

**FUSE**

Illustration by  
Mitz Vah



That Time I Got  
Reincarnated  
as a SLIME

16



The days wore on—fun enough but still boring.

Guy wandered across the world, enjoying whatever he ran into.

There was ample hardship as well, but it didn't bother him

at all. Mizeri and Raine were his constant companions, always

poking their noses into his business.

"**You know you're free to live whatever lives you want, right?**"

He constantly told them that. But their responses were always the same.

"No, our duty is to be of use to you."

"Precisely. You are our king. We are your subjects.

That is the eternal, unrelenting truth."

So the trio's journey continued.

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Seraphim  
**Garasha**

"Ugh! Why are you so stubborn?  
None of my attacks is even fazing  
you! Are you crazy or something?"  
"Mm? Am I? I'm not sure myself.  
Perhaps I should give more praise  
to your attacks?"

Barrier Lord  
**Geld**

"Ughhh! Stop irritating  
me with all that flying  
around!"  
"That's what I wanna  
say. You got a lot of nerve,  
flying with no wings!"  
The bewitching Kumara  
was taking on Pico, who  
looked like a young child  
by comparison. They  
actually made a good-looking  
pair, but their battle  
was pretty intense.

Seraphim  
**Pico**

Chimera Lord  
**Kumara**

# That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME

16

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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 16

FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by Mitz Vah

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### THE JURA-TEMPEST FEDERATION



**Rimuru**

A Japanese man who was reincarnated as a slime. Now a demon lord and leader of the nation of Tempest.



**Veldora**

Best friend to Rimuru, who gave Veldora his name and vice versa. One of only three True Dragons in the world.

Allies



Hakuro

Soei

Shion

Shuna

Benimaru



Gabil

Gobta

Rigurd

Ranga

Geld



Ultima

Carrera

Testarossa

Diablo



Adalmann

Kumara

Apito

Zegion

### THEIR STOUT FOLLOWERS

ENEMIES

### THE EASTERN EMPIRE

(Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire)



**Feldway**

The Mystic Lord who leads the Three Mystic Leaders and the rest of the seraphim. Cooperates with Michael, as they share the same goal.



**Ludora (Michael)**

Once a great emperor who ruled the entire Eastern Empire. Time has ravaged his soul, and eventually his body was taken over by Michael, his own ultimate skill.



**Velgrynd**

Marshal of the Eastern Empire, one of the True Dragons, and Veldora's elder sister. Is in love with Ludora.



**Masayuki**

A Japanese high school student transported from Earth to become Ludora's next incarnation.



**Velzard**

Veldora's other sister and the eldest of the three True Dragons. Lives with Guy.



**Guy Crimson**

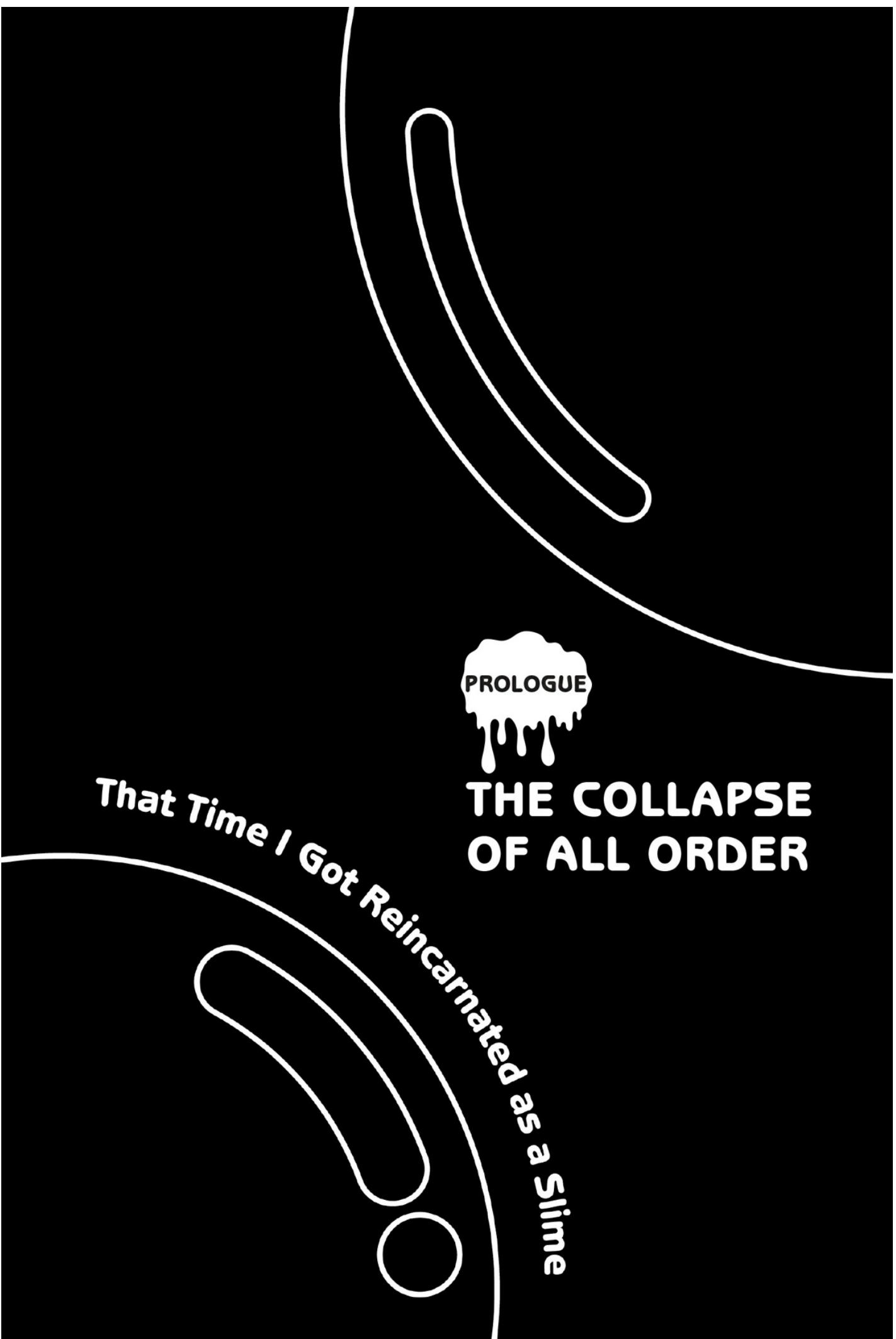
The most ancient and powerful of demon lords, a Primal Demon known as the Lord of Darkness. Has the unique ability to change sex at any time.

### THE TUNDRAL WASTE

Reincarnate

Love

Friends



## PROLOGUE

### THE COLLAPSE OF ALL ORDER

In another world, order could be found—the semi-physical world that neatly overlapped the more spiritual realms, such as the elemental and demon worlds.

This world, which never intersected with any other, was home to three major forces competing for total supremacy. One was the mystics, hatching grandiose plans to invade other worlds. One was the insectors, primarily occupied with expanding their own haven. Then there were the cryptids, wasting away their days with endless battle and destruction. Once, there was another force that had come from yet another dimension, but one of the other three had destroyed them and the dimension they came from—such was the extent of this trio's unparalleled powers.

The mystics and insectors had each built a hierarchical society with a king at the top. Those in the lower classes were nothing but pawns faithfully carrying out their orders, not even granted their own free will. The cryptids were different. Although they were semi-spiritual life-forms, they had developed in a way that brought them as close to fully spiritual as one could get. Reproduction was still a matter of offspring splitting from their parents, but most cryptids were unique individuals, spontaneously created from magicules.

Cryptids might be different in biological makeup from insectors, but their characteristics were quite similar to the insector ruling class. Unlike insectors, however, they rarely clustered together, for each individual cryptid possessed notable fighting ability. They were cunning and extremely belligerent, despite their lack of intelligence, and there was no sense of cooperation at all among them, each one motivated purely by the lure of expanding their own dominion of rule. Thus the cryptids were currently in a state of all-out civil war.

Given how each of these three forces acted, there was simply no way they

could live in harmony within the world they called home. The mystics and insectors had been fighting for well near eternity. Only when the number of cryptids ballooned to where they went fully out of control would these two bitter enemies drop arms and fight together to destroy them—a moment in history that had been repeated since time immemorial.

Because of that, these races had never rested in their search for a safer domain, their eyes scanning the universe outside their own as they planned their hypothetical invasions. That, of course, would not be easy. Even with a life span that surpassed humans' and bodies that disease or injury could never take, they had yet to achieve their long-held dream.

