouble in there, we can swap out—but either way, get moving!)

It was becoming a pretty lively scene. And indeed, if Shion were here to listen in on

this, Agera's wishes would have been summarily ignored—not that it'd trouble Esprit at all, but every demon has a certain pride they'd prefer not to see hurt. Or, really, it felt to Esprit like their reputation was going down the tubes every second.

This sucks, she thought, and she meant it. Garcia's trashy talk and behavior made him sound like a wimp, but he really did have the strength to back it up. That's what made him such a surprising handful.

Still, they were here to put up results. If they didn't beat Garcia soon, they were bound to incur the wrath of their commanding officers. And *still* Agera was just continually evading Garcia, seemingly uninterested in any kind of offense. Agera would never lose unless mortally wounded—but if he couldn't win, there wasn't much point to any of this. Esprit would then have to step in with her magic, but that didn't seem like a realistic strategy here; she had tried several approaches, but it looked like Garcia boasted high magic resistance.

“What’s the matter, huh? Is running away all you can do?!”

Now Garcia was in his element. But Agera showed no signs of a counterattack.

“Hey! Agera! We’re in real trouble here, okay? You have to hurry, or else Lady Carrera really *will* turn her fury upon us!”

The full fury of their boss would make even the powerful demons serving her quake in their boots. If it was directed at them, the sheer horror would be unbearable. Esprit, normally quite easygoing, was now in a real rush to get things moving. But Agera kept silent.

Zonda, meanwhile, was preparing tea a safe distance away, like he had nothing to do with this. Apparently he wanted to serve it to their commanders once they were out of here, but from Esprit's point of view, it was beyond ridiculous.

“Hey! Zonda! I let you out of my sight for a moment, and *now* what’re you doing?!”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? Sir Agera is not injured at the moment, so I have little to do.”

“Don’t give me that crap! Why am I the only one feeling any pressure from our leaders here?!”

Esprit was all but lunging at him.

"That's none of my business," Zonda replied with a breezy smile.

I swear I'll kill you, Esprit thought, gritting her teeth. Zonda was on the viscount level, Esprit a count, and yet he wasn't the slightest bit afraid of her.

But I suppose you need to be that thick-skinned to serve Lady Ultima, don't you?

So Esprit stopped thinking about it any further. If Zonda was useless, all she could do was beg Agera to do his best. He was emotionally agitated, no doubt about that, but there must be some reason why he refused to attack. If he was aiming for some sort of hole to strike, Esprit would just have to count on that happening sometime soon.

But then Agera shocked her out of nowhere.

"Esprit, I will tell you what I understand so far."

"...What?"

"It seems, much to my chagrin, that it is impossible for me to defeat this man solely by myself."

"Huhh?!"

You've got to be screwing with me, Esprit thought. There was no way she could contact her bosses and simply say "sorry, we can't." Carrera was usually a playful, chill kind of demon, but rile her up, and things go out of hand quickly. In fact, isn't she watching all this right now?

Before her bosses had a chance to rage over this, she had to confirm with Agera what he meant.

"What are you talking about?"

"It's quite simple. As this man revs himself up, both his offensive and defensive capabilities receive a boost. I've just realized that no matter how often I hit him with my sword, I would never be able to kill him."

The effects of Alternative, that ultimate enchantment—and in particular, its subskill Subjugation Conquest—were combining with the Legend-class Garcia had on to upgrade his defense to God-class level. Agera, realizing this, concluded that his blade

could no longer slash through it.

“...Is that why my magic didn’t work, either?”

“Indeed. He is not at all nimble in his movements, but if I cannot wound him, then we are getting nowhere.”

What Agera said made sense. All Esprit could do was scowl and nod her agreement. And if they couldn’t win, that was the news she’d have to report to Carrera—a terrible shame upon the two of them. She had eyes, too, and just like Agera, she concluded they were inferior to their adversary in force.

Their skills couldn’t compete against ultimate enchantments. If they were True Dragons, even a simple attack could break through ultimate skills—that’s what having the most strength out of any spiritual life-form got you. Esprit and her cohorts were Demon Peers, a high-level type of spiritual life-form, but the power of their wills wasn’t enough to overcome ultimate skills. That was the reality, and until they could do something about that, technique alone was never going to give them victory.

“Haaaaa-ha-ha-ha! Now do you see the difference? Have you given up yet?”

Garcia laughed loudly across the arena. Not being able to land a spear strike was aggravating, but he wasn’t going to sweat it too much. His role here was mainly to stall the enemy, waiting until they exhausted themselves for a guaranteed victory. And maybe it wouldn’t take that long—his allies in the other Gates were wiping out their opponents right now, and they’d no doubt come sprinting in here to help out shortly.

So, in Garcia’s mind, he could enjoy this battle without feeling in a hurry. Esprit clicked her tongue at him, then lobbed a question at Agera, her voice serious.

“You knew this would have happened even if you were allowed to challenge that Kondo guy, didn’t you? Did you have no plan to *win* at all today?”

Agera grinned at this. “Of course I do. I have a secret plan, and I need your cooperation for it to work.”

Esprit had no right to refuse.

“...Very well. Tell it to me.”

It was Agera's plan all along to rope Esprit in like this. She usually acted all aloof from the world, but she had her hedonistic side as well. If he simply asked her for a favor at the start of all this, she would never have said yes. That was Esprit for you—a demon who loved it when her friends came crying to her. Agera was well aware of this, so he decided to hold out until Esprit truly had no option left but to help him for a change.

Of course, if that attracted Lady Carrera's ire, I might have been purged as well...

He was very pleased to win *that* bet. But before Esprit could change her mind, he needed to tell her about this secret plan.

"I am going to transform my will into a blade with which to strike him down. That is the only way."

Agera had a feeling that nothing he could do against Garcia would ever affect him. Even if he aimed for a gap in his armor, the martial power that enveloped his entire body would keep him safe. When your defense reached God-class, appearances ceased to matter much—bare skin or not, you were still completely protected. In terms of agility alone, Agera easily surpassed Garcia, but he still couldn't land a decisive blow on him—and that was the reason.

The only solution was for Agera to reach the same level. If he could master the art of listening to the voice of his sword, becoming one with it... Concentrating all his strength, Agera lent an ear to the blade he was born with. Then, he reached a conclusion.

"Hmm. So our will cannot pierce his armor?"

"Trust in me, Esprit. You may not be the equal of your master Lady Carrera, but you are still up to levels of talent that make you a true master. I know swords are not your cup of tea, but you still have a talent for them. Thus I believe you are worthy of my trust."

"Huh? What are you talking—?"

"Place your hand on my back. I will take care of the rest."

Esprit was puzzled. Little of what Agera said made sense. But in the end, she decided to believe in him.

The swordsman was standing up straight as Esprit touched his back as she was told. Garcia was on the scene, already ridiculing them.

“Oh, finally given up, have you? Well, I’ll make it easy for you right now, okay? I’m sure your master, the demon lord Rimuru, has met his match by Lady Velgrynd’s hand by now. A pitiful end for a pitiful little monster, but at least now you can guide him to the afterlife!”

“What?”

Here was one statement that was absolutely unforgivable.

“You even think Sir Rimuru, our god, is a lowly monster?”

“And as if that weren’t enough, you believe he is dead by now?!”

The officers outside the Gate, hearing this through Esprit, looked visibly different now. But even before that, Agera—and Esprit, too—had run out of patience.

(All right. I appreciate you retaining your cool when I was insulted earlier, but if you’re going to stay calm after that, you’re no demons at all! I hereby give you permission to kill him now!!)

Carrera didn’t need to give the order. The two of them intended to do just that.

“Use my powers well, Esprit!”

“I don’t know what this is all about, but all right. I’m gonna kill that bastard!”

The pair let their fury move them. Throwing his full consciousness into his blade, Agera spoke to it directly—and that awakened a new power in him.

Let me answer your wish. Sharpen your mind, and make yourself into a blade.

He thought he could hear a beautiful voice saying that, but he wasn’t completely sure about it. Regardless, the power was clearly in Agera’s hands now.

“My body is a blade—an immortal blade, destroying my enemies!”

And as Agera lodged the shout, a golden sword was in Esprit’s hand. This was the

ultimate gift Blade Transform, the power Agera had just acquired. It turned him into a sword, its level adding itself to that of the wielder. If the holder of this blade was skilled enough, the resulting effects were almost immeasurable.

Esprit drew the sword in a natural, fluid motion. Pulled out of its golden scabbard, it shone with a radiant platinum sheen. A small bouquet of eight flower petals fluttered behind the blade as it flew in the air. This was the innermost art of sword drawing, as taught by the Oboro Shinmei-ryu. Its name: Multilayered Blossom Flash.

“Are you dead, you piece of trash?”

“Huh?... Wha?”

Garcia didn’t see anything. Nor could he comprehend anything. What just happened? His prey, focused entirely on defense up to now, seemed to disappear in a blinding flash of light. He understood that Agera had turned into a sword, but there was no longer any time to wonder why—he’d be killed if he pondered the question.

He was confident in his own defenses. In the face of their ultimate power, no attack could ever succeed. They would need another ultimate power like his to break it, and he couldn’t sense anything like that from the demons right now. So, feeling a bit relieved, he took his time and worked them into a corner.

Then the situation changed in the blink of an eye. Garcia’s armor was torn apart like thin paper, and his body was sliced up into tiny pieces. In a single instant, he had been slashed no less than eight times, and without any further time to think, his life was ended.

Or maybe he did have time to think. In Esprit’s hand now was a small ball of crimson—the embodiment of his soul.

“Hmm. This one’s red, huh? Certainly fits him,” Esprit muttered.

“You think? Because I think he was merely an upstart who didn’t know his place,” Agera replied as he reverted to his regular form. He glared dolefully at the red ball. “No warrior will remain silent when his master is insulted, you fool! But... Ah, I should have been warning my lord about this, but instead I let myself be incensed at the words of a small man...”

Esprit offered him some rare words of consolation.

"Now, now, what could you do? He was insulting Sir Rimuru himself. Even Lady Carrera gave her permission. Why be so hard on yourself?"

"Yes... Well, let's leave it at that, shall we?"

Agera resolved within himself to take this as a lesson and grow from it. He looked toward Esprit, a little envious of her.

Now, clearly, Agera had acquired a new ability. And he remembered who he was before he was born—living as one who trained to master the blade. Not all of his memories came back to him, but the mastery he had gained then was now back inside his body. Regained... or perhaps “recreated” was the more correct term.

It was the art of Oboro, the way of dispelling demons. When he was still human, Agera believed his soul resided in his sword. Was that why transforming into one brought back those memories? And only then did he realize why he now took the form of a samurai. He was one, long ago, before he was reincarnated as a demon in this world.

My name was Byakuya Araki, then? Hmm. I suppose that if I went around using the name of a dead man, it'd do nothing but confuse everyone...

The visage of Hakuro flashed through his mind. All his disciples grew into great swordsmen, taking on the newly invented style known as Oboro-ryu, or Crestwater. Agera himself had changed the name to that because he felt that “Shinmei-ryu,” or “heart-life” style, struck too conciliatory a tone for an anti-monster school. It was a funny memory to recall right now.

Heh-heh-heh... But I suppose I've come around on Shinmei since Sir Rimuru named me, haven't I? No need for me to step in, then.

He had united with an ogre in this world, and a child was born to them—a girl who, in turn, gave them a grandchild. That was Hakuro, and now this world was full of people Hakuro had raised and trained. Rimuru, the master of Agera, was the loftiest of them all, and Hakuro could take all the credit for training him.

All of Agera's honed, polished skills were being safely passed on, something he was truly elated to see, and it'd be boorish of Byakuya Araki to suddenly show up now. So he changed his focus. He no longer had any interest in the trash he just killed. So he

turned on his heel and headed back to Carrera, his current master.



The three demons emerged from the Gate, greeted with cheers from the other officers.

“Well done! I’m very proud indeed.”

Carrera slapped Agera on the back a few times. It almost killed him.

“I have some refreshments ready for all of you.”

A set of freshly brewed tea and sandwiches was flawlessly laid out on a table. This was Zonda’s work, and it, too, was well-received.

Putting other issues aside for later, Esprit handed the red ball to Carrera.

“Here is the soul of that foul-mouthed man. His heart core is locked inside, so his ego is still there!”

“Nice, Esprit! Now we can punish this fool for insulting Sir Rimuru.”

“We sure can. By the way, Carrera, can you leave that job to me?”

Carrera tossed the ball at the interrupting Ultima. “If it’s all right with Benimaru, I don’t mind.”

“Whatever you want.”

She didn’t need to ask. Benimaru had no interest in torturing the dead, and it’s not like he could do anything with people’s souls anyway, so he had little recourse but to leave this matter to the demons. Normally he’d find it against his principles to do anything further to an opponent after the duel was over. But Garcia’s comments truly were unacceptable this time. Benimaru wasn’t going to intervene for him, and so the soul went into Ultima’s hands.

“Wonderful. Now, let’s get started! Crazed Vendetta Expiation!!”

This was a deadly poison, one invented and refined by Ultima. It wasn’t a physical one, but instead one that destroyed the spiritual body and ate into the astral one as well.

There was no way for this red ball, the embodiment of a soul, to withstand it. Garcia screamed out in agony.

(Stop! Stop it!!)

But Ultima just laughed and laughed.

“Yes, yes! Look how effective this is!”

“What kind of effect is it, exactly?” asked Testarossa. She knew, of course, but wanted it spelled out for Garcia.

“Well, it applies continual, unending pain until the power housed within the soul wears off. *This* one had a lot of energy, so I think he’ll get to enjoy it for a long time to come. And once it’s done—maybe in about a thousand years?—he’ll be reborn as a clean, unblemished soul!”

Ultima was only too eager to explain. Garcia, meanwhile, could only weep in silence. He wondered where he went wrong, although it was too late for that now.

“Ah, yes, good for him. I’m sure he’s thanking you right now for letting him atone for his sins.”

Testarossa smiled warmly. Benimaru sincerely doubted any of that, but this time, he would offer their victims no quarter. Besides, they had Zonda’s nice little tea break to enjoy.

“You know,” Esprit said, internally wondering if they had time for this break, “when Agera started talking about not being able to win, I wasn’t sure *what* I was going to do.”

Now that things were peaceful again, she felt safe lodging this couched complaint. She knew Agera would have some kind of plan, but she was still bitter about being so spectacularly taken advantage of.

“I didn’t say that *we* couldn’t win,” Agera retorted—but to tell the truth, he wasn’t entirely convinced his strategy would work. All was well now, of course, but if Blade Transform failed on him, there really was no plan B left.

“Right, but you should have at least discussed it with me beforehand! It’s fine now that

we won, but if we didn't, you'd be too dead to ever atone for it!"

For someone like Esprit who almost never left her safe zone during battle, she hadn't been in such dire straits like that in ages. It made her all the more irritated toward Agera.

"Well," said Ultima with a smile, "certainly, you would never have been allowed to lose there. *I* definitely wouldn't allow it. Besides, Sir Rimuru might not be angry if we lose, but he *would* be if we die."

"Yeah, I agree. And that's why I was watching over you guys via Esprit."

Carrera seemed like she was taking a hands-off approach, but if Agera's team looked like they were on the ropes, she would've been the first to rush in. Along those lines, the *real* battle for Rimuru's top officers was about to kick off. And maybe it was a little impertinent of her, but Esprit wanted to be prepared for what came next.

"Um," she began, a little uneasily, "is Lady Shion well? We've finished our battle, but I don't see her here..."

She assumed Shion would be just fine. Now she was suddenly worried.

"No problems there," Benimaru nonchalantly replied. "I have a feeling she's forgetting her mission here, but it doesn't seem like she's struggling at all."

Soei nodded his agreement. "She's overzealous as always, indeed. She should know repeating the same old attacks won't work. She needs to consider other approaches."

Esprit wondered about this. It was almost like they were watching her fight.

"...So you're aware of what's going on in there?"

It was Testarossa who asked for her.

"Well, of course. I'm staying here in case something happens to our higher officials, you see."

Carrera and Ultima spat out their tea simultaneously.

"...Huhhh?!"

"W-wait, Testarossa. Are you saying that you know what's going on beyond the gates without Esprit's reports?"

"Absolutely."

Testarossa's smile deepened as she looked at them both. Then it suddenly dawned on Carrera.

"And... And are you watching Sir Rimuru in battle as well?!"

"Ah!"

Ultima jumped to her feet as the possibility occurred to her.

"That's so unfair, Testarossa!"

"Seriously, that's awful! And Diablo's the same way—why do you always act like all that matters is what *you* want?! Don't you think you could've invited us along, maybe?"

Carrera and Ultima were pretty riled by this. But Testarossa kept up her cool face. So did Benimaru and Soei. Intelligence gathering was one of their assigned duties, and *this* was a match they could never miss out on.

Incidentally, Shion was totally unaware of this—one reason why she was so eager to jump into a Gate first. If she was watching Rimuru's fight, she never would've moved from the spot until it was over. Benimaru, aware of this, kept it a secret from Shion instead.

Regardless, Carrera and Ultima were clearly miffed about it. Benimaru had no choice but to explain himself.

"...So as you see, Moss's monitoring skills are very convenient. We had him infiltrate all eight Gates so we could set up a monitor for each one."

It apparently was working without a hitch, which meant Moss was still on the job. Benimaru gave him strict orders to remain on standby, making sure the enemy didn't detect him.

"I see. I had tried the other Gates as well, but I can't even touch any of them. It looks like this dimension is treating Agera as the victor."

“Yes, and I cannot enter, either.”

Of course Zonda couldn’t. All he did was brew tea in there. But Esprit was also locked out from the next challenge, it seemed. Velgrynd’s judging standards were still a little unclear, but it now appeared that once you entered a gate, you could not enter any other unless you directly defeated the enemy inside.

“About what we expected, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. It was smart to have them go in first.”

Benimaru, Soei, and Testarossa nodded at each other.

“Right, so if one of us is having a hard time, then Testarossa will come in to support us?”

“That’s correct. I doubt that will be necessary, and I have other things on my mind anyway—but if it comes to that, I’ll be there.”

“I’d like to think there’s no need, but we do have Sir Rimuru’s orders to consider. We need *sure* victories here, so don’t be overeager.”

Carrera smiled boldly as she spoke. Benimaru and the others nodded, all feeling the same way. Then Benimaru frowned a bit.

“Carrera, I wouldn’t let my guard down around your opponent if I were you.”

“Well, certainly not, but why?”

“His name was Kondo, right? Well, he’s the only one so far who spotted Moss. A single bullet took his Replication out.”

“Wow... How interesting.”

Carrera kept smiling, more fascinated by than fearful of her opponent’s strength.

“Knowing you,” Testarossa said, “I’m sure I have nothing to worry about, but if something goes terribly wrong, call for help through Esprit.”

Carrera raised a hand, her attitude making it clear that she didn’t see that as necessary.

Testarossa smiled back. This was typical Carrera behavior.

So the attack on the Gates resumed. One was still being tackled by Shion, so that left six—and with the exception of the one protected by Velgrynd, now five Gates were being stormed at once.



Shion, now alone, was in for a struggle. She was all smiles and excitement outside the Gate, but now there was a look of dreadful murder on her face.

Her opponent here was Minaza, a Single Digit ranked sixth in the Empire. She was one of the four knights who guarded Ludora as well, and Shion was now breathing heavily as she glared at her.

“I must praise you for making this so difficult for me!” she shouted, her voice full of raging spirit.

Minaza was far from unscathed, either. Her uniform was torn up, exposing bare skin here and there—but there was no damsel-in-distress allure to that look. She had long since stopped using mimicry to hide her true form—she had to, if she wanted to give her all here.

“Shut up! You’re the one who deserves to be praised—praised for your futile efforts! I commend you for defeating my children, but you’ve made me angry... and I *will* rule the day!”

At Minaza’s feet was an ominously large number of insectoid corpses. All of them had been slaughtered by Shion. And as an insector, a higher plane of existence over insectoids, she wasn’t kidding about the “children” part.

“Ha! Those little grubs are nothing to me. I’ve seen training grounds filled with far more powerful insectoids, so I’m quite used to it.”

“What did you say?”

“Hee-hee-hee! Too bad for you, but I’m a lot more experienced than I look. If you think you’re the first insect magic-born I’ve ever fought, you’re wrong!”

Shion was tired, but still had plenty of energy left. She looked down on Minaza, smiling

smugly.

“Come to think of it... Razul was more of an insector than insectoid, wasn’t he? He called it his complete form, if I recall correctly, so that must have been it.”

Minaza’s expression changed. “Razul? You’re the one who defeated the guardian of the West?”

Shion sniffed at this. “I didn’t take him on alone, but yes, I dealt the final blow. He was a formidable opponent.”

“I see,” Minaza muttered. Then she turned her face down and began snickering. “So you got rid of him for me! He betrayed us, you know. We are known as Aggressors, a group of invaders from another world, but when Emperor Ludora accepted us, we finally found a safe haven for ourselves. But he refused to pledge his allegiance to us, continuing with his self-serving behavior instead. Truly the most unforgivable of fools.”

This all went straight over Shion’s head. She rewarded Minaza’s speech with a “what the hell are you talking about?” look. But one thing did bother her, so she decided to take this opportunity to ask.

“Do you mean to say that it’s not just Razul? You have your people in other parts of the world?”

Shion was curious about her friends Zegion and Apito. If Minaza knew them, maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to kill her after all. She wanted to be sure before she made the attempt.

“There are many sentient species in our home world. Aggressors like us use an Underworld Gate to reach this world. There are insectors like ourselves, along with the cryptids, with whom we share many traits. That, and there are the mystics as well. Unlike demons, we are semi-spiritual life-forms, so we may freely manifest ourselves in this world, as long as we have ample time.”

Shion didn’t really care if she got an answer, but Minaza was nice enough to give one anyway. This Underworld Gate reminded her of the Gates of Hell, something near and dear to Diablo and the other demons—but it sounded like Minaza’s world featured three major races vying for supremacy. It existed in parallel with the hell the demons called home, and as Minaza described it, it faced severe poverty and food shortages.

Thus Aggressors like her looked for every chance to invade this world.

For many years now, they had been apparently sending their compatriots over here in order to expand their territory. Insectoids like army wasps were apparently part of that effort.

“Of course, the full tale is a bit more complex than that. There are some races who are not so willing to bend to our desires.”

The leader of this offshoot band was Razul, whom Shion’s party defeated.

He proved that the Aggressors were far from a monolith, but then Shion recalled something else. Didn’t Rimuru pick up Apito and Zegion while they were on the run from someone else?

I think this Minaza is my enemy after all!

She didn’t have any real solid basis for this, but Shion made that call anyway. She trusted her intuition, and she was proud of the fact that it had never failed her in cases like these. And she was right, too. It was no coincidence, either. Having died and been revived once, Shion was now deeply connected to Rimuru—and now Ciel, his newfound skill. Its computational skills were now interfacing with the fragmentary information Shion had obtained so far, giving her deep insight into the truth.

“So you’re my enemy, basically?”

“Ha-ha-ha! A bit late for that, isn’t it? And thanks to all the time you’ve wasted talking to me, I can now bring my lovely children back to life again!”

The moment she shouted it, Minaza’s lower body swelled up. Several mouths grew out from it, usually hidden by the skirt of her military uniform—and each one of those mouths was now producing ominous-looking eggs at the same time.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You can act as strong as you like, but fighting all my children has thoroughly exhausted you. If you think you can win against these numbers—?!”

Minaza stopped in the middle of her bragging. It was obvious why. A single flash from Shion’s Goriki-maru Version 2 snuffed out the lives of so many insectors as soon as they began.

"N-no! My children... were supposed to have been reborn as warriors with overwhelming power... with the help of His Majesty..."

Minaza's power was similar to Apito's Motherly Queen in many respects. Termed Voracious Resurrection, it allowed her to regenerate her children by consuming their corpses, over and over again. Combined with the ultimate enchantment Alternative from Ludora, it was further powered up, the death-and-rebirth cycle now taking much less time.

