

FUSE

Illustration by
Mitz Vah



That Time I Got
Reincarnated
as a SLIME

18+





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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 18

FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by Mitz Vah

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TENSEI SHITARA SLIME DATTA KEN volume 18

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First published in Japan in 2021 by MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.

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

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First Yen On Edition: April 2024

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

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

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

Other titles: Tensei Shitara Slime datta ken. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen ON, 2017– Identifiers: LCCN 2017043646 | ISBN 9780316414203 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301118 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301132 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301149 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301163 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301187 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301200 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975312992 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314378 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314392 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314415 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314439 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314453 (v. 13 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314477 (v. 14 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314491 (v. 15 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975369750 (v. 16 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975375539 (v. 17 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975375553 (v. 18 : pbk.) Subjects: GSAFD: Fantasy fiction.

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

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

ISBNs: 978-1-97537555-3 (paperback) 978-1-9753-7556-0 (ebook)

E3-20240320-JV-NF-ORI

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PROLOGUE

THE
CLANDESTINE
MEETING

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

PROLOGUE

THE CLANDESTINE MEETING

As Rimuru and his allies were engaged in blistering combat with the forces of Ludora, there was an uninvited guest in the former Beast Kingdom of Eurazania.

Here a mighty edifice named the Sky Palace was in the midst of being built by a remarkably diverse team of magic-born. With the Eastern Empire kicking off their invasion of the Forest of Jura, Geld—the chief foreman—had to step away from construction duty. This meant major delays in the project, but work was still proceeding as normal on sections the remaining crew could handle by themselves.

Such was the scene that greeted Obela of the Three Mystic Leaders when she arrived.

On the topmost floor of the Sky Palace, a space serving as a provisional office, Milim and Obela were facing each other. The only other person in the room was Middray, politely standing behind Milim's back. Everyone else had taken refuge—if a fight broke out, none of them could contribute much.

Milim had seen Carillon and Frey off earlier, but she herself wasn't taking part in the war. There were several reasons for this, but the biggest one was that *somebody* needed to defend her nation. Looking at things from the Empire's perspective, she couldn't deny the possibility that they'd opt for an invasion route through the lands she ruled over. What's more, if she took the lead on any warfare, it'd mean having to kill human beings by her own hand, something she was loath to do.

So she stayed here, and it was now increasingly clear that was the right choice.

"What do you need from me?" she asked her visitor, someone rude enough to pick this exact moment for her visit. Middray, perhaps driven by his absolute

faith in Milim, stood silently as he watched on, waiting to see how Obela would respond to her question.

Obela, meanwhile, removed the God-class armor covering her entire body and kneeled before Milim.

"I am extremely delighted to have this audience with you, Dragon Princess Milim. My name is Obela, a former member of the Seven Primordial Angels and the faithful servant of Veldanava the Star-King Dragon."

She had beautiful, flowing hair as dark as the night sky; the star-like shine to her eyes was just as mesmerizing, holding enough charm to capture the mind of anyone who beheld them. Milim was all geared up for a fight, but seeing Obela's unexpectedly obsequious manner disappointed her a bit.

"Mm?"

As she stood there, unsure how to react, she sensed a smile on Obela's face.

"I can understand if you do not know of me," Obela went on. "At the time you were born, I was assigned to a job over in another world. I apologize for not coming to introduce myself sooner."

What's going on here?

Milim was doubtful about all this.

"Well, you look pretty strong. But you're not here to duke it out with me?"

"Oh, absolutely not."

"Huh. So what *are* you here for?"

"To give you my formal greetings...and a word of warning."

Obela raised her head, her expression suddenly stern as she stared at Milim.



*

They moved the conversation into a temporary reception room. After another greeting, Obela gave Milim a detailed account of current happenings.

Hearing that Velgrynd the Flame Dragon, her aunt, had fallen into the hands of Feldway made Milim want to fly off to assist Rimuru that very moment...but Obela warned against it, stating that any attempt at this point would come far too late.

"What are you talking about? At this rate, my top pal Rimuru's gonna be—"

"I am telling you: It is too late now."

Obela's response had Milim livid. "Then why didn't you come to me sooner?!"

"I'm afraid I have no excuse, Lady Milim."

Obela bowed her head at the fuming Milim, too polite to explain away her behavior. She was a servant of the Mystic Lord Feldway, and right now she was under orders to defend his Mystic Palace. Going off to meet with Milim was a serious dereliction of duty, and she could have said as much—but no, Obela was simply ashamed of herself for failing to live up to Milim's expectations. Seeing that, Milim was forced to calm herself down.

"All right. Perhaps that was asking too much. I appreciate you telling me, at least."

"It is a great relief to hear those words from you," Obela said, bowing her head in reverence. There was no sign that she was lying. Milim had a knack for reading the subtle signs people gave out, and looking at Obela, she decided she was acting out of pure sincerity.

"Rimuru may not look it, but he's a pretty cautious guy," Milim told her. "I firmly believe he can make it through anything that comes his way, no matter what. That's how much I trust him."

"Yes, indeed."

"So if you claim not to be my enemy, you'd better *not* lay a hand on him."

"I...would like to offer you my promise on that front, but I'm afraid I am not in a position to act in public. For now, I believe it best to act only when I have

Feldway's trust in the matter...but what do you say to that?"

If Feldway ordered Obela to do something, she intended to obey. But as she was not-so-subtly hinting, she was leaving the option of severing ties with Feldway on the table. The stars in her eyes shone around her night-sky hair.

"Hmm. You don't seem to be lying," Milim said.

"It is all the truth, I assure you, based on my own feelings."

"Let me ask you, then: What are your goals?"

"Feldway," Obela replied without a moment of wavering, "seems intent on trying to revive Lord Veldanava, but I feel this behavior is both arrogant and quite out of line. Your divine father, after all, will surely revive himself at some point without anyone else's assistance. If this resurrection is not so easily forthcoming, there must be a reason for it, and someone like me is hardly in a position to guess at the will of such divinity..."

In summation, instead of trying to resurrect Veldanava, Obela believed that Milim, his own daughter, should be their right and exalted master.

"So you'll be my ally?"

"Someone as infinitely small as I would never dream of having such conceited thoughts. I have nothing I wish to take from you; merely being of service would be an indescribable joy to me. Please, give me your direction."

It was all up to Milim. That was what Obela truly wanted. And Milim understood that, but something about Obela's sheer resolve bothered her.

"All right. You're not afraid to betray Feldway, then?"

"Hee-hee! I think there is a difference in perspectives at play here. If anything, one could say that it is Feldway who's defying the will of Lord Veldanava."

There was not the slightest sign of indecision in Obela's voice, proving once again that she meant every word.

"I believe that Lord Veldanava's will is more interested in the happiness of you, his daughter. I am firm in that belief, and thus I have no pity for those who may attempt to obstruct you."

This was about much more than “betraying” anyone. Obela thought that Feldway’s behavior would cause harm to Milim, and whether she worked for him or not, she was nothing but an enemy to him. But Obela was smart, too. She wasn’t acting entirely on her own decisions—she was ready to leave all of that to Milim, and she was taking great pains to ensure none of what she did got in Milim’s way. That was why she was taking such a great risk just to meet with her. If Milim didn’t want her to do anything, she wouldn’t; if she gave her the order, though, Obela would strike hard against anybody out there. Such was the will of the former Mystic Leader, and Milim wasn’t blind to it.

“Very well. In that case, I’ll add you to my team. Any objections, Middray?”

“Of course not, Lady Milim. I would never have anything to object about.”

“Good! Obela, from this day on, you’re on *my* side. They’re not here right now, but once the war is over, I’ll introduce you to Carillon and Frey!”

“Thank you.”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Now I’ve got my *own* Big Four, counting Middray as the leader. Can’t wait to brag about this to Rimuru!”

Milim laughed heartily to herself. She had always been secretly jealous of Rimuru’s Big Four, and now she could call her own underlings something similar. If Frey were here, she’d almost certainly stop this nonsense in its tracks, but—fortunately for Milim—only Middray was around at the moment.

“I’m the *leader*? Well, I suppose I am, yes. You won’t find anyone out there who knows as much about you as me, Lady Milim!” he said.

Milim already meant everything to Middray, but now that she gave him the title of Big Four leader, he wouldn’t dream of objecting to it. In fact, he gleefully agreed to the idea. Now there was a rival Big Four in town.

*

Despite being named part of the Big Four, Obela accepted the news without any major agitation. Milim’s words, as far as Obela was concerned, were the will of God, and thus she made Milim her first priority at all times. But this also led to a thorny problem.

“So, with that in mind, the question becomes what we’ll *do* with Obela,”

Milim said to Middray. “This is exactly the kinda time when I’d want to talk things over with Rimuru...”

“Mm, indeed, a tough issue. Should we leave her here, or have her retain her position and serve as a spy for us?”

Both had their pluses and minuses. They really needed to devote serious thought to it, taking in feedback from Carillon and Frey—and Rimuru, too, if it was possible.

“But what do you want to do, Obela?”

Middray, never exactly intellectual in nature, wasn’t suited for this kind of discussion. Milim knew that well, so she just asked Obela directly instead of going through him.

“Personally,” Obela replied in her clear voice, “I wish to return to the Mystic Palace one more time. I have not manifested my true body here right now, so remaining here would require moving my physical form over, which would be a challenge. Also...”

Obela’s job was to take care of the cryptids in their own world—or, really, her biggest task was keeping tabs on Ivalage, the World-Destroyer Dragon. Cornu was heading their invasion efforts into other dimensions, and Zarario was involved with handling the insectors. With a pact now in place between the Mystic Lord Feldway and the Insect Lord Zeranus, Zarario had a lot more freedom of movement—but any type of communication with Ivalage was a difficult task, which meant Obela’s main physical body was somewhat bound in place by her duties.

“The Insect Lord and the World-Destroyer Dragon? Wow! They sound strong!”

“They are. Zeranus I cannot comment on, but Ivalage is quite a menace. Call it a living desire to destroy all worlds. Attempting to live alongside it is impossible. It had been allowed to keep existing by Lord Veldanava, but only if it is ‘sealed away’ in the world it is in now. Any attempt to release it must be stopped at once.”

If Obela stayed here with Milim, she wouldn’t be able to keep as close an eye

on Ivalage. Her hope was to watch over Ivalage to the end, so it wouldn't have any impact on Feldway's plans.

"I see," said Milim. "I guess you better keep watching it, then."

"As you wish."

"But now this talk is making me wonder just what Feldway wants to *do* with Ivalage, y'know?"

"I was wondering the same thing," said Middray. The question was understandable. Neither of them knew of Feldway's plans. So Obela decided to divulge everything she knew.

"Feldway, you see, was given the duty to monitor Ivalage from Lord Veldanava himself. However, he intends to abandon that duty and prioritize Lord Veldanava's resurrection instead. He has built an Underworld Gate to that effect and is currently trying to expand it to the needed size. Once complete, he plans to send all the mystics and insectors over to this 'key world' in order to stage an invasion."

"Expanding an Underworld Gate? That's gonna be a long time coming."

"Indeed."

"But what's he gonna do after that? If he doesn't close that gate after opening it, won't it release Ivalage as well?"

"That is certainly a possibility, and I have informed Feldway of it. But he was not at all concerned. Honestly, I have no idea what he is thinking."

"Hmm?"

"Feldway, I fear, has gone insane. All he cares about is reviving Lord Veldanava. I'm almost convinced he doesn't care if he destroys the entire world in the process."

Feldway hated this world, the one that took Veldanava from him. He intended to create a brand-new one, filled solely with his handpicked inhabitants—and if Ivalage was capable of destroying worlds, well, that worked for him.

"Great. So when that happens, it's *us* who's gonna have to deal with it, huh?"

"What a tremendous hassle! Zeranus sounds like enough trouble alone, too. Why can't they just stay sealed away over in that other world?"

Milim and Middray scowled at each other. She had a standing invite to go hang out with Rimuru and his friends, but that got delayed due to the war. As if that wasn't distressing enough, now there was *this* problem. Milim was getting more miffed by the millisecond.

"At this rate, the only solution is to go up to Feldway and kick his butt."

So came Milim's overly simplistic solution.

"Quite true, Lady Milim. And as the head of your Big Four, I am ready to receive your orders and dispatch Feldway at once!"

Milim meant everything to Middray. He enthusiastically agreed with her, not bothering to think anything over first.

"Great! Glad I can rely on you, Middray. I'll join you as supreme commander, too. We need to crush this Feldway guy's ambitions, and soon!"

"Yes, my lady! I'm so excited, my muscles are tingling already! You will have a remarkable sight once I'm on the battlefield!"

Without Frey around, there was nobody to stop the pair from going off the rails. But Obela still saw fit to speak up.

"One moment, please. I have been sharing information with Feldway and his team since the start of this operation, but from what I know, the emperor Ludora had taken Lady Velgrynd's draconic factors and made them his own. However, at the last minute, the demon lord Rimuru intervened. A final confrontation is still in the cards for later."

She stated this strictly to calm Milim.

"So Rimuru's all right, then?"

"He is. The operation is currently at a standstill, and Feldway has reportedly retreated back to his home base."

"Mm... So taking action now would be too hasty."

"Yeah... I hate to say it, Middray, but you're right."

Middray and Milim settled back down, their momentum gone. They now had a comfortable amount of time before Feldway tackled his next plan. Instead of flying into action immediately, it was best to wait so they could fight alongside Rimuru's forces. What mattered most of all right now was exchanging information, and Milim was sensible enough to see that.

"So, Obela, I want you to look into Feldway's movements until you receive further orders from me."

"As you wish, my lady."

"Use magical calls to contact me, all right?"

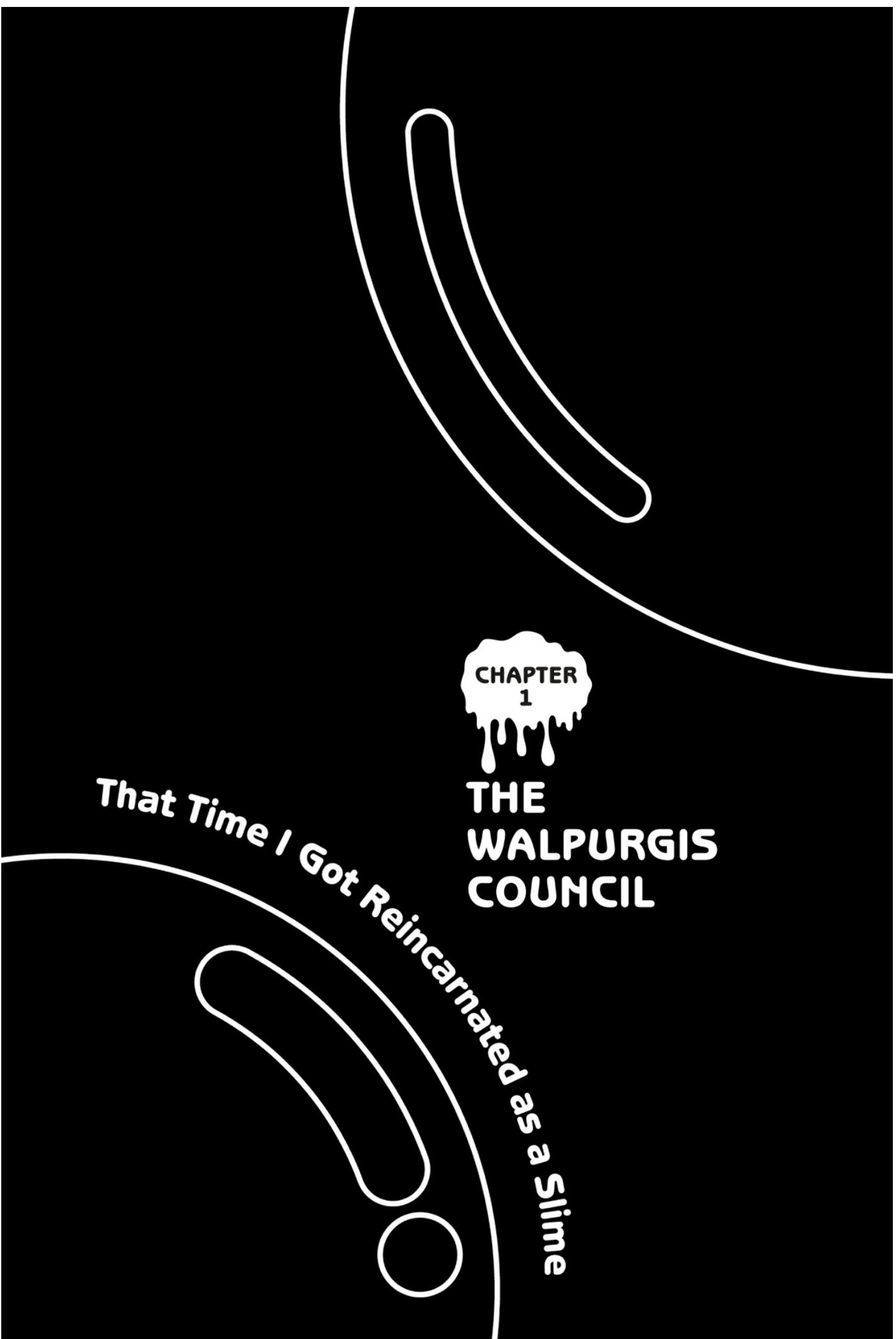
"Very well."

Milim and Obela agreed to a wavelength only they would be able to communicate over. Crossing dimensions required a vast amount of magical force, but that was no problem for someone at their level.

Once all the related business was taken care of, the meeting came to its natural end.

"In that case, I will take my leave for now."

With a final goodbye, Obela set off. And as Milim and Middray considered the potential chaos to come, they could already feel a headache making itself known.



CHAPTER 1

THE WALPURGIS COUNCIL

Raine's transport gate led me to a world of white and silver; snow was raging across the landscape. Apparently we were holding it in Guy's castle stronghold this time, not the space from before.

I set foot inside, guided by Raine, with Shion and Diablo behind me. The outside was frozen and completely inhospitable for any kind of life, but it was a comfortable temperature inside the castle. A good half of the castle was in a state of collapse, however, and it was clear to anyone what had happened here.

"Hey," Guy said once I was taken to him. "Nice to see you here. Milim and Daggrull should be coming pretty soon, so relax while you wait."

We were in a large meeting hall, big enough for a royal ball, and there were several circular tea tables placed in the middle. Chairs were dotted here and there, his way of encouraging us to just sit wherever.

I scanned the room for other guests. Luminus and Leon had already arrived, the former accompanied by the Holy Emperor Louis and her old butler Gunther, and the latter by the two knights Arlos and Claude, both clad in full armor. Seeing some familiar faces was a relief to me. Giving them a nod, I decided to claim a seat for now. I could sense Shion and Diablo standing behind me; there'd be no sitting for them. I really wished they'd lay off with the formality, but I just let them have their way.

Then Ramiris showed up, as loudly as usual.

"I can't believe this! Why'd you just leave me behind like that?!"

Oops! I thought we had left together, but I guess I went off without her.

"Oh? Why weren't you with us, Lady Ramiris?"

It was Raine, not me, showing concern about this. She must've assumed

everyone was there, so seeing an annoyed Ramiris surprised her.

"That's a very uncharacteristic mistake, Raine. Lady Ramiris sent us an emergency request, so I had to come over to greet her."

This was Mizeri, looking just as battered and beaten as Raine but still keeping that tight glare on her face. I assumed she and Raine were pretty much the same...but they had both been put through the wringer, so now their personality differences were much more distinct.

"Wow, Raine! I guess your injuries are making your mind wander a little, aren't they? And here I was pondering over who I should bring here! But *nooo!*"

That prompt made me realize Ramiris had brought two people with her, Beretta and— Whoa. Come on.

"What're you doing here, Veldora?" I demanded.

Luminus pointed her eyes behind Ramiris. Confirming that Veldora was there, she clicked her tongue and winced.

"That evil dragon..."

"Kwaaaah-ha-ha-ha! If a meeting *this* important is taking place, how could I ever not participate in it? I was intending to accompany Rimuru here, actually, but I started off a little late, you see. So I stopped Ramiris real quick and asked her to bring me along instead!"

Veldora never did know how to read a room. Luminus's suddenly dour mood didn't even register with him as he leaned back in his chair, supremely confident.

"Right, exactly!" Ramiris added. "And if my master's joining in, I couldn't ask for much better'n that, so you better thank me for thinking to bring him!"

Among them, only Beretta was shaking his head and groaning, but I guess he didn't have the power to stop them.



"I am deeply sorry," a distressed Raine said. "I'm making so many careless mistakes..."

"Nah, nah, it's not your fault, Lady Raine," I replied, trying to assuage her. "We were all kind of in a hurry on the way here."

"Well, I'd *hope* you were in a hurry, Rimuru. I'm the one who called you over, after all. And didn't I tell you before that just 'Raine' is fine?"

Oops again. I forgot.

"Sir Guy is right, Sir Rimuru. My name alone will suffice."

"Yes, exactly. I feel we are on friendlier terms that way."

Guess Mizeri understood my philosophy pretty well. I refer to people in polite terms for one of two reasons—to acknowledge their superiority, or to try to keep my distance. If I drop the titles with someone I'm not close to or am wary of, it just seems rude to me. Maybe I just don't want to be hated, either, or act hostile for no reason. On the other hand, I drop all the formalities once I'm on friendly terms with someone. Sometimes I still keep it a little formal with people like Haruna or Treyni—it's not something I can really explain, but either way, they're exceptions to the rule.

But regardless of what was on my mind, I was snapped out of it by two surprising voices.

"*You* stopped calling me 'lady' quite a long time ago, didn't you, Rimuru?"

"He sure did. We all know that's how shameless you are, so there's no need to keep up appearances now."

It was Luminus and Leon. They had a good point—enough to convince me, anyway.

"All right. I'll keep up that gesture then...with every intention of kindness, of course."

No point quibbling over it.

*

Mizeri and Raine were already gone, setting off to guide Milim and Daggrull

over. Meanwhile, I kicked back and relaxed. There were snacks on the tables, so I reached out for some to pass the time. After a little while:

"What's the meaning of this, Guy?! I'm busy with all sorts of things right now, you know. You can call for me all you want, but at least give me some advance warning! Frey called it a 'huge breach of manners,' too!"

Milim arrived, as full of spunk as usual. Loud as usual, too, but that was just her being her.

"Is that true, Frey?"

"Well, yes...Sir Guy..."

"Frey, I was just telling Rimuru that there's no need for honorifics here. That includes you, Carillon, and all of you there, too. Everyone present has earned that much."

Huh. Wasn't expecting that from Guy...but he had me convinced. Only the strongest of the strong were in this room. In terms of magicule stats, Leon's attendants didn't quite make the grade, but they probably had talents of their own. Frey, for that matter, had awakened to a true demon lord, putting her safely in the Million Class. Exactly *how* strong she was remained unknown, but nobody was about to look at her as a mere servant.

"Well, thank you." Frey nodded, seemingly aware of this as she looked around the room. "I will do just that, then."

"I was never good at that stuff anyway," Carillon said to Guy with a dignified air, "so I appreciate the thought. So, Guy...what made you call us all over here?"

He, too, was part of the Million Class alongside Frey. He'd always had the air of royalty for as long as I'd known him, so nobody was going to rap him for being arrogant. Besides, he waved at me when we made eye contact earlier.

But Guy snickered at Carillon. "Hold your horses. Daggrull will be coming shortly, so we'll save it for then. This is quite a surprise, though... Carillon I expected, but *you've* awakened, too, Frey?"

Yeah, of course he'd notice. I only found out after we received the report, but now that I was seeing her in the flesh, her newfound strength made her seem

like a wholly different person.

"Yes, thank you. Perhaps it was all part of Milim's plan, but in this most recent war, I've successfully transcended my limits as a harpy." Frey smiled.

"Fine news," a satisfied Guy replied.

"Yeah, well, it was kinda the same way for me," Carillon added with a hearty laugh. "I helped us lycanthropes put all the shame behind us, too. Sometimes playing along with Milim's schemes actually turns out all right, huh?"

"Huh?! What schemes? I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Heh. Don't bother hiding it, Milim," Guy scoffed. "You musta figured we'd die in some battle to come if we both remained a couple of wimps, right? That's the whole reason why you gave us a chance to fight humans."

"Precisely," Frey agreed. "It's a chance we'll lose, besides, if the world turns out the way Sir Rimuru would like it. This might be our final opportunity, for all I know."

"No doubt about it. Are we right?"

"Hrm...! Well, I dunno anything about that stuff. Quit your yappin' and just take your seats!"

Milim was practically screaming at them—her classic way of hiding her embarrassment. So *that's* what her aim was? Made sense. But anyway.

"Um, Ms. Frey, given what we just talked about, you can skip the 'sir' with me."

I wanted to point that out when I had the opportunity. But Frey just sniffed at me.

"Denied. You are the friend of our master Milim. I need to pay you the proper respect."

But you called her "Milim" in that same sentence just now... I'm not at all convinced about any of this.

"If you're going to bring *that* up—"

"Also, if you're going to be *that* way, can you drop that 'Ms.' stuff?"

She beat me to the punch.

Her request was kind of a tall order for me. Carillon was one thing, but I hated to call Frey straight up “Frey.” She had this kind of...*aura* I struggled with. You know? Whenever I dealt with a beautiful woman like this, I couldn’t help but shrivel up. Milim was a little girl and Luminus still looked pretty young, too, so they were okay. If they acted more like adults, though, I’d be wavering a lot. Someone as asinine as Shion, on the other hand... *Way* easier to deal with.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Don’t tell me you don’t know how to act around grown women, Rimuru!”

He saw through me?!

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Next time I ask ya for something, I’ll show up as a lady bombshell for ya.”

Ignoring Guy’s advice, I went ahead and said what I really felt.

“I don’t need *that*, thank you! You’re not exactly doing me a favor if I know it’s *you* inside anyway!”

I guess the resentment building up inside made me forget about my nerves.

“Hee-hee! Of course! Besides, Sir Rimuru has a beautiful secretary: me!”

Um, why’s Shion herself saying that?

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... The likes of *you*, Guy, trying to entice Sir Rimuru with romance—how ruthlessly narcissistic. I could learn how to transform into a woman easily as well. If Sir Rimuru wished for it—”

“I don’t, so let’s drop this, okay?”

Diablo was even more worrying than Shion. Let them be, and they’d start running in all these crazy directions, so I hurriedly put an end to the conversation. My staff was so hard to wrangle sometimes. I began to regret not bringing Benimaru along a little.

As we engaged in this friendly bickering, Daggrull arrived. He came alone, but even by himself, he dominated the room.

“Whoa, whoa, this place is lookin’ awful. It’s *that* kind of meeting this time,

huh?"

That was how he chose to greet everyone before thunking down on the large chair Raine showed him. It was a heavy one, made of thick stone slabs, but I thought I could almost see it sag under his weight. Hilarious.

So he's the one bringing up what everyone else politely avoided mentioning up to now, huh? I mean, we all knew it anyway. It was sorta clear from the large cracks running across the walls of this reception hall. That alone made it pretty obvious that *something* happened here. Something big and serious enough that we all avoided bringing it up so we could avert our eyes from reality. It was a kind of escape, a desire not to be involved...except now that we were all present, we didn't have much choice but to get down to business.

"Yeah," Guy said with a nod, "we've got a couple of thorny issues on our plate. This time, at least, I really *do* want some feedback from you all."

"Wow. If you're going *that* far, it must *really* be serious."

Daggrull sounded quieter now. He must've gotten the picture—this truly *was* going to be a pain in the ass. I stared into the space in front of me, as did quite a few others. He'd probably want a lot more than feedback, no doubt.

Then Guy stood up with a smile. "Right. Time for a change of scenery. Let's kick this off with a high-level meeting solely between members of the Octagram. We get along so well with each other, after all!"

We do?

I almost whispered "Save that crap for someone else" to myself. That smile foretold all kinds of doom to me...but, sadly, I don't think I had any right to say no to him, so we all reluctantly let Guy guide us out.

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This space, featuring a large, round table, was cut off from the outside world. There were already drinks set in place for us; I really had to hand it to his staff.

Guy was sitting in his ornate leader's chair with me opposite him. From my seat, Milim was on the right side of Guy, Ramiris on his left. Leon was adjacent to me on the right, with Luminus between him and Milim, and Daggrull on the opposite side. Ramiris had this teensy little chair set up on a pedestal a fair bit

higher than the table, while Daggrull had a seat several times heavier-looking than all the others, so you could say the seating arrangement was pretty well-balanced, at least.

Once we were all seated, the first thing we noticed was the empty chair between me and Daggrull.

“By the way, I don’t see Deeno among us. We don’t have to wait for him?”

It was once again Daggrull saying what we were all thinking. The other demon lords looked concerned about this as well, their eyes settling upon Guy.

“Ah, yeah, about that.”

Guy looked at me. I had a feeling I was already being targeted for something.

“Rimuru...”

Guess Guy found out about Deeno’s treachery. I didn’t know what kind of intelligence network Guy had, but if he was steering this conversation in my direction, he must’ve known at least *some* of the details.

“Okay, okay, you want me to explain why? Well, it’s because Deeno’s a traitor. End of story!” I said.

“No it’s not! We need some more thorough details.”

“Tsk... Oh, all right...”

No point trying to resist him any further. Giving up, I decided to relate the whole story. Deeno, now a resident of my nation, had turned traitor and switched sides in this conflict...but it wasn’t anything he volunteered for. I had a good hunch that he was being influenced by Ultimate Dominion, one of Michael’s skills. This I revealed to everyone, leaving out nothing.

“So Deeno’s gone to the other side...,” Daggrull muttered once I was done. They had been good friends, and I was sure he had his thoughts about this.

“I think it’s more that he had his mind taken over,” I explained. “I didn’t get to ask him how *he* saw all this, but—”

“Michael was his name, you said?” Guy chimed in. “Are you claiming that a skill has obtained some kind of self-awareness, like a regular person?”

Ah. So Guy didn't know *why* Deeno did what he did?

"I suppose I am, yes. There's no doubt in my mind about that. The signs of sentience are there even as we speak. It's taken over Ludora's body, so now it's functioning as Michael in real life."

I mean, I've got Ciel in my life, after all. There's a litany of evidence for this.

"Wait, Rimuru! You're saying that this Ultimate Dominion could affect angelic powers? Terms like *angelic* and *demonic* are quite vague concepts. How are you categorizing these?"

Yow! Sharp observation from Luminus there!

I wasn't all too clear on that either, but then Guy stood up.

"I can explain."

He then went into a surprisingly detailed lecture about skills. They were one of the great secrets of the world, apparently, closely intertwined with how the world itself worked. However, he left nothing to the imagination in his explanation.

In essence, the laws governing this world were originally crafted by Veldanava, but these laws could be influenced and affected by those with administrative power over them. Even if you didn't have that, however, you could make a request in your mind, instill it into your magicules, and that would rewrite the laws of the world to some extent as well. That was the basic concept behind magic, which was a type of ability. Skills, the way Guy put it, were a kind of systemized approach to influencing and altering these laws.

These skills resided in the souls of sentient beings, triggered by the pure energy housed inside them. That included, of course, the angelic ultimate skills crafted by Veldanava, and among these were seven abilities known as "virtue-based" skills.

"When I fought Veldanava, he tapped into a vast arsenal of abilities," Guy continued, "but once the world reached a more stable point, the only one he kept around was Michael, the strongest. Some of the others he gave away; the rest he released into the world at large. As a result, these abilities were claimed by the cycle of death and resurrection, appearing from time to time within the

souls of those strong enough, and qualified enough, to house them. Some of them, of course, received a demotion and became *merely* unique skills, as they were too strong in their original ultimate form. Sometimes they'd become angelic uniques, even, spreading around the world but still retaining some of their powers."

I had a feeling these virtue-type skills were a kind of yin to the yang of sin-based skills. Virtue and sin, angelic and demonic. That kind of thing.

The way Guy was talking, though, I wasn't so sure there were still seven virtue-based ultimate skills going around. My Raphael skill was evolved from Great Sage, for example, and I don't think that was a "virtue"-based thing.

I wasn't smart enough to see anything wrong with Guy's explanation, but once again, Luminus had some questions, refusing to allow anything to go unexamined.

"Guy, if you know this, I want you to tell us: Are there really seven of these angelic skills in all? And what sort of abilities do they have?"

I was wondering about that too, actually, and I guess the other demon lords were as well.

"Heh. You guys are gangin' up on me more than ever before, huh? All right—I'll tell you. First, the seven virtue-based skills..."

Guy knew a whole lot about them, these seven skills once possessed by Veldanava. According to him, they were:

Michael, Lord of Justice (ultimate skill): The most powerful of abilities, best suited for a commander role. Your orders become the dominating impulses within your targets' minds, and you enjoy literal Absolute Defense, like having Castle Guard around you at all times.

Raphael, Lord of Wisdom (ultimate skill): A support-oriented ability suited for administrating the laws governing the world.

Uriel, Lord of Vows (ultimate skill): An ability suited for overseeing physical spaces, providing the user governance over all physical phenomena.

Sariel, Lord of Hope (ultimate skill): An ability meant for managing the origins

of life and the cycle of resurrection.

Metatron, Lord of Purity (ultimate skill): An ability that sorts through the chaotic mix of all laws combined, preventing interference. Works at the level of pure energy.

Raguel, Lord of Relief (ultimate skill): An ability that supports and provides amplification for the needs of others. Given to Velgrynd.

Gabriel, Lord of Endurance (ultimate skill): An ability meant to lock conditions in place and deal with unexpected events. Given to Velzard.

That sort of thing. Honestly, he knew *way* the hell more than I thought he did about them, but I kept my surprise hidden from him.

“So that’s how these abilities add up, but as of this moment, we’ve only verified the presence of three of them. Veldanava gave his skill Michael to Ludora, and in turn, he took Uriel back for his own purposes—that’s something Ludora acquired and made into an ultimate, you see. I’m not sure, but chances are some changes occurred to that skill in the process. Either way, it’s been lost now, so there’s no way to confirm anything.”

Guy paused. No one interrupted him.

“Now, I knew that the Michael skill given to Ludora has the power to make anyone do your bidding. But it turns out this is *far* more powerful than I originally gave it credit for.”

He suddenly grew hesitant. I waited for him to continue...and then our eyes met.

“You know what I mean, don’t you, Rimuru?”

Well, no reason to lie, I guess. I wanted to pretend I knew nothing, if I could, but that wasn’t gonna happen. I didn’t get to talk fully about Ultimate Dominion before, so it was time to lay out my perspective on this. With the problem growing to the point it had, it’d cause more harm than good to avoid the subject.

“Yeah. Well, not *know* so much as, like, I was fighting against it just the other day. When Veldora got taken over by the enemy, I thought for sure that was the

end."

Velgrynd got ruled over, too, after all.

"You did?"

"I went through a lot, in fact—thanks to *you* pushing this trouble on me! It wasn't just a duel against Ludora; it was all-out war!"

I went ahead and said what needed to be said. But it wasn't like Guy actually cared.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! What's the big deal? You won," he told me.

"It's a *huge* deal! Velgrynd destroyed Ramiris's labyrinth! The land around our town is a burned-out hellscape! And, yeah, the rebuilding process is going along great, but this is the *last* time I ever do any favors for you, okay?!"

I could feel my momentum picking up. I really didn't want him making any more impossible requests—for a little bit, at least.

"Pfft. A little of your magic, and you could clean that whole mess up in two minutes. But fine. So what's your conclusion?" Guy asked me.

"Well, I vaguely talked about how it could influence people before, but let me be a little more honest about it. Michael's Ultimate Dominion is a menace of an ability. It gives the user complete control over anyone or anything that possesses an angelic ultimate skill."

"No..."

"I find that hard to believe," said Luminus. "Whether man or monster, those who wield an ultimate skill have a powerful, well-honed mentality. How could anyone take over someone like that?"

"They can. How else to explain why Velgrynd, too, was dominated by Michael, and not just Veldora? I never would've believed a spiritual life-form could be taken over like that, either, until I saw it for myself."

In fact, I still didn't want to believe it. It was the stuff of nightmares, something I never wanted to experience again.

"Well, Rimuru's telling the truth, guys. Velgrynd possessed the skill Raguel,

and like I just said, Velzard has the skill Gabriel,” Guy told everyone.

And there you go. I was wondering if that was the case, actually. Judging by how trashed Guy’s stronghold was, he must’ve been fighting against someone crazy powerful. I hated to admit it, but Velzard must’ve really been under Michael’s control. My worst premonition had come true, which did nothing but depress me.

“Whoa! Guy, are you saying that Lady Velzard’s on the enemy’s side?”

“That’s right, Daggrull.”

“You’re kidding me! That’s dreadful news, isn’t it?!”

The confirmation from Guy clearly disturbed Daggrull. They had been acquainted for a long, long time, and he knew full well just how dangerous Velzard could be. I personally didn’t know as much about her—I mean, I understood she’d probably be a handful, but I couldn’t be sure just what kind of a threat she was. Thanks to that, it didn’t quite seem real to me.

“Just for safety’s sake, I want to ask—she hasn’t been maybe defeated or put in a cage somewhere yet, has she...?”

“Rimuru,” said Guy, “do you think life would be that easy for us?”

Guess not. A pity my hopeful expectations didn’t play out. I hated to have Guy act all exasperated at me, too.

“Well, this couldn’t get much worse, could it? Now even Velzard is on Michael’s side...”

I couldn’t help but say that out loud, although I knew I was talking on behalf of everyone else.

“...You’ve got that right.”

Leon sounded troubled over it, too.

“I had my doubts whether that was true, but this is certainly no laughing matter any longer.”

Luminus had a dark look on her face. I could see why. I mean, this was Guy we were talking about, and even *he* let her get away without concluding the fight.

All of us very much doubted that we'd do any better against her.

"No need to worry! There're still seven points left on this Octagram, and the rest of us are pretty darn strong, too, right? Let's kick some ass and show them just what we're made of!"

Why does only Milim seem glad about all this? Something in the blood of a True Dragon must affect you mentally or something.

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So now we knew things couldn't get much worse, but that wasn't even the end of the bad news.

"Continuing with my answer to your question—are there really seven angelic-type ultimate skills in total? The answer to that is no," said Guy.

"Mm... Most unfortunate."

Luminus seemed less than cheerful about it.

"So you really don't have *any* idea how many of those there are?" Daggrull asked.

"I don't know all of them," Guy gravely replied. "When I fought Veldanava, he didn't show me every single thing in his arsenal. When I speak of seven virtue-based skills, I am taking him at his word. Beyond that...he said he'd give one special ability to each of the Seven Primordial Angels. Or intended to."

The hall fell into silence. First the seven virtue-based skills, and now seven others he gave to those angels. That meant fourteen in total...?

"You're hinting that he didn't manage to...?"

"That's right, Daggrull," Guy replied. "The angels of the time didn't have much in the way of self-awareness yet. Some of them lacked the ability to handle an ultimate skill. That's why Veldanava gave Velzard and Velgrynd Gabriel and Raguel, respectively. He *did* also give skills to the angels that qualified for them, but anything he couldn't give out, he let loose on the world instead."

All Veldanava kept was Michael, which he later traded for the Uriel skill Ludora obtained. Then, when the dragon died, Uriel was lost as well...only to become my own ability, much later on, merged with Velgrynd's Cthuga, Lord

of the Fire God. You could really sense the history behind all this...but this wasn't the time to turn my eyes away from reality. It *really* felt like I'd better keep that tidbit a secret.

Still, we now had a better grasp of the whole situation.

"So these angelic skills are just that—pure skills, crafted by Veldanava himself—and there are likely at least fourteen of them floating around. And anyone who manifests and acquires one of these skills is completely unable to resist Michael's Ultimate Dominion?" I asked.

"That'd be the case, yes."

Guy nodded at me. And that begged the next question.

"Hold on, hold on. Enough about angelic skills—what about the *demonic* ones, then?"

Whoops, Ramiris was kind enough to ask what I meant to ask. Everyone's eyes focused on Guy.

"That's a tougher question to answer, but hear me out. When I was defeated by Veldanava, I acquired the unique skill Pride. That was thanks to me observing him and trying to imitate his strength. I think there's a secret lurking around that."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Ramiris, your skill was something you were born with, right? So maybe it doesn't feel too real to you, but acquiring a skill has a lot to do with what exactly you're wishing for. It varies from person to person, but still."

Guy then gave us a quick recap on the nature of skills.

Skills generally reside in either the material, spiritual, or astral body—the three things that make up a physical creature. However, certain special skills instead take up residence in the soul itself. These are usually quite strong skills, as one's biggest desires are naturally going to be those nearest and dearest to their heart.

I combined this thought with Ciel's own opinion. Certainly, there were some unique skills that resided in the material body—ones like Berserker, for

example, which Razen inherited when he snatched Shogo's body. You saw assorted cases like this, but in the end, I agreed with Guy that the stronger skills were those that latched on to one's soul. They were easier to hide, harder to have taken from you, and served you well as unexpected trump cards in battle. Ultimate skills, too, were "soul skill"-level in power, and I suppose that means only a limited number of people could wield them.

But that wasn't all. There were actually two types of "soul"-oriented skills—not just those that *resided* in the soul, but those that were *carved* into it. Ciel, for one, was pretty much fully assimilated into my soul; we were inseparable, so I didn't need to worry about anyone taking it away from me. Still best kept a secret, but regardless.

This same rule applied to ultimate skills. If they resided in your soul, there was a chance someone could take them away...but if they were carved in there, you could safely assume that was no longer a concern. However, it was impossible to tell one from the other...

I thought about this as I listened to the conversation around me.

"So, connecting this to our earlier topic..." Guy began.

"Right—the abilities Veldanava released are part of the resurrection cycle now, residing in souls strong enough to take them?" Luminus asked.

"Yes, exactly... But in my case, I didn't receive any abilities from Veldanava. He also didn't give me anything special, either—unlike you, Ramiris. No, this unique skill of mine is entirely my own creation. You see? It's a skill that imitates one of his pure abilities. And *that* is what a demonic skill is."

"I see. So my Asmodeus is simply an inferior copy as well?"

"No, not in your case, Luminus. If the skill is modeled after your own will and wishes, it'll have the same abilities as the original. And this is something I'm less than excited to reveal, but my Pride skill has since evolved into the ultimate skill Lucifer, Lord of Arrogance. That skill works perfectly fine against angelic abilities—whether it wins out against them is purely a matter of my will against theirs."

"A match I'm sure you're confident about winning, Guy...but very well. To confirm, do you believe along those lines that there are at least fourteen

demonic ultimate skills, to go along with the fourteen angelic ones?"

"Probably. Demons are born as a response to angels, so I'm working on the assumption that demonic skills are created as a response to angelic ones."

Hmm... About what I figured, then. This world had far too many weird, unexpected connections. Heroes were fated to always cross paths with demon lords, so I suppose it wasn't too weird to see skills work in kind of the same way, but...

"At the very least," said Guy, "Veldanava's seven virtue-based skills work in a pair with seven sin-based skills, each modeled after a different sin."

Lucifer, Lord of Arrogance, formed a pair with Uriel, Lord of Vows, according to Guy. And that was far from the only one. As he put it:

Michael, Lord of Justice, was a pair with **Satanael, Lord of Wrath**.

Raphael, Lord of Wisdom, was a pair with **Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony**.

Sariel, Lord of Hope, was a pair with **Belphegor, Lord of Sloth**.

Metatron, Lord of Purity, was a pair with **Asmodeus, Lord of Lust**.

Raguel, Lord of Relief, was a pair with **Mammon, Lord of Greed**.

Gabriel, Lord of Endurance, was a pair with **Leviathan, Lord of Envy**.

In this way, he theorized, each ultimate skill was in a paired relationship with one on the other side. Personally speaking, I wasn't sure how I should react to this, given that I had already kinda sacrificed some of these skills and I knew it'd cause a huge stink if people found out. Keeping quiet about that, though, seemed like it'd present its own scary problems. And of course Ciel was being notably silent, too. So I decided to wait and see how things worked out.



With Guy's skill lesson over, we went back to the original topic.

"If I could add to what Guy said," I began, "it looks like angelic skills include a kind of override circuit that prevents the owner from resisting Michael's orders. We believe that's why Deeno turned traitor on us, so if you run into him, don't immediately assume he's our ally again."

"Sounds like a handful," Daggrull groaned. "He's the most un-dedicated man I know, but he can be surprisingly strong in a pinch."

"What matters more," Luminus solemnly interjected, wholly ignoring the topic of Deeno, "is the fact that Lady Velzard is in the enemy's camp now. Is the same true for Lady Velgrynd as well?"

Daggrull brought a hand to his forehead. This *was* a more present issue. I'd like to pretend I didn't know the answer to that, but I kinda had an obligation to tell the Octagram about Velgrynd's current state. Ramiris knew all of it, too, so they were gonna find out anyway.

But just as I opened my mouth, Leon sharply interjected.

"Wait. Velgrynd doesn't matter at the moment. Shouldn't we instead be checking whether any of *us* possess angelic skills?"

Yep. That's Leon for you—always diving into the crux of the issue. He always was astoundingly courageous that way, being an ex-Hero and all.

"I knew you'd bring that up, Leon!" a delighted Guy said. And, yeah, once I realized what today's conference was about, I understood that was going to be the most urgent topic at hand. The only question was who would bring it up. We'd be putting our own demon-lord peers under suspicion, after all, and the only way to avoid any doubts was to reveal everything in your hand. That was why Guy and Luminus were so freely revealing their own skills earlier.

Seeing this coming a mile away, I spoke up before people started leering at me. I was already late to the party, but then Ramiris shot into the air.

"Hey! Wait a minute! Are you doubting me or something?"

"Don't you worry," Guy told her. "You were factored out of this from the beginning."

Yeah, exactly. Ciel had already vowed to me that Ramiris's abilities were a special case. According to Ciel, those skills weren't something Veldanava gave her...so much as a subsection of the abilities Veldanava lost when he was no longer a god. That was enough to make me stop suspecting Ramiris at once.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, I don't have any, either. I don't really know *what* my

skills are, actually..."

"No need for concern, Milim," Guy assured her. "With the amount of sheer, insane force you throw around, your skill's clearly going to be the opposite of the ultimate skill Michael."

In other words, it was Satanael, Lord of Wrath. I didn't know exactly what it gave her, but it wasn't any kind of mind-control thing.

"I suppose that means I'm next," Daggrull said. "To tell the truth, I have no experience with any skills in the way that all of you do. I'm closer to Ramiris along those lines, in that I've possessed these abilities from the moment I was born."

Everyone fell silent at this. But it didn't seem like he was lying. Milim was sharp about these sorts of things, and her silence spoke volumes in his defense.

"I believe in you, Daggrull."

"Me too!"

"Heh. Well, if Rimuru and Milim say so, I'll trust you, too," said Guy.

So three out of the seven voiced their trust in him. Counting Daggrull himself, he now had a majority vote, but his supporters weren't done talking yet.

"Pfft. I'll believe in him, too."

"Whoa, hey guys, I'll trust him, too, if you're all gonna be like that!"

Leon casually dropped his suspicion of Daggrull. Ramiris, a little late but still sensible enough to see the trend, hopped on the bandwagon as well. The only open vote left was Luminus.

"Tsk! How annoying. I was hoping to engineer Daggrull's downfall here, but it appears the odds are against me."

"Gah-ha-ha! Well, Luminus, people seem to see me as a man of virtue, don't they? Too bad for you!"

"Silence! If *you* ever fall under someone's control, I'll ridicule you as a weakling until the end of my days."

The two of them didn't seem to get along much, but they also seemed to

have this odd sort of faith in each other. Maybe I was just imagining it, though. Regardless, Daggrull was now free of suspicion.

Luminus and Guy had already revealed their skills Asmodeus and Lucifer, and everyone had already concluded they were safe. That left just me and Leon, and I thought I should go on the offensive while I still could.

"Um, I'm gonna exercise my right to remain silent on this topic," I said, smiling brightly. "I have, like, a whole bunch of skills, and I don't wanna go telling everyone about them, so!"

Right? I mean, my skills were all kinds of messed up. The ultimate skills Azathoth, Lord of the Void, and Shub-Niggurath, Lord of Abundance... I mean, how would it possibly benefit me to reveal those? I could try acting all serious and explain how they worked, but they'd all accuse me of making up a bunch of crap. I was fully convinced nobody would ever buy it, so I wanted to just keep mum about the whole thing.

...But, of course, this wasn't going to be allowed.

"...You think we'll accept *that* reason?!"

Guy promptly shut me down.

Hmm. No dice, huh? But I'm sure all hope isn't lost yet...

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, I trust Rimuru, so he can keep quiet all he wants!" Milim chimed in. "But only if he promises to give me some honey later!"

I guess I could always trust her, despite how she was already trying to get something out of me. Either way, Milim was always gonna be an ally.

"In that case, I'll want some cake, then. Three days' worth!"

And, yes, I could buy out Ramiris, too. "Three days" was asking an awful lot, but we could work something out.

"Great!" I espoused with a nod. "Let's go with that! Milim, I'll give you three jugs of Apito's honey, and Ramiris, you'll get to have all my desserts for three days!"

"Excellent! And I'll tell the world that you're perfectly okay, Rimuru!"

"Ooh, yes, of course! Besides, Rimuru's the guy who exposed all those secrets about angelic skills in the first place. What's *he* stand to gain from revealing what's in his own hand? And there's no way anyone could rule over him!"

Wow! Ramiris bringing some actual logic into this! Normally, I'd never place any trust in what she said, but sometimes she had these flashes of brilliance. What's more, the logic was so convincing that the rest of the demon lords seemed to be buying it.

"Hmm... That's a good point. If the master I trusted would betray us, that puts me under suspicion as well. I suppose I need to cast my lot for Rimuru!"

Daggrull accentuated his decision with a friendly guffaw. That gave me the majority, albeit one with me as the tiebreaker. If I could recruit at least one more ally here, that'd be perfect.

As I thought that, I took a glance at Luminus.

"...What? If you think you can bribe *me* as well, you've got another—"

I spoke up before she could finish.

"Shuna, you know—she's designed a new set of swimwear."

"...Pardon?"

There's a nibble! Heh-heh-heh... Looks like my flanking maneuver on Luminus worked to brilliant effect.

"And y'know, I've been working with Ramiris to create a real ocean in the labyrinth, too. Sandy beaches and everything."

"Yeah! We really nailed that, lemme tell ya!"

"We sure did. Just picture it. A fully private seaside paradise, right in the Forest of Jura—"

"Rimuru," Luminus said, "I think we need to take a few moments to talk this over."

"Imagine this perfectly blue, transparent sea, warmly embracing everyone who swims in its waters. Sunlight dancing beautifully on the surface—but it's still the labyrinth, so no need to worry about sunburn! But then, I seem to recall

that you can make your skin any shade of tanned you like, can't you?"

"Wait, wait—"

"And so many beautiful women, baring it all, basking in the sense of pure freedom from all their worldly concerns..."

"Right. I have several requests and plans to show you as well, so I will pay you a visit after this meeting is over. Do you have some spare time for me?"

"Oh, of course. Soooo..."

"Fine, fine. I trusted you from the start anyway."

Ya-hoo!

Pumping my fist in the air was probably a faux pas, but either way, my victory was now set in stone.

"...Come on, people. You actually think this kind of thing's okay? The mighty Octagram, getting won over *this* easily?!"

Guy glared at me. I guess my blitzkrieg of corruption wasn't sitting well with him. But it wasn't any care of mine. The winners get to write the history books, and all that.

"Sorry, Guy, but you're gonna have to admit defeat. I'm not exactly thrilled to see it, either, but it's fairly obvious Rimuru isn't being controlled by anyone, at least."

I loved that tinge of frustration in Leon's voice. So, with that, I successfully bribed my way out of suspicion.

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That just left Leon.

"Now, Leon, how about you?"

"Heh! My skill? Well, it's Metatron, Lord of Purity."

""" ... """

Leon was quick to answer Daggrull's question...but, *hmm*, what did he just say? Metatron, Lord of Purity? That's *totally* an angelic skill, right?! It was hard to describe the "Oh, God, *now* what'll we do?" atmosphere that suddenly

pervaded the hall.

"Um... Leon? Pretty rare of you to crack a joke in public," said Guy. "This *is* meant to be a serious meeting, remember. Can you perhaps take a deep breath and answer the question?"

"I'm not here to waste time, either, Guy. The Metatron skill you mentioned a little bit ago is absolutely in my possession."

I was sure everyone hated to see this development. It looked for a moment like we were close to ending this meeting, and now we had this bombshell to deal with.

"Well...what to do about this, eh? Right, Rimuru?"

"Why're you turning it over to *me*!?" I hollered at Guy. "It's blatantly obvious that you're angling to push anything you don't wanna handle on *my* shoulders! You're not even trying to hide it!"

"That's what you got to say to me, huh? Then quit whining about it and come up with a solution, dammit!"

"Enough of this! Stop with your ugly infighting!" Luminus spat.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! But I know how Guy feels, Luminus," Milim added. "You can always rely on Rimuru at a time like this!"

"Yeah, for real!" said Ramiris. "Let's leave this to Rimuru and go whip out some tea or something!"

My so-called allies were off in their own little world. And Ramiris was the worst of them all. I cursed her in my mind, swearing I'd get her back for it. Having people throw all these headaches at me... This was why demon lords were such scary dudes. Who ever said we cooperated with each other? Anyone who saw these shambles would think the opposite.

"Rimuru," an exasperated-looking Daggrull said, "I know you have it tough. I've had a certain affinity for you ever since Deeno got pushed on you, but you have my sympathies for this as well."

What a nice guy! A giant and a demon lord, maybe, but you can't judge a book by its cover.

“Thanks, Sir Daggrull!”

“No need for that ‘sir’ stuff. Didn’t we just discuss this?”

Oh, right. I really need to start thinking like a demon lord. Too much self-deprecation can be harmful at times.

“All right. Well, thanks, Daggrull!”

“No need to worry about it,” he said with a nod. “But are we okay with Leon and all?”

“Yes,” chimed in Luminus. Considering how much they sniped at each other, they often seemed to be of similar minds about things. “He doesn’t look unusual, but if his mind’s been taken over, that is bad news for every one of us.”

All eyes were on me. They really needed to be talking to the man himself, but that didn’t seem to occur to anyone. I wasn’t capable of much more than conjecture on this topic, but there *was* one thing I had already confirmed earlier.

“Like I said, when Deeno double-crossed us, the labyrinth was all busted up and open to enemy invasion. I think that’s when he contacted the Mystic Lord Feldway.”

“Once he entered the labyrinth,” added Ramiris, “it became impossible to fully shut it away from the outside. So I don’t think they ever had a direct conversation or whatever, but they coulda used telepathy to communicate with each other, y’know?”

Nice to see her at least try to contribute. I reevaluated my opinion of her as I spoke to Guy.

“So I want to ask—what exactly happened over here, Guy? I imagine this was Velzard attacking you, but I want to know what transpired.”

“You noticed?”

“I believe that’s the first thing anyone would think after seeing this mess.”

It was obvious to everyone that Guy and Velzard had a fight. There wouldn’t have been all this carnage otherwise. But what I wanted to know was the

reason—or, really, how Velzard fell into enemy hands. Could her override circuit be tapped into from anywhere, or did you need to be a certain distance away? The answer to that would tell us how much of a threat this really was. Also, unlike Velzard and (presumably) Deeno, who both received their abilities from Veldanava, Leon's was probably created by himself and evolved to an ultimate. His override probably hadn't gone away, but for all we knew, maybe some sort of bug kept it from working. That'd explain why no orders had worked on Leon so far...but either way, it was crucial that we obtain some more accurate information.

"Like you said, that bastard Feldway penetrated our barrier of ice and snow and made his way in," Guy explained. "Mizeri and Raine stepped up to engage him, and I wanted to teach him a lesson or two as well...but then Velzard got in our way."

Hmm.

"So there was no contact, but he got pretty close to you?" I asked him. "Same situation as Deeno, then... But it's hard to figure out how to judge this."

"Meaning whether you need to be physically nearby to access the override circuit? Or do you think that's just what he's trying to make us think?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Well, Leon? Do you feel anything?"

"Nothing palpable, no. I am still myself, and I sincerely doubt anyone's taken over my mind."

Leon sounded wholly confident about that, but neither Lieutenant Kondo nor Velgrynd herself had actually realized they were being controlled. It was a little tough to trust him at face value.

"Right," said Guy. "So that means you still love me the most out of anyone—"

"No, you fool. It is Chloe, of course," Leon spat. "You hardly register in my mind at all."

Great. He's okay, then. That unwavering avowal definitely felt like Leon's own will. Besides, it's not like I had any solid evidence either way.

Just as Feldway was recorded in the labyrinth.

Ciel was right. When Chloe was facing off against Feldway, he said—quoting here—“*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! So that's where it was! It seems Sir Veldanava's will is for me to win after all!*” You could interpret that to mean that, until that point, neither Feldway nor Michael knew exactly who possessed an angelic ultimate skill. There was no guarantee that wasn't just an act on his part, but we couldn't go around self-doubting ourselves forever. My gut was telling me I was in the clear, so we needed to proceed on the assumption we could trust Leon.

We could be more certain if you used Predation on Leon and destroyed the override circuit itself.

Ciel made that sound all casual, but I had to say no. Preying upon Leon like that just didn't sit right with me. I suppose that might've been all the more reason why I wanted to trust him.

“Right. We won't reach any conclusion talking it out here. We could question him about all kinds of things, but I'd like to believe that he's okay. Let's call it a gray area...close to a black area, really...and see how things turn out!”

“You're fine with that?”

I nodded briskly at Guy. “I can't be absolutely certain on this, but I don't think the enemy knows where the angelic skill holders are located.”

“Do you have any basis for that?” asked a curious-looking Daggrull. I decided to lay out my thoughts to him.

“Well, I have full records from when Feldway fought us in Ramiris's labyrinth. Based on what he said during the battle, the only angelic skill holders they're aware of are the ones who received their abilities straight from Veldanava. If someone manifested one of those skills themselves, I don't think they can pick up on that until they're physically pretty close to them.”

“Right, yeah! I'm not really a fan of revealing labyrinth data in public like this, but if it's for a good cause, no complaints from me!”

“I appreciate it a lot,” I said, trying to assuage Ramiris. The labyrinth really was exceptional in all aspects, and I had no problem expressing my appreciation

for it.

"Hey, I'll never get sick of praise, y'know!"

She seemed to enjoy it, too. Not wanting this to become an endless cycle, I got back to the subject.

"Anyway, Leon hasn't made his skill public outside of here, so I think it'll be a while before the enemy finds out about it, if at all."

"Indeed," said a discouraged-looking Leon. "I'd be foolish to reveal the cards in my hand, save in exceptional circumstances like these."

"Yes," Luminus agreed, "Leon is right. I imagine he could be found out rather easily if he's approached at close range, so I agree that we can't fully rest easy about this, but it'd be ridiculous to be *too* wary of each other and ruin our relationships at a time like this."

"Mm... I have no objection to that."

Daggrull also agreed. They really *did* think alike, despite their differences. It was funny to see them constantly seething at each other, but they were still keeping their cool and making sound judgments, so I didn't see any problem with that.

"Yeah, I trust whatever Rimuru says, and Leon isn't lying, either!"

With Milim's seal of approval as well, this problem was fully solved...or so I thought, until Ramiris just had to get in another word.

"Right, so there ya go. We might need to keep an eye on Leon, but the problem is *who's* gonna do the watching!"

Great. If she tossed something like *that* in here...

"Rimuru?" said Guy.

"No. Don't say any more. I know what you want."

I knew it. I knew they'd want me to be Leon's observer. So I acquiesced.

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"Outside of Deeno the deserter, we've concluded that all seven of us in here are united under the same cause," I declared. "That, and I think we all

understand just how dangerous a foe this is.”

We’d figure out how to track Leon later.

“Now, Guy, what do you plan to do with this Michael thing?”

I focused on what Guy had to say.

“Huh? I’m gonna crush it, of course.”

“Mm. It will be all-out war, then.”

Luminus sounded thoughtful about it. It was the will of everyone else in here as well.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I’m getting so pumped now!”

“Heck yeah!” Ramiris agreed with Milim. “The time has come to show off what I can *really* do! Whether it’s Feldway or Michael, I’ll floor ‘em all with a single punch!”

“If this so-called Mystic Lord is back, we won’t be able to avoid a fight. Our very lands are at stake.”

Milim could back up her boasting with results, but Ramiris talking like that seemed pretty unrealistic to me. A punch from her wouldn’t do much, but her labyrinth was extremely vital to us, so I opted not to pick on her about it.

“Do we know just how large the enemy force is?” Leon asked.

Guy shook his head. “We know it consists of at least the Seven Primordial Angels, including Feldway and Deeno. That, and Michael, who’s serving as their supreme commander.”

“Hmm...and to that we can add Lady Velzard as well?” said Luminus. “A Temma War is never a breeze, but *this* one could prove quite a challenge.”

Pardon?

“A Temma War, you said?”

“Yes. A war that occurs approximately once every five hundred years. But isn’t that usually kicked off when whoever holds Ludora’s ability summons the angels?”

Daggrull was being awfully casual about this, but it was enough to surprise me and everybody else.

“What?! Do not make up stories like that, Daggrull!”

Luminus flared up at him, but Guy raised a hand to stop her.

“Calm down, Luminus. What Daggrull says is accurate. Ludora has an ability called Armageddon, you see, and he can use it to summon a force of angels and have them do whatever he wants. Ludora himself seemed to have trouble keeping control over that skill, though. It looks like he was only capable of giving them simple orders.”

As Guy explained, this battle occurred on a five-hundred-year cycle. However, since the summoned angels didn’t have any physical bodies, they wound up vanishing after no longer than a week’s time. I rued the fact that I wasn’t informed of this sooner.

“Question,” I said to Guy.

“Yes?”

“Could angels remain in this world if they’re granted physical bodies, like demons can?”

...Actually, I didn’t need to ask, did I? The tengu race—Benimaru’s wife Momiji among them—were created when angels were granted bodies by the wolfmen. With all the things that might happen in these wars, I could easily see lots of species being born that way.

But this did nothing to dispel my bad premonition.

It is the forbidden curse known as Dead Birthday.

Ciel was on point yet again. It knew exactly what I was thinking.

“You look worried about something. Speak up. I’ll listen to you.”

With Guy pressing me, I decided not to hide anything.

“Well, you guys know about Kazalim the Curse Lord, right? To tell the truth, Kazalim’s been taken over by the enemy, too, and he’s been creating a bunch of walking dead...”

I had given orders to stop this ceremony if they found a chance, but I didn't really know how effective that was, sadly.

"A Dead Birthday, you mean? How many thousands died in it?" Guy asked me.

"Around sixty thousand. The imperial members of Yuuki's Composite Division. So I think that created maybe ten of them max."

"Mm. Emphasizing quality over quantity, eh? They'll each at least have the power of a Clayman, then. Perfectly fine vessels for a Primordial to slip into."

Ah, I think Guy's got the wrong idea. My concerns lie elsewhere, so I better correct him while I can.

"No, um, those Seven Primordial Angels obtained physical bodies a long time ago. I think they made the transformation over on their world, with Feldway leading them. And Deeno's buddies, too..."

Um, what were their names?

"Pico and Garasha, right?"

Yeah, them!

Ramiris saved me once again. *Gotta thank her for that.*

"So what you're worried about is..."

"Right, I'm thinking these walking dead will serve as bodies for the high-level angels they summoned via the Dead Birthday. Angels have only a very thin sort of sentience, right? So if you let them set up shop inside the soul of something with much more defined self-awareness, I think you could create a new species of utter bruisers with angelic powers, you know?"

"""" ... """"

Guy and the other demon lords fell silent. After a few seconds, they began to talk among themselves, saying things like "Oh, come now" and "You scare me with your conjecturing sometimes." But it's not like I wanted to tell them stuff like that. The possibility just came to mind, is all.

"And you think there's a good chance of that happening, Rimuru?" Guy asked

me.

“Again, can you stop trying to push responsibility on me for everything I say?”

“Sure, sure. So what is it?”

“If it were me, I’d certainly make the attempt. Failure just means losing one walking dead, after all.”