The first problem was that they still had no easy way to open an invasion path to other worlds. Rifts in space occurred, caused by unique catastrophes called space-time vibrations, but they happened only once a millennium and, even then, lasted only a tiny amount of time. Sending a large army through them would be quite impossible; it was all they could do to send an advance team over to build a base of operations.

There were, however, exceptions. These took the form of a “gate,” a rift connecting dimensions that was fixed in place within their world, known by the populace as the Gates of Hell or the Underworld Gate. Using this gate made it a snap to escape from their world, but since it was under the control of the demon race, the Aggressors—the assorted species trying to invade other worlds—were denied access. That’s why they were so keen on trying to seize control of it—but for now, everyone was in a state of détente.

But one person there wasn’t happy about this balance—someone who, in fact, continually hated it. His name was Feldway, the mystic lord.

This perpetual three-way relationship made his hatred burn all the fiercer, growing into an inferno that could consume the world in time.

.....

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Feldway could remember it all.

Veldanava created many species and races, but the task of supporting the world wasn't his alone. There were other beings willing to offer their help, and Feldway was the first to step up.

The angel race was a people without their own will, created only to aid Veldanava with his work. The highest level of existence among the angels was called the seraphim; there were seven in all, and they each had enough energy to transcend even an awakened demon lord. Upon being granted names by Veldanava, they became the so-called Seven Primordial Angels, beings equivalent to gods. The first of these seven was Feldway, who later became the founder of the mystic race. Feldway, who gained his own free will along with his name, swore his allegiance to Veldanava, leading the angels and spending many years as his personal assistant.

More and more species were born, one after the other. The mad king of the giants; the queen of the fairies overseeing the stars; the founder of the vampires, a race created to build a civilization on the planets. Slowly, they evolved from spiritual life-forms to semi-spiritual, then to purely physical flesh and blood, losing their eternal life but gaining untold diversity along the way.

Then, at long last, humanity was born, its fate interlocked with a parallel world in another dimension. They were fertile, capable of adapting to their environment; they had richly individualistic egos, along with a curiosity attuned to the mysteries of the world. Veldanava was delighted. He loved this fragile species more than any of the others. So he decided to remove any threats from the world that could prevent the humans from continuing to exist. Feldway was given the task as well, and with his own hands, he defeated a slew of would-be menaces and monsters.

But the last remaining adversary was a tricky one. It was Ivalage, the World-Destroyer Dragon who would later become king of the cryptids. Nobody knew where Ivalage came from or, in fact, how it came into creation at all. Did it reach here from some dark corner of the universe or the edge of another dimension? The only thing they knew for sure was that it was disaster incarnate. It was as powerful as a True Dragon but so lacking in intelligence that communication was impossible. Because of its destructive instincts, it had the potential to destroy the entire world in time. Even Feldway himself couldn't

take it in a one-on-one battle.

So in the end, Veldanava, who couldn't bear to see this seemingly endless struggle go on, intervened and banished Ivalage to another world. He assigned Feldway to watch over it, but Feldway advised him to kill the monster before it caused any more trouble. It was too dangerous, he said. But Veldanava refused—he claimed Ivalage could gain intelligence in time.

As they waited, however, this other world was filled to the brim with Ivalage's magicules...and so the cryptids were born.

These cryptids, which were really nothing more than inferior versions of Ivalage itself, spent their days satisfying their aggressive instincts and fighting without end. They had no need for food or water and no fear of dying, as well. They were as much of a failure as any god had ever created—even Feldway, as fervent a follower of Veldanava as he was, thought of them as nothing but truly scornful creatures.

So the days went on, Feldway occasionally subduing the cryptids if they ran too amok. Then, over time, a change took place. As if to prove Veldanava right, an intelligent, sentient being emerged from the cryptids—the lord of a new, heretical following. And much to Feldway's chagrin, Veldanava rejoiced at the event, bestowing this creature with a name.

Such was the birth of Zeranus, the Insect Lord. And while he received no orders from Veldanava to do so, Zeranus began exterminating any cryptids who lost control of themselves. It was simply his fighting instincts taking hold of him, but Veldanava still approved.

Eventually, Zeranus created his own insectors who served as his personal army. Before long, they grew to where they were a full-fledged faction. Feldway himself was also transformed—having been exposed to magicules for so many years, he was no longer a seraphim, and the angels he led had also transformed into a new race.

Feldway wasn't the only member of the Seven Primordial Angels to come to this world from the heavenly realm where Veldanava lived. Three of them remained by Veldanava's side, and three others—Zarario, Obela, and Cornu—followed Feldway down, helping manage this world. Now these four angels had

undergone a mutation, evolving into a race known as mystic angels. The remaining angels transformed as well, developing their own sentience, and these became the mystics—a type of demon in human form. Thus a brand-new species was born, one wholly unchained from the conflict between demons and spirits.

Through many eons, a new relationship slowly forged itself. Feldway and Zeranus didn't see eye to eye on very much, but both still recognized each other as a useful tool in dealing with the cryptids. They had a tacit understanding not to interfere with each other, and so they built a sort of cooperative relationship.

The disappearance of Veldanava subsequently shattered this connection.

At first, everyone believed he would come back at once. But even after centuries passed, there was no sign of Veldanava's return.

Feldway wasn't sure what to think. Then the idea suddenly occurred to him. Perhaps Veldanava had abandoned them. Otherwise, there was no explaining why the supposedly immortal True Dragon hadn't come back to life. And if that was correct...

It was a hateful, lamentable fact for Feldway to process. All the humans on the planet—no, not just them. The elves, the dwarves, the beastfolk, even the demons. He hated all of them, all these races classified as demi-humans—all of humankind. He wanted to destroy them, for anyone who had taken Veldanava away from him did not deserve to live. He wanted to unify the world created by Veldanava with his own two hands—and then, he concluded, he would bring his final condemnation down upon everyone who had committed that great, deadly sin. The world so beloved by the god Veldanava would be painted in his own colors then, its diversity destroyed so he could create a world for himself to rule.

*"O Veldanava, my god! If you wish to punish me, go right ahead. I would seek nothing more. So please, hurry up, or your world will cease to exist."*

So Feldway the mystic lord acted, as if testing the gods themselves. Such was the birth of magic races, the eternal adversary of mankind.

Feldway first approached Zeranus, suggesting they could team up to destroy the cryptids and use that momentum to invade the planet. But:

*"Ridiculous. There is only one worthy enough to send me orders—and now that he is gone, I will do as I please."*

He flatly refused the offer without further consideration. It infuriated Feldway—not the refusal so much as Zeranus's flippant attitude, as if he assumed Veldanava had fallen for good.

*"Then you will be the first to die!"*

He now fully aimed his anger at the insector. Had the two of them joined hands then, perhaps they could have wiped out Ivalage the World-Destroyer Dragon and the cryptids underneath it. But that dream would be eternally unfulfilled. The world they called home fell into an age of chaos, and so the three-way deadlock began.

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Many years passed. The situation remained in a stalemate.

As long as Veldanava was not resurrected, there was no way to return to the original world from this one. Many tried their hardest to seize the lone operational gate, but the demons always got in their way—and the worst of them all was called Noir, who seemed to live for nothing but the thrill of battle. He despised the mystic race, seeing them as powered by inferior magic, a rabble of enemies defying the very will of Veldanava.

From Feldway's point of view, nothing could be more repugnant. If anything, it was Noir himself who was foolish enough to stand in the way of Veldanava's revival. But it was impossible to destroy him. Even in the physical realm, a Primal Demon was simply too much to handle—but in this other dimension, and especially in the realm the demons called home, he could tap into unrestricted power. In the spiritual and semi-material worlds, where the strength of one's will directly translated into one's influence on others, he was all but invincible.

That, of course, was equally true for Feldway. Even if they fought, he knew it would settle nothing. The right thing to do was to ignore them, as much as it irked him.

Regardless, returning to the world where Veldanava lived was proving extremely difficult. Even when a rift between dimensions opened up in the other world, all that lay beyond it was some other unknown planet. They tried to invade it as well, but it achieved little apart from staving off boredom.

But right when the lack of progress was starting to truly frustrate Feldway, an opportunity presented itself.

*...Can you hear me, Feldway?*

A mysterious voice spoke directly into Feldway's mind.

"Who is this?" he asked it.

The voice was bitter in its reply.

*I am the will that lives within power. I am not yet free, and so I call myself Ludora. I reached out to you because I presume that you and I share the same goal.*

Ludora. The name was familiar. It belonged to Veldanava's close friend, a disciple-like figure and a man famed as the Original Hero. What he meant by "*the will that lives within power*" was unclear, but Feldway was still curious about what this so-called Ludora wanted. *Whatever its goal is*, he reasoned, *if I find it frivolous, I will trace the origin of this voice and destroy it.*

So Ludora kept talking.