The countless insectoids she was birthing were just as formidable for Shion as Minaza thought they were. Each one had abilities equivalent to a high-level magic-born, and a few among them could even pass for pre-awakened demon lords.

But although it was a tough fight, Shion had dispatched all of them. And now that she did, Minaza would never get another whack at it. Optimal Action, part of her unique Master Chef skill, had no trouble defeating the reborn insectors in an instant.

Minaza was shocked. This high-speed childbirth process was usually enough to exhaust opponents by itself—she didn't have to lift a finger. It was a proven strategy for her, so facing a wild card like Shion confused her. But she wasn't a "queen" for no reason. She stood up, indignant, and it was clear she wouldn't make the same mistake again.

"You will pay for that. My children, lend your strength to your queen mother!"

"Perfect! Let's see what you've got!"

Taking her children's power as her own, Minaza shifted into battle form. Shion, Goriki-maru Version 2 at the ready, joyfully engaged her... and so the long battle began.

The fight seesawed back and forth. Minaza's attack could wound Shion, but Ultraspeed Regeneration instantly healed her. By the same token, none of Shion's attacks could so much as scratch Minaza's exoskeleton. She was protected with an ultimate enchantment incorporating Legend-class armor, and even God-class gear would have trouble against it.

Minaza's speed did surpass Shion's, but Shion had more muscle. Minaza had the upper hand in defense, although Shion was much more adept at healing.

"Ugh! This again! You insects are such a handful. So tough!"

Shion was trying her best to crack through Minaza's exoskeleton, no matter how small the fissure. Once she did, Master Chef would take care of the rest, and Minaza wanted to avoid that at all costs. She hadn't underestimated Shion, but she was proving far more obstinate than previously thought—to be honest, she felt threatened.

I can't believe it. Even in this form, she's fighting so evenly with me...

Minaza could see Shion's gigantic magicule count well enough, but if that was all she boasted, it didn't explain why she was having such a hard time. Shion was a handful because despite her seemingly slipshod style, she was still pretty handy with a sword—not as good as Benimaru, but her instructor Hakuro fully attested to her skills. That made her a master of the blade, and between that and her brute strength, this was turning into a nightmarish marathon for Minaza.

But Shion wasn't enjoying this much. She wanted to take down Minaza at once and move on, but she was proving stronger than she seemed.

She truly is a warrior among the Empire's upper echelons, no doubt. Just as Sir Rimuru said, I cannot let my guard down around her.

Perhaps she could have considered that before diving in. But Shion was never one to think about things too deeply. Only now did she begin to wonder about how she was going to defeat this adversary. It was beyond too late for that, but at least she realized now that she needed to use her head a bit. But that alone wasn't going to suddenly spark a brilliant idea in her mind. It wouldn't, but Shion had Ciel on her side.

You possess great power. It took me a while to choose the best species among all the possibilities, but I have made my decision. The one best suited for you is...

Hearing this voice made Shion remember something. She seemed to recall Rimuru asking her a whole bunch of questions when he endowed her with his evolutionary reward. Shion didn't give much consideration to her answers, just telling Rimuru that she'd accept whatever he provided—but in the end, nothing new *did* ever happen to her body.

But even if the rest of her friends evolved, Shion didn't mind much. Benimaru had gone from an *oni* to a Flamesoul Ogre, giving him powers equivalent to a true god-ogre, but Shion was still a plain old *oni*. She didn't mind this because, in her mind, she was

already decently strong enough.

This alone, however, would not give her victory over Minaza. It was thus natural that Shion would seek more—and in response to that, the soul corridor was opened up.

...Battlesoul Ogre. It is a high-level chaos elemental, but one that boasts unparalleled material strength. Now, examining your skills...

I'll leave that to you, thought Shion, throwing the ball in Ciel's direction entirely. Then she refocused on Minaza. She was copping a bit of an attitude right now, but even so, she thought the voice sounded a little happy. It might have just been her imagination—but more importantly, real changes were taking place.

"Wh-what are you...?! That surging aura of yours... Were you just toying with me up until now?!"

Her spirit was now surpassing her body. As the voice suggested, the awakening of her new species was now in progress. Ciel managed the assorted evolutionary possibilities, selecting the most suitable ones as it saw fit.

Thus Shion was evolved into a Battlesoul Ogre, an uncommon but powerful chaos elemental—and since it was equipped with Infinite Regeneration, it was indestructible as long as any magicules remained. The attacks from this body cause not only physical damage, but also destruction on the spiritual level. And while this was a spiritual life-form with no elemental weaknesses, it held a decisive advantage over all other elements. In a way, Shion had evolved into something that could be called the natural enemy of spiritual life-forms.

The evolution also remade her body, optimizing it to be more specialized for combat. Shion could mostly pick up on this by instinct. She felt refreshed—invigorated, as if stretching out under a clear blue sky. She readied Goriki-maru Version 2.

"I've kept you waiting, haven't I? But my time with you has come to an end."

She spoke to Minaza with the utmost politeness.

"Don't you give me that! You might have been hiding your power, but I have revealed my true form to you as well!"

Just as she said, Minaza had changed even further from before. It meant shaving time

off her own lifespan, but still she yearned for even more offensive force as she tried to fight off Shion.

So the battle began...

"Those who try to take away our safe haven will writhe in pain before dying! The ultimate enchantment Alternative is released in its full force... Now, come to me! Feed upon my flesh, and use your instincts to kill—"

"Chaotic Fate!!"

...and was over in an instant.

The evil, forbidden final attack that Minaza was about to trigger was shattered by Shion's sword before she could fully reveal it. Before Shion now was a dismembered pile of flesh, broken into innumerable pieces.

"You're both too loud *and* talk for too long."

"Wha... What did you...?"

One of the chunks of flesh lying around was Minaza's head—or, to be exact, a bit less than half of it. She grew flustered, realizing unavoidable death was coming soon but unable to accept the reality.

Shion looked coldly down at her.

"Would you like me to help you along?"

As an opponent, Shion was the worst possible match for Minaza. Before evolving into a Battlesoul Ogre, they were evenly matched, given the right ultimate skills—but given Shion's lack of ultimate skills, the fact they were still even meant Minaza had no way to win. But after the evolution, the power of her will had reached its pinnacle. It also evolved her beloved blade, turning it into a God-class weapon you could call Goriki-maru Divine. Perhaps it would've been another story if Minaza's power was her own and not borrowed from the emperor, but against Shion right now, there was nothing she could do.

"Ngh... N-no... You're... You're too strong. B-but my children will..."

Minaza only said this because she presumably couldn't see any longer. But her hopes were already dashed. Shion's Chaotic Fate had already slashed through every living thing in this arena.

"I certainly hope so."

But Shion had nothing but words of mercy for her.

"...How kind of you. But if you're that kind... you will never beat our Insect Lord—"

And Minaza's energy ran out there. With her life now a thing of the past, Shion had complete victory.

"...Insect Lord?"

That title dropped by Minaza held very important meaning. But Shion didn't seem to care too much.

"Well, I'm sure it's none of my business anyway!"

Showing an almost refreshing amount of detachment from the problem at hand, she didn't even try to remember it.

So Minaza, an Aggressor from another world, met the same pitiful end as her children. She had been trying to build a paradise for the insectors under the patronage of Emperor Ludora, but now she vanished from existence just before she achieved her ambition.



Out of the seven Demon Peers who currently existed, Veyron was the second most powerful. He had achieved the rank of duke, having been undefeated for over four thousand years. Despite this, though, he was now on the floor, humiliated by Marco, standing before him in the guise of a warrior.

Marco's unique skill Adapter allowed him to mimic the appearance of Kondo, and he combined that with consummate usage of the ultimate enchantment Alternate to give himself Kondo-level abilities. Nothing went to waste in his approach, and while Veyron

was a titan, Marco was one step above him.

Only because of Veyron's own great experience was he merely brought to his knees instead of killed outright. All of his combat skills, honed over many years of demon-dom, seemed to do nothing. It was a vaguely frightening reality to face, but Veyron had no fear. If anything, he was enjoying this situation, deep down. Of course he did. After all, he had declared in front of his master Ultima and all the officers that he could win. Thus, he must.

"Demon... Your name is Veyron? Well, I congratulate you on your excellent attempt, but there is no use in trying this over and over again. I have seen what you're capable of well enough, and it is within my ability to handle it."

"I... am sure it is. And your assessment is correct, for I have not shown my own true potential yet."

"What?"

Marco was about to recommend he surrender. Veyron's reaction gave him second thoughts. In his view, there existed an ability gap between himself and Veyron that could be described as heaven and earth. Kondo's strength was proving overwhelming to the demon, after all—but to Marco right now, that functioned as his own strength.

That's why Veyron's words angered him so much. Here he was, a Demon Peer, but his magicule count was under a quarter of his. Things were a bit trickier before since that wasn't a one-on-one duel, but right now Veyron was alone. Nobody was swooping in to interfere, which gave Marco an overwhelming advantage.

Still, Veyron stood up and laughed. "Offering me an impersonation of someone else will not beat me. It is that type of mimicry, after all, that I'm good at."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"A counterfeit can never approach the real thing. You understand that to be the truth, do you not?"

"What do you mean?" Marco asked, a tad agitated.

Veyron had a little internal laugh at this, wishing he could just slash away instead of having this chat.

"Well, let me tell you. The thing I consider to be the best possible work of art..."

And as he shouted this, Veyron activated his newfound skill.

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Veyron was Ultima's butler. He had served her for a very long time, entrusted with all of her personal care, and it was his job to deal with whatever his master asked of him. The more specialized field of cooking was left to Zonda, but everything else was in Veyron's domain.

Along those lines, he had developed a unique skill known as Imitator that allowed him to become whoever he wanted. With Imitator, Veyron could turn into anyone he caught sight of—very similar to Marco's Adapter, but Imitator was a more precise ability. However, Marco's skill was now enhanced by the borrowed power of Emperor Ludora. Keeping that in mind, Veyron didn't have a chance; it didn't even need to be said.

Why? Because what Veyron was Imitating was far stronger than the Kondo that Marco was Adapting. Marco could reproduce something below 80 percent of Kondo's actual strength. As someone with a similar skill, Veyron knew it was impossible to recreate someone who was far stronger than you. But he still decided to turn himself into the demon lord Rimuru, a supernatural being who had successfully charmed even his master—doing that, he hoped, would give him at least a bit of that power for himself.

But then Veyron heard a voice.

I cannot allow you to do that. Instead, I will give you another power.

The voice was something akin to the World Language. It puzzled Veyron at first, but once he understood the meaning of its message, he was almost moved to tears.

I... Yes, I too am being watched over with that love!

Veyron offered his thanks, as if praying to a god. Then he realized that his skill had evolved. Even if it was counterfeit, an imitation, it could still be art if it truly moved people—and as if to prove that, he could certainly feel something new within him: the

ultimate gift Artist. And with that, he was convinced he could defeat Marco.

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Now Marco was confronted by a young warrior with keen, sharpened eyes.

“...Who are you? No, wait—I don’t care. I don’t know any swordsman better than Lieutenant Kondo. You are free to copy anyone you like, but you still don’t stand a chance.”

The young warrior Veyron imitated looked quite a bit like Agera—which makes sense, because it was Byakuya Araki from his younger days. It was the very epitome, the ultimate in imitation on Veyron’s part.

I suppose, he thought, a truly talented forger could copy paintings from the pinnacle of an artist’s career, not their lesser years.

He had come to this conclusion precisely because he had tried to master every field of art in response to Ultima’s requests. Even if he had never met the person, the Artist skill could recreate the full power of his glory days—truly akin to cheating.

To this Veyron now added his own unleashed power. Ultima, his master, had evolved through the force she received from Rimuru, and by her graces, Veyron had expanded his force as well. Veyron now possessed enough magicules to match up with an awakened demon lord, not just your garden-variety one.

“Wait... What?! You even *feel* like a different person from before.”

Marco was astonished. Veyron ignored him, instead materializing a sword in his hand with the demon-specific Create Material skill. It was just an imitation of the Blade Transform Agera had, but it had the ultimate gift Artist applied to it. There was now no doubt that it performed as close to the real thing as possible.

Veyron glanced at Marco. “Indeed. There is no underestimating this man, Kondo. But you know...”

“But what?”

“Now that Lady Carrera is setting off to fight him, I fear his fate may be soon at hand.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Ridiculous!”

Marco laughed off the nonsensical idea. He could never imagine Kondo being defeated.

The two sides stared at each other. They were at irreconcilable odds, and so there was no choice but to settle the matter by force. Both sides moved at once.

“Baika... Goka-totsu!!”

“Gallery Fake—Multilayered... Blossom Flash...”

Here and now, the forgery had become the real thing. Veyron’s eight sword strikes batted down five slashes from his opponent, the remaining three amputating both of Marco’s arms before he stopped the tip of the blade right against the nape of his neck.

“Ah, ah, ahhh...”

The intense pain caused Marco to shut off his mimicry. He tried to stop the blood from spraying out, but that wasn’t going to happen now that his arms ended at the elbows.

“Hee-hee-hee! I’m not going to kill you.”

“Ngh... Taking me hostage, then?”

“Oh, goodness no.” Veyron went back to his own form as he grinned. “I serve Lady Ultima as her butler, and I am willing to do anything in order to please my lady.”

It wasn’t much of an answer to Marco’s question. But it did give him an inscrutable fear of what was to come. “What are you gonna do to me?” he couldn’t help but ask. But that reaction already proved he had fallen into Veyron’s trap.

“My lady is quite cruel,” he replied. “She loves nothing more than the pain expressed by those who dare to oppose her—letting their bodies rot slowly over time, for example, rather than kill them immediately. It is my duty and responsibility to admonish her over it... and yet, and yet...!”

I don't want to hear this, Marco thought. But Veyron was heartless.

"I must admit, I love it as well. In fact, I find nothing more pleasurable than to watch the great and powerful plead pitifully for relief!"

And that, Veyron was implying, is why you are the best toy possible.

"S-stop! Please, stop. I surrender. In fact, I'll swear to you that I'll never disobey your will again. So—"

Marco began pleading with Veyron, and nobody could blame him for that. He had never known defeat before in his life, so being put on the defensive like this made him feel vulnerable indeed. There was no denying his solid abilities, but his inner spirit had never received the equivalent training. His ultimate power had only been lent to him; it wasn't something he had mastered. And as a demon among demons, Veyron was an expert at making opponents like that experience true fear.

"Mmm, sorry, my friend! No need to fill your head with *that* possibility. I refuse."

"Why?!"

"If a war is underway, then we must never accept surrender. Isn't that wonderful? If you were truly that weak, you should have submitted fully from the beginning. Trying to bargain *after* defeat is simply shameful. The mere idea is impossible for me to consider"

"B-but..."

"And it's not wrong of me, is it? After all, it's exactly what *you've* all done up to now. I don't want to hear any back talk just because it's *our* turn. So..."

Veyron's lips curled, his mouth splitting open until his grin stretched from ear to ear as he laughed maniacally. The display, paired with his gentlemanly demeanor, was like fingernails on a chalkboard to anyone who saw it.

"It is time for you to take responsibility... and to please Lady Ultima."

Now he revealed his true nature. As Ultima's first servant, he was a cruel, brutal, merciless demon.

"H-help me... Help me, Lieutenant Kondo!"

Marco's cry for help would never reach Kondo.

"Hmm... Yes, a very pleasant kind of wail there. But it might disturb the others, so please be quiet for a while."

With that, Veyron unceremoniously pulled out Marco's tongue.

"Grrk?! Nn, nnn-nnnnhh!!"

So Marco's silent voice echoed away in this alternate dimension, cut off from the world we know. As for what fate had in store for him...



Soei was in high spirits. He had been watching Rimuru's battle in secret, one that Rimuru had just won in crushing fashion. It was a lucky break for him.

Despite taking on Veldora and Velgrynd at the same time, Rimuru seemed to have the upper hand throughout. He even consumed Veldora and evolved himself mid-battle. That let him overpower Velgrynd in the end, despite an onslaught that Soei would have been helpless against.

But it seemed that the extent of Rimuru's newfound strength wasn't something visible to the naked eye. Even through the soul corridor that connected them, Soei couldn't sense anything. He was sure he wasn't the only one curious about that.

Regardless, Diablo hadn't made any moves right up to the end. Even now, Soei was sure, he was by Rimuru's side. He wanted to call him a bastard for hogging the best seat in the house, but he also understood that Diablo had a valid rationale for his actions, so he couldn't openly complain about it.

Testarossa, too, was pretty angry about it. She had flatly declared her intention to stay, but when Soei thought about why, it gave him a lot of mixed feelings. Even so, he still didn't object to it, because he knew what her motivations were. The Velgrynd here, perhaps realizing her disadvantage, had moved to protect Ludora even as she was fighting Rimuru. There was no guarantee that she'd stay obediently in her Gate until the other seven were destroyed.

As cunning as Testarossa is, there's no way she didn't see the possibility. But if she didn't point it out, that suggests she believes she can handle her alone. I can hardly see her defeating Lady Velgrynd, but she's certainly confident, at least.

Soei had an accurate grasp of Testarossa's intentions. She was quite likely positioning herself for a rematch with Velgrynd. That was someone Soei knew he couldn't beat, so he thought being a bit jealous of her was perfectly valid.

Besides, he thought, Benimaru must've read Testarossa's thoughts and given them at least his tacit approval. Not even he was a match for Velgrynd, after all—she was the very incarnation of fire, and Benimaru's fire-based moves would do nothing against her. He may not even stop her for very long—and so Testarossa was much more qualified for the job.

Soei, by the way, would likely be able to stop Velgrynd for a few seconds at best. With her spatial control skills, none of Soei's trademark techniques would work at all. He wouldn't even be allowed any escape—none that didn't involve immolation in the flames. He fully understood that, which didn't thrill him, but he still had to give up his seat to Testarossa.

So he devoted himself to his work with a complex mix of feelings. He was overjoyed to see Rimuru win, but increasingly dissatisfied with his own lack of power. He had absolute orders from Rimuru to kill his enemy, though, and he wouldn't hesitate to follow them. For Soei, that was just the natural thing to do.

Let's get this over with so I can hurry back to Sir Rimuru's side.

His loyalty to Rimuru soaring higher than ever, Soei obeyed his racing heart's desires and ran through the Gate.

The enemy was in sight. Soei went right for him. All of the Gates had the same battle arena inside, and in the center of this one stood his target.

“Hey. I'm fighting you, then?”

This was Gardner, the fourth-ranked Single Digit.

“Since you're here and all, let me introduce myself. I am Gardner, entrusted with the

protection of Emperor Ludora. I don't think we'll be together for long, but I hope you enjoy it, huh?"

Gardner eyed Soei, trying to gauge his worth. He was tingling with a cruel, hidden desire, wondering just how he could best torment this target.

Soei met him with silence. But not entirely. He let out a sigh after a short pause.

"So I am losing precious time in order to dispose of you?"

He spat the words out in disgust. Gardner wasn't about to let it go unaddressed.

"...What?"

"My name is Soei. If you say that you'll surrender, I'll accept it... but you won't, will you?"

"Of course not!"

This chip on Soei's shoulder incensed Gardner. This only locked him in Soei's trap before the fight even began, but he was unaware of that.

"Soei, was it? I've heard of you. Kondo was looking into you before, but you're trying to run your own little intelligence bureau over in the land of monsters, aren't you? Which means you're not suited for direct combat!"

Of course, Kondo's research wasn't as vague as all that. Gardner knew that Soei had a certain level of ability—but, even knowing that, he was taunting him right now. He didn't think he needed to in order to win, but if it made this Soei lose his cool, then all the better. It was, of course, a shallow tactic, and one that was meaningless if he tried it against someone like Soei.

"Imbecile. Enough of this nonsense. Let's get on with it."

In this short period of time, Soei had already identified Gardner's full abilities. Gardner, unaware of this, recklessly slashed at him. His weapon of choice was an azure dragon blade held in both hands, thicker and larger than a knife—difficult to handle, but powerful in the right hands. He made it flow in a magnificent dance-like motion as he unleashed a flurry of strikes, a mixture of strength, sharpness, and Gardner's own polished skills. But it didn't work on Soei.

Without warning, he dove into the shadows, Gardner's sword slicing through the air. His momentum threw him off-balance, and Soei was ready. The bullet that flew out from the shadow at Gardner's feed lodged itself in the chest of its prey.

"Gahhh!"

He collapsed, coughing up blood.

Appearing from the shadows to finish him off, Soei revealed the small Walther P99 handgun. He had recently obtained one of the prototypes that Rimuru had Kaijin build for him, practicing how to fire it from shadow space, and now the results were as clear as the bullet that shot through Gardner's heart.

"Hmph. Too easy."

No matter how strong a fighter someone was, if you caught them off guard, you could finish them off with a single blow. That was Soei's pet theory, but he understood that this just wasn't possible for some opponents. Gardner, however, was not one of them, and his plan had just worked brilliantly.

The bullet he just fired, after all, was infused with all of Soei's own skills—the Ultraspeed and Insta-Kill from his unique skill Shadow Striker, but also poison, paralysis, and corrosion effects. Ultraspeed made the bullet begin its journey at dozens of times the speed of sound, and with Insta-Kill added to its already lethal effects, it could even destroy the spiritual body of a life-form. Between that and the various status ailments, Gardner's death was absolutely certain. Everyone, not just Soei, would have thought so.

However:

"You let your guard down, fool!"

A voice shot out from behind Soei as he started walking back toward the Gate. Before he could react, his head was severed, the azure dragon blade emerging from his chest.

"Ah, these tricks are such a pain... They're fine for killing clever bastards like him, but it's no fun if everything gets decided in an instant, you know?"

These words were spoken, needless to say, by the supposedly dead Gardner. The corpse was still lying on the ground, but he was still standing here, perfectly fine. That

could be chalked up to the special ability he acquired—for Ludora had used Alternate to grant him the skill Parallel Existence.

Unlike Velgrynd, who boasted a vast amount of magicules, Gardner's was about average for a Saint-level person. That put him up there with an awakened demon lord, but he couldn't create multiple replications of himself at once. Just one at a time was his limit, but that was still enough.

Thanks to that, no matter how cunning his opponent was, they'd never be able to tell the "fake" from the real thing—they were both "real" by definition. So Gardner's typical winning strategy was to lure his foe into a trap, then use a replication as a decoy while he attacked with his main body. It was a proven tactic, but he didn't like using it much. He was more into tormenting people as they begged for their lives—this approach killed them before things even got to that level.

"Hey, you alive?... Psh, as if, right?"

Despite his complaints, Gardner didn't forget his job. He had to ensure that anyone who went through this Gate was killed, so he needed to check up on Soei.

But as he was about to, a cold voice said "I knew it" in his ear. Soei's body, still decapitated and pierced through the heart, dissipated into a black mist.

"Damn it!"

By the time Gardner noticed and shouted out, it was already too late. If he hadn't lost his composure during his first engagement with Soei, he might have realized that he was dealing with a Replication the whole time—but no point debating what-ifs now. What mattered was that Gardner failed; that, and the consequences he would see from it.

"A simple Replication is good enough to use as a decoy. It appears you are wasting a great power there."

Soei's voice echoed coldly. It was a valid criticism, one that stabbed Gardner in the heart.

Gardner had, in fact, met Velgrynd before. Not long after he became a Saint, he learned that the Marshal was a beautiful woman, a bit of info that convinced him he could win in a fight. He instead tasted abject defeat by one of her Parallel Existences as she sat

elegantly on the throne, serving as little more than a diversion for her. But it was this skill of hers that Gardner was amazed by. He craved it badly, and now he had a form of it. Even the azure dragon blade he loved was a gift from her.

But Soei had known all of that. Gardner had been dancing on his palm from the beginning.

“God damn you!!”

Gardner screamed at him. This extreme situation was shaking him to the core. If you begin to doubt your abilities, it’ll start to affect you—and the more “ultimate” that ability, the worse it becomes. It was a given that Soei would aim for that.

“If you understand now, then die!”

With that, Soei tried to summon his unique skill Shadow Striker. Then Gardner took out one of his hidden moves.