“Yeah... I guess I’d do the same, too. No point having a huge army if they’re all weaklings.”

Guy and I nodded at each other, the other demon lords looking at us in disgust. What’s with that, huh? I think anyone would try it, if it’d boost their warpower and all.

“Don’t look at me like that!” I shouted. “I dunno what’s actually happening, but we need to think about worst-case scenarios, don’t we?”

“You’re right, but...,” Luminus said, kicking off the debate.

“You really *are* a menace. And the scariest thing of all is how you act like you can *do* something about that if it happens.”

“That’s right, Rimuru,” said Daggrull. “By ‘high-level angels,’ you’re talking about seraphim, but a body as powerful as Clayman’s would be able to support that well enough, I’m sure. The result could reach the level of an awakened demon lord, I imagine.”

“Mm. And if something like what Daggrull described appears—several of them, even—we too would need to brace ourselves,” added Luminus. “Louis and Gunther would have a hard time, at least.”

Instead of whining at me like I expected, they were whining more about how to deal with this.

“Sir Guy, everyone seems pretty worked up about this. Can you help restore some order here?” I asked.

“Whoa, whoa, I told you to drop the ‘sir’ already. We all have the right to speak as equals in here, don’t we? And it’s not like it’ll hurt you to step in and deal with this problem, either!”

“Oh, shut up! Like *you* ever pay me any respect. Why do *I* always get the short end of the stick, huh?!”

I was no longer holding back. It calmed me down a bit. Sure, Guy was scary, but we were good.

“What’s the big problem? Just kick their asses, and it’ll all work out fine!”

“Yeah! And we have my master Veldora here, too. You don’t need to be quakin’ in your boots *that* much!”

Milim and Ramiris had been the most consistently optimistic voices in this meeting. I was jealous of how unconcerned they were. As for Veldora, the guy Ramiris was placing her hopes on, he was...well, probably reading manga in the other room. He’d been talking recently about all this wondrous knowledge he’d uncovered, but it turned out he was just reading a long nonfiction historical series. He’ll probably be talking about Zhuge Liang’s brilliant strategy from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* pretty soon, and it’ll probably be up to me to conjure up the rest of the series for him, so I can’t say I’m too excited about any of that. At least he wasn’t bothering us in here.

“It’s not going to be easy, though. Both Lady Velzard and Lady Velgrynd are in enemy hands, aren’t they? Even with that wretched Veldora on our side, the enemy has a clear advantage! And it’s a silly idea to rely on that stupid dragon anyway.”

Luminus was right. Veldora might seem reliable, but he rarely was. He got all wimpy whenever his sisters were around, and he’d been caught by the enemy not long ago.

“Oh, I think we’re safe when it comes to Velgrynd.”

I was so distracted by everything that I kind of let that drop. A clear mistake, of course.

“Why are you so sure about that?”

Oops, I thought—but it was already too late. I hated standing up onstage like this and delivering all this tumultuous news, but by now, I had no choice but to be honest.

"Well, thanks to some stuff that happened during her battle with me, Velgrynd managed to escape Ultimate Dominion. Also, she doesn't have the ultimate skill Raguel any longer, so we don't have to worry about Michael controlling her."

“““Huhhh?!”””

Play dumb about it, play dumb about it...

"Hey, it was a really hard battle, y'know? I was totally absorbed by it, brain working on automatic...and the next thing I knew, I had a pretty good victory drop in my lap, sort of thing!"

The demon lords' doubtful eyes were killing me. But if I lost here, they'd probably make me reveal everything else I knew.

"What the hell did you do to her?"

Even Guy looked shocked for a change.

"That's, um, a trade secret..."

I had to keep mum about my abilities. They wouldn't believe me if I talked about them; all it'd do was place more suspicion on me. Maybe I was worrying too much, but I really felt I had to block this at all costs.

"Tsk! All that petty nonsense," Daggrull spat. "Why you gotta be so stingy, huh?"

I don't think it's a matter of that. Call it strategizing.

"Uh, no, I mean—I know you haven't experienced it, Daggrull, but the rest of us have seen our skills evolve now and then, right?"

"I haven't, though."

Yeah, thanks, Ramiris. I ignored her attempts to put a word in edgewise.

"Well, Velgrynd kinda ran into the same situation. During our battle, it's like... you know, she got her senses back, just like that. She told me that Raguel evolved on her right then."

I was embellishing the story a little bit—okay, a lot—but I think I got my point across.

"True, yeah..."

"I don't totally remember, but I think something like that's happened to me, yeah," Milim noted.

"Hmm... Skills evolving amid pitched battle?" Luminus mused. "It doesn't seem impossible to me. Not *normal*, but..."

"That was the case with me, too, actually. I was walking the line between life and death, and I wagered everything on my own potential. That was how I obtained Metatron, and even now, I have no regrets about that."

Leon seemed convinced, at least, given the experience he had. That was a relief. If I claimed that Velgrynd didn't tell me about her current abilities, I could pretend I never knew about Cthuga, her new ultimate skill. It wasn't technically my fault anyway. Ciel did all that stuff for me.

"...I thought ultimate skills were as far as they could go, but apparently there is still room to evolve? Tsk. I got a lot to learn, I see. Guess I was kidding myself into thinking I was at my limits."

With that final observation from Guy, the topic was put to rest.

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I had the feeling that our debate wasn't making much progress, so I decided it was time for one more recap. It was vital that we had an accurate picture of our enemy's powers; this wasn't something we could gloss over.

"So you're certain that Velgrynd is all right?" Guy asked me.

"Yeah. She's protecting Masayuki the Hero right now. He and I are on friendly terms, so we agreed to help each other when we need to."

"We can count her as on our side, then?"

Hmm... I didn't want to make that call for her, but she'd probably lend a hand if asked.

"Well, we should just be glad she's not on theirs, shouldn't we? I, for one, never want to fight her again."

"Fair enough. Almost no one could beat her in a fight, I'm sure, so good job on that one. With Velzard already opposing us, we'd be up the creek if Velgrynd

switched sides, too.”

Guy sounded like he hated the idea, and I’m sure he meant it. I’d say a good half of us in the room didn’t stand a chance against a True Dragon. The only ones who could take a swing at her were me, Guy, and Milim—maybe Daggrull, too? Either way, taking an enemy like her out of the picture was nothing but a godsend.

Oh, and one more thing.

“And while we’re talking about Velgrynd, let me bring this up, too. So four out of the Seven Primordial Angels have traveled back to their own world, Feldway included...but three of them attacked Ramiris’s labyrinth.”

“You bet they did! And with *my* talents, I trundled them right outta there.”

Ramiris nodded, like this was news to her. I kept going before she derailed my train of thought.

“Um, regardless of the details... They introduced themselves to us as Feldway the Mystic Lord and the Three Mystic Leaders serving him.”

“Ah, yeah, they’ve been plotting behind the scenes for ages to wipe out the humans on this world,” said Guy. “We opposed them, calling them the ‘magic race’ and so on, but they were actually mystics all along.”

“I thought ‘magic race’ was the generic term for anyone that fought against humans, but that’s where it came from? Huh. But anyway, out of these Three Mystic Leaders, Velgrynd’s already destroyed one of them. Just something to keep in mind.”

Cornu was the name of the guy, I think—the one who riled up Velgrynd by talking trash about Masayuki. I could sense that she had grown stronger, but one-hitting a Mystic Leader? Scary.

Then again, this Cornu didn’t seem to have the same lofty aspirations as Feldway or even Zarario for that matter. That’s just something I sensed looking back at the video footage...but after analyzing everything that happened in the labyrinth, Ciel said that while they were mostly equal in existence points, Cornu was a step behind in terms of actual strength. I’m not sure how it came to that conclusion, but I trusted in it. Thus, while I wasn’t trying to underestimate my

foes at all, there was no need to worry about someone who was already destroyed. That's why I decided to tell them.

"I'm sure it was Cornu, right? I've known him for years and years, and I'm not exactly shedding a tear for him right now."

Guy sounded like he couldn't care less about the man. It meant one less enemy to worry about, and he was glad for that, but that's about it. Very Guy-like of him, I thought, so I moved on without commenting on it...or I meant to, but Milim interrupted me.

"Hey, now seems like a good time for this. I got something to report, too!"

I decided to let her have her say.

"So one of the other Mystic Leaders is this girl named Obela, and a li'l while ago she asked to serve under me outta nowhere. We had this meeting totally in secret, so I don't think Feldway or any of the other mystics are on to her!"

This didn't throw me for a total loop, but I wasn't sure how to react to it, either. My first thought was: *That's her move, huh?*

"W-wow. Great job, Milim. How did you win her over?"

"Yeah, tell us. Obela's not as narrow-minded as Cornu was. I think she's a pretty serious woman, too. The last person I'd expect to switch sides. So how did that subject come up?"

Me and Guy questioned Milim at the same time. Our eyes met, indicating that we were thinking the same thing: In essence, we were concerned that Milim was being tricked. We both nodded at each other.

"With my natural wiles, of course! She understood how amazing I was, so she came up to me with the offer! It's tough being so popular, huh?"

She was smiling through this, but we weren't about to take her at her word.

"Don't get carried away like that," admonished Guy. "It might be one of the enemy's schemes."

"Oh, it's fine," replied Milim, not listening to him at all. "Obela didn't tell me any lies or whatever!"

"Hmm..." I murmured. "Well, Milim, there's this manga I read about the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and one chapter's about this really obvious trick they call 'ambush poison.' Basically, they send this guy over to their opponent's side, pretending to surrender and asking to join them, and then they can spy on them all they want to. We're talking something that's been around since ancient times. And here she is, coming over right when war's about to break out. That's all but asking us to question her motives, isn't it?"

Veldora was reading that manga right now. "*Now I, too, am a master strategist,*" I recall him saying, but if it were that simple to train a military tactician, war would be a lot easier for all of us. Besides, the story setting's so different from here, I don't think it's useful as much more than a reference.

Either way, this was clearly suspicious, something I tried to convince Milim of. But she just gave me her usual bold smile.

"It's no problem! I doubted her, too, but I talked it over later with Carillon and Frey, and we all agreed to trust in Obela."

Hmm. Milim was no fool, of course. I'm sure she did all the necessary checking. And if Carillon and Frey made the same decision, maybe we could trust her after all.

"What did you and Obela talk about?" I decided to ask.

"Well..."

Then, upon hearing the whole story, I opted to make the same decision.

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"So Obela's over in the Mystic Palace, tracking Ivalage the World-Destroyer Dragon? In that case, she wouldn't have the free time or capacity to try anything against us anyway."

That was the conclusion Guy made after Milim finished. Ivalage, and the cryptids under it, were apparently hell-bent on destruction and weren't open to negotiation. If Obela got distracted at all, it could lead to Ivalage's return, so it was natural to assume she wouldn't be part of any invasion.

But something still bothered me.

"If Feldway really doesn't care if the world's destroyed, like Obela said, wouldn't he try to release Ivalage on us?"

Feldway and Michael wanted to resurrect Veldanava, but even if they failed, we'd still be in big trouble. They might lose all hope and turn to wanton destruction. Nothing's scarier than someone who doesn't consider the consequences of their actions. That's why I brought it up, however:

"I find that hard to believe, Rimuru."

It seemed like a perfectly viable scenario to me, but it was surprisingly unpopular among my peers. First Luminus shot it down, followed by Daggrull. "Feldway," he said, "isn't enough of a fool to try using a monster too strong and uncontrollable for him to handle."

Oh, so Ivalage is stronger than him?

"It was a real pain last time, lemme tell ya," added Ramiris. "Guy took the dragon on, but I had to pitch in to make sure the whole planet didn't get busted up!"

"Gah-ha-ha! Yeah, Ivalage really *could* destroy a planet if you're not careful. Fight the wrong way, and you're gonna have a lot of trouble on your hands," said Daggrull.

"Maybe it'll destroy his foes for him, but what about after that? You can't really rule a world if it's been torn to shreds," I offered.

Huh... Guess I was being unrealistic. Ivalage honestly *did* seem like some kind of freak.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Just the kind of opponent I like!" Milim crowed. "If it decides to rear its ugly head around me, I'm gonna give it a good thrashing!"

"Don't."

"Forget it."

"Yeah, no way!"

"Milim," Guy started, "me and everyone else here understand how strong you are, but you need to think this through. Not that I'm one to talk, but consider the damage you might cause to the surroundings."

"Oooh, come on, I know how to let up a little, y'know? So whether it's this world-destroying dragon or not, just a quick punch or two, and—"

"Okay, okay, fine. Realistically speaking, if Ivalage gets revived, then sure, I'll take it on. I've been wanting to settle the score with it anyway. The next chance I have, I *will* take it out."

Guy's voice resonated ominously across the room. Nobody was going to challenge him on that. Milim looked a tad put off, but we all agreed that should Ivalage show up, Guy would take care of things.

Now, back to Obela.

"Would it be possible," queried Daggrull, "to ask her about enemy internals and such?"

"I tried, but it didn't seem like she knows very much about their warpower over in this world," Milim replied. "Feldway's a pretty suspicious guy, so maybe he gets anxious about people asking him too many questions."

"Obela's right about that," agreed Ramiris. "Feldway's a smart fella, and I'm sure he doesn't want his staff to know more than they need to."

"So he just gives people orders and sends them off?" I asked. It reminded me of at least one annoying boss I'd had.

"Not exactly," said Guy, leaning back as if recalling a memory. "The way he thinks, if you're actively trying to carry out the tactics he gave you, then you shouldn't even *have* the time to worry about other people. Obela's smart not to pry into him."

If she wanted to deceive us, she could have earned our trust by divulging some false intelligence. If she'd simply said "I don't know" instead, that actually would have improved our trust in her a fair amount. I highly doubted Feldway and I saw eye to eye about very much, though.

"Thinking about your team as nothing but pawns... Pretty self-righteous of him. I bet he thinks that everything he conceives is correct."

I couldn't help but speak my mind. Guy smiled back at me.

"Is that sarcasm meant for me?"

"Not at all!"

Careful there. Guy isn't self-righteous—more like despotic. He sees the demons serving him as *less* than pawns. Best not to inadvertently stir him up like that.

"For now," I said to take his mind off it, "let's lean toward trusting in her and see how things work out, maybe?"

Everyone nodded back at me.



With Obela behind us, we returned to the main subject. Getting sidetracked this much was starting to tire me out.

"I swear," I said out loud, "this meeting's not going anywhere at all. Does anyone *else* in here have any secrets they're not sharing?"

"""*You're* one to talk!""""

Fair point. I probably had the most secrets of everyone, so that statement was a mistake. Regretting it, I focused back on the meeting, which was mostly being led by Luminus at the moment.

"Regardless, it's hard to build cooperation between ourselves if we hardly see each other. So let me step up and try to summarize matters."

With that, she ran down all the forces our enemy had. Michael was their leader, Velzard the Ice Dragon serving under his rule. There was Feldway the Mystic Lord, and his assistant Zarario of the Three Mystic Leaders.

Zarario was tasked with watching over the insectors, led by Zeranus the Insect Lord. Zeranus must've had his own staff, too, but Obela didn't know much about them—another unknown, and honestly, it was this force I was the most curious about. All the insectors I knew, at least, were scary strong. Zegion and Apito go without saying, of course, but there was also Razul, the guardian deity of the west, and Minaza, a Single Digit (number six, I think) who Shion defeated. Zeranus looked like a handful to me, and I'm sure he had a lot of powerful insectors under him, something we'd need to watch out for.

Then there was the trio of Deeno, Pico, and Garasha. Being as powerful as an

awakened demon lord was trouble enough, but we didn't know what kind of ultimate skills they had, if any. It wouldn't be weird if they possessed some of their own ultimate skills, so it was best to assume they did.

And that just left...

"...Those walking dead with angels housed in them? Hmm. If they're about equal to us, that makes them a menace indeed. If we had an accurate idea of their numbers, at least, that would put my mind at ease."

"You can't ask for the world like that, Daggrull," Luminus countered. "We should be glad we know what we do and form a strategy based on that."

"How do you mean?" retorted Leon. "Do you want to decide who will take on whom in battle?"

It sounded like a waste of time to me, but it wasn't meaningless, either.

"Well...at the very least, Leon, we know that *you* shouldn't try fighting Michael," Daggrull replied.

That was a given. He'd be in Michael's thrall, and that'd be it for him. In fact, we all needed to work together to make absolutely sure that didn't happen. I was concerned that Feldway might have these mind-control abilities as well, not just Michael...but after examining all the info, I now had at least a vague idea about how that worked.

"So listen, it looks like Michael's abilities can be transferred to other people...including his mind-control skills, to a certain extent," I told everyone. "Thus, I think we're gonna need to keep Leon away from Feldway, too."

We needed to assume that Feldway was borrowing that skill, much like Lieutenant Kondo did.

"How troublesome," Luminus said. "If Leon were to be taken over, that would tip the balance of power in rapid order."

Hearing her, I realized I had forgotten to say something.

"Oh right—and it's not only Leon who's in danger, either."

"Mm? What do you mean?"

"Well, like I just said, in the fight not too long ago, Veldora fell into enemy hands for a bit."

"...I am *very* keen to hear more about this," the bewildered Luminus urged.

So I told them all about Regalia Dominion, an ability of Michael's that gave him absolute control over pretty much any target. I avoided talking about Chloe, since she'd already taken care of that herself. If things had gotten really bad, I'm sure Ciel would've forcibly gotten itself involved, so I just trusted that it would save me if needed. Thus I stuck entirely to how Veldora acted in battle.

"""" ...

"You *were* the one who asked if anyone was holding any more secrets, weren't you, Rimuru?" asked Guy.

Uh-oh.

"Oh, um...did I?"

"Yes!"

"You sure did!" said Ramiris.

"That you did," added Daggrull.

"Absolutely," agreed Luminus.

"I'm certain you did."

I had nobody on my side. "It wasn't anything like a *secret*," I pleaded, "just something I forgot to say earlier."

...Nobody was buying it. Why me? Ramiris knew about all this, too...but bringing that up wouldn't improve my situation any. So I gave up and apologized.

*

With the other demon lords all peeved at me, it proved surprisingly difficult to smooth things over. We were back on track, at least, but looking at matters, we really were in just a terrible situation. Not only had we lost key firepower, but the enemy had in turn gained some. It was like one player in a chess game getting to replace any pieces they lost, and I honestly wasn't sure how we were

gonna win under these conditions. It was my fault for forgetting to mention that earlier, and I'm sure it badly unnerved everyone who heard it.

"So is anyone here being influenced by Regalia Dominion, then?" Luminus asked.

"No worries there. People with angelic skills don't seem to realize they're being mind-controlled, but Regalia Dominion is more of a forced thing, so you lose yourself and start acting weird, like, immediately. With Veldora, we're connected by our souls anyway, so he told me that he was taken over the moment it happened."

"I see. So how did you free Veldora from that?"

"That—"

This question again? Well, I ate him up and Ciel did a bit of Ability Adjust magic on him, but I had no intention of being honest about that. No one would believe me anyway. So I had to conjure up another story.

"It was just like with Velgrynd. We were involved in this heated battle for who knows how long, and then Veldora evolved his own abilities. I guess you could say that our friendship won the day, yeah?"

"""" ...

The stares were almost painful. I could tell that everyone found this a little hard to believe, but that was my story and I had to stick with it.

"You know, Rimuru," Guy began, "I fought pretty hard against Velzard myself, but *she* didn't show any signs of evolving her skills."

"Hey, I'm sure it varies from dragon to dragon."

I knew expecting them to believe any of this was asking way too much of my peers.

"It *varies*, eh...?"

No dice? I'm being doubted *so* damn much in here. What'll I do? I *could* always just tell them the truth—it doesn't really matter whether they believe it or not. But if I go with that move...

If you go with that move, Master, you will be asked to fight against anyone who's been mind-controlled, and your ability set will be pored over with a fine-toothed comb.

Right, I'm sure it would. It was all Ciel's doing anyway, not mine—I couldn't even begin to explain it. Keeping quiet was definitely the way to go.

"Enough," Luminus said. "Clearly he's in no hurry to talk, and I'm sure it was another incomprehensible miracle on his part anyway. If we can tell who's under its influence, I'd say Regalia Dominion isn't as much of a threat as Ultimate Dominion. The question here is how we'll counter it."

The way she saw it, at least we could tell when it was happening. What we *really* needed to do was discuss how to deal with Michael and his force. I nodded my agreement.

"Instead of deciding who fights whom, why don't we work out what moves we'll make based on where they might strike us?"

Guy nodded. "I agree with Rimuru. The enemy's no fool, so I doubt they'll try spreading their forces wide."

We clearly needed a way to call for help if it turned out to be a huge enemy force, or if one of us ran into something we had trouble with. We knew that, but there were problems to address.

"All right, but *we're* spread out, too, aren't we?" I asked. "Should we all stay in one place to make sure we're ready whenever the enemy shows up?"

"Hmm, that won't work."

"Right?"

Looks like Guy's on my side, then.

Personally, my plan was to defend my nation with my life. Surely Leon and Luminus would hate to leave their homeland, and the same was true for Daggrull and Milim as well. Okay, I had my doubts about Milim, but I was certain about everyone else. Thus, we needed a system where we could send reinforcements anywhere we might be attacked.

"True enough," said Luminus. "We have an obligation to defend our own

nations. If worse comes to worst, we may need to abandon our territories, but I'd very much like that to be a last resort."

"Yes, I agree. And don't worry, Luminus," Daggrull urged. "If *you* abandon your land, I'll gladly take it for you."

"Don't give me that! I have *no* intention of letting you have it, so don't even think about it."

Daggrull was ready to take the land, and Luminus was ready to stop him. But beyond their squabbling, it was clear that nobody could leave their home bases.

"What will *you* do, Guy?" I asked. "Ramiris lives in my nation, but you don't really have much in your territory that you need to defend at all costs, do you?"

"Not really, no. Maybe I'll pay a visit to Leon. I'm worried about him."

Leon scowled at that, but I could understand his concern. He *was* my biggest worry, and it wasn't like he had been fully cleared of all doubt yet. That was why we talked about me keeping tabs on him. So Guy was being perfectly valid.

If Guy will be there, maybe I don't need to watch Leon after all...?

"But here, Rimuru, you have all kinds of extra staff you can send out, don't you? Go deploy them to Luminus, Daggrull, Milim...and Leon, too, while you're at it."

Huh?

Whoa, whoa...

This sudden demand from Guy plunged me into the depths of bewilderment.

*

To make a long story short, I couldn't say no to him. I bravely resisted, but Guy wasn't interested in hearing it. Even worse, he ordered me to set up transport circles in each of our domains so people could travel to and fro quickly.

It made me want to shout at him that I wasn't his employee, but there was one thing stopping me: the fact was that I could never, ever beat him. So it was better just to give up fast. When Guy was serious about something, the sheer pressure he put on you was far too staggering to defy. Maybe I could force my

way through it, but it was a lot easier for me to just surrender.

Who should I deploy, and to where? I needed people with consistent transportation and Thought Communication skills, the ability to work alone in any situation, and a decent resistance to mind control. Along those lines, I could think of three demonesses perfect for the job. But I had already assigned Testarossa to tackle assorted schemes of ours around the Eastern Empire, and I didn't think I could tap her for this. Carrera and Ultima would have to be my main players. Maybe a few people from my cabinet, too.

"First off," I began, "I think Geld would be the best guy to send to Milim's domain. I need to get construction back on track over there, and you know each other already, so I'm pretty sure he'd sign on for it."

"Great! Yeah, everybody loves him," Milim agreed. "And speaking of which, Middray's really keen on seeing Gabil sometime, too. He said he wanted to spar with him again."

Oh yeah? Not a bad idea, maybe. I had assigned Ultima to train Gabil, and just a few days later, he was already staring at me with tears in his eyes. Maybe Middray could be a nice break for him. Ultima would also join him in that case, but since Tempest was still in war mode, there wasn't much police work for her to do anyway. Plus, I could call them right back as needed, so this seemed easy enough to commit to.

"All right. In that case, I'll send Geld, Gabil, and Ultima to Milim's domain."

"Okay! Looking forward to it!"

First one down. Next came the Holy Empire of Lubelius.

"So, as for you, Luminus, do you have any requests?"

I've learned a thing or two in negotiations like this. I knew she'd fly into a rage if I suggested sending Veldora over. I figured it was better to talk things out before stepping on any landmines.

"Hmm, let's see..."

She thought for a moment before answering. Guess asking that question was the smart thing to do.

"I'd like to have Shion, the woman you came in with. She's visited my land before, so she'd be familiar with things."

I knew Luminus was a huge fan of Shion's violin skills. It didn't strike me as strange that she remembered her.

"All right, I'll send Shion over. Her, and...maybe Adalmann and his assistants, too."

Adalmann knew Luminus as well. He had some beefs with the Seven Days Clergy, I think, but that was all in the distant past now, so it'd probably be fine.

"Hmm. Yes, I did cause some...trouble for him before. It could be interesting to provide him with some of my teachings. Very well. I accept."

"Roger that!"

Luminus was now taken care of.

"Now," Daggrull said, "who will you send to my domain? I don't know any of your underlings personally, so I suppose it doesn't matter too much..."

True enough. If anybody's okay with him, then...

"I'll send Carrera."

"Carrera?"

"Yeah. You might know her as Jaune, the Original—"

"Jaune?!!" he shouted, looking tremendously alarmed. "Don't tell me you've tamed *that* firebrand!"

"I dunno about 'tamed,' exactly, but...yeah, kind of."

"You'll just have to accept that, Daggrull. I know you have things to say about that, but now's not the time for it."

"And by the way," added Luminus, "when he said Ultima, he meant Violet. I am just as exasperated about it as you, trust me."

Oh, that's right. The domain Ultima ruled over overlapped with Luminus's and Daggrull's lands, apparently, so they had known each other for a while. Luminus's comment made Daggrull shout out "Gehhhh?!" in abject surprise.

"Yeah, I'm real exasperated, too!" he said to her.

"And it's not just Jaune and Violet, either. There's simply no point arguing over all the insane things Rimuru has done by now."

They were having their way with my good name. Milim was nodding along as well, and honestly, wasn't she supposed to be on *my* side? Whatever.

"So...yeah. I'll send Carrera over to you, okay, Daggrull?"

"Wait! Wait just a minute!"

He stood up from his seat, loudly protesting, arms open wide like he was about to start dancing. *Hang on, is he trying to defy me?*

"Objection! I do believe I have the right to refuse this!"

His face told me just how desperate he was. Clearly he wasn't going to give an inch. Leon, meanwhile, was flashing a calm, collected smile, all but proclaiming out loud how glad he was Carrera wasn't coming his way.

"Listen, Rimuru. If you send that wild marauder to me, my Damargania will fall in just a few days. I'm not here to make demands, but could you at least select someone a little less hotheaded?"

Personality counts more for him than strength, I guess. Which, I dunno, a lot of my Tempest friends have a screw or two loose, so...

I decided to ask him some more questions. Daggrull's domain was the Holy Void of Damargania, a barren land with little in the way of resources. Most of its structures had been abandoned and reclaimed by the sand dunes. His image of Carrera couldn't be worse—he basically saw her as this vengeful destroyer who constantly tossed around nuclear magic spells as a kind of hobby. Milim's nickname was "the Destroyer," and as far as Daggrull was concerned, Carrera was worse than that.

"Gee, she's not *that* bad of a—"

"Yes she is!"

"I'd agree with Daggrull. She damaged my own lands on a daily basis once, so I think I understand his feelings all too well."

Daggrull was staying absolutely firm, and now the normally taciturn Leon was regaling us with tales of Carrera's violent streak. I had to believe their stories—really, I had no choice.

So what did that leave me with?

"All right. In that case, why don't I have Carrera go to Leon instead?"

They seemed to know each other, and Guy would be over there anyway. He'd keep Carrera from going too far out of line, right? A pretty good idea, if I do say so myself. And yet:

"Surely you have to be joking! Did you even listen to what I just said?! I absolutely refuse. I would *never* let that demon set foot in my lands! *Ever!*"

Daggrull was all smiles, but Leon was putting his foot down hard. He was angry enough that I could practically see the italics he was adding to his rant, so I must've struck one serious nerve with him. It was kind of funny to see, so I resolved that I'd send Carrera over no matter what. But Guy stopped me.

"Rimuru, you know you can't send Carrera there."

"Why not?"

"Because she likes to pick fights with me, too, all the time. And whenever it looks like she's going to lose, she leaves a few parting words and tries to run away from me, do you know that? *This* war isn't any kind of game, and I don't want to waste my stamina on extraneous distractions. Am I clear?"

He was correct, of course. And the dreadful tinge to his eyes indicated just how serious he was about this.

"Now, *if* Carrera was absolutely faithful in following your orders, and *if* you are willing to take responsibility for whatever happens, then maybe I'll think about it, all right? But you know that's impossible, isn't it?"

Hmm... Having it put it in such stark terms didn't make me too confident. I could stop her if I was standing next to her, but with Carrera, once you take your eyes off her, you just never know.

"Right, of course not! Carrera's the girl who tried popularizing this game in my labyrinth where she tried to punch a hole through as many floors as she could! I

wish she'd stop with that! It's *really* annoying!"

"Wow. She was being *that* reckless? Guess she was a problem child in more places than I knew about.

"For cases like that, Diablo's the one responsible for supervising her, so I'll put the screws on him."

As I deflected responsibility, I thought about what I should do.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I dunno, I kinda like Carrera! I'd love to see her, so you can just send her over to my domain as a guest."

Oh! Here's Milim giving me exactly the kind of offer I want!

"You sure about that, Milim?"

"Totally!"

Great. Problem solved. Milim would host Carrera, and I'd send Ultima over to Daggrull instead. Frey might yell at Milim about it later, but that was none of my business.

Let's move on before Milim changes her mind.

"Okay, I'll put Carrera over in Milim's domain and give Daggrull Ultima. I guess she's familiar with the area, and you don't have any complaints about her, right?"

"No, I don't want—"

"Great! It's settled, then. Daggrull, play nice with Ultima for me, okay?"

I took that as a green light from Guy. Daggrull was about to say something, but I just pretended I'd imagined that.

So now I had my assignments for Luminus, Milim, and Daggrull's lands. That left Leon's Golden Land of El Dorado. Who would I send there?

"You know, if Guy's going there anyway, do I really have to send any of my own people? Besides, Guy can watch Leon to check if he's suspect. I just don't see the need to dilute my fighting power for Leon's sake."

I had been wanting to say that. Why did I have to send my forces out of the nation when this huge war was about to break out?

I mean, it wasn't all *that* bad, of course. The three demonesses could teleport back home in a crisis, and at worst I could just summon them back anyway. I needed to send Geld out because we couldn't hold up that construction project forever, and Gabil, well, he was kind of bodyguarding Geld, too, you could say. Geld had more pure fighting power, but defense was his main specialty, so it'd be more helpful if we had a dedicated attacker with him. Gabil was good at both offense and defense, so I thought pairing him with Geld would produce some pretty neat outcomes.

As for Adalmann and his crew, I really wanted them to focus on labyrinth defense...but sending Shion alone to Luminus's domain made me anxious. She's beyond well qualified on the fighting front, but her behavior is, well, dicey at times. Adalmann's mastered all types of magic, and he told me he knows teleportation travel like the back of his hand. He knows Luminus, and I'm pretty sure he'll be perfectly polite around her. I thought it was a pretty appropriate assignment, really.

So all that was set in stone. And now I didn't have anyone left to send to Leon.

"Hey, quit being so stingy. You're practically swimming in Million-Class underlings," Guy spat.

"Yeah, I am, but I still need people to protect my nation, so..."

"You worry far too much. You have Veldora, I presume? And how about that Benimaru character? No one would complain about having him."

"You know I can't do that! Benimaru just got married! And he has *two* wives! And they're *both* pregnant! What kind of ogre would I be if I sent him off on assignment until who knows when right at this huge milestone in his life?!"

Benimaru was ogre-derived himself, however, so he wouldn't mind... Jokes like that weren't funny at this juncture, though. If he *wanted* to go, that was another thing, but...

Back when lifetime employment was still a mainstream thing in Japan, big companies were known to send employees out on long-term business trips at the worst possible timing—right after marrying, or just after they built a new house—merely to test out their faith in the firm. If there was a good reason for it, then fine, but the way I heard the story, this was mainly done to harass

employees. Any company that tried that today would get beaten down and go bankrupt in a hurry. And there's no way I wanted any injustice like *that* taking place in my own nation...but that was beside the point.

"Anyway," I told Guy, "I gotta give a firm no on sending out Benimaru."

"Pfft. Your reasoning makes no sense to me, but fine. So who else, then...?"

"Oh, um, we can send Diablo out!"

I kept forgetting about him because he was always right next to me—but if I deployed Shion, I might as well deploy Diablo, too. If I left one behind and not the other, that was bound to lead to arguments. Shuna was my *real* secretary, too, so I doubted them being gone would hobble me much.

That's the best decision for everyone, isn't it?

"Diablo, you said?"

"Yeah. He's pretty strong, too. He'll be fine by himself."

"Hold on just one moment, Rimuru."

Guy was speaking very softly, but nothing he'd say would be good news. So I ignored him and tried to bring this topic to a conclusion.

"And, you know, I have a lot to deal with right now. I don't have enough personnel to pass out just for funsies, but I'm still handing out some of my best aces to everyone. So if you could show some consideration for that, please?"

When it came to Guy, it was better to start with your final offer than try to negotiate. With that in mind, I recalled my old job as a general contractor, way back when. The HQ chief once fought off one of our partner firms asking for more personnel on a project. Claiming he couldn't give up any more, stating that he'd already given them his best crew and there was nothing else to offer, that kind of thing. I'm sure the other side thought something like "We don't have enough people *because* your staff is so incompetent!" most of the time, but nobody was foolishly honest enough to actually say that.

Everybody involved, me included, knew that there was little to no sincerity behind this defense. Whether the staff we provided really *were* the best or not...well, that depended on luck, mostly. If the local government or partner

firm had the right to name who they wanted, that could be a lot more... interesting, though. It certainly gave insight into exactly *who* your partners actually valued, and who they wouldn't miss at all if they were gone. But anyway, that's all well in the past. Right now, my main goal was to palm Diablo off to Guy.

"Youuu..."

"Is there a problem?"

"..."

"..."

I waited for Guy's answer, staying dignified on the outside but sweating it hard on the inside.

"Tsk. You're getting more and more shameless every time I see you. But fine. I'll put up with Diablo this time."

Whew! I won!

Leon gave me no time to bask in my victory: "Well, I don't care who I receive. I'd normally want to call Chloe over, but not in these circumstances, of course. And come to think of it, Rimuru...if you're interested, you should come visit my nation alongside Diablo. I promised I would invite you, but I haven't gotten around to it yet."

Bringing Chloe over is out of the question, but maybe I should consider paying Leon a visit?

"Okay. I'll need to leave Chloe behind, but if our schedules work out, I'll drop by sometime in the future. I'll contact you through Diablo in advance when I do."

I couldn't move Chloe around; she needed bed rest for now. Telling Leon that could lead to all kinds of unintended consequences, so I was better off keeping quiet about it. His invite, though, I didn't mind accepting at all. I may not have the free time for it with everything going on, but just sitting back home and waiting for Michael's side to act would get boring fast. Once all my prep work was done, I was planning to gradually segue back to my normal lifestyle.

"Very well. I look forward to hearing from you."

"Sure. And if Diablo causes you guys any trouble, just let me know. I'll reeducate him right then and there...and I won't take no for an answer."

"Got it. We won't be shy to reach out, okay? Give him a good lesson for us."

This was Guy reinforcing the point, not Leon, even though Diablo hadn't done anything yet. I wonder why they have it out with each other so much? But maybe I'm better off not knowing. It's probably a bunch of drama I don't care about.

So, with that thought in mind, I had a general idea of our future direction.

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"Right," began Guy once we returned to the large reception hall we started the day in. "I'm going to set off with Leon right now, but I'm counting on all of you to take action as directed."

"Whoa, whoa, you're not gonna tell *us* what's going on?"

"Mizeri told us some of it, but you could at least explain what direction you're going to take."

Carillon and Frey had a word or two for Guy, it seems, and their concerns seemed valid to me. Guy always had a tendency to hurry things along to their conclusion too quickly. If he was convinced about something, nobody else's opinion mattered; he'd happily leave them in the dark.

However, there was no way Guy could explain everything. And not just him. Milim and Ramiris were too childish to remember it all, Daggrull and Leon weren't exactly gifted public speakers, and Luminus would never volunteer for such an annoying job. We'd get nowhere with any of them, so I needed to step up and do the talking instead.

"Well, regarding what we've all decided upon...you've been briefed about our enemies, right?" I asked.

"Sure, yeah," Guy replied. "Velzard's on the opposing side, huh?"

"It looks that way, yes. But not because she's betrayed us or anything..."

I gave them my organized summary. It really *was* smart to have only us seven

demon lords in that conference. If we'd brought our attendants, we would've made even less progress. Guy saw that in advance, so it was right for him to make that choice—all those years of experience weren't for nothing. But, really, Guy had it pretty rough, too. We demon lords had, well, an idiosyncrasy or two, and it took an extraordinary sort of mental strength to bring all of us to a common agreement.

That was how I mentally reevaluated Guy as I finished up my summary.

"I didn't think it was very like you to be so frantic like that...but things are a lot more serious than I imagined."

Frey was amazed. I think she regretted hearing about it.

"Yeah, well, I've got all this power. I wanna see how far I can go against a True Dragon, but if it's Lady Velzard, there's no way I'm ever gonna win."

Carillon was talking as boldly as usual, but I could see the sweat on his brow. I'm sure he grasped the levity of this situation, trying to figure out a way through it.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Your name was Carillon, right? I have never come close to defeating my elder sister. If you wish to test yourself, you should do so against me first!"

"Master, I *seriously* don't think it's the right time for this. You have to be more serious or else Rimuru'll yell at you again."

Hmm. Maybe Ramiris is right—I *do* need to yell at him. But Veldora's over-optimistic chatter is doing a lot to lighten the mood. Getting *too* serious will only serve to depress us all.

"Oh, really?" Frey said. "Well, you'd better pool your strength so you can resist being taken over. You can't resist Regalia Dominion at all?"

"He can," I chimed in, "as long as his will's strong enough. In Veldora's case, the enemy was aiming for a sneak attack when his resistance would be at its lowest, so..."

"Indeed, I am sure I could've repelled it normally...but it was right in the middle of a battle against my sister, you understand. It was a touch difficult to

handle.”

Difficult? You got brainwashed, dude.

I wished he wouldn’t try to downplay it like that.

“Rimuru,” Daggrull said as I rolled my eyes at Veldora, “do you think you could perhaps send Veldora to my domain while you’re at it? Because I must admit, Vio—er, Ultima and I don’t see eye to eye on too much. Veldora, at least, I’m more familiar with. We know each other’s dispositions.”

He was asking me for a last-minute reshuffling of my job orders, and sadly I had to turn him down.

“Sorry, but I’m afraid you’re barking up the wrong tree. Veldora doesn’t work for me; he’s more my friend and equal, so I can’t decide for him.”

If *he* was fine with it, I had no right to intervene either way...but I wasn’t about to ignore Veldora’s own desires and decide for him. Let’s see what he thinks.

“Well, Veldora? You have an invite—what’ll you do?”

Veldora gave me the haughtiest smile possible. “Heh-heh-heh... Daggrull, I do sincerely wish I could stride in to help you, but I am a busy dragon. I have an obligation to keep Ramiris’s dungeon protected, for one!”

In other words, I realized as I looked at him, he was going to do what he always did—sit around the labyrinth and waste everyone’s time.

“Master!!”

I felt bad for Ramiris, shouting with tears in her eyes, but I genuinely felt that Veldora was just looking for the easy way out.

“Ah. Too bad, then. I’d have quite a bit of trouble defending myself against Velzard if she attacked, you know. Having you on hand to help out would put my mind very much at ease.”

“Kwa—kwah-ha-ha, *kwaaaaahh-ha-ha-ha!* Yes, yes, with someone as powerful as me around, even my sister is nobody to fear. A pity, then! Truly a pity, Daggrull.”

He's being so blatantly pretentious about this, isn't he? But Velzard really *is* big trouble, so I'm pretty glad overall that Veldora's staying in Tempest. Not very good news for Daggrull, but I really do need to put my own nation's safety first.

"Daggrull's right," Milim said, overhearing us. "I've never fought Velzard before, but my instincts tell me she's one *meeeaaan* customer. If she comes over to my domain, I'm the only one who could take her on, and then I wouldn't be able to focus on anything else. We really need a way for me to call for help on a moment's notice."

She was being perfectly reasonable, of course. It was a surprisingly realistic suggestion from the usually overconfident Milim. But I guess it showed just how much we all feared Velzard—and since it was unlikely that she'd attack us solo, we needed to avoid being caught alone out there. I agreed with that, and so did Frey and the others.

"Very true," said Frey. "We'll be careful not to work alone, then."

"Yep, we sure will! So, Rimuru, that's why I want you to bring Geld and Gabil over to me on the double! In fact, I could pick them up for you if you like?"

"Nah, that's okay, Milim. I'll explain things to them when I return and get them ready to depart."

Geld had transport-gate skills he could use for travel purposes, so there was no need for excessive rushing. I had to brief my entire cabinet on today's proceedings, and I figured it wouldn't be too late if I sent them off after everyone was on the same page.

"Okay, Rimuru! I'll leave that to you, then."

"Certainly. And we'll contact you at once if the enemy attacks us."

Right, yeah. They'd be receiving Carrera, and by the looks of things, Frey didn't seem to have realized Carrera was a Primal Demon. No real need to tell her, though. Better to end this conversation on a calmer note. Besides, if our mission was to stop a potential Velzard attack in its tracks, I'm sure they'd have no complaint about deploying Carrera for that.

"One thing I do wonder about," added Louis, "is Michael's goals. I doubt he

seeks only to rule this world..."

"Right, well, what it's trying to do is revive Veldanava. Michael and Feldway are both trying to resurrect their master, basically."

""Huhhh?!""

Everyone who hadn't heard the news before gasped. My fellow demon lords were already aware, but for everyone else, it must've been quite a shock.

"Yep." Milim nodded. "Rimuru's right. Obela's helping our side now, and that's what she said."

"For real...?" Carillon frowned. "News to me."

"Oh, didn't I mention that? I thought I already told you two."

"I sure didn't hear about it, Milim," said Frey. "But then, Middray's to blame for that, too. We'll need to quiz him in depth about this later."

Just when I was starting to rethink my opinion of Milim, this happened. She and Middray both spoke to Obela, they said, but it looks like the nature of their conversation didn't come across to her other associates. This is exactly why it's so important to make sure all your staffers strive to communicate with each other. Of course, I forgot to tell them, too, so I'm not one to talk.

"But a True Dragon is immortal," a pensive Louis said as Milim's crew carried on with themselves. "Veldanava is bound to revive himself in due time. There's no need for anybody's help."

"Yes, that's what one would normally think...but this Michael is a self-conscious entity that has taken the form of a skill, something you would never normally expect to exist. Perhaps that's why it's contemplating things that would never occur to normal people." Luminus shook her head in disbelief.

Guy, meanwhile, had his own thoughts:

"Yeah, but it's a fact that Veldanava's showing no signs of reviving right now. I can understand why people think Feldway might not care if he destroys the world on the way to his desires."

Having fought him once before, Guy could confidently attest to Veldanava's immortality. That, and he understood if someone like Feldway yearned for his

resurrection that badly.

"But doesn't dying affect some of his memories and personality and stuff?" I asked. "He might wind up being someone completely different."

"It would be little more than an aesthetic difference," Luminus replied. "To me, he would still be one and the same. His soul would be just as it was before."

"Hmm... Kinda hard for me to picture. Velgrynd said kinda the same thing—that she didn't care whether Ludora was reborn as a good or bad guy, just as long as he was reborn. That deserved to be addressed sometime, I felt."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Looks to me like you haven't shaken off your prejudices from your human years. But don't worry. You'll understand in time."

"That's how it is, huh?"

I wasn't too convinced, but to people as long-lived as them, concepts like "good" and "evil" might seem like nothing more than ephemeral trends. If so, it's a reminder that I better cherish my own thoughts on this issue. I mean, what if I decided to start doing evil things? I might turn into exactly the kind of despot the late Maribel worried I'd become.

I'm a pretty selfish guy, after all. I know that. So no matter what happens, I need to ensure my selfish behavior doesn't plunge the world into chaos. I got a lot of leeway to do what I want already, but it's all part of my effort to make this a better world. Causing pain for others in my pursuit of happiness—well, I'd never do that. It's something I've sworn in my heart.

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As I thought about the importance of constantly asking myself if what I was doing was all right, Guy suddenly spoke up about something new.

"Oh, um, Rimuru, I just had a thought."

"Mm? I'm not hiding anything else, though."

"I kinda doubt that, honestly, but whatever. It's not that. I'm wondering what Michael might be thinking. For example, how does he intend to awaken Veldanava? If you know, tell me."

He was being awfully pushy. I was about to tell him that I had no way of

knowing before my own mind stopped me.

“Oh, actually, didn’t he say something along those lines?” I muttered.

“Yes, he did,” Veldora said, nodding.

If I recall...

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Apparently he believes that if he brings the power—the ‘draconic factors’—of three True Dragons together, Sir Veldanava will be reborn. A foolish idea, in my opinion, but one that we can’t completely discount, either.”

Diablo explained my thoughts before I could. Right, right, it was that sort of thing, wasn’t it? It didn’t seem realistic at all, and it seemed so impossible to make work that I had forgotten all about it. Those “draconic factors” were the keys to it all, apparently.

You are in possession of draconic factors as well, Master.

Ah yes, I’m something resembling a True Dragon now, aren’t I? Maybe it’s a given that I have these factors, then. Anyway.

Even if you could collect the draconic factors from the three remaining True Dragons—Velzard, Velgrynd, and Veldora—I don’t think it’d matter. You’d still be lacking the factors of Veldanava himself, and those were the most important of all. Nobody else would have his soul, after all. Diablo didn’t see it as totally impossible, but still.

“Huh? That logic is completely flawed, though. The only thing Michael could create with *that* is a pseudo-copy. And maybe it could imitate all of his abilities, but without that all-important soul, it’s not at all the same thing.”

Guy apparently agreed with me.

“Well, I cannot say either way, but if a completed physical body is in place, there may be a chance of the lost soul returning to it.”

“Mm, could be. Veldanava’s a fully spiritual life-form, so his soul won’t be scattered across the universe like Ludora’s, I don’t think. It’s not *impossible*, no.”

Hmm... I think I’m losing sight of the logic here.

There is no reason for Veldanava's soul to return to that body. If he wished to return, he could simply recreate his own body for that purpose.

Right? And with Ciel joining the naysayers, I was now full-on skeptical of the enemy's plan. If it's bound to fail anyway, maybe we could just ignore them—

"Hmm. Then perhaps the enemy's true goal is obtaining Veldora."

Everybody in the chamber stopped.

"Hweh?"

Veldora's half-breathed exclamation echoed across the quiet room. He seemed completely oblivious to this, so it was best to just leave him be. Luminus's suggestion was far more important.

"Ah yes, I've been overlooking that. Veldora's been taken over once already, but his draconic factors weren't taken from him."

I suppose Michael cared more about possibilities than probabilities. If so, then whether reviving Veldanava was a harebrained idea or not, there was a decent likelihood that he'd still be after Veldora's draconic factors.

Uh-oh. I never considered Velzard getting mind-dominated in the first place. Now I'm worried our enemy's catching us flat-footed.

"Hmm," mused Milim. "If I recall correctly, Obela said that Emperor Ludora—in other words, Michael—had taken in the draconic factors of Velgrynd. If Velzard has been taken over as well, that means Veldora's the only one not in his collection!"

"Whoa, whoa, wait. Are you trying to say that Velzard's had her factors taken away from her?!"

Guy looked a little panicked about what Milim just said. I decided to express my own thoughts.

"You're really sure about that?"

"If it's true," a somewhat frantic-looking Guy replied, "you know Velzard won't emerge unscathed. She's as good a fighter as I am, but the process may very well make her cease to exist, maybe?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure. In Velgrynd's case, it was only one of her Parallel Existences that was taken and absorbed. We're talking maybe a tenth of her overall magicule energy at most, I think, and I bet even that pushed Michael's body to the limit."

That helped reassure Guy a bit.

"Ah. Yeah, true. As obscenely powerful as a True Dragon is, they're not gonna be absorbed *that* easily."

I nodded. At the time, Velgrynd had been pretty severely damaged by Carrera's Judgment Bullet...but even then, she had a lot of stamina left. Michael himself was using Lifestealer (an ability of Yuuki's) to sap Velgrynd's life force, but he never fully absorbed her.

That, and I had a good idea of why Michael tried to banish Velgrynd from this world.

"Also, he won't just take away her power and factors—he'll take her abilities, too. But that'll cause him to lose his absolute thrall over angelic skills, so he'll have to be careful about it, lest he get counterattacked."

So Michael's plan was likely to use and abuse Velzard, weaken her to the limit, take everything she had, and then banish her.

I agree.

Right. I can be pretty sharp myself sometimes.

"But why would he need to take her abilities, too?" said Guy. "If he can rule over her already, wouldn't it be smarter to use her as a pawn in battle? Why take away all her powers and banish her?"

Um. Good point. Michael's abilities gave him access to those of the target he was taking over. He wouldn't seem to have much reason to seize them entirely. And here I thought my reasoning was perfect, too. Ciel even agreed with me.

"But you know," Daggrull said as I wailed over this, "do we really think it's necessary for Michael to collect every single ability out there to revive Veldanava?"

"You think he could ignore demonic skills, and the other types, too?"

"I would imagine so," Luminus replied. "He might believe the abilities that Veldanava possessed before are the only 'pure' ones."

I think she was striking at the core of the issue, actually. Pretty impressive, considering she chimed in late on our conversation.

"So you think he's trying to collect only Veldanava's genuine skills, and that'll let him create the 'complete' Veldanava? This omnipotent being who's created all abilities? It's a pretty big concept to grasp, but if that's what Michael wishes for, he's probably not gonna get it. As long as Leon's on our side, there's no way he'll get *all* the needed abilities."

Guy flashed a bold grin. But I wasn't sure it was that simple. If he was right, then we'd already foiled Michael's strategic objectives. I mean, I—or Ciel really, but regardless—had already consumed Raphael, *and* Uriel, *and* Raguel.

But before I could ponder this any further, Ciel offered some assistance.

When Velgrynd had her draconic factors seized, she became unable to maintain her own existence and was doomed to perish even before Dimensional Transfer could be cast. However, it is believed that after you released her main essence, that had the effect of resynthesizing all her energy.

Okay. So why bother banishing her at all, after already shriveling her up like that?

Likely because he feared that she could have revived herself. Taking her draconic elements is a different thing from breaking her soul or heart core. Presumably, he wanted to prevent a revived Velgrynd from exacting revenge upon him.

With all the qualifiers Ciel was adding to the analysis, this clearly wasn't a 100-percent guarantee. Maybe that's why it was avoiding this topic up to now. It always was a perfectionist that way, but I nonetheless appreciated having someone to bounce ideas off like this.

Is Ciel wavering this much because it doesn't know what would happen if Velgrynd was resurrected after losing all her abilities?

Yes, exactly. She was doomed to perish, but that would also mean

being released from Michael's rule. Once that happens...

Once it happened, Velgrynd—who'd probably still have her memories from being mind-dominated—might be pretty pissed off. If she saw that this domination was being driven by an ability, she might do away with Raguel (the cause of it), gain her freedom, and reappear before Michael, just like that.

So he'd just banish her entirely, then, right? Makes sense to me. And with Velgrynd no longer around to exercise her skills on anything, it wouldn't be strange for him to want to fetch any beneficial skills from her before she went away.

But I was starting to think the whole “collect all abilities” theory we talked about was mistaken.

Once a skill is created, after all, it can be recreated again and again.

Right, exactly! Just what I wanted to say. I feel like Ciel's been polishing that confident streak quite a bit compared to before. What a relief.

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With my thoughts now better organized, I rejoined the discussion.

“Certainly, I think that collecting abilities would benefit Michael, but maybe that doesn’t have anything to do with reviving Veldanava, y’know? I think what we *really* need to focus on is those draconic factors.”

“Going full circle on us?” Daggrull asked, eyebrow raised. He seemed pretty sick of this endless talking, and I could sympathize with him. Nothing’s more meaningless than a meeting that doesn’t produce any answers. That’s why I wanted to dish out my conclusion right now.

“No, I’m just talking about certainties. Michael never talked about abilities at all, so I think those are just kind of a bonus to him.”

“Hmm... Continue.”

I didn’t really ask Luminus for permission to continue. I don’t know why she acted so high and mighty like that, but it was time to end this debate, not tease her about that. I wasn’t trying to avoid her, I promise.

So. The conclusion.

"Well, if abilities were so important, I have some ideas of who we need to watch besides Leon. So I think we need to ignore that whole question and just focus on keeping Veldora away from the enemy."

"Oh? You sound confident about that."

"Yeah, well... I know I talked about him snatching abilities earlier, which might've caused some confusion, but how about we not worry about that for now?"

Guy looked at me, thinking. "Hmph! I hate to leave the question of why he took Velgrynd's abilities go unanswered...but all right. You have my trust."

Wow, Guy's actually a pretty understanding person sometimes.

I felt I had a solid direction in mind. You could call it me reverting back to my first conclusion, but let's just gloss over that detail.

"So that means," he continued, "the thing we *really* need to do is keep Velzard and Veldora from facing off against each other. We'll be counting on you for that, Rimuru."

One could interpret this as him palming off more responsibility on me, but accusing him of that would've kept us locked in here for even longer, so I just nodded. It's something I do a lot whenever I'm growing sick of a meeting, but by this point, I didn't really care.

So yeah—

"Oho! I knew it! I *knew* I would be so extremely important in all this, eh?"

—I don't think anyone would blame me for hearing Veldora chime in with this stupid crap, instead of seriously trying to participate at all, and getting a little incensed.

We were now demonstrably several steps behind the enemy. We all had to admit to that—but it was possible to catch up.

Veldora didn't have any angelic skills, and he'd already wriggled out of Regalia Dominion once. The enemy knew that, though, so they would likely try a more frontal approach next time. That meant total war, so our first objective was to get everybody with angelic skills together.

If I were Michael, I'd definitely be as careful as possible with my actions, yet the main gist of his strategy was still unknown. But no need to panic, either. We were certain that Veldora was the enemy's main target, so I could just take measures to prevent access to him. In the worst-case scenario, I could even cut out the override circuit inside Leon, though I preferred not to.

"All right, everyone... Good luck out there. If something happens, drop me a line immediately."

With that, Guy wrapped up the Walpurgis Council. "Cooperation" wasn't exactly a major theme of this conference—in fact, there was absolutely none of it at all—but at least it was over now, at long last.

INTERLUDE

HEAVENLY EMPEROR AND EX-HERO

“What’s bothering you today, Leon?”

The question was lodged by Elmesia El-Ru Thalion, Heavenly Emperor of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion. It was pointed, of course, at the demon lord Leon Cromwell. He had made a stop at Thalion before returning home after the Walpurgis Council.

“Guy is going to be visiting my lands. I’m afraid I can’t stay for very long in here, so let’s skip the pleasantries and get straight to business.”

“You always were impatient like that, hmm? But if *these* are the circumstances, I can hardly blame you.”

Leon coming over to Thalion and meeting with Elmesia without an appointment was, in itself, a sign of just how much preferential treatment he was receiving. He was also forcing the topic without even considering Elmesia’s feelings about it. An observer unaware of their relationship would find it to be an absolutely unbelievable sight.

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That relationship dated back before Leon became a demon lord—even before he was a Hero. He was wandering the world in search of Chloe, and one day his travels brought him to Thalion. There he came across Elmesia’s mother, Sylvia El-Ru, a woman with all the time in the world.

She was a high elf, one of the “true” elves, and a famed genius known for her core theories in the field of sorcerous science. But she had another face as well—that of the best pupil of Twilight Valentine, vampire and demigod.

Sylvia was a strong woman. If she had been there to help, maybe her husband—Elmesia's father—wouldn't have had to die. But it was not to be, because Elmesia herself had been in Sylvia's womb at that moment.

In time, Sylvia became Leon's instructor, imparting all the swordsmanship and magic she knew. It was only natural that it would help Leon grow immensely. Thanks to that, Leon became acquainted with Elmesia as well. He had gained access allowed only to family and close friends, and that was why he had been granted an audience with Elmesia now.

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With Elmesia's blessing, Leon began to speak.

"You've deployed at least some intelligence operatives, haven't you?"

"Oh, of course."

Elmesia wasn't shy about admitting it.

"Then you know the demon lord Rimuru has won against the Eastern Empire?"

"We're aware of everything up to the Primals' actions. We spoke briefly after their victory party."

"What about the fighting after that?"

"...What was his name? Yuuki? I heard they were fighting in tandem with an informant within the Empire, but unfortunately, our information source was cut off right at the worst possible moment..."

Leon nodded in understanding. Then he revealed what he knew, hoping to gauge Elmesia's reaction.

"Well, quite a few things happened at once, it seems. Velgrynd made her appearance, Veldora had his mind taken over... It turned into a very dangerous situation. But Rimuru still managed to push all that aside and emerge victorious."

"Huh? He did?"

"So you really don't know, then? Let me give you a brief summary."

This he did, as succinctly as possible. He also went over their discussions at the Walpurgis Council, leaving almost nothing hidden. He knew he could never put one over on Elmesia, so he decided to just be honest and request her help.

"I see... Well, if *that's* how it worked out, I can see why he declined to go into detail with me."

She sounded convinced. When Rimuru told her "Hey, we won," she had no idea it meant *that* much. They "won" against Velgrynd herself... It shocked Elmesia into silence. She'd always thought of him as a rather strong figure, but never did she imagine that he would grow into this kind of monster.

Looks like he grew beyond my own mother long ago. No wonder he's out there taming Primals.

So he released both Velgrynd and Veldora from their thrall for a huge comeback victory. Michael and the other enemy leaders escaped his grasp, but as she saw things, it was safe to call this a huge victory for him.

"I do want to ask, Leon—you're not trying to deceive me with lies, are you?"

"I have no reason to be dishonest with you. I heard it from Rimuru himself, though, so I cannot say if it's the absolute truth."

"Hmm... You must trust that demon lord quite a bit more than I thought."

"What do you think of that story? About how Emperor Ludora's been taken over by his own skill and is now calling himself Michael?"

"Well...if you're lying about that, I wish you'd give me a more believable tale..."

"I know exactly what you mean. It's so preposterous, I'm willing to believe just about anything at this point."

Such was Leon's evaluation. It made Elmesia grin.

"As suspicious of everyone as you are? That's hard to believe."

"It's not a joke. Rimuru can stoop pretty low sometimes, but he's not the kind

of man to brazenly lie to others. In fact, he's quite the opposite—”

“He tries to make people underestimate him, is what I assume you're about to say? If so, I agree.”

It's so very much like that slime to do that, Elmesia thought. All these Primals he'd tamed, and still he pretended that was no big deal. And it was the exact same with this war, too. Nonetheless, knowing that slime, she was sure Rimuru had gotten involved in something huge, so she planned to sit with him and ask what happened once things settled down.

Sounds like a real mess he's gotten into. Something I know he can't talk about over our “cell phone” devices, but maybe I should have asked for more details.

Elmesia's expression didn't change, but she could still feel regret. He'd said, “We won,” and that was enough to fully relieve her. That was a mistake.

“Still, if Veldora remains friendly and Velgrynd is now on their side, that's excellent news, is it not?”

Leon nodded. “From what I heard, it's a miracle any of them survived that. I, at least, would have no chance of defeating Velgrynd in battle.”

If he fought Guy, then maybe there'd be one chance in a thousand. But against the Parallel Existence skill Rimuru described to him, Leon had no way to win. And that, he was sure, was why Rimuru had no reason to lie to him about winning against that skill.

“I'm certain of that, yes. I wouldn't, either. There's no reason to beat yourself up about it.”

“I wasn't doing that.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Leon wanted to get back on topic. Elmesia loved teasing her conversation partners whenever she had a chance. Seeing the writing on the wall, he opted to get right to the most important matters at hand.

“So, given everything I've told you, I have a request. I'd like to get in contact with my master.”

“My mother, hmm...?”

Elmesia understood what he was asking. Given his possession of the ultimate skill Metatron, he could never escape the control of Michael in a confrontation. He needed to do something about that before his ownership of that skill became known.

However, Elmesia alone didn’t have the knowledge needed to help him. Given how serious things were, she saw the need to tap into the greatest wisdom available in Thalion.

But Sylvia was...a free thinker. That, and the greatest fighting asset Thalion had. She was also gifted in stealth; if Sylvia hid somewhere, finding her would be far from simple. One could deploy all thirteen leaders of Thalion’s Magus corps, and it would still be a coin flip whether they found her. Any attempt at a magical call would be blocked, so there was no way to contact her. She *did* pay regular visits, though, and she’d be open to talking then...but outside of those occasions, contacting her was difficult.

These “regular visits” occurred about once a year. There was a reason for that, and Elmesia didn’t mind this frequency at all. Besides, it was rare for Thalion to encounter a problem so thorny that it couldn’t be solved without resorting to Sylvia. There were certain other secret methods they could tap into—methods available in case things were *really* getting out of hand...

“Not likely?”

Elmesia sighed at Leon’s direct question. As Sylvia’s pupil, Leon was something of a darling little brother to Elmesia. Bluntly refusing this request made her hesitate a little.

“I’ll do my best...but you may need to wait upward of half a year, at worst.”

“...All right. If you could, then.” Leon stood up.

“Leaving already?”

“My business is done.”

Elmesia chuckled. She wished he could relax a little more, but this was just like Leon. So awkward throughout his whole life.

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Once Leon left, Elmesia began to fulfill her promise. She ordered a royal guard to initiate emergency contact with Sylvia.

It so happened that Elmesia and Sylvia looked exactly alike, and they would occasionally swap roles so Elmesia could take some time away from her imperial duties—a secret shared only between the two of them.

“Oooh, I know she’ll resent me for this...”

Interrupting Sylvia’s free time was likely to enrage her. Elmesia knew that, but there was just no avoiding it now. She was ready to hold out, no matter how much her mother complained about it...but she still didn’t think she was making the wrong choice. This was a crisis like none she had seen before. From what she was told, they were even sending the demon lord Guy to serve as Leon’s bodyguard. Guy, abandoning his domain of permafrost? That alone indicated just how bad things had become.

“All this time I’ve lived, and I’ve never seen anything as dire as this...”

Mulling over this put a melancholic frown on Elmesia’s face. The whole thing depressed her.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
2

BRIEF
NORMALCY

CHAPTER 2

BRIEF NORMALCY

Five months had passed since the Walpurgis Council.

A lot of stuff happened in the meantime, but really, it couldn't have been more peaceful. Michael showed no signs of activity. We couldn't keep track of Feldway and his mystic force, which was a concern, but I chose to remain optimistic. We were being given all the time in the world to shore up our defenses.

And actually, I had another reason to take it easy. It turns out that we managed to get back into contact with Deeno in the meantime. How? Via the curse that Zegion had placed on him during their fight. This curse spell formed a sort of connection between them, as Ciel explained it to me, so I asked whether we could use it to converse.

It would be simple.

Ciel's casual assurance made me stop in my tracks. If conversing with Deeno was on the table, then that was a huge boon. So I promptly reached out to admonish him a bit.

With Deeno, at least, I almost preferred for him to side with our enemies. He was performing miscellaneous duties over at Ramiris's workshop, but even as our ally, he mostly just seemed to be lazing around and eating well on my dime. I couldn't shake that image of him... So, really, him staying in the enemy camp as he leaked out info to us was far more useful to me.

As I think I've said before, a useless ally is far more fearsome a thing than a talented enemy. That described Deeno to a tee, and in fact, he was contributing to our cause simply by sticking with our opponents.

Now, as for how our conversation turned out:

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(Yo-ho-ho! How's life, Deeno?)

I could sense Deeno panicking the moment I said that. Which—yeah, speaking right into someone's brain outta nowhere would surprise anybody.