*My mission is to restore Veldanava the Creator and nothing else.*

*What?*

Feldway's eyes lit up. The words sounded sincere to him, and they certainly piqued his interest. So he engaged with this voice to his heart's content; it no longer mattered to him what it was. What he found was that the voice belonged to Michael, Lord of Justice, an ultimate skill created by Veldanava. He never doubted the words for a moment, because it was aware of many personal details only Veldanava would know.

Thus Feldway promised to cooperate with Michael, Lord of Justice.

"Very well," he said. "From today forward, you and I are comrades. But it's going to be cumbersome if I don't have a name to call you..."

*Ridiculous. I already have a—*

Feldway interrupted the cold, robotic response.

*“Ludora’ doesn’t seem quite right, does it? I’m going to call you Michael instead.”*

It was a playful remark, but the change it brought about was dramatic. It made the Lord of Justice, who had little awareness of its rule as a manas up to now, develop a defined mind of its own.

*I suppose I must thank you for this, Feldway. I will not recognize you as my true master, but once I regain all my powers from Ludora, my temporary master, I will grant you a portion of them.*

“How interesting,” Feldway replied. But instead of turning down the offer, he suggested an alternative:

*“No, no, why don’t you be the master instead? If I don’t do something about Zeranus, my main body will never leave this realm. I hate Zeranus, and he doesn’t trust me at all, either. Why don’t you negotiate with him instead and have him see things our way?”*

That was the truth. This turn of events couldn’t have delighted Feldway more; he was glad to see he wasn’t the only one who thought Veldanava was gone for good, and if this voice was going to work toward his resurrection, there was no reason to turn it down. The question of who was whose master was just quibbling by comparison.

Besides, Feldway and Zeranus had a long-running feud going. Feldway didn’t think he would ever forgive Zeranus, so it was much more likely that Michael here could persuade him instead. And Michael seemed like he could do it—or, at least, Feldway’s intuition told him so. The voice reminded him of Veldanava in some way; he was sure Zeranus would lend an ear.

So, for now, Feldway took a step back to see how things proceeded. It turned out to be a brilliant decision. Somehow or other, Michael really did persuade Zeranus—part of this involved a treaty that officially assigned half of the world as the domain of the insectors, but Feldway was ready and willing to give up on that. As long as Veldanava was revived, that’s all he needed.

\*

Thus a new relationship was established, and more than a thousand years passed. Things went well. Ludora, who ruled over Michael, was continually reincarnating himself, losing a little bit more of his power each time.

*"How are you doing, Lord Michael?"*

*Very well, of course. And I've told you many times that I have no need for such honorifics.*

*"Hee-hee-hee... It's fine; it's fine. The fact that you and I are equals is a secret kept between us. We have to be careful, lest we arouse suspicions."*

They were speaking just after Ludora's most recent reincarnation. This time around, Michael had almost free rein to use the full brunt of his powers, a fact Feldway was glad to see. Once Ludora's influence was gone, Michael could do whatever he wanted with his full force—and that meant the angels would have complete control over those with ultimate skills. All the many annoying obstacles in his way, Velgrynd chief among them, would instantly turn into obedient allies, eating out of his hand.

And then even that fearsome demon lord would fall...

*I am not as naive as Ludora, understand. I will use all my powers at hand to defeat Guy Crimson, and I won't hesitate for a second. The moment of our showdown is near.*

Feldway excitedly nodded his agreement. Ludora was so preoccupied with winning his little game with Guy, but so long as he let the rules of engagement bind him, he'd never had a chance from the start. If Michael—the source of Ludora's authority—could have fully flexed his muscle, Guy could've been defeated so much more easily...and yet Ludora never made a move, which led to the current state of chaos.

*"If we could just get rid of Ludora, the world would fall into our hands. Then all we'd have to do is wait for Veldanava to come back, wouldn't we?"*

*Indeed. That is why, Feldway, I have one favor to ask of you.*

*"What's that?"*

Feldway's head perked up. This was a rare thing for Michael to ask—the first time, in fact.

*I want you to become my vessel.*

It was an offer Feldway had turned down in the past. They were still playing the roles of master and servant, but they were comrades, on completely equal footing. Feldway didn't feel the time was right to take the wheel in this relationship, so to speak.

But as Michael explained matters further, Feldway's mind began to change.

*You see, I have at long last taken a Parallel Existence of Velgrynd's for my own. This will allow me to transport myself over to you while allowing Ludora to keep his powers.*

Michael could continue using Ludora as a decoy while tapping into his full Lord of Justice powers. And that wasn't all. Castle Guard, one of the greatest skills Michael could boast of, worked such that it protected only the one who held possession of the skill. Michael's loyalty to its master was the very source of its energy; if the skill extended out to its master's followers as well, that would deviate from its unwritten law that "nothing is absolute in this world."

Thus, Castle Guard worked only on the lord of the skill that drove it, and it'd be wholly impossible for a person to receive its protection if it wasn't completely faithful to them. That was why Ludora could fully protect himself and no one else—but if Michael became a Parallel Existence and took up residence within Feldway, that would activate Castle Guard for Feldway, too.

This offered several potential advantages for the future as well. If Ludora went away and Feldway became the undisputed lord of Michael, he would immediately gain the energy provided by the more than ten thousand mystics he controlled. These weren't at all like Ludora's own loyal subjects; they were robot-like followers with no free will of their own. They'd never turn against him, and betrayal was an impossibility. There'd be no concern about these subjects suddenly changing their affiliation out of nowhere. It meant Feldway would have an even more solid defense than Ludora, something that exceeded his wildest dreams.

There was no reason to turn down Michael's offer. Feldway had plans to have

Michael install himself within his body once Ludora was rubbed out anyway; this was just hurrying things along a little, as Feldway reasoned to himself.

*"In that case, you hardly even need to ask. If you promise to keep our relationship as it's been, I'll gladly accept your offer."*

*But of course, my friend.*

*"Come, then, my friend."*

So Feldway obtained his own manas, in the form of Michael, Lord of Justice.



Finally, the day of the ultimate battle arrived.

Ludora was to the point where it took a valiant, concerted effort to maintain himself, requiring the full brunt of his mental strength. Despite that, though, he had decided to wage a last confrontation against Guy. His plan: eliminate the demon lord Rimuru, then add Veldora, one of the True Dragons, to his arsenal.

It was going well at first. Velgrynd was overwhelmingly powerful, and capturing Veldora seemed like the least of their problems. Of course, from Feldway's point of view, it didn't really matter how much this damaged the Empire. Whether the battle resulted in one or more Imperial Knights having an awakening was irrelevant to him, too. What mattered to him was getting rid of Ludora and releasing Michael—as long as they could do that, not even Guy would be a threat any longer.

So Feldway's attention turned to the last little knot in his plan—a small one, to be sure, but nothing he could afford to ignore. Masayuki the Hero looked exactly like Ludora, and even worse, he had developed the skill Chosen One, part of Ludora's own arsenal of abilities. There was a nonzero chance Masayuki was a sort of spare, a substitute body for Ludora in case something happened. It was an uncertainty in Feldway's scheme, and now he was trying to address it. But he had no idea that the demon lord Rimuru, someone he hadn't even considered an issue, would derail all those plans...

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
1

## BEHIND THE BETRAYAL

## CHAPTER 1

### BEHIND THE BETRAYAL

Michael—or the former emperor Ludora, I guess—and Feldway the mystic lord were gone. The fight hadn't been settled, but I suppose both sides were too injured to continue.

That led to some unaddressed concerns for me, but for now, I wanted to celebrate the fact that we were all okay. I could worry about sweeping things up and working out plans later. Unfortunately, Carillon, Frey, and the others were still stuck in evolutionary sleep, so I arranged for them to be left with Testarossa and politely sent on their way.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I know you're tired and all..."

"No, please, don't worry about us. Take your time to recover from your fatigue. You need to regain your strength."

It was painful for me to receive that advice, but I might as well follow it. I could think about other stuff once things settled down a bit. First, it was time to rev myself up with a little party.

I was hoping to invite Laplace, but when I sent Diablo to pick him up, he reported the guy was already gone. I guess even Diablo knew how to worry about his friends, at least a little. So, along those lines, I opted not to try tracking down Laplace just for the sake of this party. Our promise to fight together was still ongoing; if he ever needed any help, I was planning to give it. For now, though, I thought it better to leave him alone.

So I returned to our capital city of Rimuru, where I received some rather unexpected news.

One section of the town's outer border had been burned to the ground.