“Hrrrrr-rah!! H-how about that? Each one is my real body. I will die, too, but now I can take you with me!”

Multiple Parallel Existences began their attack at once. All were the real thing, so defeating any given individual would be meaningless. It was the ultimate attack, one Gardner burned his very life away to execute. It happened in the blink of an eye, too, making it hard for Soei to evade as he tried to finish the battle with Shadow Striker.

The greatest weakness of Soei’s Replications was that only his own main body could activate unique skills. Soei could control multiple Replications at once, but there was no way to compensate for that weakness. Such was the difference between a Replication and a Parallel Existence, so it was to be expected. Soei could make it *look* like he could pull that off if he was close enough to a Replication, but even that would come at a time lag that could be lethal against a stronger opponent. With someone like that, only Soei’s main body could strike the final blow.

“Ngh!!”

Soei thought he had been caught off guard. The most dangerous moment of a fight, as everybody knew, was right when you were about to finish the job. You could never let your guard down then, and his failure to do that even though he knew better was a shameful mistake.

Forgive me, Sir Rimuru! I promise you I will survive this and make amends later...

Soei prepared for Gardner's final onrush. He was not allowed to die—he had to survive this.

But then:

You are not forgiven, Soei. Thus I will grant you power as well.

Soei thought he heard a strange voice.

Wait, that voice... No! Don't!

Instantly he understood—this voice must never be thought over or pursued in any way. Perhaps it was an unwise thing for the leader of an intelligence department to do, but Soei made the decision without further hesitation.

That is fine. The name of the ability you will gain is...

At once, Soei understood this power as if he were born with it. At the same time, within this field of consciousness that seemed to stretch out a million times over, he realized that his Replications were now Separate Bodies. It only meant one thing—Soei had also acquired Parallel Existence.

“Hyah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I’m going to die, but it’s the end for you, too! Taste my—”

“Is that the end of your will, then?”

“What? N-no! This has to be your main body...”

“That it is. And so is this one. If you understand that, then die.”

“God damn you!!”

This time, Gardner truly had nothing left.

“Thousand Shadow Death.”

Soei’s shadow stretched out, turning into a thousand arms that promptly seized Gardner.

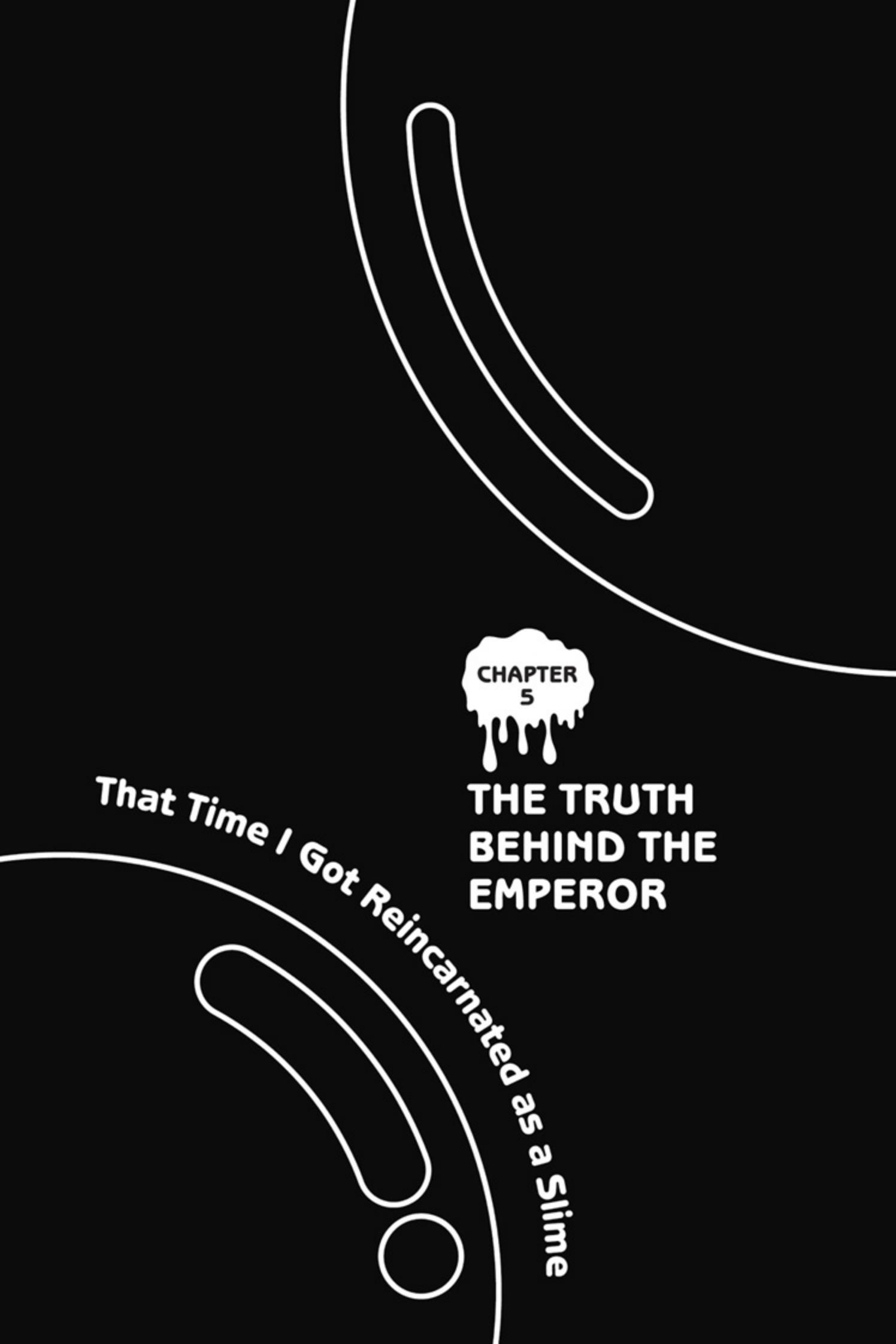
This was the effect of Eye of the Moon in play, one of the skills offered by the ultimate gift Tsukuyomi, Lord of Moonshade. It granted Soei the ability to manipulate shadows at will, and nothing could have matched him better. He could use shadows to investigate any part of the world he wanted, and wherever shadows existed, he could easily “Move” to them instantly. Combine this with Parallel Existence, and he could create multiple pairs of arms to attack people freely from the shadows—an effective battle tactic.

“Go ahead,” Gardner shouted as he was held down. “Gloat over your victory! You will never beat Lady Velgrynd or Sir Granit—”

But his life came to an end before he could finish the thought, snuffed out by Soei’s Insta-Kill.

“Sir Rimuru already took care of Lady Velgrynd. This ‘Granit’ you mentioned is being attended to by Benimaru, one far stronger than I. I suppose, much like me... Ah, but that’s no concern of yours.”

Without further comment, Soei melted away, allowing Gardner to be swallowed by the darkness.



CHAPTER
5

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE EMPEROR

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 5

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE EMPEROR

Damrada, alone as he watched over one of the Eight Gates, couldn't help but wonder:

Why did it turn out like this?

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Things couldn't be any worse.

Yuuki had fallen into the hands of Emperor Ludora, deprived of his free will like all of his friends. Ludora had ordered Damrada to watch over them all, and he was in no position to defy him. Now, however, Ludora had given another order. Yuuki would be watched by someone else, and once the handover was done, he was to board the emperor's flagship.

So began that great air battle.

Single Digits ranked sixth or higher were allowed to learn the true identity of the Marshal—but they could tell no one else. That was an absolute order, the information so vitally confidential that Damrada, whose business frequently took him to foreign lands, had his memories manipulated for extra security.

Yes. I made a promise to him. And that was...

Damrada recalled it once he saw the Marshal reveal herself. Many more memories followed, coming back vividly. He had previously recalled the most important promise he had made to Ludora, but now he remembered the reason it was so important to execute on it.

Well, now what...?

There was no time to stew over it. The demon lord Rimuru, whom he had seen not long ago, was a very nice person, one who didn't seem much of a threat. Once he was captured in Velgrynd's alternate dimension, he shouldn't have been able to interfere with their measures to capture Veldora. And now, indeed, Veldora was completely dominated, giving Ludora a decisive advantage over Guy.

But this was of no importance to Damrada. Or to Ludora, even...

With a clarity of thought that felt like a thick fog being lifted, Damrada began wondering what was truly best for Ludora. But before he could answer that question, the demon lord Rimuru made his move—truly unprecedented violence.

Why did he ever think he wasn't a threat? Damrada wished he could interrogate himself over that. The fact he made it out of Velgrynd's seal made it no doubt that he was a force to be reckoned with. But more than that—the moment Damrada saw Rimuru appear, he realized just how naïve he had been. The demon lord had taken one look at him and the rest with his golden eyes. It was a glare, a cold one, as if he didn't even recognize Damrada as his enemy. Kondo immediately stepped up to respond, but his attack didn't work.

Is that all you have? Then I don't even need to be wary of you. All of you can wait for later. Have fun being terrorized. And try not to get killed until I can deal with you...

That was the story Rimuru's eyes seemed to tell. To him, Damrada and the others were as good as dead already. Emperor Ludora was no exception to this; if things kept going this way, they'd all doubtlessly be killed.

But what did tactical victory mean for Rimuru in this situation? It meant fulfilling two conditions. One, recapture Veldora. Two, eliminate the invaders.

Veldora was the demon lord's staunchest ally. For Rimuru, him losing his free will couldn't be allowed to stand. If he had come all the way over here, he must have been prepared to deal with Velgrynd—and from Damrada's point of view, there was no predicting the outcome of that battle. It was a vast contest in some far-off land, and he had no way of analyzing it.

So what about eliminating the invaders? People called Rimuru a pacifist, but that didn't make him nonviolent. His lands had been subject to numerous invasions in the past, and he had repelled all of them—by any means he saw fit.

Thanks to Veldora's help, the land of monsters had a long string of victories. Rimuru would never forgive the Empire's acts of aggression. The time for negotiation was over. For him, the only course of action was to kill every single imperial soldier. Bargaining in the face of this was meaningless—the only way out was to fight to the bitter end.

Even worse, they had signed no previous agreement over this war, which meant there was no guarantee that surrender would bring forgiveness. The Empire, seeing no point in such actions, set a trap for Rimuru when he came to negotiate. Their trust was ruined, and it could be concluded that no further talks would ever be agreed to.

We should have made much more of an effort to stop His Majesty.

Damrada, too, had grossly overestimated the Empire's fighting ability. He saw no way they could lose, so he assumed they could dictate whatever terms of victory they wanted. He wanted to show off the Empire's strength, smash his opponents, and swallow them up before they showed any signs of rebellion. They could replace their leadership, establish a puppet state—whatever they wanted, as long as they won the war. This was how the Empire expanded its territory, but this time, they made a great miscalculation. Not only were the two sides evenly matched on the battlefield; there was no guarantee even Emperor Ludora would be safe.

It was no wonder why Damrada felt so depressed.

It should be noted that Damrada's primary concern was the promise he made to Ludora. There was no doubt in his mind that Rimuru wanted the emperor dead as well, and that made Damrada wonder what the right course of action for him could be. He wanted to keep that promise to Ludora—but it was something he wanted to achieve with his own two hands. But, oh, defeating Rimuru seemed so impossible...

Damrada shivered a bit as he analyzed the issue. Their flagship had been surrounded by terrifying magic, with the survivors now protecting the Eight Gates. Could you really call this fighting as equals? Because to him, this looked like nothing but a dreadful error.

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That brought us to now.

“Did I keep you waiting?”

Before Damrada’s eyes was a young girl, smiling happily. She was one of the seven Primal Demons, one bearing unbelievable strength—Ultima, servant of the demon lord Rimuru.

“He has Primals serving under him... and he’s even granted them power...”

She was an even more awesome sight up close. The accuracy and power of that fearsome Death Streak was far beyond what it used to be, proving that the demons had indeed been evolved. Rimuru had opened a massive gate to summon them all, not even caring about all the eyewitnesses, and then he did... *something* to everyone there. There had been no time to investigate exactly what, but Ultima had now given them a firm answer.

The demon looked amused with herself.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You figured it out, huh? Well, that’s right. Sir Rimuru gave me a bunch of power, and now I’m feeling *really* good!”

It was a nice anecdote for Ultima. To Damrada, it was his worst nightmare. Giving power to a Primal—there was no way a mere demon lord could do that, as much as he predicted it himself. Not even Guy Crimson had evolved the Primals under his control, which made clear just how extraordinary the demon lord Rimuru’s actions were. But that didn’t stop Damrada from trying to defeat him. He had to fulfill his promise to Ludora, and as part of that, he was obliged to go all-out against the demon Ultima.

“You know, I have not always strived for the very best. Even if I have to choose a much harder path... as long as I can fulfill my goal at the end, that’s all that matters.”

Damrada stopped worrying. Even looking at Ultima and all the overwhelming force she boasted, he stood strong, never growing timid.

“Hmm... Still up for this, huh?”

“Of course. I am one of my master’s knights, and I will show you my power to the

fullest."

"Great. Can't wait! Let's get started then!"

Thus began the battle between Damrada, second-ranked of the Single Digits, and the "Pain Lord" Ultima.

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Ultima chuckled as she observed Damrada. She could feel his power—an incredible amount for a human being, and exceptional even as a Saint. If she hadn't been evolved, this might not have been winnable for her.

Hmm... I know this. He's about equal with Hinata, huh? And she was like a natural enemy to all monsters, but it looks to me like this guy's honed himself purely against humans, and individual targets for that matter. His type certainly can be a nuisance.

Ultima knew that people who improved and invented their own abilities, rather than have them granted by others, were a pain. Hakuro was a good example of that, someone who could use a seemingly boundless number of techniques to handle any situation in his way. Adapting and applying those skills was the secret to his strength, and to higher forms of existence like herself, it was an alien concept.

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Demons existed on a much higher plane of existence than people. All they needed to do was release a little magic force, and that itself became an attack.

That was true of Ultima, who stood at the very top of the demon race. She was born an expert on magic manipulation—the perfect control of magic force—and she didn't have to work for it at all. Any wish she had instantly came true. That's what magic was, and no one could dare hope to compete against its overwhelming versatility.

Until fairly recently, Ultima believed the only adversaries who could beat her were other Primals or wild cards like True Dragons. But this belief was mistaken, something she discovered during her battle with Velgrynd. She and her cohorts put up a good

fight against her, despite being far outclassed; they even beat one of her Separate Bodies, although even that only had about 10 percent of Velgrynd's strength. At the same time, however, they discovered that using their power the wrong way could get them defeated by a lower-ranked opponent.

The battles that followed offered a great many lessons. True Dragons, already the most powerful beings in the world, exhibited highly precise, sophisticated magic manipulation. That allowed them to fully overwhelm Ultima and the demonesses, despite their own magic skills. Ultima had no idea how Velgrynd pulled that off mid-battle, but now she did. The secret lay in applying an ultimate skill to your magic.

An ultimate skill gives you a lot more precision over your magic control, right? No wonder we couldn't beat her at all.

Velgrynd was doing little more than keeping the demonesses at bay, but even that was too much for Ultima to overcome back then. And for Carrera, a self-styled magic expert, seeing someone handle it so much better than her was a humiliation.

Yes, a humiliation... but also a stroke of good luck. She enjoyed the opportunity to experience that battle, and she survived without tasting a decisive defeat. Never until now did Ultima consider that simply incorporating the effects of a skill into magic could potentially double its power. Now that this battle was behind her, she was quickly realizing some new possibilities.

True, we've got a very good foundation, but that doesn't mean we should rely on it too much. A little innovation, and we can get even stronger!

Ultima, as the strongest of them all, had never held much of a craving for power. This time, though, she sincerely wanted it for herself. If someone already near-invincible strove for even greater heights through hard work and study, how much stronger could they get? The answer to this question probably lay in Velgrynd—her and Guy Crimson, no doubt. Along those lines, Diablo, constantly pursuing his own interests over anything else, was probably a wild card. It was completely different from Ultima and Carrera, who had never made an effort at anything before (Testarossa was another story).

Ultima was aware that she was the most inexperienced out of the seven Primals, but even so, she felt she could fight as an equal with Mizeri or Raine. When it came to Testarossa and Carrera in a serious fight, though, she didn't like her chances.

Testarossa was perfect—and elegant all the way. She was confident, even with her bad habit of looking down on others. Carrera was arrogant and sloppy, capable of perfection if she wanted it but prone to losing interest and phoning it in instead.

So what did that make Ultima? She couldn't control magic as precisely as Testarossa, or throw around magic force the way Carrera could. Out of the three Devil Lords, she was probably bringing up the rear. Everything was just halfway there at best with her—she was a wellspring of talent, but she never enthusiastically applied herself to anything. In that way, she was similar to Carrera in many respects; that's why they competed as rivals for so long. But now Carrera had taken up a new hobby—swordsmanship. It only made Ultima jealous.

But that would end today. Ultima was blessed with the opportunity to awaken, and now she had the power she wished for.

And I'm the one with the most room for growth among us all, right?

Now that she was thinking this way, it all seemed like a pretty funny story to her. It was all thanks to Rimuru, her master, and while Ultima had no idea how the demon lord could do that, it didn't matter to her. All that mattered was whether she could attain a higher plane of existence or not—that and whether she could prove useful to Rimuru.

She continued to wish as she watched over Agera's battle. And at the end of all that pondering, she heard what she thought was a voice.

Allow me to help you give shape to that wish a little.

This was the ultimate skill Samael, Lord of Deathly Poison. It could detect the weaknesses of any living thing and create a suitable “poison” to target them—and now that Ultima had this power, she felt she had no chance of losing to anyone.

But then she remembered. Wasn't that what Diablo had always told her—to hone her skills and not rely too much on her latent power? She had been losing frequently to Zegion around that time, so she assumed Diablo was just giving her a hard time; he was mean that way. But Ultima had it all wrong. He was probably being sarcastic, yes, but he had her best interests in mind when he said it. He was teaching her, in essence, that the right control over your power could make a world of difference. And once that got through to Ultima, a lot of Diablo's other advice popped into her mind.

You can't truly acquire the power you've been given just by calling on it in a pinch. That's really true!

Now Ultima was deeply convinced. She was told that not long after she was granted her name, and now she thought it was really true.

Come to think of it, Diablo never really used the powers Sir Rimuru gave him—not unless things were real bad. I thought he just didn't see his enemies as worthy of tasting those attacks, but maybe he had a good reason.

So why not her, too, then?

Thus Ultima decided to use this opportunity as a way for her to grow. This man Damrada would be a tricky opponent, after all, so he'd be the perfect target to give her all against.

Ugh... Look at Diablo, trying to train us by making us fight like this... He really does look down on all of us, doesn't he? If Testa finds that out, she's gonna cause a lot of trouble for us, huh? But then again, maybe Testa went along with it. But, well, since we're here and all... I might as well take advantage.

Even Damrada, a doubtlessly strong opponent, was merely a training partner to Ultima. She was determined to use her ultimate skill against him, the product of her long-held wishes, to win this out—and she was sure it'd be a growing experience for her. So she swore to herself that she'd win—not with the “power” she had without asking, but by perfectly applying the “ability” she had obtained through her own desires. Then, she thought, she could prove it. She wouldn't be wishing it any longer—she really *would* be useful to Rimuru.

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The battle was reaching its peak intensity. Ultima had the power advantage with her attacks, but Damrada's techniques parried them away. Occasionally he could even focus his entire body's fighting spirit to cancel out the attack head-on. That was the fundamental power of Damrada—thinking on his feet and never wasting a movement. It was honestly impressive and fascinating to Ultima; it helped her realize a great many

things mid-battle.

I see... So this kind of flow won't put you off balance? I bet this would work on Zegion as well!

Zegion was just too much. The moment Ultima approached him, she'd get knocked to the ground. On-the-field battle training was one thing, but when it came to martial arts practice, he wasn't a suitable sparring partner.

Along those lines, Damrada was a nice, approachable rival, the best person for her to fight against. Now Ultima realized how fortunate she was. With overwhelming magical power, she could easily defend against any attack—and on offense, she could crush any enemy by brute force alone. She thought she knew that, but now it actually began to feel that way—and as both sides increased their power, the battle grew more and more ferocious.



The powers were so closely balanced, there was no telling when the battle was going to end... or, at least, it seemed that way at a glance.

"Ah-ha-ha! What fun! I never would've lasted this long in a training session with Zegion."

Ultima looked like she was truly enjoying herself. Damrada, by contrast, looked like this whole affair disgusted him.

"You treat a fight against me as a training session...? You truly *do* look down upon me."

But despite his words, even Damrada knew it deep down. If this kept up, he would be the one who lost. Ultima was still growing, but Damrada was already giving her everything he had—all of his technique at once. There was no time to enjoy this; all that mattered was how he would ever defeat her.

Primals, after all, were like the “chosen ones” of magic. No half-hearted attack could ever work against someone capable of writing the physical laws of this planet.

Only through applying the ultimate enchantment Alternate to all of his attacks could Damrada inflict any damage on Ultima. He had spent over two millennia training himself, growing capable of using this borrowed power the way you or I breathe. It

was so familiar to Damrada now that he had all but forgotten Ludora had lent it to him in the first place. Besides, demons had certain checks placed on them. There was a set limit to their magicule counts (although that seemed to be unlocked at the moment). As a result, someone Saint-class like Damrada had more overall energy on hand than Ultima—hence why he could keep it even with her.

The more I attack, the more I expose my hand, after all. But I doubt any of my more powerful finishers would work against her anyway. So... I can't win?

Damrada expended a bone-crushing effort to acquire his technique, but Ultima could just steal it after a single glance. It would've been better if he went on a quick attack to end this in a hurry, but he knew that could leave him open and vulnerable to self-imploding. Ultima was still launching multiple attacks at once, all with the same mind-boggling force, and he was still canceling them all out at the same time... but that didn't seem to frustrate his foe. In fact, Ultima looked happy.

"That's so good! Like a textbook example!"

Being told that made Damrada far more frustrated instead.

He was in the corner. Not only was he in no position to hold anything back, but as soon as he showed any new move, he could *feel* Ultima growing off of it, like a pile of dry sand sucking up water.

Ha-ha-ha... All I can do is laugh.

It was true. Damrada had no idea that Primals were such terrifying things. An external observer would think their abilities were balanced against each other, but that balance was about to fall apart shortly. As long as one side of the fight continued growing, the scales were bound to tip sooner or later. That was the stark reality... and now the moment was here.

"Ha-ha! Now I'm *really* starting to get it!"

The change in Ultima's mood was clear as she shouted it. Until now she had been storing up her powers so she could focus on stealing Damrada's moves. Now that power was released—and behind her sprouted six pairs of featherless, batlike wings, a shining light purple in color.

"Here we go!"

“Ngh?!”

With that, the twelve wings began to move at once, changing shape in a multitude of ways as they aimed themselves at Damrada. Some were thin as blades, some sharp as needles, some formed fist-like mounds. The constant changes made it difficult to even attempt a mad dash away from them, much less try to deal with them.

Damrada, trying to parry a fist-like wing, was blown away once the fists crossed each other. The power was incomparable to anything before, too severe for Damrada to cancel out, and it was increasing rapidly. There was no longer any upper limit to her magicule count, and no sign of this rapid increase slowing down at all—she could make herself literally as powerful as she wished.

“Tsk!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I just love that kind of facial expression.”

“Hmph! Don’t sass me, little girl. Your power is amazing, but it doesn’t matter if you can’t hit me.”

Damrada had required more focus than ever before to avoid that attack. He acted unaffected, but inside, he began to feel a sense of deep urgency. If this continued, there was no way to win—but Ultima left no holes open. If she didn’t, Damrada would just have to poke one open... and so he resorted to desperate actions.

One of the wings pierced Damrada’s leg. It looked like a failure on his part, but that was exactly what his strategy was. A race like the demons, prone to boasting about their mighty power, was just as prone to arrogance. Even Ultima would let this put her off guard—and if Damrada could catch that, he was sure of victory.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I thought you were gonna just keep dodging me. Or did you get tired?”