(R...Rimuru?)

(Wow, way to recognize me. Yeah, it's me, okay? Your old pal.)

I didn't mean to sound like a mafioso or anything, but I *did* want to lay the pressure on. He had to understand that I held the dominant position here.

(Um... So what do you need? Because I'm pretty busy right now—)

He sounded beyond reluctant. I smiled to myself. *You can't run from me now*, I thought as I sent my words straight into his mind.

(Oh, you know, it's nothing too complicated. So I'm led to understand that you tried to pick a fight with us?)

(W-well, uh, not a fight, exactly... I mean, nothing that elaborate or whatever...)

(I'm not too interested in hearing excuses, thank you. I think what matters more right now is whether you're talking in good faith with me or not.)

(Good faith...?)

(Because it sounds like you not only led a bunch of invaders into Ramiris's labyrinth, but also went on your own little violent rampage, too. And you even planned to kidnap Ramiris, didn't you?)

I grinned as I painted Deeno into a corner.

(W-well, about that... It was kind of, you know, there were these orders I was forced to follow—)

(I think I just told you that I don't want to hear excuses, didn't I?)

(Y-yes...sorry...)

I wasn't too sure who the bad guy was in this conversation any longer, but so what? I'm a demon lord. So's Deeno, actually; it's not like this was bothering my conscience at all. Thank heavens for that.

So Deeno, perhaps realizing he was in a no-win situation, wasn't giving me much to work with. Seizing this chance, I made him an offer.

(Now, normally your behavior would never be forgivable, but I'm willing to look the other way this time. But I'll only do it if I see that you regret what you've done.)

(Really?! Oh, I regret it a lot. But I kinda have my own obligations, too, and that's why all of this happened. I think you know what I mean, don't you?)

(Oh, sure, loud and clear. You were just being controlled by Michael.)

(...What?)

No awareness of it, just like I thought. But it didn't seem to me that Deeno was too loyal to Michael at all. He was always self-serving that way, and that actually helped me a lot.

(W-wait. Seriously?! I'm being controlled?)

(Yeah. Totally. I don't think you willfully did any of that, even.)

So I told him all about Michael's skill set.

(...Anyway, yeah, it looks very much to me like you have at least one angelic skill, but am I wrong?)

(Oh, no way... Yeah, I got one. An ultimate. Astarte, Lord of High Heaven.)

So Deeno's got Astarte? I don't know what it does, but it sure *sounds* angelic to me.

(Right, that one. And that's why Michael's able to control you—while you remain totally oblivious.)

Judging by Deeno's reaction, it might've been a good idea to keep him in the dark about all this. It looked like Michael didn't have complete control over him—clearly, he wasn't under some oath of fealty or anything—so he cracked pretty quickly. Knowing his personality, I had a feeling that I could seal the deal

on this fairly easily.

(So what should I do? Because even hearing that, I don't feel any anger or whatever toward Michael. I don't feel like double-crossing him, and I don't feel like rejoining your side, either. And I didn't notice until you made me aware of it, but this does feel kinda weird, yeah.)

He had told me his ability, and I made him aware of the truth. I'd say this contact's been a big success so far. But let's see about going in even deeper.

(Well, I have a theory. If you had a demonic-type ability, one that could resist an angelic one, maybe they'd cancel each other out and then you'd be free of this. There are a couple of other remedies I could try out, but there's an element of luck to them all, so I wouldn't recommend them.)

This "cancel out" theory had its basis in Chloe's experiences. Chloe avoided having her mind taken over thanks to possessing the manas known as Chronoa. Apparently she was no longer in contact with Chronoa at the moment, but I was willing to bet she was fighting hard to remove the override circuit on the Sariel skill. I wished I could help her, but with this, I trusted that she and Chronoa would figure out a way.

So as for the "luck" approach... Well, that was a lie. Not that I didn't trust Deeno, but he *was* still under mind control. I wasn't dumb enough to reveal my entire hand from the get-go. The way I saw it, if I used Predation on Deeno, Ciel would probably figure out the rest for me. Just like it would with Leon, actually. But, again, that felt kinda gross to me, so I wanted to save that for when all else failed. As a result, I told Deeno that there was a *chance* I had a working solution, and I just left it at that for now.

(...Okay. Well, I don't want to be under his control forever, so I'll see if I can't do something about it on my end, too.)

(Whoa, whoa, don't push it. Michael's side is in a state of total war with us demon lords, remember. So I don't want you to do anything, okay? Just lay low and don't do anything to make them suspect you.)

I could ask a spy of mine to bring info from Deeno, but I still couldn't fully trust it. I wasn't sure that Zegion's curse forced him to tell me the truth—and even if it did, what if Michael made him tattle on me? I couldn't tell if Zegion's

force was beating Michael's rule or not, so for now, relying on potentially suspect data would be way too dangerous.

But hang on! Leaving Deeno dangling like this would be such a waste, wouldn't it? Besides, why do we have to be the only ones doing all the heavy lifting around here?

(That's all you want from me?)

Being told not to do anything was clearly right up Deeno's alley. He's such a dupe that way. Not like I'd be *that* kind to him.

(Well, I'd feel terribly sorry, asking you to betray Michael as well.)

I tried to sound nice to him, but really, I couldn't wait to put him to work.

(Oh, um, I'm not planning to, but if you want me to throw some info your way, that's cool!)

Whoa. He's fine with that? He really *can't* be trusted, can he? Right down to the core...but, well, that's fine. If we can make him work for us without making him feel like he's betraying anyone, that's perfect.

(No, that's all right. Just don't do anything, okay?)

(For real? After all that talk about "good faith" a minute ago?)

I was really liking the direction I was guiding this talk. I knew how much of a contrarian he was, and I wanted to use that to make him volunteer to do stuff for me. That wound up being exactly the right approach.

(Well, if you don't participate in any fighting, for example, that's the same thing as scratching you off Michael's arsenal.)

(Oh, right, yeah!)

It annoyed me how readily accepting of this he was, but that's Deeno for you. Let's run with it.

(Okay. If you say so, then. If I see anything useful, I'll let you know.)

(Sure. Much appreciated.)

Good, good. He'll be a dedicated spy for me without even realizing it.

(I'll dedicate myself to observing stuff around here, so let me know if anything comes up. Is that good?)

(Oh, actually, do you know what Michael's up to right now? If he's making any moves soon, do you know when?)

With Deeno now fully on my side, I decided to ask what I wanted. I could tell if he was lying to me, so as long as he didn't tell anyone else about this, I could get some pretty reliable intel from him.

(Well, he's sleeping now, it looks like. You know, he got Velgrynd's power, and then he took Velzard's right after that. The strain was too much for him, I guess, so he's pretty much dormant.)

Whoa. Pretty big piece of intel to kick off with. And here I thought he'd weaken Velzard a little before acting. Why the big hurry, huh? ...But, ah, she *did* fight Guy, so maybe that weakened her enough. Then again, I don't think Velzard or Guy were fighting for *real*, so maybe her energy was too much for Michael anyway.

But he's got her "draconic factors" now, huh? That could potentially trigger some kind of transformation in him, so we better watch out for that. And if so, that begs another question.

(How did Velzard turn out?)

(She's recuperating right now, too. I think she'll be back to normal in a few more days.)

Aha...

I think this means we shouldn't expect an immediate attack—but, *man*, True Dragons sure heal up fast. They do, but I'd like to assume we won't see any serious attempt at an invasion until Michael, their commander, is back in action.

(All right. Thank you.)

(Oh, that much is no problem at all.)

There was a lot more I wanted to ask—the enemy's numbers, for example—but let's end it there. Keeping Deeno cheerful about these data leaks was the best way to retain him as a source.

(Sure. I'll be in contact again later.)

(Right... Oh, I just remembered. If you could tell Ramiris I said sorry to her, I'd really appreciate it.)

That request came just before I cut off our chat. Nuh-uh.

(What? Apologize to her yourself. She's pretty worked up about it, you know. She said she's got forty-eight different lethal attack moves she wants to test out on you.)

(Dude, there's no way she's got forty-eight of them! Like, her dropkick's about the only move she has!)

(Hey, that's what she told me. None of my business, all right? Anyway, now you know.)

I thought I could sense Deeno smiling.

(Heh-heh... Got it. Talk to you later, then.)

(Yep. See you.)

With that acknowledgment, I shut off the link.

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So, yeah, that's how things went. I think it turned out really well. I had also shared this conversation with my fellow demon lords, carefully omitting the part about Deeno being my mole.

Thanks to what he told me, I was now quite a bit more relaxed about things. There was a chance everything he said was a trap—I couldn't deny that—but it'd take someone like Ciel to engineer something like that so perfectly. Being *too* wary would fray my nerves, which wouldn't be fun. It also played into the enemy's hands, so I ultimately decided that it was better to act natural. The same thing I thought when I heard the angels were attacking, actually.

I'm the type of person who, if something can be done tomorrow, I do it tomorrow. Whenever I got assigned summer homework, I was all gung ho

about it the first few days, promptly abandoned it, and then wrote out the whole thing the last day before school started again. What if I couldn't finish it in time? Well, I'd just go to school, tell the teacher "I forgot," and get yelled at. If the teacher said to bring it in tomorrow, I'd complete it if I could, and if not, I'd break out the "I lost it" excuse the next day. I mean, I tried my best if I wanted to finish it ASAP, but it's important to admit when something's too tough to handle.

What? I should make more of a consistent effort? Well, you see, I don't have the focus for that.

So there's my philosophy—as long as you're prepared to get yelled at, things have a way of working themselves out. In other words, take responsibility for your own behavior, I suppose. But now I'm way offtrack.

I had Deeno call in each morning to report on whether Michael was awake yet. I don't think even Michael could've foreseen every possibility. He has access to the skills of anyone under his thrall, but I doubt he could read their thoughts. If *that* were possible, he'd have to process mounds and mounds of information all the time, and it'd become way too hard to sift through it all for useful stuff. And why would Michael bother with that if people under his control couldn't lie to him anyway?

My basis for this reasoning was all Ciel. Ciel itself stated that it was impossible to read every single thought in someone's mind, even those you're connected to via soul corridor. You might be able to detect some in your surface psyche, but anything being pondered over deep inside your mind couldn't be accessed. If you asked the subject a question, you *might* be able to see the answer in their mind—and I think I was familiar with that already. I felt like people were reading my thoughts a lot, actually, something I was trying to be more careful about.

Anyway, that's why I placed more than my usual trust in Deeno's statements.

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So during these five months that Michael lay dormant, I was working out our preparations for the final battle.

The other demon lords and I built up a system of cooperation, me working

closely with all their home bases to ensure we could handle any emergencies quickly. It was mostly me doing the work, though. Forging a treaty that stated we'd come to each other's aid if possible was really significant, but having to coordinate everything myself was a huge pain. I think the proceedings from our last Walpurgis showed just how hard it was to debate matters with such a selfish group of demon lords.

First, as promised, we were building permanent transport circles in the domains of each demon lord. After the council, I asked Mizeri to take me to the relevant domains; there I recorded the necessary coordinates to make it possible to transport in and out easily.

All the others gave their permission for this, of course. Guy's Icefayr Castle was the site of the recent council, so I already had those coordinates squared away. I had also been to Lune before, the holy capital of Luminus's Holy Empire of Lubelius, and Milim's as-yet-unnamed domain was also extremely familiar territory to me. Thus, I had to visit only *two* domains to scope out their coordinates: the Golden Land of El Dorado and the Holy Void of Damargania.

Daggrull's domain really *did* look like the barren remains of a holy land. I'd have loved to tour around in-depth when I had the time, but work came first. I hurried right back to Tempest, where I got ready to send off Ultima and the others.

One thing I learned from our conversations was that Milim and Daggrull were *not* capable of transport-based travel. Ramiris, too, of course.

"Well, you know, I'm not good with anything like that..." Daggrull admitted.

"Yeah, me neither!" said Milim. "Why sit around calculating all these complex coordinates when I could just fly right over, huh?"

Both valid excuses, I guess. And, yes, with teleport magic, you could only go to previously recorded locations. The skill Spatial Transport gave you a lot more freedom, but it still wouldn't work unless you had the coordinates for both your starting point and your destination, or at least a real accurate idea of them. You needed a firm grasp of the start and endpoint's relative positions to each other, so you could calculate the correct angle and distance for the jump. It might seem easy, but there's a time lag as well, and overall it's actually a pretty tricky

skill to use.

Milim's got a natural instinct for this kind of thing, so she didn't see why she had to do a bunch of math. She's actually very gifted at these calculations, but I guess she saw them as a pain to do. And Daggrull, well, he's more brawn than brains...and Ramiris needs no explanation.

These transport circles were Guy's request, but they might prove pretty valuable going forward. Leon and Luminus could use their magic and skills for transporting themselves, but seeing as how they didn't object to building these circles in their domains, I guess they saw their usefulness as well. Anyone can use these, after all, including humans without much in the way of magic. In fact, one could use the magicules in the air to transport nearly fifty humans in one go, and that'd make it a lot easier for them to travel to any nations between the circles.

It'd be neat to build an even bigger infrastructure later on, but efficiency would be a problem. Transporting living creatures, as I knew by now, required a very large amount of magicules. If you waited around for the magicules in the air to get replenished, I calculated that a circle would only be capable of one transport per week. Demon lords like us could supplant this with our own magicules, but for humans, that'd require a hell of a lot of work.

Still, the potential was there. Use these to transport goods and freight, and it'd be a revolution in logistics. In fact, it threatened to make the magitrains we were developing obsolete before we even completed a rail network. Clearly, there were a lot of issues to be addressed, and I needed to compartmentalize for the time being. Taking advantage of this tech was a topic for another time.

...So we were constructing these transport circles, but the ones in the demon lords' domains were all done now. How did it work out?

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The first one we finished was in Tempest, of course. I placed it in an isolated chamber of the labyrinth, for safety's sake. That way, enemies couldn't make

use of it.

Our next circle was put up in Damargania. I traveled there with Ultima in tow, and we had it whipped up in a jiffy. Normally I would've delegated the job to someone else, but given the situation, we couldn't afford to waste any time.

Plus, Damargania was in kind of a unique location. It was home to a vast, ancient city, one ruined by the definitive battle between Guy and Milim long ago...but the repercussions from that tragedy were still there today. There were several reasons why this area was called the Barren Lands, or the Deadly Desert. The sandstorms that constantly blew around the region corroded everything they touched, and they also effectively isolated Damargania from the outside world.

Chances are that when Guy and Milim's clashes of force were about to cause cataclysmic destruction, their powers were forcibly sent to another dimension to keep the fallout as light as possible. However, this force has not fully disappeared, but is still leaking out from local dimensional rifts. That is likely the cause of this sorry state of affairs.

Such was Ciel's analysis. It was long, long ago, but still affecting the land now? Freaky.

Anyway, this was the kind of dangerous land Daggrull ruled over. And within Damargania was a gigantic edifice, Skyspire Tower, that honestly did seem to pierce the heavens themselves. Around it was the so-called Holy Void, a safe zone that had managed to avoid the worst of the destruction. A barrier had been erected over it since ancient times, and the outside was just as dangerous as the eternally frozen lands Guy called home. Weaker creatures would be killed by the sandstorms that stabbed at you like knives, and even stronger ones couldn't last long in this landscape without paying the ultimate price.

That applied to Daggrull and his race of giants, too. Their higher-level warriors were one thing, but the weaker giants, to say nothing of the women and children, were far too vulnerable to dream of venturing outside the safe Holy Void. If that was true for giants, then for humans, the place was nothing but a death zone.

And so, instead of sending out someone like Vester's team, I did all the work

personally. Of course, it mostly involved installing the magic circle itself. It was a saucer of pure magisteel, around three or four feet high and twenty or so in diameter, with the necessary magical incantations constructed by Ciel and carved on top. I placed it where Daggrull specified, and that was it, really. The little details would be the job of the demons who came along with Ultima.

“You’re working under orders from Sir Rimuru! Don’t you *dare* embarrass me as you complete this job!”

That, I suppose, was Ultima’s way of encouraging her demons. Or threatening them, most likely, but given the demons’ talent for magic, I didn’t worry much about entrusting the rest to them.

I was about to leave...

“Are you sure about this, Rimuru?”

...only to have a concerned-looking Daggrull stop me.

“Yeah, it won’t be a problem. Veyron’s here with Ultima, and if they run into any trouble, we can call Zonda back here, too. The test was successful, so letting them handle the final adjustments won’t be an issue at all.”

It *shouldn’t* be an issue. Ultima and her team may not act that way, but they *are* great demons, bearing the kind of wisdom I couldn’t hold a candle to. Nothing weighed on my mind at all as I wrapped up my work.

“No, I mean, what if these demons start to get violent and—?”

“Well, I’m on my way! Thanks again!”

Daggrull was about to say something, but let’s just gloss over that. Changing personnel at this point would be too much more annoying work, so I fled as soon as I could.

After Damargania came Lubelius. I put the magic circle in the spot Luminus specified, and the rest would be handled by the overcomers here—along with Gobkyuu, my foreman. With him overseeing things, I was sure they’d construct a splendid building to serve as the transport facility—and the overcomers would have no problem computing all the destination data and other details.

“I think we’ll be able to work all this out. We’ll stay in contact with Tempest

and Damargania as well, until we bring this up to a serviceable level!"

They seemed ready for the job, so that was the end of mine. But I had one more bit of business. Shion, Adalmann, and their respective personal forces were due to report to Luminus. They would all be traveling at once, but the question was where we'd house them.

"No need to worry about that. We have free rooms in my temple, so they can sleep there."

"Much appreciated. Shion, Adalmann, make sure you're good guests for these people."

"Absolutely, Sir Rimuru! I promise I will carry out our mission and not place shame upon you as your secretary!"

I'm so anxious about this. Really, if the enemy attacks here, I'll almost want her to do nothing and just contact me.

"A pity there won't be any kitchen to cook in, however. They say you'll become rusty if you skip so much as a single day..."

Who's "they"? And isn't that more about playing piano, or some other kind of really delicate talent? And speaking of which, with Shion as talented a violin player as she is, doesn't she need to keep practicing *that* instead?

"Hey, don't you need to practice your music at all? I know how dedicated you are to battle training, but I've never seen you playing the violin outside of that concert."

"Hee-hee-hee! Don't you worry about that. With consistent training from day to day, playing an instrument is quite simple. But with cooking, you need to make all these precise judgments at every step..."

Crazy. She was thinking about it in a completely wrong way. I kept myself from rolling my eyes, as I mentally demanded she apologize to every would-be musician in the world.

That being said, no matter how much Shion screwed up those "precise judgments" in the kitchen, you'd at least be assured that it'd taste good these days. You ran the risk of overdosing on salt or sugar with her stuff, though, so

she was right that judgment was key. Either way, though, her appraisal of cooking and music was completely backward.

"Your name is Shion, right?" Luminus said as I brooded. "When it comes to battle training, I know that Hinata is relatively free. In fact, I could even spar with you if you'd like. And as for cooking... Well, I'm sure I can procure a spare kitchen and fill the pantry for you, so feel free to do whatever you like."

I was stunned. Luminus truly knew no fear...and meanwhile, I was shaking. It was such a surprise to me that I was almost too late to stop her.

"L-Luminus, allowing Shion to cook is kind of a—"

"Oh, I don't mind. In times like these, the diversions you enjoy become more important than ever. I was quite passionate about cooking myself, once upon a time... Hee-hee-hee. In fact, it could be fun to test a thing or two out together."

"My, what a wonderful idea! But don't expect to outclass me over a hot oven, Lady Luminus!"

"Hee-hee... Hinata is quite a good cook, too, you know. I'll invite her to join us."

You gotta be kidding me. This was a full-blown crisis. And Hinata's joining in, too? It's beyond *my* help now, lemme tell you. Let's just hope a higher power can guide them all to safety.

"W-well, Adalmann, have fun with them!"

"What?!"

Despite how pious and devoted he was, Adalmann must've felt a premonition disturbing enough that not even *he* could approve of this. But the die had already been cast.

"So yeah, lemme know if anything comes up," I said as I fled at full speed.

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Stop number three was Milim's domain—the former Eurazania, a place I knew well. But instead of the holy mountain that towered high within its boundaries, I was looking up at a gigantic building, still under construction. I had transported myself to the remains of the capital, waiting for our guide; Geld had already left

ahead of us, so I was with Gabil, Carrera, and Esprit at the moment.

Gabil had come with Kakushin, Sukero, and Yashichi, his favorite brownnosing yes-men, along with Gazatt, a captain in Team Hiryu. I don't know who Gabil thought of as his main second-in-command, but these four certainly stood out of the dragonewt crowd, at least.

Despite the dangerous battle everyone knew was ahead, Team Hiryu was in a remarkably joyful mood. Apparently this was because their training sessions with Ultima were on hold until further notice. Those sessions were so grueling, I heard, that many of the students had died multiple times during them—and since they were held inside the labyrinth, they wailed at me, not even death earned them a break. Guess the labyrinth could be unfair that way. This wasn't training that'd make you figuratively say, "Oh, man, that almost killed me" afterward—here, death was a given.

The strength boost that resulted was pretty conspicuous to me, though. Merely evolving and retaining more magicules didn't make you truly stronger. Only through the effective use of that newfound strength could you be called a first-rate warrior. But still, guys, you can't go *too* far. I sure don't wanna go through training like that, so I resolved to tell Ultima to try being a little more sensible about this.

So, all told, there were a bit over a hundred people in our party, and we had been waiting for around ten minutes. Milim told me via Thought Communication that she'd be here today, but maybe she forgot?

"She's late, isn't she?"

"Now, now, Lady Carrera, we've only just arrived. Let us be calm, like a visiting tourist should, as we patiently wait for her!"

"You're so forgiving, Sir Gabil."

"I think it's more that Lady Carrera is too quick-tempered."

"Did you say something, Esprit?"

"No, nothing."

It may have only been ten minutes, but I could understand why Carrera was

peeved. Still, that's only because I used to live in Japan, where my life was scheduled down to the individual minute. In this world, that made you seem needlessly impatient. People had the *concept* of time, of course, and there were clocks and stuff, but the kind of accurate wristwatches I had in my previous life just weren't found in the markets. You'd see rather bulky pocket watches at times, but those were typically carried only by nobles or rich merchants. As a result, if you agreed to meet someone in the "early afternoon" or something similarly vague, the normal custom was to send a messenger ahead of you. Milim had neglected to do that, which was on her—but maybe she just had the time (or day) wrong, so it'd be immature to get all livid about it.

Still, that would do nothing to assuage Carrera, so I needed to step up.

"Hey, no big hurry, you know? I'll check with Milim right now."

I sent a Thought Communication her way.

(Uh, Milim? We're here, but we didn't see anyone waiting for us.)

(Mm?! R-Rimuru? I'm busy with homework right now, but I did tell Middray about you guys! M-maybe he was mistaken about the meeting time? I'll give him a stern reminder, so don't get angry at him!)

...

Now it made sense. She must've been so busy with the homework Frey gave her that she forgot to relay my message.

(All right. No need to hurry, though.)

(O-okay! I'll talk to you later!)

Sure. These things happen sometimes.

I tried keeping Carrera calm as we waited...but then something unexpected occurred. A group of people ran up to us, their leader saying the strangest things.

"Ah, you must be the demon lord Rimuru! So much more gallant than I've heard... Truly, a figure of fine dignity. I, Jagie, am ever admiring of you!"

Jagie then gave a respectful bow of the head...to Gabil, not me.

He looked like a fellow dragonewt, but unlike Gabil, his form was straight-up human, with two horns on his head. He was on the small side, but stout, and every move he made was brimming with energy. The five magic-born accompanying him came from a variety of species, but otherwise weren't too noteworthy to me.

For some reason, Jagie had what looked like fresh wounds here and there on his body. I was curious about that, but he acted like he was in fine health, so it couldn't be too serious. What struck me more was what he said to us. It left me dumbfounded, but Gabil seemed the most surprised of all.

"Oh, no, no, no, I am merely Rimu—"

"Ah, such an august sight! No, there is no need to introduce yourself to a low-level officer such as myself! For there isn't a soul anywhere in the demon lord Sir Rimuru's domain who would not be well aware of his name by now!"

Gabil tried to correct this case of mistaken identity, but he was brutally cut off. What's the point of knowing someone's name if you don't know their face? A lot of magic-born knew both by now, but I suppose the low-level officers were a bit slower on the uptake. I'm guessing that Jagie mistook Gabil for me because of the aura he was emitting, maybe? I had mine perfectly held back, so I looked like a regular human on the outside. Carrera and Esprit were the same, looking neither like demons nor like magic-born, even. We have a lot of human visitors to Tempest these days, so we've gotten into the habit of keeping our aura in check.

We couldn't let this continue, though. Being treated like this for the first time in a while was actually kind of fun, but Carrera and Esprit had next to no patience for it.

"Hold on. That guy's name is Gabi—"

"And who are *you* people? His maidens-in-waiting, perhaps? You may have military uniforms on, but if you butt into a conversation between two grown-ups like us, people are going to think you lack education, you know."

Oh great, he just cut off Esprit. It was pretty clear who was lacking in education here.

"Ha-ha-ha! What a funny gentleman."

Carrera smiled. But behind those words, I could already see a vein throbbing in her temple. She was *really* trying to be patient, but give her around three seconds, and she would probably explode. Not the time for laughter.

But Esprit acted before I could.

"Hey, um, I'd like you to listen to us already, please."

With those forceful words, she reached out to Jagie. Not hard enough to call a punch, really, but it had some strength behind it. The type of light blow a weaker magic-born might get knocked unconscious by, unable to react in time.

Esprit really didn't have to do that, but Jagie *was* at fault—mistaking Gabil for me, then refusing to listen to reason. I didn't think violence was the best answer, but if something wasn't done, Carrera really was going to go on a rampage. Esprit took action because she saw that coming, so I just let it slide this time. If Jagie calmed down and listened to us, it'd be the end of the whole problem.

But another surprise was waiting. Jagie reacted to Esprit.

"...Huh?"

"Hyah!"

The exchange occurred in an instant. Esprit's left-side backhand blow was stopped by his right hand; Jagie twisted her wrist lightly. It cost Esprit her balance, and Jagie attempted a sweep with his right foot in the process. Avoiding that kick-like sweep—or maybe anticipating it—Esprit leaped up, twisting in the air as she unleashed a right-side kick at Jagie's head. Jagie dodged it, leaning his upper body back, but Esprit's attack wasn't finished yet. Using the fist in Jagie's grasp as a fulcrum, she swung her right leg back like a pendulum, completing another kick with her left.

Now two different kicks were headed toward Jagie's head at once. It was an acrobatic move—I think I saw it in a fighting manga once, but for anyone who hadn't seen something like that before, it must've been hard to counter. Despite that, Jagie let go of Esprit's fist and somersaulted back, completely avoiding the combo strike. They were even again, and I was sure they'd drop

the kid gloves before too long.

"Hoh! What a fascinating woman you are," Jagie said, cracking his neck a couple of times. "Going easy against someone like me? That uniform isn't just for show."

"You're not too bad, either. Wanna see what I can *really* do? I bet it could be fun."

Esprit cracked her knuckles, a fetching smile on her face. Carrera didn't move. I didn't need to see her joyous smile to know that, as her boss, she had no intention of stopping her.

Gabil, sadly, just can't be relied on at times like these. I think he's got a lot of trauma when it comes to the three demonesses, all thanks to Ultima. It was Esprit here, of course, but he still looked unsure whether to speak up.

He stole a glance at me. Great. Guess I'm the only voice of reason here. But fine. I'll dive in. First off, we need to take the man responsible for this to task.

"Okay, okay, that's enough. Jagie, right? We'll never get anywhere dealing with you, so you think you could call your superior over?"

I stood up straight, trying to sound like a big shot. It was my attempt to act all cool, and maybe I'd give it an eight out of ten? I waited for Jagie's response as I sang my own praises, but:

"Huh? What are *you* doing? Don't interrupt a real *man's* battle!"

What was he talking about? It instantly set me off. But the next moment:

"You! Stop being rude to Sir Rimuru."

Carrera's kick shot forth like a lightning bolt.

"Yes, even *my* patience has its limits!"

Jagie was thrown into the air, only to be tossed downward by Gabil's spear.

"Oh, they got ahead of me."

Esprit had nothing left to do. And as for me:

"And *you* guys... Nothing took place here just now, all right?"

I was busy laying a little pressure on the magic-born dragging Jagie away. Gotta hide the evidence, you know.

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It turned out that we didn't need to bully Jagie like that after all. It soon became blatantly obvious that Milim's side was entirely to blame.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well? Clearly it's not my fault now, right?"

"Maybe not. I thought you had forgotten to relay the message, but...well, I never dreamed that you guys held an impromptu tournament to decide who'd come to greet us..."

The winner of that contest was Jagie, but the real culprit here was Middray, the organizer.

"Why did you even *do* that...?" I asked Milim.

"Hey, my guys are always lookin' for a fight, but Middray's crew sure don't mess around, either!"

Frey had both hands covering her face, while Carillon was practically rolling around on the floor laughing.

"But Jagie's that strong a fighter, huh?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, "he sure is. Maybe fifty-fifty with Phobio?"

I was being honest, too. By magicule count alone he was a little behind, but going toe-to-toe with Esprit like that was an impressive bit of action. He might've also had the transformation skills of Gabil, and if so, I'd rate him even higher than that. Of course, Phobio had the Animalize skill, too, so it wouldn't close the gap with *him* any...and if they fought for *real*, I'm sure Phobio would seal the win.

Still, Jagie was definitely a top talent. There really *were* a bunch of strong dudes in the Dragon Faithful, Middray included. They didn't rely purely on strength, they knew how to adapt their talents for the situation... All great assets in battle. Too bad they're all a bunch of muscle-bound clods. That was the cruel reality of it.

"I could not begin to apologize to you. This is all the result of my careless

management.”

Middray bowed his head low. Given the influence I imagined he held over Jagie, I wouldn’t hesitate to lay most of the blame on him.

“And...Lady Carrera? I, Sir Gabil, and everyone else here look forward to your assistance in our domain.”

Good thing Frey’s around to help. Carillon may be a mighty king, but he became that in no small part because he loves bashing heads in battle. He was close to Middray like that, never abandoning the credo that if you’re defeated, it’s your fault for being too weak. In this case, well, I guess we’re lucky that we happened to be the stronger side. If we weren’t, I doubt our talks would’ve gone this well.

“All right, Carrera. Wanna test each other out a little?”

See? There goes Carillon again.

“Hoh! That’s the spirit! Tell me how easy you want me to go first.”

Carrera’s that ready to join them?!

“Whoa, whoa...”

“It’s all right, my lord. Sir Carillon has completed his evolution, has he not? It’s only natural that he’d want to see how much stronger he’s become.”

“Look, um, that might be true, but we’re not in the labyrinth, okay? If you go too far with each other, you might wind up dying. It’s too dangerous.”

Gabil and Frey nodded at this...but only them. Everyone else looked unconvinced, Milim in particular.

“Aw, you’re no fun!” She pouted.

“Don’t say that!” Frey hollered.

But, practically speaking, I really couldn’t allow that. *Definitely* not near a large construction site, for one; we’d have to go somewhere that wouldn’t be affected by the fighting. And staging something like this in *these* times was all but asking the enemy to come along and attack us.

Still, Carillon was proving surprisingly stubborn. “Yeah, I know full well how

dangerous it could be. But I meant what I said a moment ago. I really *do* want to know how strong I've become before we have to start fighting for keeps. Aren't you the same, Frey?"

Yeah, well...I guess I have Ciel to help me with that, so...

Even back when it first upgraded itself to Raphael, it still gave me clear answers to everything I asked. I didn't need to "test my skill" against someone to have at least a basic grasp of their strength. In Carillon and Frey's case, they had to grope around in battle, scoping themselves out as they tested their abilities, so fighting someone *really* strong was probably the quickest way for them.

"I won't deny that, no," Frey replied. "But self-evaluation is a problem we constantly have to deal with, isn't it?"

"Maybe, but the enemy ain't gonna wait for us. We got a duty to get strong fast and protect the citizens relying on us. And I think that means we gotta put up with a little rough stuff sometimes. But whaddaya think?"

"Um..."

Frey was debated into a corner. Bringing up her duty as a ruler was hard to refute. If this were just a "test your strength" carnival game, she'd immediately turn it down, but if there was a good reason to do this, it was worth debating.

"Rimuru," Milim said, "I think I agree with Carillon, too. I've been training them myself, but I think that has its limits."

"Agreed. I hate to say it, but awakening like this made me realize how far away I really am from Milim, despite getting stronger. It's the same thing with you, too, Rimuru. No matter how much I struggle, I'll never make up the difference. So—"

"Hee-hee! So you think you could catch up with *me* instead? You must think very little of me indeed...but you're right that I'm likely a fairer match than Lady Milim."

I see...

You know, I highly doubt Carrera and I are that different, in our current forms.

But if Carillon feels otherwise, it just shows that he's become a better judge of the essence of things. Guy had high praise for him as well, and clearly he's making full use of the power he awakened. I think he'll be a major asset in the war to come.

And now, of course, I had Milim asking me. Maybe playing along is the right thing to do?

"All right. Carrera, you stay here and keep the area defended. I'll be back with Carillon and Frey later."

"Huh? But I was going to fight—"

"I know just the right person for this in the labyrinth!"

"Very well. As you wish, my lord."

I hated to disappoint her like this, but I couldn't sweet-talk everybody here. Carrera would just go too far. Ramiris was bound to give me a headache with her complaining. If I wanted Carillon to take on somebody, it'd be much smarter to find a more common-sense candidate.

Yes, Carillon could be paired with Benimaru. Him or Zegion. And I think someone like Kumara would work with Frey. But we'll work out the details back home. I'll be contacted if anything comes up, so we can transport everyone back as needed.

"Sorry to make you put up with my selfish request."

"Nah, it's fine, Carillon. I sided with you, so I wanna help you, is all. You okay with that, too, Frey?"

"Yes, of course. I appreciate it, in fact. There's no reason to turn you down."

So it's settled. We would leave Gabil and Carrera with Milim, and I'd return home with Carillon and Frey. The people under them could join in, too, if they wanted. They wouldn't be at an awakened-level, so I don't think they'd wreck the local environment too much...probably. I'll give them a ton of healing potions, too, so it's up to them whether they want to take this opportunity. It's exactly how Benimaru and everyone else got stronger, after all, so I had no concerns.

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Returning from Milim's domain, I left them with Benimaru and threw them all in the labyrinth.

Now it was finally time for me to visit Leon's domain. Diablo was already there, but I saved Leon for last, so I'm sure they were waiting for my arrival—something that was on my mind as I prepared for the trip. I knew where the Golden Land of El Dorado was, since Mizeri showed me the way before. Transport would thus take an instant.

"I'll be your bodyguard," Soei said—and with him around, my mind was at ease.

"Do not forget about me, my master!"

Ranga, popping his head out from my shadow, was pleading his own case. Aww, what a good boy! I gave him a nod and a couple of appreciative pets. He's with me at all times, but he can be so cute when he does that stuff.

Something about this trip made me pretty reluctant to go, but I was already in contact with them. It's always best to take care of the annoying work first, so I slowly lifted myself up.

"Well, shall we?" I muttered. Then, with Shuna, Rigurd, and the rest seeing me off, I activated the transport.

Leon's domain was a small continent in itself. Small, yes, but "continent" was the only word for it. Maybe a tad bigger than Australia? It featured a remarkably vast plain, the towns in it laid out in neat grid patterns.

Before Leon and his forces moved in, there was a lot more natural beauty—forests, plains, rivers, mountain ranges. All of this was magically rearranged by force, optimized to maximize output, and these were the results. That's what the Golden Land of El Dorado was—a kind of man-made metropolis, created with an eye toward maximizing its harmony with nature.

"Whoa. This is amazing..."

Arlos the Silver Knight, who greeted me when I arrived, smiled at my muttered observation. "Ha-ha-ha! It's an honor to hear that. I'm sure it would delight Sir Leon as well."

The last time I met Arlos, he had the visor all the way down on his helm. This time, his face was exposed. He was so beautiful, you could almost mistake him for a woman, although not as much as Leon. His attractive silver hair flowed down his back, but between the thickness of his neck and the size of his Adam's apple, he was pretty clearly male.

He was also Leon's second-in-command and the head of his domain's Magic Knights. The strongest among that crew was reportedly Claude the Black Knight and another man I've met before, but Arlos was no pushover, either. He could shoot magic in rapid-fire fashion with no casting time, pulling off transport magic as naturally as snapping his fingers. We had teleported to a spot outside the main city—in other words, beyond its defensive barrier—but he then teleported all of us to the main gate in the blink of an eye.

I don't *think* he was human in species, but he looked like one in appearance... and as I thought it over, he revealed that he was part of the demonoid race. They were long-lived and well-versed in magic, but still human at the root, apparently. They were born via a mutation that put them into the ranks of magic-born, and he said only a very few of them existed.

Hmm. I wonder if people like Mjurran or Razen would be among them?

They could certainly be defined in the same manner, yes.

I thought so. But then, magic-born came in all shapes and sizes, so trying to strictly classify them almost wasn't worth it. Personally, I didn't see the issue with calling any human who got magic-bornified a demonoid.

Regardless, my eyes were now turned toward the city beyond the main gate. It was more wondrous than I expected—these beautiful buildings, shining like gold as they lined the streets.

They did an excellent job building them, and everything about the city was engineered to very precise standards. In simple terms, the whole metropolis was shaped like a six-pointed star, which by itself created a magical effect over the whole of it—and the wonders continued from there. The streets were built in spirals, gradually going uphill from their entrances, and they connected to a chalk-colored castle that loomed threateningly in the middle, its spiral towers dwarfing everything else. The castle itself wasn't that big, but since the whole

town was built more outward than upward, it looked comparatively gigantic.

If you were to view it from above, you could tell that the entire city formed a large, powerful, layered magic circle. To those without this kind of overhead perspective, that magic circle would never be noticed—and even with it, you had to pay attention. That's how ingenious, and how exquisite, this design was. I've been following a lot of my own passions when developing my city, but I didn't think to incorporate a magic circle into the design.

What a great idea! For the first time in a while, I felt so frustrated about not coming up with it first. As an ex-member of the construction industry, seeing such a minutely designed city did a lot to prod my sense of pride. I know I had a wonderful city going back home, but I wasn't in a position to place functionality first with everything like this. Ramiris's labyrinth solved all my defense problems, but that was the result of several strokes of good luck at once. But here's a design that harnesses the citizens' magic power to keep their defense running—and they actually made it work.

"So this entire city produces the same effect as a large, powerful magic circle, huh? Amazing, is all I can say."

I kind of felt like I'd been outfoxed, so I had to be honest in my praise.

"Oh, you could tell?" Arlos said with a smile.

"Does it have the effect of Search Enemy and Counterattack, maybe? It's so much huger in scope than regular magic, I'm sure it does an incredible job."

Having a single magic circle evoke two different effects required a very careful arrangement by itself. Here, they made it work with something the size of a city, "drawing" the needed incantations with buildings to cast tactical-level magic that ran day and night. I couldn't even fathom how amazing it was. Anyone who snuck in without permission would be spotted at once, and any magic attack from the outside would bounce right off the barrier. Even a legion magic crafted for attacking cities would fizzle out, I bet.

"Ha-ha-ha! Well spotted. You could tell that much at a single glance? There's no point hiding it from you, of course, so I'll say that yes, you're correct. This city generates its own foolproof magical defense."

Arlos sounded proud of it, too, going on and on saying stuff like, “Having this barrier in place protects us from even the most insidious of demons, the kind that’d fire nuclear magic at us”—but I didn’t ask him any in-depth questions, because I figured it’d make me look bad. His brag reminded me of a certain blond, high school teen-like demon I knew, but I’m sure that was just a coincidence. So, putting my theoretical weapons together, I attempted to butter Arlos up.

“I’m sure it took so much time and money to obtain even one of those effects, right? But you’ve perfectly nailed two of them, all while calculating how to further develop this city and its features.”

“Precisely. It was a terribly difficult ordeal, but we succeeded, thanks to our trust in Sir Leon.”

“Well, count me impressed. Tackling something like that’d be a godsend if it actually worked, but you really *did* it, you know?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Thank you very much. I didn’t expect you to be so complimentary. It was Sir Leon who first conceived this city, so I’m sure he would love to hear that.”

Oh, no way. Leon designed all this?! He really *is* a genius, huh? Here I thought he was this silent, creepy demon lord with a weird obsession for Chloe, but maybe I needed to see him in a new light. This cityscape really *was* beautiful, a reality I had to accept—the excitement was winning over the frustration in my mind. Soei was observing the city as well, looking just as impressed...and I don’t think he’s that gifted in magic, but he was eagerly pricking up his ears, greedily searching for anything potentially useful.

“It’d be hard to invade from the air as well, I suppose. The only way in would be from underground...”

Oops. I was wrong. He was thinking of ways to attack this city, huh? Which, yeah, I guess that’s important. We’re friends for now, but we might wind up being enemies sometime later.

Either way, this fusion of magic and urban planning was absolutely astounding. I’d love to implement parts of this in my own nation, but this wasn’t anything I could readily copy. Our capital city of Rimuru was in pretty much a

“complete” state, so to speak, and I wasn’t gonna bulldoze it and start over.

Something to think about for the future, then. If I have the chance to build more cities, maybe that’s when we can try that idea out. Now I’ve got something fun to look forward to when I return home. Maybe it’d be a huge boondoggle, but I’d love to try designing my own magical city sometime.

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Walking past the main gate’s entryway, we proceeded up a spiraling glass hallway. The city was just as pretty on the inside. A waterfall was robustly flowing off a man-made cliff in the distance, running down the canals spread across the cityscape and providing the most charming views from any angle.

We pressed on for about ten minutes, me taking in the views as I walked, and then we reached a knight-guarded area where normal citizens were forbidden.

“Beyond this door is a magic circle connected to the front of the palace.”

Arlos guided us in, and after we leaped through the circle, we found none other than the demon lord Leon Cromwell, leader of El Dorado, on the other side. He was dressed a lot more casually than I expected—jeans and a white shirt—but it looked fine on him. He’s the kind of heartthrob who’d look good in anything, I guess. Arms crossed as he leaned against a column, he almost looked like a living piece of art.

But once he opened his mouth, the effect was shattered.

“Feh. No Chloe, huh?”

His mind really was stuffed with nothing but visions of her, huh? It annoyed me a little. Guess he really *is* a silent, creepy demon lord, what with that unhealthy fixation on Chloe. That was the “true” him, I was convinced, and there was no point trying to shake him of that.

Besides, something seemed off with Leon. I thought Arlos was a pretty boy, but his good looks paled compared to Leon’s. He was just as vexingly handsome as always, but he seemed pretty downtrodden at the moment.

“Of course not. But what’s up with you? You look pretty worn out.”

“...Don’t even start with me. *You’re* the one who sent over the cause of it.”

Ah!

That was all I needed to know, yeah. He must be annoying him to no end.

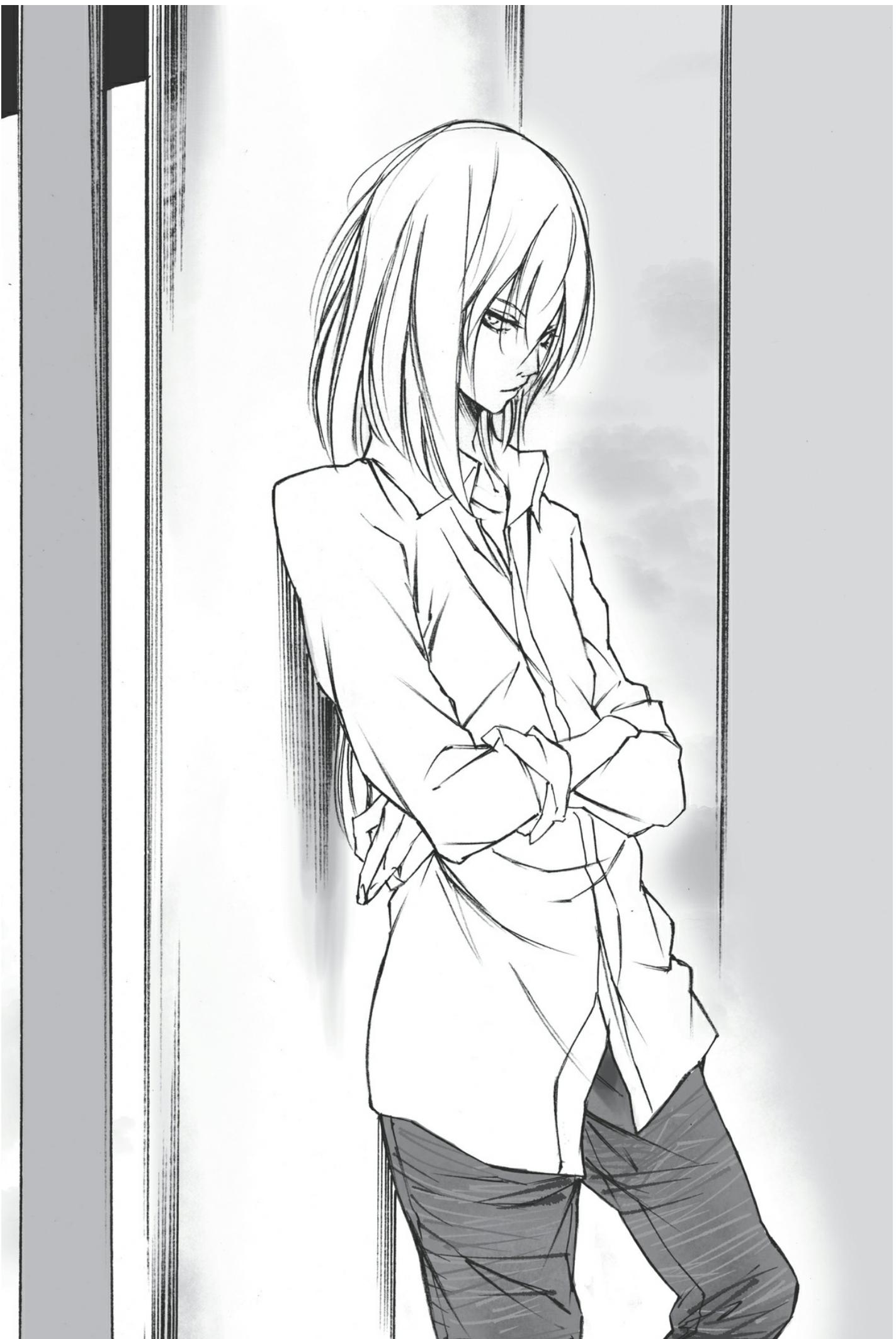
"Did Diablo do...something?"

"...Kind of."

For just a moment there, we were staring at each other like a Wild West standoff. Leon seemed ready to say something else, but bottled up the words and just nodded at me. It felt so heavy—the oppressive weight of the air around us.

He guided us into his castle, still silent. We were taken to a glorious, well-decorated chamber, all done up in gold, silver, and jewels—but the furnishings were still tasteful, not gaudy at all. The wallpaper was all the same shade of white, providing a canvas for all the jewels to reflect the chandelier's light on.

Nothing was tacky about it, just like Clayman's stronghold; his sense for good taste was clear as sunlight. Call it luxury without being overpowering. The chalky-white exterior didn't look flashy or anything, and the insides, too, were beautiful, elegant, and refined. Even a common-born man like me could relax in here without feeling all nervous. The air between Leon and me was heavy, but this decor was already calming my nerves.



Or so I thought, but the hallway outside was getting awfully noisy. I might've been relaxed, but I could still feel a headache coming on. And my guesses were right.

"Ah, Sir Rimuru! I've been waiting for you."

It was Diablo. He reverently greeted me, then took me to a reception room like it was his right to. Aren't we in Leon's domain? Why is he acting like he owns the place? I had a lot of questions.

Guy came along soon after Diablo. "Way to keep me in suspense, Rimuru," he said as he sat across from me. "Why the hell did you save *here* for last?"

"Well, because *you* were here, Guy. Having someone as strong as *you* around, y'know, maybe I didn't need to show up at all!"

Those were my true feelings, disguised as a joke. But it made Guy's temples throb. Uh-oh. I know when I've crossed a line, so I changed the subject before his head exploded.

"Hey, calm down! You and Diablo are here, after all, so I knew you could handle any enemies that showed up. Luminus's domain I wasn't so sure about, and I don't really know how strong Daggrull is in the first place. It's only natural I went to them first."

"Well, *Milim* is as about as strong as me, you know..."

True. Milim was a powerhouse. I understood what Guy wanted to say, but I had a reason for what I did.

"Yes, and Milim's already been assigned the construction work in her domain. 'Trust comes first'—that's my motto, and that's why her work needs to take priority."

I sneered at him. Milim was a valued friend of mine, despite it all, someone who'd helped me out a lot. It's on me to repay that favor, and in terms of who I care about more, her or Guy... Well, it's not even close. She can be a real pain to me sometimes, but I'm sure the opposite's true, too.

"Pfft. Fine. How were the other demon lords looking?"

One thing I like about Guy is that he's able to take his losses and move on

really fast. Despite his annoyance at being put off until the end, he still knew what the right call was, which relieved me.

"Well, we've built transport magic circles in each of the domains now. They still need to be fine-tuned, but even now, we can activate them all in case of emergency."

I opened up my Stomach a little to reveal one of the magisteel saucers I had put in place. They were so big, I didn't want to whip out the whole thing in there.

"Just give me the coordinates you want, and I'll install one over here, too."

"Hmm. All right. I'll guide you to the spot later."

Now Leon was sticking his head into the conversation. Which, okay, he owns this castle and all, so he has the right to. He puts up such a big attitude, and I can't help but be fooled sometimes.

"I'm glad that we have an emergency system in place when we need it. So all that remains is to wait for the enemy to attack us?"

"More or less. I'm planning to handle some more postwar cleanup in the Eastern Empire in the meantime. That, and strengthen our ties with the Western Nations."

"Even though we can hardly expect any human army to play a factor in this war?"

"Sure. Like disaster drills, for example. I wanna do my best to help them evacuate, so we don't go wiping out civilizations with this war."

I was pretty certain the residents of Rimuru, capital of Tempest, would survive just fine. Any other nation, though... Well, it was hard to estimate what the damage would be. So I was in the middle of setting up a network of shelters to evacuate to, via our REG enterprise. Mjöllmile was putting a lot of effort into that. I felt like I was piling too much work on his desk, so once things chilled out a bit, I planned to give him a nice little reward.

By the way, I was once fairly sure that Michael required the citizens of the empire, and their faith in him, in order for his skills to work. Better to assume

that wasn't an absolute must, though. I kind of suggested to him that I wouldn't be afraid to kill off all his citizens, so I'm sure Michael is taking measures against that...something you could say I induced him to do. But either way, we can't be sure until battle begins.

"Hmm... Sounds like you're a busy demon lord, too."

Guy looked exasperated with me. But I *was* busy. I'd gone through a lot of trouble to establish links with human society, and keeping those links safe was top priority for our nation. Having Michael's force break them down would be like stomping all over that work, and I wasn't about to put up with that.

Leon seemed just as astonished.

"So focused not just on your own nation, but others as well... You're even more of a pushover than I thought. Do you think you can grow an infinite number of arms to handle all this work?"

Mm, he has a point. I don't think I'm omnipotent or anything...but I'm also sick of losing stuff because I fail to act.

"I just don't wanna have any regrets later, y'know? I wanna do everything that I can, and if it doesn't work out, at least I'll know when to give up."

Of course, if it came to that, I probably wouldn't give up anyway. And I'd have tons of regrets, too. But I was striving so hard because I wanted to avoid that. Until a grim future was truly unavoidable, I wanted to puff my chest out and live as proudly as possible. There's no way I could fool myself into doing anything else.

"Heh. Well, I'm full of nothing but regret. Perhaps that's why that girl chose you over me."

Chloe again? Something about the tone of Leon's voice indicated I shouldn't be ignoring this. I know he's done some pretty crazy things in his past—maybe this is his warning to be careful, lest I turn out like him. For now, though, I decided to laugh off his concern.

"Well, unlike you, I'm not into little girls—er, sorry, cute little-sister types. I'm a normal person who knows when he's being a bother to others, so no worries about any of that."

"Do you want to die?"

Out of nowhere, the situation got explosive. Our debate continued until an exasperated Guy finally stepped in.

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"You know, I thought you coming over would improve things a little. *Boy*, was I wrong."

Guy seemed oddly tired as he griped at me. I don't know what he was expecting, really.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Perhaps now would be a good time to settle the score for good? And luckily, Mizeri has gotten used to building Damage-Reducing Barriers as of late..."

Is Diablo asking me to duke it out with Leon?

"Look, we're both demon lords, okay? We can't be that reckless," I said.

"No need to worry, Sir Rimuru. I would gladly take him on. You wouldn't need to lift a finger."

Diablo narrowed his eyes at Leon, like a predator stalking its prey. He might've actually been serious about this. I really couldn't guess who would win, and I'd be lying if I claimed not to be interested. But, in many ways, giving my okay would be out of the question.

"I'm saying that the damage would be enormous! I told you that your job was to *protect* Leon, didn't I? And you want to fight him instead? Why are we even *here*, then, huh?"

Diablo slumped down, looking disappointed as I lectured him. He didn't appear too regretful, but he seemed willing to drop this subject. I'll take it.

"Chew him out some more for me, Rimuru. He just never learns his lesson! He was trying to antagonize me just yesterday, the bastard. I went easy on him, but we *still* destroyed a training arena."

Don't whine at *me* about that. I can't really say who's at fault unless I know what caused this argument. And besides...

"Wait. You and Diablo fought each other?"

"Yeah. I've been bored lately, so we had a little exercise."

Ridiculous. So Diablo fought Guy, and the way Diablo put it, it was painful beyond description. Good thing this happened yesterday, at least, not today.

I looked over at Leon. He sighed, looking beyond displeased.

"It began when that maid over there tried picking a fight with Diablo, I think. She got annihilated by him, but she made all these excuses and fled the scene..."

His eyes were pointed at Raine.

"Surely you're joking. I didn't make a single excuse, and for that matter, I *didn't lose!*"

So she's not denying the "picking a fight with him" part. Great.

"There is no value to your subjective opinions."

Leon had no interest in Raine's shameless defense. Then Diablo picked up the baton.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I don't like bullying the weak, so I allowed her to flee from me."

"Huh? I said I'd take you on for *real* next time, didn't I? I was going easy on you. Did you get the wrong idea about that?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, did you forget how you roped Mizeri in and made it a two-on-one bout? You truly *do* need to be taught some discipline next time, don't you?"

Diablo remained calm, treating Raine like a child as they trolled each other. I was worried it'd lead to blows soon, but strangely, it didn't.

"Well, in an even *more* annoying development, these two freaks forged an armistice at some point."

I couldn't believe what Guy just said. As he put it, these verbal arguments occurred on a daily basis, and he preferred them to actual bouts without question.

"After all, they've been fighting every day for the past two weeks, you see?"

But somewhere along the line, I guess they started to hit it off.”

If Leon was backing Guy up, it had to be true. And if so, I could see that the balance of power around here was teetering in a direction I didn’t want it to go.

“I would *not* say that at all,” a quizzical Raine said. “What kind of evidence do you have for this nonsense?”

“What, you thought no one would find out?” Leon asked, as composed as ever. “During yesterday’s battle, you were shouting, ‘Don’t give me that wimpy junk, Diablo! Put more of your heart into it!’”

“Raine,” Guy’s heavy voice chimed in, “we know how you really feel. And why are you cheering on Diablo instead of me, huh...?”

“Oh, not at all! I would never use such vulgar language in the first place, Sir Guy, and I am now and forever your faithful servant. I’m sure Sir Leon is making a mistake.”

She certainly was bold about this. As serious as she usually acted, I never picked up on it, but did she have a bad case of “youngest child syndrome” or what? The type of woman who never reflects on her own actions and assumes things should always go her way. Kids who get doted on by their older siblings can turn out that way pretty often.

But after hearing all this, it was blatantly clear who was in the right.

“Diablo, why are you all chummy with her now?”

Might as well throw that question his way. I figured he probably wouldn’t lie to me.

He smiled back at me. “It is all thanks to your own glory, Sir Rimuru. I was regaling Raine with stories of your great wisdom and depth of thinking, and before we knew it, she had fully converted to my side!”

Whoa! Scary! So we’re talkin’ about brainwashing, then? I wanted to ask, but stopped myself.

“Sh-she did?”

“I am a fan of yours, Sir Rimuru. So, in exchange for Diablo telling me more stories about you, I agreed to offer him a little help.” Raine accentuated this

with a curtsy.

Wow. That self-serving, huh? Just like Diablo. No wonder they got along.

"Uh, yeah..."

What else could I say? I turned toward Guy, unsure how to proceed. He shook his head back, his way of saying "it's too late."

"Sorry my employees are all so dimwitted."

"No, no, Diablo's clearly just as much of a pain. They're both at fault here."

Guy must have it just as rough. Now I felt even more of an affinity for him than before. But then Mizeri, who usually stood there blankly, spoke up.

"...What? Wait, are you treating *me* as a dimwit as well for everything Raine constantly does...?"

Hmm. Sounds like the truth has dawned on her. I won't say it out loud, but I think that's correct, yeah. But an outsider like me butting in wouldn't achieve much of anything, so I pretended not to hear her pleading.

So, after some more chitchat, we were led to a hidden enclave behind the palace's throne room and audience chamber. There, I installed our transport magic circle. It weighed several dozen tons, so once it was in place, moving it again would take a lot of work.

Speaking of work, mine was done here, and I took my leave soon after. I could tell Leon desperately wanted me to take Diablo and Raine away, but that would surely damage our war footing. Even if it didn't, no way was I gonna take 'em back. Leon would just have to be patient.

Then, right as I departed:

"And *please*...take care of Chloe for me."

Leon emphasized his words.

"Sure thing." I nodded back.

He didn't need to say it, but my affirmation must've been convincing enough, because he let me go pretty readily. I expected him to be pushier about all that, so it was kind of unexpected, not that I'd tell him.

In normal circumstances, he's really a pretty cool guy. That, and he revealed a very surprising truth to me. Leon and I actually share the same hobby. No, not his thing for underage girls—it turns out Leon's dream was to be an architect. No wonder he had so much aesthetic sense, huh? He let me in on that factoid as I praised his city and palace in our conversation, and I could certainly believe it. He's got a great head for it, and I told him as much.

He's a smug bastard, yes, but deep down, he's really a nice guy. That was my new estimation of the demon lord Leon. So, after forging a much improved relationship, I completed my successful journey to El Dorado.

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Even after returning from Leon's domain, I kept making foreign visits. I had no idea when the enemy might attack, so I was on a mission to strengthen our links with other nations as much as possible. I had that emergency transport network in place with the other demon lords, and obviously I wanted to install some of those circles in our allied nations as well.

The first stop was the Dwarven Kingdom. Carrera's demon servant Agera was currently deployed over there, and I was told he was busy training with Gazel, their king. Seeing how that turned out could be useful as well.

So I transported myself to the massive gate protecting Dwargon. A long line snaked out from it, as usual, packed with merchants and adventurers. I gave it a sideways glance as I headed for the nobility-only corridor and spoke to the guard.

Without any further wait, I was guided to the royal palace. I felt like such a huge, powerful figure, getting this kind of treatment, which perhaps shows how unnable I still am. I knew I was in way over my head when it came to this stuff, so I was careful not to openly sneer at anyone in public, at least.

Gazel was there to greet me.

"I've been expecting you, Rimuru."

And Agera was with him, of course, offering an exaggerated bow.

"It pleases me immensely to see you in good health, my lord."

It was like he just walked out of a historical samurai drama—and he pulled it

off, too. And also, much to my surprise, it turns out Agera was the reincarnation of Hakuro's grandfather. I was pretty shocked when Carrera told me, but—taking an impartial look at him—all his mannerisms were exactly the same. I had wanted to speak with him, as I recalled, but never quite found the opportunity. Maybe we could find some time afterward to sit and chat.

I thought over all of this as I returned his greeting. "Great to see you again, King Gazel. Glad you're well. And you too, Agera."

"Ha-ha-ha! You're still far too formal with me, you know. Like I always tell you, just 'Gazel' is perfectly fine!"

"Yeahhh, I meant to do that, but seeing you in your palace like this gets me nervous. Kinda reminds me of the trial I had here. I know it's petty..."

I couldn't shake that non-nobility thinking fully, but I think it's endearing, sort of. I dunno... It'd be weird if I *didn't* get all nervous around authority figures.

Vaughn and Dolph watched us, not all that interested. Soei was the same way. It was Agera who finally butted in.

"In my humble opinion, my lord, I would wish for you to act just as you please, although Lady Carrera would no doubt upbraid me for it. You are both the leaders of allied nations. Simply be your normal, dignified selves! No need to artificially distance yourself from King Gazel."

"Yeah, I know that, but..."

Of course I understood what he meant, but I was a humble salaryman until a few years ago. Unless I'm angry, or focused, or involved in something so huge that I can't think about anything else, I can't help but revert back to my normal self.

"It's fine, Rimuru! I understand how you feel, besides. I, for one, find myself fretting under the gaze of the Heavenly Emperor Elmesia when I see her."

"Wow, even *you* have someone like that, King Gazel?"

"*However!* You speak completely casually with the Heavenly Emperor, do you not? Someone I have *untold* trouble with! And I just don't understand how you do it!"

Fair point. And I really had no way to counter that. Gazel wants me to be just as casual with him, and I promised that I'd try my best at it. It's just, you know, I can't help but respect people I think I can truly rely on. It's something embedded deep in my personality, so it's not the easiest thing to fix.

"But I *can* act the way I'm supposed to sometimes, depending on the time and situation. It's not *that* big of a problem, is it?"

"It is, you fool. It is precisely those sorts of situations where your natural habits come out on you. You need to evaluate how you speak and act on a regular basis, so you won't trip up in the most important of times."

Another good lesson from him. He did tend to lecture me a lot, which only encouraged a return to my normal attitude even more. Sometimes Elmesia says the same things to me, but *she* can turn it on and off like a switch. Maybe she adjusts her own approach so Mollie and I can talk with her more easily...or maybe I'm just overthinking it. Anyway, Gazel's advice was something to address in the future. I wanted to make sure I didn't forget it.

Now we were in a less stuffy reception room, drinks in hand, as we discussed recent events. This was my main objective here—comparing notes and seeing where we stood.

"Could this great war be avoided, do you think?" Gazel asked me.

"I am reluctant to say it, but it seems doubtful to me. The other demon lords and I are working on a transport network of magic circles, in order to ease travel between our domains in an emergency."

"Hmm... It's just one crisis after the other, isn't it? To be honest with you, I thought all was lost when Lady Velgrynd was captured. Now that she's back on our side, I don't think this... Michael, was it? I don't see him as anyone to be *that* perturbed about."

Well, not to toot my own horn, but Tempest's forces now outclassed the Empire's at its peak. We also had the other demon lords, along with Velgrynd and Veldora, so I suppose Gazel couldn't see any possible way we'd lose. But that was wishful thinking.

"No, I mean, that's how strong this foe is. In terms of its power alone, not

even the Empire compares to its size.”

“I understand that. I’m not underestimating this foe at all. The opposite, actually.”

“The opposite?”

“Indeed. I’m half-resigned to our fate by now. All the struggling in the world won’t help *us* at all, this time.”

“Oh, right...”

I suppose he was right. If Velzard targeted Dwargon, not even a nation this powerful could win. That one individual was just too strong—I could see why he was so ready to throw in the towel.

“Of course, we won’t go down that easily. I’m ready to retaliate, in the worst case.”

He sounded ready for it, all but howling for blood. His resolve for that, at least, was the real thing. The way that he refused to flee in the face of Velgrynd shows he was willing to fight a hopeless battle if need be. I was glad to see that.

“Well,” I said, “if you know you can’t win, there are still necessary measures to take, aren’t there?”

The quality of our foes, not the quantity, was scary. And Velzard being among them was the worst thing of all. It basically rendered Veldora worthless; when it came to people who could decently take on Velzard, Guy and Velgrynd were about it. Me? I’d run. I wanted to avoid that fight at all costs.