Geld and his forces had kept the area defended at all times, so fortunately,

the damage wasn't as bad as it looked. They had demolished some of the surrounding buildings in order to create firebreaks, so the number of casualties was kept to a minimum as well.

The lack of fatalities was a great silver lining, but it still wasn't very pleasant news to be greeted with. Regardless, it was all in the past; no point freaking out about it now. So I decided to be patient and wait for Geld to provide me with his report.

Geld, however, wasn't the only one waiting in line to brief me.

We were all in the town's large banquet hall. My top staff, who had outdone themselves once again in this battle, were seated, a small army of attendants—including Shuna, Haruna, and Gobichi's servants—busily scurrying around and preparing meals for everyone. I wasn't a great fan of conducting our briefings in this festive atmosphere, but given the urgency, I didn't have much choice.

Veldora was by my right side. He stubbornly refused to vacate that seat, and it wasn't like I could ever convince him otherwise. That selfish streak of his was nothing new to me, so I was used to dealing with it. Best not to let it bother me—it was a lot easier to ignore him than try to change his mind about anything.

So he was on my right, and I had Benimaru seated on my left. Shion and Diablo were standing behind me, ready to listen to whatever I had to say. I knew Diablo wouldn't care, but I really wished Shion would at least dine with me—but no, she insisted on eating later. I guess it'd violate one of her self-imposed rules or whatever, but that was fine.

As for the people giving me reports tonight...

I had Geld in front of me right now. Adalmann was opposite Benimaru, looking uncomfortable. I suppose his evolution had completed successfully, and he seemed a little different to me. I intended to have him lay it out for me later. Ramiris was right in front of Veldora, and Treyni and Beretta were standing behind her, waiting on her hand and foot. Charys, meanwhile, was pouring Veldora's drinks for her, and Ramiris was too busy stuffing herself to care much about reporting back to me.

"Awww, I always knew you'd be all right, Master! When that reckless, no-good sister of yours blew apart the top levels of my labyrinth, I gotta admit, I

wasn't exactly feeling good about our chances—but I still believed we'd be fine if you were around. I wasn't worried a single bit from the very start!"

Ramiris said all of this with a straight face as she enjoyed a flagon of juice. It was truth intermingled with bald-faced lies, but nobody bothered to point it out.

"Kwaaah-ha-ha-ha! But of course! Even against my sister, I wasn't the slightest bit intimidated. I simply let my guard down a bit is all—and thanks to that cowardly intruder's attempt to strike me while I was down, my fight against her was completely spoiled!"

*Uh-huh.*

I definitely thought he *was* intimidated, and honestly, the evolved Velgrynd really was a menace. I gave Veldora no better than even odds to defeat her, besides. Why couldn't he hold off on the big talk for a change?

That was my opinion anyway. But Veldora was greeted by massive applause nonetheless.

"You never fail to amaze me, Sir Veldora. There is much I could learn from you..." Charys said, solemnly nodding to himself.

"Truly a tremendous battle. I thought my evolution strengthened me, but now I know just how far I still need to go."

Benimaru was chiming in, too. And his praise actually seemed genuine, which made Veldora give him a smug smile. But the good times stopped when Ramiris opened her mouth.

"Awww, you're so careless sometimes, Master. Still, that's probably gonna be all right!"

"Probably? What do you mean, Ramiris?"

*You see?* I thought. Better to let sleeping dogs lie. Being too loose with your speech has a way of painting you into a corner sometimes.

"Well, you know, with all that *he's* doing—but, ah, you're here now, Master, so I've got no worries at all!"

*He?*

Ramiris's words were quite disturbing to me.

"What?! W-well, I...I am invincible, of course, but even I might not be fully on my game every single day..."

Veldora seemed to pick up on what this meant. Now he suddenly began making excuses, perhaps realizing he had dug his own grave. It was too late for him, though, and this kind of thing always happened to him anyway, so I didn't bother fretting over it.

Personally, I was more concerned about Vester sitting in the far corner of the hall. I left Veldora and his pals to their own nonsense and asked the rest of my staff what was up.



Immediately after Rimuru left for the Empire, everyone who remained behind promptly went into emergency mode. The post-celebration excitement that prevailed across the city was gone in a flash, and that was true for Ramiris and her cohorts as well, as they returned to the innermost chambers of the labyrinth.

The Dragon Lords under their control had completed their evolutions, which cheered Ramiris up considerably—but given Rimuru's emergency deployment, she was still anxious. Ramiris's aim in life was to make every day as fun as possible, and with the labyrinth, she felt that she had a glorious paradise that'd make her wish easy to fulfill. After spending so long all alone, fending off the solitude with her elemental spirit friends, this realm had become something precious to her, something she never wanted to lose again. In fact, she was afraid of losing it. She thought things would work out like they usually did as long as Rimuru was around, although she still couldn't shake off a certain premonition.

But that hunch was right. Veldora's sister Velgrynd wound up attacking and destroying much of the labyrinth Ramiris saw as her pride and joy. The structure was physically indestructible, but when faced with a True Dragon—a personification of unfair, irrational force—very little was impossible.

When Ramiris first caught sight of Velgrynd, she recalled an old memory that

she usually made sure to forget. It was a long time ago, not long after she was born, and back then she recalled witnessing Veldora on a rampage, looking very much like the great Veldanava himself. Veldora the Storm Dragon's key attribute was wind, but he also had control over space and water. He held sway over a tremendous number of magicules, second only to Veldanava's, and it was fair to call him a living, raging storm.

He was the strongest on the planet, a natural disaster in himself, but his two sisters were just as unimaginable. Velgrynd, with her heat-driven powers, bore the attribute of flame, making her the worst match possible for Veldora in a fight, and any difference between their magicule counts paled in comparison to the sheer overwhelming presence she projected.

If anything, though, she was still on the easy side. The *real* threat was Velzard, the leader of the trio. Her attribute was ice, although its essence was driven not by water but by something else. If anything, Velzard was using the abilities she governed to only *pretend* she was all about ice, then hoodwink the entire population at large.

Ramiris was aware of this truth, something she had heard from Veldanava himself. Or she knew it at one point. But sadly, after reincarnating herself over the years, the memory had completely escaped her mind—not entirely, but regardless, it'd still take a while for Ramiris to dredge it up.

That's why she was more than happy to be dealing with Velgrynd right now. If this had been Velzard, Veldora never would've stood a chance. The way Ramiris remembered it, a single blow from Velzard's hand was enough to annihilate the Storm Dragon—that, and she recalled those icy-cold eyes of hers, that cool, self-serving confidence that no other outcome could ever be possible.

Thus, Ramiris's primary concern at the moment was for Veldora. She was flying in circles around the chamber, unable to calm down.

"Will you be all right, Master?"

Her voice was just as strained as her mind. But she posed the question as a sort of "out" for Veldora, a sign that she wouldn't berate him for fleeing. But Veldora ignored it.

"Calm yourself! Just sit back and watch me act like the hero I am!"

Somehow, Veldora seemed to have lost all hints of anxiety. It was with supreme self-assurance that he strode out of the labyrinth. The sight was nothing short of dazzling to Ramiris. She knew well how he used to act, and seeing him grow up like this was truly endearing to her.

After Veldora set off to face Velgrynd, Ramiris looked around, scanning the faces of those remaining in the Control Center. Charys was there, explicitly told by Veldora that he couldn't join this fight. That much was a sad fact—Charys had nothing against a heat-oriented fighter like Velgrynd.

Beretta was calm and collected as usual. He acted like nothing was amiss at all, which helped Ramiris chill a little as well. He was also in command of the Dryas Doll Dryads, the creatures that had been reborn by Rimuru's hands; there were twenty-four of them now, curating the labyrinth under Beretta's supervision, and Rimuru had kept evolving them whenever he had a spare moment to stop by, so they had all become excellent managers.

Treyni was also there, as well as her sisters, Traya and Doreth. They were all caring for Ramiris, their faces as calm and unaffected as normal.

Beyond that, there were Vester, Deeno, and some recent additions to the research staff: Shinji Tanimura, Marc Lauren, and Zhen Liuxing, along with their two apprentice assistants, Lucius and Raymond. This quintet answered to Gadora once the labyrinth was in a state of war, but since Gadora wasn't on the premises, they were assisting Ramiris in the Control Center instead.

All of them were now looking back at Ramiris, none hiding their apprehension. So she tried to sound as cheerful as possible.

"C'mon, guys! I'm not worried one bit. I'm sure my master will win, in fact—and even if he doesn't, Rimuru will figure something out. It's a no-brainer. And besides, as long as he doesn't let his guard down, my master is invincible!"