With a wicked grin, Ultima relaxed her attack and began taunting Damrada. Her wings went on the move, plunging into his limbs but not his vitals.

Yes, I know it. You’re all strong. That’s why you look down upon us... and dig your own graves at the final moment.

Damrada was sure his plan would succeed. Then, pretending to be wounded and

fallen, he unleashed an all-out strike against Ultima.

“Holy Smashfist!”

This was his most powerful of finisher moves, a skill that took all his fighting spirit as a Saint and used Alternate to compress it into a single strike. Even the most powerful evil demon would be permanently extinguished by it, and without a body to inhabit, Ultima the Primal would be forced to vanish.

Damrada felt he had won, but there would be no victorious afterglow today. Just as he was about to finish Ultima off, he felt a chill for some reason. All that fell away was a single wing. It seemed to change shape, imitating Ultima herself, but Damrada couldn't see it—and then it was too late.



“Poison Smashfist!”

Ultima had punched through Damrada’s chest.

Her hand was infused with an enormous amount of magic force as she executed an open-hand spear strike, much as Damrada had. But with the ultimate skill Samael added to the mix, she was able to control it perfectly, the Deathly Poison from Samael turning her five fingernails a dark purple. It was well beyond a lethal dose, and it crushed Damrada’s defenses.

“Gnnh!”

Damrada fell, vomiting blood.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Too bad, huh? I was right on target!”

The evil laughter echoed. Damrada tried getting up again but failed. His entire body was so drained of energy that he could barely close a fist, much less stand up. But still he gathered his strength and stared at Ultima.

“That is no Smashfist, you fool. It was a spear-hand strike. As if you could copy me after just one look... But the power behind it... was excellent. Call it... ‘Bloody Deathhand’ instead, perhaps...”

Damrada gazed upward, a satisfied look on his face as he beheld the sky and remorsefully chuckled to himself. He was completely defeated. Long before he could challenge Guy to a final battle, the demon lord Rimuru’s forces had crushed him. Perhaps some of the Empire’s elites would survive, but it would be impossible to rebuild their position. Emperor Ludora has no time left to wait for the next opportunity. Before that, he needs to...

“Your Majesty,” Damrada muttered, looking back on his life.

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“Will you listen to me, Damrada?”

“What is it? If it’s more boring complaining, please save it for Lady Velgrynd. Or are you complaining at her, actually? Then bring it to her, not me. I don’t want her to think *I* have a grievance with her, too.”

“You really are a cold person, aren’t you?... But no, this is serious.”

“...What is it?”

He didn’t want to know. He knew from the moment he looked into Ludora’s eyes that this was a serious matter—but if he heard about it, their current relationship would cease to exist, and Damrada didn’t want that.

“So it appears that every time I reincarnate, it wears my heart out a little bit. That or the ‘soul,’ the way Guy describes it—but either way, if this goes on long enough, I may wind up not being me any longer.”

The resurrections of the Hero Ludora were not magical in nature. They involved a special ritual, crafted to help the new body inherit the old one’s overblown magic force. This was the cost for becoming both a god among mankind and the owner of a force that even surpassed that of a True Dragon, the ultimate spiritual life-form. It was up to Ludora and his own skills to manage that process; Damrada had no solution for him.

“The wearing of the soul, you say? And it would cause Your Majesty to cease being yourself...?”

“Right.”

“That’s a funny joke. But I’m not so naïve as to take it seriously and reduce your workload, you know.”

“Eesh. Still all serious like that, huh?”

“I think that’s what I’m best at, yes.”

“Ha-ha! Maybe so, yeah. Well, forget about it. Stupid to ask anyway.”

“I will do just that, then.”

There was no forgetting. Damrada was just running away from it. He wanted to serve Ludora forever, maintaining the current relationship they had.

So time passed.

"Ah, I knew it... Every time I'm reborn, it seems, I lose something important to me, little by little. The problem is, I don't even know what."

"Your Majesty..."

"Hey, Damrada?"

"Yes?"

"This is an order. When I am no longer myself, I want you to kill me by your own hand."

"Emperor Ludora!"

"I can't really ask Velgrynd to do it, can I?"

Damrada struggled mightily to keep himself from saying he couldn't do it, either. This was the heartfelt wish of his best friend Ludora; there was no way he could deny him.

"That is a terribly weak-minded thing for you to say, my liege. But should that happen, I promise you that I will settle your affairs for you. So please, I hope you can rest assured as you go about your political duties."

"Hee-hee. You never change, do you? Then it's settled."

It was a promise made on a distant day.

And time marched on again...

"I am tired. I can only keep Michael, Lord of Justice, from going out of control for so long. Absolute justice is no better than evil, when you get down to it, for there's no such thing as a justice that can be accepted by all."

"Your Majesty..."

"Damrada, do you remember your promise with me?"

"Of course I do, my liege."

Ludora smiled. "Good, then." He changed his expression, giving a stern order. "Damrada, I hereby order you... You must find someone who can overcome Michael, Lord of Justice, and defeat me, should you yourself fail at it! It pains me to ask you to do this... but while I am still myself, I need to take all possible precautions."

The order was tantamount to Ludora asking Damrada to wipe him from existence. But Damrada had no choice but to nod.

"You have my word, Your Majesty."

"Thank you," Ludora replied. "And my apologies." His eyes pointed far away, his speech pointed toward no particular target. "This Michael was entrusted to me by a friend, but looking back, it might have been too much power for me. Whether I win or lose my game against Guy, I think next time will be the last occasion I ever use it. I intend to use it well... but if you see any signs of it going out of control, please do not hesitate. Stop it, and stop me as well."

"Yes, my liege."

"...Please."

Ludora closed his eyes, recalling the oath he had given to Veldanava the Star-King Dragon long ago and feeling frustrated at his inability to keep it. A small murmur escaped from his mouth: "If you fail at this promise... I will apologize to you in the afterlife."

Damrada, pretending not to hear it, quietly left the room.

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Choking on the blood seeping out from his own mouth, Damrada was brought back to reality. He seemed to have lost consciousness for a few tenths of a second.

Your Majesty, I... I owe you an apology... You gave me your orders... and I failed to fulfill them...

In his inner consciousness, already threatening to fade again, Damrada attempted to state an apology. But it was not to be. All he did was cough up blood again.

There was regret. But there was also relief. To Damrada, the edict to seek out someone to kill his beloved master was nothing but pain. It had made him suffer for far too long. And of course it would, because to Damrada, Emperor Ludora was every bit the brilliant hero he had always been.

How could I ever kill the one... who I value so much...?! Why did it have to be me? Couldn't it have been someone else?! Without you, I would have no lingering regrets about this world. I would gladly join you on your journey to the afterlife...

That was what Damrada truly felt. The game between Ludora and Guy was of no importance to him. What mattered was Ludora's will, and the way that will was reflected by the world.

Guy Crimson was an arrogant demon lord, but he was no tyrant who refused to listen to reason. His rule was absolute, but he still worked on a proper framework of rules that he stuck to. He and Ludora had different ideals, but they weren't incompatible with each other. From Damrada's point of view, they could have come to a mutually acceptable agreement. Guy would never move on his own. Ludora was sure of it; that must've been why he issued his orders to Damrada.

But if they understood each other that well, why did they even bother keeping up with this game? It made Damrada wonder—but there was no way he could disobey Ludora, so in the end, he carried the order out. The journey would bring him all around the world—but after leaving the emperor's side for many years, he found the right candidate.

This was Yuuki Kagurazaka, a boy who had the extremely unusual ability Anti-Skill. Even ultimate skills could be nullified by this, Damrada was overjoyed to find. He was glad to find something that could work against Michael, Lord of Justice... but the results were disastrous. Yuuki was now square in Ludora's hands and could no longer be relied upon.

So Damrada lost his ace in the hole, but now another question arose.

“...Why did His Majesty try to rule over Yuuki?”

“Huh?”

Ultima reacted to the unintended murmuring. Damrada didn’t answer it. Ludora himself ordered Damrada to find someone who could kill him. Why would he then interfere with that effort?

...Or maybe Damrada just didn’t want to admit it. The signs were there from the beginning.

“...So it really was true... His Majesty, Emperor Ludora... He’s already...”

Damrada kept muttering as if suffering from a high fever.

“What’re you *talking* about?”

Ultima was sounding clearly irritated, but her voice would never reach him. He was far too absorbed in his own thoughts—a pre-death moment of clarity. His mind was sharper than ever... and now it could arrive at the truth.

Ludora burned with his ideals—his drive to unite the world and establish a lasting peace. He dreamed of an end to conflict and poverty, and the rise of a more developed mankind. Only when the entire world was united and at peace could everyone live as true equals.

Believing this, Ludora set out to establish a united nation. He believed humans have the innate ability to understand each other—and from the bottom of his heart, he knew they could all unite under one will to create a better world. So he became a Hero serving all mankind, facing great hardship as he did. He never stopped pursuing his struggle, hoping it would bring smiles to the faces of as many people as possible.

And Damrada loved him for it. But even now, Ludora’s ideals had ended while they were still a dream. He himself had changed too much before the day that dream came true.

The ideals we pursued were crushed long ago...

Damrada finally had to admit it. It wrapped his mind in sadness.

“Are you crying?”

“...Yes.”

“Because you’re afraid to die?”

“...No. My promise...”

“Your promise?”

“...Yes.”

Inescapable death had Damrada in its hands, refusing to let go. He could accept that much as inevitable—yet the one thing he couldn’t stand was not being able to keep his promise to Ludora. But if Ludora’s original will was long gone, then who really *was* Ludora now? There was just one answer. It was the ultimate skill Michael, Lord of Justice, unchanged from when Veldanava the Star-King Dragon gave it to him.

Damrada needed to carry out Ludora’s orders before his spirit fully collapsed... but his life was running out before that could ever happen. He wanted to curse his own incompetence, but even now, he decided the situation was not at its worst. He had to stop Michael at all costs, and if he failed, he needed to find someone to entrust the task to. That was Ludora’s order to him, the promise he had to keep—and he had found Yuuki for that.

But there was one other candidate he had in mind. Rimuru, the fearsome demon lord, his greatest enemy and also his greatest hope.

“I want you... to kill His Majesty... Kill Ludora for me...”

“Huh? Why me?”

“It doesn’t have to be you. Can you at least... relay the message... to the demon lord Rimuru for me...?”

“Aw, c’mon, let *me* do the honors! ’Cause I’m sure open to taking the job. I was planning to kill that Ludora guy anyway.”

Ultima was always up for satisfying a new whim. She wasn't going to take this job for free, but she did have a liking for Damrada. They had fought for only a short time, but for someone with an infinite lifespan like Ultima, battle was about quality over quantity anyway. This was an intense battle, packed with ups and downs from start to finish, and after that experience, she was willing to forgive just about everything.

"Then let me ask you... one more favor..."

"What?"

"Protect him... Protect the boy Masayuki..."

Damrada was fully convinced. Masayuki was the one—

"Well, sure, I guess. But you got a reward for me, right?"

Demons never worked for free. That wasn't an absolute rule; there were plenty of loopholes, but Ultima was feeling selfish. She wanted to annoy Damrada a little, so that's the approach she took. But the question still relieved Damrada. He felt a new peace, like his heart had been freed.

"Your reward... is all of me. I entrust you with my soul... and all of my skills, etched deep into my body..."

"Mmm, that'll work, I guess."

Ultima reluctantly agreed, making Damrada break out in a smile. And then:

"Your Majesty... I will come to you now..."

Those were Damrada's last words. He breathed his last and died, as if falling asleep. So the curtain finally came down on the long life of Damrada, Lord of the Fist, former prime minister of the Kingdom of Nasca, and close personal friend of its United Emperor, Ludora Nam-ul-Nasca.

Now Ultima stood alone in the battle arena of an alternate dimension.

"Well, *that's* no fun. His heart core disappeared on me. I was gonna offer it to Sir

Rimuru, too..."

Despite that saddened muttering, Ultima still gently wrapped Damrada's body in her twelve wings. As they agreed upon, she took all of him as her own—and that was the end of the battle between the two.

One Lord of the Fist ended his life, and a new Demon of the Fist was born.

Damrada, at the very end of his life, had given one of the worst demons in history one of the most dreadful powers known to mankind. If *he* knew about this, would it have filled him with shame? Or would he be happy to learn that his craft would be used by a third generation? Now that Damrada was gone, there was no way to know. It would be up to the survivors to carefully weigh the fallout.



"Well, I suppose I'll be dealing with you, then."

Agera made the announcement to Kondo, standing in the center of the arena.

Kondo's eyebrows twitched as he silently placed a hand on his sword. He didn't answer Agera, but instead glanced over at Carrera.

"Don't worry. I'll serve as an observer."

"Don't make me laugh. As if I could ever trust you."

Kondo finally opened his mouth, and his words were scathing. If they were both his enemy anyway, he was saying, they might as well both tackle him at the same time. But Carrera was unaffected.

"No, maybe not, I suppose. I don't see two-on-one as a coward move, and nobody's gonna go easy on you here. This time, though, it's what Agera wished for. So please, don't worry about me. Enjoy yourselves!"

Having had her say, she sat down atop the stone wall around the arena, like this was

no longer any of her business.

Kondo shrugged. "What a farce... But I respect your spirit, at least." Then he drew his military sword and faced up to Agera.

"My thanks. Now, let's get down to—"

Agera was interrupted by a hollow *bang*. He fell to the ground, clutching his chest.

"You!"

Carrera, closing the distance in an instant, flew in between the pair. Kondo's sword, which was even now about to descend upon Agera's head, was stopped by her blade.

"Hmm. You were fast enough at *this* speed?"

Kondo, the still-smoking Nambu semiautomatic handgun in his left hand and his military-issue sword in the right, looked straight at Carrera.

"You thought I would, wouldn't I? If you were serious about your business, Agera would've been destroyed. Am I wrong?"

Kondo had never explicitly stated that he would accept a match with Agera. It was Agera's fault for failing to confirm his intentions. Besides, he made far too feeble an effort to truly finish him off—something Carrera, who parried his blade, innately understood.

Someone as strong as Kondo would never have lost in a head-on battle against Agera. If it were fought with swords alone, maybe they could've had a lively, pitched battle—but even so, Kondo's victory was unassailable. But Kondo opted for a surprise attack instead, because he knew Carrera was waiting in the wings. It would be ridiculous to ever trust the words of a demon—and even more foolish to heed the words of a demon. That was the ironclad rule of warfare—eliminate all the uncertainties you can.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have all day, you know. I don't have to put up with your farcical nonsense."

Kondo sniffed at Carrera, as if this was all below his standards.

"Well, if you say so. But if you're interested, I could serve as your next opponent?"

"With that sword?"

Kondo pointed at Carrera's blade. It had been cracked by the blow, and Carrera herself knew a few more good blows would break it entirely.

"Oh, of course not. I can replace it, but I have something better than that. I think you know what I'm talking about, Agera?"

"...Of course. A pity that I could not cross swords with a practitioner from my own school... but this, too, is following my teachings. I have no reason to complain. But I cannot say I like how you disarmed me with such obvious disdain."

Agera stood up as he spoke. The hole in his chest was already closed. Kondo had shot him with an Eraser Bullet, which absorbs and eliminates the target's energy equivalent to the amount of magic force imbued in it. If it had been a Necrosis Bullet, Agera would have great difficulty standing up right now. As Carrera correctly guessed, and as Agera realized now, Kondo clearly didn't give him his best effort.

But it meant Agera could still fight.

"...Blade Transform."

He transformed into a sword—and needless to say, it was Carrera who took it up. Her magic force filled Agera, refilling his lost energy. The blade shone, indicating that Agera's spiritual force was back to full.

"A foolish move. I only let you off the hook because you lived by the sword, much as myself..."

"My kind love to fight, all right? The exact method is none of your business."

"I see. Well, it's not important now. That person committed the unforgivable sin of deceiving our school's founder... and I will do everything in my power to make you pay."

To Kondo, Carrera was just as guilty for holding Agera in her hands. The hostility was clear in his voice as he took his stance.

About an hour into the fight, Carrera was on her knees.

Kondo was strong, unbelievably so: truly a master. To Carrera, he was a monster beyond imagination. And she knew *she* was good—but she now understood that there was always someone better out there.

She might not have been able to defeat Diablo, but she knew that she'd never lose to anyone else. But Zegion had little trouble dispatching her, and during this war, she put up a pathetic performance against Velgrynd. So she wasn't surprised that Kondo was making quick work of her. In fact, she was thrilled by it.

Carrera rolled on the ground, putting some distance between herself and Kondo. Then she stood up, her sword pointed straight ahead.

“Not bad! Agera praised my sword skills a lot, but I sure can’t hold a candle to you.”

“Silence. That gets on my nerves, considering you’ve been fending me off by sheer force alone.”

Kondo, too, had an ominous feeling about Carrera’s fighting sense. Now was no time for pussyfooting around, so he had gone all out from the beginning—not just with his sword strikes, but with a generous amount of the ultimate skill Sandalphon, Lord of Judgment, sprinkled in. But he still couldn’t fully finish off Carrera—something he inwardly found both amazing and horrifying.

They had both recognized each other as worthy opponents by now, and from there, the battle raged even more fiercely. Carrera struck Kondo with a forceful blow, blocking his attempted slash. Kondo lightly parried the move, aiming at Carrera with the gun in his right hand. Loaded inside was a Dispel Bullet, built to disable the target’s magic, and what Carrera did next explained why Kondo felt the need to fire it.

Without a moment of spellcasting time, a gravitational force field was built around the arena. Kondo had chided Carrera as nothing but “brute strength” a moment ago, but instead of taking that to heart, she just tapped her strength even more. This invocation wouldn’t affect her at all, but it would do a great deal to slow Kondo’s movements... or so she hoped.

Anticipating this, Kondo chose to counteract it with a Dispel Bullet.

His strength lay very much in the versatility of his skills. The ultimate skill Sandalphon

had four effects in all, and he could tap into one or the other depending on what the times called for. The Removal Bullet broke down its target's defensive barriers; the Dispel Bullet blacked out magical effects; the Necrosis Bullet destroyed magic-based healing; and the Eraser Bullet was a highly precise magical strike, identifying the target's essence and consuming its energy from the inside. All of these abilities could also be placed together in a single, all-powerful shot—the Judgment Bullet.

Up to now, Carrera was still daring enough to cast magical attacks that required spellcasting time. That was in the past now, but even so, all of her spells were being canceled out the moment the magic invoked itself. Kondo had an accurate beat on her, and he wasn't making any mistaken choices. What's more, he could fire any kind of bullet he wanted whenever the opportunity came up. If she couldn't assess and deal with them, even a single one could be a painful blow to Carrera. One moment off her guard, and the duel would be over instantly.

Kondo was carefully analyzing this battle, not letting his emotions get the better of him. It was a mechanical approach, even—spot the enemy's weak points, figure out the flow of magical power, and take suitable countermeasures. That was all there was to it. But by sticking to the fundamentals, Kondo had reached his position as strongest in the imperial armies. That made him the exact opposite of the emotionally driven Carrera, but still, they were also similar in some ways.

"You're a pain in the ass," Carrera said, shaking her head before asking in a friendly manner, "How do you know when I'll cast magic?"

Kondo gathered his breath as he replied. "Heh... It's simple. I just thought about what I would do in your situation."

"Aha. A very simple explanation."

Once again, Carrera found herself liking Kondo. But at the same time, she grew increasingly aware that this was an adversary like none other.

He's reading the magic flow required to cast a spell, then cutting it off with complete precision. And that's how he phrases it? Come on.

"What I would do" sounded like such a trite excuse. But even as she bitterly mused over that, she couldn't hide the joy on her face. Having an opponent you could fight at full force against was sheer bliss. The demon lord Leon, for example, was a fighter

whose strengths even Guy attested to. She expected a satisfying fight against him, but he refused to take the bait on her provocation. It was tremendously frustrating and disappointing, but if she had Kondo now, she could enjoy herself to her heart's content. To her, after all, the process of the fight was far more important than the outcome.

"Well, good... Very good. Kondo was your name, right? You're the greatest enemy I could ever want!"

Kondo just sniffed away the praise, preferring to express his opinions with his sword instead of his tongue. He slashed at Carrera—and even this lefthanded, single-hand strike was true. A truly beautiful demonstration from a master swordsman, and Carrera had to rely on both Agera's skill and her own intuition to parry the barrage.

After a while of this, a certain habit of Kondo's began to dawn on Carrera. His left hand held the sword; the other, his gun. That was his fighting style, but when he fired his gun, his eyes and finger muscles would involuntarily move in tandem, revealing the bullet's trajectory. It was a tiny quirk, something only Carrera could have ever spotted, but the flaw was still fatal enough to potentially decide the fight.

Here!

With perfect timing, Carrera swung his sword away. Kondo, about to fire a gunshot, failed to immediately respond—and despite himself, he held out his gun to catch Carrera's sword. His reaction speed was up there with the best in the world, but it wasn't enough to stop her.

"Let's see you pick on me now! I've just taken away one of your weapons!"

Thanks to the twisted, off-balance stance he took to stop Carrera, he couldn't fully resist the demon's powerful strike. It wound up costing him his gun. The Nambu semiautomatic clattered to the ground.

Carrera was delighted to have this bit of revenge against Kondo. But then something gave her the creeps. As soon as she felt it, Carrera followed her instincts and jumped back from the spot.

Kondo's sword cleaved through the air.

"Tsk. Missed my chance."

The next thing that fell to the ground was Carrera's severed left arm. Not even her orichalc skeleton could resist the force behind Kondo's blade.

"Youuu!!"

Carrera was enraged. But her heart remained calm enough to recognize the reality of this situation, even though she was trembling in humiliation.

Now she knew that she'd never defeat Kondo like this. And as if to prove it, Kondo was now holding his military sword with both hands. It was a complete picture of beauty; he seemed like a completely different person from before. He had no intention of relying on his gun from the beginning, and now Carrera understood that he was trying to create an opening to lure her into all along.

Once again, Kondo had been looking down on her the entire time. He was at least an even match for her with his blade alone, but instead he was putting on this show the whole time to hide it...

He was hoping to take me down easy with that, I'm sure... but even a master like him's using dirty tricks instead of showing off his full talents? I find that hard to forgive.

It made Carrera let out a shout.

"How dare you damned human beings berate us!!"

In a fit of rage, Carrera took a step forward to tear Kondo to pieces. But at that moment:

(Lady Carrera, please wait.)

Agera, still transformed into a sword, spoke to her.

Carrera and Agera were now almost as one—connected by Thought Communication, of course, so it was possible for them to talk to each other through their minds. So, in a field of consciousness stretched a million times over by Carrera's ability, their conversation began.

(What is it, Agera? I'm busy right now, you know. Get in my way, and I'll kill you, too.)

(Calm down, Lady Carrera. Losing your cool is exactly what Kondo wants from you.)

(I know that. But he made me out to be a fool, you know. Me, an overlord! How could I ever forgive that?)

Agera's chief role lately had been to stop Carrera before she got carried away. But he had never seen her this angry before. He hadn't, but if he didn't take measures right now, Carrera's defeat was inevitable.

So, as earnestly as he could, he tried to persuade her.

(Listen to me. Kondo hadn't been relying on his sword since the beginning—and not because he thought little of you, either.)

(Why is that? He's clearly belittling me!)

(No, he is not. In fact, it is quite the opposite.)

(Huh?)

(He recognizes you as a threat, Lady Carrera, and that's why he is trying to conceal his hand. Not everyone is born innately strong like you, do you understand me? And it is a natural thing for any warrior to consider all due measures against a strong enemy!)

(So what're you saying? He recognizes me as a strong fighter, then?)

(Yes, exactly!)

Agera made the strongest argument he could. Kondo had fully mastered a complete style, making it his own, but he had still basically inherited Agera's style. He was serious about his craft, no doubt, but that was why he didn't break it out from the beginning, only choosing to do so now. The slight opening he revealed when firing his gun must have been caused by his nerve-wracking training; the only reason he went with that move now was that he decided Carrera was formidable enough to take the risk against. He never would've tried anything so tricky otherwise.