“Well, if we’re talking two True Dragons locked in battle, that’s a natural disaster right there. An honest-to-goodness battle between gods.”

“It’ll sure feel that way, yeah. But we can’t escape it, either.”

“Have you figured out a way to win?”

“Nope! But I’m taking every measure I can to improve our chances.”

“Heh-heh-heh... Oh, look at you.”

Gazel nodded as he chuckled. To be frank, I really had no idea until we tried, but if it looked hopeless, we needed to secure a means of escape. I was trying

to act all cool, but without a full analysis of the enemy's force, there was no point debating over whether we could win or not. All we *could* do was figure out what to do if our prospects started to dim.

"So I want your help."

"Very well. Just say the word. I'll lend you what help I can."

Gazel readily agreed to my request. At once, I asked him to install a transport magic circle in his kingdom. There was already one for personal use here in Dwargon, but cargo transport was another urgent need.

"I'm impressed you refined so much magisteel to such a level of purity."

"I cheated a little with my skills," I admitted. "Normally, I'd want to wait until we had the right engineers trained for the job, but the enemy won't wait that long."

"...I assumed as much. We'll handle the details for you."

"Thank you," I said with a nod—and with that, I had the magic circle installed in Gazel's designated spot at once.

With my main goal complete, we settled down to chitchat.

"So how's the training going?"

"Well, I have to hand it to Agera—grandfather to Master Hakuro the Sword Ogre, and founder of the Crestwater style. I certainly have a long way to go with my own sword, as I learned rather quickly!"

"There is no need for such modesty, King Gazel," Agera said. "You have already earned the hidden art Five-Bloom Stab, and you are aiming for even loftier heights, are you not?"

In the Crestwater style, anything on the level of Five-Bloom Stab or higher was called a hidden art. These included Pomegranate – Six-Bloom Slash, a high-speed blunt slash not meant to kill, and Willow – Seven-Bloom Sweep, a sword move that softly parried the enemy's attack. There were others—slashes, stabs—and the most hidden art of all was the Multilayered Blossom Flash. It was meant to stay within the Crestwater family, but apparently Agera was intent on teaching it to Gazel.

"Hakuro told me that his grandfather showed him the Multilayered Blossom Flash once."

"Yes, I did. This was before my reincarnation, so my memory is hazy, but I vaguely recall demonstrating it to him once. If he could recreate it and show it to me, I said, he would truly be a genius. And not to boast of my own grandson, but I am no longer the Byakuya Araki that I was at the time. I offer nothing but praise to the leaders of the monster nation."

Agera looked a tad ashamed, but also fiercely proud.

"Oh, certainly. Hakuro's my own master as well. I don't mind you praising him at all. In fact, I'm glad for it."

"Yes, indeed. Your teachings, Sir Agera, have been firmly passed on through Sir Hakuro. Destiny can be quite a mysterious thing sometimes, can it not?"

Gazel agreed with me, warmly smiling. Agera, seeing this, nodded back, filled with emotion.

"So, Rimuru, do you mind if I pick your brain about something?"

"If I know the answer, sure."

"Good. I know I asked about this before, but I have a question about ultimate skills. Do you think, if I continued to polish my sword skills, I could ever defeat someone bearing such a skill?"

Huh. Way to cut right to the point. The answer was yes, it's possible, but only in the right circumstances. It'd be a real tough shot, but there was a nonzero chance.

"According to what I've been taught, an ultimate skill can be counteracted only by another ultimate skill. It's best to assume that a unique skill won't cut it."

"I see..."

"But if the conditions work out just right, I think you *might* be able to work it out."

"Oh? And those conditions are?"

"For example, there was Yuuki Kagurazaka's Anti-Skill—a super-unique one that suppressed my skills. Very dangerous. That, and I've seen Diablo dominate ultimate skill users via his magic alone."

"Hmm..."

"I think one thing that matters a lot is your willpower. A spiritual life-form lives off nothing but its own willpower, and it looks like they can hold their own against ultimates even if they don't have one. It's a theory, but it's pretty likely to be correct."

I remained noncommittal, but Ciel was of the same opinion, so I was fairly certain of it. Which meant the key to it all was...

"So I'd need to raise the power of my will until it's at the level of a spiritual life-form's? Something beyond the path of the sword...?"

"Well, I think there's a much quicker way."

"What?!"

"It looks like if a God-class weapon accepts you as its master, that makes you something on the level of a spiritual life-form."

That was the answer. There was also the cheat method of granting someone else the right skills, but absolute power corrupts absolutely, and all that. Or was it greed? Maybe I'm drifting away from the original saying, but I think I'm getting the point across. You can't fully access powers that are far beyond your capability. That's why I didn't grant all my skills to everyone in my force. I certainly won't do that for Gazel, either; he'd need to earn them himself. Of course, I can't grant skills to anyone whose soul I'm not connected to in the first place. I helped Raine and Mizeri awaken, yes, but that's a different story.

For *this* situation, obtaining a God-class weapon was the optimal solution, I think. But you didn't get to be a God-class weapon by being easy to obtain. I had Hinata's Holy Spirit Armor analyzed well enough that I was working to mass-produce it, but no matter how hard we tried, the results would *maybe* be Legend-class at best. Wearing it would grant you powers on the level of a Saint, but that wouldn't be enough to fend off an ultimate skill.

"...God-class, eh?"

Gazel looked at his sword. It was a famed one, well used. Probably Legend-class, and on the high end of that, too. But there were untold numbers of nicks and scratches on its blade.

"You see before you the results of me clashing blades with Kondo. It was a tremendous fortune that it didn't simply break...but this sword's usable life has come to an end."

True enough. This must've been a Dwargon treasure, passed down across generations of rulers. In this sorry state, it'd be little more than a museum piece.

Or maybe...

"Hey, how about I ask Kurobe for his help? He might be able to revive this sword for you."

"What? Are you serious?!"

"I can't make any guarantees, but Kurobe *did* give Gabil's spear a new lease on life."

Repairing it with the crimson steel I provided allowed Kurobe to craft Gabil's Vortex Spear, a reborn weapon just a step away from God-class. If he kept using it in battle, we believed it'd evolve to the God level in time. And I *did* have some spare crimson steel left...

"I don't think that sword's fully dead yet, either. You never know—"

"Please. I won't fault him if he fails. *Please* ask Sir Kurobe for me!"

I'd be doing him a *huge* favor, but as his fellow training partner, I wouldn't be stingy. As much help as he provided me, I owed him one anyway. So I took the blade from Gazel's hands.

"Aside from this sword," I asked, "do you know where else you might be able to obtain a God-class weapon?"

"Do you think I do? Maybe you're too lacking in common sense to know it, but even a Legend-class weapon is a national treasure. Even for *major* nations, too. Maybe the Empire's one thing, but you won't find those bumping around just anywhere."

He didn't have to be *that* sarcastic with me. I assumed the same thing.

"Yes, my own investigations have led me to the same result. I pored through every possible route in the Western Nations underworld, but I discovered no more than a few Legend-class examples."

Soei's experience was backing up Gazel's sass. I guess Kurobe's our final hope, then. (Soei's own twin blades, by the way, were another one of Kurobe's overhaul projects. Not God-class, sadly, but at Soei's skill level, that's no big problem. They've both got room to grow, you could say.)

"Well, no point asking for the impossible. But back to our conversation—you said that becoming a spiritual life-form would let you withstand ultimate skills?"

"Again, I can't speak in absolutes. It'll vary depending on how long you've lived, of course. For example, a newborn Arch Demon wouldn't survive at all. But with a strong enough will and the magicule energy to support it, it sure looks like you could hold out against an ultimate, yeah."

"Hmm. Your answers are too murky to comprehend too well..."

Really? I don't think so...I hope. But if he feels otherwise, let's try simplifying it for him.

"Basically, you gotta *want* to win!"

I didn't want to resort to a "gotta have the right attitude" explanation, like I was a soccer coach or something. In addition to being trite, it was probably incorrect a lot of the time. But when it came to ultimate skills, it really *was* difficult to explain it any other way. Besides, we live in a world where the slash of a sword can literally rip a hole in the atmosphere, so maybe sword skills and magic are pretty much alike after a certain point. Build up your willpower, and you could even bend the laws of the world.

That, at least, makes things easy to understand and act upon. So let's go with it.

Gazel, hearing me out, now fell silent, a grave look on his face. I glanced at Agera; he looked just as thoughtful.

"Sir Rimuru is correct," Soei said. "As the recipient of an ultimate gift, I am not

one to talk, but if you instill enough will in your blade, you could kill any opponent. That is how it feels to me, at least.”

Agera nodded. “Indeed. To me, it feels as if I am sublimating all my will into my blade. My very will to kill my foe. I am driven to believe that my entire body is the blade, that there is nothing I would fail to slice through. That I could even slash through things with no corporeal form.”

Oh, right, Agera’s skill was Blade Transform, wasn’t it? Comparing existence points alone, Agera’s transformed sword wouldn’t be quite God-class...but its cutting edge gave Agera the winning advantage. A God-class weapon is said to have a will of its own, but not even it could outclass the will of the right person.

Then Ranga popped out from my shadow to join the conversation.

“It works slightly differently with me. When I was asleep in my master’s shadow, I felt like I suddenly heard a strange, unfamiliar voice... And then Hastur, Lord of Starwind, flashed before my eyes. But I believe it took form like that because of my constant wish to help my master!”

He accentuated his point with a few self-content pants. I guess he’s gotten proficient enough that he could take only half his body out of the shadow now, leaving his hindquarters hidden—but he was probably wagging his tail at full speed.

So cute. I used to be a cat person, but I’m *really* leaning toward dogs lately, and I’m sure Ranga is a lot of the reason for that.

Regardless, Soei, Agera, and Ranga provided a few key examples for my point.

“It’s all about will, then...?”

“Indeed. There is no need for impatience, either. If the enemy should strike at us while I am present, I will lend you my powers. Do not be afraid to ask for them.”



Very reassuring. Gazel's power, plus Agera's sword moves, would let him put up a good fight against someone like Kondo, even—or, at least, buy us some more time.

But...

"But if that enemy winds up being Velzard, you better not hesitate to run. I'm guessing that with her, it wouldn't even be a battle at all."

"That bad, eh?"

"Yeah. I can't be sure since I've never seen her seriously fight, but she always struck me as scarier than Velgrynd."

"Hmm... I hate to admit it, but you're likely correct. And now that I've seen Velgrynd for myself, I know just how rash it'd be to take on a True Dragon. Still... I am a king, and I cannot abandon my citizens."

"Well, just pray Velzard doesn't come for your kingdom, then. If she does, call me."

I showed him my cell phone.

"Ah! Yes! There was *that*, wasn't there?!"

"Like I said before, it's a magic device that lets you converse directly with me. There aren't a lot made yet, so take good care of it, okay?"

That being said, all I gave him was my number and a link to the Control Center's hotline. He wouldn't receive El and Mollie's numbers—it'd be poor manners. He'd need to ask them for those himself. I had coworkers give clients my personal number a few times in my past life, and it annoyed me beyond belief.

"All right. So I type in the numbers recorded here, and that will connect me to that person?"

"Exactly, yeah. There aren't a lot of people with these yet, but if you run into one, you can have them give you their number, too."

"Mm. I suppose can discuss matters, then, should I run into trouble."

"That's the intended use of this, yeah. I'll make sure I can step up for ya when

you call me, too."

"Very well. I will count on that. And, of course, don't hesitate to let me know if I can do anything for you, too. I'm personally willing to help in whatever way I can."

Gazel and I exchanged smiles. I didn't think the chances were high that Dwargon would be targeted, but this was still a relief—and we now knew how to stay in touch in an emergency, too.

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After spending a few days in the Dwarven Kingdom, I moved on to the kingdom of Farminus.

Gadora, now an apprentice to Diablo, was staying here, aiding Testarossa as well. We were having him provide all the intelligence he could from within the Empire as we tried to build a rock-solid foundation for Masayuki's enthronement. He was a busy man, traveling frequently between the two nations, but for now he had settled down in Farminus, and I wanted to talk things over with him while I could.

The Farminus capital was brimming with way more activity than I anticipated. Most of it was under construction the last time I came, and that was still true now, but a lot more of it was looking nice.

A large rail station had also been completed just outside of the capital, and warehouses lined the streets nearby. This was a stopover point for traffic between Blumund and Dwargon, so they needed a lot of storage space for all the different types of goods that came through. This proved difficult within the capital itself, so the station building was put up outside the city.

The capital itself was still very much under construction because they wanted to get all the station facilities up and running first, in anticipation of Farminus's future economy. That, and the current Farminus royal family was surely flat broke. To be brutally frank, I was financing basically the entire cost of this construction. Tempest was contracted to lay the rails for the magitrain lines we were developing, too. You might think we didn't stand to gain much from this besides goodwill, but think again. We'd be earning all the usage fees, and we also had free rights to all the required land for eternity—really, a mind-blowing

deal. Once all this construction was over, we'd do nothing but rake in the revenue. Even minus labor, equipment, and rail-maintenance costs, we expected quite a bit of yearly profit.

So, thanks to those reasons, I was heading up all the magitrain business. Farminus, meanwhile, handled development for all the surrounding urban area. Queen Mjurran was the main person in charge of planning for that stuff, but she had to take some childbirth leave, so Yohm, the king, became a more prominent figure. He kept mentioning how uneducated he was, but I felt he had a lot of natural intelligence; he studied urban planning hard so he could fill Mjurran's shoes while she was on leave. As a result, even though the pregnancy went without a hitch and she was back in action, Yohm was still the go-to man on the project for the kingdom's nobility and government officials.

In order to support his efforts, I offered him a series of low-interest, collateral-free loans. Why weren't they *no*-interest loans, you ask? Well, because it'd make the receiver feel so obligated to me that it'd lead to a lot of needless restraint on their part. It'd make the lender feel like the superior party, and then it wouldn't be a partnership any longer. Lending or borrowing money is a great way to torpedo a friendship if you're not careful, so we drafted an official contract between our nations and enacted it with a clear understanding between ourselves.

So, with future economic development the watchword for Farminus at the moment, large-scale construction on the capital was only beginning to roll into action.

Checking in at the gate, I watched people go to and fro in the city for a little while before an express wagon was sent over for us. Normally, I should be bringing in all my top officials so we can do this fancy royal visit, stage a parade down the main street, the whole bit—but these were tense times, and an elegant train journey was out of the question. So I just teleported myself over with Soei and Ranga.

I contacted Gadora to have him bring us a wagon so we wouldn't be too conspicuous here in Farminus. The wagon actually came, too, which relieved me. Unlike Milim's gang, they know how to follow through on promises around here.

"Very sorry for the delay! King Yohm is waiting for you, so I'll take you directly to the palace."

In fact, it was Gadora himself stepping out of the carriage. He couldn't *be* more careful, could he?

"Whoa! You scared me. You didn't have to come meet us at the gate," I told him.

"Oh, I'd stand for nothing else! And I hardly get to enjoy *this* honorable a role any longer, outside of times like these. Besides, Sir Rimuru, if I did *not* personally greet you, I rather think Sir Diablo would have my head for it!"

Gadora laughed, but I don't think he meant it as a joke.

"Um, if he's bullying you around, let me know, all right? You answer directly to me, after all, just like him."

He looked like an old man, but I talked to him like he was an even older friend. It felt a little weird, but I was used to it by now.

So I gave him a little friendly advice. Diablo is obedient around me but tends to go off the rails when my attention is elsewhere. We could laugh off his antics over in Leon's domain, but pulling that stuff on one of Tempest's closest allies would be a huge problem. Gadora was now Diablo's apprentice—or part of his family tree, I suppose it's more accurate to say—so maybe he wasn't in much of a position to complain. It was up to me as the boss to keep everyone on their best behavior.

But Gadora laughed and said it wasn't a problem. Any hardship, he said, was worth it in the name of new knowledge. It was like a fetish with him; I sure didn't understand it. Best not to get too deeply involved, I thought, resolving to let Gadora continue doing what he wanted.

Inside the carriage, Gadora told me how things went with Masayuki after his crowning. The wagon was taking its time traveling through the city, so we made the best use of it we could.

"So did Masayuki's coronation go without a hitch?"

"It did, yes. Very smoothly, in fact. Of course, Lady Testarossa and Lady

Velgrynd were doing everything they could to back it up, so I'd have been more surprised if it were a failure."

"Ah. Well, with *those* two on our side, I'll bet it went fine."

I wouldn't want the opposite to be true, but...yeah, about what I figured. Masayuki was always blessed by luck (so to speak), and he had both the talented Testarossa and the rock of strength that was Velgrynd. You'd have to be crazy to oppose them.

"Once the citizens saw the full glory of Lady Velgrynd," Gadora said, "they were more than welcoming of the new emperor Masayuki. Really, anyone who was there to see it wouldn't ever dream of defying her again."

Well, yeah. Triggering a volcanic eruption, then using her own powers to block it? Like, she conjured up the biggest natural disaster ever, then put an end to it without causing any damage. I don't think anyone would complain to her after that. And tapping into a volcano for the task... Velgrynd really doesn't know what "too much" means.

"There were *some* who've voiced their disapproval, of course, but I believe Lady Testarossa will be addressing those complaints."

"You think it'll work out?"

"It will not be a problem. Some, like Sir Caligilio, were concerned that Lady Testarossa would simply kill any potential opposition...but those worries, at least, appear unfounded. She's making exceptionally good use of the information I provide her, and Sir Moss's own skills are proving quite impressive. He's done a perfect job, digging up dirt on the enemy and wrapping things up neatly."

I'm sure of that. I'd never want *them* to work for my enemies.

"Well, if anyone over there's brave enough to oppose it, I'd almost want to scout them for my own nation."

"You're certainly right on that point!"

"I know *I'd* never say no to them."

"No doubt about it. Like I said, anyone who saw what unfolded would feel

exactly the same as me.”

Gadora and I had a little laugh over this. He really is a fun old guy to hang out with. And considering how much we thought alike on this topic, I really feel like we made a close connection here.

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Inside the castle, we were greeted by the full set of ministers and officials, King Yohm and Queen Mjurran leading them.

Edmaris, the former king of Farmus, was casually mixed in among them, notably thinner and also with his beard shaved. He looked like a different man from when I first met him—especially given how pure and uncorrupted his eyes looked now. I didn’t speak to him, though, since it’d just be awkward.

This was technically an unofficial visit, but we informed them in advance that we wanted to discuss the great threat facing us. I’d wish nothing more than for Farminus to be spared in this war, but everybody knew that this was far too optimistic a thought.

It was still a newborn nation, one with limited financial resources; as mentioned, they were highly dependent on Tempestian investment. What’s more, their military hadn’t really recovered yet. You can’t train a new set of knights in a day, and it went without saying that they didn’t have the budget for soldiers of fortune. I had a lot to do with that, yes, but I’m not planning to shoulder any of the blame. You can’t fight for the greater good if you get bogged down over every little detail. I don’t think everything I’ve done is just, but I still want to declare as much in public. Otherwise, I’d be doing a disservice to everyone who died along the way.

So, yeah, I owe them one, but I’m not gonna say it out loud. But we have an alliance going, so I intended to offer them as much support as I could. Sending Gadora here was part of it, and the royal court understood that well enough. The government knew, in so many words, that they better not mess around with me too much right now.

“Well, Boss, things improvin’ any for ya?” Yohm asked on behalf of everyone else.

"I've worked out some countermeasures with the other demon lords, but honestly, we're gonna have to see what happens. But that makes me pretty anxious, so I'm visiting a bunch of different nations at the moment."

Gadora had already reported the news, so I didn't see any surprise from him. He showed me where to place my transport magic circle without prompting, too.

"You can ask Gadora here for help on fine-tuning and how to use it."

"Any time, Sir Rimuru."

"So we can use this to evacuate if we're against the wall, huh? But the big question is, who'll stay and who'll go?"

"It's an important one, yeah. Your destination may not be much safer. It might be a cold comfort at best."

"Well, Boss, if *your* nation gets taken down, there ain't gonna be no runnin' anywhere after that, for sure. If it happens, we'll just chalk it up to fate, y'know?"

Yohm was awfully brisk about it. The other ministers nodded in agreement. Maybe people around here fear me more than I gave them credit for. The prevailing wisdom seemed to be that if *I* couldn't beat something, they had no chance to start with—a pretty funny thing to think, really.

"Hey, don't just admit defeat like that. You're supposed to struggle until the very end, you know that?"

"Sure we do. My baby girl was only born a little bit ago—I'm not about to die now! She hasn't even called me 'daddy' yet!"

Glad to see he's already a doting father. He was poking at Mieme, the little girl in Mjurran's arms, as he spoke.

"I didn't know that... But don't crowd her too much. You'll wake her up."

That was likely to anger Mjurran, her mother, so I thought fit to offer that advice. Being thoughtful like that is the sign of a successful person...I think... probably.

"I wish you were around to say that more often," a sighing Mjurran said.

"Whenever this girl comes up, it's like he loses all common sense."

Sounds like a pretty typical set of parents, then.

"Well, you know that stupid wolf who claims that it's *his* girl. We can't let our guard down for a moment!"

I had no idea what Yohm was talking about.

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm second in line for the throne, so that means I'm gonna marry Mjurran someday! And when I do, that'll make Mieme *my* daughter, you know!"

"God dammit, Gruecith, stop with that creepy junk already! How many times do I have to tell you—your whole *assumption* is demented!"

Oh. Okay. Yohm's a little weird, but Gruecith the "stupid wolf" is wholly off his rocker. I know Mieme's cute and all, but any claims that she belongs to him are sheer fantasy.

"I must admit, I have to side with Yohm here..."

"Right? You hear that, Gruecith? I *knew* you'd understand, Boss!"

Apparently Yohm was obsessed about hanging with Mieme whenever he could find time in his busy schedule, lest she forget about him as a father. It was a very touching effort he was making, just to ensure that Gruecith didn't somehow win her over. Still, in times like these, having a distraction was important. No matter how stupid it was, anything that kept your mind off things should be welcomed.

However:

"Just try not to act stupid *all* the time, okay? Because comic-relief characters often wind up being the first to die."

I decided to offer a little advice to Yohm and his court, based on my video game experience.

We held a more formal conference in an assembly hall that dated back to the glory days of Farmus. The itinerary was pretty well laid out in advance, so things went smoothly with my presentation.

I wasn't asking Yohm and his government for war support. All I'd be doing was helping Farminus's people evacuate, if need be. That transport magic circle didn't have enough capacity for everyone, so we needed to decide in advance who'd have access to it. This I asked them to work out for themselves, so there wouldn't be chaos if push came to shove.

That being said, any destination they'd go to might not be safe, either. The main goal of this magic circle wasn't to transport dignitaries out, but to transport needed warpower to where it belonged. If Farminus became a battleground, the newly established knight corps would be called up. Gruecith had been training up both the new recruits and the old Farmus knights, but I couldn't expect them to be nearly enough. So I planned for reinforcements to be sent from other nations. It'd be nice if we could set everything up in advance, but we didn't know where the enemy would aim at first, so we needed as much flexibility as possible.

In terms of importance, Farminus was admittedly rather low priority. If the kingdom fell, we could rebuild it later. As long as we kept casualties to a minimum, I didn't see the need for them to resist down to the last man. I wavered over telling Yohm's government about this, but I did, and they accepted it well enough. Worst-case scenario, we'd help them rebuild; I promised them all the support I could spare for that.

This sort of political groundwork was key if we wanted to use our limited resources as best we could.

"Yeah, I know, Boss," said Yohm. "I know you're not gonna just abandon us."

"Nah. But keep in mind, the transport magic circle can only handle fifty or so people at a time. It's not nearly enough to be cheering about."

"Still, a nation's only obligated to protect itself, y'know? But here you are, makin' all these arrangements... Why, I couldn't hardly ask for any more!"

I felt like Yohm directed that less at me and more at some of his dubious government ministers. I could understand their point of view, even if they didn't voice it—they wanted help, they didn't want citizens to die, and they wanted more weaponry. Unfortunately, I could only spare so much. I'm sure they understood; that's why they begrudgingly agreed to it.

Regardless, that was the end of my errand in Farminus.



Yohm then took us around to see a few sights. The most impressive one was the construction site where they were building some of their most important facilities.

Farminus was using the same capital city as Farmus, so the central part of town, encircled by defensive walls, was the noble quarter. The neighborhoods grew poorer the farther away you went from there, with free citizens shunted out to the far edges of the city walls. A lot of rezoning was going on to address this inequality, and as part of it, they were digging up the road that went through the heart of town and building a large tunnel. This would house a subway that'd go from the station next to the capital right into the city itself.

"Pretty ambitious move."

"Yeah, Mjurran is really somethin' else. Using magic to evaluate the strength of the ground, comin' up with all those plans..."

Magic really is a cheat sometimes. Geological surveys were a pain in the ass at the best of times, but a talented enough sorcerer could complete one without breaking a sweat...or breaking any ground. Searching for underground water veins, cavities, weaker soil, other features—they could grasp all of that. In fact, they could even conduct soil improvements, working with earth, sand, soft or hard soil, you name it.

All hail magic! No wonder science hasn't advanced much around here. That's exactly why the Empire, and those vampires we treated as weirdoes, were seen as so unusual for their focus on technology. They're making incredibly beneficial discoveries, though, so I saw no reason to make fun of them.

"Well, it's nothing I would have come up with. I didn't think tunneling shields were something I'd ever see in this world, for example, but with magic, you can kind of build the equivalent, can't you?"

"I dunno what that 'tunneling shield' would be, but I'm sure our stuff's just as good, huh?"

"It's this thing that bores through the earth while providing a support

structure to prevent cave-ins. It's a really large-scale machine, but a talented sorcerer could do the same thing, yeah. Or even better, maybe."

I remember telling people in the past that it'd be neat if we could run trains underground. Mjurran remembered that, and now she actually made it happen, which left me beyond impressed. Razen apparently pitched in as well, helping to complete this out-of-the-box otherworld approach to construction. It saved a lot of money, too.

And besides, it's not a matter of winning or losing. Applying the right technology to magic really could trigger a revolution around here, I felt.

"So we're thinkin' that we'll delay construction for now and use the tunnel as a shelter. The ceilings are all reinforced by magic, so it should hold out even if some magic blast torches the city."

"It'll depend on the scope of the destruction, but I think it'd make for a good air raid shelter, yeah. Keep a supply of food and water in there, and you could hole up in there for a pretty long time."

"Yeah, and it sounds like we can magically supply the water, so we'd only need to ship food inside. We dug several tunnels for use as sleepin' quarters, along with rooms with doors and big holes in the bottom. For use as latrines, they told me."

He took me into one such room, which...well, was a public bathroom, all right. It was divided into lots of cubicles, and I'd estimate a good hundred people could use it at the same time. The toilets were the standard sit-down type, but waste just dropped right into the hole below like an old-style outhouse.

"But won't it stink really bad, being underground and all?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But we spread wood chips and stuff like that underneath, and they said it removes the smell entirely."

Oh. So it's like one of those composting toilets? That was outside of my expertise, but you could use these microorganisms to break down waste and turn it into water and carbon dioxide, right?

That is generally correct, yes. I have checked this facility and confirmed that it does function as intended, so problems related to smell are unlikely

to occur.

Ah, wonderful. And as Yohm explained, they had five of these bathrooms ready to go. Sounds like they'd be all set, even in the event of a long siege. The tunnel also extended all the way underneath the palace, keeping the royalty prepared for anything. I was relieved to hear that—relieved, and newly excited about the technology of this world.

"So, yeah, our city's defensive barrier is airtight, and we're holding evacuation drills regularly, too. The moment we spot the enemy, we're sendin' everyone right down there."

"That's why your ministers didn't demand too much from me?"

"Well, pretty much, yeah. And I ain't about to let any of 'em act stupid in public, either. If all they can do is whine about how tough life is, well, don't let the front door hit ya on the backside on the way out, 'n all that."

As Yohm saw it, anyone can complain—what matters is keeping your head up and being constructive. This he told me with a smile. I gotta say, he's grown such an incredible amount from when I first met him. It was a reminder that anybody's got the potential to transform, if they're really forced to.

Back on the surface, we headed over to their training grounds. I wanted to see how well Gruecith was training the new Farminus knight corps.

There I found that they had around five hundred knights that ranked B or higher, along with three thousand that merited a C or below. If they gathered able-bodied citizens from across the land, they could amass a force of around forty thousand...but numbers like that won't count for much in this war, so this corps was chiefly focused on peacekeeping duties.

"Makes sense. If a huge angel force came along, it's not like they could do very much from the surface."

"Right. We got some anti-air magic, to be sure, but not a whole lot of sorcerers to cast it, y'know? Rommel decided that it's better for us to concentrate on defendin' our city via legion magic."

"Razen agreed with that, too," added Gruecith, "so that's how we've been conducting our training. For these knights, if enemies come flyin' down from

the air, their mission's to get the residents to safety.”

At least they weren’t sending them out for a bloody battle against the invaders. That gladdened me.

“I was a bit worried you’d take a far more reckless strategy.”

“Ha-ha-ha! I’m a lot more of a coward than Sir Phobio, y’know. I realize how far my abilities can take me, and I’m not going to take any further risk,” Gruecith said. “Of course, Razen *has* been training me, so I think I’m stronger than before. And I had a sudden surge of new power recently, too. So I’m ready to be a shield for our citizens. I’ve got a knight-captain title to live up to!”

I wouldn’t call him a coward at all. Cold decision-making is the one asset any commander needs the most. Knowing how calculating Gruecith can be, I doubt he’d misjudge any gaps between himself and the enemy.

But I wondered what that “surge of new power” was. Certainly, Gruecith’s magicule count put him up there with the Three Lycanthropeers, rating maybe a special-A. Between that and his skill level, I was sure he’d grown into quite a powerful presence. And even though his lot was cast with Yohm now, he never forgot his respect for Carillon—and given that “surge,” the reverse was probably true as well. It proved there was still a deep bond between the two of them.

“Well, that’s because Carillon had an awakening and evolved. You got to enjoy some of the effects of it.”

“Sir Carillon did?!”

“Yep. So don’t let that new power go to waste, okay?”

“Oh, of course, yes! I know that full well!”

“Ah, I’m sure you didn’t need me to remind you.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Don’t worry about it. I’m glad to know the reason, and Sir Carillon fully recognizes *your* talents as well. I genuinely appreciate it.”

Nice. Didn’t want him thinking I was lecturing him or something.

“Great to hear, then. By the way, you said Razen was training you?”

Good old Razen. It's thanks to him that I thought about spreading ramen across this world in the first place. He was a sorcerer, wasn't he? But he can outclass Gruecith in battle, too?

"Oh, yes, Razen can do just about anything. His magic knowledge is on par with Mjurran's, and—"

"Hey, that's *Queen* Mjurran to you, bozo!"

"Ah, shut up. She'll be mine someday, you—"

"Shut that damn mouth of yours right now!"

"Okay, okay, enough fighting. You were saying?"

I was getting a little sick of this comedy act, so I pushed things along.

To sum up Gruecith's explanation, when Razen seized the body of an otherworlder named Shogo, he was able to make that guy's power his own. He couldn't take all the skills and stuff, but Razen's kind of in-the-trenches experience made him both a wizard and a first-class martial artist. He was killer when it came to punch and kick attacks, and that's what he was imparting to Gruecith.

"The idea of fighting just with your natural gifts... It made no sense to me at first."

Gruecith chuckled a bit.

"I'll bet," replied Yohm. "Saare beat Razen in muscle, but he couldn't even beat Razen in an arm-wrestling match. Nobody could take him on in actual combat, either. Man, was I impressed. Razen's name as a magic-born was huge all across the Western Nations, and I sure could see why."

"No wonder the Three Lycanthropeers kept such a keen eye out for him. But..."

Gruecith stopped there, looking at me, and then he shook his head.

"Oh, I know, Gruecith," Yohm said, patting him on the shoulder. As I wondered what this meant, they looked at each other and sighed.

"There's always someone better out there, huh, Boss?"

"Yeah, exactly. And when he was faced with Sir Gadora, Razen got played with like a little baby, too. I just about lost my mind, watching it."

Ah. That kind of thing? Well, yeah. Diablo called Razen a "weakling who'd never cause me any problem," and I got a bunch more people like him, besides. Gadora's strong, for sure. I had no doubt about that, but in Tempest, he'd maybe be in the middle ranks? But after becoming part of Diablo's family, I think he's been undergoing some kind of weird evolution, so maybe I'll need to adjust my opinion. Still, I don't think he'd make it to the top ranks.

This talk was making me wonder what Gadora was up to, actually.

"But speaking of Razen and Gadora, I don't see either of them in here. Are they off doing something else?"

Yohm gave me a half smile. "They're trainin', of course. They show up for things like your visit or when we're talkin' about our future direction, but outside of that, they're pretty much always fightin'."

"For real?"

"Really real, yeah!"

Gruecith was nodding, too, so it must be true. Here I thought Gadora's talents were more strategic in nature; I didn't know he liked fighting that much. Maybe Diablo's been a bad influence? That concern flashed across my mind, but I hurriedly banished it.

"If you're curious, I could bring ya over."

I gratefully accepted Yohm's offer, and so we were off to see how Gadora and Razen were doing.

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We were taken to a field a good hour away by carriage. On it was a simple little cottage, a bit reminiscent of a vacation home, and nothing else—just wild plains, as far as I could see. Only four people lived here, Yohm said, and I could guess who they were: Razen, the most powerful fighter in Farminus; along with two of the former Three Battlesages, Saare and Grigori; and finally, Gadora. *Pretty interesting combo*, I thought; when we arrived, they were all standing in a row to greet us. It was kinda weird seeing Gadora speak for them as if he was

their boss.

"It is a tremendous honor to see you travel all the way here!" said Gadora.

Razen, Saare, and Grigori bowed along with his greeting—to me, not Yohm.

"Hey," said Yohm. "I'm here too, y'know."

"Your Majesty," Razen said, "Saare and Grigori are guests of Farminus, but they have not pledged your loyalty to you. They were therefore expressing their respect to Lord Rimuru, the master of Sir Gadora, on their own volition."

"Oh, I know. You don't have to keep lecturing me over stuff that's better left unsaid."

Razen tried his best to assuage the whining Yohm, but to me, they seemed a lot friendlier with each other than I thought. I don't know how Razen felt about it, but he *was* considered a loyal subject of Farminus. I didn't think he had a shred of loyalty for Yohm, but judging by this attitude, maybe he cared about him after all.

But outside of them, I had no idea why Saare and Grigori would care to act polite around me.

"By their own volition, though? Why act so nice to me?"

I was curious enough to ask. Yohm looked on, just as curious about this; I guess it was news to him, too. If they wanted to move to Tempest, I could consider the request. I don't think Hinata was out hunting for Saare and Grigori so she could execute them as traitors or whatever.

"We have a very clear reason, my lord. Our instructor Master Razen has shown us just how immature we were...but Holy Master Gadora has shown us the true nature of your majesty. It has left a deep impression upon us, and we now wish to be a part of your force, however low you may place us!"

Holy Master?!

"Yes, indeed. Sir Gadora's strength was beyond imagination, Your Majesty, but he tells us that he couldn't even hold a candle to you. And not just you! When he told me there were many strong people in your force that he couldn't stand a chance against, well, it inspired in us a desire to try our hand against

them sometime..."

Grigori was eagerly pleading his case, but he got interrupted by Ranga jumping out from my shadow.

"Well said! Grigori was your name? I always thought you had immense potential! If I may suffice, I would happily let you test your skills against me!"

"Ah... Ahhh! It's that dog from back then!"

"Hmm?"

"N-no, um...Sir Ranga, I mean."

Grigori was breaking into a worryingly intense cold sweat as he stood there shaking. I guess Ranga kicked his ass at some point—did that cause some kind of trauma in him? No way.

"Well, if he's offering, why don't you accept?"

"Huh?!"

"Gladly, my master!!"

"N-no, I..."

"Come, Grigori. Let us go a distance away, so we do not harm my master."

"Ah, wait...!"

So Ranga grabbed Grigori by the neck—with his mouth—and joyfully pranced off. I couldn't see Grigori's expression, but I'm sure he was delighted that his wish had come true and stuff. It almost teared me up, seeing them go, and everyone else was the same way.

"Um, I'd like to test my skill as well, but, er, I'm still too immature, so I'd maybe prefer someone a little lower in rank..."

Saare sounded like he'd rather be anywhere else right now.

"I'm sure. Ranga's strong enough to be my watchdog, so he's ranked pretty high, yeah. Grigori sure ain't afraid of a challenge, is he?"

"Absolutely not! I believe he's cultivated a fear of dogs ever since he lost to Sir Ranga. Perhaps he's attempting to overcome it today?"

Saare's conjecture made Razen bring an embarrassed hand to his forehead. Next to him, though, Yohm and Gadora were chatting away.

"Not even I could pose a threat to Ranga," said the old man. "He must truly be a fool."

"Yeah? Pretty drastic treatment he's taking, I guess. Well, good on 'im. I'd never volunteer for that."

"You don't need to, Your Majesty. As the king of this land, nobody is seeking physical feats of strength from you."

"Well, I *do* wanna get stronger, y'know. I just know my limits these days, is all. Now that I've come to know Rimuru and his whole gang, it's pretty damn clear to me that a little muscle doesn't count for too much."

"It won't go to waste, perhaps, but you're right. At best, it'd let you struggle on for a bit longer until help hopefully arrived in time."

"Yeah. But I'll keep up my training, y'know? Gotta protect the people I love, as much as I can."

"A fine idea."

Seemed like Yohm was beginning to settle into his position as king. Better not let him get ahead of me. I'm not planning to perform any crazy stunts like Grigori, though. It's one firm step after the other.

And it looked like Razen had recognized Yohm as king, too. "As long as the king keeps doing his all for his nation," he said, "I will do everything I can to help you. I have a promise with Queen Mjurran that I will take in Princess Mieme as an apprentice in due time, so I'll be *sure* to protect her above all others."

He had supported the Kingdom of Farmus for hundreds of years, and I'm sure Yohm loved having a rock like him around. But I was thinking about something else—namely, how much Razen spoke like an old grandfather, despite not looking that far removed from college.

As we talked about this and that, Ranga came back with a limp Grigori in his mouth.

"My master, we only played a little bit, and then he stopped moving!"

Too much, boy!

"Look, you're not Shion, are you? You know how to hold back a little, right?"

I evaluated Grigori as I scolded Ranga. Fortunately, the man had only fainted.

"I have to say, he should have known better. Why did he mention Ranga out of nowhere?"

I could understand if he wanted revenge or something. But he really needed to know his place.

"I'm not so sure that's the case, Boss."

"Huh?"

"He'd *never* want to fight him. In fact, he told me he didn't want to ever see him again."

"Really?"

That's what Yohm and Saare said, but maybe I had this all wrong, then? Because Saare, in particular, said the exact opposite a little bit ago. So instead of being delighted to see Ranga again, he wanted to run away as soon as possible?

"...No, I'm not so sure. He was a courageous man, boldly striving to take on a foe he had already lost to once. I'm really moved by that. That's why I gave Ranga permission to fight him. Right, Ranga?"

If I called it my mistake, that'd be admitting responsibility. Grigori was safe, luckily, so I pretended to not know any better. And Ranga kindly backed me up.

"Yes, exactly! I was so overwhelmed by the force of this man's spirit that I'm afraid I went a little too far!"

What a talent. And way to gloss over all *his* own mistakes, too. He's developed a bit of a crafty streak lately, not that I'd know who he got it from. But thanks to his clutch teamwork, Yohm and his friends were convinced.

"Yes, Sir Rimuru is exactly right. Isn't he, all of you?"

"Um, yeah, if the boss says so, I'm sure it's true."

"I have no disagreement with that. Perhaps you were mistaken, Saare?"

"Ah, right! Yes, Grigori's become a far gutsier man as of late..."

Good, good. No problems now.

"Yeah. I respect that kinda thing. A lot. I know! I'll call him *Mister* Grigori from now on!"

That was my reward for him...but when he opened his eyes, Grigori himself promptly turned down the offer.

*

My little tour of Farminus was over.

After talking it over with Yohm, we agreed to let Saare and Grigori live in Tempest for training purposes. I worried about Farminus losing those valuable weapons, but with Gadora still there, I was sure it would work out. Him and Razen, too. Unless the main enemy force attacked all at once, they could probably buy enough time until we showed up. If *that* happened, Saare and Grigori would be little more than a drop in the bucket anyway. So, instead of fretting over every scenario, I decided to work on their talents and prep them for whatever came up.

By the way, comparing all of them in terms of fighting power produced some pretty interesting results. In terms of their estimate magicule count alone, Saare was at the top, followed by Razen, Grigori, then Gruecith. Yohm—no offense to him—wasn't even in the competition. With Hakuro's hellish training and the abilities of his equipment, he could just barely rank an A, and I wouldn't expect him to grow fast in a short time.

Gruecith, I have to say, was truly one of the Beast Master's Warrior Alliance elites. The gifts from Carillon had brought him up to the level of Grigori, the ex-Battlesage...but it'd be a problem for a knight captain to leave the nation and he wasn't asking to anyway, so I didn't take him. He said he'd pay us a visit once everything was wrapped up.

So here's Grigori, the first new guest to Tempest. An iron wall of a man with a special skill known as Impervious. He likes to wield a halberd, but he's a talented martial artist as well. He lost big to Ranga, but he was Enlightened-level, putting him close to a demon lord seed, and his existence points totaled

around four hundred thousand. Certainly stronger than I thought, and with the right training, he might even have another breakout.

He'd join us alongside Saare, the former Chief Knight of the Master Rooks over in Luminus, although he lost the role after Hinata defeated him. A former Battlesage, he'd fought against Diablo, which eventually brought him over to Farminus. Guess he has a knack for picking bad opponents. Just like Grigori, luck hasn't always been on his side, but there's no doubting his abilities. As a Saint, his EP was over a million, a shocking discovery for me. Having him attempt a serious labyrinth run could be pretty neat.

Razen, by the way, was only a little higher than Grigori in magicule count, but his actual power was well above Saare's. When he took Shogo Taguchi's body, he apparently also earned the unique skills Berserker and Survivor.

According to Ciel, unique skills may either bond to a person's heart core, be carved into their soul, or take residence in their astral, spiritual, or material bodies. There are abilities that can seize skills from the enemy, but they only work if the skill is "in residence" like that. Some exceptional skills can reside in the soul instead, but those could be snatched away as well.

So if a skill's carved into a soul, that makes it much harder to steal?

Not for certain. However, if it has bonded to a heart core, it is impossible to remove.

Ciel sounded confident enough about that. You *could* just copy a skill instead of stealing it, though, which is why Michael could do all this crazy stuff...

But anyway, after obtaining these two unique skills, Razen realized that he could take far better advantage of them than Shogo could. That's why he dominated Saare despite having maybe half his magicules—a real testament to his abilities.

However, that was only in the early stages. Saare had his own unique skill, something called All-Rounder, which let him identify and learn any technique after watching an enemy use it just once. Razen, aware of this, had taught Saare every technique and magic spell he could think of. Magic was an "art" as well, a skill derived from one's knowledge, and while he wasn't a natural at it, Saare never complained, constantly asking for more instruction. That's why he called

him his “master.”

So, by this point, Saare was stronger than Razen in name and deed. But Gadora still beat the crap out of him, apparently. How do their EPs compare?

Displaying Gadora’s information.

Name: Gadora (EP: 1,126,666)

Race: High-level chaos elemental Metal Demon

Protection: Noir clan

Title: Servant #2 “Poochie”

Magic: Dark magic, elemental magic

Ability: Ultimate gift Grimoire

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

There were a few things in his file I could comment about, but it was best to focus my limited energy elsewhere.

I was asking for a comparison with Saare, but in terms of EP, Gadora was ahead of him. Honestly, I didn’t think he had grown this strong. He sure wasn’t at *this* level before his reincarnation anyway. His magical knowledge was now off the charts, his skill levels quite a sight to see...but when judging battle skill alone, I wouldn’t call him a threat. He was a shrewd player, though, crafty to the core—if he were on the enemy’s side, you’d want to crush him first. That was my honest evaluation of him.

Thinking of it that way, I’d say Gadora made a string of good choices. He was still alive, for one, and he was now a full member of my hierarchy. In terms of ability in actual battle, he had surpassed Saare the Sage.

Saare’s All-Rounder skill is quite a menace, but actually quite simple to counteract—just use a basic, frontal approach, and you’re all good. No arts, no magic—just overwhelming melee strikes. If you *do* resort to magic, cast it when you’re going in for the kill, so he can’t copy you. I had heard Saare lost to Hinata, and now I could guess why. Hinata never dropped her guard, so I’m sure she fought Saare without revealing any of her cards. This meant he had nothing

to copy from her, so he immediately lost the advantage his unique skill gave him.

This time, too, the clincher that helped Gadora beat him was the presence of his ultimate skill. Gadora's just as crafty, after all, so maybe he didn't reveal his full hand to Saare, either...but even if he did, Saare wasn't likely to copy it. A unique skill can't compete against an ultimate, after all. Looking at it that way reminded me of how eminently unfair it was, me being able to shower my subordinates with ultimate gifts.

The ultimate skill Grimoire, by the way, was in the same family as Adalmann's Necronomicon and boasted similar abilities. These included Haste Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Cast Cancel, Analyze and Assess, All of Creation, Mental Strike, Browse Knowledge, and Share Concept. Browse Knowledge let him learn stuff from Ciel, and Share Concept was a skill that let him share stuff with Adalmann, apparently. Another case of Ciel taking someone's wishes and turning them into just the right abilities.

Anyway, that explained why Gadora was stronger than Saare. And I also had a general idea of Saare's actual ability, too.

I knew that the Crusaders were making regular labyrinth runs, but Apito's floor was as far as they'd reached, right? And that was before Adalmann's evolution, so I'm not sure how good a reference point that is...but anyway, they had visited the labyrinth recently, and we had a full set of data for them. Arnaud and Renard were the standouts in strength among their band, their existence points both close to half a million. The other squad leader-class Crusaders were at around three hundred thousand, too, definitely a big leap up from the early days. That put them on the same level as Grigori, and maybe it'd be fun to put them all in the same party, actually.

As for Saare, I think I'll pair him up with Hakuro, given how easily he can learn other people's arts. He'd probably make a great training partner for the kids, and I wanted him to learn a lot in Tempest. Not any of our national secrets, but still.

So I now had a general idea of how Saare and Grigori would train with us.



For the time being we'd let them get used to things down in the labyrinth. I gave Benimaru a quick rundown about Saare and Grigori, so they'd be sent to their respective training sites when the timing was right.

"So I'll be taking care of someone again?"

"If you could, please. Throwing them right at Hakuro might just lead to confusion."

"Yes, true," Benimaru said with a chuckle. "But we went through the same experience, remember. You sure you're not being overprotective?"

He had a point, but this pair were guests of Tempest. If they were moving in for good, that'd be another thing, but I didn't want them to get *too* reckless.

And speaking of training...

"So how are Carillon and Frey doing?"

"Heh. It's pretty interesting, actually."

The moment Benimaru said that, Ciel put up some data for me.

Name: Carillon (EP: 2,773,537)

Race: Beast-god; high-level chaos elemental Lightsoul Beast

Name: Frey (EP: 1,948,734)

Race: Bird-god; high-level chaos elemental Skysoul Bird

Damn, my labyrinth was scary. Ciel was giving me these EP figures—basically people's personal information—in a flash.

When Carillon and Frey evolved, they achieved some level of divinity. Frey's EP was just under two million, but I guess she still passed the test for demigod-hood anyway. It must not be a strict cutoff.

Their skills and tolerances weren't divulged to me, but awakening and becoming a true demon lord granted them all the strength you'd expect. Awakening boosted my magicule count a good ten times over, but Carillon and Frey didn't seem to power up quite that much. It must vary from person-to-person.

In my personal estimation, pre-evolution Carillon had an EP of around seven

hundred thousand, with Frey's maybe a bit under four hundred thousand. Assuming that wasn't wholly off the mark, Carillon's strength went up four times and Frey's nearly five times. But then, maybe *my* stats were relatively low when I went through with it? When I thought about it, that was pretty obvious. I really need to think in terms of how much improvement was shown, not how many times stronger they became. It seems clear, though, that the more EP you have, the more intense the power you receive upon awakening.

Now it was time to use this data to perform a little battle analysis.

Carillon's bodily abilities nearly tripled when he transformed, but convert that into EP, and I don't think it was even a doubling. No, I think that's just a temporary ability boost—that transformation didn't give him omnipotent powers, safe to say. It just meant he'd get weaker again once time expired. That also applied to Gabil and his crew, not just Carillon—if not for that time limit, they'd just spend all day transformed, after all.

Still, transformation does have its advantages. It heals your wounds, refills your stamina, and does a bunch of other stuff. It was one of the merits of being a lycanthrope, and I wasn't about to downplay it. All about how you use it, really.

So how well was the transformed Carillon using his newfound powers?

"How're they looking to you?" I asked Benimaru.

"Well, Sir Carillon took me on first. Revenge, as he called it."

"Huh?"

"Do you remember when we sent an observation team over to Eurazania? He failed to land anything on me back then. So I tested out the awakened Sir Carillon to see how much I had grown."

Hmm... I think some wires got crossed. I wanted to test out Carillon and Frey's powers with everything I had, not Benimaru's. What would that achieve?

...On second thought, maybe that's no biggie? Benimaru, fighting for keeps, against Carillon, bringing out everything he's got. In the labyrinth, where nobody has to die... I couldn't imagine a more entertaining card, actually. Ramiris and her team recorded everything for me, so I'll sit back and relax with

the video later. For now, let's just hear the results.

"And who won?"

"Me, by a nose."

"Oh, that's great!"

I praised Benimaru, but internally, I was unsure how to react. I realized that something in me was so assured of his victory that hearing how close it was unnerved me.

"But by a nose, huh? How did it go?"

Before Benimaru could address my curiosity, an image flashed across my mind.

It appears Carillon unleashed one of his hidden techniques as his first move.

Nice one, Ciel. It immediately gave me the info I sought. And as Ciel said, the video revealed that Carillon was the first to move. Weapon in hand, he sank down in a flowing motion—and the next moment, his entire body began to glow. Then he quite literally turned into a storm of particles, all streaming Benimaru's way.

Carillon has named it Burst Roar. It transforms his body into a sentient stream of particles that plunge into their target. Call it an ever-changing scattering/converging particle ray.

Sentient, huh?

With Carillon awakened, he'd acquired all the unique traits of a spiritual life-form. I could see how the light doubled back and consumed Benimaru after he dodged it the first time.

"The moment the fight began, I felt a shiver down my spine...or I could just tell something bad was coming my way," Benimaru explained. "I knew I couldn't just stand there, so I triggered some Shimmering Haze..."

This Shimmering Haze was something at the deepest level of his Formhide skill set. It kept any kind of attack from tracking down his body. Unless an ultimate skill was involved in the attack, it'd never work against him.

If he didn't use that, however, Benimaru would've lost in the first shot. Carillon was working at a speed several hundred times the speed of sound, in a similar vein to Velgrynd's own ultraspeed attacks. I'm amazed Benimaru dodged it, but if the light could home right back in on him, there was nothing he could do. It took his ultimate skill Amaterasu, Lord of Shimmering Flame, to hold out against it.

"So your sixth sense and your ultimate skill made all the difference."

"Yes, it was quite dangerous. My pride convinced me that victory would come far easier. It's proven to be a good, if painful, lesson."

"Yeah, I had no doubt you'd win, so I'm not sure how to take this, either. Pride and carelessness are two shortcuts to defeat, you know, and they're also difficult to keep watch over. Good thing you picked up on this before the *real* fight."

"I know. Even if I'm aware of it, my subconscious still lets me grow conceited. That's why they call it being careless, but it's truly a scary thing."

"You said it."

Carillon gave us both a good reminder of the dangers of underestimating matters. I had to thank him for that.

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After that little postmortem, I sipped the cup of café au lait prepared by Shuna as we continued talking.

"Did you fight against Frey, then?"

"No, after watching the two of us fight, Frey decided that she didn't have a chance against me. You know how she hates wasting time and effort, of course."

"Ah, yes, she *did* seem that way."

I nodded. Benimaru was right. And Frey was never the belligerent type, so I could understand that reaction. She was much more methodical, something that Milim complained to me endlessly about. It was beyond infuriating to Milim, in fact, but it was none of my business, so I just nodded and said "yeah"

a few times.

"So, after that, we talked about the two of them marching into the labyrinth to see how far their skills could take them."

"Yeah, that'd be the quickest and easiest way to test her strength, maybe."

"Yes. They both went in solo, beginning on Floor 51."

The video played in my brain as Benimaru commentated. Ciel's always on point like that.

First, Carillon. He gave Benimaru a good run for his money, and he proved why as he steadily advanced. Gadora was absent from Floor 60, so he got a free pass through there, but chances are Carillon would've wiped the floor with him. That's how much of a head of steam he had going.

It turns out he had "tested his strength" against Adalmann and his army, too, back when they returned to do some fine-tuning on the transport magic circle. It was three against one, and Carillon still took them down easily. It's hardly a wonder why—he wasn't shy about using Burst Roar back then, either, and Adalmann had no time to devise any countermeasures. Venti was their tank, with Alberto providing hit-and-run raid attacks and Adalmann serving as main attacker—but that combo fell apart the moment Venti got toasted first. Carillon then went straight for Adalmann, ignoring Alberto entirely—like a mighty lion on the hunt, mane flowing in the air.

Actually, it's the female lions that do most of the hunting for—

I know that!!

Ciel's commentary is incredibly useful, but sometimes I feel like it's making fun of me. And it's not the first time. It's been going on since back in the Great Sage days, hasn't it?

I will be more careful.

If you could, please. I nodded, my feelings hurt.

But anyway, Carillon's Burst Roar had an insane amount of force. Adalmann's main attribute is light, but so is Carillon's. There was no advantage or disadvantage there, so it just came down to a strength contest.

The thing that piqued my interest was the fact that Adalmann possessed an ultimate gift. I don't think Carillon had an ultimate skill, or any God-class gear, either. So how did he beat him? Because I think Ciel smugly stated to me that only an ultimate could beat another ultimate...

That is not in my memory.

Oh, it's not?

I feel like I'm being gaslit here, but I'm not too confident *I'm* right, either...

Carillon now has the properties of a spiritual life-form. That, combined with the force of his will, has likely given him strength equivalent to an ultimate.

I see. That thinking makes sense. So Carillon simply possesses enough attack force to overcome a Multilayer Barrier reinforced by Adalmann's Necronomicon.

"Sir Carillon's next opponent was Kumara. She sent a request to fight him ahead of anyone else remaining, and we accepted it."

"Oh? Yeah, Zegion's stronger than her nowadays. Maybe I need to rethink the labyrinth's boss floors sometime soon."

"Yeah. But it actually resulted in a pretty good fight."

More video popped into my brain.

Kumara went all-out from the start, declining to summon any of her tail beasts. She had heard about Adalmann's defeat, but apparently she didn't ask how the battle proceeded. Knowing your enemy's preferred moves can make a world of difference in battle, but she made a deliberate decision to challenge him fair and square.

Carillon had the EP advantage, but Kumara had the ultimate skill Bahamut, Lord of Fantastic Beasts. Here, too, he broke out Burst Roar first thing—but this time, the light formed into several flashing rays, extending out at Kumara from all directions. In response, Kumara leaped into the air and invoked Dominate Gravity. The sudden intense gravitational pull made the light itself bend, pushing it down so it struck nowhere but at her legs.

I don't think Kumara planned that defense; it was just a bit of good luck for her. But she failed to capitalize with a counterattack, opting instead to prioritize her healing. Couldn't her tail beasts' legs propel her instead? She could resurrect those anytime if she had the magicules for it, which would make it hard for an evenly matched foe to knock her out entirely.

So Carillon's first strike didn't work, and soon after, he reverted back to his usual form. There must be a time limit to that "particle" mode after all. But instead of pursuing Kumara, he kept his distance, White Tiger-Blue Dragon sword at the ready. Kumara watched him from above, and he sneered back, thinking about his next move.

Their eyes met, and the next moment, there was an intense rumble. Kumara dove down at terminal speed, unleashing a piercing attack with her nine tails. Carillon, on the other side, focused his magic on his blade and invoked Beast Roar.

It was Kumara who won the clash. Carillon's particle beam dissipated, and the White Tiger-Blue Dragon sword shattered to pieces.

"Victory is mine!"

Shouting with joy, Kumara attempted to strike the final blow. But it didn't go as planned.

"Not so fast," Carillon whispered—and only after Kumara's heart was torn apart did that whisper echo against the walls. His weapon was in pieces, but it was not broken. The jagged fragments floated into the air, following his will, and they formed particles of light that stabbed Kumara from behind.

It was all over. But Carillon, not one to let his guard down, kept going, mercilessly firing another Beast Roar at the limp Kumara to end it for good.

"...And that's how Sir Carillon won."

"Sounds like it. And, you know, given how much stronger Kumara's gotten, I can't believe she was beaten so easily."

"Well, that's how battle works. Good thing this wasn't a real fight, at least."

"Right. I think it's great experience for her, too."

Seeing Carillon storm down my labyrinth was a humbling experience. I was so sure of myself, too.

"I wonder if us volunteering to host Sir Carillon was itself an overly arrogant move to make. We have much to teach him, and much to learn as well."

"Yeah, I'm sure. Some people say being a teacher is a good opportunity to discover what you're lacking."

The idea being, I guess, that if you're asked something you don't know, you can't just talk your way out of it. You need to quickly investigate the answer, then make it your own.

In this case, I feel like staging these real fights with Carillon is teaching us to be more careful in battle. Still, the same was true for Carillon. I think he's refining his battle style more and more with each fight. If Kumara had fought him before Adalmann, I bet we would've seen the opposite results—that was how wonderful Carillon's growth was.



“Well, at *this* rate, I bet Zegion had it rough, too, huh?”

I hated to even imagine Zegion losing, but after all this momentum—

“Oh, that wasn’t a problem.”

“Huh?”

“They faced off, and Sir Carillon was the first to act, but...”

The video came back on. A single instant was all it lasted. Before Carillon could even enter particle form—well, that’s not the right way to put it. Zegion just smiled, like someone was showing a neat little illusion to him, and then Carillon’s whole body was sliced up like confetti.

“...It was *that* instant? What *is* Zegion, anyway?”

“Honestly, I think it was a miracle that I beat him. I don’t think I’d stand a chance now.”

Benimaru smirked. That might just be modesty, but if a sore loser like him is going that far, Zegion must truly be from another dimension. If *he* lost as well, we’d have to fully retool our approach to defense from the bottom up.

“Zegion never seems to get too conceited, no. This experience reminded us to keep our guards up, but it sure doesn’t feel like *he* needs the lesson.”

“I agree. He’s beyond stoic that way. It was a complete, total victory, but he still wasn’t satisfied with it. ‘*I remain a far cry from Sir Rimuru,*’ he said.”

So was Zegion pursuing this Rimuru of his imagination? The thought made my eyes water.

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That was the end of Carillon’s challenge. But what about Frey?

“Lady Frey defeated Adalmann as well. Rather handily, in fact.”

“Really?!”

That was unexpected. I thought Adalmann’s team would win that one. Him alone, maybe Frey would pull it off, but three-on-one? I really think Adalmann’s team would have the advantage there. But when I brought up the video, it soon became clear why she won.

"Ah, it's a complete mismatch!"

"It looks to be that, yes. Lady Frey's Magic Interference completely shut down Adalmann's magic. That threw their attack patterns off, and then Lady Frey dictated the pace of the battle. It cost him dearly."

Benimaru was right. The area in a fifty-yard radius around Frey became an anti-magic zone that blocked all magicule movement. It was a more powerful form of interference than anything the Charybdis could manage, strong enough to cancel out Adalmann's Necronomicon.

Frey achieved divinity, too, didn't she? That's a property only attainable by spiritual life-forms who shed their natural lifespan, so no wonder Frey could compete against an ultimate gift. In fact, there's a chance she earned an ultimate skill, too, isn't there?

After this, Adalmann switched his main weapon to Holy Cannon, that piece of holy magic, but it wasn't decisive. Frey's flight capabilities made it simple for her to dart around these bolts—and in the meantime, she zoomed right up to Venti the tank and grabbed on with her talons.

"Those talons of hers are a major threat. They disrupt the magicules within your body, so they're like a natural poison for monsters. Once she latches on, you're all but robbed of your skills and magic."

I had no problem calling those talons as dangerous as a God-class weapon.

"Wow. If I didn't know, maybe I woulda been in trouble, too."

"Ha-ha-ha! Oh, you'd be fine, wouldn't you? You could just use Replication to escape. But Sir Carillon said he'd have no way out, and I'm not sure I would, either. I'd defeat her before she could latch on, but..."

Yes, I'm sure that's what Benimaru would do. But that was asking too much of Adalmann's party.

Venti, destroyed from the inside, was forced out of battle. Then Frey switched to a long-range approach. With Adalmann unable to cast flight magic, all she had to do was fly up and rain down attacks from above. Alberto, irritated, leaped up and tried to swipe at Frey, but that just made him ripe for the picking. They called her the Sky Queen for a reason, and before long, Alberto was in

pieces and scattered across the air. That just left Adalmann, and by this point he had no chance. Faced with Frey's might, defeat was the only option for him.

"Then Lady Frey pressed on downward and went into battle with Kumara."

"And how'd that go?"

They were about equal in power, but Kumara didn't have divinity. And looking at the last battle, Frey was clearly battle-seasoned. She called herself among the weakest of the Ten Great Demon Lords, but I think she was being too modest.

She was a clever fighter, and Kumara was immature. I thought it'd turn into a fun fight, and that's exactly what it was.

"It was one for the record books. They fought for three days straight, both of them bringing out all their strength. I wish I could call it a draw, but Lady Frey was the victor."

"Ooh! Sounds like a great fight. I'll have to study the video later."

"Yes, I learned a lot from it myself. It's important to have the fortitude to never give up on victory, but in the end, a bit of ingenuity really can make the difference. If you're an even match with your opponent in strength, misleading them about your powers becomes so vital. Kumara lost, after all, because she misjudged how much force her opponent had left."

Wow. Now I'm really looking forward to the video. It has three days' worth of data, so I'll need to use Haste Thought to speed it up a bit.

"And did Fry try her hand against Zegion next?"

If it was *that* even against Kumara, she was doomed against him. If Frey declined to fight Benimaru, I doubt she'd take on an even bigger menace.

"No, she fought Apito instead."

"Oh, her?"

"Yes. I suppose it was a matter of pride, as a fellow winged creature."

"Huh. That kinda thing...?"

It seemed logical. Maybe it prodded that competitive streak of hers.

"That turned into a pretty impressive fight, too, but Lady Frey won thanks to

the difference in core strength.”

I’m sure she did. If it was that good a battle, Apito deserves the highest of praise.

Either way, this made the extent of Frey’s powers much clearer to me—that, and I could see what my allies needed to work on. I’m sure it was a shock for Adalmann’s team, getting a break from work only to have their asses kicked twice in a row. But let’s just be glad this wasn’t *real* combat and hope they capitalize on this experience.

That, and maybe Carillon and Frey owed me a favor now, huh? I had Ramiris to thank for that, too, so I’d need to express my appreciation to all of them later. The latter in particular. I can’t thank her enough.

So what else did I need to tackle?

“Okay,” I said to Benimaru. “I’ll leave Saare and Grigori in your hands, then.”

“Roger that. As it stands, they *might* have a chance against Adalmann’s trio.”

“I’m with you there. In fact, maybe Alberto could handle them himself. But don’t keep Adalmann from his work for *too* long!”

I had just sworn to myself to keep my guard up, so I won’t be too shocked if my prediction turns out wrong. But Saare couldn’t even beat old man Gadora, and that told me Adalmann’s party would be a major challenge for him.

In fact, my prediction wound up becoming 100 percent true a few days later. And with that proven, Saare and Grigori were assigned to train their hardest with Apito, as Adalmann’s crew had other work to do.