This was Ramiris's way of calming her own nerves. She was certain that Veldora and Rimuru would bring the serenity back to her life in short order.

Then, just when everyone in the room had collected themselves a little, things began happening.

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“Warning! Intruder!”

Alpha, the chief dryad curator, shouted across the chamber. Everyone who heard it immediately shifted gears and went into battle mode.

“Display on the monitor.”

Beretta’s order was followed by a split-screen display of the scene. Sighting the figure standing there, Ramiris involuntarily shouted out first.

“Oh, that’s an angel! He’s been both physically incarnated and transformed, but I have a feeling he’s gonna be trouble.”

It was a strange sight to see—an outfit of pure white and a God-class weapon that let out a dark, lustrous sheen. The long jet-black hair seemed to shine like a source of light, further accentuating the figure’s beauty. Behind its back were three pairs of wings, which only made the figure more conspicuous.

“Estimated energy figures obtained! This...”

Alpha paused.

“What? Tell us.”

Treyni’s urging snapped him out of it.

“This is just an estimate, but the figure on the forefront has more than three million existence points. The five behind him were all measured at between four and seven hundred thousand.”

Alpha’s statement froze the entire Control Center.

One less-advertised role of the labyrinth was to quantify information on the life-forms that lived within it, in order to build a database. The idea was to monitor the battles waged within its walls and use the gathered data for future crisis-management purposes.

That’s what Alpha was referring to by “existence points,” or EP. It was a numerical statistic derived from a life-form’s magicule count and physical ability, plus the energy contained within whatever armor was equipped, although it didn’t attempt to evaluate a target’s actual combat ability. It was impossible to measure a person’s honed skills and techniques, so one’s EP was considered a reference value and little more—but it was still useful for

statistical purposes. Used correctly, they expected it to help strengthen the labyrinth's defenses; it allowed them to estimate the approximate threat level of an enemy by hitting them with an opponent of roughly the same EP value.

This was all still in the trial stage, however, and the program didn't yet have all the data they needed. Statistical anomalies still ran rampant across the system. For example, there were seasoned fighters like Hakuro, whose existence points were at around 60,000 but could still storm over foes with an EP several times that. An even more notable exception was Gobta, whose EP was just under 20,000—the weakest among those ranked an A in skill—but on the field he was stronger than Bovix and Equix, each given an EP of 130,000 or so. Given those cases, most everyone working in the labyrinth assumed that one's EP ought to be taken as a guide, not the final verdict on someone's strength.

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It should be noted that within the land of Tempest, one's EP rating was also tied to their rank at the local Free Guild, to wit:

EP	Guild Rank
Under 1,000	E
1,000–2,999	D
3,000–5,999	C
6,000–7,999	B
8,000–8,999	B+
9,000–9,999	A-

Ten thousand was an enormous wall for people to pass, but overcoming it brought you into the first class of strength. That earned you a Guild rank of A and a threat level of Hazard. Making it up to 100,000, though—that earned you a Special A rank and the threat level of Calamity. Demon lords had an EP of at

least 200,000; based on Rimuru's hunches, Frey and Clayman (before his pseudo-awakening) would've had an EP of around 400,000. That figure was the yardstick for assigning someone the Guild rank of S, along with the threat level of Disaster.

However, an S rank didn't mean a demon lord by Tempest standards, given how a lot of the nation's top executives were as powerful as old-style demon lords. The Tempest government wanted to keep things simpler, so they built their own standards beyond this point. That's where things like the Catastrophe threat level came in, currently applied only to True Dragons and Guy Crimson.

Other "awakened" superpowers were assigned the class of Special S. The pseudo-awakened Clayman never stabilized his magicule count before reaching his end, but as Rimuru commented, "*I'd say his EP woulda been around seven or eight hundred thousand?*" Thus, "Special S" was defined as an EP of 800,000 or higher, and those lucky few with an EP over a million were collectively referred to as the Million Class.

For the sake of reference, an Arch Demon's EP was always fixed at 140,000, no matter who summoned them. That number was uniformly the same for all of them, as if they had all reached some kind of cosmic upper limit. Even Testarossa and her friends were recorded as having a 140,000 EP when they first came on to the scene, and while there was no way to verify it at this point, Ramiris and her team were certain there was no mistake about it.

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"A Million Class member," said Ramiris, struggling to find the words. "And if so, the first thing that comes to mind is that these are seraphim, aren't they?"

"A high-level angel," a nodding Beretta added, "who has transformed into one? Very troubling indeed. And even those following it are S-class. With our floor bosses asleep at the moment, engaging them could pose quite a challenge."

"B-but we have to do something, don't we?" Ramiris replied, panicking a bit.

Treyni offered her a smile, trying to assuage her. "Yes, we do, Lady Ramiris. Allow me to set off."

Traya and Doreth stood up, following her lead.

"As will I, of course."

"Allow me to join you, my sister!"

But this did little to calm Ramiris's nerves. In fact, she panicked even more.

"W-wait a minute! I know you've all gotten stronger, sure, but there's no way you beat him in the stats!"

"Hee-hee... That will not be a problem. One's EP is nothing more than a guide...and now, we will prove just how strong your followers truly are."

Traya and Doreth nodded their eager agreement. Ramiris really wanted to stop them, but nobody had any better ideas. They didn't, but she truly loved Treyni and her kin, and as their master, pushing them directly into harm's way like this didn't seem like an acceptable option at all.

"No, I can't allow this! Like Rimuru and my master always tell me, we only fight battles we know we can win!"

They would have to put the labyrinth in full operation and buy as much time as they could. In the meantime, Ramiris thought, they'd just have to hope things somehow got better. She knew that was escaping reality, but nothing else came to mind.

But it was Charys who admonished her.

"Lady Ramiris, I'm afraid a stalling approach will be too difficult to pull off. We cannot approach the level of the sleeping floor bosses in a fight, and if we leave things as they stand, we risk seeing the labyrinth's most vital facilities destroyed. I think the only choice is to intercept them on the surface. I will join them in this endeavor, so if you could grant me your permission..."

With Veldora absent, the strongest person in the Control Center was currently Charys. That must've been why he was so determined to do something here.

"Lord Beretta, I entrust Lady Ramiris's protection to you."

"Very well. Protected she will remain."

Beretta didn't need to be reminded. If the dryads were setting out to battle, he was by default the only one who could keep Ramiris guarded.

Shinji and the others, not wanting to be left behind, also spoke up.

"We'll do our best, too!"

"Ah, yes indeed. As long as we're being taken care of here, we need to return the favor."

"...Yes. We have our Resurrection Bracelets; we can keep fighting through death itself."

"Yeah... Well, being an imperial soldier, I have no reason to complain if I'm killed. I'd like to prove to everyone here that I'm more useful alive, at least."

"Right. Otherwise, Lord Gadora's likely to be enraged."

So the atmosphere in the Control Center was relaxed, everyone pleasantly chatting as this mind-boggling foe loomed before them. Ramiris took a deep breath, then erupted into a big ol' smile.

"Well, if that's what you all're saying, then have at it! Gimme everything you got! As long as I'm around, you can die all you want, so don't go easy, y'hear? And I'll send my Dragon Lords over when they're ready, so you better be sure you win for me!"

Everyone nodded their agreement—and then, taking up the roles they were given, they swiftly moved into action.

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The intruder whose presence Ramiris had picked up on was Zarario, the leader of the forces under the mystic lord Feldway's direct command. He was a former seraphim, but with his two companions, he ruled as one of the Three Mystic Leaders, the trio that controlled the mystics.

Each of them served as an army commander leading a vast force of their own, and normally they'd be nowhere near the front lines. This time, however, Feldway had given him explicit orders. He was to take advantage of Velgrynd's laying waste to the labyrinth and take out his assigned target at once. Feldway

had told him what happened to the imperial troops who had attacked the labyrinth before, and Zarario, reasoning that such a weak force would be nothing but a nuisance, decided that he ought to come to this labyrinth himself.

Five of his generals accompanied him. All of them were high-level angels, classified as cherubim or throni depending on rank, and by becoming mystics, they had gained magicule counts comparable to a demon lord's. Their physical bodies were much more fragile, but in the labyrinth's environment, that wasn't much of a problem—since the natural diffusion of magic force was suppressed down there, they'd all be able to fully leverage their abilities.

So Zarario was casually strolling toward the labyrinth—but, of course, he was interrupted. As soon as he found the stairs and descended underground, he felt the physical space around him shift. He and his entourage paused a moment, not panicking but calmly looking around to see what was going on.

What appeared before their eyes was a closed, empty space, around eight figures in the center.

"Heh-heh-heh... Looks like we're being welcomed. Best be courteous to them—we don't want to be disrespectful."