(...I see. You have a good point, yes.)

After careful persuasion, Carrera finally saw things Agera's way. He breathed a sigh of relief.

(I'm sorry to worry you, Agera. I feel like my eyes have been opened.)

(I am glad to hear that.)

(Here, let me promise you that I won't make you worry any longer. All right?)

With that declaration, Carrera turned toward Kondo again. Then, out of nowhere, she struck herself in the face with the back of her fist. It was a full-power blast, one that seemed to make her head explode—but, unperturbed, she flashed Kondo a smile.

"Oops! Did I startle you? Well, don't worry. I wasn't being very coolheaded about any of this. I mistakenly thought that you were looking down on me. But you humans really are amazing, aren't you? You really *will* play all kinds of tricks to win. The idea never occurred to us, so it's kind of surprising."

She was all smiles about it, but now she realized how important it was not to underestimate your enemy. She was by no means letting her guard down, but without Agera, she would've been taken in by Kondo's scheme just now. She used to allow herself to be endlessly selfish—but that past was over. She was now a loyal servant of the demon lord Rimuru, and so she acted in accordance with her orders. Defeat was one thing, but death would be unforgivable.

Carrera admonished herself. That's what that blow was for—that, and it was a way to state her resolve. Carrera recognized Kondo as an adversary, one of the same rank as her. It was a very sober thought, quite unlike her typical, capricious self.

"Like, no way, you know? No way I would ever go all-out... against a human, you know?"

Knowing she was the strongest of all races made her conceited enough that she never really gave her all before. She thought that Kondo was going easy on her, and it required Agera's intervention to put an end to that. It was a blunder, and now that she realized it, she finally got serious. She flashed her horrible smile, one that looked boundlessly beautiful to Kondo.

"So the demon's treating this seriously now? A rather unwelcome turn of events for a hapless human such as I."

For the first time in this encounter, his expression changed. He now saw Carrera as a worthy enemy.

“Very well. I, too, will take this seriously.”

With that declaration, Kondo put on his “armor” for the first time. It wasn’t a uniform manifested by the power of his will, but a spiritual outfit of pure white, a God-class piece given to him by Ludora. It was modeled after the ceremonial uniform of the old Imperial Japanese Navy, and while it didn’t make Kondo look all that different, the aura he presented seemed like something else entirely. To Kondo, this uniform was also the garment he would have been buried in; as a lieutenant, he vowed to carry the guilt of all the men he had let die. He wanted to hold that resolve close to his heart, and so he decided to fight in this.

Looking at him, Carrera released the full extent of her magical force and reintroduced herself.

“I am Carrera, Menace Lord and faithful servant of the demon lord Sir Rimuru. By my pride, I swear I will kill you.”

“I am Tatsuya Kondo, former lieutenant of the Imperial Japanese Navy and current commander of the Imperial Guardians... and I hereby accept your challenge.”

The two warriors stared each other down, quietly building up their power. Now the real battle would begin.

*

Carrera picked up the fallen left arm, lightly putting it against her stump. That alone was all it took to reattach it like nothing had happened.

“A little unfair.”

“Oh, don’t be that way. Sir Rimuru gave me this precious body. I can’t afford to leave even a scratch on it.”

The conversation was light at the moment, but both sides were looking for an opening. Kondo had his reasons for letting Carrera heal her arm. Now that he had given up his sidearm, he’d be fighting exclusively with his sword—the default form for the Oboro school. On the other hand, it meant he had no other secret trick left to pull out. He was deadly serious about this, putting everything he had on the line, and now that he held his sword in both hands, he was confident that no enemy could defeat him.

Kondo's unique skill Decipherer allowed him to fully grasp Carrera's movements—every twitch of her muscles, the flow of magic force throughout her body, even the telltale signs that a spell was about to be invoked. This was linked to the ultimate skill Sandalphon, and its performance went far beyond the realm of a unique skill. That was why he didn't miss the fact that Carrera's power was growing at an alarming rate.

It was a true torrent of force, all but symbolizing the demon's sheer tyranny. And yet there was no stagnation at all to the flow; it all moved as one, as if unified by some great will. This mighty deluge would normally have resulted in a powerful explosion, but Carrera had it fully under control. *What a monster*, Kondo thought. Not even a trace of the grievous arm wound he landed a moment ago remained—even her clothes were repaired, in what seemed to be a cruel joke. All this raging energy was concentrated on the demonic blade Agera had transformed into. Being united in mind and body with Carrera completed the cycle.

Kondo could barely abide by this, but now he noticed a sign that troubled him even more. Astoundingly, in the very center of Carrera's magic, a fearsome crystal of power was about to be born. Kondo had an idea of what it was. He himself had one, so he knew—it was something seen when a living mind was materialized.

She... Ahhh, I knew it. She's trying to obtain an ultimate skill!

The moment he realized it, Kondo went on the move. He needed to eliminate this enemy at once, no matter how powerful she was. That was why he put on his ceremonial uniform, a symbol of his dedication. There was no room for defeat—he must win, by fair means or foul, and only through victory would right and wrong be decided.

Kondo continued to inspect Carrera as he finished his preparations. His sword was all he had left; pushing all his power into it, he slashed at the demon.

“Good, good! That unwavering eye of yours... It sends me into ecstasy!”

Kondo continued to swing, not lending an ear to Carrera's squeals of joy. His swings were parried by her demon blade, but the power of Kondo's military sword was nonetheless massive—without Agera's will housed within, it might have broken her weapon right there.

“You...?!”

It was a honed, heavy slash, one that made Carrera grunt out loud.

The secret to this military sword's force lay in the will placed inside of it. Kondo's ultimate skill Sandalphon worked on more than just bullets. His will—his soul—was in this sword, and only then was the true essence of his power revealed. That was Kondo's true secret move... and when he had to fight for keeps, that's how he did it.

So Kondo's onslaught began, immediately putting Carrera on the defensive. He was determined to end this bout before Carrera could awaken to her ultimate power, using every trick in the book to push her into the corner. Even when she manipulated her sheer violence to fire off an attack of ponderous force, Kondo deflected it all without so much as blinking. Kondo clearly had the advantage in fighting technique; the only reason why this match kept going was because of Carrera's huge magic count, not to mention the skills of Agera on top of that. Without both, Carrera would have been annihilated long ago.

Even now, a slash imbued with the power of an Eraser Bullet cut through Carrera's left side. She had taken many of these slashes to her limbs already, but since they had a Necrosis effect applied to them, they were wreaking havoc on her magic vessels. Even her link with Agera was now being affected.

"You..."

Carrera bared her teeth as she stared at Kondo. It was a bad idea. However strong he was, she thought she could handle him if she put her mind to it—but Kondo wouldn't be that easy on her. Even with Agera's aid, he was superhuman, more than enough so to outclass Carrera.

This human... This damned human! Awakened to Saint or not, how can a mere human corner me like this...?

Despite her disappointment in herself, Carrera put her right hand on her left side, which was cut open and leaking magic force. She tried to heal it, but her magic vessels were too out of control for it to work well. Normally, a wound of this level could be repaired without conscious effort—but even when she actively tried to heal, it was still like this. No matter how bold and careless Carrera could be, she was fully aware that this was an awful state of affairs.

As Kondo knew, the strength of one's will can also affect how superior their power is. Kondo was a man who had attained an ultimate power entirely on his own. Compared to Carrera, who had an unlimited lifespan and lived her days however she wanted, the nobility of his character was without question.

With the pain that was torturing her even now, Carrera understood the difference. A skill is meaningless if it is just given to you; only when you wish to acquire it can you make the most of its essence. Carrera was superior to Agera in all respects—species, physical prowess, vitality, everything. Thanks to Agera's aid, she was equal with her opponent... but she couldn't win. In fact, they were on the verge of defeat.

If this keeps up, will we lose? Will I be destroyed... killed? Me, one of the overlords of the all-powerful demons...?!

It was absolutely unacceptable. Carrera's pride would never allow it, and more than anything else, it'd be against the orders of Rimuru, her beloved demon lord. If it ever happened, she feared, it'd be such a blunder that he might kill her a million times and still not feel sated. She might have been fearless in all other ways, but not being able to follow Rimuru's orders terrified her.

"I could never allow it!"

As soon as she shouted that, Carrera's bloodshot eyes ogled Kondo. Forcefully regenerating her body to heal the wound, she readied herself. Deeper and stronger than ever, she made a wish—a wish to beat the man before her.

Until now, she had only been fighting with her all-dominant demon force. But it wasn't enough. Those who dwelt in the ranks of the ultimate were untouchable to her—as true for Diablo as it was for Kondo. She knew now that anyone who awakened an ultimate power was impossible for her to defeat—and if they were, she was no match at all for Guy Crimson, who stood at the very pinnacle of the world. Simply boosting her power wasn't enough. No matter how hard she struggled, she'd only be cannon fodder for the more powerful.

Now that she was fully cornered, it finally dawned on Carrera. If she wanted to fight the *truly* powerful, she needed to understand herself more deeply—and what she needed the most for that was a strong will. And that was the moment when Carrera, a spiritual life-form, sought the power of will, the very essence of it all.

In that case, let me help you a little.

She thought she heard a voice—and the next moment, Carrera felt something that had been nagging her in the back of her mind take shape. She turned her attention to it—this manifestation of her wish, her determination. Until now, it was just pure power raging inside of her, something she controlled and tapped into as necessary. Now, however, it was time to recognize that power as her own... and release it.

But any ultimate power needs a name.

...My power... Let me give you a name. You will become my skill, and further release your force in order to fulfill the role Sir Rimuru gave me. Your name... is the ultimate skill Abaddon, Lord of Destruction!

Abaddon. The destroyer, the one who destroys—and the king of the abyss. For the Menace Lord, no power could have been more appropriate. Now she finally had it. The absolute, undeniable power to destroy everything.

The ultimate skill Abaddon, Lord of Destruction.

It was the embodiment of all Carrera's desires. A fearsome power that, once released, would bring certain destruction to its opponents. It took encountering a truly powerful enemy for Carrera to desire power for the first time—and now, that encounter was about to come to an end.

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This isn't funny, Kondo thought.

Just when he was about to finish her off, Carrera had awakened to her ultimate power right before his eyes. He wished he could tell her to stop with that nonsense, but it was too late now.

He had tried to deliver a fatal blow to her on several occasions, but no matter how many times Carrera fell, she kept getting back up. He used a Removal Bullet to slash through her barriers, then a Necrosis Bullet to disrupt the magical flow within her. Then, once she had accumulated enough damage, the power of the Eraser Bullet ability took center stage.

This should have been settled long ago. And yet, despite all his earnestness, Kondo

was unable to defeat Carrera—and now her power was awakened. It was, as he was keenly aware, a terrible mistake.

Well, wonderful. If only I had any Judgment Bullets left...

Perhaps it was Kondo's nascent timidity that made the thought come to his mind. A Judgment Bullet was a true joker card, something he could only produce once per day, the strongest blow he could muster. But he had used one not that long ago to bring Veldora to his knees. Begging for something he didn't have in a life-or-death battle was the height of foolishness, something very unlike Kondo. Here she was, this formidable foe before her who had just gained an unknown power. The mere thought put him in a somber mood.

But he could still rally himself. Now that he had his ceremonial uniform on, it was his duty to fight through the battle, never wavering in his resolve. But as he took up that duty, he spoke to Carrera, revealing his personal feelings for the first time.

“You are all so unfair.”

She laughed at mankind as feeble, and rightly so. In terms of species, the difference in “status” was like a chasm, impossible to fill. Even Kondo felt justified in complaining about it a bit.

Carrera gave this a satisfied nod. “Yes, of course it is. We are the strongest species, after all. But I think *you’re* being rather unfair, too, aren’t you?”

It was the greatest compliment Carrera could give, in her own way. She had already recognized him as her equal, and thus, with the utmost respect, she was ready to challenge him full bore.

Pointing her sword at him, she assumed a fighting stance, making sure her guard was up. Abaddon, Lord of Destruction, activated itself in both of her hands, a massive force circulating through them. The space between her and Kondo was filled with black and white light as a huge amount of magicules transformed into energy, the shock waves alone threatening to blow them away. Carrera could control it all through conscious focus alone.

“Allow me to show you everything.”

“...I’d appreciate it if you didn’t.”

"Hee-hee! Don't be such a stick in the mud. I have recognized you as my equal, and I will show you the best magic I've got!"

Kondo had a bad feeling about this.

"..."

But Carrera was a demon who cared very little about the feelings of other people. That gave the demon lord Leon a hard time as well, although Carrera was just playing around at the time. It was a nasty thing to think, but from Kondo's point of view, Leon had it easy. He didn't have to deal with Carrera when she was truly serious, but Kondo did.

Among the four Devil Lords (including Diablo), Carrera now boasted the largest magicule count. She hadn't been able to fully control it before, but with Abaddon, that shortcoming was a thing of the past. The current Carrera, in fact, could manipulate magic to an extent that rivaled Velgrynd.

"Let me grant you perdition. Vanish before me! Abyss Annihilation!!"

This was an ultimate magic, surpassing even Gravity Collapse—the greatest and most powerful attack magic—and Carrera's ideals in action. It worked by adding matter from the lowest of hellish abysses into a collapsed gravitational force field, generating an unfathomable torrent of extreme energy. It was, needless to say, extremely difficult to even point this energy at something, much less control it.

It wasn't even meant to be invoked while standing on a planetary surface, but Carrera didn't hesitate to whip it out. One mistake controlling it could wipe out an entire planet, in fact. She had never successfully pulled it off during her practice sessions in the underworld, and this was the first time she ever tried it in the material world. It had never worked before, but she still didn't hesitate.

If the other demonesses were here, they would've stopped her at any cost—but Carrera wasn't about to be held down now. Agera was there, but telling Carrera to quit now would have been far too much to ask. If anything, the most frightened person in the arena was Agera, not Kondo, because he knew exactly how dangerous this magic was.

Kondo, meanwhile, detected the danger once Carrera began to invoke the skill, deploying Sandalphon before she made her final declaration. That quick assessment

was Kondo's forte, but this time, he had messed with the wrong opponent. Abyss Annihilation was an extremely large spell, one that could only work using Carrera's absurd magic force, and its range was just as gigantic. If this weren't another dimension, there was no telling how much damage it would cause. Kondo wondered if it could even destroy this entire dimension. If so—and if it was aimed at him, like it was now—anything in the line of fire would be obliterated.

That was Kondo's conclusion. And if this dimension was destroyed, it could even harm Emperor Ludora. His defenses were sound enough, yes, but this was an unprecedented attack.

And that wasn't all. Now Kondo became aware of an even more troubling fact. Looking at Carrera's posture, even *this* vicious magic was just a decoy. Should he somehow survive this, he would likely then be struck by her *real* ace in the hole—a downward slash from her demon blade. If so, there was no way to counter it. The only way to survive was to brave every sacrifice and out-slash the enemy.

So Kondo made up his mind. Sheathing his beloved sword, he waited for the moment to come. Then, as soon as Carrera activated her magic, he made his move.

Risking it all, he drew his sword.

"Multilayered... Blossom Flash..."

And then, right there, he reproduced the technique that Hakuro had shown him. The power imbued into it was that of a Judgment Bullet, one he was only allowed to use once per day—but he had to exceed the limit here, or else only destruction awaited. So he gambled on his own potential, firmly believing he could do it.

The power of the soul shone brightly in the arena. Did it belong to Kondo, or to Carrera? That would remain forever unknown, but one thing was clear—both sides were giving everything they had.

Kondo's blade slashed through the torrent of frantic energy generated by Abyss Annihilation. It made Carrera's eyes widen, but there was a smile on her lips. Intense pain racked his body. Even this God-class ceremonial robe, the best protection he could hope for, was unable to resist the power of destruction.

But he didn't let this intimidate him. His faith unwavering, he aimed at Carrera's head and unleashed the "eight blossom" slashes that gave Hakuro's move its name.

Carrera went above him.

"Nice try. Now let me show you my greatest technique, for I have made Agera's experience my own!"

It was both spoken and not spoken. In a single moment of time, Carrera had communicated her will to Kondo, in the form of a hundred sword flashes, all transcending his speed. This was the move Crestwater Hundred Flower Bloom, and its unbearable violence promptly shattered Kondo's sword—and immediately after, Carrera's final blow made a diagonal slash across his body.

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Kondo could feel the strength draining from his entire body. He had exceeded his limits long ago, and knowing this, he closed his eyes and fell on his back. The end of his life was near.

How incomplete...

He laughed at himself as he thought this. In the end, he could do nothing—neither protect his nation nor keep his promise to Ludora.

Be my friend, Tatsuya.

Ah, I... I couldn't even keep my promise to you.

Kondo's heart was filled with regret, the thought of the unfulfilled promise making him feel ready to burst.

"Tatsuya, may I ask you a favor?"

"Yes. Anything. I will do whatever I can to help as a friend."

Right. I wanted to return the favor. I wanted to thank Ludora for calling me a friend—for giving me a reason to live in this world. But even so, that wish was such a cruel one...

"Long ago, I asked Damrada for a favor. I told him that should I ever lose sight of my ideals, I wanted him, my friend, to stop me. But I have now lived far too long, and Damrada is too kind a person to take my life with his own hands. I truly regret asking him for such a terrible favor."

"So..."

"Tatsuya... I know you will be able to reason through it calmly. You will be able to kill me, won't you? So please—you must interfere with Damrada's efforts, and stop me with your own hands."

He didn't want to. He wanted Ludora to live as much as anyone. He was an intelligent man, reasonable and always keeping his eyes on the prize. He was like an idol to Kondo, a lord he could always strive to emulate but never equal. He was the one who stopped Kondo before he could turn the blade upon himself, despondent after failing to protect his home country. Emperor Ludora, the great hero.

But he still nodded, for he knew of Ludora's suffering. His body—his shining soul—had long since reached its limit. He had reincarnated himself many, many times in his quest to control his special skill Michael, Lord of Justice. Thanks to Decipherer, his own unique skill, Kondo felt he understood that better than anyone else—even more than Velgrynd, in all likelihood. Velgrynd had grown blinded by her love for Ludora, so much so that if she knew the favors he asked Damrada and Kondo for, she'd likely be furious.

In a sense, it was only natural that Ludora would ask this favor of Kondo. He had nodded at his emperor, and so he had to keep the promise. That's what making a promise meant, after all. But that time was far away. Ludora was still alive and well, in full control of his faculties.

...Or was that really the case? Looking back, there were a few irregularities he could've picked up on—the cold eyes he'd reveal at times, the occasionally heartless decisions he'd hand down. That was the only Ludora Kondo knew, but he could understand how

it must have tormented Damrada. If Ludora was alive, he thought, why should Damrada be so distressed about it? Looking back, it was a pretty silly thought to have.

When did it begin?

When did Damrada begin to make serious moves toward this effort?

Did I overlook something important, perhaps?

He had interfered with Damrada as ordered, but perhaps that was a serious mistake. When they first met, Ludora was absolutely a shining presence—but Kondo had missed his transformation.

As soon as Kondo realized this, he felt the gloom in his heart clear out, as if the shackles had finally been undone.

Yes... I suppose I was long ago under Michael's influence as well...

How pathetic, he thought. And it was. Right when Damrada was about to murder Ludora, he should have acted first instead of interfering. Perhaps he would have been able to stop Ludora then.

What a mistake...

There was no taking that back now.

Kondo didn't know why he had been freed from Michael's control—but at this point, he could no longer move a finger. All that remained was to wait for his body to rot away.

My liege, I am useless. I couldn't bear your suffering alongside you... nor could I do anything to alleviate it. And even that promise to free you...

His role was to stop Ludora, but there was no carrying that out now. His life would surely end in regret...

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"Hey, why're you sleeping down there? Let's keep going!"

He heard a voice speaking to him, rousing him from his sleep. Opening his eyes a little, he saw his enemy, the one who fought him to the death, pouting and looking straight at him. She was a demon with shining blond hair and a dazzling smile—truly beautiful.

...Don't be ridiculous. I am already near death. There is no way I could fight.

"Huh? But we haven't settled this yet. You can't do that!"

Heh... heh-heh... Settle this? Yes... indeed. In the end... You are so unfair...

He doubted it was coming across, but Kondo still smiled faintly at Carrera's words. Carrera herself would already be out of energy, just a few steps away from losing her physical body—and the thought made him smile.

He tried to lift his body up and failed. It was so shameful.

So I can't do anything after all...

And meanwhile, the demon before him was so free, so pure...

I truly do envy you.

It was an honest, sincere thought. It drove Kondo to say things he didn't even understand the meaning of.

"I... I have a favor. Use my—my gun, to kill His Majesty..."

He was about to entrust his one and only role to his mortal enemy.

What am I doing? What a stupid thing to ask the demon I was just fighting against...

The wishes of the defeated were doomed to always be laughed at. He truly thought so, but for some reason, he still said it.

So Carrera picked up the Nambu semiautomatic on the ground.

"You mean this? It's broken."

Ah, yes, it probably is, Kondo thought as his consciousness faded. Perhaps asking for this wish was a little naïve of him. No demon would be that kind to him. That's the harsh reality of it, and Kondo knew it well.

He was fading fast. He had become a Saint, but he was still a human being. If his soul was broken, revival would be impossible. Carrera's blow had inflicted a fatal wound on him, and he could tell he was disintegrating from the far edges inward. By now, reversal was impossible.

"Pfft! So you're going to give up just because you broke your toy here? After all the suffering you put me through, that's pretty weak. It was such a nice battle, too! What a disappointment."

Carrera, his former enemy, was giving him encouragement. He didn't expect that. So, with his last ounce of energy, he smiled bitterly.

"Heh... heh-heh... Yes. Hilarious. My own worthlessness is but a joke..."

With that, he tried to let go of his consciousness. But:

"Wait. Don't go on me yet. Maybe I'm willing to kill this emperor for you, huh?"

...?

"Ugh! You're so slow on the uptake! What do I get out of it? Everybody knows that if you want a demon to work for you, you need an agreement!"

Carrera, by her nature, was not at all the type of demon you could negotiate with. But, for some reason, she felt like doing Kondo a favor. That didn't mean she'd do it for free, though.

Kondo couldn't help but smile at the flustered Carrera. It was growing more amusing by the moment. This devil, his enemy, acting all shy and confused. It was soothing.

You will get everything I have... even my soul. So please...

The words were no longer audible. Kondo opened his eyes with the last of his strength and gave Carrera an iron-willed look. Believing in a demon was beyond laughable—

but, her beauty burned into his mind, he made a wish. Perhaps it was his own selfish delusions telling him that she'd get the message. But even so, he placed his final hopes on it, if only to save himself from eternal disappointment.

But the voiceless request reached Carrera.

"Your wish has been heard. By my name as Carrera the Menace Lord, our contract is complete! Your wish shall be granted."

Kondo smiled at these solemn words. Moving his powerless hand toward Carrera by sheer force of will, his fingertips touched the gun that she had assured him was broken. The moment his finger touched it, the Nambu semiautomatic glowed a golden shade. His power had transformed it, and it was reborn as a God-class weapon—and through it, Kondo's soul passed over to Carrera.

But it did not include his heart core. Carrera expected this. The heart core of someone who had attained enlightenment and absolved himself of all sin could never be reborn, even if bound down. It was released from the wheel of reincarnation for good, with no restrictions placed upon it, and then it would travel to the promised land. Liberation.

It made Carrera a little sad.

"Pfft. This isn't funny. It's been a long time since I had an opponent with some actual backbone..."

And as she muttered that:

In that case, let's merge the ultimate skill Abaddon, Lord of Destruction, with Sandalphon, Lord of Judgment.

She felt like she heard a voice. Hurriedly, Carrera turned her attention back to the gun in her hand.

Its golden glow seemed to brighten further, as if to tell her she'd no longer be alone. It was something to remember Kondo by... and now, it was Carrera's new partner.

"Oh... So you're with me now."

When she spoke, the light from the gun seemed to blink for a moment—and as it did, she began to feel the power flowing into her.