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After leaving those guys with Benimaru, my next destination was the kingdom of Blumund, where Mjöllmile was waiting. We planned to meet there, then travel together to Englesia.

I was pretty used to Blumund by now, after all the visits I made. I wouldn’t be going into any urban areas, so there was no need to work my way through their barrier. Instead, I was headed for the outlying suburban areas, feeling every bit like a tourist.

These areas have now become the center for a very large firm. World Central Station was under construction, attracting laborers from all the nearby countries, and our Four Nations Trade Alliance had just opened a new headquarters building in a cushy district not far away.

I gotta say, I'm pretty happy about it. It was a high-rise by this world's standards—ten stories and around a hundred feet tall. The gigantic palace under construction in Milim's domain would dwarf it, but it was still a world-class piece of architecture by local standards—neatly designed, and using rare, valuable glass like it was going out of style. It was all magicked glass, of course, so hurricanes, earthquakes, and magic attacks wouldn't put a scratch on it. A lot of my other personal preferences were incorporated in the building, too, so you could say I have a lot of emotional investment in it. We were meeting here, and we also had a party planned—sort of a grand opening event. *I am* the owner, technically, but I was attending this as a guest.

So there I was, in front of the building. I wanted to take a tour of the place once construction was complete, but I'd been so damn busy lately, I just couldn't make it happen. Mjöllmile thus had free rein over this building, including who got to work in it. My job isn't exactly easy, but I'm sure he's pretty frazzled by now, too. Without him, we never would've been able to make this happen.

I knew Mjöllmile was a talented man, but it's like he has a gift for conning people. He was the director of the FNTA, but there was another person leading operations within this HQ. Remarkably, Veryard—who had recently earned a noble promotion to viscount—was working for Mjöllmile now, and I was told he's been appointed the head of this building.

Having Veryard on our side made me both happy and very relieved. I haven't forgotten how expertly he swindled me, so I look forward to him working some of that magic for my benefit. That, and I was told we've procured a few more key talents for this place, people I'd get introduced to at the party. Can't wait.

Soei and I were standing abreast, Ranga in my shadow like usual. We were in formal attire for this occasion: a gray three-piece suit for me, a black two-piece for Soei. They were made of hellmoth silk—a name-brand Tempestian export these days—and Shuna had tailored them just for us. You won't find made-to-

order stuff like this in the stores, and I'd like to think that people who see us will pick up on the difference.

The party wouldn't begin until the evening, so not many people were around. Despite that, I was still attracting looks from passersby. My natural charisma at work, I guess.

"Wow, look how handsome that guy is!"

"Are they brothers? He looks like someone bodyguarding for his little brother or something."

"Yeah, the smaller one's kinda cute, too. Wonder what he'll look like when he grows up."

"Isn't he so cool? We've had a lot of foreigners visit as of late, but you don't see many that look as suave as him..."

...Um? That wasn't exactly the reaction I expected. It sounds like they're a lot more interested in Soei than my charisma. It made me realize how self-conscious I was being, which embarrassed me a bit.

"Okay, let's go in and say hello," I said, trying to hide the shame.

So we went inside and up to the front desk. The first floor was large, like a hotel lobby, complete with a front desk and waiting area. I already knew the layout, so I didn't bother asking for a guide.

"Hey, is Mollie around here...?"

When I asked the woman at the front desk, this fancy-looking man in a sharp suit came out from behind a closed door, giving me a quizzical sneer as he chomped on his cigar.

"Can I ask who you are, sir?"

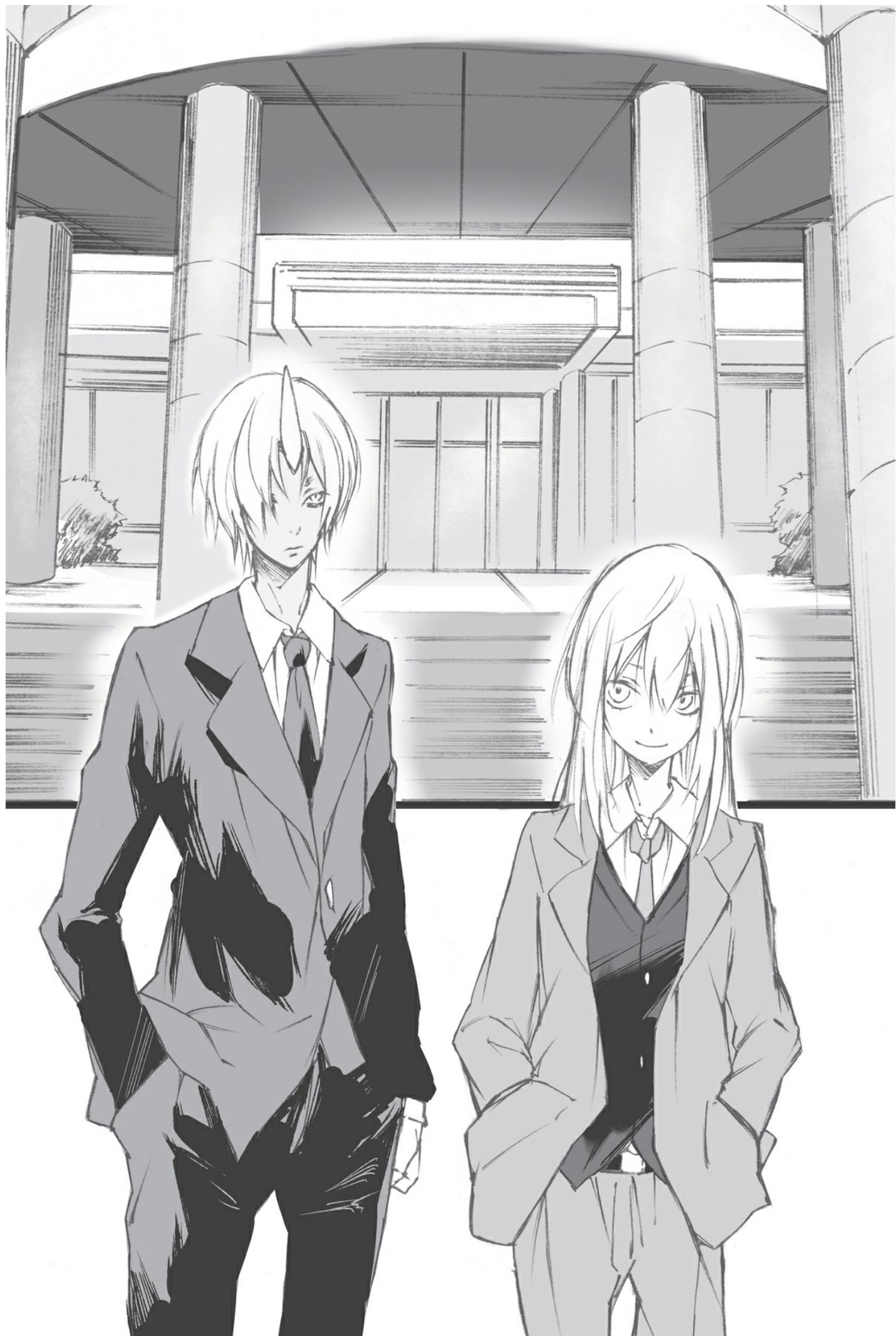
"Oh, I'm Rimuru. Could you tell Mollie that I'm here?"

He looks like a gentleman, but he's pretty arrogant, huh? I smiled back at him anyway.

The front-desk woman, upon hearing my name, hurriedly reached for a crystal ball—a magical item, meant to connect the user to whoever has the other half

of the pair. It doesn't have much of a range, but it's really useful inside buildings like this.

I watched on, satisfied to see the staff was working as trained...but suddenly that arrogant man stopped the receptionist.



"Ah, Mr. Gabbana, this man is—"

"Don't worry about it. I'll take care of this."

"No, sir, I mean—"

"There're a lot of liars, y'know? People who'll say anything to meet with Sir Mjöllmile. A bunch of fools are trying to crash our party tonight, too. It's tough being famous, you see. He doesn't really understand that, though, which is why talented staff like myself need to be here. Tough luck for you, huh? If I wasn't around, you might've actually been successful, too."

"Oh... Yeah, I guess...?"

I wasn't sure how else to respond. The receptionist seemed to know my name, but this Gabbana gentleman didn't seem aware of me at all. Maybe he was, but he failed to match the name with the face. It's not like he normally handled front-desk duty, either, by the looks of things. I couldn't help but think that he was just trying to look good around this beautiful receptionist so he could make a move or two on her.

"I will teach this man a lesson, Sir Rimuru."

Soei, quietly seething next to me, focused his eyes on Gabbana.

"Wait, wait, wait! Mollie's working hard to train his staff, okay? We have to expect a misunderstanding or two!"

We need to be nice here, you know? I'm sure Mjöllmile really *is* busy, but it's a shame he couldn't be personally here to greet me. I wasn't a big fan of Gabbana's attitude, but if people are dropping in without an appointment in search of jobs or whatever, it'd be natural to treat people like me this way.

As I tried to assuage Soei, the receptionist raised her voice.

"Mr. Gabbana! This one is the real thing! I'm sure of it! He looks exactly like the portrait on the wall in Sir Mjöllmile's office!"

Oh, he had a portrait? I noticed one inconspicuously hanging in his house when I visited, but he's still got that one, huh? And hanging it in public, too. Strange guy...but, yeah. Shizu, who gave me my looks, was a real beauty, after all. I understand if he's smitten, but I'm basically a grade-school version of her...

but come to think of it, I've been growing, haven't I? I was now a little bit under five-foot-three, which I suppose is average for a girl in high school. I didn't have a chest or anything, but maybe I'd look pretty good in a portrait. I'm too fidgety to sit for one, though, so I'd need to have Ciel conjure something up in my place. Not that I have any interest in being a model anyway.

As my mind kept wandering down this trivial side path, I heard Gabbana's surprised voice.

"Wh-what? This little brat—um, this child is Sir Rimuru himself?"

"Yes, I'm positive."

"But that's just crazy! He's a demon lord! Why would the lord of such a huge domain be traveling around with a single bodyguard? It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard!"

Hmm. He has a good point. I really need to follow more of the formalities when I'm traveling around—Shuna said as much when I headed to Dwargon. Here, I skipped most of them due to lack of time, but I knew how anxious that made her. Maybe I better shape up in the future to avoid things like this.

"It might be, sir, but it's the truth!"

"I mean, would a demon lord just prance in here and say, 'Hey, is Mollie around?' Of course he wouldn't. Right?"

Gabbana sounded like he was pleading for his life, tears in his eyes. If he admitted he was wrong, after all, it'd mean he tried to kick a demon lord out of the building. I'm sure he had a vested interest in denying everything. The "gentleman" mask was off, and now I was seeing the real him.

Hmm... I feel kinda like a bad guy.

"Hey, um, I'm sorry. I'm not out to sic my dogs on you or anything—"

"You have a covert agent here you could sic on him."

"Enough, Soei! But this isn't your fault, Gabbana, so I'll put it behind me. Could you just pass me on to Mollie, please?"

My proposal made Gabbana's face light up. "A-are you sure?"

"We'll all be a lot happier that way, won't we?"

Tears began to flow from his eyes. I'm not sure what kind of scenario he was picturing, but he beamed at me, saying stuff like "Thank you very much! I'll never forget this favor!" and so on. I felt a little weird about it, given how I was trying to conceal my own mistakes anyway.

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As Gabbana emoted his appreciation, the receptionist called in Mjöllmile. She and Gabbana saw me off, heads bowed, as me and Mjöllmile moved to his office. It was situated in a large room on the top floor, offering a great view and plenty of sunlight. I took in the sights as I sat down on a luxurious sofa, taking a drink of the juice provided.

"Is anything the matter, Sir Rimuru?" Mjöllmile asked.

"Nope. Nothing."

"Well, great, then. I was just worried that bozo Gabbana did something rude to you..."

"No, no, it's perfectly fine!"

After reassuring Mjöllmile, I casually changed the subject.

"But Mollie, I see that you have a portrait of me in this office? What's up with that?"

I asked the question calmly, my eyes focused on a certain point on the wall.

"Ah...?! W-well, yes, about that..."

"It would seem he obtained this on the black market," Soei said. "However, both its origin and the identity of the artist are unknown."

"Oh?"

"There were pieces depicting you in slime form as well, Sir Rimuru, so I believe it is someone who knows you well...but even with our intelligence network, I have been unable to pin them down. A shrewd character, to be sure."

Whoa, wait a second. "Shrewd" isn't the half of it. Am I in trouble?

“So not even *your* investigations went anywhere, Soei?”

“Unfortunately not.”

“No way...”

“As we are in a state of war, I assigned a low priority to this investigation. I therefore could not assign many personnel to the case, which is the likely culprit.”

Oh. That kind of reason? But I feel kind of violated, being a model for a portrait by someone I don't even know.

“Well,” Mjöllmile said, “journalists around the world have seen you in person now, Sir Rimuru. I’m sure at least some of them have artistic talents. There’s nothing that strange about it, is there?”

“You think...?”

If even Soei’s team was failing, that was cause for concern. But no point brooding over it.

“Okay, well, I’m confiscating this.”

“Very well— Wait, *what*?!”

I attempted to persuade the shocked Mjöllmile, although I had already decided on this in my mind.

“Why do you have to do something like hang a picture of me in public? I hereby forbid you from doing that!”

“C-come on! This is tyranny! I don’t think even the great tyrants of history would order something like that!”

“You don’t have to exaggerate! Why are you resisting it so much? I’ll pay you for the portrait, okay? So let me just take this...”

I took the artwork off the wall. I mean, whoever painted this had beautified me so much that it hardly even resembled me any longer. To be frank, it looked way more like Shizu than me. That beauty, that fleeting feeling... An excellent representation of her.

“I was so excited about hanging this here, too...”

Soei patted the wailing Mjöllmile on the shoulder. “Heh... Give it up. Have this instead.”

“Huh?”

“Is—is that...?”

The moment the surprised Mjöllmile and I saw the artwork in Soei’s hand, we both raised an eyebrow in confusion. It depicted a slime.

“Hmm...”

“Well, isn’t that nice, Mollie? Hopefully this’ll be enough inspiration for you.”

“No, no, I’m not sure this works, you could say...”

I’m sure it doesn’t. I don’t think seeing a picture of a slime would make for a very motivational poster.

“But why do you have something like that, Soei?”

“These were pieces we seized in the midst of our investigations. A few other examples have appeared in the market as well, and we’ve retrieved all of them.”

“All just of me as a slime?”

“.....Yes.”

What was that pause for?

“...Well...one of them was taken from me by Diablo...”

What? That bastard!

“I resisted him with everything I could, but he overpowered me. I’m deeply sorry.”

“Ah. Well, that’s all right. I’ll be sure to retrieve it from Diablo, then. That, and I’ll tell him to stop getting in your hair.”

Diablo can be such a pain. He glorifies me way too much—and I know that my looks are derived from Shizu’s, so it’s not like I claim I’m ugly or something. But this is all the more reason why I can’t allow him to own portraits of me painted by God knows who.

Soei smiled briskly, relieved by my promise. Mjöllmile muttered something like “What, so Sir Soei gets to keep *his* art?” But he should really stop worrying about that kind of thing.

“Well, why not?” I asked. “At least Soei attracts *normal* women. You can bet they’ll be safe with him!”

Mjöllmile gave me a funny look and nodded. The subject was closed for now, but I’d need to *thoroughly* look into where this stuff came from.

*

There wasn’t much time left before evening, so we got down to business.

“I’m glad to see things have gone well so far, but what about our future plans?”

“Ah, that’s the question, isn’t it? I’d like to receive an update from you, too.”

“Well, should I begin, then?”

“No, um, you see, we’ve received loads of questions about your plans from all kinds of people. For tonight, I’d like you to enjoy the party, and then tomorrow we’ll hold a conference to go through them all.”

“Ah, well done, Mollie! No stone’s left unturned with you!”

“Wah-ha-ha! But of course!”

I feel like I’ve been repeating myself a lot lately, which I’m getting sick of, but we’ll get a whole lot more done at once this way. Kudos to Mjöllmile.

So I had him report to me on his current dealings. All our plans were experiencing smooth sailing. We had gradually been consuming a number of underground criminal organizations, and by now, almost nobody openly defied REG any longer.

“That’s wonderful. It’s scary how well that’s going.”

“Oh, it truly is! Sir Veryard is one of the most talented people I’ve ever met. He’s using methods I never would have conceived of in a million years to expand our power. Honestly, he’s even better at this than I am.”

“Well, don’t feel bad about that, Mollie. He got the best of *me* once, as I

recall. I can't blame you for thinking you lose out to him."

"I hate to admit it, but he's just a monster, let me tell you! It's like he reads people's minds and manipulates them into doing whatever works out best for him. He might even be more qualified to direct the FNTA than me, you know?"

Well, who knows? He's clearly a talent, yes, but whether he's CEO material is another story.

"No, I don't think so."

"...?"

"And I'm not just saying that 'cause we're friends, Mollie. It's a boss's mission to reward the people under them for getting the job done. If a boss is *too* talented, they won't be able to accurately judge other people's achievements."

"Hmm... I think I understand what you're getting at, Sir Rimuru, but..."

Mjöllmile looked less than convinced, so I kept on talking. I could have just laughed this off, but better to address anxieties like this while they're still small.

"Well, everybody's different, right? So of course they're all gonna have different talents. And any boss is asked to assign their workers the tasks they're best suited for. But if you're *too* good at your work, you tend to just do it all yourself instead of relying on anyone else."

"Right..."

"So if someone like that's at the top of the hierarchy, there's a pretty good chance they'll start thinking, like, 'I'm the best; I'm always correct.'"

Autocratic is the word for it. They're talented, yeah, but many of them think in strict, polarized ways. If your staff gets the job done, that's a baseline; if they don't, they're worthless. Even if the failure's caused by having impossible quantities of work placed upon them, if the boss thinks he's right, he could pin all of the blame on the staff. And if that boss is the president of the company, that's the worst of all. People might be too afraid of being fired to point it out—and even if they aren't, no one might be listening anyway.

Along those lines, I felt safe with Mjöllmile. He can be pretty autocratic at times, but he's kind and broad-minded enough to see his staff's failures as his

own.

Veryard, meanwhile, is the kind of boss who immediately lays off anyone he deems incompetent. Well, maybe that's going too far. I wouldn't call him coldhearted, but he's the type who looks at nothing but numbers and gives the cold shoulder to personnel he deems redundant. Management like that can contribute to the growth of a firm, but that's not the kind of firm I'm aiming for. I want the people in *my* organization to feel joy from helping others out.

The Four Nations Trade Alliance, as set up by us, didn't need to hurry growth. I didn't care if it took its time—I just want a firm where people trust in each other. Rapid growth can result in people dropping out, and if Veryard were director, that's probably what would happen, wouldn't it?

I explained all this carefully to Mjöllmile.

"...I see. That's how you think, Sir Rimuru?"

"Well, it may all be baseless anxieties, of course. I'm not trying to say Veryard's a bad person, either. I just think he's so talented that he puts efficiency ahead of everything else."

"Hmm, yes, I can't deny that. So my job's to manage things so it's easier for everybody to work under Sir Veryard, then?"

"Exactly. Glad we're on the same page there. The top person in a company shouldn't really be much more than decoration...but they can't be an empty shell, either. If we can all shoulder some of it until everyone's okay with their load—well, *that's* when things start to come together!"

This wasn't an absolute, of course. Everything's case by case in this business. But here, at least, I was certain that Mjöllmile was the best man to have on top. Besides, given that he's also the finance minister of Tempest, it's best that he doesn't try *too* hard as the FNTA director. Just keep an eye on things and send work over to those with the best talent for it. Besides, I think Veryard's more suited for working *under* someone, not the other way around.

So Mjöllmile had my seal of approval as director, but the man himself treated this with a jovial laugh.

"Wah-ha-ha! Ah, Sir Rimuru, you are *such* a modest leader!"

...?

Oh.

"No, you idiot, I was talking about *you*, not me!"

He kept on laughing in my face.

*

Once Mjöllmile was done briefing me, it was almost time for the party.

"We've invited nobility from many nations today, Sir Rimuru, so I'm sure you'll receive quite a bit of attention. It'll be such a large-scale event, I'm not sure we'll have much time to rest, but are you okay with that?"

Hmm...

"Well...hopefully it won't just be me sitting there intimidating people."

That was obviously a bad idea. But I didn't want to deal with a bunch of annoying hangers-on, either. I suppose I could solve this by just not attending, but everyone from Gazel and Yohm to King Doram of Blumund was on the invite list. If Mjöllmile is director of the FNTA, then I'm sort of like the firm's top benefactor. I can't just duck out because I don't want to be there.

"I could shoo them away, if you like."

Soei looked deadly serious. If I let him "shoo them away," my instincts told me there'd be a bloodbath.

"N-no, uh, I'll be okay. I'll just use my consummate communication skills to fend them off."

"Ah... Understood. I will keep a prudent distance in my bodyguard duties, then."

"Great. Thank you."

Cool. That's a relief. There'd be nothing but A-listers at this event, so violence was out of the question. It'd still be that way even if they weren't A-listers, but if we triggered an international incident, it'd wind up involving a hell of a lot more people than me.

"I am here, too, my master. Fear not!"

Ranga poked his face out from my shadow to express himself.

“Perfect. I’m counting on you!”

Cute little guy. His antics drained all the nervousness from me as I began striding toward the party venue.

The ninth floor—one below us—was wide open for the most part, designed to hold large meetings, activities that required many employees, and other such things. Right now, it was decorated for the party, complete with a few tables set up for buffet service. The eighth floor, by the way, was the employee dining hall, letting staffers look at the scenery while they enjoyed their meals. Coffee and tea were available at all times from there, so the staff could use it for business meetings and informal chats as well.

All the food served at this party was, of course, prepared by the cooks plugging away in the kitchen. There was an assortment of pickles, soups, cured ham, premium steak, meatballs, roast beef slices, a selection of pasta, *takoyaki*, *yakisoba*, *okonomiyaki*, curry, meatloaf... Hang on. They didn’t go as far as ramen, at least, but something about this menu didn’t seem too appropriate for a business party.

“Hey, uh, Mollie?”

“What is it?”

“Isn’t the choice of food a little odd?”

“You think so? It’s all the most popular items from Tempest’s dining halls.”

“Um, yeah, I know that, but... Huh?”

Well, let’s just take a deep breath. Maybe the buffet menu could’ve used more of a red-carpet touch, but there’s no need to be bound by convention at all either, right? If we’re here to try giving this world a breath of fresh air, maybe this menu was the right way to go.

“You know, the food we had on offer at the Founder’s Festival was pretty off the beaten path as well. If anything, I think some of our guests were expecting something like this.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I guess we’re good, then.”

"Indeed. And if we're not, it's not like anyone's about to complain!"

Hmm... I really like how Mollie can keep such a casual "what happens, happens" attitude with this. As I reflected on it, I realized that I was overthinking it anyway.

I took another look around, wondering if there was anything else to bring up. Then my eyes settled on the man who had built this whole venue. It was Veryard.

"Well, well, Your Majesty! Oh, but in my current position, I suppose you'd allow me to just call you Sir Rimuru?"

He greeted me with a friendly, beaming smile, and I couldn't help but nod back at him. Not that it's a problem or anything, but Veryard's smile brought up some bad memories in me, so I couldn't help but keep my guard up around him. Now I really *couldn't* laugh at Mjöllmile, huh?

Still, it's pretty darn extraordinary that the kingdom of Blumund would be so ready and willing to change the entire makeup of the nation like that. It would've been unthinkable back in my old life—even if absolute monarchies still existed on Earth, the idea of accomplishing that without any bloodshed was just a fantasy.

But here's King Doram, doing just that. Better not mess with *him*, I guess. Using his own kingdom as his chips... Talk about a true gambler. I frankly don't have the cajones for that, so he gets nothing but respect from me. And Veryard, being his former right-hand man, wasn't anyone to look down on, either.

"Well, everything looks thoroughly taken care of around here, Sir Veryard. Having you in command is a tremendous relief. Keep supporting Mjöllmile for me, okay?"

"But of course. And please, go ahead and call me just Veryard. My father, the head of our family, might be a marquis, but he is planning to abandon the title without me inheriting it."

"Really? Whoa."

I mean, yeah, Blumund's moves would shake the nobility a lot in the future, but that only really applied to the lower classes of nobility. I'm not so sure

about earls, but if you're a marquis or higher—the senior class—I think you'd be safe no matter how things work out.

"Yes, well, the time will come soon when we're called 'peers,' not nobles, and then we'll likely lose our powers before long. I was the one who drafted that plan and presented it to King Doram, after all."

It was you?!

I think I deserved praise for not saying that out loud.

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, those are the times we live in. The nobles may be the big movers and shakers of government for now, but once the people get up to speed on politics, you know they're not going to be happy with the status quo. It's important to gradually cede authority to them, so things won't get too hostile once that happens."

"Well, I'm sure, yes, but you can't just ask a bunch of guys who've never been near politics before to run a nation."

Varyard smiled at my concern. "No. And that's why I want to become a commoner now. That way, I'll be in a position to accept the powers that're due to come to us."

Oh. *That* kind of thing? I wouldn't call it "cheating," but he was certainly fixing the match quite a bit. But, yeah, it sounded reasonable to me. I do think that strategy would keep the nobility's dissatisfaction to a minimum. But—man—how much foresight does this guy *have*, anyway? Because from what I've seen, he'd be up there with anyone I've met, supernatural or not. It's so amazing, I'd feel bad for leaving the "sir" off his name.

Mjöllmile shook his head, exasperated. He had a look of "I told you so, didn't I?" in his eyes, and I nodded my firm agreement with that.

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So the party began without a hitch. Mjöllmile, as director, gave the first speech, with King Doram adding a few words and proposing a toast.

Then things got informal real fast. Informal, but not crass—that was important. There were royals here, after all, so that goes without saying. Of course, there are always some people who don't quite get the message, so as

soon as we entered the party's "chatter" phase, I had a crowd forming around me.

Guys, guys, guys... I know I've got brilliant communication skills, but even I have my limits! One or two people are fine, but when I'm surrounded by a dozen or so, that's trouble.

"Your Majesty! Please, you need to hear my story!"

"My homeland would like to send a diplomat to Tempest!"

"We would like to open trade with you! And we also have roads we would like to improve..."

"Ugh! All you little small-fry nations, get out of my way! I, er, my nation is close to yours, and—"

"Why are *you* acting so above us? What kind of diplomat doesn't even know how to stand in line?!"

"I am the crown prince, I'll have you know. If you want to talk about lines, I think *my* position enables me to go first."

"Like you've got any authority outside of your borders!"

"Should I interpret that to mean you are openly hostile to my homeland?"

So, yeah, it was pretty raucous. A lot of it was stuff I had no reply to but "Who gives a crap," and I was worried a fight might break out soon. All a big headache, really. I couldn't just ignore them all, but it was a huge hassle to deal with. Way beyond what I imagined anyway.

I suppose this is just how important my position has become—but tonight, at least, I think I let my guard down. It's not like people swarm Gazel like this. Even Yohm presents himself as a stately figure—or not. That's more Mjurran smiling and keeping guard over him, isn't it? I envy him. Still, Yohm's something of a sharp-eyed warrior, so maybe that's one reason why a snooty noble wouldn't want to get close to him.

Ahh, this must be why El from Thalion never shows up, right? Because it's always a huge uproar whenever she does. She told me she has people go through formal procedures and wait their turn to see her; nobody without an

appointment gets allowed in. I think I'll try something like that next time.

Still, I had to do something about this situation. As I pondered over how to approach this, an unexpected person offered a helping hand.

"People, people, can we all relax a little, please?"

It was Gabbana, the guy I ran into out front, talking to the crowd in his low, husky voice.

"His Majesty the demon lord Rimuru is head of the powerful Jura-Tempest Federation and our nation's greatest supporter. I understand your earnest wishes, but please refrain from badgering him this evening!"

The point he was not-so-discreetly making was that tonight's a celebration of a new beginning, so let's discuss business some other time. He might've been crying in front of me earlier, but Gabbana's a beacon of hope now. And he got a good reaction, too.

"Ah, Mr. Gabbana! I heard you've become an executive in the Alliance. It's great to see you in good spirits..."

"Y-yes, my apologies for being in such a rush. It's a great fortune for me just to say hello to you tonight, so I'll leave you be for now..."

"My pardons as well. I'll look forward to seeing you at a later date, once I file a more formal request."

And those were the lucky ones. Most of the crowd quickly made good their escape instead of trying to say anything to me. I wouldn't exactly call that praiseworthy behavior, but I wasn't going to yell at people about trivial things.

I only had so much time in the first place, so Rigurd was in charge of who got to meet with me. I only extended the honor to a carefully selected few, and even now, I'm still in the process of sifting through all the requests. In the future, I'll follow Elmesia's example and be a bit more stringent. The fewer troublesome people in my life, the better. That, of course, meant that I may never see some of the people at this party again. For tonight, at least, I'm not going to mind a little crass behavior thrown in my direction.

I gotta say, though, I'm seeing Gabbana in a much better light now. He was

standing a distance away, keeping an eye out for me, and thanks to him, I got to sit back and enjoy this party a little more.

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So, now that I had a little more freedom of movement, I looked around at the other guests. I met with Gazel and Yohm in advance, so no need to go out of my way to say hi. They'd be at tomorrow's conference, too, and if they had anything important to tell me, they could do it there. For tonight, all I had to do was hang out and act regal, so I was hoping to find someone interesting and get into some fun chitchat.

I looked around to see if anyone suitable was nearby...and there she was! A tremendous beauty, the kind who'd make anyone turn their head. Who is it? It's Hinata, of course!

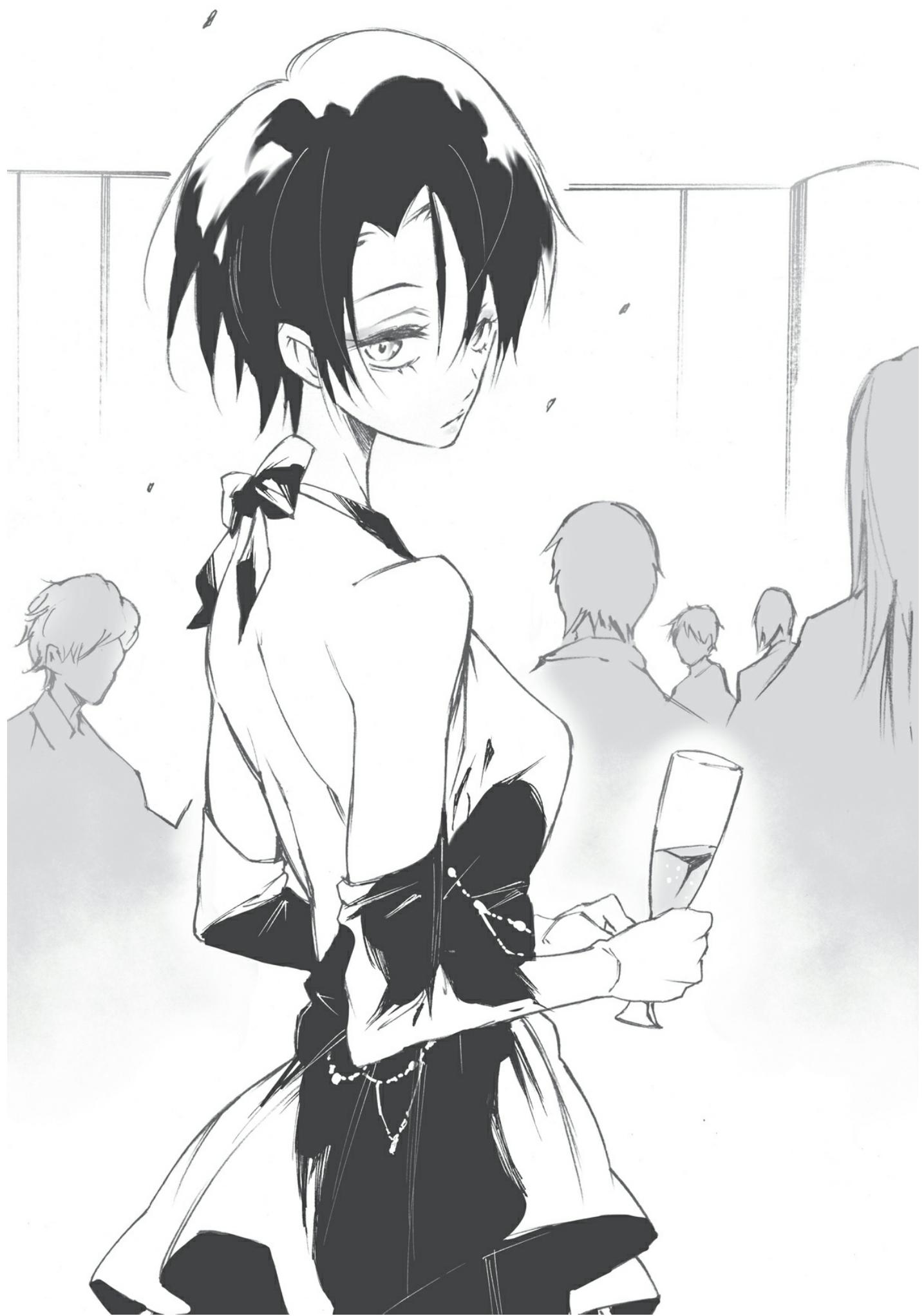
Hinata was wearing a dress with a wide-open back, jet-black like a moonless night, and studded with jewels that looked like stars. But the dress wasn't all that noteworthy compared to her own sexiness. She kept her hair short, and between that and the dress, all her skin from the back of her neck down to her waist was on full display. She had tied a ribbon around her neck, but even this only accentuated her appeal.

Her pale skin was dazzling against the dark hue of her dress. Just *too* dazzling, really! It was called a backless dress, apparently, and I don't know who invented it, but it's a truly wonderful design. Better save that to a file in my brain. Or, actually, maybe I could have Ciel record this as a video for me—

There is no such function.

No, there *is*, isn't there? I mean, you played back that high-res video of all the stuff in the labyrinth for me.

As we are not inside the labyrinth, no recorded footage is accessible.



*

You gotta be kidding me. I *know* you can do this! Like, you save the video from my battles against monsters, don't you? So I can study them later? Just do something like that here, is all I'm asking—

Negative. No justification found.

Hey, why's it talking like a robot all of a sudden? God dammit! I hate a partner who goes all unreliable right at the most critical moment.

Left with no other choice, I devoted every slime cell in my body to the task as I smiled and spoke up.

"Wow, Hinata. You look beautiful tonight. That dress suits you so well!"

Hinata was having a sip of wine, but she put the glass on the table and turned back toward me. Then, gazing dubiously at me, she spoke.

"Huh? So you've learned how to flatter people now, eh?"

"No, no, I mean it! I'm not good at any kind of flattery!"

That was half true. I was no good at giving compliments I didn't actually mean. Hinata snickered a bit instead of taking me to task for it—but I couldn't end the conversation here, so I plowed onward.

"But it's really bold, too, y'know? Not to be rude, but I didn't think you'd be so aggressive with your evening wear—"

She glared at me. I swallowed the rest of my words. *Oh, crap, I feel like my stock is plummeting with her.*

"If you're aware that it's rude, it would've been the right move *not* to say it, wouldn't it?"

"Sorry! You're absolutely right!"

Enough antagonizing her. An apology was the only way out.

Hinata was reproachfully staring at me. I was panicking under her gaze. Then I smelled the aroma of wine. Hinata, breathing out a sigh, looked impossibly sexy to me. I mean, she looked great from the back, but the front view was definitely nosebleed-worthy. Her dress went all the way up to her neck, but it was

sleeveless, so there was nothing hiding her pale shoulders. And the most important part of all was the sides, down from the—

“What are you looking at? I’ll kill you.”

“Sorry.”

Bad move. I forgot I was in human form as I stared at her. No wonder she spotted it. Good thing this body of mine doesn’t get nosebleeds.

“Luminus wouldn’t shut up about having me wear this,” she said.

Dang! Nice one, Luminus! I’d love to send an “attaboy” out to her right now. I can picture her looking all smug about it, but either way, I have a ton of respect for her.

I still tried to keep it cool as I did cartwheels for Luminus in my mind.

“Hmm... Really? Well, I don’t think she made a bad choice. I mean, seriously, you look beautiful tonight.”

I tried to appear as self-assured as possible. I meant every word of it, so I wasn’t afraid of Hinata glaring back at me...

...Okay, that’s a lie. Actually, I was all kinds of freaking out.

“Here we go again...”

But before Hinata could continue, I covered her lips with my own—or rather, it’d be perfect if I could *actually* do something like that, but a single misstep and it’d be a lot more than just sexual harassment. I’d be a sexual *offender*, more like, and besides, I was way too timid to have that kind of courage.

So I went with words instead. “No, really!” I said, trying to sound serious. Then I noticed Hinata’s cheeks turning red.

This may work!

Look at this! I’m doing better than ever before with—

I believe she is just inebriated.

...Huh?

I turned my attention toward the wine Hinata was drinking.

“Oh... Hey, doesn’t this one have a high alcohol content?”

“Is it? I’m enjoying it a lot.”

Hinata may not have much of a tolerance, huh? I sincerely doubt that, but if that’s what Ciel says... I was too focused on her looks tonight, but now I was curious about that sort of thing, too. So I held up three fingers.

“Hey, how many am I holding up?”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No, no, no, nothing like that...”

Hinata sighed heavily as I hurriedly denied it.

“Look, you realize that I’m a Saint, don’t you? I’ve had the chance to travel with Chloe, and Luminus taught me a lot after I came back, too. I could easily detoxify this alcohol if I wanted!”

Ciel tricked me! But if that was Hinata’s claim, it made sense.

After that... Well, let’s just say that I had a lot of trouble getting back on her good side. I never *did* get to ask why her cheeks turned red right then.

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The day after the party, our conference began after a lunch break. The attendee rundown went a bit like this.

First, we had the four kings and one queen supporting the FNTA—me, Gazel, Yohm and Mjurran, and King Doram. All of us in this group had already reached a consensus, so we were only here to put our stamp of approval on things. Next up was Mjöllmile, who was nominated to direct the FNTA by all four of us (minus Mjurran), and Hinata, representing the Western Holy Church. The chairman of the Council of the West was making a personal appearance as well. His name was Leicester, if I recall correctly, and he still had that long, bushy, Santa-like beard.

Beyond that, there were around thirty more Council members in the conference room, all carefully selected to represent all the assorted Western Nations. Veryard was also present as secretary, and Cien was serving as moderator.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I'd like to thank you all from the bottom of my heart for taking time out of your busy schedules to gather here. We will begin this conference by explaining the crisis that will likely be occurring in the near future."

Today's main goal was to go over the stuff Mjöllmile asked me about yesterday—who this enemy was, exactly; what it was aiming for; the potential fallout of the ensuing war; and how we'd deal with it. We carefully screened the people joining this meeting to keep any fear from growing into outright panic. Kicking and screaming wasn't going to change this reality; instead, we needed to be mindful about the best possible course of action available to us. As leaders, we couldn't be timid about that, as difficult as it can be.

So that's why I wanted to lay everything out on the table first. I had given this spiel quite a few times before, so I appreciated Mjöllmile's arranging all of this.

In the meantime, Cien completed his overview of the situation.

"...So you're saying the demon lord Rimuru won the war against the Empire," said Chairman Leicester, "but now there's this new enemy, Michael?"

This muttered question ignited the other councilors.

"And this Michael is leading the angelic race, too?"

"A Temma War, is it? I never thought that five-hundred-year calamity would happen in my lifetime..."

Hearing their reaction, I raised my hand to speak up. We'd better address a misunderstanding or two sooner than later.

"Umm, like Cien said, the goal of the enemy is to resurrect Veldanava. We can only speculate on how they plan to do that, and we have no evidence favoring one scenario or the other. Most importantly, we do not have a timeframe for this, either. We believe they will make their move soon, but Michael is from a very long-lived species. It could be tomorrow, it could be a few years, or it could even be a few decades."

That's the most troublesome part of it. We're clueless on the timing. If there's any movement, Deeno would tell us in his daily morning report, and then we'd contact Obela via Milim to confirm the accuracy of his intel.

But so far, Michael hadn't stirred at all. It was ominous, but there was nothing we could do about it, so we put that behind us for now. We had to keep on the alert for this enemy who could attack at any time, but until then, we were obligated to continue with our regular activities.

Japan was pretty much the same way, I guess. A subduction-zone earthquake was 60 percent likely to strike the country within ten years, and that likelihood went up to 99 percent in thirty years, but that didn't stop us from living our lives. We just made sure we were prepared in advance, so we wouldn't be helpless when something happened. Beyond that, it was just a matter of cherishing our daily lives. Honestly, I was a lot more afraid of sudden volcanic eruptions than earthquakes, since there's pretty much no way to prepare for those. They say that if Mount Aso, the largest active volcano in Japan, were to have a full-on caldera eruption, it'd cause untold damage. They call it a "super volcano," after all, and apparently there'd be no escape no matter where in Japan you were. Maybe parts of Hokkaido up north would be unscathed, but either way, it'd be the end of the country.

That's all a hypothetical, of course, but what if the government released a statement saying this was *guaranteed* to happen within the next year? I mean, I doubt it'd really happen, but even if I trusted it and wanted to flee somewhere, there wouldn't be any escape. No country is gonna be willing to accept a hundred million or so refugees from Japan, and I doubt we'd arrange some elaborate system where we're all divided up among a bunch of other nations. Of course, if that prediction was 100 percent accurate, I'm sure the government will do what it can to help...but that depends on who's in power. Maybe they wouldn't accept it at all, and in the end, we'd have to rely on our own social connections to make our escape.

Me, I guess I always feel in my mind somewhere that if it happens, it happens. Better to live each day in the pursuit of happiness, rather than cower in fear every day. It's not like anywhere we escape to is guaranteed to be safe, either. They call them "natural disasters" because there's no point thinking about them all the time. There's an expression that goes along the lines of "the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry," but I think that as a human being, you gotta just do the best you can with what you have.

“...So we’ll ensure that we are ready for Michael’s attack at any time, but we also want people to keep enjoying their daily lives. That was why I wanted to reveal this truth only to the world’s leadership. I hope this is understood as we ask you to join us in this preparation effort.”

Everyone was silent as I made my conclusion. There was audible groaning. But after half a minute or so of this, Hinata finally spoke up.

“As the representative of the Western Holy Church, we promise you our full support.”

“I see,” Leicester said. “That makes sense to me. So the projects being hastily developed and promoted in the Western Nations were in preparation for this?”

Cien nodded. “That is correct. It is all in accordance with Sir Rimuru’s will.”

We were building tracks to run magitrains on, as well as station buildings to serve them. These were now being expanded and redesigned for use as shelters for the local residents. They could serve as gyms or auditoriums or other things in regular times. I was going to ask our audience here to hold evacuation drills for these facilities once they were done, but before I could say anything, Leicester spoke up.

“It certainly makes sense to me that advance preparation is very important. I, personally, do not have the authority to intervene in other countries’ policies, but I can at least offer these evacuation drills as a proposal. Along those lines, I would be glad to offer my cooperation.”

“Indeed. I may only be a councilor, but I am a marquis in my homeland. I will offer my advice to the king and get our training program underway.”

“Yes, it’s a perfectly valid idea. Allow me to join you in this!”

The councilors appeared to be on our side. This was going quicker than I expected, actually. We *did* pick this group carefully, after all, and none of them were foolish enough to grumble about this. Or, really, Mjöllmile said he kept the audience for this meeting small to prevent disorder like that. When it comes to decisions as monumental as these, a larger group would never reach a consensus, so the plan was to persuade a small group of power brokers first so they could win over the other councilors back home for us.

That plan seemed to be going well, but it remains to be seen how the whole Council of the West will vote on the matter.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! Lord Rimuru seems to be concerned about the Council's ultimate decision, but I would advise him to rest assured about that. Nobody, after all, would ever dare stand up to Lady Testarossa."

Um?

"Ha-ha-ha! You are certainly correct. I have my political interests, yes, but I value my life quite a bit more. If this matter could threaten the very existence of our country... Well, if it's something as simple as evacuation drills, a single word from an authority like Lady Testarossa will bring everyone on the same page."

"Indeed. It's hardly something I am willing to openly fight against just to make my own opinion known."

"It'll pass unanimously, I'm sure. It benefits all of us equally."

The councilors' reaction was quite a bit different from what Mjöllmile and I expected. Now I wasn't so sure I needed to be cautious and explain the whole situation to them.

"Hmm, it'd seem I had a certain lack of awareness about this," an impressed Veryard said. "I have never met this Testarossa before. She sounds like a very remarkable figure."

The councilors all looked at him warmly... Or was that envy in their eyes?

"Gentlemen," Cien said with a harrumph, "don't you think you're being a tad too careless? I will remind you that I am a faithful servant of Lady Testarossa, and I will be obliged to report to her about this meeting, lest anyone forget."

The panic this generated among the councilors was nothing short of hilarious.

"No! You've got me wrong, I promise you!"

"I did not mean any disrespect, no! I was merely praising her leadership..."

"I was stating the truth—er, um, *ahem*, glory to Lady Testarossa!!"

I'm not sure what that last guy was trying to say, but I could sense the emotion and desperation in his voice. I didn't expect Testarossa to be so

dreaded like this. What a surprise.

“Cien,” I said as he smiled to himself, “try not to bully everyone too much, please.”

And I’m sure this simple exchange taught Veryard just how mean Testarossa could be. “Hmm... I was thinking I should meet with this woman,” he said, “but I’m sure she is busy, so perhaps another time. So does that mean our meeting is over for today?”

I could almost see him backing away from the minefield. His danger detection skills were something I could learn from, actually. Once more, I was reminded of how talented Veryard was.

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So the meeting was at a natural ending point, but I recalled that I had one more thing to say.

“Oh, right! So Testarossa sent me a message that Masayuki, the new emperor over in the east, wanted to build a peaceful relationship with the west. He’s sent a request to join the Council of the West, but what do you think?”

I had received this Thought Communication just before I came here. I was pretty casual with the moves, but most of the attendees froze, startled.

“...What?”

All of them turned toward me, their eyes shrunk to little dots. The only unsurprised people in the hall were Gazel, Yohm, Mjöllmile, and Cien, all of whom I gave advance word to. I hadn’t even told King Doram yet, so he was just as astonished as Veryard. I almost never see Veryard look shocked, so I got a bit of secret enjoyment out of that. Still, it seems my statement was more of a bombshell than I expected.

“I heard nothing about this!”

“Well, no, I just told you, so...”

“Were you aware, King Gazel?”

“Yes, I had received word about it, but I don’t know any details...and I *certainly* didn’t know that talks had proceeded *this* far.”

Wait, I thought Gazel knew all that stuff...?

No, we had discussions along the lines of “Wouldn’t it be nice if this happened?” but we had not gone over any dates or other specifics.

Oh. Yeah, maybe not. I know the timing was a little tough, but I really should’ve contacted him via our cell phones to say something. I figured I’d clue him in today since we had this meeting and all, but I didn’t quite make it to him beforehand, so this was the first notice for a lot of people.

“Did you not know either, Yohm?”

“Not a bit, no.”

“So why weren’t you surprised at all?”

“Well, if I let every little thing the boss did surprise me, I’d have died of a heart attack long ago.”

I didn’t much appreciate being openly dissed like this. Mjurran, listening from Yohm’s side, had a hand on her forehead—but she was staying quiet, which I’ll take to mean she agreed with him. These stares from everyone started to feel excruciating.

“This is just stunning. Why do you always have to break this incredibly important news as if it were nothing?”

Hinata’s gaze stung particularly hard.

“W-well, I deeply apologize, madam, but...um...”

I don’t know why I was calling her “madam” all of a sudden. Must be the nerves. But is this really my fault? Like, I was so preoccupied with this war against Michael that I kind of assumed that the Eastern Empire would generally cooperate with us. Tempest is providing all kinds of support to them, too, so we can all be on the same page here. Wasn’t it kind of a given that it’d work out like this? I didn’t expect so much surprise.

“Because you don’t seem too remorseful about it.”

Oof...

“W-wait a minute, Hinata! You know that Tempest and the Empire were at

war, right? And we won, so now we're exercising our rights and building a peaceful relationship with them. And now that *that's* underway, it's a given they'll want to reconcile with the West, too, isn't it?"

I was laying on the excuses as thick as I could. But Hinata never stopped glaring at me. Which—well, I'm not in the wrong or anything, but not telling anyone might've been a bad mistake. It's not like I had no way to communicate with them all, and being busy wasn't much of an excuse. Maybe this was my fault as well. I was about to say sorry, but then Veryard nodded deeply and lent a hand.

"You're absolutely right. This is not Sir Rimuru's fault...but rather ours, for failing to ask him to take such measures."

Wow. You really get me, Veryard! What a smart guy. I couldn't ask for a more reliable ally here.

He and Hinata glared at each other. The latter broke first.

"Well, yes, I suppose. Think about it a little, and it's clear Rimuru would've done what he thought was best. But..."

"But?"

"But as someone living in the West, it's pretty hard to believe that the Empire, our enemy since prehistoric times, would take a step like this. We had so many preconceptions about our relationship with them that, well, we never saw this coming."

She sounded frustrated about it. And I get it, for sure. This great power, hostile against you for so long, suddenly asking for a peace deal. It's something anyone should be skeptical about at first, but the fact that I, the winner of our war, was giving the news was proving to be quite persuasive. If all we're trying to do is build a cooperative relationship, that wouldn't be any major risk to take. And what would be more foolish than humans squabbling with each other when a war threatening their survival could break out?

"Lord Rimuru, if I could ask you..."

"Yes?"

I turned toward Leicester, the chairman.

"I'd like to know where these potential talks with the Empire might be taking place. Also, you called the emperor 'Masayuki' just now, but are you referring to Lightspeed Masayuki?"

The concept clearly excited him. The second question caused more of a stir than the first, making me realize that I perhaps didn't explain myself well enough.

"Umm, well, the meeting will be held in the kingdom of Englesia. They would like to hold it quite soon if possible, so they might be able to attend the next regular Council meeting. And to answer your second question—yes, Chairman, you are correct. Masayuki, the Hero and also my personal friend, was recently crowned Emperor."

The moment I said it, the conference hall erupted in applause.

"Brilliant! I'd expect nothing less of Sir Masayuki!"

"Such wonderful news! Now we're sure to have averted a war!"

"I have no idea how such a thing happened...but with Sir Masayuki, anything truly *is* possible!"

"Exactly! Even that evil Empire was no threat to the Hero!!"

So, yeah, pretty big deal.

"I had heard reports that a new Emperor was crowned, but I had no idea it was *the* Sir Masayuki..."

Chairman Leicester was almost in tears as he spoke. To be honest, I didn't expect this reaction. Now I was wondering if I had done something bad to Masayuki, actually. I mean, this unassuming teen coming to grips with his abilities and ultimately overthrowing the malicious Empire... Don't tell me they'll make a sci-fi movie trilogy about *him* next? I mean, in what universe can a single person take down an entire country? The fact that these people believe all that really happened shows just how much faith they must have in Masayuki. But what can I do? It's all true, so...

"Well...yeah. I don't know all the details myself, so you'll have to ask him

when you get the chance."

I tried to keep it casual as I threw all responsibility over to Masayuki, whether he knew it or not.

So, in addition to sharing plans for implementing the evacuation drills we proposed, we decided that the new Emperor would be invited to sit in the next Council of the West session.

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...And, yeah, that's what's been happening the past five months. Maybe some minor mishaps here and there, but overall, the prep work's been going pretty steadily.

The next Council meeting will be held in Englesia in two weeks, and Masayuki had already built a pretty good consensus with the top councilors. The Empire's admission into the Western Nations was already all but set in stone, and I felt safe entrusting Testarossa with the details.

On the surface, at least, all of humankind was now united under a single mission. The demon lords were all fully prepared. All we could do now is hope that the enemy force wasn't stronger than we expected...

But as I thought over this, I received a sudden contact from Deeno.

(Uh, hey, it's Deeno. Can you hear me?)

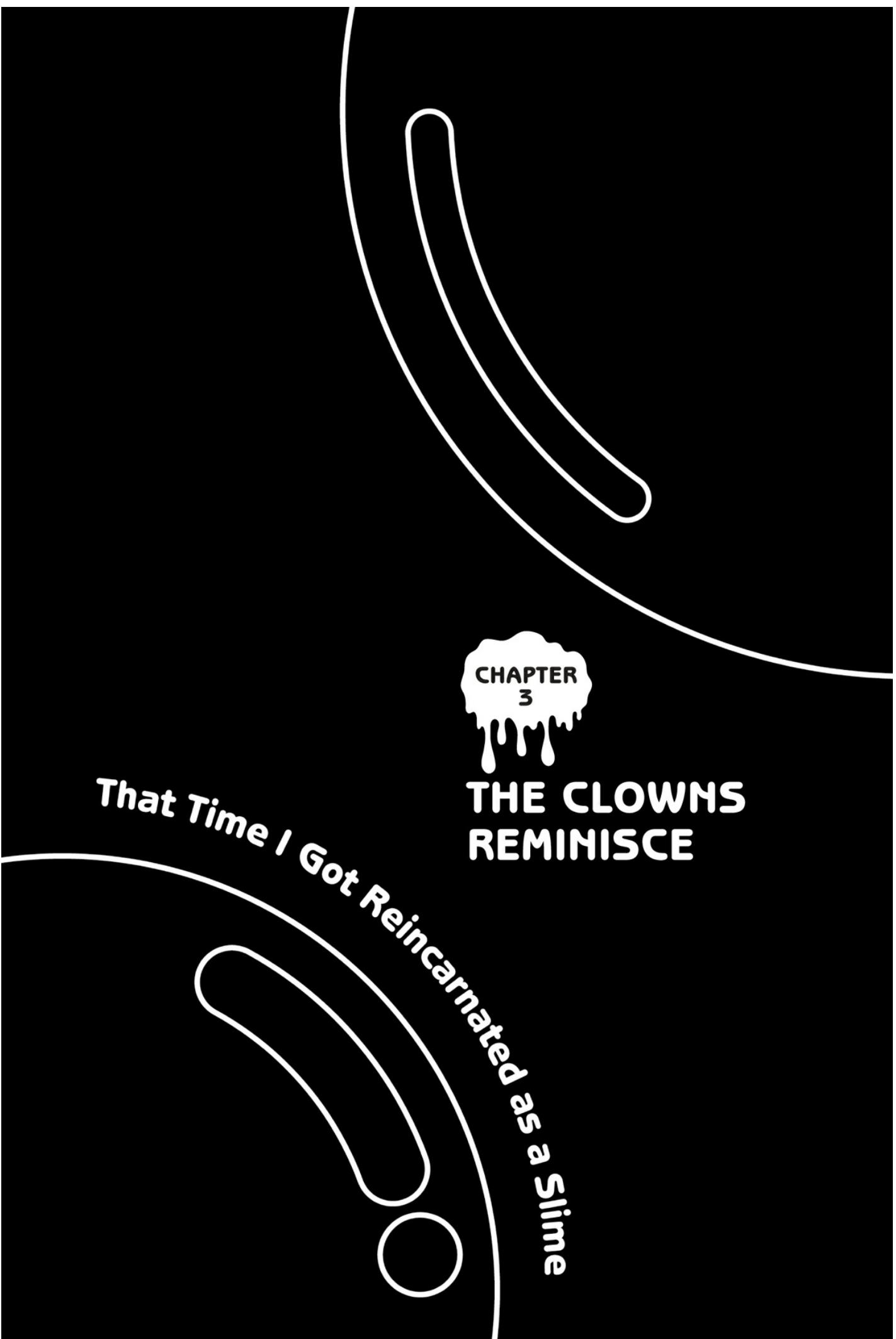
(Of course I can. Any moves?)

This wasn't his regular morning check-in, so clearly something was up.

(Mm, well, yeah, more or less, so I thought I'd let you know. Like, there's so much going on, I don't even know where to begin, really...)

Huh?

He wasn't being too coherent with me, but clearly something was up. We had a pretty peaceful last few months, but that all ended the moment he called me.



CHAPTER 3

THE CLOWNS REMINISCE

Back when Kagali was dragged away from the battlefield by Feldway several months ago, she lost consciousness at the same time Lieutenant Kondo breathed his last in the fight—the result of his rule over her being snapped. But when she came to, she found herself in a world she had no knowledge of.

What's going on...?

She attempted to grasp the situation. Then she found a familiar face near her.
“Deeno...”

“Yo! Looks like you’re up, huh, Kazalim? Guess that guy Kondo is dead, then.”
“Y-you noticed I was... Oh. I’m sure the boss told you.”

Deeno using the name she abandoned surprised Kagali, but as her eyes focused more, she discovered Yuuki, lazily sitting on a chair and looking like he wasn’t even there. He, much like Kagali, had been placed under the rule of someone. And when Kagali realized this, she instantly determined that it wouldn’t be strange at all if Yuuki revealed her identity to the world.

“Yeah, kind of. I dunno exactly what happened to you, but honestly, I like how you look now a lot better.”

Kagali looked nothing at all like the demon lord Kazalim, and Deeno wasn’t afraid to say it out loud.

As detached as ever... I can never read him.

She began to relax a bit. To be honest, she didn’t have nearly enough fighting force at the moment. She’d merit an over-A rank, yes, but in the eyes of *true* monsters, she was just a face in the crowd. Deeno’s powers were unknown, but she knew she didn’t stand a chance. So Kagali pursued her best option at the

moment—intelligence gathering.

“So where am I?”

Deeno scowled. “You know it’s not your own world, right? This is kind of a special place. It’s right next to every world out there, but it’s isolated from them, too. The origin point. We call it the Celestial Palace.”

It wasn’t a familiar name. But a few keywords stood out to her.

The origin point...? Not the place where Veldanava the Star-King Dragon was born...?

The origin point—the place that existed even before all the worlds were created. A folktale, recorded only within mythology. It was claimed to exist, but nobody had ever seen it before.

“How...?”

“You need a key to go through the gate leading to here, but I didn’t know what that key was, either. But now that I’ve been taken here, I know how it works. Can’t tell you, but...”

That annoyed Kagali. But then she recalled that Deeno hated to do anything he deemed unnecessary. If he wasn’t going to tell her, then Kagali could do nothing to make him.

It was time to ask something else.

“Well, I won’t force you, so if you can just tell me what you’re able to...”

“...Ugh, what a pain.”

“We’ve known each other a long time now. You could do at least that much for me.”

“Tsk. Not that I get anything out of it.”

“I seem to remember doing a lot of work for you...”

Before Kagali could finish, Deeno had straightened up. “What do you wanna ask me? And when you do, you’ll forget about the past for me, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course I will.”

Kagali smiled. Deeno was the same as ever. That was a relief, despite how confusing everything else was at the moment.

"So our boss—I mean Yuuki Kagurazaka there—why is he still being mind-controlled by someone? You said earlier that Kondo was dead, but... Wait! You don't mean..."

"...You really *are* quick on the uptake, aren't you? I think you got it right, so I'll say it. You were being controlled by Kondo, but Yuuki over there was being controlled by the guy who lent that skill to Kondo."

"I knew it..."

She didn't want to believe it—the fact that someone out there could actually lend the power of mind control to other people. But Deeno wasn't a liar that way. If he didn't want to admit to something, he'd just keep his mouth shut. And that made it seem all the more truthful.

Yuuki was being controlled. Despite having this one-of-a-kind super-body that canceled out all skills, there was something that could break through that. It was nothing short of terrifying. Kagali wanted to restore Yuuki to normal so she could get out of here, but she had no idea how. And if that's how it was...

"Where are my beautiful children?"

"You mean the guys standing behind you?"

Kagali quickly turned around. She hadn't detected anyone there before, and she couldn't have, for that matter.

Oh. So they've gone into killing mode. Following only my orders, no one else's...

She chided herself for being in such a panic, despite her intentions otherwise. She canceled the order, bringing Teare and Footman back to normal. There were also around nine unfamiliar-looking walking dead standing in line with them, but Kagali gave them no notice.

But she did have some vague memories of back when her mind was being controlled. She recalled using the forbidden curse Dead Birthday as commanded, so these walking dead must've been created at that time. But she

felt no personal attachment to them. She never intended to create them, after all.

"Oh! Hey, President! You're okay, huh? I was real worried!"

"Hohhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! I firmly agree with Teare, President. Did the boss save us?"

"No, he didn't. And there's no point hiding it, so I'll just say that we're...in a terrible situation."

She told the two of them what was going on. Deeno had fallen asleep, not minding being ignored at all.

"Wow... Guess we didn't live up to expectations, huh?"

"Of course you did, Teare. Even the boss had his mind controlled. I'm sure there was nothing we could've done to resist it."

"So now what'll we do?" Footman asked. "Are we just gonna go along with it?"

"Yeah," added Teare, "can't we just escape? I don't see any guards."

"That's the problem," Kagali darkly responded. "I'd like to escape, of course, but I guess we're in this Celestial Palace on another world. Magic won't get us out."

Kagali had already tried out the elemental magic Warp Portal long ago. If it showed any sign of working, she was ready to leave, taking Teare, Footman, and Yuuki with her. But since she had no idea of her current coordinates, she had no way to activate the spell.

Luckily, the thrall on me was broken...but whoever did it knew that regaining my senses wouldn't let me do anything...

It was agonizing but it was the truth. Nobody was guarding them, no—but that's only because nobody thought Kagali and his companions could escape.

"Deeno?"

"H-hey. What's up? I was trying to enjoy a nap here. Got another question?"

"I doubt you'll answer this one, but is there any way to get out of this place?"

"You think there is?"

"...No."

"Right? I always appreciated how sharp you were like that. So, yeah, better stop wasting your time and start behaving yourself, y'know?"

She saw that coming. But now Kagali was truly stuck.

The Celestial Palace was a very small, very flat world. It existed within a single sphere: the lower half earth and the top half the sky. It was perfectly level and around forty square miles in size, its climate mild with no seasonal fluctuation, and in the middle of it was a beautiful white castle. But that was everything. No flowers withered on it, no fruit rotted on the branch, no water was tainted, and the earth was never parched. The fields of flowers were always in full bloom, and what trees there were always bore the tastiest, sweetest-smelling fruit. It felt like time had stopped there, such was the complete lack of change.

Kagali and the rest were held in a small, square structure set up for them in the middle of a garden. The whole of the castle was visible from there, and if they turned around, they could see a huge gate on the edge of the world. There was never any sign of anyone leaving the castle, but as long as the gates remained closed, there seemed to be no way out from here.

So Kagali, undeterred by Deeno's reply, calmly thought about what to do. But then someone came out from the castle to bother her.

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He was a man with a stout, muscular physique and a face that seemed to know no fear. His entire body seemed to course with pure spirit, hinting at the exceptional strength he had.

"We can't have you here, Sir Deeno. Someone of *your* stature shouldn't be so familiar with these people."

The man looked down on Kagali, seeing no reason not to. *Who is this guy?* thought an annoyed Kagali, but for now she put up with this treatment. She was always cautious that way.

"You were...Gnohm, right? Looks like you successfully installed yourself in that body, huh?"

"That I did! This man Vega's body was the perfect catalyst for me. He regenerates quickly, and at this rate, I think everyone will succeed in their incarnations, Sir Dhalis included."

"Great," murmured a disinterested Deeno. Kagali, following none of this, silently listened on. Vega—or Vega the Power, as he was called—was one of the three leaders of Cerberus. This had to be him, she thought. Her faint memories included a couple of scenes of him joining her on the way here.

Vega...a "catalyst"? Was he a vessel for one of these guys to take physical form in? It's possible, yes. This man has inherited the blood of a magical inquisitor, one of the greatest results of Rozzo's research. He's a freak of nature bearing both human and monster traits. And as long as he's kept fed, he can recover from any injury, no matter how brutal.

If his arms were cut off, they'd simply grow back. In fact, their experiments proved that even if only the head remained, the rest of the body could still regenerate itself. But the horrors only began there: Any part that was chopped off the main body would attempt to regenerate into a mindless monster. That was why Yuuki had given Vega strict orders to bring his limbs back if any got sliced off.