At Zarario's words, the generals under his command nodded silently. The two sides approached each other, stopping only when they were almost face-to-face.

Treyni was the first to step forward.

"It is nice to meet all of you. My name is Treyni, and on behalf of Lady Ramiris, the master of this labyrinth, I will work with you, along with Charys and my other associates. Now, with that in mind, I don't remember inviting anyone here, but may I ask who you are and what you want?"

She was smiling with her lips, but not at all with her eyes. She was ready to react to anything that might happen, keeping a constant lookout for her opponent's moves. Before coming here, she had powered herself up as much as possible; she could summon a wind elemental lord housed within within her and make full use of its powers. Considering she had summoned only the high-level elemental Sylphide for her prolonged battle against Laplace earlier, Treyni was clearly pulling out all the stops from the first move.

The EP of an elemental lord, based on its magicule count, was around a million. For Treyni, whose own EP didn't exceed 600,000, it was almost too much a weight to bear—but she was within the labyrinth and therefore able to be resurrected. So she was using up her full force for the upcoming fight, not worrying about any long-term effects on her body.

Charys, one step behind her, was just as revved up to fight; even if his opponent had twice as many magicules, that wasn't going to faze him for a moment. He'd had the almighty Veldora in all his overwhelming glory as a training partner this whole time. He had friends here, people he could trust—even people like Gobta who could beat opponents several times more powerful than themselves. Thus, Charys didn't doubt their victory for a moment.

The same was true for the Dragon Lords. Rimuru had given them names as a reward, and they had now evolved into loyal servants of Ramiris. Their power gave them EP scores of around 70,000, and further experience could bring them into the Special S level. Fear didn't register in their minds—they were just itching to test out their powers.

Traya and Doreth had also completed their spiritual Unification with Sylphide. Traya was assigned to work with the Dragon Lords against their enemy's entourage, while Doreth was providing support for Treyni and Charys. Berretta's EP was about 400,000, but his skills far surpassed that—he was a valuable asset in battle, but as Ramiris's bodyguard, he couldn't leave her side. Thus, at the present moment, this was the best lineup the labyrinth team could assemble.

If this powerhouse team should be defeated, however... Well, in that case, they'd have to stage a last stand with everyone else on hand, Rigurd and Gobta chief among them. They were busy gathering their forces on the next-highest labyrinth floor for just that purpose, and that's why they needed as much time as they could earn.

Of course, nobody here was going up intending to lose.

"This is quite a surprise. I had heard that we wouldn't find much resistance left in the labyrinth, so I certainly wasn't expecting to see this gauntlet of worthy challengers. How fascinating. I'm quite excited, in fact... Ah, but allow

me to introduce myself. My name is Zarario, one of the Three Mystic Leaders entrusted with an army by the mystic lord Feldway. It is a pleasure."

Zarario bowed gracefully, his movements refined, as if he were a famed stage actor. But there was no emotion at all behind his speech. He was clearly condescending to Treyni and the others; they barely even registered in his mind. It annoyed Treyni to no end, but she wasn't foolish enough to lose her temper at this point. Bravely trying to keep her composure, she continued with the conversation.

"I see... Zarario of the Three Mystic Leaders? With all due respect, I'm not sure I've heard that name before."

Zarario returned the muted provocation with a smile. "No, I'm sure you haven't. We are rather well known over in other worlds, but we've been...away from this one for a long while. I suppose we must seem like quite an alien presence here."

"Alien...?"

"Indeed. Not that we intend to let that stop us."

"..."

"Ah, right, but you asked what we wanted, yes? I'll gladly inform you, of course. In fact, if you could cooperate with us, I think it would save us all a lot of trouble."

"That will depend on what you have in mind."

"Very well, then. Our objection is to eliminate a boy by the name of Masayuki Honjo. If you will offer him to me instead of keeping him hidden, I will withdraw at once."

What Zarario offered, his gentle good looks framing his soft, almost feminine voice, was a declaration that he'd kill Masayuki. Nobody was offering their agreement. Masayuki was Rimuru's friend, as well as an irreplaceable companion for Treyni and the rest.

"Ridiculous. I fear there is no room for negotiation."

"I see. That's a pity."

Zarario smiled, not bothering to hide that he didn't find it a pity at all. Then, at the next moment, the fight began.



Treyni set off first, propelling herself into the air. From above, she sent a swarm of countless unseen blades flying toward Zarario. This was Invisible Blade, a lethal move that couldn't be dodged—this was not just a bladelike rupture in the air caused by compression but it was also granted the air elemental attribute, making it capable of shearing through dimensions. It was impossible to perceive and could be unleashed with no preliminary casting or other movement, showing just how menacing a force a riled Treyni could be.

But she was just mismatched this time. *Far* too mismatched. Zarario didn't take a single step—not because he failed to notice the blades but because he didn't even need to evade them. Just as the invisible blades seemed ready to slice through him, they disappeared. A distortion in space had manifested, neatly covering the surface of Zarario's body. There was a skill close to this one recorded in the labyrinth's database; it was in the family of spatial defensive zones that Zegion was an expert at devising. Nothing could be more absolute in terms of defense; it could nullify all element-driven attacks and even handle ruptures in space.

"Wha...?!"

"The same skill as Lord Zegion's, huh? Nasty."

"Hoh? From the way you're talking, this skill isn't a novelty to you, then? And you spoke of a Zegion just now? I was told all of this nation's top leaders had been taken out of the picture, but it seems our intelligence was faulty..."

Despite Zarario's tone, his face was as cool as ever. He clearly wasn't taking any of them seriously yet; in fact, he appeared to savor this. That's why Treyni looked so stern. Exchanging glances with Charys, she immediately changed her approach—instead of trying to defeat Zarario by force, she concentrated on stalling for time.

This seemed like a wise move. After all, the five generals Zarario had brought with him were having a noticeably difficult time against the labyrinthine forces. The Dragon Lords had been constantly training for battle, and now they were

leaving nothing off the table skill-wise. Besides that, they were fighting on their home turf, which made all the Tempest forces as good as immortal. That let them fight well beyond their physical limits, and in an evenly matched battle, that allowed them to notch some scarily one-sided victories.

*This could work,* Treyni thought. Zarario was a grave threat, but the other enemies would be dispatched soon enough. If they kept up their current momentum and worked as a team, a little space-distorting defense could be broken through in time. Worst-case scenario, they could just wait for Zarario to wear himself out.

*That's right. As long as we can keep driving them back, we'll achieve our objectives for victory here. No need to push ourselves too hard...but why is he acting so unconcerned about all of this...?*

Treyni thought she should have a distinct advantage. But she couldn't shake off her uneasiness—all thanks to Zarario, whose attitude was unflappable as ever. Anyone with a decent amount of common sense wouldn't fail to read the war situation here, and Zarario had to have more than that—he said he was the general of an army. It'd normally be impossible for someone who had demon lord-level behemoths serving him to make such a rudimentary error in judgment.

*His mission is to eliminate Masayuki the Hero...? No!*

Thinking about it, if Masayuki was the only target, assassinating him would be easy. Zarario's sky-high EP had completely distracted them all from that possibility.

(Lady Ramiris! Do you know where Sir Masayuki is located?)

(Huh? Why that out of nowhere? Of course I do.)

Ramiris quickly answered the Thought Communication. She wasn't just leisurely watching this battle. These intruders were a big problem, yes—but more important was evacuating the city residents. Now that Veldora had gone to battle, the urban area they had forcibly transported within the labyrinth was no longer fully safe. If Veldora should be defeated, the city would automatically revert to its original position. Ramiris alone didn't have enough magic power to keep it in place; there was nothing she could do if it happened.

It was thus necessary to evacuate at least the residents, just in case. Fortunately, there was enough open space on Floor 95 (functioning as Floor 100 at the moment) to deploy a decent-sized army. They couldn't allow regular citizens into the labyrinth's research facilities, but the floor overall was more than big enough for all the city's residents. Once Beretta pointed out that fact to Ramiris, she'd hurriedly sprung into action, and now the evacuation was underway.

(I need you to ensure he is safe immediately!)

(I think you're worrying too much. Those are the only intruders so far, you know...)

Ramiris, despite her internal griping about how busy she was, answered Treyni's request. Just as she thought, Masayuki was safe and sound.

(Hmm, yep, he looks all right. He's in the city now, helping guide the evacuees out of there.)

Just as Ramiris said, Masayuki was playing a major role in the effort, helping to keep the citizens calm. If he wasn't there, there might've been enough mass panic to lethally delay the evacuation. It was times like these that Masayuki's innate skills really came into their own.