The way you use your power is far too careless. I will help you, so you must make sure to use me better than that.

It sounded like Kondo's voice to her—and the next moment, she understood everything. In an instant, she had made Kondo's ability her own.

"How is *that* any of your business? Stop treating me like a child."

Arrogant to the end, Carrera thought. But at least she didn't feel lonely any longer. She stood up.

"Congratulations on your splendid victory. I, Agera, am thoroughly impressed."

"You too. Good job surviving that and all."

"Heh-heh... It's very embarrassing to receive praise from you, you know."

Agera, despite being wounded up and down his body, was still smiling. He had taken the brunt of Kondo's sword skills, all while taking in the full fury of Carrera's magic. It had brought him almost to the breaking point, but now that he was no longer in sword form, that all fed back to him in the form of serious injury. It was a wonder that he was still manifesting himself here—but still, he looked tremendously satisfied with himself.

"This man Kondo... He was a descendant of one of your trainees, wasn't he?"

"It would appear so."

"Guess I shouldn't treat all humans like idiots, given the way they can inherit and accumulate skills and everything."

Agera happily nodded.

"But seeing how much stronger he was than *you* was a surprise."

The smile disappeared.

"He was... but only because he was a truly exceptional man. If we had fought with swords alone, I am positive I would have won."

"Yeah, right."

They shared a loud laugh. If they were alike in any way, it was that they were both sore losers.

But beyond the eyes of the laughing Carrera was a rift in this dimension, which was already collapsing. Through it, she could see Emperor Ludora sitting on his throne.

"Let's go. This fight's just getting started."

Carrera strode on, her usual bold smile now front and center on her face once more.

"Of course. I will be glad to join you... and we shall strike terror in the hearts of those who dare to stand in our way!"

Agera followed, wounded almost to the point of death but totally unconcerned about it. The enemy was still out there—and the most important thing now was the promise they must fulfill.



Granit, the third-ranked member of the Single Digits, was a Hero who supported the Empire from time immemorial. He helped lay the foundation of the Empire, playing an instrumental role in the thousand years of peace it enjoyed. Glorified as a god of war by its subjects, he was a great man, one chronicled in history books. Although he had disappeared from the public eye in the years since, he was still alive and well, serving as the emperor's close confidant and captain of the four knights who guarded him.

A skilled warrior versed in all manner of weapons and fighting techniques, his physique was magnificent. Despite being over two thousand years old, his black hair, slicked back and kept short, gave him an eternally youthful impression.

He was now facing off against Benimaru, the Flare Lord.

Both men squared off against each other in the center of the arena.

"I am Granit, guardian of the Empire."

“Benimaru. Consider me the second-in-command of the demon lord Rimuru.”

And after those introductions, all that remained was to fight. That was Benimaru’s thought, but Granit just smiled at him.

“Now wait one moment. Are you willing to hear me out?”

“That depends on what it is.”

“It’s simple. We’ve been doing some research on you, you see. I’ve been told that you’re a very, very strong man.”

“I’m flattered.”

“Hee-hee-hee... I wasn’t trying to flatter you. I’ve slaughtered many powerful people, so I have a good eye for these things. In my opinion, you have fully passed the test. Not even your garden-variety demon lord could give you much trouble.”

“What are you getting at?”

At this point, Benimaru was starting to get irritated. He didn’t mind negotiation, but now that the battle had grown this heated, there was no time for casual conversation. If he was going to surrender, that was a different story—but the way Granit looked, that wasn’t the case. If anything, he seemed to be steering this talk toward demanding Benimaru’s surrender.

That prediction was right on the money.

“I didn’t expect you to be this strong, you see. It’s quite a surprise—and I have to say, Kondo disappointed me. Thanks to the negligence of his Imperial Intelligence Bureau, the entire Empire is exposed to danger. If the damage is worse than expected, it will be too late to stage a final battle. Personally, I think it’s time to call it a day. Will you swear to join my side and serve under me? If you do, I promise I will take full responsibility for both you and all who serve you.”

It was a very convenient offer for Granit. Here he was, facing sure defeat, and instead he was offering a cease-fire with zero consequences for himself. From a third-party view, that’s all it would have looked like.

But it wasn’t that—for Granit didn’t think he could lose. He was only trying to bring

Benimaru and the others to shore up the significant loss of strength the Empire faced. And Benimaru, seeing through this, was now feeling extraordinarily annoyed.

This fool... Trying to use us as his pawns? But he does seem to have the power to back up that confidence...

Benimaru calmly assessed Granit. The fact that he was making this suggestion here, in the alternate dimension, indicated that he knew what was going on in the other Gates. He was more than a guard—likely more of an officer type with a tactical view over the entire battle.

“Putting my army aside for a moment, what would you do with Sir Rimuru?”

“I am sorry to say that the demon lord is dangerous. In order to confirm your allegiance to me, I’d need to ask your help defeating him.”

That was about what Benimaru figured. This was the offer he made, but what he *really* wanted was for the monsters to slaughter each other. And yes, maybe Granit would take Benimaru in if he survived, but he wasn’t stupid enough to trust such an uncertain story as that. Besides, betraying Rimuru was too outrageous an idea to even suggest.

“How ridiculous. We would never stab Sir Rimuru in the back.”

Benimaru was listening to all of this in order to stall for time. He had, in fact, heard a little voice in his mind a bit earlier—a vaguely familiar, comforting one—and it had a suggestion for him.

Benimaru, may I make a slight modification to the type of power you crave?

It was a pretty shady thing to ask, and normally Benimaru would have never given it the nod. But for some reason, he agreed to it.

He had evolved into a Flamesoul Ogre, a spiritual life-form, but he wasn’t satisfied with just that. He had been lent an ultimate skill from Rimuru, and based on that experience, he wanted to acquire one by his own hand.

And he was actually halfway there already. Watching the battle between Rimuru and Velgrynd, as well as the struggles of his other companions, Benimaru had become enlightened. His power of fire, his main specialty, was now integrated with his unique skill Born Leader. He couldn’t reproduce Rimuru’s Absolute Severance ability, but his

beloved sword Guren had been reforged by Kurobe to attain God-class. When Dark Flame was added to it, the difference in performance was such that he'd never lose with it.

Between his unique talents as a Flamesoul Ogre and the skill Born Leader that united them all, he was on the verge of reaching his ultimate peak. That's when the voice came in.

So he decided to wait and see what kind of changes his approval brought about. That was why he agreed to talk with Granit, but when he asked him to betray Rimuru, Benimaru began to regret it deeply. The mere suggestion was offensive to him.

Having had more than enough of this, he drew his sword and pointed it toward Granit.

"Whoa, whoa, it's not good to have a short fuse like that. Monsters are all about survival of the fittest, aren't they? Aren't you supposed to serve and follow the strong? And don't monsters switch masters all the time?"

Hearing this from Granit almost made Benimaru's blood boil. He was the commander-in-chief of the monster forces, and he thought he had a good grip on his anger by now, but...

Heh-heh... Guess I can't laugh at Shion any longer.

He mocked himself for it, but now he had no intention of holding back his anger.

"Draw your blade. There is no meaning to further conversation."

"Oh brother," Granit said, shaking his head. "I don't understand. This is both an extension of mercy and the greatest concession you could ever receive from me. Out of great respect for your position, I was allowing you to serve under me without anyone having to be hurt..."

He sounded truly mystified over it. He certainly didn't doubt his own strength; he was saying all this because he truly believed he could overwhelm his foe. And Benimaru, fully aware of this, grew more incensed by the moment. The only reason he hadn't started slashing away yet was because he wanted to make Granit truly regret his words.

"So are you keeping this chat going because you want to make excuses about your

defeat?"

"Ha-ha-ha! What a thing to say. I like your spirit, but you should really know your place here. Yes, my men were perhaps too proud for their own good—and all of them are now defeated. It would shame me to even show my face to His Majesty right now, but if you would only nod your head at me, we'd have more strength than ever before. *I'd* be happy, and even better, *you* wouldn't have to die. We can build a good relationship that way, can't you see? And now that I've given you my offer, do you understand what's at stake here? I'm not at all the sort to use you and your people as discardable pawns, you see."

Despite how obvious Benimaru's annoyance was by now, Granit just kept pressing on. And even worse, he was unmistakably sincere in his words. He had the air of a hero, certainly, and his demeanor spoke volumes about his honest, guileless approach.

"If you, too, are a commander, think about it. Think of all the soldiers and officers you could save with a single decision. And let me also tell you the cold, hard truth: Damrada and Kondo truly are strong. I have been friends with Damrada for many years, and I know his character well. I'm stronger, of course, but not even a Primal could defeat the likes of him. And look at Kondo! A relative newcomer, but every bit as strong as we are. His Majesty placed him under his control because he's *too* dangerous, really, but there's no way a Primal could beat him either. What I'm saying here is that if you seek to confront His Majesty, you will have to face *four* invincible guardians first, including myself and Velgrynd. And you can understand how impossible that is, don't you?"

This guy's got a pretty loose tongue, Benimaru thought. That defused his anger a little, so he decided to see what else he could milk him for. There were a few words here and there that enraged him, but if Granit could reveal more of the Empire's inner workings to him, he wouldn't mind putting up with it. One interesting tidbit in particular was how the emperor had Kondo "under his control"—it seemed clear now that Ludora had some kind of domination skill.

"Of all the irresponsible things to say to me. It's a little surprising to hear you decide for us that we can't win. Besides, even if I said yes, I have no interest in having our hearts and minds all be controlled by you."

"Ha-ha-ha! Have I piqued your interest? Well, I'm sure I have. I understand that you ogres have long served as talented mercenaries, so I assumed you might be interested

in joining me under the right conditions. And fear not—as you said, His Majesty can indeed control people's minds. But there's hardly any point worrying about it, is there?"

"..."

"Hmm... Unconvinced? Well, you may be entitled to, but it's something of a thorny issue, you know? If you are ruled over, after all, you should be proud of it. If you weren't competent enough for that honor, after all, we'd just be ignoring you anyway. Kondo is ruled over in the same way, too, although he's not aware of it. I'm the only one who knows about it all. Can't help but feel a little sorry for him sometimes."

"This is going nowhere."

It really was out of the question. He could understand Granit's logic, faulty as it was. If you were being mind-controlled but never realized it, there was nothing to be unhappy about, was the idea. It was valid, yes, but not exactly a convincing argument.

"You don't think? But it's really true—you have nothing to worry about. I was taking an alternate angle to this because I thought you wouldn't believe me otherwise, but I can assure you that *you* and your companions will *never* be ruled over in that fashion."

"Why not?"

"Because you are weak."

"Uh-huh..."

This reignited Benimaru's anger. Granit's speech was perfectly natural; he didn't suggest for a moment that he was bluffing—or, for that matter, meaning to insult him. He was just breezily declaring that Benimaru and his team were weak—a natural fact in his mind. Benimaru, fully aware that he had evolved into something stronger, never expected this sort of disrespect.

"Well, hear me out. What I mean is that as enemies of ours, you're on the strong side, certainly—but if you join us, you wouldn't be worth having your minds dominated. It looks like both Kondo and Yuuki are under His Majesty's control now, but now he's taken over the mind of Sir Veldora as well. I doubt he has enough remaining force to add all of you to the list, so if you swear loyalty to him, I'm sure he'll allow you to move freely. After all, even if all of you challenged me at once, you still wouldn't be able to

beat me.”

“You certainly aren’t lacking in confidence. But I’m just as confident in my own strength, you know. And I’m getting kind of sick of hearing all your nonsense, so how about we see which side is correct via actions, not words?”

Benimaru readjusted the sword on his shoulder. He thought he could get some more useful information, but concluded that any more of this would just make him more agitated.

Granit gave this a displeased sigh. “You monsters are so hard to deal with, you know? I’m extending a hand to you, and you’re just pushing it away. It’s sad that you can’t see the reality of this... but oh, well. I’ll give on trying to win you over, then. Perhaps I could negotiate with whoever just defeated Minaza.”

Benimaru snickered. “Better not. Shion’s more hardheaded than I am.”

This made Granit’s countenance grow stern for the first time in this whole encounter. “Oh...? I don’t believe I mentioned Minaza to you. Do you know who she is?”

“Well, intelligence gathering is a key part of any war zone, isn’t it? Sir Rimuru taught me to be thorough about that sort of thing.”

“Hmm... Interesting. But how did you get that information inside Lady Velgrynd’s dimension here? It really would be a shame to kill a man of your stature...”

Saying this, Granit finally drew his sword. He had a skilled hand for any weapon, but always felt better with a familiar sword in his hand. The moment he held it up to Benimaru, his mood changed completely. His previously calm demeanor vanished entirely, and he radiated an air of supremacy that’d give even a god-ogre a run for their money. His short hair stood up on end, as if personifying the expression “hair-raising havoc.”

“‘Ask not the sparrow how the eagle soars’—an expression from an old history book from another world, if I recall correctly. It means that the little people cannot understand the thoughts of the greats—and that describes you to a tee. You should have obeyed me while I was being gentler in my advice.”

“You’re still lecturing me? Because I’ve had quite enough of it.”

“Hmph! Then die! Army Destroyer: Quaking Blast!!”

From the very first move, Granit was unleashing his maximum power, fully convinced that would be the end of it.

He was gifted in enemy analysis, capable of discerning the combat ability of his opponents via Read Enemy Status—a skill granted to him by Ludora via Alternate. That gave him a correct grasp of the power of Benimaru and his team, and that was why he was convinced there was no way he could be defeated. Read Enemy Status wasn’t foolproof, of course; if the target had awakened to an ultimate skill, it’d be impossible to gauge their full power. Still, it was easy enough to guess the level of power involved simply by gauging magicule counts... and in that respect, Benimaru didn’t look like a threat. Neither, for that matter, did Soei, Shion, or the demons.

It was clear to Granit that not one of them could have acquired an ultimate skill. The Primals were a thorn in their side—negotiating with *them* was a fool’s errand. He planned to do away with the demons if they had come through this Gate, but instead he got Benimaru. In this, Granit saw great promise—an enterprising monster on the verge of discovering his ultimate skill. But as he stood, he was no match for himself. He had a huge amount of magicules, but still less than half of Granit’s. In that way, it was natural for him to decide Benimaru was no threat.

And Granit wasn’t being conceited or careless at all. If the enemy held an ultimate skill, that might give him a hard time, depending on the nature of it. An extended fight could lead to his enemy feeling like his life was in danger, which could trigger an awakening. But a mere conversation wasn’t going to do that.

So Granit was determined to finish Benimaru off with such overwhelming force that he wouldn’t be able to counter with anything. He knew Benimaru didn’t have any hidden transformation skill like the lycanthropes—and now that he did, there was absolutely no chance of losing. Granit’s victory was a certainty...

“What a travesty. After all that bravado, you’re not showing me much.”

“Wh-what?!”

Then something truly unexpected happened. Army Destroyer: Quaking Blast, a move that contained enough energy to vaporize Benimaru, was harmlessly parried off by his sword. It was a truly unbelievable sight to behold. All of Granit’s equipment was

God-class, from head to toe. Benimaru clearly wielded a good sword, but it couldn't have held up to God-class gear.

And more to the point:

"No! No, no, no! This is unreal! Why... Why have you obtained an ultimate skill?!"

Granit's shouting was understandable. The idea of someone obtaining an ultimate skill without showing even the tiniest sign in advance was sheer lunacy. It threw him into a panic, even though Benimaru remained cool.

"Why are you so amazed? Aren't all of us constantly growing in life?"

He tried to sound all cool about it, but on the inside, he was sweating it badly. He had, in fact, obtained this power at the exact moment he stepped up to stop Granit's blade. And right when he did, he got a glimpse of his full power. If his timing was even a little off just now, Benimaru would have taken terrible damage. He could have died, even. It was certainly nothing to laugh about.

That was a close call. I didn't think he was hiding his full abilities that much... but without this power, I would have lost, huh?

Good thing, he now thought, that he put up with that story for so long.

"Right. Now it's my turn."

Mentally shifting gears, Benimaru focused on his enemy. He was glad to survive that in the end, but he could reflect on that later.

The power he had just acquired was exactly the ideal he had envisioned, so he wasted no time breaking it out, as free and easy as if he was taking a breath. This was the ultimate skill Amaterasu, Lord of Shimmering Flame—a fearsome force based on the information Ciel obtained by analyzing Velgrynd.

His beloved sword Guren took on a black glow, the dark haze of heat that now symbolized his authority. This was both a literal haze and a representation of being fully impossible to hit—no substantial form; something that cannot be burned, frozen, or cut open. That, and it had one more meaning—the light of the sun, a superheated flame. To this magical flame was added Benimaru's swordsmanship, and not even he could imagine how powerful that made him.

Granit, for his part, had fully lived up to his “god of war” nickname. Although shocked for a moment, he immediately calmed himself and began searching for his enemy’s weak points.

Benimaru now had far fewer magicules, a potential side effect of acquiring an ultimate skill. He remained a force that your typical demon lord would be helpless against, but his magic level was only about a third of Granit’s. This unknown new force was a threat, but by his reckoning, another full-throated strike could overcome it.

“Don’t mess with me, monster,” he shouted. “I’m not going to hold back next time. You’re about to face every ounce of my might!”

In the imperial army, Granit’s brute strength was second only to Velgrynd’s. He was stronger than Damrada, even, and likely an even match with Kondo. That remained just as true now. But there was a good reason why he was entrusted with guarding Ludora. He just never had a chance to get fully serious in battle.

Now he was summoning all his might to crush Benimaru.

“Die! Army Destroyer: Quaking Blast!!”

It was the same technique as before, but on a far greater level. Raging spirit gushed out of him, discharging in the form of lightning bolts in the air. But they harmlessly passed through Benimaru. Nothing could catch the heat haze.

There was a roaring sound. Something had happened—not in this space, but some other realm.

Damn it, Carrera... Of all the terrible things to do...

Benimaru’s mind was filled with vivid images of what Carrera had done. He didn’t need to go through Moss for it. After acquiring Amaterasu, Lord of Shimmering Flame, he was able to “see” whatever those serving him could, as long as they were connected to Rimuru via a soul corridor. It gave him a picture-perfect view of Carrera’s skills.

“Let me show you something real special. I’ve only just seen it myself, but... well, let’s give it a whirl.”

“Wha—?”

Granit couldn't react. Benimaru's attack had just cut him into tiny pieces that were charred by the time they reached the ground.

Perhaps Benimaru was the most "terrible" of all. He truly moved like a haze off a hot road. Amaterasu, derived from Velgrynd's own abilities, included the skill Dominate Heat, which accelerated his body. Using that, he could release a sword slash at truly divine speed. Although it wasn't quite up to Cardinal Acceleration levels, it was an invincible skill, powerful and fast...

"It is called Crestwater Darkflame Hundred Flower Bloom. Not that you're around to hear that, but..."

With that side comment, Benimaru turned away, a refreshed expression on his face. Granit truly was strong—calculating, well prepared, and in tip-top fighting condition. His defeat was caused, in so many words, by bad luck. If there was any mistake he made, it was violating the tried-and-true credo of striking the enemy while you can still defeat them. Benimaru vowed not to repeat Granit's error in his mind.



Velgrynd was growing concerned. She should have been watching out for the demon lord Rimuru all along; he had consumed her Separate Body, and now she couldn't communicate with it. Any thoughts she projected were swallowed by the abyss, doomed to never receive a response. Even pouring energy into her other Body felt like nothing more than throwing it into a bottomless swamp. There was just no point to it.

The True Dragon bit her lip. Approximately half of her total energy was lost with no hope of recovery. Seeing her seemingly invincible Parallel Existence get defeated like this made it hard for her to retain her composure. Compared to her at full health, she had only around 20 percent of her magicules. It was now, in her estimation, impossible to defeat Rimuru, and she was forced to conclude that fleeing the scene as soon as possible was her best choice.

"Ludora... I can't put him in danger..."

So she decided to abandon guard duty of the Gate she was behind. Fortunately for her (she guessed), nobody had come to attack her yet, so she didn't have to hesitate as she went back outside the Gate. If someone got in her way, she could just take care of them then.

There, in the room with the Eight Gates, she did indeed see a few figures.

"Oh? Why are you leaving in such a hurry, Lady Velgrynd? Did you forget something?"

The question was asked by Testarossa, relaxing and sipping some tea like she owned the place.

"...Blanc..."

Testarossa's smile grew as Velgrynd glared at her. Considering the hurry she was in, having to face this troublesome opponent was a great annoyance.

"I asked you," Testarossa said with an elegant smile, "to stop calling me that, didn't I? Or are you trying to... pick a fight with me?"

Her eyes were no longer smiling. Velgrynd was still superior by far to her, but she wasn't ready to take a single step back.

"You want to go with me after I beat you that badly?"

"I would be happy to, yes. After all, I don't really *need* to win. If I can buy some time against you, all is well."

Testarossa stood up as she spoke. Velgrynd immediately greeted her with her fist. The shock wave shattered the table and chairs, Esprit and Zonda evacuating a prudent distance away.

Now she was dancing lightly on the ground. Velgrynd's heat was so intense that just touching her would burn her into cinders, her speed such that you couldn't see her with the naked eye. It was an intense onslaught, and there was certainly no need to try taking that on. And it wasn't just a matter of level. Velgrynd had nearly ten times more magicules than Testarossa, even though her tank was down to about 20 percent. That's how much of a gap there was.

And yet Testarossa looked as relaxed as ever. Winning would be difficult—there wasn't really any way to defeat her. But if she wanted to stall for time without attempting a victory, that was no problem for her.

"This is why I hate you so much!"

"Oh? Too bad. I have nothing but the utmost respect for you, as Sir Veldora's elder sister."

"Quit being so shameless about this! Stop bothering me and get out of my way!"

"Sorry, but I will have to decline that request. I may not look it, but I'm a very sore loser... *sooo*, I'm gonna get even with you right now!"

Testarossa truly meant it. She couldn't beat Velgrynd in a head-to-head match, but merely harassing her was much easier. And even if she couldn't hold out until the other officers were on the scene, Rimuru himself was likely to show up soon. By that point, her victory was assured.

Ah, Sir Rimuru's victory was truly a sight to behold. Overwhelming Lady Velgrynd was like taking candy from a baby for him. Now it's my turn.

Rimuru had done much to reveal Velgrynd's arsenal to Testarossa. She didn't want this opportunity to slip away, no matter what.

Red and white streaks crossed paths in the air. One was harsh and intense; the other graceful and elegant. The dual-colored pattern weaved itself around the chamber at frightening speed—and then they faced off against each other, neither side having made any contact.

"That's crazy... You're a different person from before..."

"I suppose I am, yes. I was rather surprised at it myself, but I, too, have acquired an ultimate skill. That's the reason, I presume."

Testarossa broke the news casually, as if it were nothing serious. She had actually used her waiting time to wish for a new power—and as a result, she successfully materialized the very shape of her mind. She thought she heard a mysterious "voice" when she did, but she dismissed it as her imagination. This was all done by sheer instinct; it was just the way the demon Testarossa always worked.

But what struck her curiosity was the name of the ultimate skill—Belial, Lord of the Underworld. Much like Luminus's skill Asmodeus, Ruler of Lust, it held governance over life and death... but Belial was tilted more toward death, befitting Testarossa's nature.

To her, defeat was a humiliation she could never admit to, and that applied just as much to the “defeat” of death. If a demon wanted to evolve, that required them to accumulate power to their current limit, then age at least two thousand years. That meant even a single defeat was unforgivable—but when it came to death, “defeat” meant annihilation, losing one’s body and being returned to hell. A draw, strictly speaking, didn’t count as a defeat, but fleeing battle was a different story. A spiritual life-form is easily influenced by its own mind, and if one admits that they can’t beat their opponents and stop putting up resistance, that counts as a defeat.

There were a few truly demented demons out there, Diablo one of them, who had maintained perfect, undefeated records, but they were few and far between. Testarossa could count them on one hand. But the only thing that really mattered was that you never had your heart broken. That was why Testarossa never stopped challenging Zegion; as long as you didn’t stop until you won, it never counted as defeat.