This Gnohm person must have taken advantage of this unique trait of Vega's to obtain an empty, soulless body of his.

But why does he need a body in the first place? Who is he anyway? A demon, if he needs to procure a physical form like this? No... From this divine presence, he must be an angel. In which case, this would be a far more powerful vessel than any human or monster...

Kagali's thoughts raced. She had lost the majority of her fighting power, but her brain was alive and well.

Already, she had a rough conclusion. This man Gnohm was an angel—or some similar spiritual life-form—and he was brought into physical existence to invade other worlds. Vega was being used as a catalyst in order to create physical bodies for these angels. He was alive, chances are, but not in any position to act.

And she was correct on all this—except that Gnohm was actually a mystic. By

fusing his body with Vega's cells, he had performed a magicule-fueled transformation of their temporary bodies, strengthening them immensely. That allowed Gnohm and his ilk to take in the component matter, triggering a complete physical incarnation.

This component matter was proteins and carbohydrates recovered from the ground. To put it in less scientific terms, all they had to do was eat to build their physical bodies. It was different from the "walking dead" method, but it was more convenient for mystics like Gnohm, as they were only demi-spiritual life-forms.

Gnohm, by the way, was one of the mystics working directly under Zarario. He was stationed back at home while his kin attacked Ramiris's labyrinth, so he was there when Feldway returned with Vega and the others, allowing him to attain this body. Zarario's team came back a bit later on, just in time to meet up with Deeno and the others. Gnohm was the first to complete his incarnation, as he was the test case for others to follow; that was why he was still alone for the time being.

Once a thronus, he was now a "general"-rank mystic, placing him on the lower end of the upper classes. With his incarnation, he now had access to more power than a demon lord seed. And from his perspective, Kagali—not much different from a human—was nothing more than a pile of trash. That's why he had no qualms about acting superior to her.

"Kagali, you should know that you are nothing more than a tool for increasing our strength," said Gnohm. "Kondo was a somewhat useful tool to us, and perhaps you've regained your free will after his death, but don't let that fool you. Sir Deeno over there is on a far higher level than any of you!"

"Whoa, whoa, that's enough."

"No, Sir Deeno! You are one of the great Seven Primordial Angels, are you not? Talking so casually with these lowly people... You are offering far too much mercy to them!"

"I told you, Kazalim and I are old acquaintances."

"My name's Kagali now. Could you call me that going forward?"

"...Normally I'd say, 'No way, that's a pain in the ass,' but Kagali *is* shorter. Let's go with that."

Kagali was now a beautiful woman, not at all like before. The name seemed to match as well, so Deeno didn't put up much resistance.

There they were, ignoring Gnohm while having a friendly conversation. It annoyed Gnohm greatly. His master was a former cherub given the name Dhalis, a noble figure gifted in combat who served as Zarario's second-in-command. Not even Dhalis, however, could compete against the supreme beings known as the Primordial Angels.

Much like Gnohm and the rest, his name was not acquired just recently. As apostles created and named by Veldanava himself, they had served as great seraphim, attacking and destroying the evil demons of the world since their creation. From Gnohm's point of view, they were as good as gods.

Kagali's attitude was therefore unacceptable. *Deeno might have allowed it, but letting this behavior go unchecked would affect Zarario's status as well,* Gnohm thought. It was time to force the issue.

"I told you to stop getting carried away!!"

Kagali, sitting on a chair, was hit with a bolt of heavenly light—a high-speed mass of spiritual energy. Deeno didn't move. He didn't need to.

"Hohhhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Are we done talking now? You know, the only one being rude right now is you!"

"Yeah, he's right! Let's do it, Footman!"

So Kagali's valued friends, her ever-faithful clowns, stood up against Gnohm with all their might.

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The battle was as fierce as it was one-sided. Gnohm was a war-tested mystic under Zarario's command, with experience in multiple battles against the insectors. He had only just obtained physical form, but he felt perfectly comfortable with it—in fact, it felt like an upgrade in fighting ability for him. His existence points exceeded one million, and his magicule count was expanding even now, filling in his empty body.

He couldn't have been in better shape, and here he was pitted against Footman, someone better in combat than the Clayman of old. He wasn't gifted with intelligence, but his sheer power was unmatched, earning him an EP of 1.3 million. Now that all restrictions were removed from his behavior, he was demonstrating force nobody could've imagined back during his fight against Geld.

"Boooom!" Footman shouted as he punched Gnohm.

"Gahhh?!"

Gnohm was sent flying, his face caved in.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! Let's keep it going!"

He was no longer a threat to Footman, who kept punching, and punching, and punching. He grabbed him by the legs, swinging him around and throwing him into the air—then followed him upward, using the rebound to build his momentum as he plunged like a cannonball into Gnohm's back.

"Grrph..."

Then he grabbed Gnohm, slamming him into the ground. The force, enlarged by Footman's pressure on his back, was enough to shatter the earth underneath. Footman wasn't smart, but he had a brilliant sense for fighting. With the cells from Vega's body in him, Gnohm would be able to regenerate just fine, no matter how battered and shredded he became. Footman instinctively realized the pointlessness of a normal approach, so he instead opted for a style designed to build up damage and rob him of his stamina.

Gnohm, meanwhile, was puzzled. This Footman was far stronger than he imagined. *Y-you're kidding me! How can I, a general in the mystic force, be so inferior to this complete unknown?!*

Acquiring a body had greatly enhanced his fighting ability...and he was still being dominated. It was bewildering.

"What...what are you...?!"

"Me? I'm Footman. Footman the Angry Jester, part of the Moderate Jesters. Good to meet you!"

He gave Gnohm a condescending bow. He was totally relaxed, rankling his opponent. Then Teare came in with the follow-up.

"Hey, I'll give my name, too! I'm Teare. Teare the Teardrop Jester, from the Moderate Jesters! And once Footman is done, you better play with me, too!"

Her voice was cutesy and lilting, but it couldn't hide her evil intentions. She wasn't as strong as Footman, but she was still a menace. Her EP was over a million, and her unique skill was one nefarious finisher. For now, she wouldn't make any moves—but if Footman was defeated, that was when she'd head into the fray. She watched on, waiting eagerly for that moment.

Footman's onslaught began anew. Punching, kicking, slamming, he continued to torment Gnohm, like a cat chasing a mouse. Gnohm was growing panicked; Footman and Teare laughed jovially; and Kagali, watching all this, calmly analyzed the situation.

This is awful. At this rate, we have no future here. Even if we win this battle, this Gnohm guy is still just an underling. I know Teare's here for me, but I don't think there's much we can do.

Kagali took a glance at Yuuki.

And I doubt Teare could win against someone that Sir Yuuki couldn't...

Angels and demons can't be physically destroyed in the first place. If they had the right skill, it'd be a different story—but even if they killed Gnohm here, he'd be revived soon enough. The moment Vega's cells were incorporated in his body, it became all but physically impossible for him to die. And if he was likely to come back good as new anyway, this whole battle seemed pointless.

Defeat, in the end, was guaranteed. Kagali, knowing this, began to feel like a fool.

"Stop it, Footman. That's enough playing."

"Hoh? Are you sure, President?"

"Yes. We can't escape from here regardless. Maybe we can if we could destroy that big gate, but I just don't see a way."

If Deeno could be believed, this Celestial Palace was a closed world. Some sort

of key was required to pass through the gate, and Kagali had no way of acquiring it. They were at a dead end.

Gnohm laughed loudly. “Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha! That’s right—and if you understand that, it saves us all a lot of time. All you gotta do is work as hard as you can for us—all right, you tool? Do that, and I’ll treat you as well as any capable servant deserves.”

Footman had stopped moving, and Gnohm knew what that meant. Failing to defeat this adversary was beyond unexpected, but Kagali, his master, was an intelligent woman. As long as Kagali was under their control, Footman and Teare were just puppets, no threat to Gnohm’s authority at all.

Thinking that helped Gnohm regain his composure. But the next moment, he was frightened by the overwhelming presence of death that wrapped around him.

“It pains me to see this state of affairs, Gnohm. It was a mistake to ever grant you a name.”

At some point, the large gate had opened, revealing three figures. One of them was an outstanding beauty, with long, jet-black hair that seemed to be studded with stars from the night sky. It was Zarario, head of the Three Mystic Leaders.

He had returned home, keeping his presence hidden as he watched Gnohm speak and fight. The sheer ineptitude he showed was a staggering disappointment.

Pico and Garasha, his companions, began to walk toward Deeno.

“Hey, guys. Wrapped up your work?”

“Yeah. We come in, tired from a long day’s work, and you guys are fighting?”

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“It’s just like what you see,” Deeno said in a hushed voice, shrugging. Sensing he was in no mood to explain matters, Pico and Garasha turned their attention to Gnohm.

“S-Sir Zarario?! ”

“Keep my name out of your mouth.”

“N-no! Please, wait, this is all a misunderstanding—”

“You are mistaken. Everything I say is justice. It is right. There is no such thing as a misunderstanding.”

“B-but...”

Agreeing with him would be admitting his mistake. Denying it would be an act of open hostility toward Zarario. Gnohm was instantly in the greatest crisis of his life, and he couldn’t think of a way out.

“Compared to you—no, it’d be rude to even do that. She may be one of Feldway’s pickups, but even *she* is far more useful to me.”

Zarario’s words were plain, without a hint of emotional wavering. Gnohm still sensed something ominous in them. “Please, wait!” he shouted frantically...but it was too late. Zarario was a noble man, and he had no time for fools.

“You have committed the crime of misjudging your own worth. In light of the many years you’ve served me, I will forgive you—but only by erasing your personality.”

So came the cruel verdict.

Erase his personality?!



Kagali was amazed.

“No! Please, no. Forgive me, Zarario, please forgi—”

Zarario had not allowed him to state his name again.

“Jupiter Flash.”

A single flash of lightning danced from his fingertips, a defined bolt that seared Gnohm. His body was unharmed, but the heart core had been overwritten with a cataclysmic amount of data, re-initializing it with a new personality.

It was a staggering power to have. Zarario had not actually been seriously fighting in Ramiris’s labyrinth at all. And Kagali, witnessing this force, realized just how hopeless her situation was.

Well, that’s it. This isn’t the kind of opponent I could even begin to fight. I thought Deeno was a lot of trouble, but this man... He’s in the same class as Guy, or Milim...

It was of another dimension. And it was at that point when Kagali gave up all further resistance.

“So,” she drummed up the courage to ask, “what’s going to happen to me?”

If she was going to be executed, so be it—she just wanted to retain her pride until the end.

“Nothing’s going to happen. I suppose Gnohm was causing you some trouble, but don’t expect an apology for that.”

“What?”

The matter was so quickly resolved, it puzzled Kagali. But from Zarario’s point of view, he was telling the truth about everything.

Kagali had been picked up by Lieutenant Kondo, but Kondo himself was only carrying out Feldway’s will. She had been taken so she could create vessels for further physical incarnations, using a skill granted by Michael. That was now complete, and although it resulted in only nine bodies, they were all excellent specimens.

As transcendent beings, Zarario and his team needed to be choosy about which bodies they would incarnate into. Regular humans and monsters, much like the temporary bodies they were currently using, would disintegrate under the kind of power they wielded. It was a similar situation to back when the Primordial Angels fought each other, competing to get incarnated first.

These difficulties manifesting themselves in the material world made their invasion strategy far more difficult than it should have been. Then Kagali happened to be in the right place at the right time, and they came up with the idea of using the walking dead as a base. They'd need to experiment first, but the results were superb. They'd later stumble upon the idea of using Vega's body as well...but the side effects of that led directly to Gnohm's outburst. This body seemed to be altering Gnohm's very personality for the worse. Zarario chalked it up as a failure.

By comparison, the walking dead had no free will. And since Footman had clearly just proven his powers, it was decided that he'd be strong enough to withstand being possessed by Zarario and the others.

"Well, so much for the idea of using that man Vega. Gnohm was always a more prudent man than that. I can only assume the body was influencing him the wrong way."

Zarario muttered those words to no one in particular. To Kagali, they were food for thought. She replied to him without thinking, even though what he'd said needed no response.

"Vega's a greedy man. He symbolizes power itself. He practically lives off desire and ambition—and it enhances him."

"Oh?"

Uh-oh, she thought. But it was too late. Zarario was silently pressuring her into continuing.

"Vega is a very pure-minded man. He serves the strong and preys on the weak. It may be vile of him, but those are the convictions he lives by. And that's what makes him so powerful."

He never feels bad about losing. If he thinks he can't win, he won't hesitate to

become as servile as possible. If he can survive and take that experience to the next round, he'll see that as a win. That's why Vega has never felt like he lost. Any opponent who lets him go is a fool who he'll get even with someday, once he's able to beat him.

That was how Kagali saw Vega.

But in terms of greed, of course, Sir Yuuki is the clear winner.

Yuuki had a good grasp of Vega's personality, and he had the strength to take advantage of it. Kagali had to respect him for that.

"I see. So you're saying that this greed, this insatiable desire, has penetrated so deeply into Vega that it exists at the cellular level?"

Kagali didn't think she had explained herself well enough. Now she nodded at Zarario's precise analysis.

"Exactly. So I don't recommend propagating his cells for use in your projects, to be honest."

"I'll make a note of that," Zarario said, turning his eyes toward the castle. "But...yes, there's no making use of *him*, then. Follow me."

"Huh?"

Zarario was already walking briskly toward the castle. Gnohm, who barely registered with anyone here now, followed. Kagali wasn't sure what to do, but she decided that disobeying him was unwise.

"You all follow me, too," she told her comrades.

"Right away."

"Okay!"

So Kagali came after Zarario, accompanied by Footman and Teare. Yuuki also followed Kagali, as if that were perfectly natural of him.

The only ones left there were Deeno, Pico, and Garasha.

"So now what're we gonna do?"

"What *can* we do? It's none of our business."

“Yeah.”

“That’s what I sure think, yeah. But Pico, don’t try to ingratiate yourself with Deeno too much. I can’t have *you* turning out all weird on me, too.”

“Okay.”

“Hey, why’re you talking about me like I’m some kind of failure?”

“Well, aren’t you?”

“You’re the lamest angel ever. *Totally* a fallen angel!”

“Oh, shut up! I bet you think that sounds really cool, but shut up!”

Their shouting echoed across the small house they occupied.

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Upon stepping into the castle, Kagali was immediately impressed by how majestic it was. She thought she had expended every effort to make the castle she gave Clayman as luxurious as possible, but now she realized she hadn’t done nearly enough. That royal palace she lived in long ago looked like a hovel compared to here.

“It’s wonderful...”

“Of course it is. This is the home of Lord Veldanava.”

Kagali hadn’t expect a reply. It made her rethink her opinion of Zarario; maybe he was a lot more open to conversation after all.

She mulled this as they reached their destination—a room with two large cultivation tanks, looking a bit like a laboratory. Five people were surrounding one of the tanks, and floating inside of it was something human-shaped. Taking a closer look revealed a figure who looked like Vega’s identical twin.

The staff all turned upon noticing Zarario, bowing their heads. “Welcome back, Sir Zarario,” one of them said on their behalf. This man’s name was Dhalis—mystics were all genderless, strictly speaking, but he had been serving Zarario in a male form since way back from his time as a cherub.

Zarario gave him a light nod and immediately announced his business.

“The project’s hereby canceled.”

"Yes, sir."

Dhalis didn't ask why. Zarario's words were always correct, no matter what he said, and as they saw it, their only job was to follow them. This was why angels were consistently described as having little self-awareness, and why Gnohm was so easily influenced by Vega's cellular-level greed.

"I went through all the trouble of granting all of you names. Now I'm not sure the benefits were worth it."

"I'm very sorry, sir. Are we at fault in any way?"

"No, nothing like that. Surely I was just expecting too much."

Zarario always did his best at everything, but he didn't expect every single outcome to be perfect. He tried to accurately evaluate the results he was given, in the hopes they'd come in useful later on. Thus, no matter the outcome, he never had an emotional attachment to his projects.

Dhalis, meanwhile, was deathly afraid of disappointing Zarario. Despite his frustration, he meekly followed his words, ordering his staff members Gnohm and Berun to shut off the cultivation tank. Neece, Dhalis's fellow supervisor, had no objection to this, ordering her researchers Behm and Sonne to assist her. While Dhalis and Neece had defined genders, the same was not true for former throni like Gnohm. However, as Zarario mentioned, they had recently obtained names, which subsequently helped them grow distinctive personalities. They were becoming individuals now, although it was still a work in progress.

During one invasion Zarario wished he could take back, Cornu—a fellow Mystic Leader—lost control over some of his troopers because they were possessed by the locals. This was due, they believed, to a weak sense of ego among the angels. As a countermeasure, it was decided to grant names to the top management—but only the ex-angels among them. However, after several decades, the amount of change was still pretty scant, leading Zarario to believe that little further growth could be expected. That was why he was looking for a suitable vessel for himself to possess.

...I thought using Vega's body as a base for cultivation was feasible, but I had no idea even his cells were so corrupted. The only other way is to use the

walking dead we've created...

They had only nine of them, which was enough to provide bodies to the current top ranks. But Feldway was also planning to have Michael invoke Armageddon in order to boost their strength further. When it happened, instead of summoning a vast number of angels at once, they planned to concentrate their energies and create a handful of all-powerful seraphim. That's what the walking dead were for.

The people serving Zarario directly—even Dhalis, his right-hand man—were ranked only second in the hierarchy. There was a need to amass great power, the kind that couldn't be shaken by anything—and so the walking dead had to be reserved exclusively for the seraphim.

Well, fine. We don't know how many we can summon, so there's no need to be hasty. I'll discuss this matter with Feldway later.

Zarario was about to leave, but then he heard the sound of shattering glass. The cultivation tank was destroyed.

“Wait! Wait, god dammit! How dare you rip my arm off like that! It’s you, right? I’m taking it back!”

With the tank put offline, Vega was awake and on the move. His target: Gnohm, with Vega’s cells inside of him.

“Hng... Grrrrrrhahaahh!!”

Before anyone could stop him, Vega grabbed Gnohm with an arm. That was all it took for the fusion to begin. In a scant few seconds, Gnohm was fully absorbed into Vega’s body.

“Oooh! This is delicious! This power... It’s coursing through me!”

Vega was overjoyed. Gnohm contained an enormous amount of magicules, and now they were boosting his own power.

“Kah-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is perfect! I could take on any of you bastards right now—*Ooh?!*”

But his ego trip ended when his eyes met Zarario’s.

“I’ve heard about you. Which will it be—will you be a grown man and

befriend us, or will you fight right here?"

Vega didn't need long to decide.

"Heh-heh... Sorry. Got a little carried away. I'm takin' your orders, of course."

It was impressively pathetic of him. Zarario expected it, so he didn't show any dismay. *I thought so*, was how he took it.

Losing Gnohm was an unfortunate event, but he had helped further strengthen Vega. In the battle to come, they didn't need a vast army—they needed a few exceptional talents. The more allies like *this* they had, the better it'd be for them all. Besides, Gnohm had just lost his sentience, lowering his value as a useful pawn. If anything, they were better off feeding his power to Vega. It was a heartless move against someone who had served him for eons, but those were Zarario's thoughts on the subject.

And if that was Zarario's will, nobody else had any complaints. Vega's bout of violence was forgiven, and they all treated him as a close friend.

Kagali, watching all this, couldn't help but feel exasperated. Vega's attitude was terrible, but it was hard to understand why Zarario was willing to tolerate it so readily. He didn't act like Yuuki one bit, so she had trouble guessing his thoughts. Yuuki, at least, fully understood the danger Vega presented, and handled him well. But Zarario...

Does he even think Vega's dangerous at all? I don't think so. Is that just how far above everyone else he is in strength?

That was how Kagali saw the situation, and she was right. Zarario didn't even see Vega, as he stood now, as a threat. Those who served him were little more than slightly useful tools in his mind. But that wasn't arrogance. Zarario, after all, wasn't mistaken when he thought that. He had a knack for correctly assessing information, something far removed from arrogance. It was far too incomprehensible for Kagali to understand, though.

"Hey. That you, Kagali? Man, and Yuuki's with ya, too, huh? The gang's all here, ain't it? Let's have some fun while we're together, eh?"

Vega, noticing Kagali, called out to her. There was no way she could beat him; if Teare and Footman double-teamed him, the result would be a coin flip, and

Yuuki was still deprived of his free will. For now, it was best to just play along with him.

"Yeah, I guess so. Friends, right? We're all in a pretty different set of circumstances right now, after all."

"You bet. But, hey, where are we?"

"They call it the Celestial Palace. I don't think there's any escaping from here, so we've got no choice but to obey these people."

"Yeah? Well, no point tryin' to escape. I'm sure they're gonna need my power anyways. Might as well enjoy it, huh?"

Kagali was jealous of how naïvely undeterred Vega was. Zarario didn't seem to want anything to do with Yuuki, but she couldn't guess what those controlling him were after. Dead Birthday could be her ticket out of here, but she couldn't really be sure of that yet. A forbidden curse that required tens of thousands of dead bodies to work wasn't something you could organize overnight.

I need to find a way to make us seem useful. I'll abase myself as much as it takes if it lets us survive.

She had come this far. There was no possible way they'd abandon their hopes at this point. Right now, surrender was the name of the game. They were prepared to throw away their pride...and that resolve would soon be put to the test. Michael and Feldway were back.

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The center of the castle housed an audience chamber. The throne, however, was empty. No one had sat on it for a long time.

Chairs were lined up across the hall, people sitting wherever they pleased. Michael was seated in the one closest to the throne, Feldway standing next to him and glaring at the rest of the audience. Deeno's group was here—this was one event not even he could skip out on—and the newly-born walking dead had also been taken inside.

And that wasn't all. Obela, along with her close associate, had also been summoned on short notice.

This assistant's name was Ohma, and it was the only close one Obela had left after the others were killed in battle against the cryptids. As one can surmise from this, Obela was often sent over to the bloodiest, most grueling battles. The transformation to mystic beast had cost Ohma both eyes, but in their place was a single eye that could perceive everything. Its mouth was also visibly stitched shut, leaving it to communicate via telepathy instead of words. It was a scary sight, but it was also a former cherub and a tested warrior who had served Obela for ages upon ages.

Feldway had taken in more than just Obela and Ohma. There were also insectors, foes he had fought a near-eternal war with—but now they were building an alliance. Zeranus the Insect Lord was the leader of this group; he was accompanied by his closest officers, the so-called Twelve Insect Masters, although they only numbered eight at the moment.

One of the missing members was Razul, guardian deity of the west. Under Zeranus's orders, he had invaded the key world over two thousand years ago, only to betray his lord and become an ally of Granville in his Hero days. He was a noble, proud insector, but he met his end at the hands of Shion and Ranga. Another absent member was Minaza, an insect general sent by Zeranus to assist Emperor Ludora. He had promised Minaza half of the world as compensation, but—by cruel chance—she, too, was defeated by Shion.

The remaining two missing members were still very young, born more recently to serve as replacements, but they were currently absent without leave. One of them was a direct descendant of Zeranus, so a top-secret search order was out for him...but he was still missing at this time.

However, the eight Insect Masters present were all capable of fighting on par with awakened demon lords, just as Razul and Minaza had been. Among them was Zeth, chief insectoid general and another relation of Zeranus. His strength set him apart from the others, and he and Zarario were close rivals, often dueling each other with deadly force.

The strength of the other seven was largely equal. There was Beethop, who bore both bee-and grasshopper-like traits; Mujika, who looked like a giant humanoid centipede; Tishorn, resembling a mantis; Torun, a drone beetle-like insectoid with dragonfly-esque wings; Abalt, with spider-like limbs on his back;

Sarill, a poisonous scorpion; and Pirioid, as beautiful as an antlion.

These strong figures all stood there, not bothering to sit as they showed off their strange and unusual characteristics. The audience chamber was quite large, but so oppressive were their figures that they made the space seem smaller. Kagali was in awe, but remained silent, ready to watch events unfold around her.

Once everyone was assembled, the meeting with Michael began.

"Thank you for coming," Feldway began. "With Ludora's disappearance, Sir Michael is now free—and we have also successfully banished Velgrynd, the first step toward resurrecting Lord Veldanava. With this, our plan is—"

Zarario chose this moment to interrupt. Normally he wouldn't dare interfere with his boss like this, but it was a matter of deep urgency.

"Sir Feldway, if you please, I think there are some differences in perception here."

Feldway was in a festive mood, but Zarario made the smile disappear from his face. "...What is it?" he asked, audibly peeved.

"Velgrynd is still alive... And what's more, it is thanks to her that Cornu fell."

"...?!"

Even Zeranus's face twitched a bit.

Feldway frowned, intensely displeased. This new obstacle in his way, the demon lord Rimuru, was proving quite irksome, but overall the plan had been going well. Guy Crimson and Rimuru Tempest would be obstacles, yes, but Veldanava's resurrection was all but imminent. Of the three remaining True Dragons, they had obtained the factors of Velgrynd. Two remained, but plans were underway to procure them. If Zarario was telling the truth, however, it was a major snag in the project.

That, and as if to confirm his words, Cornu's presence was notably absent. He could be found neither here, in the Celestial Palace, nor in the Mystic Palace.

"You're sure about that?"

"Yep, it's true. Cornu's gone, and the plan's a big failure. We had no choice

but to retreat and stuff. I didn't think your plan would fail like that, but I guess it's all thanks to you not delivering in the end, huh?"

This was Deeno speaking up, not Zarario. The way he so casually shifted the blame showed just how quick-witted he could be.

Zarario sat in silent agreement. He didn't appreciate Deeno's opinion very much, but there was no need to outwardly deny it. He may be fair-minded and strict with himself, but he could be flexible that way. And with that reaction from both of them, Feldway had no choice but to stop doubting.

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This unexpected turn of events made Feldway understandably cranky. But, his mind still clear, he quickly came up with a countermeasure.

The most important thing right now was to secure the True Dragons. Their draconic factors were essential to revive Veldanava, so that naturally took top priority. Velgrynd's was already in hand, fortunately. But while her being back in this world wasn't the worst possible outcome, it was both unexpected and very distressing.

We were careless. I retrieved her skills because she was going to disappear anyway, but the override circuit vanished with her. I banished her into the far reaches of space, so she'd never bother us even if she was revived, but now I have another headache of an enemy to deal with...

Velgrynd, at the time, had lost most of her power and her draconic factors as well. She was on the verge of vanishing, and that was why Michael took Raguel, Lord of Relief, from her. There was no way he could've predicted that it would lead directly to Cornu's destruction.

Well, so be it. As long as Veldanava is revived, the rest doesn't matter. Velgrynd can be left alone. Let's add Velzard to our side first.

This time, he'd be careful not to let her disappear. He'd make her a full-fledged ally, leaving her with some degree of free will. It'd be a good

countermeasure against Velgrynd, and it could be useful for capturing Veldora, too.

But once Velzard was in their ranks, what next? They had planned to go for Veldora at once, but they may need to rethink this.

If even Velgrynd is against us, do we need to shore up our fighting strength? I thought we could get by with just me and Michael, but we can never be too careful.

Deeno had just told him he failed to execute in the very end. So Feldway decided to make some major changes to his initial plan.

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"In that case," said Feldway, "I think we will need to take immediate action. For starters, let's take in Velzard. Instead of banishing her to the far reaches of space, why don't we recruit her as an ally and make use of her that way?"

Michael nodded in agreement. "It is the only way to go. If we eliminate as many uncertainties as possible and conduct the final ceremony once the three True Dragons are taken in, that would put us on much more solid footing."

Velzard had received the ultimate skill Gabriel, Lord of Endurance, from Veldanava, which meant her override circuit was still active. It'd be possible to add her to their side in a completely safe and secure manner.

The problem was what came next. Michael eyed the audience, appraising them.

"I did not think it was necessary at first, but we'll need to provide physical bodies for everyone. Do that, and we will be able to handle anything that arises."

"Good point. Let's put Veldora on the back burner and finish up as much prep work as we can, then."

Feldway and Michael had reached their conclusion. Zarario, sensing this, continued his report.

"I have one other thing to say about that."

"And that is?"

"Our attempts at using Vega over there to create body vessels has ended in failure. The only sure way we have of creating vessels is via the walking dead."

"Hmm. So we have nine, then? It'll be difficult to decide who gets them..."

Zeranus spoke up as Feldway pondered over this.

"You may do whatever you like with those walking dead. We have no need of them."

In times of need, insectors could create a new body by coagulating the magicules inside of them. That was what enabled them to travel to other worlds. Having spare bodies would be nice, but it wasn't essential for them. Such had been the case with Minaza. She had assumed a physical form after taking in matter from the other world, but the insect creatures she summoned shared her same properties. Actually crossing into another world was extremely difficult, but once someone like Minaza pulled off a successful jump, they were fully able to exercise their vast and powerful abilities at their destination.

The "world crossing" problem had already been solved for this project. It was only natural for Zeranus to give up his right to the walking dead.

"Zarario and Obela of the Three Mystic Leaders are givens, then. Shall we fill the remaining seven slots with our other top leaders?"

"I have something to say about that."

"You may speak freely."

"Thank you."

It was times like these when Deeno marveled at how serious-minded Zarario was.

"Unlike us Primordials," Zarario began, "those at the cherub level or below are too weak-willed. They were able to fight up to now through sheer willpower, but in the war ahead, I fear we cannot expect them to contribute very much to our offense."

“Mm. So what do you suggest?”

“Well, why don’t we leave their struggle for survival in the hands of nature, I say?”

Zarario had basically given up on his entire staff. The same was true for Cornu’s team—the group that had their minds taken over by humans in the world they invaded. Now people were being influenced by Vega’s *cells*, of all things, to go on insane rampages. Offering such a precious vessel to people like that wouldn’t make them of much use in the battles ahead.

“We still have many obstacles in our way—Velgrynd, Veldora, and the demon lords are all alive and well. Even those damned demons will be a nuisance. In the face of these threats, sending in mere tools who do nothing more than follow orders is—”

“Worthless?”

“Yes.”

Feldway nodded at Zarario’s hypothesis. He had the same deep-seated concerns.

Yes... What matters the most is the strength of someone’s will. Without that kind of burning desire, it’s meaningless to give anyone an ultimate skill. Conversely...

On the other hand, no matter how strong someone’s sense of self was, giving them the ultimate enchantment Alternative would ensure against betrayal for good.

Feldway looked at Michael. Their eyes met. Apparently he had other opinions.

“Is something on your mind?”

“Well, I was thinking I might call forth my seraphim with Armageddon once it was ready, then have them possess the bodies...”

“That works as well, but we don’t know how many angels will be called or what kind of will they’ll possess, do we?”

“There would be seven at the most. But we will not know what kind of will these seraphim have until they are summoned.”

If the walking dead were to be possessed by seraphim, that alone would likely make them more powerful than an awakened demon lord. But, again, their strength of will was a sticking point. It took many, many years for the people in this room to firmly establish their own wills, so trying to put a force together too quickly was pointless—such was Feldway's outlook.

"Interesting," Zeranus said. "If you think there will be too many of these seraphim, I or my children could always eat them up for you."

"Hmm..."

Feldway thought about it. They were in an alliance with the insectors now, but only because they shared a common interest. Once either side achieved their objectives, chances were good that they'd return to being enemies. Allowing such an untrusted partner to strengthen themselves gave Feldway pause, but if they wanted to destroy this world, it seemed like an effective strategy.

"Let's hold off on that for now," he advised. "We can think about it when the opportunity arises."

"Very well. I will not force the issue," said Zeranus.

That was enough about seraphim. They returned to the question of whom to put in their vessels.

"In that case, we should reserve these vessels for Zarario and the others."

"That sounds good to me. Feldway's right when he says that it would eliminate any uncertainty."

"I have no objections," Zeranus added.

Both sides were in agreement.

"We'll adopt Zarario's proposal, then. Is that all right with you?"

Feldway posed the question to his own staff. He phrased it as a question, but the decision was already made. Anyone who objected would be branded as too timid, so Dhalis and his colleagues had no right to argue with it.

So it was settled. Zarario and the others would possess the walking dead—and, at the same time, release the wills that resided in those bodies.

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Once that was decided, it was time to begin the incarnation ceremony. Zarario and five members of his staff would receive bodies, along with Obela and Ohma. The process of installing these egos into the walking dead would be handled by Kagali.

There's one extra, then? What are they going to do with that?

Just when Kagali was wondering this, her eyes met Feldway's.

"Ah, Kagali, right? You must be released from your thrall now that Kondo is dead, but what are your plans going forward?"

Here we go, she thought, tensing up. "Do you think you could let me go?" she cautiously asked, unsure how much she'd be allowed to say. The response was beyond unexpected.

"Certainly. Once this ceremony is over, I don't mind at all."

"Huh?"

"Really, your job was done once you crafted the walking dead who'll serve as our vessels. You've contributed more than enough to the cause, so if that's what you want, I could return you to the surface."

You're kidding.

Kagali was confused. At best, she expected to be locked up for life; at worst, she expected a swift execution. But now she was being let go? Feldway didn't seem like he was lying, and lying about this would just lead to pointless trouble for him. Clearly, Kagali was useless otherwise—she lacked the power to do anything else. She saw no reason why he would try to trick her otherwise, so she concluded that Feldway must be telling the truth.

With that in mind, she stepped further onto thin ice.

"And do you think it's possible to release the rule over Sir Yuuki and release him along with me?"

Michael stepped up to answer.

"That I cannot permit. The ultimate skill Mammon, Lord of Greed, as possessed by Yuuki Kagurazaka, is extremely valuable to me."

To Michael, Yuuki's fighting ability didn't matter as much as that skill. The idea of releasing him was dead in the water. Kagali, understanding that, decided to stop wishing for more.

So what'll I do? Is running the right choice?

"If it's just you and those two," Feldway said, "I'd gladly take you down there. However, I'm sure the key world is in a state of chaos right now. I have a deep-seated hatred for everybody on that planet, you see. And I don't need the death of all living things to achieve my goal, but I'm sure the flames will burn high and hot as we fight against those who defy us. But that is just the punishment of the gods. Those who Lady Veldanava loved are now betraying that love. They need to pay the price."

It sounded so matter-of-fact, but it sent shivers down Kagali's spine. When he talked about flames burning high, he meant that the ravages of war would spread across the entire world. Even if she fled there, would it be safe at all? It didn't seem so. Yuuki was still in their grasp, and if all the utter powerhouses here went on the rampage, there would be no safe sanctuary left on the planet.

We just wanted to create a world where we could be happy. But given how things are, hoping for something like that would just be in vain. The important thing right now is to survive...and to do that, I need power.

It may have been a foolish decision. But it seemed like the only correct answer to Kagali at the time. So she made the wish.

"Please give me one of the walking dead. And, if you don't mind, please give me permission to house a seraphim in my body..."

She wanted to leave her fragile body behind and be reborn as a walking dead. That, plus the seraphim, would give her the kind of strength she wanted. The strength she *needed*. As long as she had that, nothing more would be taken from her.

Her words had no chance of convincing anyone...and yet, nobody refuted them. Deeno looked dumbfounded but said nothing. Zarario and Obela would obey whatever Michael decided, and the insectors didn't care either way; they had no interest in the weak.

As all these sides reacted to her, Michael nodded. "Hmm. Interesting. But I will not tolerate betrayal. Accept my ultimate enchantment, and I will grant your wish."

"I swear that I will not betray you... And I accept your dominion over me."

So the contract was sealed.

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Installing self-awareness in the walking dead is akin to waking up their original personality. In some cases, the strongest will prevails; in others, they form a mixture and create a wholly new ego. Not even Kagali could say how it would turn out—as Teare and Footman demonstrated, it's very hard to aim for any particular personality.

Would Kagali's ego triumph over the one in that body? It was a crapshoot, even for her. But she was still resolved to gain that power for herself. So, after awakening these eight bodies, she conducted the same ritual on the one she would occupy—and with that, she transferred herself from her artificial body to the walking dead.

So the ritual was completed. And the results...

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Zarario woke up. Realizing he was surrounded by the armor of actual flesh, he could feel how great a force he'd be able to wield in the key world.

Obela woke up. She prided herself on her noble will, completely impervious to any challenge, and she had just proved it.

When Dhalis was just about to awaken, he realized that another personality resided within him. His name was Tornewot, and he was a man of ambition, apparently. Dhalis could sense that this man's warrior skills were becoming his

own, and he was sure it would make him far more of a presence than before.

Neece woke up. She was stronger now, as ordered, but nothing had changed personally for her. Her strong sense of self was alive and well.

Ohma woke up. Its indomitable will was intact, but now it had internalized a being with similar sensibilities. The name of this being was Zero, it seemed, but now it was Ohma's flesh and blood.

Orca and Alia woke up. Alia's had a wizard's knowledge, Orca that of a warrior—and with both egos coexisting in the same body, they were reborn as a magical warrior. There was not a shred of the ego of Sonne, Zarario's servant, left in that body.

Arius woke up. His unique skill Murderer was still there. He never forgot his grudge against Damrada for killing him, and now he had resurrected himself, seeking even more strength.

Mai Furuki woke up. There was no way she could die. In the other world—the one she used to live in, not this one—she left behind a sickly younger brother. She swore to herself that she'd come home for him someday.

The eight of them had awoken. One was left...but she was still in a deep sleep.

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Kagali had a dream. One that brought back old, cherished memories. From back when she was the demon lord Kazalim? No. It was of a much, much older time, back when she was still a little girl.

She could no longer remember the name she went by at that time, but she was a happy young princess. The nation her family ruled was founded on the site where the high humans had once built their great civilization. A large river flowed through it; the forest grew thick; and fertile plains spread all the way to the horizon, making it a natural utopia. This bounty—along with the ruins of the ancient, highly advanced empire of magic that once existed there—made this country into a superpower of its own, a paradise for the elven race.

But all too suddenly, her father—the king—went mad. Kagali remembered him as an extraordinarily kind and gentle ruler, praised and lauded as the wise king of the high elves, but one day, he suddenly transformed into someone

different. He changed his own name, calling himself the sorcerous dynast Jahil.

Her memories were not as clear after that. Jahil proved to be a brutal despot, exploiting his people and thinking about nothing but his own prosperity. He conducted a number of vast, failed experiments, creating all sorts of nightmares for his people.

Kagali was one of his victims; born a high elf, she was stripped of her powers, killed, then resurrected as a walking dead. All she was left with was a hideous appearance and the name Kazalim. Her beautiful looks were gone, and now she was doomed to be a cursed figure her whole life. Rotting flesh covered her bones. It was dry, at least, and therefore didn't stink of the dead.

Few people knew Kagali's secret. She was so saddened by it that she began to hide herself behind a mask.

"Why are you doing this to me?!"

"Geh-heh-heh-heh! Because it's fun. Why, you should be rejoicing! Tens of thousands of our people had to die to bring you back to life! Har-har-har-har!!"

It was a nightmare. Her father was so kind to her once—why did he turn into such a ghoul? But this was her reality, and there was no point lamenting over it.

"Father! I don't care what you do to me. But at least spare a thought for your citizens, as you did in the past..."

"Silence! Are you here to mock me as well? I knew having a daughter would do me no good. I will not make the same foolish mistake he did. I have instilled a sense of loyalty to me inside of you...but you still cannot be trusted! Kazalim, from now on, you will live as a man, do you understand?"

It was an absolute order. Kagali's pleas had no chance of reaching Jahil's ears. Everything was decided for her. At least she wasn't killed—or, really, the fact she had already been killed and turned into a faithful puppet meant that she was too useful a tool to be discarded.

At that moment, Kagali internally said her goodbyes to the father inside her mind. So the nightmare continued.

The glory of the arrogant emperor Jahil seemed like it would never end, but

then the day came. He had committed the ultimate sin—antagonizing the Dragon Princess Milim, hoping to make her into a puppet as well. Soma, the capital of this superpower, was reduced to ruins overnight, and Jahil himself was never found.

He was presumed dead, since it didn't seem that anyone could possibly survive that flash of lethal light. Instead of dwelling on him, Kagali's mind turned toward those more important to her. The kind female attendants who always watched over her. The knights who accompanied her after she became a warrior. The people she loved, living out their happy lives. Thinking of all those she loved, she invoked a forbidden spell.

She had learned the theory behind Dead Birthday thanks to becoming one of its test subjects. Thus, she had no problem completing the spell—and this was how Teare, Footman, and Clayman were born. They were an adorable set of children, and Kagali named them herself.

Then she learned a fact she preferred not knowing. Walking dead that were born via Dead Birthday were not inherently doomed to be ugly. Only Kagali had been made that way—on purpose. Jahil, her hated father, had taken away her beauty for the sole purpose of making her suffer.

But it was far too late to do anything. Kagali's appearance was the result of a curse, and there was no way to reverse it. But the children Kagali created did not leave her alone to suffer. They, too, hid their true faces behind masks, sharing in her suffering. *I'm not alone*, she thought—and that planted within her an earnest hope for survival. And before long, Kagali's four-member family was joined by the elves that managed to survive the attack.

We can bring this country of ours back to what it was. And we'll make it into a land where everyone can keep a smile on their face...

That was the wish Kagali secretly resolved to have come true. But it turned out to be a faint, fleeting dream. The land was attacked by a Chaos Dragon, one that contaminated it for good, and Kagali's followers were all cursed and transformed into dark elves.

Kagali took this opportunity to act like she, too, had been cursed. She and her children were walking dead, making them impervious to any such curse...but

she lamented, over and over, about how she was different from everyone else. Hiding her face with a mask was a blessing to her along those lines, ensuring nobody noticed the difference, but it only served to make her sadder. Having Teare and the others around was a great relief to her.

After that, she and her family abandoned their homeland and fled. Their followers joined them, leaving all their unfulfilled memories behind.

They all spent a long period wandering the land before finally discovering their next safe haven.

Once life had settled down for everyone, Kagali decided to visit her homeland again. She needed to recover the assorted treasures that were left behind, but most of all, she just wanted to see the land for herself once more. The city may be in ruins, but in her memories, it was still shining as beautifully as always. She felt a clean break from the past was necessary—something she could make use of for the future.

So Kagali set off. When she reached her destination, she came across a man lying on the ground.

"Oh, it's you, huh? If you were watchin' over this land, you coulda lifted a finger to help me, couldn't ya?"

"Don't be ridiculous. How could I ever defend us against that evil dragon?"

"Ah, you're bein' too modest. From my point of view, you're just as much of a menace, but... Owww..."

The man's name was Thalion Grimwald, the Hero who finally chased the Chaos Dragon away from this land. Unfortunately, his fight against this dragon had brought him to the brink of death.

"Take it easy. I'll cast some healing magic—"

"Don't waste yer breath. The Chaos Dragon's attacks are all cursed—my wounds ain't never gonna heal. I had a few healing tricks up my sleeve, too, but, ahhh, you see how well they worked."

Thalion's body had in fact been blown off from the chest down. It was a wonder he was still alive. But he still had the wherewithal to laugh about it,

making the strength of his spirit clear for the world to see.

"I got a message for you. Tell everyone that I beat the Chaos Dragon here. I died in style, the way a Hero needs to."

"Heh... What do you mean by that? Here... Before you die, I have a proposal for you. There's a chance I'll be able to use my evil magic to give you another lease on life. It may cost you your memory—you may very well end up like me, in fact—but are you interested in giving it a try?"

Kagali took off her mask as she spoke, revealing her ugliness for the Hero to behold. But Thalion just gave that visage a half smile.

"Well, look at you, huh? You got some nice aspects to ya after all. Sylvia would kill me if I died in a place like this. An offer like yours...well, how can I say no to that, eh?"

"Are you sure? I'm a cursed man... And if I'm going to be persecuted either way, I'll choose evil over good any day. If you became a Hero to protect everyone...well, I'll become a demon lord to do that, all right? That's what I'm ready to do. And you realize this evil magic will also make you my puppet, don't you?"

"Aw, it's fine, it's fine. It'll be fun! I'm a free spirit, y'know? You ain't gonna control me that easily. Besides, Heroes and demon lords are always fated to get intertwined with each other 'n all that. That's probably why we ran into each other, huh?"

"Heh... All this nonsense, in your condition. You're a real strange one. Well, all right, then. Be my puppet, for all I care!"

So the negotiations were concluded. Kagali took Thalion's words as a joke, but he was telling the truth... And as a result of her passing whim, Thalion became a walking dead, surviving this ordeal.

And that was the moment when both Kazalim the Curse Lord and Laplace the Wonder Jester were born.

A lot of other things happened afterward. Kagali secured a domain, fighting fierce battles with assorted human and demi-human races...but, overcoming all the persecution, Kazalim the Curse Lord rose to prominence. Recognized as a

demon lord, she began to steadily expand her powers—and along the way, she backed Carillon the Beast Master and Frey the Sky Queen's entry to the demon lord class, establishing a powerful alliance with them both.

Everything couldn't have gone better. It went too well, in fact. So much so that she was completely unaware of the conceited pride growing in her heart.

Kagali's next target was an up-and-coming figure by the name of Leon, governing over some rural backwater and claiming to be a demon lord. He needed to be taught a lesson about where he stood, and Kagali also wanted to bring him under her wing.

The first time she caught sight of him, Kagali grew jealous. This man, calling himself a demon lord, was beyond beautiful. Thanks to being disfigured by her demonic father, Kagali had struggled every day of her life, robbed of even her gender...but here was Leon, a man more beautiful than any woman. The sight dulled her thoughts—and then she made the mistake of overestimating her abilities.

With a single strike from Leon, Kagali's physical body was lost. She was forced to stalk the land with only her spiritual body once more; it was a miracle that she didn't just fade away. She had her grudges, but more than that was a single wish—one that helped her cling to life.

Using what little of her Curse Lord power remained, she patiently took the time to prepare her own resurrection. In a daze, she completed her final summoning—but failed to occupy the one she summoned. Her plan failed, and no physical body would be hers. All that remained was to perish for good...

“...Help me. You have to help me. I don’t want anything else taken from me. All I wanted was to live happily with my friends. Why am I the only one who has to go through this...?”

She begged for help, wailing about her misfortune, but nobody reached out to help her. She wasn't alone, but still no one would lend a hand. It had been an arduous path to walk. Her ideals seemed to be far, far away now, even as Kagali was obliged to be a leader for everyone. She wasn't allowed to whine about her lot in life; instead, she constantly had to keep her head pointed forward.

So Kagali had given up hope that she would ever be saved. All she could trust

were herself and the companions she loved. That's how she had lived her life.

But that boy, Yuuki Kagurazaka...

"All right, sure. You look pretty tired, so just rest inside me for now."

"...?!"

Kagali, this monster nobody wanted to save, had tried to take his life a moment ago. But now he was reaching out to her.

A few years later, Kagali was still resting inside Yuuki, providing him counsel and advice. Her unique skill Schemer still worked even in her current soul form, fortunately, but she nonetheless had to deal with a lot of fearsome opponents.

Maribel Rozzo, in particular, was a major headache. Yuuki was a genius strategist, and Kagali was confident enough about her own ingenuity...but despite the two of them conspiring together, outwitting Maribel proved extremely difficult. They were outmatched in every possible way, from finances to human resources. They had obtained an organization that allowed them to be free, but it was Maribel who had the final say over whether they'd be free at all.

"I gotta kill her. I have to do it sometime, or our plan will never go anywhere."

"That's for sure. That devil of a girl's the biggest obstacle we have."

An economic battle cannot be won off one's pure fighting ability. And Maribel was still a young girl. If she grew to adulthood, they wouldn't be able to compete with her in any aspect at all.

A few years after Kagali and Yuuki resolved themselves to this, the times began to change. It wasn't caused by the birth of the demon lord Rimuru, that weird slime, but by Kagali obtaining an artificial body. Yuuki had kept his promise all along.

And what's more...

This is how I originally looked...

Yuuki's kindness made her want to cry tears of joy, but Kagali kept it cool on the outside. She tried to maintain the manly speaking voice she had nurtured, but Laplace stopped her. He was teasing her about it, but deep down, he was

concerned for her.

"I appreciate this, Boss," she said—and she sincerely meant it.

With her new physical body, Kagali was excited to get a few good meals (plus dessert) in her. The cream puffs, in particular, were just exquisite. Laughing with her friends, enjoying fun times together—how happy could she be?

But the happiness didn't last long. Clayman died, and both Kagali and her colleagues realized that once again, a valued friend had been taken from them. They had to conquer the world, for the sake of their own happiness. And once they ruled the world, they'd lead it the right way.

Clayman, you were so foolish, so arrogant...and so charming. I'm sorry you had to go through all of that. Rest well now and watch over us. We'll make our ambitions come true, I promise you.

Kagali wasn't on the side of good, but her faction wasn't evil, either. They were...moderate. And that's why she thought she could create a world that provided happiness for everyone.

Trusting in this fact, she continued on. When they defeated Maribel, Kagali's true identity was revealed by the demon lord Rimuru, she fled to the Empire, and then her mind was taken over by Lieutenant Kondo. It was enough to break Kagali's heart, but she couldn't afford to give up now.

"I swear that I will not betray you... And I accept your dominion over me."

It was a contract, and it had to be followed. She received a great favor, and now it had to be repaid. And Kagali was willing to do whatever it took.

And so she, too, woke up. She had abandoned her fragile, artificial homunculus body and gained one of the walking dead's vessels, making her stronger and far more beautiful than her days as the demon lord Kazalim.

Thus all nine of the walking dead were reborn. But these were only the first few steps.

When Kagali finally awoke, the last of her peers to do so, the first thing she saw was Feldway leading the group that was bringing back Velzard. Michael had already taken Velzard's draconic factors from her, hoping to use them for

further evolution—but before that, he invoked Armageddon in order to implant the resulting seraphim in Kagali and the others. She could sense the strength of Michael’s will; he was completely unwilling to make any compromises.

Seven seraphim had been successfully summoned. They’d be installed in those walking dead who weren’t from angels to start with, and Kagali was naturally part of them. She, Teare, Footman, Vega, Orca/Alia, Arius, and Mai Furuki would each receive one.

Extraordinary powers struggled against each other within their bodies, remodeling the vessels as they did. All of them, with the exception of Vega, were reborn once more as mystic angels.

And by the time this had happened, five months had passed since Kagali first arrived at the Celestial Palace.

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At the audience chamber of this vast castle above the heavens, lined with pillars of chalky white, the very air seemed to be filled with a divine spirit. The space was filled with angels, each bearing wings of pure white; they had yet to gain physical bodies, but they still couldn’t wait to invade the planetary surface. Lacking their own will, they were motionless as statues, their presence giving the chamber a solemn feel.

There was a circle of chairs up front, with those who existed above these angels—all the reborn, Kagali included—sitting on them. Having gained far more power than before, the aura they exuded was amplified up to even greater levels. They had been called here because Michael was about to awaken. He was still asleep when Kagali woke up with the seraphim in her body...but his continued absence told the audience that things were apparently behind schedule.

Kagali, with nothing else better to do, turned her attention to the angels behind her.

The way it was explained to her, the only limit to what you could summon at once was the total amount of energy you could expend on it. Summoning an army a million strong was the normal custom, but after calling forth seven seraphim at once, they couldn’t expect this kind of quantity.

Still, the quality was impressive. All the low-level rabble of angel-dom had been eliminated, and this force consisted entirely of the middle and upper classes. There were around a thousand Dominion angels, three thousand Virtue-class, and six thousand Power types. Not having physical bodies, they couldn't tap into their full strength, but despite that, even the Powers enjoyed combat ability on an over-A rank. They could remain active for just seven days, but that was more than enough to turn the world into a wasteland.

...But the demon lords could probably handle them, couldn't they?

That was Kagali's impression.

"This won't be enough, will it? If this is all we have, it'll be hard to defeat even a single one of the forces opposing us."

Kagali's under-her-breath muttering still echoed in this quiet hall. She didn't expect an answer, but she was surprised to hear one.

"Yeah, well, I didn't have anyone serving me, but all the other demon lords have a whole bunch of strong guys, y'know? Honestly, I dunno if we could take down even a single member of the Octagram."

Kagali looked at her sudden conversational partner. "Well! I never thought I'd agree with you about something, Deeno. But..." Her voice went to a whisper. "You know, I had no idea you worked for Sir Feldway until now."

"Like I could've told you," he flatly responded. "I'm a Monitor, you realize. I'm supposed to hide my true identity and be as inconspicuous as possible. And lemme set one other thing straight—I'm *former* friends with Feldway. I don't work for him."

Deeno's Monitor duties had driven him to even infiltrate the Octagram. The reason? So he could keep an eye on things in their world. He, Pico, and Garasha—the three fallen angels—were on a special mission to investigate the world of man. They were tasked with monitoring the human race so it would never be destroyed by the will of Veldanava.

If mankind grew too strong, it was the job of the demon lords, led by Guy, to put them back in their place. The Heroes, meanwhile, served as a deterrent to keep the demon lords from getting carried away—and it was Deeno and his

team's job to ensure the fated relationship between demon lords and Heroes was working correctly.

With Deeno taking a prominent, attention-grabbing position as demon lord, Pico and Garasha were busily conducting their investigations while staying out of the public eye. Deeno also had another, hidden role—to conceal the other two's presence, so it'd be easier for them to move around.

Now that Veldanava was gone and un-resurrected, though, they had nobody to report to. So Deeno was just chilling out, enjoying life as a demon lord and talking about stuff like this openly, with no intention of hiding it at all. Kagali wondered why he was even here, and it must have been obvious from her facial expression, because Garasha gave her a little laugh.

"This guy, you know... He kinda owes a lot to Feldway. If it's him asking, Deeno just can't say no."

"But at this point," Pico added, "he says that he can't go back to the demon lord Rimuru. So he decided to serve Sir Michael instead."

"Yeah, pretty much," Deeno agreed with a nod.

Kagali couldn't believe it. Would *that* be the only reason he was serving Michael? She doubted it—but this whole story seemed so ridiculously Deeno-like, it was almost convincing.

"So," she said, moving on, "what was the demon lord Rimuru like? Because I still resent him for killing Clayman, and I'd like to get some revenge if I get the chance."

This was a lie. She didn't have any hate at all for Rimuru. Certainly, he was a foe who figured large in her life—but he had just formed an alliance with Yuuki, and even if that were dissolved, Rimuru piqued her interest a great deal. If she should hate anyone over Clayman's death, it should be Lieutenant Kondo for manipulating him—and by extension, Michael for controlling Kondo. She could understand that well enough, but she wasn't foolish enough to say it out loud.

"He's a menace," Deeno said, not pursuing the previous subject, "and so is everyone in his government. Especially that Zegion guy."

Deeno's role in the previous operation, apparently, was to neutralize the

forces within the labyrinth—to be exact, he was asked to either kidnap or eliminate Ramiris. He was one step away from completing that mission (or that's what he claims, at least), but either way, he failed. Why? Because, he said, he was stopped by an unstoppably powerful magic-born named Zegion.

"He's that strong?"

"Oh, strong doesn't even begin to describe it. Like, seriously, it's not even funny. He's rumored to be the best in the Ten Dungeon Marvels, and I can tell you that he's stronger than *me*, at least."

He had just finished up a series of fights, and Deeno admitted that he maybe looked down on him a little, but Zegion made him look like a fool without even really trying. The way he put it, he couldn't even feel like a sore loser about it—that was how thorough his beating was.

"Of all the wimpy things to say. Well, don't worry—I'm gonna crush that bastard! Sounds like he deserves a good beating!"

Vega was already in a bragging mood. *Must be nice to be such an idiot*, thought Deeno, although he refrained from saying it. It was pointless anyway.

Vega never changes, does he? Now I'm not sure we'll have any effective use for his new powers...

Kagali let out a sigh as well. Confidence in your own strength was all well and good, but if it cost you the battle sense you needed the most, it wouldn't do you any good. *Sense* here meant the ability to gauge the difference in strength between two sides. Going up against someone you can't beat, after all, will do nothing but hurt your side.

Pico and Garasha, apparently understanding this, frowned. They only said nothing, in all likelihood, because they weren't friendly with Vega and thus figured any warning they'd give would be ignored.

But just when everyone thought this conversation was over:

"Either way, if you guys notice any insectors inside the labyrinth, watch the hell out, got it? Zegion's a beetle type, but they got this bee girl named Apito who's real dangerous, too."

Deeno meant that as a way of wrapping up this topic. But it caught Zeranus's attention.

"A beetle type and a bee type? Tell me more."

Suddenly Deeno found himself overwhelmed by Zeranus's sheer vigor. Before he could think about it, he divulged everything else he knew about them, although it wasn't very much.

"Oh...? Um, well, if I recall, I think Rimuru's been giving them shelter since before he became a demon lord..."

Zeranus listened silently. And when Deeno was done talking, an awkward silence drifted over the chamber.

Dude, give me some kinda reaction! Deeno begged internally.

But Zeranus was beyond intimidating. He didn't want to call him out over it, though, so he had no choice but to change the subject and keep talking.

"...But anyway, inside Ramiris's labyrinth, the defenders have a huge advantage. There's a group of really strong guardians in there, Zegion leading them, and taking them down's gonna be a huge challenge, trust me!"

With that, Deeno was done talking.

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As silence reigned once more, everyone gathered in the chamber were caught up in their own thoughts.

Kagali had a wide range of topics she had to think about. Deeno's guidance was pretty important, but for now, the first priority was getting to grips with her own changes.

As she searched for information and checked over her own body, she could feel a tremendous power welling up within her. A seraphim is the highest level of angel, allegedly comparable to an awakened demon lord. After taking on the power of one of them and becoming a mystic angel, Kagali was now so strong that the memories of her demon lord days just embarrassed her now.

What's more, in addition to her unique skill Schemer, she discovered a new skill embedded in her soul. This was the ultimate enchantment Melchizedek,

Lord of Dominion, one earned by Michael separating his domination skills off and granting her a piece. A fearsome skill, it allowed her to instantly analyze any other skill and place it under her control. However, Kagali herself was placed under control of this skill, which made it impossible for her to betray Michael.

It's just terrifying. A war between people with these kinds of powers... It's unimaginable for someone like me.

That's how she felt about it, but when it was time to fight, Kagali's body would no doubt slaughter the enemy on its own, no input required from her. She instinctively understood this, and seeing this change in herself made her shiver. But she also couldn't help but think, too, that she wanted to test out this immense power she gained. She knew she shouldn't think about it, but something inside of her was wishing for that so badly. And she also predicted that she'd have a chance very, very soon.

She thought her desire for revenge was gone. But now she was growing resentful of Leon for killing her and of Rimuru for killing Clayman. And perhaps she could beat them now? She knew it was pointless, but she couldn't stop that desire from bubbling up.

Am I really weaker than Deeno right now? No. I just can't see it that way.

In fact, now that she was a mystic angel, Kagali was on the same tier as Deeno.

Heh... And what an embarrassing sight Deeno is. You know, even back in my demon lord days, I never did see Deeno fight anyone. No wonder he's so weak—

She had a hard time suppressing the pleasant, joyful feelings coming up from the bottom of her heart. She knew she couldn't let her guard down against these foes. But even so...even if this opponent played Deeno like a fiddle...she thought she could win.

She had gone well past an awakened demon lord, after all. Even the older demon lords, like Luminus and Deeno, couldn't beat Kagali today. And if not, maybe even the demon lord Leon wouldn't be a challenge.

You just wait for me, Leon. You'll be the one crying next!

So she kept thinking, attempting to suppress those dark feelings of pleasure

as she did. The skill controlling her mind was now radicalizing her thoughts, but she never noticed it happening.

Vega wasn't thinking about anything. He was just waiting for orders.

He had gained power. He had experienced death many times, giving him a look into the yet-deeper abysses of the world. He had consumed Gradim, and his own weapon had taken in the God-class Azure Dragon Spear. He had even feasted upon a seraphim, taking its power for his own.

All the countless defeats he'd tasted had granted him more power. He was the very personification of explosive force. That's what he was—a being created and transformed by Yuuki, infused with various skills that fused and complemented each other to help him become the ultimate fighting creature.

His unique skill Scavenger had now evolved into the ultimate skill Azhdahak, Lord of Dark Dragons—one with such destructive power that it literally overwhelmed all other existing skills. It was a disaster for the world that Vega, who never thought to temper any of his powers, was granted something like this. Or maybe the opposite was true. Maybe he only obtained this skill because of his constant, thoughtless drive to master the ways of pure force.

But regardless, Vega waited. He waited for the orders to come. And all he'd have to do was annihilate, then consume, those who stood before him.

Deeno stared at the floor, thinking about his current situation. *Why did it turn out like this?* he asked himself multiple times, but he never seemed to reach an answer.

Long ago, Veldanava asked him to take on this role, and so he descended to the surface. He didn't think he had much in the way of sentience at the time, but somewhere along the line, he started thinking about things for himself. He asked his colleagues Pico and Garasha about it, but it sounded like they had developed self-awareness at about the same time.

For various reasons, the three of them had become fallen angels. The only purpose in their lives had been to obey the orders of their vanished lord, and Deeno had become a demon lord to comply with that. He continued to watch over the world, and he wanted to see how the game between Guy and Ludora would turn out, although he'd never dream of intervening.

Through all this, Deeno's loyalty to Veldanava was unwavering. He still believed that someday, at the end of time, he'd be able to return to him.

And then he met him—that weird slime. A single glance was all he needed to understand the blinding brightness of his soul. It was totally different from Veldanava's, but somehow it felt familiar to him.

So began a happy period of his life. He hated working so much, but getting used and abused by humans all day was satisfying for him. He could hardly believe it himself, but somehow he felt contentment with this life. It was all thanks to the colleagues he was working with.

Ahhh, and I just had to double-cross Ramiris anyway...

That's what he regretted the most, the attack that took place five months earlier. On Feldway's orders, he betrayed Rimuru's people and invited the enemy right into their labyrinth. As if that wasn't enough, he'd also attempted to capture Ramiris, the enemy's most vital target. The order said to kill her if capture wasn't possible, but Deeno had no intention of that—not kill, at least. Instead he'd seal her in a Deep Hypno state and make it look like she was dead.

But, fortunately or not, the plan failed. And now Deeno found it strange he'd ever tried it in the first place.

Nah, but that just proves he was telling the truth, doesn't it?

Deeno couldn't help but think so. He didn't want to make excuses for attempting to harm Ramiris, but he was fully sure he was being driven by Michael's control over him.

So as long as I have the skill Astarte, I have no way of defying Michael and Feldway? You gotta be kidding...

He thought he had an accurate grasp of the situation, but he couldn't think up any brilliant ways out of it. The only saving grace he had was that Rimuru still trusted him.

He acts all shrewd and calculating, but he's really a big softie. You'd think you could trick him easily, but really, you gotta keep your guard up around him, too.

Deeno looked at the blue butterfly-shaped mark on his right arm. He thought

that Zegion had let him off the hook, but apparently this mark had become a corridor that connected the two of them, heart and soul. That's how Rimuru was able to contact him.

See? Totally calculating.

Now Rimuru was speaking directly into his mind, taking all the information he could get from Deeno. All but forcing him to spy on the enemy with impunity. He didn't feel disgusted about it or anything—in fact, he got a strange sort of thrill from the work. Maybe he was oddly happy to receive Rimuru's trust.

Here we go again...

Deeno suddenly realized that, for the first time in a while, he felt pretty amused about all this. *This sure has turned into a big deal*, he thought.

He had no intention whatsoever of betraying Veldanava, his creator. As long as Veldanava's revival remained Michael and Feldway's goal, he felt it was his duty to help with that. But, deep down, he couldn't help but feel that this was turning into a lot more trouble than it was worth.

Well, whatever. I'm not that much use around here regardless. I mean, the more serious I am about my work, the weaker I get. Not much I can do about it now. It'll be better for everybody if I half-ass my work anyway, so what more could I ask for?

That was one good trait of Deeno's. If a problem presented itself, he could accept it and not dwell on it forever. There was an easygoing, positive solution for everything when it came to Deeno, who was unrivaled when it came to slacking off. That positivity was something terrifying about him, really.

Regardless, he now felt quite refreshed as he waited for Feldway and the others, a relieved look on his face.

Arius was thinking.

His bosses—Kagali and the others—were talking, but he had no idea what they were talking about. His temperament would normally make him complain about that, but his instincts told him that wasn't a good idea.