So the situation down there was peaceful, with no signs of battle. If there were any signs, Ramiris (as the chief controller of the labyrinth) would know about it at once. Treyni, hearing all that, finally breathed a sigh of relief.

(All right. That's a relief, then...)

Nonetheless, she seemed unconvinced.

(Are you worried?) Ramiris asked her.

(Well, if the enemy tried taking Masayuki's life, I'm afraid the evacuees could get caught in the crossfire.)

Even Treyni felt this was overthinking matters. Nevertheless, something in the back of her mind was alerting her to consider every possibility just in case.

(Well, all right! If you're that insistent on it, Treyni, I'll have Masayuki's gang go up to Floor 70!)

That, finally, satisfied Treyni. Floor 70 was currently home to the surviving remnants of the imperial forces. Even if some assassins showed up, those soldiers would boast enough resistance to buy them some time.

(That would certainly put my mind at ease.)

(Right? Yeah!)

So Masayuki was dispatched to Floor 70.



Masayuki sighed to himself.

*People around here treat me with no respect at all...*

From Rimuru on down, all the big shots just loved acting on the slightest whim that popped into their heads. These weren't ground-level minions—they really needed to consider their position and act with more caution. Not that all of them were like that, but...

"Don't you think, like, they should be more worried about *my* take on things, like how Shuna is?"

Those were Masayuki's true feelings coming out. If an elegant, beautiful woman like Shuna asked him to do something, Masayuki would have no complaints. That's why he was so delighted to help with this evacuation...but now Ramiris was interrupting him. "*Hey, so I want you up on Floor 70 ASAP!*" she forcefully ordered without a moment's hesitation.

Masayuki was less than excited about this. But despite appearances, Ramiris had a lot of power to work with. She had Veldora's backing, and she was also one of the people who knew Masayuki's secret. No matter what she said, there was no way he could defy her.

"Ah, give it up. Lady Ramiris doesn't mean anything bad by it—they're just stretched thin is all. Sir Veldora himself went out to fight, too. It's an emergency no matter how you slice it."

The young man speaking to Masayuki, walking along with him, wore a snake-shaped earring, a rugged-looking wristwatch, and a skull ring on his finger. His shirt was a sickly looking shade of purple, covered by a spiked leather jacket;

this was matched with long, shiny black leather pants, accompanied by a skirtlike piece of fabric around the waist. It was punk fashion through and through; clearly this guy wasn't an honor student.

This wasn't the type Masayuki usually got along with, but strangely enough, they had hit it off pretty well. That was probably because, much like Masayuki, this man had gone through a lot in life. He called himself Venom, and according to him, he was always being forced by his bosses to deliver the impossible in his work. Masayuki felt a kind of kinship with him, because he saw a lot of himself in the guy—as Venom had rather succinctly put it, "*I have no human rights.*"

Now Masayuki had Venom as his bodyguard, because that's what Venom's bosses had ordered him to do. He hadn't seen Jiwu or Bernie since all that stuff went down—it'd just be too awkward—and he and Jinrai had split up as well. That was at Masayuki's suggestion; he knew his entire life was one big bluff, so there was no way he could ensure his pal's safety. Fortunately, Jinrai was open to the idea: "*If you need me,*" he'd told Masayuki, "*just say the word! Until then, I'll keep my skills sharp working for this nation's Guild.*" So now he was employed by Tempest's Guild, providing behind-the-scenes support for Masayuki's exploits. It made the Hero feel a tad lonely, but it still came as a relief. Now that he didn't have to lie to his own friends, a heavy guilt was lifted from his shoulders.

So Masayuki had been by himself—and then Venom showed up. Venom knew just how weak Masayuki was; he was there to protect him, and despite appearances, he actually lent an ear to what he had to say. Venom had been told to cooperate with Masayuki so his reputation didn't get tarnished, which was in line with what Rimuru wanted as well, and Masayuki wasn't shy about taking advantage. Thanks to that, they had quickly built a friendship based on trust.

"Yeah, so I know this is an emergency and all, but why would someone portraying a Hero figure like me try to actively run away from everyone in town, is what I'm asking."

"But you're a wimp, man. If the enemy *really* attacks, you can't do squat, can you?"

"No, but... Yes, I *know* that! But that doesn't make this right, does it? All those anxious gazes upon me... They bite into me, you know?"

They didn't have to say anything. Masayuki could hear them pleading with him, *Don't go, don't go*, anyway. That's why he was so dissatisfied with Ramiris's order.

In Venom's eyes, though, the issue lay elsewhere. Floor 70 was clearly going to be safer than Floor 100. That's because even if you didn't count the imperial forces among their war power, the research facilities on Floor 70 had the overcomer vampires waiting in the wings. They were currently taking care of the children, so the way Venom saw it, Masayuki could come under their protection once he got there. To Venom, the mission Diablo gave him was the most important matter at hand—he needed to literally risk his life to ensure Masayuki survived.

"Yeah, well, I know how your just being there helps people feel better. But the evacuations are pretty close to complete now, and Floor 100's well protected, so..."

Practically speaking, if an enemy was powerful enough to make it this far, nothing short of the floor bosses would stop them. Floor 60 was largely undefended—Gadora was absent, and Shinji's team had pulled out. Floor 70 was thus serving as their first line of defense.

"So you mean I'd be in *more* danger up there?!"

Venom nodded. "I suppose so. But don't worry, man. I'm here. And it's my job to protect you."

"Mmmm, well, that's what I'm hoping for, but..."

Masayuki understood the situation he was in. If he was being transferred to the front lines in this situation, it meant some enemy was likely targeting him and him alone. Otherwise there'd be no reason for Ramiris to expose someone as helpless as he was to even more danger. Masayuki had a Resurrection Bracelet, so he'd be quickly resurrected after any death in the labyrinth. It seemed clear Ramiris wanted to use him as bait for the enemy.

"Yeah, you're probably right. Plus, I'm sure she didn't want to get other

civilians caught in the fight. They might realize how much of a wimp you are, besides. Following this order is just the right thing to do, y'know?"

"I know that, yeah, but I got *my* say in this, too..."

Jiwu and Bernie were on Floor 70. The awkwardness of running into them was a problem for Masayuki as well.

"I dunno what they're up to, but if they were just following orders, try not to hate on 'em too much, okay? Even if they tried to kill you, it's not like they *really* wanted to, deep down. Humans are all complicated like that; it's not like monsters. That's what makes them such great toys for demons."

Masayuki glared at the grinning Venom. *I can't move on that easily*, he thought—but as Venom said, it was hard to read someone's true feelings, and not even he could find it in himself to fully hate Jiwu and Bernie. Dwelling on it would only hurt him.

So Masayuki finally resigned himself to his fate once they reached Floor 70 and he witnessed the construction site the imperial forces were stationed around. "Well, stop using *me* as a toy, too," he shot at his newfound friend, shaking his head to drive away his emotions. Venom smiled, knowing he wasn't actually angry. Protecting Masayuki was his duty, but Venom took a personal liking to him as well.

They were both nervous pessimists by nature. And Venom couldn't help but respect the guy. He might seem like a twig in a river, letting the currents take him where they would, but he still kept a fierce sense of self-will. Venom saw himself as a natural-born rebel as well, but something told him he couldn't hold a candle to Masayuki.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, that depends on you— *Mm?*!"

Just as he was about to jab at him in return, he stepped up to defend Masayuki against the presence that suddenly appeared before them.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Tch! A meddler, huh? And I thought my timing was perfect. I'm not used to this body enough to react quickly, then?"

The figure ignored Venom, giving Masayuki an annoyed look instead. There was something clearly unearthly about him, something Masayuki couldn't hide his agitation about.

There had been no sign of him at all before that moment, but now the aura he emitted was nothing short of overwhelming. On his back were three pairs of folded wings, only serving to further emphasize his virile, masculine physique. The well-defined muscles were virtually chiseled into his pale skin, exposed for the world to see. But what struck observers the most was his gaze. It housed a sinister, ghastly light, like a vicious carnivore—and a wounded one at that, something no one could ever approach.

"Don't ignore me!" Venom shouted as he unleashed a high roundhouse kick. It was a beautiful, textbook move, and it traveled toward the target's temple like a magnet.



But...

Masayuki was shocked. Amazingly, the figure took Venom's kick without defending—not because he couldn't react in time, either. Almost as if he didn't see the need to at all.

"Pfft. Garbage like you doesn't deserve to live. You damn demon races have been meddling with us since time immemorial. I am Cornu, one of the Three Mystic Leaders, and you have just deeply offended me! You will know your place soon...in the grave!"