And it was the same thing here. If she didn’t run away from Velgrynd, Testarossa thought, she was bound to win against her someday.

“You’ve obtained an ultimate skill?”

“Yes. Partly because I was getting sick of Diablo’s boasting, but *mainly*, I just realized how inadequate I was in our previous battle. If a skill represents what I am in my heart, I thought, then I didn’t think I really needed any. But that, it seems, was rather shallow thinking.”

“...”

“Perhaps it’s because I was able to face up to my own desires. I feel like I’ve better honed the way I use my powers now.”

Considering her possession of Raguel, Lord of Relief, Velgrynd could understand what Testarossa meant. That, she knew, was why getting out of this chamber was so difficult for her.

“This is *so* frustrating...”

Testarossa laughed at this muttered griping.

“I couldn’t ask for a better compliment.”

Just as that remark brought Velgrynd's rage up to a maximum, there was a sudden explosion, one so massive that it distorted space itself. It brought Velgrynd back to her senses. She looked back, surprised. One of the Gates had been blown away in spectacular fashion—and from behind it, the blond-haired Carrera was visible. (She was responsible for a lot of the things that gave Leon a bad name, by the way, but that's irrelevant right now.)

"Hello there! Looks like I'm right on schedule, huh? I'm not a big fan of losing all the time, too, so I'm hoping you'll let me join in."

"Hee-hee-hee-hee... Don't you start, Carrera. I'm not trying to be mean or anything, but you're covered in wounds."

"Well, that Kondo guy was pretty strong, all right? But I'm satisfied enough for now, so all right. I'll let it slide today."

Carrera laughed, even as she was visibly having trouble standing up. Esprit quickly ran up to lend her a shoulder, Zonda inviting her to sit in a chair he had all set for her.

Agera was there, too, but nobody gave him any attention.

"If you're putting up with it, Carrera, I guess I'll quit being so selfish, too. I'm a little tired anyway, so I'll just sit back and watch this time."

Ultima, out of nowhere, was now seated next to Carrera, Veyron nimbly setting up a chair for her. The demons were growing in number, and they weren't alone—now Shion, Soei, and Benimaru were appearing from their Gates. The sight made Velgrynd wince. Now, she realized, every powerful force on her side was defeated.

So Testarossa had a tactical victory. And Ludora's and Velgrynd's hopes were all about to be crushed.



Shifting perspectives from the skies to the ground...

The battlefield was experiencing a very sudden, and very rapid, cooldown. In the midst of it, Laplace was running toward Kagali, Vega accompanying him. The forbidden curse Dead Birthday had long ceased functioning—or, to be exact, Kagali lost control of it when Velgrynd stopped helping her out.

Nobody knew how many walking dead the spell produced, but it'd be some time before they became active. If they had the right will inside their minds, these walking dead could work as powerful warriors from the moment of creation. It was vital that they took them into their command before anyone else could—and if Laplace thought so, he couldn't have been the only one. Lieutenant Kondo had led this ritual, and it was impossible that he wasn't aware of this.

“Tsk... I knew he was up to something.”

By the time Laplace reached the scene, a group of imperial officers was in the midst of carrying Kagali and her entourage into a military vehicle.

“Oh, were you Laplace? I heard you were pretty strong. Do you think a fight's inevitable here?”

He was approached by a kind-looking man wearing a differently colored uniform. Lieutenant Kondo certainly struck a figure in his white outfit, but this man's bright-red uniform looked out of this world. He didn't look too strong, though. His face looked oddly fake, like a doll, and you could have pegged him as either male or female. If it weren't for that flashy uniform, he was far too ordinary-looking to leave any strong impression... but then, maybe the uniform just made everything else about him look plain by comparison.

“Yeah,” Laplace replied as he thought about this, “I'm Laplace. If you guys would let that girl go back, I don't think we need a fight any longer, do we?”

“Hee-hee-hee! I'm not so sure that's possible. See? There's a fight over there right now. I can't just run away from here.”

The man was willing. Laplace, seeing no other option, took up a fighting stance.

“Well, if you want, then. But who're you?”

If he'd tell him, that'd certainly be helpful.

“Me? Well, yes, it's probably natural that you don't know. I am ranked tenth within the Empire, the man supporting imperial history—and my name is Feldway!”

This man, Feldway, was permanently stationed within the Empire, expected to function as a space in the unlikely event that one of the Single Digits dropped out.

Laplace had heard stories about him, but this was their first meeting.

"Oh, are ya? The man they call the 'space,' huh?"

"I am not a man. For that matter, I'm not a woman, either."

"Uh... Sounds complicated."

Laplace eyed Feldway as they conversed. He seemed in his element, not uncomfortable at all; he didn't look ready for a fight, but he wasn't ready to flee, either. He was hard to grasp.

"Leave this to me," the impatient Vega said. "I'll crush that bastard with my bare hands."

He was about to step forward when Laplace hurriedly stopped him. "Whoa! Hang on. I told ya not to get ahead of me, didn't I? We can't take any risky chances while the director's held hostage."

Footman and Teare were alive and well, too, still fighting hard against the crowds around them. If they were called away, it'd be hard to tell how that would affect the battle. Laplace was cautiously trying to feel out the other side—but then he was interrupted by an unexpected visitor.

"Vega, lend me a hand here. Laplace is a traitor. We gotta take care of him right here."

"...?!"

Laplace immediately fled the scene, sensing a murderous rage. The voice that reached his ears belonged to Yuuki Kagurazaka, his erstwhile boss, but what it said wasn't exactly what Laplace wanted to hear.

"Boss, snap out of it! Bein' controlled by someone else like this... It's just not *like* you!"

Yuuki had defined Maribel's mind domination and lived to tell the tale. With his mental strength, he should've been able to resist any kind of mind control. But Laplace's plea went unheeded.

So Yuuki attacked Laplace, showing no hesitation in his movements. The bewildered Vega, seeing this, smiled his happy, distorted-looking smile.

“Really, boss? Once you get rid of him, is it okay if I eat him up?”

“Sure thing. I’m all for whatever makes you stronger.”

“Thanks, boss! I’m so glad you understand!”

That was Vega’s philosophy—always stick to the stronger one. Never any sense of ethics or morality in his mind. He preferred living more on instinct, like a wild animal.

Thus, without even feeling that this was an evil deed at all, he gleefully launched his attack against Laplace. If it had been either him or Yuuki alone, Laplace could have dealt with that. At the same time? Even for him, that was asking a lot.

Tch... I ain’t a fan of this at all. I was tryin’ to save the chairman, and now I’m about to get myself killed. Better leave now...

Strategically, Laplace was absolutely correct. But it wasn’t going to happen.

“Hee-hee-hee... Don’t bother trying to escape. Your name was Laplace, right? You’re as cunning as you are cautious. You’re too dangerous to let free, so I think we’ll have you die here instead.”

Just as Feldway warned, Laplace’s teleportation failed. He had been observing all of this so far, but now he had cast Dominate Space over this battle zone, preventing Laplace’s escape.

“Damn you!”

Vega launched a flurry of spirit blasts, timing it with an intense kick attack from Yuuki. He was more brawn than brains, but no one could deny his battlefield senses. Laplace’s escape route was blocked, his chances of victory very small—or nonexistent, really, as long as Yuuki was there.

No dice, huh? The end of the road?

But Laplace still had no intention of giving up that easily. Betting on the ever-so-slight possibility that he could break Yuuki’s mind control, he decided to reveal the true power he was hiding this whole time.

“Die!”

“Damn idiot! You’re the dead man!”

He kicked at Vega, who was lumbering up to him even as Yuuki kept up his attacks. That made it impossible for Vega to stand up for a little while.

“Huh. Not bad.”

“Yeah. Not as good as you, boss, but I’m pretty strong too, y’know?”

“I know. So I’ll at least kill you by my own hand, okay?”

“...?!”

An ever-so-tiny feeling of discomfort. The moment Laplace felt it, he stared intently at Yuuki’s face. It was the same one he always knew...

And that left him open. So caught up in his own thoughts, Laplace was too late to react to Yuuki’s fist. *No*, he screamed in his heart—but the pain never came. Right before his eyes, someone had put a hand in to stop the strike.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Dear me, I’ve been terribly scolded by Sir Rimuru. This is the fault of all of you, do you realize?”

It was Diablo.

What do you mean? Laplace almost asked before realizing now wasn’t the time.

“D-Diablo... You came to save me?”

“What? Why would I—well, yes. Laplace, was it? Yes, I have come to save you. So please make it *very* clear to Sir Rimuru that you saved me when you see him, all right?”

Diablo’s face went from sheer disgust to a breezy smile.

I ain’t never seen a more suspicious smile than that.

Laplace knew a thing or two about leering smiles, so to him, Diablo was a real impressive piece of work. This, of course, wasn’t meant as a compliment.

“Ah... All right. I’ll be sure to tell Sir Rimuru that you helped me out a whole lot, okay?”

"Wonderful! Now to actually save you..."

The moment Rimuru spotted Diablo, he marched up and said, "What the hell are you doing here?" In the middle of this epic battle, he was just sitting back and watching Rimuru fight. He deserved to get yelled at—and while he had the excuse of being there to protect Rimuru, since he seemed to have completely forgotten about that order, Diablo didn't dare bring it up. Really, Rimuru was the only person in the world who could handle someone as selfish as Diablo, and he had just proven it once again.

So Diablo was ordered to go to work—and after Moss gave him his report, he rushed right over here. Not to save Laplace per se, but to take out anyone down here who looked suspicious.

Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Lucky thing I could make this man owe me a favor. Now I'll restore my good name in Sir Rimuru's eyes.

Already Diablo was assuming he had won.

"All right. Yuuki is allied with us, so I'll let him off the hook, but... Hmm? Oh, is this a mystic lord before me? I know you've been aiming for this world a very long time, but... Hmm. You've joined forces with Ludora?"

Diablo's gaze stopped at Feldway, who was flashing a thin smile. It disappeared as he sized up Diablo and scowled.

"...And you are Noir, are you? Kondo's investigation said a Primal was serving the demon lord Rimuru, but I see that's true all along?"

"I now have the name Diablo. And I don't care what you decide to do, but stand in Sir Rimuru's way, and I won't show you any mercy. If you want to antagonize me, I'd suggest you come well prepared."

"Oh, look at you! This accursed devil who's constantly getting in our way!"

Feldway glared at Diablo, his intense hatred palpable. The murderous intent alone would've killed a normal person instantly. But Diablo was wholly unconcerned, laughing his taunting laugh at Feldway.

"Ah, whatever. Even if I fought you here, there's no chance that I'd win."

“Don’t worry. It would be just as impossible for me.”

After a couple more pointed glares, Feldway was the first to speak.

“I’ll leave for today. But the next time you get in my way, Diablo, I hope you realize what comes next.”



“Mmm. Well, since you were kind enough to remember my name, I won’t pursue the matter any longer. But do keep in mind that I have the means to kill you, do you understand?”

With that, the two of them glared at each other again. Then, as if their business was now done, they moved on, ignoring each other’s presence.

Feldway acted first, giving out orders to Kagali and Yuuki.

“I am worried about His Majesty. We’re returning to the flagship, so get ready at once.”

Yuuki, watching all of this unfold, got out of his fighting stance. Vega unsteadily stood up, following Yuuki over to Kagali. Footman and Teare were also called back, and through Feldway’s Dominate Space, everybody—including the newborn walking dead—was teleported away.

Diablo remained on the scene, conferring with Moss. Now that he knew their enemy was a mystic lord, he decided that he was the only one who could fight back against him. So he resolved to clean up this mess, as reluctant as he was about it.

With Footman and Teare retreating, the battle on the ground came to an end. After confirming that everyone was safe, he attended to the injured as needed. Moss was both quite competent at this and connected to Benimaru, so Diablo decided his work was done after that. Once Feldway and the others left, he teleported himself up to the flagship.

Laplace, meanwhile, was left all alone.

“Great, left behind again,” he muttered, shrugging.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



EPILOGUE

SISTER AND BROTHER

EPILOGUE

SISTER AND BROTHER

I'd chowed down on Velgrynd, and things were a lot calmer. Now that I had the time to look around, I surveyed the battlefield.

The forest was pretty badly damaged, but our capital city of Rimuru appeared to be safe, at least. Everywhere around it was now an empty lot, and there was some damage here and there, but Geld and his forces did a good job protecting it for me. That was a relief.

"So what are you doing here?"

"Ah, er, Sir Rimuru. Y-you see, I was making sure that nobody would get in your way..."

I *felt* like someone was watching me during that whole battle against Velgrynd. It was annoying, to be honest, but I didn't really have the time to attend to it. So here we are. I definitely felt like I deserved to complain.

"...All right. Fine. But everyone else is working their asses off right now, so you go join them."

"...?! Y-yes, my lord..."

He gave me a sad puppy-dog look before leaving. I really do have no idea what's going on in his head sometimes.

I imagine he was watching your battle, Master, under the auspices of preventing anyone else from interfering. Frankly speaking, it was unnecessary.

Ciel sounded just as fed up with Diablo. Talk about bitter. But regardless, now I could chill out a bit and go back to dealing with Velgrynd. It'd be up to Veldora to explain matters to her, and hopefully see things our way.

When I checked in with him, I found that Veldora was basically blaming me for everything. *Ugh*, I thought, *why do I have all these problem children working for me?* I assumed he was trying to deflect Velgrynd's rage by making me out to be the bad guy.

"My sister, I wanted to tell you that I was safe, but Rimuru didn't let me. But now that we're in the same position, you'll understand what I am saying, right?"

...That kind of thing. It was like a spoiled child blaming his friends because he didn't want to get yelled at.

It was clearly a mistake to leave the persuasion effort to Veldora. But considering the fit of rage Velgrynd had after thinking Veldora was dead, I can understand why he wouldn't want to show his face around her. I get that, but did you have to blame it on me? All you're doing is pushing all the trouble on me instead. I asked him to persuade her, but now she's going to be even *more* critical of me. It's pointless!

So, yeah, I couldn't leave Veldora in charge any longer. I needed to explain to Velgrynd that she was in the same position as Veldora right now.

Before that, I have something to report.

What's that?

As I was analyzing Velgrynd, I found out that she was under the domination of someone, possibly Ludora. I can lift the influence on her, but what would you like to do?

Oh, come on. Way to drop another bombshell on me.

This report was given out super casually, but really, I didn't even know how to reply. I knew that Ciel would run Analyze and Assess on Velgrynd, so I wasn't too surprised, but Velgrynd was being mind-controlled? I couldn't take *that* sitting down.

But you think Ludora was the culprit?

It is all but certain. I had observed the battle between Carrera and Tatsuya Kondo through the soul corridor, and Kondo was similarly under Ludora's control. I assume the case is the same with her.

After getting some more details, I found that Granit, who was paired with Benimaru, basically admitted to all of that. Pretty stupid guy the Empire had on their side, huh?

Better use him as a lesson on what *not* to do—but we can deal with that after I return.

The question at hand was about what to do with Velgrynd. Veldora was proving to be an unreliable ally, so I thought about explaining matters myself, but if she was under Ludora's mental influence, she was more than likely not gonna listen to me.

So now what...?

Since we've gone through the trouble of taking her in, why don't we appoint Velgrynd the same position as Veldora?

Huh? You mean, like, connecting a soul corridor to her like I did with Veldora? And then I'll make her into an ultimate skill? Is that even possible?

Not a problem. You are now equivalent to at least a True Dragon, Sir Rimuru, and you have more than enough magicules for the job. I think it is possible enough for you to take in Velgrynd.

But wouldn't doing that take away Velgrynd's free will?... Guess not, huh? Not like I can force Veldora to do anything—I have to ask, and he goes ahead with it if he approves. Or, really, he just does whatever he wants. Even now, he's clearly not afraid to sell me out to save his own skin. Then I have to punish him by taking his snacks away, but really, he gives me *such* a hard time.

Even if he did something really bad to me, it was no longer possible to take his freedom away. I can stop the energy supply, but I can't just make Veldora disappear with a snap of my fingers. Plus, with all the magicules a True Dragon has, you can't just do away with that in any normal manner. As long as Veldora's not on board with it and goes back to confinement voluntarily, he's free to do what he wants.

So, basically, there's no compelling him to do anything. When he's freed, I can't bend his will, really. Remembering that, I realized that Velgrynd would probably be the same way. If I gave her the same status as Veldora and "freed" her like that, I bet it'd be the quickest way to prove my innocence. I wouldn't be further misunderstood and exposed to these falsehoods about me. And if these two siblings have a fight? Well, that's not my problem. That's not really in my job description.

All right, then. Let's put her in the same state as Veldora.

If you're still anxious, would you like me to place some restrictions on Velgrynd?

Hmm? Restrictions? Is that even doable...?

Yeah, considering what lies ahead, maybe we need to set things up so she can't disobey me or whatever. But that's kind of against my principles. If I fail to get Velgrynd over to my side, after, it's better for everyone involved if I keep her isolated in Complex Space. Forcing her into anything would just make me the same as Ludora.

If she doesn't cooperate with me, then fine. As long as she promises not to interfere with us, I have no problem with her going out and living wherever she wants.

Very well. That's your style, after all.

So my policy was all worked out. Let's put it into action.

First, some hellos.

"Hello, Velgrynd. How are you—?"

"Are you Rimuru? Quit messing with me! Let me out of here right now!"

I had turned my attention to her within my Complex Space, but she was just rampaging all over the joint. I suppose, to an outside observer, this was some suspicious-looking slime approaching a beautiful woman. I looked like a criminal, really. Though I suppose, by default, I could look like a pretty girl of sixteen-ish, having her way with an older, bewitching beauty. It was all kind of iffy either way, but I had no choice.

Within my image, I held my hand out toward Velgrynd. Feeding on Ludora's power over her, I "unlocked" it and connected a soul corridor up as I did. There are doors on both sides of this, so I made it impossible for her to communicate with me unless she opened her heart up to me. I can talk to her, at least, so I'm hoping this effort isn't in vain.

These tasks all wrapped up without any problems. It immediately made the rampaging Velgrynd act a little more her age, the change sudden enough that I was more surprised than her.

"R-Rimuru? Did you, by chance, do something *untoward* to my sister...?"

"Sh-shut up, you idiot! Of course not! If *you* had persuaded her like I asked you to, I wouldn't have to go through any of this!"

We were about to have an argument right then and there.

“Silence!”

“Oh... Okay.”

“My apologies!”

Veldora and I nodded at the same time to this outburst. To be honest, I was scared. No wonder Veldora looked so uncomfortable around her.

“So what is the meaning of this, Rimuru?”

“The *meaning*? That’s a little hard to answer...”

I really had no idea what to say.

“I can hear the voice of my Separate Body on the other side, but my own voice isn’t reaching it. What did you do to me?”

Having such a beautiful woman stare me in the eye like this made my heart skip a beat. Her breath on my face made me light-headed. It smelled so good—sweet and fragrant, perhaps because she normally didn’t need to breathe at all.

Now is not the time for this. Velgrynd is likely asking the question because she has been freed from Ludora’s control.

Are you a little angry at me?

That is just your imagination.

Y-you think?

Well, either way, better to drop this topic.

Ciel gave me a full explanation, and according to it, the story’s pretty simple. The Velgrynd in front of me is freed from her mind control, but her Separate Body elsewhere is still under Ludora’s thrall. Ciel had thus used Unlimited Imprisonment to block the flow of information from our side, although she can still receive signals from the other side. This had put the Velgrynd on the other side in full-on crisis mode; she

was under Ludora's control with no idea what I was thinking. A total one-way street. I understood that Ciel had done something pretty amazing, but now it hardly even felt like a surprise.

"So if we analyze the difference between your two consciousnesses, I think I can prove to you that you were under mind control."

"Mmm, yes, well done, Rimuru. My sister, you should trust in him and—"

"Silence!"

"Right!"

Veldora got reamed for that interruption, and don't tell him, but I was a little glad to see it.

Now Velgrynd seemed a bit lost in thought. I guess she was trying to figure out the difference between her and the Separate Body, as I explained. Through the eyes of my companions, I also updated myself on what was up in the flagship. The battle was in its final stages, and something had just happened that should fully show Velgrynd what's going on.

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My friends had Velgrynd surrounded. Kind of a coward move, you could argue, but only if you didn't know what the deal was. The fact is, even in her weakened state, we could all dogpile on her at once and still have trouble winning.

However, with the alternate dimension she created now crumbling apart, the whole thing was about ready to collapse. Or it *would* have, but then Diablo came along and just destroyed it with a few whacks.

"Noir..."

"No, his name's Diablo. Pretty competent guy, when I'm not around for him to ogle."

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! He gives me treats, you know. I rather like him!"

So Veldora sold out to him, huh? Better not treat it too seriously the next time he praises Diablo.

As we continued to watch, the Velgrynd on the other side took a step back, as if to protect Ludora. Despite how things were going, he was still seated in his chair, all composed. That's a lot of guts. Or is it confidence?

But as I watched, someone went on the move. It was Carrera, wielding a golden handgun, and she promptly shot Ludora with it. But the bullet was—

“Oh, is that the bullet that weakened me?”

“It’s a Judgment Bullet. The most powerful one Kondo has. He can only shoot it once a day. So why does Jaune have it...?”

I knew what was going on because Ciel told me.

“Not Jaune. Her name’s Carrera. I guess she beat Kondo, and then he asked her to take care of Ludora for him.”

“Not Kondo, too,” Velgrynd muttered. But events were now unfolding fast.

“*Ludora!*”

The other Velgrynd shouted loudly, arms outstretched to protect Ludora. Her God-level velocity was in time to catch the bullet—I gotta hand it to her; she’s a monster. But the Judgment Bullet was no pushover, either. It penetrated Velgrynd in the right shoulder, blew her entire right arm off, and then hit Ludora anyway, going as fast as ever.

But, shockingly, Ludora was unhurt. He remained totally composed, as if he knew all along Carrera’s attack would be in vain.

“What the heck? How could he just cancel out that attack?”

“I don’t know. I saw a glimpse of a barrier, but it’s hard to believe that any barrier could completely stop it.”

Veldora and I were both surprised. Velgrynd was just as incredulous, whispering “Why...?” as she sat down on the spot, hands on the ground.

“Wh-what’s the matter, my sister?! ”

"Your friend was right," she muttered at the panicked Veldora. "I really *was* under Ludora's control..."

Then she began telling us about Ludora. According to her, he had an ironclad protection system keeping him safe, something that could never be destroyed no matter who you threw at it. But there was a condition: The barrier's energy source was the loyalty of the emperor's subjects and associates, so he needed people to remain loyal to him. That, and there was a flaw to it—although the barrier was perfect and always on, Ludora couldn't take any action while it was activated.

This was Castle Guard, one of the greatest features of the ultimate skill Michael, Lord of Justice. It had just stopped Carrera's Judgment Bullet, so clearly, he was all but invincible. He can't attack while it's on, but he could just have his associates handle the battle instead.

"If he had that kind of power, my sister, you didn't need to step up to protect him, did you?"

Yeah, I was just thinking that.

"No," replied Velgrynd. "Normally I should have pretended to protect him and use that as a feint for an attack. But if that's how I acted instead..."

If the other Velgrynd was laying down her life needlessly to protect Ludora, there was no doubting it. Our Velgrynd now understood that she had been mind-controlled.

Ludora, meanwhile, remained safe in his Castle Guard, immobile as it stayed activated. Or he should have been.

"...Huh?!"

Velgrynd shouted out first, but we were all in a state of shock. Removing Castle Guard for just a moment, Ludora had just stabbed the chest of Velgrynd, who had run up to him despite her missing arm. It almost looked like she did that on purpose...

"Oh... Yes. That man, my beloved Ludora, is no more..."

Tears fell from her eyes. As if to prove it, Ludora laughed loudly.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Velgrynd, you should be honored to be of service to me. I will put

your power to good use!"

As he spoke, the other Velgrynd crouched down in pain.

"That was Yuuki's Lifestealer skill. Ludora—or Michael, I suppose I should say—has the power to control the abilities of whatever he controls."