Of course it wasn't. Arius was under Kagali's full control. He had become a

mystic angel, a figure well above the walking dead, but his locking curse was still in effect. If he awakened under his own power, it'd be a different story...but since this evolution was wholly set up for him, it only served to strengthen the dominance over him.

Arius had no time to be annoyed by this. He was aware enough of his current situation. He was brimming with unbelievable power; the omnipotence at his fingertips elated him. And the biggest change of all was the evolution of his unique skill Murderer into the ultimate enchantment Sandalphon, Lord of Judgment. Michael had retrieved this skill from Kondo and ferried it right over to Arius, consuming Murderer in the process.

It was nothing Arius had any say in, but he wasn't dissatisfied at all. And as he waited to be called up, he honestly felt pleased to have this new power.

Orca/Alia was confused. They had no time to eavesdrop on the conversations around them, because they were having a heated one inside their own body.

"Who am I? Am I Alia? Or Orca?"

"I don't know. I'm Alia, but also Orca at the same time."

In this rather chaotic way, they could feel their consciousnesses unify into one. But it wasn't unpleasant to them. In fact, it felt quite nice.

"I...am Orlia..."

Then the answer came to her.

Orlia was a newborn, but already a first-rate warrior and magic-user in one. What's more, Alternative—the skill granted to her—had optimized itself within Orlia's body, transforming into the ultimate enchantment Multi-Weapon. This enabled her to create a variety of weapons by using the experiences accumulated within her own body. There were only so many she could bring out at the same time, but each one of them was equivalent to God-class.

With all these weapons at her disposal, there wasn't an enemy out there she was afraid to fight.

Mai Furuki was in despair.

She thought she was dead, but here she was, back to life. That was fine, but

the problem was that even now, with all this power in her hands, she still hadn't fulfilled her wish to return to Japan.

...I won't give up. My unique skill Drifter couldn't cut it, but Yuuki still said it was possible. And if skills get created from your wishes, I know I've got the power to make mine come true...

But the moment that thought crossed her morose mind...

When the seraphim was implanted within her, the ultimate enchantment Alternative granted by Michael was consumed, evolving Drifter into the ultimate enchantment World Map. It was an astonishing ability, letting her accurately visualize any location in this world and grasp what was happening there at that moment. Even more amazingly, it also let her instantaneously travel to the location of her choice without any time lag. Someone with a spatially oriented skill would be shocked to hear of it.

And yet, Mai's wish did not come true. The coordinates programmed into World Map covered this world alone. It wouldn't let her cross the walls between dimensions, something she could understand without testing it out.

It was a tragedy, a huge disappointment—but either way, Mai wasn't free right now. Everything was following the will of Michael. And until that day she could set off and freely travel back to her beloved brother, Mai would continue to follow orders, her heart closed to the world.

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The newborn mystic angels weren't the only ones trying to figure out what was going on. Zarario and Obela were thinking about their own situations as well.

Zarario was quite grateful for his new physical body. He always had great power to wield, but it only really worked over in his own world. In the key world, the more power he exercised, the more energy he lost. A physical body was the only way to prevent this, but for someone as strong as Zarario, finding a vessel that could withstand his force was extremely difficult.

That problem was solved now, allowing him to break out his full strength on the surface of the world—but another big problem arose.

Well, great. Acquiring all this power has earned me Israfil, Lord of Trials, it seems. An angelic skill.

And that was the issue. Zarario picked up Israfil as part of his new incarnation.

Now there's no way for me to go against Michael. But if I do away with this skill, he'll think I am rebelling against him.

Feldway, the way Zarario saw him, was a colleague. He recognized that Feldway could give him orders, but he wasn't absolutely obedient to him. He also had qualms about Michael. Feldway trusted Michael wholeheartedly, but Zarario did not. He wasn't about to readily trust the kind of will that's strictly based on someone else's authority. He agreed with their current objectives and was willing to help with them, but he couldn't say whether that'd be the case forever. He had wanted to avoid acquiring any angelic skills just in case the time came to part ways later on.

Nonetheless, Israfil had been tossed into his lap. It wasn't an ultimate enchantment, so Michael's will had nothing to do with it. Zarario obtained this power naturally, that much was for sure, and that made it all the more impossible to throw away.

Now, how much does Michael know about this?

Given his ability to tame Velgrynd and Velzard, there's no doubt that Michael could wield full control over all angelic skills. But would he know exactly who possessed what? He should have thought about that question and acted accordingly.

My will belongs to no one but me. I cannot allow anyone to rewrite my very thoughts without me realizing it.

Zarario was a rational thinker. He didn't intervene when it came to dominating the True Dragon sisters, not wanting to hurt its high chances of success...but in truth, he never liked that operation from the start. And now here he was, in pretty much the same position as them.

Look at this... Just awful.

It's what he deserved, he thought, for not putting his foot down against it first thing. He could see that now but didn't dwell on it. It was time to figure out

how to deal with this.

Obela, too, had acquired an angelic ultimate skill. And much like with Zarario, it was at best an unwelcome guest.

During her evolution, Obela picked up the ultimate skill Azrael, Lord of Salvation. It was incredibly powerful, but ultimately useless to her. That was because, as a Primordial Angel, she was born with managerial abilities that were wholly non-reliant on skills. Primordials could instantly cast all kinds of magic, and that was enough to conduct their business without skills entering the picture. It was that resourcefulness that gave angels like her that aura of omnipotence.

For Obela and her fellow Primordials, who were already an ultimate form of existence, ultimate skills didn't really make any difference. She wasn't wishing for this at all, but she just *had* to get one at this exact moment. And of course it was going to be an angelic type...

This is bad news. At this rate, he might find out that I'm turning traitor.

That was exactly what Obela was intent on doing, which meant she was facing much more of a crisis than Zarario.

She pondered over her options. Having her mind read wasn't a concern; it was easy for her to erase her surface conscious well enough. But she couldn't discount the possibility of falling under Michael's control without realizing it, and that called for countermeasures.

Perhaps some self-suggestion is in order, she decided. If any contradiction made itself known in her mind, she would promptly destroy Azrael. It was an act that defied common sense, but for ultimate spiritual life-forms like them, it was completely possible.

Of course, if it were to reach that point, it'd mean a complete breakaway from Feldway. Not even Obela could be safe then. But even so, Obela felt no need for concern. The fate of Milim, the orphaned daughter of Veldanava, was at stake.

It'd be beyond disrespectful for us to second-guess the thoughts of the Creator, wouldn't it? Perhaps Feldway isn't performing this resurrection on his

own volition, but either way, he's gone far out of line.

Those were her true feelings. Obela believed that Milim was the rightful successor to the title of Creator.

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The beautiful tones of a bell rang out—solemnly, clearly, and tugging at the heartstrings of all who heard it. Then the door opened.

Michael, Feldway, and Velzard breezily walked in. The three of them alone radiated an aura so intense that it instantly banished the divine atmosphere of the audience chamber. Michael took his seat, followed by Feldway and Velzard.

"Now...let us begin."

With that, their strategy conference kicked off.

First, Mai was ordered to project a three-dimensional view of the entire key world in the center of the seating. This was, in essence, a miniature of the planet as perhaps seen by God, the bases of each demon lord depicted on it.

"These are the domains and strongholds of the Octagram, the group of demon lords opposing us. There are six of them in total..."

At Michael's bidding, Mai placed six points of light on the lands: Guy's domain at the north pole, Daggrull's in the far west, Luminus's a bit west of center, Rimuru's in the forest, Milim's to the southeast, and Leon's vast island continent.

"I would like to hear all of your opinions on how we should tackle this."

Feldway was asking for feedback from the whole audience, but his eyes were on just a few members—his closest advisors Zarario and Obela, along with Yuuki and Kagali. Deeno and his cohorts weren't much for tactical thinking, and Vega was never going to contribute to something like this. Everyone else was a level below in Feldway's eyes, not even granted the right to speak.

Zarario and Obela kept their mouths shut, perhaps gauging the reaction from the others. Kagali, picking up on this, spoke first.

"I would think the attackers would have the advantage here. I believe we should focus our fighting force on a single target."

"I agree with you there. It's just hard to figure out where to strike."

The defending side was obligated to spread their forces wide, but there was no need for the attackers to follow their lead. Kagali and Yuuki agreed on that... but, surprisingly, Deeno was the first to react.

"Lemme just say, you probably shouldn't attack Ramiris's labyrinth. Also, the Tempest capital of Rimuru is gonna be quarantined inside the labyrinth during the entire war. It's designed to be as tough to take down as possible, so I'd recommend saving it for last."

This information had already been shared around, so nobody objected. If they stumbled in the labyrinth, they could quickly be surrounded and annihilated by reinforcements from all the other allied nations.

"Right. That'll be last, then. And perhaps attacking elsewhere will lure out some forces holed up in that labyrinth for us."

Being dragged into a defensive battle would make Ramiris a major headache to deal with. They'd need to work out a clear strategy for whatever location they attacked.

Velzard suddenly spoke, her gaze sharpened upon Leon's continent. "There's nobody left in Icefayr Castle right now. I don't see any sign of people, at least."

"Hmm. The enemy's thought up a few measures of their own, then? Consolidating the demon lords so they don't spread themselves too thin?" Feldway mused.

"...Indeed," said Michael. "It looks like there are large powers concentrated upon five locations on the surface."

Mai took the dot off the north pole Guy called home and turned up the brightness on the other five. They had eliminated one option, although now the difficulty level seemed much higher. Despite that, the attacking side still had a great advantage.

So where to aim? Zarario was the first to make a move.

"Sir Feldway, I have a question."

"What's that?"

"We know that Sir Michael has full control over the angelic set of skills, but can he find out where the owners of these skills are, or at least a general idea of their location?"

It was a vital question, one that had major implications for Zarario himself.

"I was wondering about that, too," added Obela. "If we had a grasp of that, we should try to recruit those skill holders first."

Michael nodded. "I was unable to sense it before, but now, it has come into focus. I see that you and Zarario have Azrael and Israfil, and Deeno's group has Astarte, Haniel, and Jibril as well. Kagali has taken Melchizedek, the remaining skill, and Arius over there is now the owner of Sandalphon. As for the higher-level angelics, the ones on my level..."

He paused at this point, scowling.

"...Something is missing."

The words caused everyone to tense up.

"What do you mean, my lord?" Feldway asked.

"First," Michael began in a straightforward tone, "Raguel, the one Velgrynd possessed. I recovered it from her and granted it to a qualified receiver."

No one reacted. An eerie silence pervaded, but Michael paid it no mind.

"Next is Gabriel. This has not been retrieved from its source. It's still possessed by Velzard, isn't it?"

The ice beauty remained motionless, no expression on her face. It was the natural step to take, in order to ensure the Ultimate Dominion over her stayed active.

"So I know the owner of all these skills so far, but out of the remaining four, three are still in question."

As Michael explained, he had taken Velgrynd's abilities as his own, as well as Velzard's draconic factors. This greatly increased his powers, granting him the ability to search for the owners of the angelic skills under his control. However, the only one of the four remaining skills he could track down was Metatron, Lord of Purity.

"What? But didn't the Hero Chronoa possess the ultimate skill Sariel, Lord of Hope?"

"I failed to detect it. Either my detection skills cannot reach into Ramiris's labyrinth, or there is some other cause afoot. I cannot say."

"Hmm. No, Ramiris is not one to trifle with. Perhaps the labyrinth is impossible for us to see into, then. Should we take that to mean that the owners of Uriel and Raphael are in the same location as Sariel?"

"We can't be sure, but it seems reasonable to assume so. There is no other possible place that my detection skill could not penetrate."

No skill created by Veldanava could go undetected by Michael. The only way to explain this was Mazecraft, Ramiris's intrinsic skill. This was why Michael concluded that the three "missing" skills must be in the same location. He was correct, in a way. All three of them were already gone from this world, their very essences transformed into something else...but, unaware of this, Michael assumed this problem was solved, and so did Feldway and the others.

"Hmm. Well, that's not a problem, then. We know Veldora's in that labyrinth, so we'll be attacking it sooner or later anyway. We can just track down those skill holders then, and add them to our ranks."

"It's kind of like having an inside mole, isn't it?"

"Exactly. So let's drop this topic for now. A single peek inside that labyrinth, and we'll know where all the skills are. What we need to consider right now is which target to strike first..."

"Well, I think we've already answered that question. If we're one hundred percent sure where *one* of those angelic skills is, let's add that guy to our group first, why don't we?"

That was Yuuki's conclusion. His free will had been taken away, but his deep insight was still alive and well.

"Mm. The one who possesses Metatron...is here."

All eyes focused on Michael's finger. He was pointing straight at El Dorado, the capital of Leon's domain.

"The demon lord Leon," muttered Kagali. "The one who killed me?"

So it was Metatron, Lord of Purity, then? The blinding flash of light that burned her until she was a pile of ash? Now it was clear to her.

"Sounds like we have a plan." Yuuki smiled. "So who'll be attacking?"

"I'll go," Vega offered. "I dunno who this demon lord Leon guy is, but nobody minds if I eat him, right?"

"Weren't you even listening? Leon might wind up becoming our ally."

"Tsk... Oh, all right. I'll make do with some other guys, then."

Yuuki and Vega were chatting like they already had a plan ratified. But with no one else objecting, that was the direction they went in.

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The whole object of this was to revive Veldanava, so there was no need to send a formal declaration of war. That was Michael and Feldway's decision, and inevitably that meant things would kick off with a surprise attack.

There wasn't any need to be stingy with the firepower they threw into this... but Feldway had his own ideas about that.

"So our objective here is to recruit the possessor of Metatron. If we could eliminate at least a few of the fighters who'd get in the way of that, even better, but I wouldn't want to see this result in too many casualties. Let's leave the rank-and-file soldiers behind for this one."

Only the strongest would be involved in this. Michael's Ultimate Dominion might have been all-powerful, but it wasn't universally available. It held absolute control over angelic skills, yet the user still had to make eye contact with the target to make it work. Dominion Bullet, lent to Lieutenant Kondo, only worked against a single target, and it also was unlikely to work unless you diverted that target's attention.

Regalia Dominion, by contrast, could control a varying number of people, depending on the existence points of the targets. Another important factor: The success rate went down if the target was of similar rank to the skill user, which meant it was likely to fail unless this target was fairly seriously wounded.

Success wasn't really guaranteed unless the target was below the user in rank, which made it a difficult power to leverage very well.

Michael's EP was at around ninety million. However, Yuki's own EP of around two million needed to be subtracted from this. And considering Veldora's EP was eighty-eight million, Regalia Dominion wasn't likely to work on him. Michael had no way of knowing this, of course, but he still thought that controlling Veldora would be a trying task at best. That's why he wanted to gather up as much offensive force as he could before tackling Ramiris's labyrinth.

So they needed to decide who to deploy on this mission.

"I'm staying behind."

Deeno spoke up first. No one objected.

"What about myself and my force?" Zeranus asked.

"For now, I'd like you to be prepared to move your forces. This operation will be followed by a full-scale invasion."

"Very well."

The insectors, much like the mystics, would be preparing for total war. Dhalis and Neece would manage the Zarario force, while Obela would need to return to the other world to pick up her force before handing it over to Ohma.

Now all the top staff were deploying for war.

Mai could use her skill to instantly transport just this group to their destination. Obela could also use Detect Aura to easily work out the right coordinates and teleport herself right over.

That was how the logistics would work—and with that, the surprise attack was underway.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
4

ASPIRATIONS SHATTERED

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ASPIRATIONS SHATTERED

So I got word from Deeno, but what he had to tell me was pretty whacked out.

I guess I should've seen it coming, but yes, Michael was on the move. That much was expected, so I didn't mind—but the real surprise was what Obela was up to. It turns out that she left Michael's camp for an unknown destination...and took her army with her. I was stunned.

(What? You're kidding me.)

(Nope. I'm pretty surprised, too. And get this—Michael's still completely unaware of it. I'm about to go inform him.)

Wow. He really is a huge idiot, isn't he? Now I'm sure of it. With everything going on, is now really the time to get lazy about that sort of thing? And before that, why is he leaking stuff out to the enemy before telling his own boss about it?

I mean...Deeno being that way helps a lot and all, but...you know? Now I'm feeling just a little sympathetic for Michael and Feldway. But before I get too carried away, let's ask one important question.

(So where are you guys gonna attack?)

(Oh, yeah, they're attackin' Leon's city. Like I said, Obela's AWOL and I'm holding down the fort here, so all the other top brass are on the move. Pico and Garasha got taken along against their will, too, so could ya give them a pass if you happen to get in a fight with them?)

(You think I can guarantee that?! Like, I'll keep it in mind, but...)

(Thanks. Oh, also, I got one more favor to ask...)

(Make it quick. I'm kinda busy.)

I was preparing to set off for battle, in fact. But I let Deeno have his say.

(Like, I guess I sorta miss working with Vester and Ramiris and the gang. It's so boring up here, y'know? So can you hurry up and beat Michael's ass for me? And then get me outta here!)

...

I was stunned into silence.

(Look, did you get hit in the head or something? You understand that's nothing you're supposed to say to the enemy, right?)

(Wow, so mean! We're friends, aren't we? Quit being so cold like that! Oh, right, I just remembered—did you apologize to Ramiris for me yet? I wanna make up with her later.)

(Don't give me that crap! I told you to go apologize yourself!)

(W-wait a second, Rimuru!)

(Regardless—)

Yes, regardless, I'm not about to let anyone be mind-controlled against their will like this.

(Regardless, just do your best to get out from your mind control for me, okay? Hurry up before you shame all us other demon lords!)

(Ha-ha-ha! I'll try. But, hey, I know I can depend on you and stuff. Nobody's better at leaving work to other people than me, so I hope you don't mind me taking advantage of you like that, okay?)

He was really starting to piss me off. I'd expect nothing else from him...

(Also, one more word of warning. Feldway's in league with the insectors.)

(I know. It sure doesn't sound like good news.)

(Oh, it's beyond bad. Their king, Zeranus—we met for the first time, but he might be even higher up there than Guy. I won't know unless I try, but I'm sure I wouldn't win even if I went all-out. He and his force're sitting out this current attack, but I dunno when they'll spring into action, so keep your guard up,

okay?)

I didn't need that advice from him. But as intel, it was really valuable—and really ominous. Hearing he outstripped Guy ratcheted up my despair to maximum. If someone *that* dangerous is both leading an army and resting up for now, we'll need to make sure we can respond to any move from him immediately.

I thought about calling back Geld and the other guys I had stationed across the land, but opted against it. If they targeted us wherever we were shorthanded, we'd be on the ropes in a hurry. We'll just have to make do with the forces we have on hand.

(Thanks for the warning. I'll tell everyone, and we'll stay on the lookout. Now, seriously, try a little up there, won't you?)

(Sure. Don't get yourself killed, Rimuru.)

He didn't have to remind me. I was on my second life as a slime, and I wanted to enjoy it for a change. It'd been nothing but war for a while—I wanted to just clean up all this mess and take it easy. I wanted to have a blast with all my friends, too, and that included Deeno, of course.

(You too.) I replied—and I meant it, from the bottom of my heart.

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As soon as I finished my conversation with Deeno, I called the cabinet members still standing by in our capital of Rimuru.

We assembled in the Control Center. Our Argos surveillance system was showing us Leon's base of operations, but the whole area was being walloped by a blizzard, making it impossible to see anything. Considering El Dorado's usually mild climate, a blizzard like this was clearly unnatural; it was obviously Velzard's work. There was no contact from anyone on Leon's side, and we had no way of visually confirming the enemy. Communications were probably being jammed somehow, and overall, Deeno was starting to look pretty darn correct about all this.

If the enemy was deploying strictly the main forces, we'd need to call up something appropriate in return. We need to send some support for the guys

already there—mess that up, though, and it could lead to enormous damage. Too many of us sent over there, and the labyrinth would be too thinly guarded; too few, and we couldn't complete the mission. We were being asked to thread an exceedingly small needle.

"I see. So the enemy's on the large side, then?"

Benimaru's eyes lit up when I told him what Deeno had said to me. He was ready to go out there right now, and I wasn't about to stop him.

"I was thinking about backing up our crew over there with just me, Ranga, and Soei to start out...but it's looking like a more powerful force than we thought. We could be in danger if we hold back...so I'll want you to join us, Benimaru."

"Oh, that goes without saying. Who else will you take with you?"

Benimaru broke into a giddy smile when I announced I was bringing him. As long as he was going, I don't think he really cared who else was there.

"Me, perhaps?"

"No."

I killed Veldora's proposal immediately. He really needs to think a little more. Yes, it'd certainly be reassuring to have him on our side, and I'll admit that he'd be a huge asset in battle...but I can't have him so conveniently forgetting that he's the enemy's biggest target.

"Look, you need to realize that they're after you, okay? And in the first place, we can always revive ourselves as long as one of us is safe, so both of us fighting at the same time is the stupidest idea ever!"

"Kwaaaah-hah-hah-hah! Perhaps I was careless, yes. Leave the labyrinth defenses to me, then!"

"Yes. Please."

We're in serious trouble here, okay? Don't try anything funny, I'm begging you.

So, with our problem child out of the picture, I turned toward Zegion.

"Now, as for you and Apito, I'd like you both to continue guarding the

labyrinth. I think they got some serious threats on their side, so we can't afford to leave the place completely empty."

"We will be on the job, Sir Rimuru. Good hunting out there."

So encouraging. We have the Dragon Lords on standby down there as well, so they should still be a pretty respectable force—them, and Treyni, Beretta, and Charys, too.

"Charys, make sure you keep an eye on Veldora so he doesn't go out of control on us."

"There is no need to remind me, Sir Rimuru. I will be sure to keep a close watch on Sir Veldora, so you may go into battle with full peace of mind."

"Huh? I'm being watched now?"

"Don't worry about it."

"N-no, um, I rather am worried..."

"Here, just read this and relax a bit."

Seeing Charys all but force a manga volume into Veldora's hands was encouraging in a much different way.

"Yeah, so just leave my master here to us!"

"We have the labyrinth well defended, and we are training hard so that we won't be caught unawares next time. I very much look forward to showing you the results."

Hopefully the opportunity won't present itself, but doing all this prep work just in case is reassuring to see. I nodded my approval back at Treyni.

"With the power you've given me, Sir Rimuru, I am stronger than ever. I have never missed a day of training with Charys, and I assure you that I have no intention of losing to Deeno next time."

Right. Let's trust in that. Whether he can defeat Deeno or not, Beretta and his team couldn't be that far behind him by now.

So:

"I'm taking Kumara with me."

I decided that my deployment team would be me, Benimaru, Ranga, Kumara, and Soei. Not that I didn't have my concerns, though...

"I'm sorry, though, Benimaru. I made this decision without asking your opinion, but you've got a right to refuse if you want to. I know you have a couple of wives to protect, after all. Don't you?"

Momiji and Alvis were both well into their pregnancies. I think. It turned out that the gestation periods of monsters could vary surprisingly widely. Kaede had apparently kept Momiji inside her womb for over three hundred years, after all. And with the lycanthropes, well, sometimes they were embryos in the womb, sometimes they were eggs—they were counted as the same race, but all this diversity!

Alvis was ovoviparous, which was kind of a middle ground between the two—the embryos developed inside of eggs that remained in the mom's body until pretty much the moment they were ready to hatch. Alvis was obliged to stay in her animal transformation during the whole pregnancy, too. I guess retaining human form required some amount of physical strain, but this, too, varied from person to person.

The science of monster ecology was still in its infancy, really, and I couldn't devote much time to it. Hopefully we'll see some enterprising biologists or naturists delve into the topic in the near future. For now, I'll leave it at that.

The important thing right now was how Benimaru felt about heading to battle with two pregnant wives to think about. What's more important to him—his work, or himself? It's the kind of question nobody likes to answer. And I'm...you know, single, so it's never one I've had to tackle before. Not that I mind or anything. I'm not jealous, I swear! Besides, I was the kind of office flack who had to pull an all-nighter on my own birthday, so having a girlfriend would've just sucked for both of us.

From an emotional standpoint, of course my wife would matter more...but from a practical one, maybe my job would. I can't make a living without money, so honestly, I might have to prioritize work that way. But what's the point of working if you can't protect your family? That question's gonna come up at times, too. It's hard.

It'd be nice if we all worked at companies that understood that sort of thing... but in my nation, at least, I want to pursue ways to get as close to that ideal as possible. I don't want Benimaru to face marital trouble this early on, so I really wanted to respect his will on this.

But Benimaru just laughed off my concern.

"There is no need to worry. I'll do everything I can to protect those I love. I always wanted to have a successor to take on my will in case something happened to me, after all. I would hate to get my priorities wrong about that."

I see. That seems reasonable. But is he really sure about that?

"Yes, but..."

Kind of weird how I'm wavering over this more than he is. But Benimaru gave me a reassuring smile.

"I'm telling you, it's fine. Right here is the safest place in the world, and I've also asked Hakuro to guard them for me. If worse comes to worst, I'm sure he will step up and raise my progeny. So please, don't worry about me! Besides, I don't think I could possibly lose, and I also don't doubt your victory for a moment, Sir Rimuru."

There was something bracing, refreshing, to the way he said it. Soei was nodding his approval, and everybody else in the room seemed to agree with him. Now I feel like I had the wrong idea all along.

"Ho-ho-ho! You're a very kind leader, Sir Rimuru. I'm sure you feel that way because you were born in peaceful times, but in a war-torn world like this one, it's not exactly the mainstream way of thinking, you see. My daughter Momiji is prepared for the worst, as is Lady Alvis. And more to the point, we also believe in Sir Benimaru."

It was clear from his choice of words that Hakuro was being serious. And Momiji and Alvis—who had let themselves into the room at some point—were in full agreement.

"Exactly. My husband couldn't possibly fall in battle!"

"I agree with Momiji. Sir Benimaru, if you were to do something like die on us,

I'd chase you down to the ends of the earth and make you pay for it. So be ready!"

Guess they're all resolved to this. No point in me meaninglessly fretting over it, then.

"All right. I get the message, yeah. I can't guarantee that we'll win this, but I *will* promise that we'll all make it back alive."

"Heh. You are in good hands, Sir Rimuru. Win, and all is well."

I had kind of forgotten how incredibly confident Benimaru was all the time. When he and Soei were together, it's like there was nobody they couldn't beat. I could say the same for the Kumara/Ranga duo, too, actually.

"Yes. I will do my best as well. Defeat is impossible!"

"As will I, my master! No matter who the enemy is, one bite and it'll be as good as done!"

I wasn't so sure about that, but I got what he meant.

"Yeah... Well, now's not the time to be wavering like this. We can't get all worried before a fight this big. It's kind of funny to see us stepping up to protect Leon, of all people, but let's do our best and put an end to Michael's plans!"

That was my declaration of war. I wasn't about to sit here and give my team a bunch of pleasantries. If I thought we could maybe come to terms with Michael if we just sat down and talked things out, I'd say so—but not here. He's dangerous. He's got no sense of humanity at all, and he's willing to sacrifice anything to reach his goals. He's pretty much the worst kind of person, but at the end of the day, if someone's beyond negotiating with, all you can do is step up and settle things for good.

"Let's go!"

Everyone nodded. I'd fret over things once it was all over. And with that resolve, I was ready to transfer all of us to the battlefield.



But while Rimuru and his staff were making preparations, the battle had already begun. There was no lengthy declaration of war at all—it began with

Vega going on a rampage.

"Tsk! Can't he take any strategic action at all?"

"You said it..."

Kagali nodded at Feldway's pained complaint. Their mission here wasn't to lay waste to El Dorado. They needed to track down the possessor of the angelic skill, drag him out of there, and add him to their force.

Hearing that Feldway could use Michael's domination skills puzzled Kagali at first. But it made sense. It was a tactically sound way of keeping your supreme commander away from battle. So, without any further doubts, she accepted their plan.

And a simple plan it was. Thirteen people were here on the field—Feldway, Velzard, Zarario, Pico, Garasha, Kagali, Yuuki, Teare, Footman, Vega, Orlia, Arius, and Mai Furuki—and they were being asked to kick as much ass as possible. They'd mow down anyone who attempted to engage them, and in the meantime, they'd also search for the angelic skill's possessor.

They were working on conjecture instead of proven fact, but Kagali was all but certain this possessor was Leon. But even if she was wrong, that wasn't much of a problem. Just grab all the potential targets they could find, and the operation was as good as over. If he didn't come out—if they hardened up the city's defenses instead—Kagali would lead a storming party to venture into the city.

However, as soon as Mai teleported everyone there, Vega promptly ignored orders and went berserk, bashing and smashing up the city's defensive barrier. He was zooming his way to what appeared to be a royal castle, leaving a trail of carnage behind him. Even Kagali was appalled.

I feel like this boost in power has made him stupider than ever. We can't use him in any coherent tactical maneuvers like this. In fact, we may have to seriously consider purging him.

In their organization, breaking orders was strictly forbidden. If a senior officer was acting like this, it may already be too late to save military discipline around here. They'd likely need to discuss how to handle Vega, if only to make an

example out of him to the rest of their force.

Either way, though, the operation was now underway. Vega could be discussed when they were back. For now, Kagali decided to consult with Feldway about their direction.

"Velzard and I are a perfect diversion. But Zarario, Pico, Garasha: You stay here with us, too. Everyone else will go under your command, so get out there, start bashing heads, and figure out who we're after."

Many people here were under Kagali's locking curse—Teare and Footman, of course, but also walking-dead incarnates like Arius, Orlia, and Mai. She couldn't force orders upon them, but she could telepathically communicate into their minds. Kagali was also a good operation planner, something Feldway appreciated, so she had the right to craft any kind of tactics she wanted out here.

Thus, she gave the orders.

"We'll reprimand Vega for his outburst later. For now, just go all-out against the enemy. You may retreat if you feel you can't win, so go out there and pummel them!"

Everybody there, except for Yuuki, had freshly obtained untold amounts of power. They undoubtedly had more self-control than Vega, but they all couldn't wait to test how strong they had become. Thus, as soon as Kagali gave permission, everyone moved en masse.

Kagali followed at a prudent distance.

My own free will has been left intact, as well as a certain amount of authority. I'm not sure I'll ever get an opportunity this good again...

Perhaps it was wiser to wait for a better chance to arise. That thought crossed her mind, but Michael's current grip over it scared her deeply. If she were turned into a fully subservient puppet, all hope would be dashed. It was entirely possible that this would be her last chance—optimism was a dangerous thing. So Kagali decided to take action.

From the very beginning, she had no intention of pledging her allegiance to Feldway and his cohorts. In fact, she thought of both him and Michael as insane

—so out of their minds, she could feel it on her skin. To her, she was sure any future that involved her and them was bleak indeed.

"I swear that I will not betray you... And I accept your dominion over me."

That's right. Kagali swore that she wouldn't betray her companions, even if it meant accepting Michael's control over her. And no matter how dirty her hands got, she was prepared to return the favor she received from Yuuki.

It looks like Michael's control is absolute within a certain range. But maybe the effect dwindles the farther you are from him. That, or if we can fully isolate ourselves in a different space from him, we could eliminate the effect entirely!

Michael had done everything he could to search for the remaining angelic skills. But three were still missing—in some kind of safe zone from him. And that was Ramiris's labyrinth. If she could flee into there, Kagali and her friends had a chance at being saved. Fortunately, she was in an alliance with the demon lord Rimuru...although that might be a bit doubtful by now. Yet as soft and good-natured as he was, there was an exceedingly good chance that he'd shelter them.

So her mission here was to cause as big a commotion as possible, then find an opening for her escape. And to do that...

(Can you hear me, Laplace?)

(...President?! Wow, you're all right?!)

(Yes, but I'm in a tricky situation. So—)

(Well, gimme yer orders, Boss. Where d'you want me?)

(...El Dorado.)

Kagali played the most reliable card in her deck—and with that, Laplace joined the battle.

*

Leon's force was feeling the strain. They had been expecting an attack, training for it—and today was the day.

It didn't take long for Leon to receive a report that the city's defensive barrier was broken, allowing the enemy inside. "There's only eight of them," a pale-

looking knight said in a later follow-up, “but they possess massive strength! They’ve been allowed to penetrate the castle! Our forces are in disarray!”

Leon looked at Guy as the knight returned to battle.

“Any word from Rimuru?”

“Oof. We’re isolated here. Velzard... She’s above us. There’s more than eight of ‘em.”

If he was invading this city, Guy would’ve moved to rob the enemy of its cohesion as well. This was something they all expected. To deal with it, Rimuru was using Argos to monitor the situation with each of his forces, as a countermeasure against just such a situation. There’d be a time lag, but at least they’d all know what’s going on.

Help would quickly be forthcoming...and even if it wasn’t on time and the worst-case scenario occurred, Rimuru had another plan, one he’d explained with a chuckle. He probably wasn’t being serious, and Leon wanted nothing to do with that plan, but if it got that bad, he wouldn’t be in any position to protest. The worst case had to be prevented from happening.

“So now what? Should we wait here until Rimuru’s backup arrives?”

“That’s gonna be pretty difficult,” Guy said. “We would’ve had a lot of options if Velzard wasn’t here. But once she gets serious in battle, she’s liable to take down this entire city.”

“...I wouldn’t like that.”

A spatial transfer required you to have accurate coordinates of both your current position and your destination. If contact beyond city limits was cut off, that meant the enemy was taking measures against that, no doubt. If their transport magic circle were destroyed as well, it’d delay the arrival of reinforcements even more. If they could buy another ten or so minutes, Rimuru was probably going to show up—but if they wanted to hope for that, they had to protect this position with their lives.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t, no. Guess I’m gonna have to go out and take them on, then.” Guy stood up.

"I'll join you."

"Let me show them just how serious I can be."

Mizeri and Raine joined him. After living together with them for the past few months, Leon knew exactly what they were capable of. Raine, in particular, had been rapidly improving her skills, giving Leon a run for his money in their training. It'd annoy him to no end in normal times, but with her on his side, he saw her as a trustworthy ally.

"I wish she could always be that serious," complained Mizeri, and really, she spoke for everybody else.

But then another problem child spoke up.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I doubt a pair of weaklings like you would help us very much. I am rather reluctant to lend a hand to Guy, but I have my orders from Sir Rimuru, and I will concentrate on those. You will have my assistance. Shall we go?"

Diablo smiled, as if to show how grateful Guy should be for this. Raine shot back at him, triggering an argument. A disgusted Guy yelled at them, Mizeri shaking her head in frustration all the while. And seeing them yell and scream as they left the room, Leon's only thought was how much of a happy family they were.

But he didn't have time for them. Guy's team would handle the scene outside, but Leon had his own duties. He could hear his soldiers screaming out in the hallways; the battle clearly wasn't going their way. Even worse, any rash moves exposed him to potential mind control—the most frustrating thing of all.

"None of them are headed for the city?" he asked Arlos the Silver Knight, the trusty assistant who always stood by him.

Arlos used Thought Communication to speak with a few of his fellow knights before answering, "No, sir! All the enemies appear to be heading for the castle."

Leon nodded. That, at least, was good news.

"In that case, have our magic knights seal off the castle! We'll isolate the

intruders inside and keep them from reaching the outside world!"

"Yes, sir!"

Deciding that any further worry for Guy was unwarranted, Leon sent a flurry of orders. If the enemy's cooped up in the castle, there'd be no more damaging the city outside. Then he could wait for Rimuru's backup and defeat this foe inside their virtual cage.

"I want every knight captain engaging our enemies to prevent any further casualties."

"As you wish!"

Their standing defense force would never handle them all. Once the castle was sealed off with an isolation barrier, the knight captains would be sent in to intercept the enemy. It was time to deploy the troops they were preserving until now.

The Yellow Knights, a team of defense specialists, would join the healers in the White Knights to maintain the city's defensive barriers. The Red Knights, geared for attacking, would then be dispatched to engage the enemy. That only left the Blue Knights, mainly suited as a commando unit; they'd take action as needed to cover any lightly guarded territory.

Arlos took the lead, sending out Leon's commands. Then a group of six people suddenly appeared before the demon lord, kneeling in submission.

"Demon lord Leon, please grant us permission to go out as well."

These were the generals serving under Guy. They technically served Mizeri and Raine, and with their recent evolutions, they had been promoted to Demon Peers.

Misora, the chief officer under Raine, must've had a hard time in her position, because she was now at the duke level of the demon hierarchy. She was weaker than Moss, who was a grand duke, but she was a head above the rest of this group. Khan, Mizeri's chief officer, wasn't lagging too far behind—not as good in battle as Misora, but strong enough to merit a marquis title. Even the other four generals here were on par with the captains of the various magic knight corps present. Idling them here would be a tremendous waste.

"Granted," said Leon. "Get going. Work with Fran and the others and defeat our enemies."

So the demons were unleashed.

The only ones left in the room with Leon were his attendant Arlos and the Black Knight Claude, Arlos's instructor. Leon would have preferred them heading out to face their enemies as well, but since Leon himself was clearly the target, he needed some bodyguards with him.

"Frustrating, isn't it?" Leon groused.

"Be patient, please," Arlos urged him. "It's a little strange to be protecting someone like you, Sir Leon, but you must trust us and stay here."

"Heh-heh-heh... There are just eight enemies in the castle. We have four knight captains here, as well as those demons and a number of well-trained knight corps. There's no way we could lose."

Claude was trying to assuage Leon. Arlos was optimistic, as if trying to remind himself of their chances. He knew it wouldn't be that easy, but he had to keep Leon from falling into the hands of the enemy. Patience was key right now. They had to await better news here, on Leon's throne.

Then, after a while, they began to sense violent tremors across the castle.

The most intense battlefield was the site of Vega's rampage. Misora was in command, with four other demons working to stall for time. Maeter, the White Knight and captain of the White Knight corps, was providing support. She was a blond, blue-eyed woman with very ladylike features, but her specialty was healing, and her mere presence ensured they could fight for that much longer.

Each demon was striking once, then retreating so Maeter could heal them and help them back into battle to repeat the cycle. Faced with overwhelming violence, their only choice was to throw themselves into the fray and hope for the best.

Misora's face contorted in pain. But she couldn't lose heart now. She had to endure her master Raine's crazed rush over and over again in training...and in any case, Guy would purge her if she fled at this point. Better instead, she thought, to fight proudly and ensure she fulfilled her role.

But while Vega's existence points numbered over ten million, the top-level demons did no better than half a million. Even Misora's EP was at around seven hundred thousand. None of them had any ultimate skills, so the difference in firepower was obvious to everyone.

"Gah-ha-ha-ha! Weak, weak, weak... *Soooo* weak!! Or maybe I'm too strong? Sorry, guys! You're so weak, I don't even feel like eating any of you. I guess that means your suffering will continue for a while...but don't hate me. Hate how weak you are!"

The trash-talking came nonstop from Vega; he was trampling on the demons' pride, and they had no choice but to stay calm and deal with it. But that was their exact strategy, actually. With their gifts at reading emotions, the demons were trying to take advantage of Vega's personality, maintaining the stalemate by letting him kick all the ass he wanted.

The fight against Vega was intense, but at least stable. By comparison, every moment of the fight against Arius was screeching with tension.

"Hyaaaaah-ha-ha-ha! It's all-you-can-kill today! Oh man, oh man, oh man... This power is just *so cool!!*"

Arius was lost in a never-ending spasm of violence, all his cool from his human years apparently lost.

The ultimate enchantment Sandalphon had embodied itself in the form of a handgun that Arius could fire as much as he wanted, no reloading required. He also had a bastard sword in his right hand, a product of Orlia's Multi-Weapon skill. These two pieces of equipment were far more powerful than run-of-the-mill God-class gear, and Arius was making full use of them both as he slaughtered the knights. He seemed to be mimicking Lieutenant Kondo in battle style, likely expressing an aspiration that Arius himself would never admit to.

Oxian the Blue Knight had formed a tag team with Khan to challenge him. There was no way to make up for the weapon difference, but the two of them proved to be an excellent match in terms of skill. Khan was staking his pride as a great demon, casting magic to interfere with Arius's movements, while Oxian's graceful sword strikes were letting him hold his own against this adversary. The latter also had a gift for support magic, which was huge; their physical abilities

and durability were both upgraded by multiple layers of magic from them both.

But they still had almost no chance. This was a foe that not even a direct strike could injure, and Oxian, a nihilistic young noble, didn't expect to win from the start. Taking care not to break his sword, he just kept throwing himself in, trying to extend this battle as long as possible. This was one enemy he wanted to be sure would never reach his beloved Leon.

It seemed like this fight would last forever...but it had only just begun.

Fighting against Orlia were Fran and Kizona, commanders of the Red and Yellow Knights respectively. Fran was a healthy beauty with auburn skin, lightly armored and focused on offensive force, while Kizona was small, bright-faced, and clad in heavy full-body armor.

If these two women had anything going for them, it was their foe's lack of fighting spirit. Orlia was being extremely careful. Unlike Vega and Arius, she was much more methodical about testing out her powers, testing Multi-Weapon to see what kinds of gear it could conjure. She had given a one-handed sword to Arius and a crescent bow to Mai, but for herself, she prepared a morning star and a tower shield in order to test both her offense and defense.

That personality quirk was proving to be a lifesaver for her adversaries. Using the two of them as experimental subjects, Orlia slowly but surely came to grips with the gear she had in hand, thanks to her brand-new ultimate enchantment.

Mai, meanwhile, was on the battlefield, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she didn't belong here. She had no idea why she should be fighting, but it was impossible to defy Michael's will. He had even brainwashed Yuuki, someone she trusted immensely. There was no way someone like Mai could beat him.

But that didn't mean she wanted to let off some steam against a bunch of knights he had no grudge against, either. So she just watched from the sidelines. If she *did* join the fray, the battle would have long ago tilted in the angels' favor, but that's not how it turned out.

"All this is gonna do is bring pain to us all. But what should I do? Tell me, Yuuki..."

She was lost, troubled, and unable to find an answer. She would still need some more time before she could make a move.

*

Guy's party stormed out to intercept the enemy...only to find a giant blizzard blowing outside. It was a special gift from Velzard.

"I'll take care of her," Guy said, and nobody was about to stop him.

The two of them had fought many times, from long ago in the past to just recently—but frankly, Velzard was crazily strong. Guy was her only natural opponent here—and she wasn't holding back one bit, either. As if to prove it, she had transformed herself from a young girl to an adult woman, her eyes golden instead of their usual deep-sea blue. They shone bewitchingly, beautifully, portending great disaster to come. This human state was Velzard fighting in her "real" mode, and it made Guy realize just how serious she was.

That, and Velzard had gone mad—in a good way. When Guy flew up to her, floating in the middle of this great snowstorm, she found him shouting with joy.

"I love, love, *looove* you, Guy. So join me...and let's kill, kill, kill, kill, and kill some more!"

She challenged him, a gigantic smile on her face.

"Tsk... I *told* you that's nothing but trouble!"

Guy was just as serious about fighting back. Trying to take it easy against Velzard would be tantamount to suicide. So, here in the skies above the castle, a battle broke out between two of the most powerful forces in the world.

Yes, Guy was strong. His EP was extremely high, almost reaching forty million. But Velzard was simply on another level—her powers more than twice that of Guy, unimaginably. She was the younger sister of the Creator for a reason, and here on the surface of the planet, she wielded absolute power.

And what's worse, she had never truly fought all-out before—not even against her sister Velgrynd. She always took the form of a little girl when she did, sealing away her powers. When she obliterated Veldora, that was nothing but a playful blow to her. Her strikes weren't just powerful—they were energy-efficient.

The only time she ever got serious was when she fought against Guy. He could only fight on an even keel with her thanks to his superior fighting sense. He was also trying to ensure this fight didn't damage people and buildings on the ground as much as possible, which perhaps says something about just how all-powerful Guy Crimson can be.

The battle, as usual, was shaping up to be a stalemate. Then Guy realized something.

She's not being controlled at all...

He was sure she was, but in his mind, she simply chose not to resist this thrall, likely because her desires matched those of her cohorts. Velzard just looked so happy—a face that brought back memories for Guy, one she only showed in the midst of battle.

It wasn't exactly good news, though. Guy was fed up with it. She had bottled up all these desires of hers for so long, and here comes Feldway and his gang, freeing it all. Until Velzard could be convinced otherwise, in other words, their relationship would never improve. If this were merely about mind control, they could shut it off and everything would be fixed. But it wasn't, and now Guy had nothing left to try.

Velzard wasn't going to be persuaded. The only way to restore her sanity was to let her have at it with Guy for as long as she wanted.

"I never should've left my bedroom today..."

Guy was whining, but there was a bold smile on his face. He lunged at his enemy once more, enjoying every moment.

*

In the skies, even higher above the castle than Velzard and Guy, Feldway and Zarario were facing off against Diablo.

"So a single evil demon wants to take us both on? Looks like you don't know your place, do you?"

"Keh-heh-heh-heh... You told me to prepare for the worst the next time we met. You *will* be entertaining me today, won't you?"

“...Feh. I don’t have time to play with you. He’s all yours, Zarario.”

Feldway wanted to avoid a decisive battle with Diablo. He knew how much of a headache that demon was, and he hesitated to take him on in a serious fight. So, without saying another word, he left for the castle.

Diablo thought about getting in his way, but Zarario wouldn’t allow it. The angel hated every bit of this situation, especially how he was forced into it, and honestly, he wanted to say no to Feldway. But it was an order from his direct boss, and he had no choice but to comply with it.

“Well, so be it. I suppose you’ve obtained the name Diablo in the meantime, but let’s see just how much stronger you’ve become.”

With those words, the two of them entered battle.

Zarario may not have wanted to be here very much, but he liked his chances. He had just obtained a physical body, and already it seemed to fit like a glove. For the first time in too long, he could exert his full strength without breaking himself in the process, and the thought was already lifting his spirits.

“Eight-Way Dark Authority.”

He decided to go first. The technique was simple—gather his aura around his palm, then release—but the power was immeasurable. Eight projectiles streamed toward Diablo.

“Ridiculous. So that truly *is* all you have to offer?”

Diablo, on the other hand, couldn’t have sounded more bored. It wasn’t some strategy to egg his opponent on or brag about his superiority—he meant it. It might’ve been one thing if one side here was notably stronger than the other, but in an even match, you had to be very careful with your first few moves.

Lightly dodging these blasts of force, Diablo glared at Zarario.

“Wasting your energy like this... Were you just some amateur who happened to have a little muscle?”

He was being pretty serious about that. Zarario maintained his composure, despite how annoying he found this. *This is exactly why I hate him*, he thought as he hid his anger.

"Silence. That doesn't even count as expending energy to me. The absolute amounts of power that each of us contains are like night and day. You should worry about yourself first before giving a thought to me."

This much was the truth. Zarario was a different creature from back when he stormed Ramiris's labyrinth. With his physical body, he was able to fully tap into the power of his "real" body from back in the Mystic Palace. With an EP count of over 20 million, he was sure not even a True Dragon could defeat him. A little excessive energy use could be made up for instantly. It wasn't worth worrying about.

But Diablo sniffed at this. "This is why amateurs don't belong here. In *our* battles, we must either eliminate the opponent with a single blow, or prepare ourselves for a prolonged fight. If you don't understand that, Zarario... Well, you've been lazy with your training, haven't you?"

His superiority complex was starting to grate on Zarario. He could put up with it if Diablo talked this way after beating him, but this fight had only just begun. Trying to sap your opponent's will to fight is a perfectly valid strategy, but that didn't seem to be Diablo's aim here. He was honestly, seriously, giving him a word of warning. Zarario understood that, and it irritated him even more.

"Shut your mouth. I don't need any of your advice. You don't *need* to worry about me. I've fought on the front lines for years and years against the insectors—the nemesis of both us and you demons. I need to teach you that people like you, lounging around here on the surface, are *nothing* to me!"

"Hmm. Well, good to know that. And don't worry. I've been constantly fighting to the death against Sir Zegion as well. He's an insector, too, and on the strong side of them, I believe. Also, much to my envy, Sir Rimuru has even granted him some of his cells, so there's very little to his body that's vulnerable at all. Even for me, he is a difficult foe to conquer."

When he said very little of Zegion is vulnerable to attack, he didn't mean it literally. That was just a rule Diablo invented for himself when he fought him—he didn't want to target anywhere on Zegion's body that may contain Rimuru's cell matter. This rule was also the reason why the three demonesses had yet to defeat Zegion, but that's another story.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but none of the training you could do on *this* world could ever—"

Zarario stopped himself mid-sentence. It didn't dawn on him at first, but that name Zegion was familiar to him. Deeno described him as a serious challenge, and even Zeranus demonstrated a healthy interest in him, didn't he? And if Diablo was not just training, but literally fighting to the death against him...

"Hmm. Perhaps this is no time for playing after all."

So Zarario finally resolved to get serious—and the real battle between him and Diablo was about to begin.

*

Pico and Garasha were standing before Raine and Mizeri.

"It...it's cold..."

But Raine's heart was already about to break. *If I weren't a demon, she thought, I'd be running for the nearest fireplace long ago—but she had to focus on how to work her way through this.*

"Raine...didn't you say a moment ago that you were going to show your true colors? Why do you look so unmotivated right now?"

"What a foolish question, Mizeri. It's because I'm cold. Why do we have to fight in this cold—in the middle of a blizzard, no less—against someone we don't even *dislike* at all?!"

She wasn't even trying to hide her true feelings to Mizeri. It shocked her to hear it—but even more amazingly, Raine wasn't the only one with that opinion.

"You're so right!"

It was Pico, the enemy, who spoke up.

"It's pure white all over the place, we've got zero visibility...and why do I have to fight dressed like *this*, too?"

Pico *did* look cold, actually. So did Garasha, for that matter.

"Oh, stop complaining. I'm just as cold, you know."

She might've been admonishing Pico, but it was obvious that she shared her

feelings. Raine and Mizeri's maid outfits didn't exactly offer much insulation, either, but Pico and Garasha were wearing only a single, thin layer of clothing. Garasha's shoulders were bare, even. Just looking at her would make one shiver.

Wait... So am I the only one seriously trying to fight?

Mizeri, realizing this devastating truth, was visibly upset. The other three paid her no mind, sympathizing with each other over these terrible conditions.

"Like, I really wish Lady Velzard would stop conjuring up blizzards like this out of nowhere."

"Oh, for real. I wouldn't mind *that* much, but I wish she could've given us some warning, you know? Then I would've brought my fur coat along. I could've at least shown off a little."

"Whoa, Pico, when did you buy a fur coat?"

"Hee-hee-hee! Oh, I did a little shopping between jobs."

"Ohhh, from that city before? I bet you could find some good deals there!"

They were talking about Blumund, now a vital link between east and west where all sorts of products from around the world gathered. That included goods from Tempest, of course, including some very high-quality clothing and accessories. Pico and Garasha were supposed to be monitoring this world, but they were also having fun traveling all over it—much like Deeno, they danced to the beat of their own drum. They also had houses worldwide to serve as their bases, which helped a lot as they stayed at the forefront of high fashion.

So now everybody was starting to hit it off with each other, despite Raine's wary eyes upon them all.

"You can boast all you want, but we have some business first, don't we?"

These words came as a surprise to Mizeri.

Ah, there goes Raine again! Was she whining a moment ago in order to catch those two off guard? I didn't think she was looking to do something like that...

She had to applaud her coworker for it. And if that was the case, Mizeri was just waiting for the signal to start fighting. Instead, what she heard was Raine

taking it another step further.

“But we can’t hold a conversation in a place like *this*, can we? Don’t you think we should get out of the cold first?”

“...!!”

The other three were shocked at how self-serving this was. The entire concept of friend and foe was thrown out the window, leaving nothing but confusion in its wake. But Raine didn’t care. Swiftly alighting on the ground, she cast a certain spell.

“Strategic magic—Cocytus!”

“Raine! Hey! That spell could destroy the city— Whoa, since when were you *that* good with it?”

Mizeri was at a loss for words, and she had a right to be. Raine was just going nuts. Cocytus, the spell she cast, was meant to encase a wide area in ice all at once. Its range depended on the power of the caster, but if Raine wanted to, she could turn a twenty-mile radius around her into an ice rink. Mizeri had no idea why she was playing with fire (or rather, ice) like that, but in a few moments, she was greeted by a perfect ten-foot-tall cube of ice. It was teeming with evil magic, but it hadn’t caused any damage at all. Raine seemed to cast it just because she could, more than anything else. It began to seem like some kind of joke.

“Well?” Raine smugly asked.

Pico grinned, perhaps understanding her intent.

“Garasha!”

“Oh, I’m on it. I know exactly what you’re thinking!”

Garasha was in on whatever this was, too. Seizing the opportunity, she quickly prepared a spell of her own.

“Icebreaker!”

This was another elemental magic, a fairly high-level one to cast on a single target. It deliberately froze the moisture in the atmosphere, then crushed the resulting blades of ice—an outstandingly lethal move. But Garasha nimbly

manipulated this spell so that all it did was hollow out the large cube of ice before them.

So their impromptu igloo was now complete.

"You do pretty good work."

"Ha! You too."

Raine and Garasha complimented each other. A new friendship was budding.

"Let's go inside!"

Pico was the first to bound in, Raine and Garasha following without a second thought. Mizeri, left outside, just stood there, mouth open.

"Um, Raine? That wasn't a joke or a strategy or anything? You were serious...?"

But the only one who could answer that question was inside the igloo. So Mizeri, feeling like an incredible fool, hurriedly went in.

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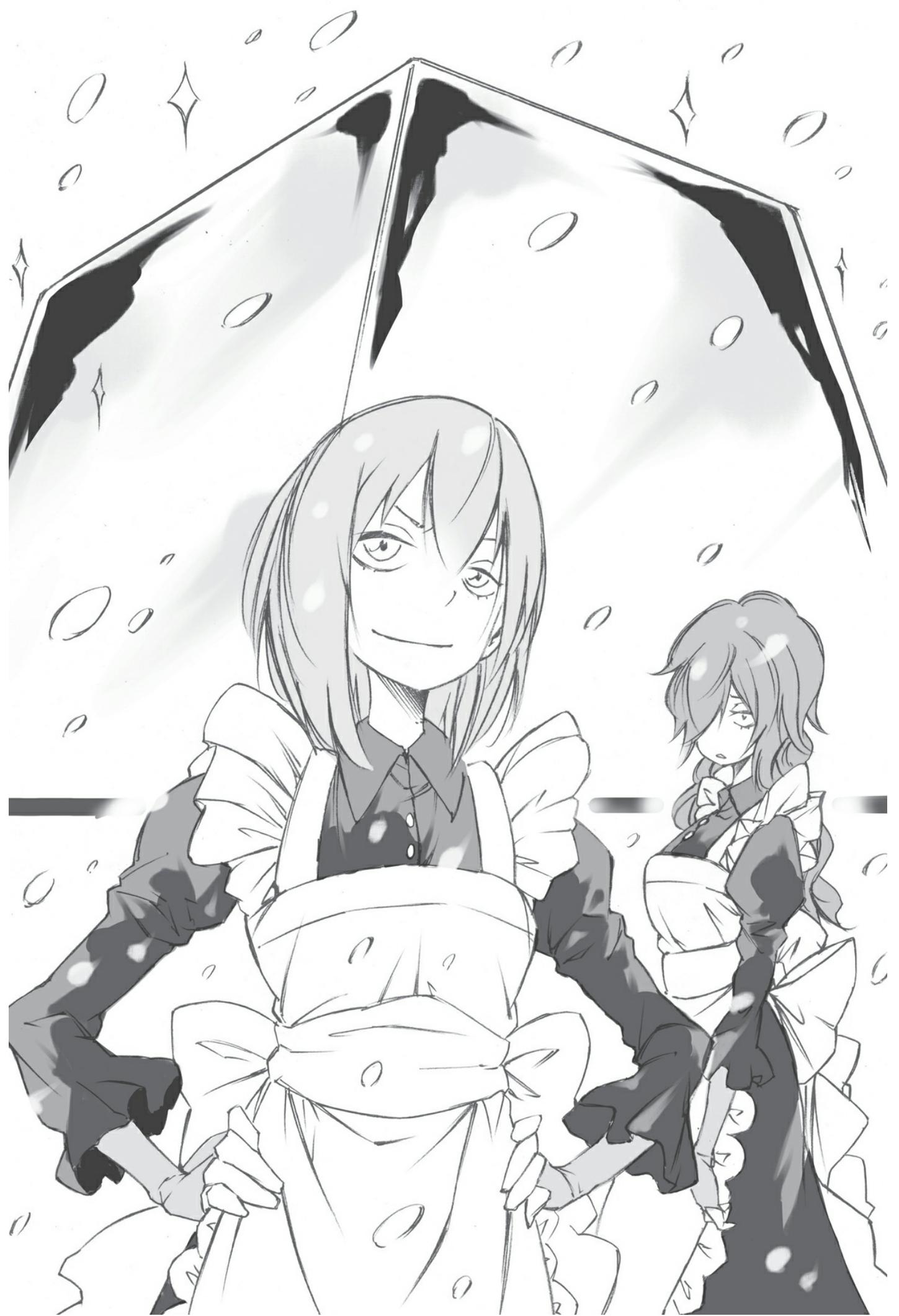
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"So, yeah, I probably shouldn't tell you exactly how we did it since it's a secret and all, but both of us had the honor of being evolved by Sir Rimuru's hand."

That was Raine wrapping up her answer to Garasha. She was asking her why they seemed so much stronger than before.

"You're blabbing about that much to the enemy...? Well, whatever."

Mizeri had given up on corralling her companion...but Raine was gaining a lot of information from Pico and Garasha, too. For one, it seems their skills, as well as Deeno's, were under the full control of Michael. Pico also had the ultimate skill Jibril, Lord of Rigor, and Garasha had her own in Haniel, Lord of Glory. And although they didn't seem to be aware of it, Raine surmised that Michael put on some kind of restraint that prevented either of them from defying his orders. All that, *plus* a full picture of the enemy force's strength.



By comparison, Raine hadn't given out much intel. Casually name-dropping Rimuru like that was ill-advised, but she hadn't been told not to, so what's the problem? There wasn't any, at least in Raine's mind. If Rimuru heard about it, he'd probably whip himself for not explicitly forbidding it before yelling at her.

Regardless, in exchange for revealing that Rimuru helped them evolve, Raine had obtained some pretty vital intelligence. After that, though, the meeting turned into a bitch-fest, everyone talking about their difficulties and complaining about their bosses.

All four of them, by the way, had a magic-powered fire going inside this igloo, making things feel very pleasant. Raine also had some sweet potatoes with her, which she placed on skewers and roasted over the fire, so there was a light, pleasant aroma in the air. She'd even brought some sweet sake.

"This is perfect for cold weather," said Raine.

"You brought *that*, too...?"

"Oh, don't frown at her, Mizeri. You shouldn't be such a stick in the mud like that. *I* think it's just fine, you know."

"You say that, Garasha, but I'm sure you just want a swig of that, don't you? I do, too, so I won't stop you..."

"Exactly, Mizeri. When the fighting's over, we will all make up over drinks. That's how these things *should* go!"

The fighting never began in the first place, but nobody besides Mizeri was going to mention that right now. It was three to one, though, leaving her with no choice but to give up. So this epic battle was transformed into a nice little winter retreat for the four of them—and as the rest of the fighting continued to rage outside the igloo, they continued trading their takes in hushed tones.

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Leon sat on his throne. His days of peace were over.

With a loud splintering sound, the grand door leading to this audience chamber caved in. Amid the carnage, the intruder appeared, walking in majestically.

"Hohhhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Hello there, everybody! My name is Footman the Angry Jester, member of the Moderate Jesters. Glad to make your acquaintance!"

Between his rotund body and angry clown mask, he was a bizarre sight to see. But Leon was familiar with this jovial-sounding clown. He had done business with him before; they were bound by a contract that, by now, was nothing but an embarrassing memory. And while this clown seemed rather powerful at the time, it was nothing compared to now.

Leon sensed a strange, eerie force from him. But what did he want? If he was here to capture him, it'd surely be too reckless to barge in alone.

So the enemy's outmuscled us, in the end? But I don't understand. What's this man thinking? If he could help the rest of our allies, perhaps we could turn the tables on this war, but...

Leon stood up.

"So you've come here all alone?" bellowed Arlos. "Don't tell me you expect to come out alive?"

Claude, meanwhile, stood motionless with one hand on his sword, ready to protect Leon at any moment.

Leon pondered the situation. *Footman*, he thought, *must have had some other objective. That, or—*

But just then, a woman came through the broken door and entered the audience chamber.

"Ah, there you are, demon lord Leon. Hee-hee-hee-hee! Do you remember me?"

It was a beautiful, graceful woman speaking, a chuckle on her lips. She was in a navy blue business suit, making her look like the quintessential secretary. Her skin was smooth and pale, her blond hair tied in a chignon around her well-balanced face. Her blue eyes had a mysterious glow to them, and she had them pointed directly at Leon.

"Then again, I suppose this is the first time some of you have seen me since

my...change in appearance. My name is Kagali, and I am president of the Moderate Jesters. I *do* have a grudge against you for killing me, so I thought fit to take you on by myself."

Kagali was being almost too theatrical as she gave this introduction.

Two clowns followed her into the room. The one with the crying mask was Teare, carrying a massive scythe on her back.

"I'm Teare," she said with a laugh, "the Teardrop Jester on the team. I hate being sad, and I'm gonna eliminate any enemy of Lady Kagali's on the double!"

To prove her point, she dexterously spun her scythe in the air in a dance-like move. Then she gave the stage over to Laplace, another clown, with an asymmetrical mask and a demeanor that made it seem like he was constantly making fun of you.

"And I'm Laplace the Wonder Jester, vice president of the Moderate Jesters. We're havin' some lovely weather outside, ain't we? ...Oh, but that doesn't matter right now, huh?! I was told to sprint all the way here, and boy, are my legs tired. And look at all the commotion around here, too! I *really* wish I could just go home..."

Laplace's introduction was really more of a rant, which certainly fit his personality. But once the clowns were done, the last member appeared, a young man wearing a black imperial uniform and an intrepid smile. It was Yuuki Kagurazaka, still under Michael's full control.

"Hey. Guess I'm going up last, huh? My name's Yuuki. And you're the demon lord Leon, right? I feel like I might've met you before, but my memory's going on me a little, so I can't be too sure. Sorry."

Michael's rule over people worked on set levels. There were two types of domination: one where the subject still had free will and one where certain restrictions were put in place. When he dominated someone via their angelic skills, there was no threat of being betrayed, so Michael gave them a lot of leeway in their behavior. Yuuki, on the other hand, was ruled via Regalia Dominion, which meant considerable checks on what he could do. In a way, this was Michael recognizing what Yuuki was capable of. If he saw him as someone less capable, he would've allowed free thought like what Kagali and the others

enjoyed.

Regardless, this had the effect of making Yuuki appear suddenly absent-minded. Once he finished introducing himself, he leaned against the destroyed doorframe, seemingly uninterested in Leon and his attendants.



Hmm...

Leon could grasp the situation. There were five adversaries in total, each with strength equal to—or, really, greater than—his own. Between that and being outnumbered, the situation couldn't be much worse. Realizing this, he began to waver over whether to invoke one of his most secret moves. Maybe he could take one of them out himself, but if he wanted to survive, he needed to put it all on the line. If it didn't work out, he had to run, and he had preparations for that in place, too.

He only wavered because in Kagali's eyes, he saw not madness, but rational reason. Rimuru told him before that Kagali was previously the demon lord Kazalim. He had almost forgotten about that man entirely, but even now, he could vividly recall the insanity in his eyes. The current Kagali might describe it as being mad with envy, but to Leon at the time, it was nothing short of terrifying. Now, however, she was as beautiful as lapis lazuli.

It's...not a different person, no. But she must have some kind of agenda for this. And would that mean there's room to negotiate?

Despite all the pressure, Leon had an accurate bead on his foe's situation. But the clowns were still talking in front of him.

"Demon lord Leon! You are not only responsible for the downfall of Sir Kazalim, but for leaving Clayman the Crazed Clown, our brother and friend, to die! You will not have an easy death, I promise you, because I am *quite* angry right now!"

Footman bent his portly frame in a bow.

"Yeah," continued Laplace, "that fool Clayman didn't become a demon lord just for fun. He was the only one for th' job, so we sent 'im out as a replacement for our president if somethin' happened to her. And *now* look how it's turned out, huh? Ahh, what a regret!"