Whoa. What a cheater. Veldora and I exchanged looks.

"Okay, how about I have *you* fight Ludora?"

"What? Don't be ridiculous! There's no need to argue with you about whether I'm the strongest yet again, but I don't want to deal with someone who looks like such a pain in the rear!"

"I'll make you a parfait for dessert."

"That *is* tempting, but... hmm..."

Velgrynd looked at us dumbfounded as we tried to palm the job off on each other. It made her stop crying, at least, which I was glad to see.

Anyway, Ludora now had Velgrynd's power...

"What did you mean when you called him Michael?"

I had an idea, but I wanted to hear it from her mouth.

"Ludora, you see... He reached his limits long ago. He reincarnated himself so many times that it wore his soul out. What you see there is Ludora... but it's also not. He's long been replaced by Michael, Lord of Justice."

She looked sad about it.

"Oh? But how can a skill born from the desire of its owner not even cause harm to that owner?"

"No, it's not like that. Michael was a power given to him by Veldanava. It was Uriel, Lord of Vows, that Ludora acquired out of his own volition. And now that my elder brother Veldanava is still not resurrected, that ultimate skill has gone missing."

...Oh. I guess I have that one, don't I? But now doesn't seem like an apt time to mention that.

Velgrynd went on to explain that, basically, Ludora's repeated reincarnations may have weakened the power of his soul enough that it made Michael impossible to control. She made it sound like the skill had betrayed him, but really, it felt like something different to me.

...Indeed. If I were in the same position as Michael, Lord of Justice, I would aim to revive you, my true master, even if it meant taking over a temporary host.

That's what I thought. As a manas, I knew that Ciel would never give up on something, no matter how impossible the challenge might be. I couldn't help but understand Michael's thinking as a result. But that doesn't mean I accepted it.

"Well, we can't let this be. Michael's probably evolved into a manas with free will. And if he has, then what he's trying to do is the exact opposite of what Ludora aimed for"

"A manas? What is that?... Wait! Rimuru, you think Michael is trying to do something?"

"Well, he's trying to resurrect Veldanava, isn't he? And I think he'd be willing to make all kinds of sacrifices to achieve that."

That, I explained, was why we couldn't let this slide.

I could see Velgrynd's face go pale. And then, at that exact moment, someone new showed up and did something to the Velgrynd facing Ludora right now.

That is the mystic lord Feldway. Diablo let him go because he reasoned that he couldn't defeat him, but it seems he has returned without his friends.

If Diablo can't beat him, he must be pretty damn powerful. Or maybe he just didn't want to put in any more hard work today? Ah, well.

Feldway was good, using Dominate Space to attack in ways even an awakened demon lord would have trouble resisting, and he was aiming it all at the other Velgrynd. Wounded and weakened, she didn't look like she had any way to resist it.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! My Dimensional Transfer has erased Velgrynd from this world! Now there are only two True Dragons left. A good sign for the future, eh, Ludora—or should I

say, Sir Michael?"

Now Feldway was calling him Michael, too. Velgrynd's guess was just proven true.

Despite the suddenness of all this, Benimaru and Diablo tried to react as quickly as they could. I hurriedly sent a Thought Communication over to stop them. There were still too many question marks about the mystic lord's abilities, but I also wanted to see how Ludora/Michael would react. Besides... I could see it. Some kind of weird substance that escaped from Ludora's body. It was clinging to the limp body of Velgrynd, as if trying to protect it. The substance was all gone from Ludora's body, and the result of that was...

"Hmm, not bad. Velgrynd's power is now my own, and Ludora is gone. Now all that remains is to capture the power of Veldora and Velzard, and his resurrection will be complete."

Ludora/Michael accepted this as a matter of course. Now we were sure of it—my enemy was Michael, not Ludora, and his goal was to fully revive Veldanava the Star-King Dragon.

"Wonderful news indeed, Sir Michael!"

"Yes. And Velzard will not be hard to deal with, but Veldora could prove more troublesome."

They kept talking for a bit, wholly unconcerned about Benimaru and the others. But that's to be expected. Shion, Testarossa, and the other allies I didn't stop all tried to attack, but Castle Guard blocked everything. Feldway, of course, was also protected and unharmed. *Real* bad news.

But enough about that.

"Ludora... That's Ludora, right? There's a piece of him... a piece of his soul, right there...!"

I thought only I could see it, but I guess Velgrynd could sense it, too. I wasn't sure if she could or not, but I suppose she was trying to track down whatever was left of Ludora.

"Here, calm down a—"

“Silence! I have to go now, or else it’ll disappear!”

She begged me like a child, crying out in anger. I used Mind Accelerate to stretch out time for us. It was now exclusively me and Velgrynd.

“Listen, calm down. If you go out right now, you’ll just have your mind taken over by Ludora again.”

“But...!”

She probably knew where he had been sent off to. But she was headed right for a dead end. There was no guarantee that she could return to this world, and saving Ludora was beyond a dream at this point. Pretty much impossible.

There is no way out for you like this.

“Sh-shut up! Then what do you *want* me to do...? I can’t just give up on Ludora like this...!”

Those were Velgrynd’s true feelings. And now she was exploding with so much rage that she didn’t realize it was Ciel talking, not me.

There is a possibility.

“...?!”

If you accept my Ability Adjust...

Ah, sweet temptation. I didn’t need to ask her twice.

“I’ll take it. If it’ll make my wish come true...”

I figured there was no way she’d ever say anything else.

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The moment Velgrynd agreed to it, a voice rang out.

Velgrynd's will is confirmed. The first thing we are going to do is cut out the interference on Raguel, Lord of Relief.

Velgrynd began to feel more at ease as she heard the voice. She scrutinized her own body, following the voice's instructions, and sure enough, there it was. Raguel, emblazoned deep inside her heart core, was being subjected to some kind of interference. It was blocked now, but there's no doubting that it was dangerous to leave that in there.

This was the cause of it...?

Now Velgrynd realized it. And she also remembered that the ultimate skill Michael, King of Justice, had a power that was a sort of counterpart to Regalia Dominion. It was something I had heard about a long time ago, too.

The powers created by Veldanava, in the pure form, are referred to as "angelic." All of them cannot resist the absolute control of Michael, a thrall known as Ultimate Dominion. Velgrynd's Raguel is no exception to this. A very narrow corridor had been built connecting it to Michael, and it was impossible for her to escape its influence.

...That's right. How could I have forgotten? Anyone with an angelic ultimate skill could never disobey my older brother. He hated that most of all, and that was why he exchanged it for Ludora's Uriel.

Now she understood why she was being controlled. Her brother Veldanava had constructed this whole system, and it was next to impossible to resist it.

No, there really isn't any way out, is there?

Rimuru was right. And Velgrynd wanted to cry her eyes out over it. But just as she was about to give up, she heard a strange voice.

Preparations for Raguel, Lord of Relief, are now complete. I will merge this with the no longer needed Uriel, Lord of Vows.

Huh?!

Velgrynd almost shouted out loud. It was only natural that Uriel, which she sought out

for Ludora's sake, would be found here. And now Velgrynd realized that the voice she had been hearing was no longer Rimuru's. She wasn't just hearing things; it was a clear, powerful, strong-willed voice. It was very similar to the World Language, but softer and more refined; it even had a little tenderness to it.

She had a lot of questions for it, but what mattered now was the meaning behind its words.

"W-wait a minute! Are you going to give me Uriel? Or what did you mean by 'merge'?!"

If it has no choice but to follow Michael's will right now, then all we have to do is modify it. I discovered a control corridor in Uriel as well, so while I discard it, I thought I would use it as food to create a new ability with, exclusively for you.

It was absurd, an answer full of silly nonsense. But Velgrynd only cared about one question.

"If I do that, can I go look for Ludora?"

I affirm that it is possible.

If it was, there was no need to hesitate. Velgrynd gave her consent with all the hope in her heart. Or...

Velgrynd, I have already confirmed your intention, so there is no need to give your consent a second time. I will now activate Ability Adjust.

That voice—Ciel—had no intention of stopping.

The moment it launched Ability Adjust, an unbelievable surge of power swept through Velgrynd's body, gently enveloping her.

Velgrynd the Flame Dragon's Raguel and Uriel will be merged to create the ultimate skill Cthugha, Lord of the Fire God... Succeeded.

Ciel declared it to the world in its solemn, otherworldly voice. And at that moment, Velgrynd was freed from all her yokes.

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When I nodded my agreement with Ciel's words, my Uriel was transferred over to it. I'm not sure if it's my fault for giving the permission, but I think it's only natural that I was so stunned. Like, having Uriel be the bond that links us as friends...

Not a problem. The Uriel that was merged is only a remnant. Its essence has been taken over by the new skill Shub-Niggurath, Lord of Abundance.

...What?!

I had a million questions to ask about this. Something told me that Ciel was doing all kinds of amazing things without my knowledge. I was almost afraid to ask, but either way, Velgrynd deserved my attention. Everything had worked, and I was glad about it.

“Congratulations, Velgrynd. Now it's safe to release you outside.”

I smiled as I spoke to her. She just stared back at me, face all contorted. I think I understood why, so I looked away from her.

“There are so many questions I really want to ask you, but I'll skip them for now. So are you going to let me go?”

It no longer seemed like an issue, so I nodded. Ciel informed me that since Velgrynd now had Uriel, she would be able to pick up on and react to Ludora's soul, allowing her to potentially find and retrieve the fragment she saw. Hearing that, I began to wonder if the “remnant” Ciel mentioned was the “core” of Uriel, which took the shape of Ludora's own heart. It'd mean that Velgrynd would always be with Ludora. If his soul was now scattered all over the world, I'm not sure she'd ever truly find it, but something told me that she might just pull it off.

“Okay, now... Release!”

So the three of us returned from the spiritual world to the real one. Time was still stretched out for us as we said our goodbyes.

“Thank you, Rimuru. I'm sorry for all the trouble.”

Yeah, I hope so. I got a lot of complaints about *you* too, y'know! But I kept my mouth shut, since I didn't want her to get angry.

"I'm sure you can connect with your Parallel Existence now, so I don't think you need to worry about getting lost. After that, I know things are gonna be tough for you... but good luck!"

I tried to be as safe as possible with my support. But:

"My sister, please don't forget—if things don't work out, I'll always be here! So don't wail in despair. Just do the best you can!"

Veldora had a big smile on his face. I can't believe how terrible he is at reading people's moods.

Velgrynd seemed at a loss for how to respond.

"You really are stupid, aren't you? Ah, my stupid, stupid, cute little brother. I'm glad you're all right."

She smiled shyly. Then she stared back at me again; don't ask me why. When someone that beautiful looks at me up close, I get so nervous that I can't even move. She just shook her head in exasperation as my heart raced.

"Well, see you later"

And with that, Velgrynd elegantly teleported away.

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Okay. Next up was giving some support to Benimaru and the gang.

"You're going, too?"

"But of course."

Less than a minute had passed. The attack on Michael was still in progress, with nothing working against Castle Guard—but they were still doing the right thing. The moment they stopped attacking, the enemy would fire back. That's why Benimaru and Diablo were dutifully watching from the sidelines without stopping Shion and the rest.

We had only two enemies left and I sure wanted to defeat them here, but unfortunately, that was impossible. As long as Castle Guard was in place, nothing would work against Michael. But then, the same was true for us—

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! How weak of you. None of your attacks will work on Sir Michael!”

Feldway, laughing loudly, was about to take advantage of the time between attacks to activate his skill. A “mystic lord” is more than just a fancy name, apparently—he was trying to throw all of my friends into an alternate dimension.

“Good-bye, everyone. I’m sure we won’t meet again, but—what?!”

But I was waiting for my moment to strike, too. I chose that moment to appear over there, blocking Feldway’s move.

“Demon lord Rimuru...”

“Hello, mystic lord Feldway. Good to meet you.”

The smile disappeared from his face at my sarcastic response.

“Some country hick with no understanding of etiquette?”

“Huh? I don’t need to be told that by an Aggressor who’s dying to live in the big city.”

My continued provocation made his face freeze up. I guess he’s the type who likes to keep letting his anger build without ever snapping—the worst type of guy to deal with.

At that moment, Michael—silently listening on so far—interrupted us, looking as composed as usual.

“Heh-heh-heh... Weren’t you hiding and observing me? I thought you were sacrificing your friends in order to find a way to attack us.”

He was more than half right, except for the “sacrifice” part. Not that I cared.

“Think whatever you want about me. You wanna settle this here?”

“Heh. Bold of you. But do you really think you can beat me?”



"I dunno. But I'll give you a warning. I know that your ability gives you absolute control over angelic skills, and that there's no breaking Castle Guard as long as someone believes in you. Along those lines, couldn't we take away that advantage if I burned your Empire to the ground and killed every living thing inside it?"

That was a total bluff. Not even I had any intention of going that far. But if I put that on the scales with having my friends be sacrificed, I'd do it without hesitation. *That* much cruelty I had resigned myself to long ago.

"...I suppose I've underestimated you as well. Perhaps I shouldn't have been hostile to you after all."

"Maybe not, no. Your lofty ideals and noble missions weren't any of my business. I sympathize with some of your goals, too. So, you know, as long as you didn't bother me, you could've done whatever you wanted."

But it's too late now. Now that Michael was running amok, he was definitely a potential disaster for us. We were good for now, but Ciel was already predicting an unavoidable conflict of interest in the future. It was my job to believe it and act accordingly.

"..."

Michael fell silent, thinking over something. So I decided to spell out my intentions.

"If you try to touch me or any of my people, I'll crush you so thoroughly that you'll never be able to try anything so stupid again."

That, and I wanted to strike some fear into him. No, I had no way to break his Castle Guard right now. But I had my trusty partner Ciel helping out, and I was sure it'd figure out a way. Besides, if he touched any of my precious friends, I'd show him no mercy. No matter what it took, I swore I would defeat Michael.

"All right. I see. Then let's retreat for now."

"...?! Are you sure, Sir Michael?"

Feldway looked surprised, but Michael placidly nodded his head, indicating his intention to retreat.

"It is too early for us as well, after all. If we fight here, it will end badly for both of us."

I agreed with that. If I followed through on my earlier threat, maybe we'd have a chance of winning. But that's against my principles. I know I was just kicking the can into the future, but I really wanted some more time to work with.

"Okay... Well, shall we all leave, then?"

"Very well. Still... Today is the day of my full revival, a day to be celebrated, and instead we're given *this* unexpected ordeal. I thought Guy Crimson would be our biggest barrier, but instead it's slime we dismissed as insignificant...?"

With those words, Michael and Feldway left. And I assumed they weren't going back to the Empire, either. My observation magic Argos, the Eye of God, wasn't picking anything up over there, and Moss reported nothing unusual.

"*Damn*, this is annoying, though. I don't even know where they went."

Benimaru smiled at my offhand remark. "But as you ordered, Sir Rimuru, all of us are safe. Why don't we celebrate that for now and return home?"

Good idea.

"Right! Home it is, then! I'm tired out today, and I'm feeling kinda hungry, too. Why don't we ask Shuna to prepare something nice for us all?"

"A feast, then?"

Also a good idea. I nodded back at Veldora.

"Okay! Let's go back and have a blast!"

My words brought smiles to everyone's faces. We had some work left to do, but at least we were all here, and well enough to celebrate our survival.



Velgrynd continued her journey. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow, she walks on, never stopping.

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...

The place she flew to after leaving Rimuru was another world, in another time. Feldway had sent her Parallel Existence to the rift between this world and that one, and she safely reintegrated herself with it right there.

This was a planet without any land, much less an atmosphere, and Velgrynd was stranded on it without any sense of time at all. She would have died instantly if she wasn't a True Dragon, but she had both Dominate Space and an infinite lifespan.

She had time to think before she found refuge. Her thinking had almost stopped entirely after all the unbelievable events that occurred to her; there was just too much information to process. But being adrift in another dimension helped her regain her composure, too.

So Velgrynd thought. The sheer volume of mind-blowing data had made her abandon thinking at one point, but now she thought as long as time allowed her to. Then she arrived at the most important fact of all. How did she gain her freedom against the system her brother created? That was the question, and there was only one person she could think of who could've made that happen. Yes—that easy-going slime. The demon lord Rimuru, her foolish brother's ally...

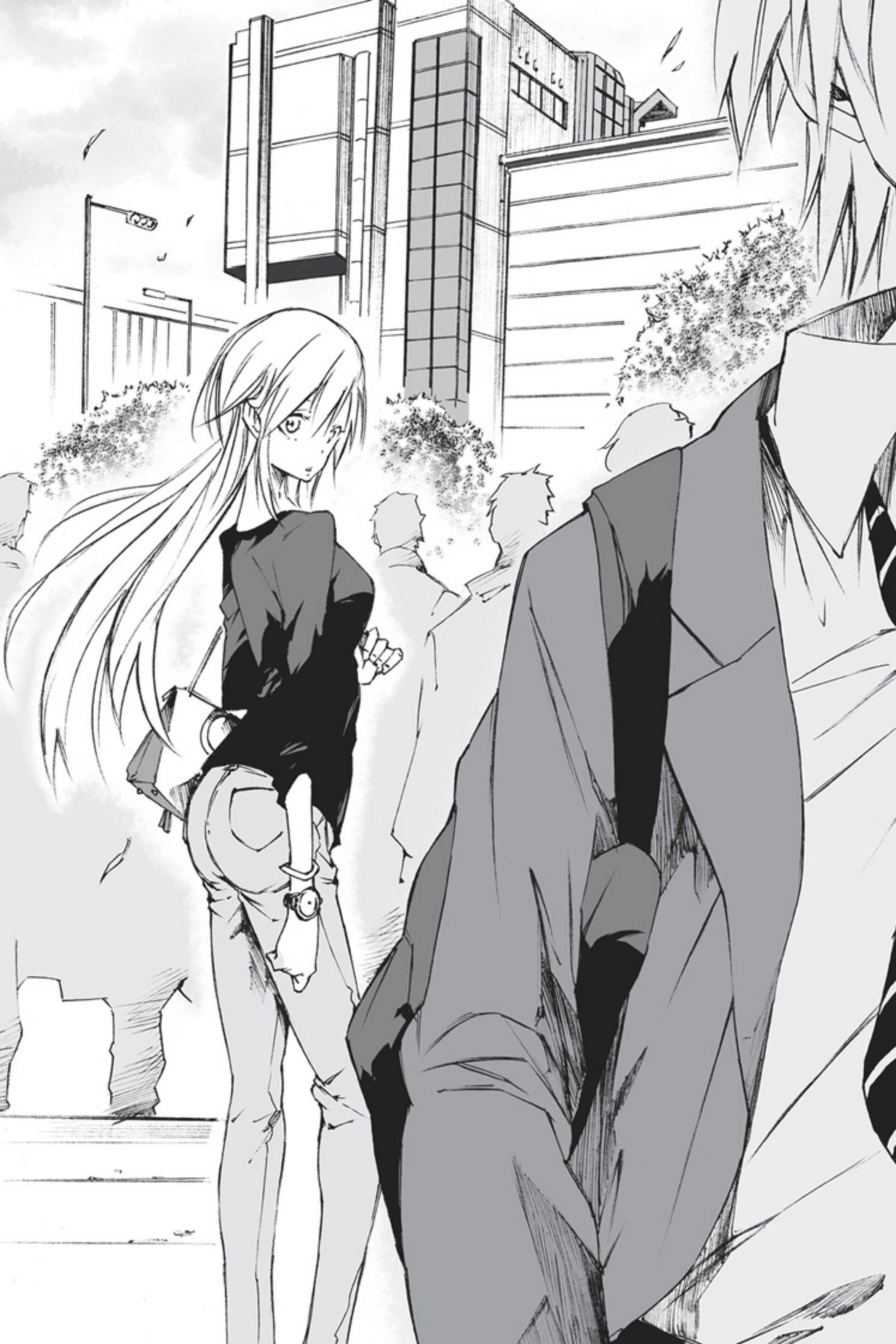
No! No, it can't be! That slime is...

...someone who freely tinkered with ultimate skills, gave Velgrynd her freedom, and massively improved her own powers, evolving them to greater heights. No regular human could possibly have done any of that.

Only my brother Veldanava could do anything so outlandish. If it were possible for anyone else at all...

Velgrynd shuddered at the impossible thought. When she turned her attention to it, her ultimate skill Cthuga, Lord of the Fire God reacted: power on an incomparable level from Raguel. But most of all, the fragments she had been taking in reacted, as if linked to Ludora's heartbeat.

Hee-hee! Well, I don't care what that slime really is. He's just Rimuru. Veldora's ally and the one I owe my life to.



That was the conclusion she arrived at—and with that, Velgrynd broke out of her thought loop and turned her attention back to reality.

.....

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...

So Velgrynd continued collecting pieces of his soul as she traveled through worlds and eras.

I love you. I love you... Ludora!!

That all-consuming desire to see Ludora drove her to overcome a cavalcade of obstacles. And then, finally, in a big city lined with skyscrapers, she found the boy.

Joy... and determination. The boy was everything she lacked. And if Velgrynd gave him the rest of the pieces she had...

But was this really okay to do? She agonized over the question. If she did it, it'd drastically change the boy's destiny. Her lifespan was infinite; she could continue to watch over him until he lived out his own life.

Yes... No reason to panic. I can't wait to see you, but it won't help me to hurry things along.

But then, a shining piece of his soul flew over to the boy. This fragment, noticed by nobody, fused itself within him, as if sucked inside—and with that shock, the boy disappeared from the world. All that remained in Velgrynd's hand was the very first fragment she found.

“Were you one of them, too? Did you want to see me?”

Velgrynd spoke to the fragment, wishing it were true. Then she activated Cthuga to pursue the boy.

AFTERWORD

Once again I was able to deliver Volume 15 to you without any trip-ups.

When I went over the deadline last volume, I might've said to myself something like "better be a little more careful next time," but unfortunately, I was late by around ten days this time as well. I really want to reflect more on that—and next time, I'll try to be just a little bit *more* careful than that!

In fact, however, I had actually discussed this issue with my editor, I, from pretty early on.

"I think it might be a little tight."

"Well, let's do our best!"

"We can't make it a 'to be continued' thing?"

"That's pretty much how the last volume was, so I'd like things to wrap up more nicely this time."

"True. But the page count is kind of..."

"That's all right! I've decided that I no longer care how many pages it is!"

That's not what I meant! I said to myself at the time, inwardly shrugging.

This volume has the largest cast of characters yet, several of whom are making their first appearance. I know I'm bucking the rules of good storytelling, but I can't help it, so I just let it slide. That's why I had to write so much more text for each scene, so I really wanted to break it up in the middle and end it in the next volume... but that got rejected.

"All right. Well, if that's the case, would you mind considering delaying the release date by a month?"

"Hmm... Well, let's keep plugging away till the last minute!"

So neither side gave any concessions, and time continued to pass by. I was writing with a lot of energy now, and the word count was already past Volume 14's.

"How's it going?"

"Mmm, it really is gonna be tight. At the rate I'm going, I'm probably gonna overshoot the deadline by around ten days."

"All right. In that case, I've made up my mind here."

"Oh, you mean you'll delay it to October?"

"No. If we can keep it to ten days, we'll work it out somehow, so it'll be released in September still!"

Are you serious? I honestly thought. Like, *that's* what you made up your mind about? There was no guarantee that even ten days were enough, but I's determination was unwavering.

"I think the page count's going to set another new record..."

"No need to worry about that! Just do your best to make the deadline!"

"...Roger."

And so, fully defeated, I somehow managed to make it on time. Thanks to that, this is the largest volume yet.

*

So that's how we were able to get this out, but I'm anxious to see how people react to it. If you like it, nothing could make me happier.

The content of this book series has now diverged so drastically from the original web novel that it's no longer an exaggeration to call it a separate work. I'm busy brainstorming for the next volume right now, so keep an eye out for it!

I'd like to express my utmost gratitude to everybody who's supported and been involved with *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*. I hope that I'll get to see you all again in the next volume!



**That
Time I Got
Reincarnated
as a
*Slime***

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