Perhaps it was his memory of Clayman that added this twinge of sadness to his voice.

"It truly *is* sad, isn't it? But now Lady Kagali's given us this opportunity for revenge! I'm gonna throw all my hatred at you, so don't fall down till we're all

done!"

With Teare's final despondent statement, the battle began.

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Leon had three people on his team. Kagali had five, but Yuuki didn't seem interested in joining in. Teare faced Arlos, with Claude serving as Footman's opponent. The remaining two, of course, would be paired with Leon.

Normally, defeat would have been inevitable...but it was not to be.

Breaking out his Flame Pillar sword, Leon brought it in front of him—just in time for Kagali to strike with the Ruin Scepter she borrowed from Michael. The shockwave of two God-class weapons clashing with each other reverberated across the chamber, and as they did, Leon heard a voice in his mind.

(Hey, can you hear me? I want to talk.)

Leon nodded back. His guess was right.

(Thank you. There are eyes on me. That's why I did what I did. There's no such thing as being too careful with this.)

That seemed true enough. Leon looked at Kagali, urging her to continue. They were playing out a heated battle through all this, their conversation being held on a thin tightrope.

Laplace was there, by the way, to serve as a conduit for their Thought Communication. The master-and-servant relationship he had with Kagali was being used to encrypt the information being transmitted before relaying it over to Leon. Leon's responses would get filtered through Laplace as well, getting encrypted again before reaching Kagali. This roundabout process was designed to keep Michael from reading her mind. Kagali believed that he couldn't read everything that went through her brain, so she kept her thoughts deep down, behind multiple layers of barriers.

She was being so careful because here, right now, she was about to betray Michael. She once had a grudge against Leon, but had regained some composure now that she was far away from Michael. Thanks to that, she concluded it was best to join forces with Leon after all. As long as she could get inside Ramiris's labyrinth, she could escape Michael's surveillance on her...and

something also told her that the mysterious slime over there would do anything to free her and her friends.

(You must have some kind of emergency accessway in here, don't you? We can't reach the labyrinth via magic, but if there's a way, we'd like access to it.)

They could magically transport themselves, but it'd be a risk. Such unexpected behavior on Kagali's part might make Michael tighten the reins on her. Ideally, she wanted to flee directly into the labyrinth—and if that wasn't possible, she wanted to meet someone on the other side, ready to receive them as refugees.

(All right. I understand your situation.)

(Well, I'm glad to see you're so unhurried about this, but Michael is after you, you realize. You possess Metatron, Lord of Purity, don't you?)

(...I will not deny it.)

Even Leon recognized that there was no point hiding it any longer. They must've known already—they wouldn't be attacking his domain otherwise.

That lent a lot more credence to what Kagali and her team told him. With this much difference between them in firepower, there was no point stringing Leon along for information like this. Normally, they could just disable him and drag him in front of Michael. Plus, as flashy and obviously violent as Teare and Footman were, Arlos and Claude were still safe and uninjured. If they *really* wanted to kill his attendants, they'd almost certainly be in pieces by now.

Under these circumstances, there was no reason to perpetuate this act. And that's why Leon was convinced Kagali meant what she said.

(All right. I'll trust you. There is indeed a transport magic circle in this castle that leads directly to the labyrinth.)

(I knew it!)

Kagali's face lit up. Now her plan seemed much more likely to succeed than before. And as their blades continued to clang against each other, she leaned forward and began to negotiate even more fiercely.

Leon might have thrown away his suspicions, but he still wasn't sure whether to meekly give the nod. But as he wavered, the smile of Chloe, the girl he loved,

passed through his mind. A smile that was directed not at him...but at Rimuru.

Dark, brooding feelings began to well up from deep within his heart. This was not jealousy. Absolutely not! He tried to swallow up these feelings, enduring them for as long as they lasted. And then he thought:

Rimuru would accept this group, I'm sure. It'd be pushing more trouble on his plate, but I won't exactly have a guilty conscience about it, no.

If anything, the thought refreshed him. Maybe he had nothing to worry about at all. So, with a broad nod, he began to be much more proactive with Kagali.

(So would it be just you five?)

(Yes. Yuuki has his own followers, but they can't be trusted. I'm planning to leave them here. They're not going to die anyway, and there's no point using them as hostages against us, either.)

(Wouldn't taking them along help reduce our enemy's force that much more?)

Leon was being oddly kind to him. He kept being misunderstood as this coldhearted miser, but that was chiefly thanks to his social awkwardness.

(You know, you're not at all like what I thought. You never gave me a break the last time we fought...)

(I couldn't help that. I had a demon lord attacking me, and I lost my cool. If I wanted to prevent civilian casualties, I couldn't let that fight extend for too long.)

That was understandable. If two evenly matched demon lords fought each other, the damage to the surrounding area would be devastating. If he wanted to avoid that, a quick, decisive battle was likely in Leon's best interests.

(That's fair. Besides, I was a fool back then anyway. I have no right to complain about it to you. Forget I brought it up.)

Leon wasn't sure how to react. He expected a lot more complaining.

(...You truly have changed.)

And then, leaving those muddled words behind, he flipped the page.

(So the magic circle in question is behind this chamber. This room itself is the most protected place in the castle, complete with a Multilayer Barrier. Open the hidden door behind the throne and you'll see it.)

(Thank you. But what will you do?)

Michael's objective was Leon. Kagali was implicitly inviting him to escape together with her. Leon didn't hesitate in his response.

(I will stay here. If I intended to escape, I would have gone to Rimuru first thing.)

Kagali nodded. It made sense to her.

(Michael's rule over you will be absolute, keep in mind.)

(Yes, but it must involve certain conditions. If the worst happens and I turn into his puppet, I'm sure Guy will analyze the process and come up with a way to cut it off.)

That was one reason he was staying, but it wasn't all of it. In truth, Leon's chief interest was doing what he personally could to protect the citizens of El Dorado. That was the will of Leon Cromwell, a man even willing to abandon his title as Hero to protect those of mixed human and monster blood.

(You truly are an awkward character, aren't you? Throwing yourself away to struggle so mightily for the sake of others...)

(Heh. Not true. You won't find many people as immoral as I am. I'm willing to sacrifice others, even for the sake of the one person I love. And that's something I'll have to personally pay for.)

That was how Leon expressed his resolve. Kagali, realizing this, decided to respect that will of his. She needed to save her own team first; she didn't intend to waste time persuading him otherwise.

So they had a plan. Kagali went through Laplace to inform Teare and Footman of it as well. Leon, meanwhile, was in contact with Arlos and Claude about it. Neither of them felt their foes were seriously fighting, either, and now Leon explained to them why. That only left Yuuki, and by this point, they could just drag him up on that circle, if it came to it.

Leon looked at Kagali, signaling the location of the hidden door. Reading this sign, Kagali pretended to be blown backward by an attack, bashing herself against the door. Laplace, seeing it open, gave his own signal to Footman and Teare. Arlos and Claude, playing along, pretended to be thrown backward as well, allowing their opponents to scramble through the door.

“Sir Yuuki!”

“Oh, I’m up?” came the reply as he strode inside.

(Okay, now we just have to have Leon activate the magic circle!)

Kagali was sure of her success. It was a tightrope the whole way, but now she could escape from Michael. Or she should have.

Alas, fate had already forsaken them all.

Michael, who remained in the Celestial Palace, had picked up on Obela’s treachery before Deeno could report to him about it. He was furious. Never before in his life had something like this happened. Seeing things go wrong with his plan made him seethe with rage.

The cause of this, if you drilled down deep enough, was his own naïveté. He had the absolute power of rule over them all, but he believed he had a friendship with them all, too—this ambiguous, inexact factor—and now it had led to this. Obela had only just obtained Azrael, Lord of Salvation, but Michael was already aware. He should have tightened his rule over here right at that point, and not doing so was his mistake.

It was up to him to make up for it, so as furious as he was, he began to think rationally. Then, through Feldway, he strengthened his Ultimate Dominion grip on his servants with angelic skills. And with that, Kagali was drained of her sense of self.

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There was just one more step. But it was so endlessly far away.

Feldway appeared through the audience chamber’s broken door.

“You know, I was *wondering* what was going on here. Look at you, plotting to betray us! You stupid fools, completely misunderstanding my cause!”

Seeing Feldway shouting in a rage, Kagali knew her plan had failed. She tried to at least get Laplace and the others through the circle to safety—the next best solution. All she had to do was order them to do it...but now, she was blocked from so much as uttering a single word.

"Don't bother. We've completely taken you over with Ultimate Dominion. Sir Michael is quite angry with you. We've let you do what you've pleased for too long, he said. And *also...*"

Leon had stopped. Feldway's cold gaze shot right through him.

"...I see that the man we wanted is in here. *You* will be our loyal servant, too."

Before his voice was even heard, Leon activated Metatron with everything he had. He wanted to unleash a blast at divine speed, hoping to kill in a single shot. But he was already too late.

Dammit... I can't resist this...

A new loyalty for Michael, a man he had never met in his life, began to shoot up from the depths. His memories and knowledge were all intact, but now Leon's ego was filled with a feeling of sheer ecstasy.

Chloe, you are mine...!!

The smile of the girl he loved, suddenly flashing through his mind, was similarly overwritten by this irresistible elation. Just like Kagali's, Leon's mind had been taken. All his feelings for his beloved companions had been replaced by his utter faith in Michael.

Every single time, I always blow the landing...

Kagali lamented her fate, feeling tremendously sad about it all, but even that regret soon disappeared.

"Hey, President, yer gonna give up now? C'mon! I believe in ya."

A sudden voice confounded her. But it was like a child crying through multiple sheets of glass. She couldn't clearly make it out.

"Kagali, does your locking curse not work on him?"

"No, Laplace is special, so he doesn't have to heed my orders."

"Oh. Well, we don't need *him*, then."

The cold voice, devoid of all emotion, propagated itself into Kagali's ears.

"All right. Thank you for everything, Laplace. At least allow me to finish you off by my own hand."

"Whoa! President?!"

Only Laplace was bewildered by this sudden change in Kagali. Teare, Footman, Yuuki, even their former enemy Leon just watched on, like all of this was obvious.

Kagali's Ruin Scepter glowed a golden color.

"Don't just *stand* there!!"

And when Laplace had given up all hope, a woman appeared out of nowhere and pushed him away. Then, with her sword, she deflected Kagali's all-destroying ray of golden light.

"Who're you?!"

"I don't have time to tell you...but hey, how 'bout I do? I'm Sylvia, and I'll take care of things in here. Think of me as, like, a superstrong hired hand!"

She was a beautiful woman, her long greenish-silver hair in a large braid. Her thin dress, with its silken luster, was high-end Tempestian make, suited for use in battle. Her legs were visible through the slits in the dress, and if you took a closer look, you could see that she was wearing denim shorts underneath. Maybe she wanted to be safe in case of a really intense fight, but if so, she should've just worn pants instead. Her fashion sense was selfishness personified; you could tell she didn't want to give up on looking nice, no matter what. And that, in turn, said a lot about her personality.

The woman called herself Sylvia—Leon's instructor, and someone called up as a final ace in the hole.

The sight of Sylvia filled Laplace with nostalgia. He was a walking dead created by Kagali, and while Kagali never exacted her thrall on him (thanks to his Hero role pre-death, perhaps), he had lost almost all of his memories. He didn't know that his real name was Thalion Grimwald, and he also had no idea that Sylvia,

the woman who just saved his hide, was his wife.

Nonetheless, he could instinctively tell that Sylvia was someone important to him.

"I dunno what's goin' on, but I'm a man, too, y'know. I ain't pathetic enough to leave all this to a li'l girl like you!"

It was back to Laplace as usual. Things had moved so fast that he needed some time to catch up, but then, that wasn't unusual for him. So, like always, he just did what he could to get out of trouble.

"You guys! If yer still alive, you gotta get outta here, okay? I'm sure Teare and Footman tired you all out, and you *ain't* gonna survive what's about to happen, okay?"

His eyes were still fixed upon Kagali and Yuuki, but he was talking to Arlos and Claude, both sprawled out in a corner of the chamber. They both somehow had enough healing potion to hold out so far, but the bags around their waists, despite their spatially expanded capacity, were nearly empty. They barely had any escape route at this rate, but still, they sniffed at Laplace's call.

"Ha-ha-ha! Don't worry about us. Like I always tell my students, when times are tough, running away's the last thing you wanna do. I need to set the example for them, you know, or else they'll never do it!"

"Heh-heh... A true knight would never abandon his lord in times of need."

They both understood they were no longer a force, but a liability in this battle. But they still refused to leave, because they were prepared to sacrifice their lives for Leon. They believed that Rimuru would come to the rescue before long, so they were willing to take years off their own lives to keep buying time.

"Man, you guys are *dumb*, y'know that?"

"Ha-ha-ha! High praise, coming from a clown like you!"

"I don't think that was meant as a compliment, Sir Claude. But I do envy you. At least you still have it in you to laugh over this!"

A small smile appeared on Arlos's lips. He and Claude were resolved to the fates, and that fact made them strong. And Laplace, too, was rethinking

matters.

Can't lose out to these guys, no...

"Okay, let's start over. If we kill that guy over there, the president'll go back to normal, right? Well, count me in!"

With that, he glared at Feldway. His gut told him that he—not Michael, who wasn't in the room—was doing a lot more to cause this.

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So the battle returned to the audience chamber, pitting Laplace, Sylvia, and two sorely wounded knights against Feldway, Kagali, Leon, Yuuki, Footman, and Teare. It was four against six, and the strength difference wasn't even worth calculating.

"Sylvia! Quick question."

"Mm? What's up?"

"How far do you think we can go with 'em? Be honest."

"Hmm... Well, I don't think my answer will make you too happy."

"Nah. Actually, never mind!"

Laplace laughed. She had a point.

Something about this exchange tugged at Sylvia's heartstrings. It wasn't the conversation itself, really—just the presence of Laplace himself. It seemed so comfortably familiar.

Do I know him, maybe? No, that can't be right. But ah well. Now's no time to worry about things like that.

Sylvia may have had a willowy, graceful body, but she was unmistakably a seasoned warrior. She wasted no time focusing her attention on her enemy. Feldway, meanwhile, wasn't moving. He fully intended to leave the grunt work to his servants—that was how little he thought of Sylvia's side.

But maybe there was a silver lining to the impossibly long odds they were facing.

That arrogance of his could be fatal—is what I'd like to tell him, but he's the

head Primordial Angel, isn't he? I heard about him from Twilight, but honestly, he's probably stronger than I am, huh?

As lackadaisical as that demigod was, it was best not to take him at his word. Sylvia had been tricked by him many times, leading to all sorts of unpleasant situations. But judging by what the Primordials were doing, they certainly couldn't be a bunch of weaklings. Even if it was just a bunch of talk, Sylvia could tell she was outclassed.

As they confronted each other, she could sense this thick, awful presence. Everybody in this room was a monster—Arlos and Claude included. In another time, even they could've had a legitimate shot at calling themselves demon lords and getting away with it. But Feldway was in his own dimension. Fighting him head-on would surely lead to defeat. The only strategy to take right now was to stall for time.

El mentioned Rimuru, thought Sylvia. He's coming soon, right? I don't know how well he can do against these freaks of nature, but he even defeated Velgrynd, didn't he? Well, we'll just have to hope.

Sylvia, as a high disciple of Twilight's, was proud of her considerable abilities. Her EP was just under two million, giving her the fighting ability of an awakened demon lord, and her weapon of choice was a God-class vajra, surpassing Leon's sword in terms of level. She could change out the number of blades on it whenever she wanted, and she excelled at stabbing away with it like a spear. Moreover, she even had the ultimate skill Indra, Lord of Thunder, making her stronger than Teare and Footman.

But not even that would put her at Feldway's level. She couldn't even shine his boots. Despite all the bold words she had for Laplace, it'd be a major challenge to turn the tables here. But if Feldway wasn't making any moves, they still had a chance at winning.

She was aware of the chance Leon was under someone's control. She had explained to him how to separate a skill from his heart core, and she was sure he was struggling hard to regain himself right now. If he succeeded, there was a very good chance the skill would be lost entirely—which is exactly what Obela did, by the way. The penalty in terms of battle strength would no doubt be

enormous.

Either way, it wouldn't be very easy, so she'd taught it to Leon as a last resort.

And, yeah, that's up to Leon anyway. He was a real skilled pupil, but will he succeed? I'd say it's around fifty-fifty, maybe...

She couldn't be too optimistic about it, but there was still a chance Leon could return to battle. Pinning their hopes on that was far too reckless a bet, but she didn't have any other bright ideas. Complaining wasn't going to help either way, though, so all she could do was brace herself and do the best she could.

"Okay, you two, focus on supporting me! And you, the clown! Your opponent is..."

"It's me, isn't it? Well, I gotta do *some* work, I guess. Don't want my rep to be hurt."

Yuuki, one of their enemies, interrupted Sylvia. Wasting no further time, he unleashed a kick on Laplace.

"Huh? Whoa! Boss! Are you serious?!"

Laplace might've had the battle start on him without warning, but he still didn't neglect to ingratiate himself with his new friend.

"I'm a clown, yeah, but my name's Laplace, okay?"

He had to shout it at Sylvia as he fought off Yuuki.

"Well, Laplace, you really *are* a dangerous one. I think there's room for one more. How about I join Sir Yuuki against you?"

Now Kagali was part of the fray.

"Hey! No fair! I'm gonna start cryin' before too long, y'know!"

Even Laplace was facing a crisis at this point. Fighting just one of them was enough of a hassle. If they were going at him simultaneously, he had no more time to joke around.

But then Leon made a move.

"Heh. Looks like I'll be facing you, then, Master Sylvia. But personally, I don't want to point a sword at you. Would you be willing to defect to our side?"

He gave the offer with only the most gentlemanly of politeness. Even being controlled like this, his memory was still intact. If Michael or Feldway ordered her dead, there was nothing he could do about that—but if not, he still had some control over himself. That being said, he had been ordered not to betray his new master, no matter what. Making this offer to Sylvia was about the best he could do for her.

“Leon... Look, you called me here, didn’t you?”

“Yes. And that is why I hope you could take my side in—”

“This is getting nowhere. You know I don’t want you to hate me, Leon. If I said yes to you right now, you *know* you’d complain to high heaven about it once you’re back to normal.”

Sylvia smiled at him. She knew exactly what Leon’s purpose in life was, and what he had always lived for. She understood his true feelings, and she wasn’t there to turn her back on them. But it didn’t come across to Leon.

“...?”

Leon still had his memories of Chloe, too. He still cared about her deeply, but that didn’t take precedence above his orders.

“You have a girl you like, don’t you? What would that girl think if she saw you right now, Leon?”

The question shook his heart. But he clamped down on it at once, regaining his cool.

“What a ridiculous question. I will just fulfill my wishes after Sir Feldway fulfills his. Until then, I am sure she will wait for me.”

“Um, you really think so...?”

Sylvia was fairly serious about that question. Based on what Elmesia and others told her, it was clear that Chloe’s own feelings weren’t geared toward Leon. He’d have to get pretty fiercely serious with her right now, or else waiting for him wouldn’t even occur in her mind. But that was Leon’s own problem, not one she was qualified to comment on. “Whatever,” she decided to advise him. “Just don’t come to me if she rejects you.”

Leon twitched a little, but nobody noticed. And just like that, the battle between him and Sylvia began.



Laplace was the most powerful magic-born in the Moderate Jesters, a demon lord in all but name and the owner of truly vicious powers. Kagali had reincarnated him into the body of a walking dead, but his experience and skills as a former Hero were all intact.

In addition, he possessed two unique skills. The first was Falsifier, which interfered with an opponent's perception—quite useful for launching a broad variety of attacks. He could also freely disguise his weapons, making the lance in his hand look like a dagger in his enemy's eyes—or make himself seem unarmed, only to throw a knife from out of thin air. That, or make a grenade look like a knife. It was a great way to toy with his enemies. With this power, too, it was easy to fake his own death to make good his escape.

That skill was devious enough by itself, but it had a partner—the clairvoyant unique skill Future Sight, Laplace's ace in the hole. With this, he could see several seconds into the future at any time—and that meant he always knew whether Falsifier would work against his foe or not.

He had immaculate physical abilities, a keen sense for battle, and the ability to predict the future and fight any way he wanted. It made Laplace invincible, and while he called himself vice-president of the Moderate Jesters, he easily outclassed President Kagali in pure strength.

Thanks to all of that, Laplace had enjoyed a long unbeaten streak ever since becoming magic-born. With fleeing being such an important tactical tool up his sleeve, he almost never actually admitted to losing against anyone. The only exception he made was when he talked about Yuuki Kagurazaka, the boy in front of him. But that was all in the past...

"Footman! Teare! Support Leon, and while you're at it, give that man the death he so richly deserves already!"

Kagali's order was the signal he needed. Realizing he had no chance if he kept running, Laplace went on the counterattack. He had two opponents, both as strong or stronger than him.

Really, the boss is probably the more dangerous one, huh? 'Cuz at the end of the day, Lady Kagali really ain't too good at close-range combat, so...

Laplace had known her for a very long time. He was well aware of her strengths and weaknesses, and even though she was far beyond what she was back in the Kazalim days, he thought she could handle her up close. Kagali had gained stamina, making her harder to beat. She had more power, more destructive force, a huge upgrade in speed...but even with all of that, her overall skill in battle hadn't changed. If he could speed up his reflexes and read her well enough, it was possible enough to handle her.

But even Laplace didn't like his chances against Yuuki. His strength looked to be around the same as before, but making assumptions about that was dangerous. Thus, Laplace decided that instead of actively engaging Kagali, he was better off keeping a wary eye on Yuuki.

"Don't hate me for this, Yuuki!" he shouted as he threw an array of knives at him. But Future Sight told him they would all miss. So, without panicking, he made his next move, tossing more knives in the direction Yuuki would dodge.

He didn't forget to keep Kagali in check, either. He might've been easygoing about it on the surface, but he was desperately working two unique skills at once to stay alive. But not even that could touch Yuuki.

Aw, no way! Even with Future Sense, all I'm seeing is my attacks missing him...

Seeing just a few seconds ahead meant little against him. Falsifier didn't even work on Yuuki anyway. He thought before that he couldn't beat him—and this time, too, victory seemed like a long shot.

But...well, not like I'll give up 'cause of that.

If he was going to admit defeat that easily, he wouldn't have gone to such a lethal fight in the first place. That, and Laplace always pinned a lot of his dreams on what Yuuki told him.

"Boss, you said it yourself! You said you were gonna conquer the world!"

"Ah-ha-ha! Why are you so dumb, Laplace? You still believe in all that nonsense?"

"Of course I do! I'm tenacious that way. I ain't gonna give up on nothin' till I die, so as long as I'm livin', I'll keep on believin' in ya, Boss!"

Laplace's shouting almost seemed desperate. Yuuki laughed mockingly at it.

"That's beyond comical, Laplace! Just because you're a clown doesn't mean you gotta try to earn a laugh at all costs, man."

Yuuki pressed in on Laplace, talking down to him the whole time. With the two of them close together, Kagali put her Ruin Scepter down before firing another death ray with it. But Laplace had no time to pay attention to it, feverishly parrying all of Yuuki's attacks.

All that power behind his fists! Is this guy really human? I swear, otherworlders really do come in all shapes 'n sizes, don't they? But still...

Still, something bothered him. At first glance, Yuuki was as fierce as ever on the attack...but in fact, his aim always seemed to be a little off. It wasn't anything Laplace did—it was all Yuuki's own free will.

Huh? Wait a sec. This signal... Maybe it's...?

Whenever he parried a punch or stopped a kick, there was a faint vibration from the blow. Now, he was recognizing the pattern. It was something he used to contact Clayman as well, encrypted so nobody else could decipher it. Only trusted associates knew the code.

So:

Uh, let's see... "Hurry up and notice, idiot! When you do, play along with me"? Wow, really?

Laplace wasn't so sure at first, but there was almost no chance this was a trap. Yuuki wouldn't need to go through the trouble of setting it—Laplace was going to lose anyway.

So, as he was told, he turned this into a sparring session with Yuuki.

"If you want power, I got a ton more than you!"

"Let's see about that."

They went into a grapple...and in an instant, he was sent flying.

So it's real!

It wasn't a trap. That throw contained his next message. Laplace deciphered it while he pretended to roll around on the floor—except without the “pretend” part, since it hurt really bad. They had latched on to each other for a short time, rather than making momentary contact with their fists or feet, so Yuuki gave him a decent amount of information this time. Now his current situation was clear to Laplace.

Boss! You've come to your senses?!

It was wonderful news, given this desperate situation. Laplace smiled joyfully under his mask as he kept reading the message.

Umm... So keep pretending to fight as you restrain the president, and I'll take care of the rest? The boss must have some kinda plan, then. All right. Let's do it!

Without a moment's hesitation, Laplace sprang into action, pretending to go on the offensive anew with Yuuki—but instead, he gripped Kagali in a tight embrace.

“...?!”

“Okay—Skill Steal...!!”

“What are you—?”

Kagali fell limply to her knees. Laplace held her up.

“Y-you okay, President?”

“Huh? Laplace? Um, what happened to—? Wait. My skill... Melchizedek! It's gone?!”

Kagali looked confused. But in another instant, she realized what happened.

“Teare! Footman! Get back here!!”

She deserved praise for shouting that to protect herself. Not even Kagali could hide her surprise at what happened...but even so, from the depths of her heart, she knew that this battle had suddenly taken a major turn.

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Sylvia, facing off against Leon, was struggling. He might have been her

student, but even she had to recognize his talents.

He had always been as good with a sword as Sylvia was, even back when he took in that light elemental and became active as a Hero—but with the ultimate skill Metatron, Lord of Purity, he was both a world-class demon lord and a peerless swordsman.

Leon, fighting for keeps now, delivered a string of light-speed slashes. They didn't really reach the speed of light, but his sword left streaks of light in the air, hence the name. The ultimate skill Metatron made these slashes into purely murderous strikes—the greatest power accessible via the holy attribute.

This skill gave Leon control over Disintegration, the most powerful holy magic. With Metatron, he could deploy the spiritual particles in his body and around his sword, turning him into a living icon of destruction that could dismantle anything he touched.

The combination of ultra-fast swordsmanship and the power of absolute destruction made Leon truly undefeatable. But Sylvia wouldn't go down without a fight.

Indra, her own ultimate skill, gave her rule over lightning, the most powerful of natural forces. The lightning strikes it summoned were strong in their own right, but the true essence of Indra lay elsewhere. Sylvia could transform her own body into a thunderbolt, allowing her to attack at divine speeds. It was why she was feared as the Thunder Empress long ago, and why she could still hold her own against Leon's onslaught.

Deftly maneuvering and transforming her vajra, she unleashed a constant flow of blade strikes. It let her save face as Leon's master, but inwardly, she felt an impending crisis ahead.

I knew he was strong, but he's grown this much...? I'm glad to see how much my pupil has advanced, but maybe not like this...

That's how she really felt. And the origins of this impending sense of doom stemmed from the fact that Leon still wasn't fighting all-out.

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It was Sylvia's position as Leon's instructor that let her know his weakness.

Leon was simply too soft. If an ally was nearby, he couldn't break out his full force. Kindness like that is a virtue, yes, but in battle, all it did was leave him open. Perhaps gaining strength out of his desire to protect was a good ideal for a Hero to uphold, but in real life, all it did was make him seem inexperienced.

And Sylvia knew it all. She knew about the orphans he picked up, the oppressed magic-born that he'd gathered to create this city with. Elmesia gave him financial support, but it was Sylvia who helped him build this nation behind the scenes. He was often misunderstood, thanks to the "evil" persona he laid out in his words and deeds, but she knew Leon was actually a very kind man.

When a girl named Shizu went out of control, costing the life of her friend, he cursed himself and called it his fault. He left her in the care of the Hero of that era, reasoning that it'd be better to live in a human world rather than be raised by a demon lord like himself. Sylvia knew he was watching over that girl, and thanks to that, he became aware of the future demon lord Rimuru before anyone else.

It was a coincidence that Elen and her friends became acquainted with that girl, Shizue Izawa. But Sylvia was also using Elmesia's troops to strengthen her surveillance beyond Leon's. That's why she found all the overlapping misunderstandings that resulted to be so frustrating. Her pupil Leon could be so weak-willed at times, which drove her crazy, but she didn't meddle in his affairs more than necessary.

So time passed, her watching over him and feeling frustrated. And now here he was, finally relying upon her. She had swung on in to answer that call, but the situation he found was exceedingly bad for everybody.

That was thanks to one clear and present reason: Leon's weakness was gone. He had always gone soft, never fighting for keeps—but now that Michael came first in his mind, he might make full use of his skill for a change. Metatron, Lord of Purity—a truly fearsome gift. He had control over it, always using minimal power whenever he called upon it. But Metatron was a skill best suited for large-scale annihilation. Indra was the same way, which only added to Sylvia's

alarm.

If Leon ever tapped fully into it...

What if Leon stopped caring about the fallout and just activated his full skill-driven powers? If he ever got *that* serious, this country would be wiped off the map. So Sylvia steeled her resolve. No matter how this turned out, she had to stop him.

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The battle seesawed back and forth, a furious exchange of sword clashes that seemed to last forever. The aftermath of this hyper-speed battle had already devastated the audience chamber—and worse still, the transport magic circle was destroyed. It was made of magisteel and meant to last, but one stray strike from Leon had battered it beyond repair. It was no longer usable. Not only could they not escape through it; Rimuru and his reinforcements wouldn't be able to reach here, either.

Sylvia rued that mistake. But Leon wasn't the sort of person who could fight while simultaneously protecting something. *It couldn't have been avoided*, she thought.

Arlos and Claude were certainly in no shape to help her, either.

"Wh-what a mind-blowing battle this is... Even with my eyes, I cannot tell who is winning."

"I know this sounds strange, but don't worry—neither can I, Sir Claude. I thought I would be able to keep up with Sir Leon at full force, but I suppose that was wishful thinking."

"Yes, indeed..."

They didn't know who Sylvia really was, but it was clear she wasn't just someone off the street. Seeing her unimaginable force in action silenced both of them.

The same was just as true for Teare and Footman.

"Not looking good. Leon's a lot stronger than I thought."

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! Yes, it'd be quite hard to intervene in that fight! So what can we do, then?"

"Guess we'll just have to pick off the wimpier guys!"

They gave each other a high five. Then they turned toward Arlos and Claude.

"Heh... They're after us now, are they?"

"We may not prevail, but at least let us raise our swords up...and show them the pride of a knight!"

"It's suicide, though... But we have no other choice."

They prepared themselves. As a proud magic knight captain and instructor, they knew where they were fated to die now. Their lives were like a candle flickering in the wind...but then a voice rang out.

"Teare! Footman! Get back here!!"

At the very last moment, Kagali regained her sanity—and Arlos and Claude were fortunate enough to escape with their lives.

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Feldway was torn. Something truly unbelievable was happening before his eyes right now. For tens of thousands of years, there had been no hitches in his plans. Lately, however, it felt like everything was coming apart at the seams.

It all began with Cornu's failures—the unthinkable act of losing an entire army. The Underworld Gate to the world in question had been shut off, making any further investigation impossible. Then the next shock: Velgrynd's return. She had been banished far off into another world, where she was doomed to wait for her final destruction—but here she was, back in the key world somehow and completely destroying Cornu.

There was no way any of this could happen, but that was the reality he had to face. So, this time, he dove deep into his planning, preparing for any possible contingency. And *now* look. Not only did Yuuki regain his freedom despite having a total lock on his brain—Kagali, who received an angelic skill from him, had gotten her wits back as well.

“...What did you do? How did you ever escape Regalia Dominion?”

Feldway’s voice sounded like it came from a deep pit of hell. He didn’t expect an answer, but this was Yuuki, after all. With a detestable little grin, he spoke up.

“Oh, the reason’s simple. I’m a genius, so I realized that this Regalia Dominion stuff was pretty bad news. Then I just substituted in this weird kind of will that was growing inside of me.”

“...A will, you say?”

“Yeah. Maybe it’s my ultimate skill Mammon, Lord of Greed, acquiring its own sentience or something? I originally took that greed-based skill from Maribel, after all, and I never *did* trust her. She was always kinda creepy, y’know?”

Yuuki might have become something of an expert at using Mammon, but that didn’t mean he trusted it. That cautious streak was a lot of what made Yuuki himself.

“It was real tough, too,” he continued. “I had to observe how this sentient Mammon was acting under your guys’ rule and figure out how all of it worked. It took a lot longer than I expected, but it looks like I got it together at the worst possible timing, huh? I mean, give me a break.”

He winked at Laplace and the others as he spoke.

This whole thing had been one big strategy. Even while being controlled, he was constantly observing the situation around him. The conclusion he came to: He had no way to beat Feldway. That’d be a different story at a future time, though. If he kept on accumulating strength, he knew he’d be able to compete with him someday. He wasn’t as fast as Rimuru, but his own growth rate was just that extraordinary.

So, for now, he was fanning the flames. If he could make Feldway’s side think they had a clear advantage and make them retreat, the day would be won. In the worst case, he at least wanted to buy some time so Rimuru could come to their aid. Just continuing this conversation would contribute to that cause.

This attitude of Yuuki’s infuriated Feldway, but he still kept calm. He thought over Yuuki’s words, seeing for himself that he wasn’t lying.

So he discovered how Sir Michael's skills work? How could some mere human do that? He's dangerous. Too dangerous...

He narrowed his eyes, seeing Yuuki as the enemy he was...and then he decided to reveal one of his hidden cards.

I wanted to keep this under wraps until the last minute, but so be it. Better to simply eliminate Yuuki here, rather than waste time examining this traitor's moves.

Feldway saw Yuuki as a clear and present danger. Not because of Yuuki's agitation, though. He could not allow Skill Steal, a feature of Mammon, to go unchecked any longer. If he did, Yuuki could free not only Leon, but everybody else here from Michael's control. With Ultimate Dominion now invoked, any trusting relationship they might've once had was as good as lost. So no matter how improbable this scenario was, Feldway decided the risk was too unacceptable.

"Way to go, Sir Yuuki!"

"Yeah, thanks."

"No wonder yer the boss, huh? It takes a lot more than *that* to keep ya down!"

"Hey, don't be shy, guys. Keep the praise coming."

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! I'm not at all sure what happened, but now I'm sure we have the upper hand!"

"I dunno about that, but...yeah, at least we've got some leeway to work with, maybe."

Feldway glared reproachfully at them as they jabbered on.

"Hold it, you! Let me ask—can you take Leon's ability, too?" Sylvia shouted.

She and Leon had continued their swordfight, regardless of what was happening around them. Now, they jumped a distance away from each other, taking a short pause, and that was the moment Sylvia took to ask the question. She hadn't even bothered to introduce herself to Yuuki, but he still gave her a friendly smile.

"Fraid not, sadly. Not now anyway. I don't really have the capacity for it..."

"Bah. Too bad. Well, you guys take care of your own business, but don't expect any help from me, okay?"

"Roger that. And try to figure something out with Leon for us, if you could?"

"I hear you! Time to show him what his master can *really* do."

So Sylvia and Leon went right back at it. It gladdened Yuuki to see, as he focused himself fully upon Feldway. His statement just now—that he couldn't snatch Leon's ability from him—was true. He had just taken Melchizedek, Lord of Dominion, from Kagali, and there was no way he could take another one before he finished analyzing the first.

The thing that mattered here was whether the skill had been created by the owner or granted by someone else. Kagali's skill was in the latter camp, making it unstable and more easily taken away. If the skill was more firmly rooted within the body, Yuuki likely couldn't take it even if he was in perfect condition—and for that matter, Skill Steal didn't work against those superior to him. Given the way Leon was, being mind-controlled and all, there was a nonzero possibility...but either way, it wasn't happening right this minute, and wasting time explaining why would just put him at a disadvantage.

That's why Yuuki got all vague at the end. *I'm sure*, he thought, *the enemy will doubt me anyway*. He knew he'd never trust the enemy, either. If he said, "I can't do it," Feldway would interpret it as "There's a chance he'll take our skills" and act accordingly. That was how Yuuki worked—he tried to exaggerate himself as much as possible.

Right now, the enemy wasn't going to make any sudden moves. And if this stalemate could continue for long enough, they'd have a tactical victory before long. But now it was Feldway laughing.

"Heh-heh-heh... Boy oh boy. I really *do* need to finish you all off here, don't I?"

The voice made Yuuki shudder—and when he heard it, he realized that his plan was already offtrack.

Did I stir him up too much? No, even if he went all-out right here, we'd be able

to withstand him, I think.

Yuuki vs. Feldway would end badly for the former. But now they were five against one. Sylvia was holding Leon back, so that'd let everybody else descend upon Feldway at once.

This, however, turned out to be a great miscalculation. Because now Feldway's final card was rearing its ugly head—in a way Yuuki could never have imagined.

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"Jahil, awaken! Kill this brat!"

The order came from Feldway.

"...?"

Yuuki didn't understand what he meant. Leon was too busy with Sylvia to comply with the order anyway. If anyone was going to do it, it'd have to be Feldway himself.

What kind of—?

But before Yuuki could figure out the answer, it plopped upon him.

"You called for me, Feldway? I owe you a debt, yes, but I very much resent being treated like your every wish is my command."

The voice reached Yuuki's ears after the searing pain battered his chest. He spat up blood, looking down at his torso—only to find a gruesome-looking hand emerge from it.

"Footman! What're you doing?!"

Footman turned around at Kagali's screaming, pulling his arm out from Yuuki's chest.

"Silence, Kazalim," he answered with a laugh. "What have you done? Abandoning the name and appearance I gave you?"

He spoke with a fluency that didn't sound like Footman at all, his evil aura greater and more horrifying than ever before.

"Ah, shit..."

Yuuki fell to his knees. As a Saint, he was a spiritual life-form and thus had complete control over his physical body. He could stop his bleeding any time he wanted, even. But this was no scratch he just incurred. A normal person would've died instantly from it.

"Hohhh? Still alive? You're a tough little piece of trash, huh? Stop causing me so much trouble!"



The moment he stopped talking, he reared back and kicked the nearly dead Yuuki into the air. With his newfound and destructive force, Footman's single strike had the power to instantly knock Yuuki out.

"Gahhh!"

"Sir Yuuki—"

Kagali and Teare rushed over to help him, while Laplace put himself in front of Footman.

"Who are you, huh?"

"Who am I, you ask? What kind of lowly garbage *are* you, if you don't even know the sorcerous dynast when you see him?"

This wasn't Footman at all. It was the king who perished from this world long ago—the emperor Jahil.

"Sorcerous... Wait, are you Jahil?"

Sylvia kept a broad watch, analyzing the situation while keeping her focus on Leon. She was listening in on this, of course, and the term *sorcerous dynast* rang a bell.

"Hohhh... And you must be Sylvia, then? Well, you're right. I am the great Jahil!"

The entire chamber tensed up. The blood drained from Kagali's face as Sylvia resentfully scowled. Kagali was his daughter, of course, but Sylvia knew Jahil as well, both having been high disciples of Twilight. They both disliked each other enough to part company and never speak to each other again, though they still appreciated each other's skills enough to be on a constant lookout.

Both of them knew how evil Jahil was, and both understood that his resurrection would be the worst of all catastrophes. And that's exactly what Feldway's trump card was.

Jahil had been found in his lands after Milim laid waste to them, a mere soul wandering around without a body. He couldn't have escaped his ultimate fate if he stayed that way, but instead he was brought into custody and put in a long, long sleep. While Lieutenant Kondo was busy controlling the demon lord

Clayman, Feldway was planting Jahil's soul inside Footman. A clown like this, with his weak sense of self and even weaker intelligence, could easily be taken over by Jahil's sheer power.

Such were Feldway's thoughts, and he was right. Jahil had gradually eroded his way through Footman's soul. At first, he could do little more than pass information on to Feldway, but now that Footman's body had a seraphim implanted in it, the balance of power was reversed and Jahil seized full control.

After that, all that remained was to awaken at Feldway's signal. He was hoping to save that moment when it'd be the most effective, and the way he saw it, that time was now.

"Jahil, it's time to use the powers I've given you to their fullest...and kill all of them."

These tools laid before Feldway were useless, and so they needed to be destroyed.

Jahil, together with his granted seraphim, had been lent Raguel, Lord of Relief, the skill Michael recovered from Velgrynd. He had secretly made it his own, making it into the ultimate enchantment Agni, Lord of Blazes.

"Har-har-har-har! I've waited ages for this day. At long last, I will be able to use my powers to the fullest!"

Jahil let out an evil laugh.

All of a sudden, Footman's enormous body was engulfed in flames, turning him into a flame overlord that destroyed everything it touched. Jahil could manipulate these flames at will, and now his vast powers were unleashed.

Footman's Angry Jester mask shattered, melting on the ground. The face behind it was horrifying, distorted, perhaps reflecting the nature of the person inside.

"Footman's mine! Give him back!"

Kagali was screaming. But her pained wailing only gladdened Jahil.

"Har-har-har-har! You were always the softest of the soft. I wish I could beat a little sense into you, but oh, what a shame! Sir Feldway has just ordered me to

kill you all. Forgive me, my idiot son!"

With zero remorse at all, Jahil threw a fireball at Kagali. It may not have been as powerful as what Velgrynd could conjure, but it was still intense. Taking that heat undefended would instantly vaporize her.

"Don't ignore *me*, dammit!"

Laplace attempted to fire a bolt of magic to deflect the ball of flame, but it just wasn't up to the task. It was swallowed up by the fireball, completely ineffective—and then it swelled up to engulf Kagali, then Teare, then Yuuki.

But after the flames died down, a figure was standing there.

"Nice try."

It was Yuuki. Despite his mortal wound, he had managed to stand up and quell the flame with Anti-Skill.

"...Hoh? My flames don't work on you? Hmm. I don't think it's a matter of overpowering you, no. That's trouble. You're trouble, I must admit."

Jahil suddenly had the curious eyes of a scientist conducting an experiment. His mouth twisted in curious glee, like he had just discovered a new toy.

"You okay, Boss?" Laplace asked.

"As if," said Yuuki. "I wanna lie down in bed as soon as I can. But I don't think this enemy's gonna let me go, and that's a problem."

"Yeah... So now what?"

"The important thing is that—"

The important thing is that we all survive. Yuuki understood that, but he couldn't think of any way to accomplish it. Based on his observations, Jahil had at least ten times the power of Laplace, and easily five times his own.

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To provide an omniscient narrator's point of view, Laplace's existence points

were just over a million. That was incomparably more powerful than a demon lord seed, but it'd put him way at the bottom of awakened demon lords. It was the experience he accrued over many years, making the most of his skills, that made him such a handful in battle.

Next was Yuuki, still a Saint but already high enough in the hierarchy that he could attain full divinity before long. His EP was around two million, but he possessed both the all-powerful Mammon, Lord of Greed, and the cheat-level ability-canceler Anti-Skill, giving him fighting ability numerical stats couldn't measure.

Teare's EP was 2.4 million, which outclassed Yuuki's. She had few sentient desires of her own, but one key possession of hers was the unique skill Born Optimist. It tripled all her physical abilities under certain conditions but was still largely unproven and probably worked only against foes ranked lower than her. She didn't have the battle skill of someone like Laplace, either, making her the weakest out of the four.

Finally, the member of this quartet with the highest EP was Kagali. It was just under three million, putting her decently above the others; her Ruin Scepter gave her a bonus as well, bringing it past four million. Sadly, though, Kagali's role was support—she wasn't particularly good at either close-or long-range battle. It wasn't like her gifts were going to waste, but one couldn't expect the world of her in a fight.

Jahil, meanwhile, had an EP of fourteen million. This was Jahil's power added on to the already-powerful Footman's. Even worse, not only did he fight with magic—he also had a taste for close-range melee combat, mainly so he could torture his weaker challengers for fun. A rampage from him could easily knock out all his adversaries. For those adversaries, it was the worst possible situation to face.

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Yuuki may have been a genius, but not even he could come up with a way through this. It frustrated him.

He wondered if he should've waited a little while before revealing he was sane and free of anyone's control...but quickly dismissed the idea. It was a potential move to make, yes, but the moment he picked to get Kagali back was probably the best chance he'd ever get. It's just that Feldway was one step ahead of them. He carefully prepared for everything, predicting every outcome and working out countermeasures, and that's what he walked in here with. Having all those hidden tricks up his sleeve certainly gave him a big advantage.

Yuuki had to admit it—he lost this one. He had been with Footman all this time, but never once did he think this ally of his could contain such an evil presence. It wasn't his fault for failing to spot it; really, kudos must go out to Feldway for being *that* prepared in advance.

It's always like this, isn't it? This world is so unfair to me...

He regretted it turning out like this, but still, Yuuki just found this world so absurd sometimes.

For all he knew, maybe Teare had been rigged with something similar, too. It made him wary of her, but again, he reconsidered quickly. Doing something like that was really pointless—if Teare had any trap like that, there was no reason to keep it locked up at this point.

Suddenly he recalled that slime, the most absurd thing of all about this place.

Rimuru, huh? I'm sure he'd never give up right now, huh? I came over to this world first, but here he is, showing up later and just doing whatever the hell he wants. And it all turns out so much more amazing than every single thing I work my ass off to produce. It just drives me crazy.

He may have thought that, but it didn't displease him much. In fact, he could almost feel the laughter rising from his heart.

"What're you laughing about, Boss?" Laplace asked.

"Oh, um, just remembering something funny. Y'know, like, I think you're a real dangerous opponent to have, but I just remembered someone I'm even *more* scared of. It'd take someone like him to brush off all my traps and act like it was no great shakes, y'know?"

"Ha-ha! Ya mean Rimuru, huh? Yeah, he's way off the charts in pretty much

every single way.”

“Right? I hate having to depend on other people, but I’m not against taking advantage of him, either. And he’s gonna be riding on in to help us real soon, so there’s really only one thing to do.”

Yuuki gave Laplace a wry smile.

“Yeah? Yeah, you’re right.”

Laplace smiled back.

“We have to buy time,” Kagali said, standing up. “That was our only option from the start, though. Kind of late deciding that, aren’t you?”

“Right!” Teare shouted. “Let’s get going on this!”

Yuuki, Laplace, Kagali, and Teare lined up, facing up against Jahil in Footman’s body.

“We’re gonna get him for you, Footman.”

With Laplace’s spirited vow as a cue, the intense battle began.

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Sylvia kept her eyes peeled, observing Yuuki and the others as she fought Leon. They were four against one, a good numerical advantage, but Jahil had the actual upper hand.

Yuuki was half-dead; the hole in his chest was closed up, but that must have taken a lot out of him. It was lucky for him that Anti-Skill was an integral part of his body. It let him block Jahil’s fireball and just barely keep this battle to the death going.

With Yuuki as the keystone of their defense, Laplace and Teare were taking a hit-and-run approach, with Kagali focused on support. That made it possible for them to keep it even with much more powerful opponents.

Yuuki was his name, right? If he falls, it’s going to end fast...

It would, and not just in the sense that they’d have no defender. Yuuki’s cheerful orders were setting the entire mood for the party. When he hears him speak, Laplace pushes himself beyond his limits. Teare, on the other hand,

mostly just went with the flow, going from strong to weak depending on how things were looking. Kagali, keeping tabs on the whole party, knew the situation they were in, but...

But even so, you need to have an effective move if you want to do anything.

And they had nothing. Their strength was being slowly drained away, and the whole fight was over how long they could stall until their defeat. They were buying time—the only correct answer they could reach.

“Ugh... He’s just impossibly strong,” Yuuki groaned. “My Anti-Skill can ignore any defensive barriers and stuff, but he’s got so much pure durability, we can’t even deal him any damage...”

“Yeah, he’s way too far above us,” Laplace agreed. “If I had to guess, I don’t see any dang way we can damage him.”

Nothing would penetrate Jahil. They knew that, and now all of them were feeling a sense of despair. But they kept it going, for just one reason: They believed that Rimuru and his team would be coming soon.

Rimuru’s just as amazing as El said, isn’t he? He’s not even here, and he’s still providing so much hope.

Sylvia wasn’t one for prayer, but she still earnestly hoped he arrived in time.

“Why’re you looking over to the side, Master?” Leon asked her. “Isn’t that a little rude of you?”

“Maybe you’re right... But when two people with the same kind of abilities fight each other, whoever gets impatient first loses!”

She fluttered in the air, dodging Leon’s continual high-speed slashes. Their skills were from the same lineage, and they even fought with the same sword style. She knew exactly what he would do.

The same was also true for Leon, but Michael’s mind dominance had given him orders to defeat his enemy. One side could bide their time and stretch out this battle forever; the other was tasked with winning. The difference in styles was obvious, and it was affecting the course of the battle. That, and there was another factor at play—Leon’s unconscious mind. Subconsciously, Leon was still

struggling to regain his free will. That might be just a minor influence on him for now, but it was definitely slowing his body down.

So the battle between them both was proceeding at a very stable pace, with Sylvia enjoying an advantage.

But then, Sylvia thought, why isn't Feldway moving at all? If he joined in, even I'd be in a little bit of trouble, you know.

It'd also wreck the balance Yuuki's party had going, dooming them. So why wasn't he doing anything?

Sylvia looked toward Feldway, hoping to find out. Observing him, she began to construct a theory.

He doesn't seem the least bit concerned. Leon and Jahil are probably sacrificial pawns to him. He just wants to record some data on us, so he can finish us off for good next time.

It wasn't a very welcome answer. Sylvia was getting fed up with him.

Feldway was being almost ridiculously cautious. Normally, he must think defeating his enemies here would make the outcome far more certain. But he wasn't aiming to do that, because he must value his own safety first. And based on that, it seemed certain that Leon and Jahil still weren't the end of Feldway's secret tricks.

He was the type of man to act based on his observations—and this time, his observations no doubt told him the enemy could be annihilated with the forces he *didn't* bring this time. He was avoiding any bold moves, lest the enemy have some sort of hidden card to play as well. It was caution to the point of cowardice, almost, but that was the essence of Feldway.

At any rate, Feldway's lack of activity played into their goal of stalling for time. Sylvia gained a little confidence from the thought—and then it happened.

"Oh, right, I just remembered," Jahil said. "That Anti-Skill is a trait the Dragon Princess's pet once possessed, isn't it? Something that could cancel out skills and magic. Quite a pain, it was, but there was an easy way to deal with it. Just drop the magic, drop the skills, and come in with pure *power*, and it won't cancel out anything!"

Jahil was evil, but he was also a first-rate researcher. As a disciple of Twilight, he had a proven track record in this, thanks to his keen observational skills. That's how he came upon the right answer.

Anti-Skill was passed on to the Chaos Dragon, the sad, final form of Milim's pet, but it was crushed by Milim and successfully sealed away. Jahil didn't know it, but Milim had already proven his theory for him. It was time for a change of tactics—straight-up violence.

So he used his own body as a projectile, striking like mad at Yuuki.

"Har-har-har-har! So pathetically weak!"

He roared at Yuuki as he landed blow upon blow on him.

From there on, the battle grew much more one-sided. Yuuki could just barely tap into enough martial arts to fend him off, but the difference in power was far too much to overcome. Laplace and Teare were just as roughly handled—and it wasn't long before the three of them were on the floor.

"Jahilllll!!!"

Kagali activated a spell in a fit of anger, but it was blocked by the aura surrounding Jahil's body. Then his fist slammed into her stomach, the pure difference in power cruelly deciding the battle.

"Har-har-har-har! Do you see how foolish it was to challenge me now? So, Sir Feldway, can I do away with them?"

The final moment of confirmation was here. Jahil probably intended to kill them from the start, but he wanted to defer to his boss first.

"Do as you like," Feldway simply replied.

Jahil let out a wicked laugh. "Kazalim, my misfortunate son—you were a good experiment for us. It is a pity, but rest assured that I'll soon have a wonderful new toy to replace the likes of you!"

He began to pool his power into his outstretched hands. A swirling eddy of fighting spirit condensed itself over them, transforming into enough energy to distort the very fabric of time. The air around it creaked, then burned. This was not magic, not a skill, but pure destructive power. It was more than enough to

destroy Yuuki...and even damage Jahil himself.

Sylvia, watching from the side, went pale with horror. With all this power concentrated on a single point, it'd create a destructive blast that would go beyond even nuclear magic. Anyone on the other end would wind up being obliterated without a single piece left behind.

She put up a defensive barrier, sensing the danger. Leon must have reached the same conclusion, stopping his attack and stepping in to protect Feldway.

Yuuki attempted to use Mammon, Lord of Greed, to solidify his defense, but already he seemed nearly out of energy. The barrier put up by Kagali's unique skill Schemer was their last resort. Melchizedek, Lord of Dominion, might've been taken from her by Yuuki, but she *had* possessed an ultimate at one point. While Schemer was merely a unique skill, it had grown to the point that it could perform as well as an ultimate.

But it wasn't enough. Kagali alone couldn't overcome this dominating difference in power.

That won't work at all. She just can't hold out...

Sylvia could see the writing on the wall.

Jahil's attack involved two different stages. The pure destructive energy he summoned would be wrapped into a strike from Agni, Lord of Blazes. Once he shot a fireball to vaporize Kagali's barrier, he had his main attack waiting for her right afterward. It was all made possible by the colossal amount of magicules Jahil possessed. He was a walking wall of energy that was hard to even conceive of, his magicule count several times that of Sylvia. It was far too late for someone like Sylvia to join in and try defending this thing.

Could anyone else stop this?

She looked at the four people there, frozen in place. Kagali was exhausting herself to no avail. Yuuki was already out. What about the other two? Teare had no ultimate skill, so a defensive barrier from her would be a drop in the bucket. All hope was thus placed on Laplace.

So Sylvia looked his way—and was startled by what she saw.

Huh? That face... No. It couldn't be him—

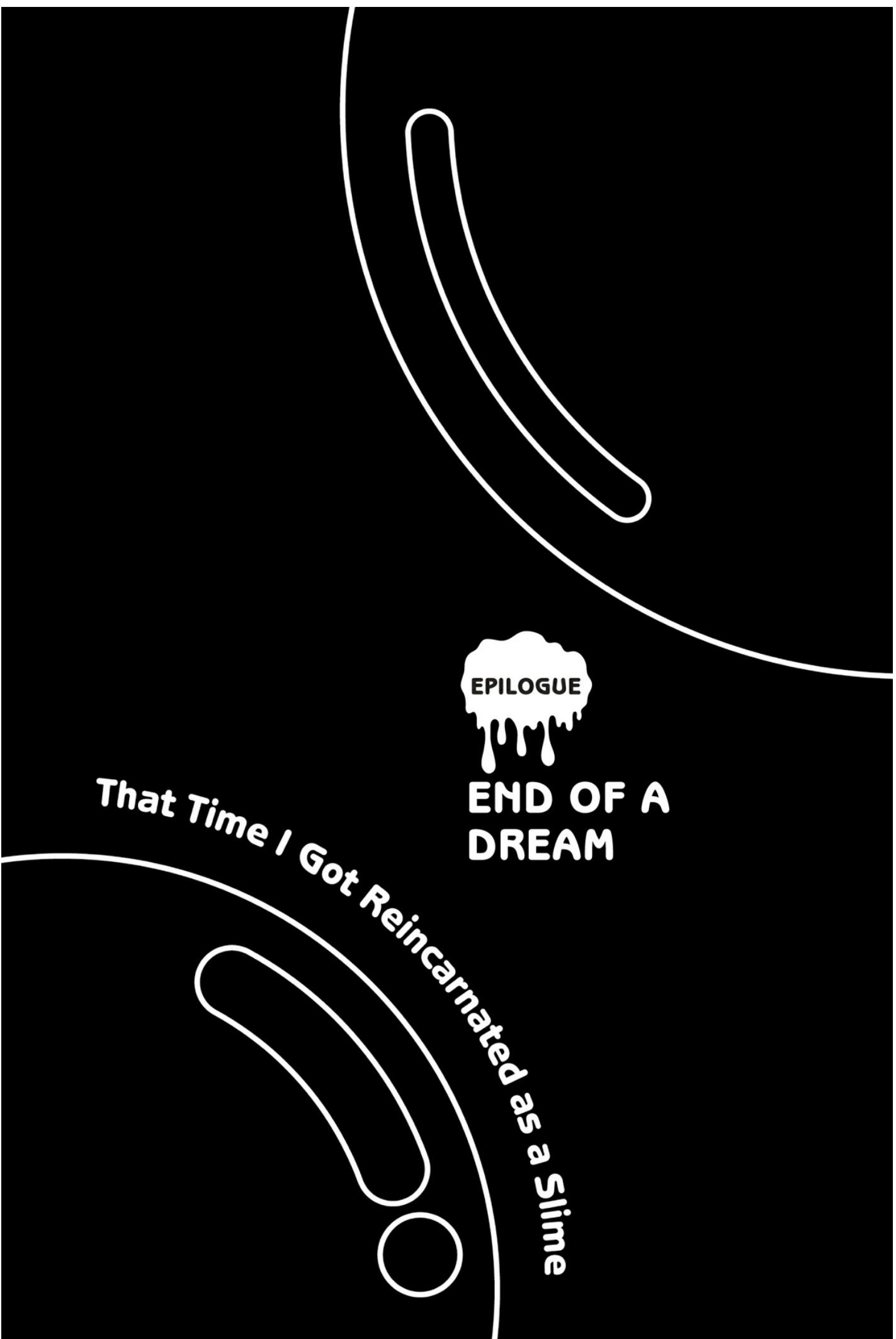
Underneath Laplace's broken mask, it was there. She thought she had forgotten it long ago, but one look, and all the memories came rolling back. She couldn't help but scream:

"Run, Thalion!!"

But that advice came far too late.

"So! Farewell, then. Time to pulverize your soul and wipe you off the face of this planet!"

Jahil's words signaled the end. And true to his words, it caused intense destruction. With a flash, then an explosion, Leon's castle was blown away. The massive fireball raged, spreading heat and flames across the land before flickering into nothingness.



EPILOGUE

END OF A DREAM

All Yuuki could do was laugh in despair.

Oh man. I tried my best, but this is it, huh?

It had been a little over ten years since he came to this world. He kicked it off by running into Kagali—still the demon lord Kazalim back then—and ever since, he'd been constantly striving to make his dreams come true. He made friends he could truly open up to, and he had shared his joys and hardships with them.

But when you grew as rapidly as he did, the seams were bound to start showing. Someone like Rimuru, who went from success to success, was beyond exceptional. And the moment Yuuki failed to notice the change in Clayman, his plans were bound to fall apart. It left him with nothing but a guilty conscience.

He had a few other regrets as well, so before it was too late, he decided to accelerate his mind and send off a final Thought Communication to everyone in the room.

(Sorry, guys. I made a bad move, and now I've caused all this trouble for you.)

Yuuki was ready to apologize now, but no one could blame him for it.

"You're not the only one to blame, Boss. I think my failure was a much larger factor."

Kagali still felt an intense amount of remorse. She never would have been in this situation if she hadn't been so obsessed with Leon. But then, she might not have met Yuuki, so maybe there were a few good things about all this.

"Don't cry, Princess," Teare haltingly said, trying to comfort her. "I just remembered some stuff, too. I don't know my original name, and it's a whole big jumble of feelings and memories, but I was one of your attendants. And it's all that king's fault! We were on your side, Princess. So don't regret anything,

okay? If I get to join you to the end of your life, I couldn't be any happier about it!"

Even if this was it, Teare had no regrets. Her life was long over by the time Kagali saved it, and she even gave her something to live for. Being able to die alongside her, Teare said, was all she needed to be happy.

"Teare..."

"Ha-ha-ha! It's been a lot of fun! And Footman and Clayman really loved you, too. You know, Boss, I'm really grateful for you. Even as the demon lord Kazalim, you were so reliable, so cool... I liked you a lot! But you really look the best like this, Princess!"

"Yeah, it's true. I laughed at you at first 'cause I didn't think it suited ya at all, but now it just feels *right*, y'know? And if that's how you always looked, then it's only natural, I'd say."

Even Laplace earnestly agreed.

"So yeah, Boss," he added with a smile. "Don't worry about it, okay? We all did our level best, and we ain't got no regrets. I'm sure Clayman's waitin' for us, so let's have fun over there, huh?"

They had done everything they could. Between the good and the bad lay the moderate, and they had walked down that exact road without any shame. It made Laplace proud of both himself and his friends.

"Ha-ha-ha! You really oughta complain to me some more, guys," Yuuki insisted. "It's your last chance."

"We don't *have* any complaints," Kagali told him.

"Right, right!" Teare agreed.

"I mean, yeah, I believed in you, Boss," said Laplace. "If you couldn't do something, y'know, we could accept it couldn't be done."

But Yuuki stood firm.

"You're okay going with me, Laplace? I think that girl called you something else, but if you went it alone, I bet you still have time to get out of here."

Sylvia had looked at him and said, “Thalion.” *Right*, he thought at the time. *Yeah, my name was Thalion, wasn’t it?* It was a lost memory, and now it had been recovered. He took a glance at Sylvia, relieved that his beloved wife was safe.

But that’s all there is to it. I’m already dead.

Over two thousand years had passed since he had come to life as Laplace. How was he supposed to come back to her like this? Besides, what mattered most to him now was Yuuki and his other friends. That’s why he didn’t mind joking about it.

“Ahhh, it’s fine. I’m Laplace. Laplace the Wonder Jester, vice president of the Moderate Jesters. It’s all in the past now, kinda thing, so you don’t needta worry about me, Boss.”

“...I don’t?”

“Nah. Besides, you wanna leave *me* alone at the very end? Forget about it!”

Hearing this warmed Yuuki’s heart. It was an absurdly unfair world, but maybe life in it wasn’t so bad after all. So, until the very last moment, he decided to resist with all he could.

“Pfft. You’re all such a bunch of idiots. Not that I mind.”

“I don’t need *you* tellin’ me that, Boss!”

“I’ll say,” added Kagali. “You’re really smart, Sir Yuuki, but sometimes you do the dumbest things. Just like now, too.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, but it’s kinda fun to join forces with everyone right at the end, isn’t it?”

Faced with the unfathomable threat of Jahil, Yuuki’s team was united at heart. As long as their friends were there, they could even make hell a fun experience. There was no fear among them.

“So! Farewell, then,” Jahil declared. “Time to pulverize your soul and wipe you off the face of this planet!!”

Even after Jahil gave him that death sentence, the smile didn’t leave Yuuki’s face. And right after that—the flash turned it all into nothing.

The time for playing was over. And with it, the ambition of Yuuki and his friends came to an end.

AFTERWORD

Great to see you all again. With the anime now running, we might have some brand-new fans reading this! If so, that'd be such a thrill.

So this series is now at Volume 18. We're plunging into the final story arc as planned, and I'm starting to think that wrapping it up in three volumes is going to be a little—okay, a lot—difficult.

The idea was to have a little trilogy here, with one volume setting up the hook, one having the climax, and one providing the resolution. But looking at the content of this volume, we're nowhere near a climax yet, huh?

It's not like this is anyone's fault! I *told* them in advance that I might change stuff around depending on how I was feeling!

...But even excuses like that are starting to get a bit strained. Ah well. Anyway, just be glad we got the war started this volume.

I don't want to go too deep into the content of this volume for spoiler reasons, but if you completed it, you now know how Kagali's backstory turned out. That changed quite a bit from my original image, but I just couldn't help how cute she looked as an elf. I mean, really, I was picturing someone of murky gender from the start, but the moment I saw that design for her, everything was set in stone. It reminded me anew of just how powerful the right illustration can be.

By the way, I know this setting differs ever so slightly from what's listed in *Slime* Volume 13.5, the official databook released in 2019. But...you know, if you can just accept it as something that kind of always happens, I'd appreciate it. I don't know when I'll break my habit of never nailing down backstory stuff unless I'm pressed by an urgent need to. Really gotta be careful about that next

time—but kind of late to be regretting that here, during the final story arc...

Anyway, that's how Volume 18 turned out. What did you think of it? I wrote this in hopes it'd please my readers, so if you enjoyed it, nothing could make me happier. Assuming you did, I hope you'll continue backing *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*, because those are the voices that keep me going as I work to expand the *Slime* world.

See you all later!

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