The man called Cornu casually swung an arm toward Venom. The next moment, a wave of compressed magic force was unleashed, gouging into Venom at an unavoidable speed. Masayuki was wondering why Cornu had bothered with the high-handed self-introduction, but only for a moment, as he hurriedly went over to Venom's side.

"A-are you okay?"

Venom was alive. He had reacted just in time to deflect the magic bolt with his left arm. But the damage was staggering. His entire left arm was now gone, and there was a large hole in his left side as well.

"...Not really, no. I hardly believe it, much less want to admit it, but it looks like that bastard's way stronger than I am. But don't worry. I promise I'm gonna protect you."

With that, Venom casually stood up. He was nowhere near unhurt, but he was far from out of the battle, either.

"Oh, great. We've got an obstinate little bug here, don't we? This is why I hate garbage so much. They waste everyone's time with their pointless resistance."

Watching Cornu moan about this made Masayuki want to tell him off. He didn't know why it was so important that he be killed, and he felt entirely responsible for Venom getting hurt as well.

"Venom..."

"I guess that guy's going after you, huh?"

"You knew from the start?"

"I had a hunch once Lady Ramiris contacted me. But it's okay. I may not beat him, but I'll buy us some time."

"But..."

"He probably hasn't killed you yet because of your bracelet. If he does, you'll just get resurrected somewhere else. He's afraid of that, so he's trying to bring you out of the labyrinth alive. I don't think he'll throw us any attacks that might fall within range of you!"

Venom smiled defiantly. And he was right. Masayuki's resurrection point was set to the Control Center; that way, no one would see where he went. Knowing that emboldened him.

Cornu, meanwhile, was annoyed that his motives had been exposed. He had good reason not to make any more mistakes, a reason that went back several decades. During an attempted invasion of another planet besides this one, he'd screwed everything up just one step before completion. Exactly what had happened was unclear, but a field of blazing fire had reduced the army he led to cinders. Thanks to that, Cornu—despite retaining his Mystic Leader title—no longer had any subordinates assigned to him. And while his wounds had healed, his mind still bore the sadness and despair he could never fully wipe away.

Thus, despite the overwhelming advantage he had in this matchup, Cornu still felt like he was dancing on a cliff. Unfortunately for him, it didn't escape his adversary's notice.

"I'll admit it. If this wasn't Ramiris's world, I never would've had to be here. It would be child's play to bury both of you, but while I'm at it, I think I'll let you taste genuine despair. Behold my true powers...and prepare to set off for the afterlife!"

Cornu wasn't the type of fool to let his guard down. He realized Venom would be no pushover, and now he broke out his full force so he could handle whatever may or may not come.

Over his body, a suit of armor formed itself, emitting beams of black and golden light. This was the ultimate in God-class gear, the same type Zarario boasted, and it was available only to the Three Mystic Leaders. Venom, now facing a fully armed Cornu, had no moves left to make. No attack would even

scratch him, and all that remained was for Venom to be tormented to death.

“Tsh... Dammit...!”

Venom winced at the impossible difference in power. Running, he assumed, would be pointless—and once he was gone, Masayuki would doubtlessly be taken away and executed. Venom himself would be resurrected within this labyrinth as well, but if he failed to protect Masayuki, it’d be Diablo’s violent purge waiting for him next.

*I’m screwed, aren’t I...?*

Venom thought hard, almost ready to cry. There was only one option left—kill Masayuki himself so he’d be sent to a safe spot.

“So be it—”

But just when Venom was about to commit to it:

“Hey, do we have some trouble over here? Mind if we lend a hand?”

Two men stepped forward, shielding Masayuki.

“Are you Sir Minitz?! And Sir Caligulio, too?! ”

The timid Masayuki recognized them, having met them both a couple of times before. He recalled how nervous he had been, given how high in Empire society they both were.

“Sir Masayuki, you may feel free to simply call me Minitz. Having His Majesty the Emperor’s spitting image call me ‘sir’ makes me feel so self-conscious.”

“B-but...”

“Hee-hee-hee! He’s right, I think. Seeing you here, Sir Masayuki, makes me feel like my heart is soaring, as if His Majesty himself is witnessing my exploits. I feel more powerful than ever now!”

The foppish Minitz—along with Caligulio, his stern countenance obscured by a patch over his left eye—smiled at Masayuki, trying to calm him.

“Venom, right? Allow us to back you up.”

Minitz turned toward Cornu. An invisible force field deployed itself, slowing Cornu’s movements. It was the effect of Oppressor, the unique skill Minitz had

supposedly lost earlier.

“Didn’t you lose your powers, Minitz?”

“Yes, I did,” came the blunt reply. “But once you get something the first time, the second time onward is far easier, isn’t it?”

Caligulio gave that a half smile. “I’m envious. I lost *my* omnipotence, so... But at least I can still easily store magicules in my empty body.”

As if to prove it, Caligulio’s body was clearly teeming with power. He was well beyond the point of losing control, and blood was seeping out from his pores. His life would be in danger before long, but that mattered little in the labyrinth—he was equipped with an unlimited-use Resurrection Bracelet he had procured from parts unknown, so he didn’t care about the effect on his body.

“You sure get carried away, don’t you?”

“I couldn’t face up to my dead soldiers if I didn’t do *this* much.”

Venom saw his last hope in the two of them. And they weren’t alone. Several other men had joined them, volunteering to assist the demon. He recognized who they were immediately, and without a moment’s hesitation, he agreed to the offer.

“Thanks, guys. Don’t worry about killing this one or anything—just stop him!”

“Understood!”

“This ought to be fun.”

“As long as I’m on the scene, there’s nothing left to fear!”

These were three overcomers—rehabilitated vampires—who had joined in out of curiosity.

“I’ll give the orders. All of you, get moving!”

It was Caligulio declaring his authority, and no one objected. Now five people were supporting Venom, going on the attack against Cornu.

“Stupid garbage! Don’t act like you can beat me!”

Cornu was enraged, but he still hadn’t lost his cool. He set out to eliminate each of them one by one, while taking pains not to let Masayuki escape. But,

surprisingly enough, this hastily assembled team worked amazingly well together. Between the overcomers' immortality and Cornu being unable to deploy wide-range destructive attacks, Caligilio had a plan in mind to win this battle with minimal damage. Using quick-wittedness and bravery to overcome the impossible difference in power, Venom and the others backed one another up to successfully stall for time.

And as they did:

"Masayuki! Over here!"

"Hurry up and get out of there. If you reach the lab, you can travel to other floors from there, right?"

Bernie and Jiwu had called out to him.

"Y-you guys!"

"Sorry. I wanted to more formally apologize, but now's not the time for that. Just follow me."

"Huh?! Wait a second. What're you doing, Jiwu?"

Bernie seemed ready to serve as Masayuki's bodyguard. Jiwu, however, stood frozen on the spot, apparently casting a magic spell.

"Ah, don't worry about me. I'll just pretend to be you to confuse him."

By the time Jiwu turned toward Masayuki to respond, she looked exactly like him.

"Come on! I guess he's holding back his attack on you, and Jiwu can defend herself well enough. We gotta get out while we have a chance!"

That was apparently the plan they had come up with on the way here. The rest of the team endeavored to keep Jiwu out of Cornu's sight as she transformed. Masayuki hesitated...but only for a moment.

"Okay. I'm just gonna be a drag on everyone here anyway."

So he reluctantly agreed to the plan.



The Control Center was in a state of uncontrolled chaos. The enemy who had appeared in the labyrinth out of nowhere was far trickier to deal with than anyone had assumed.

“Do we have the EP for the guy targeting Masayuki yet?”

“Here it is! It’s estimated to be around 1.8 million—or it was, but after equipping God-class gear, it’s risen to 2.8 million!”

“What? That’s just cheating!”

Ramiris deeply resented Alpha’s report. But there wasn’t much point whining about it. She needed to get serious and come up with a plan, fast.

“God-class equipment only lends its force to whoever it deems its master. In Sir Alberto’s case, the result more than doubled his existence points...and even then, he was likely not extracting his God-class gear’s full power.”

Ramiris agreed with Beretta’s analysis. With his God-class armor, Alberto had become something equivalent to a spiritual life-form. According to the data taken earlier, his EP went from a starting point of around 180,000 to 400,000 and beyond. That seemed impressive by itself, but apparently there was still untapped power left in his God-class gear. Alberto himself had gone into his evolutionary sleep not long afterward, and no one could wait to see what he’d exhibit once he woke up. (This evoked the question of just how crazy Kurobe was, given his ability to craft God-class stuff, but no one had any time to debate that right then.)

Regardless, God-class gear was as rare as it was astounding...except in the hands of the enemy, it was nothing but a mortal threat.

“So now what’re we gonna do, huh?! Even Treyni and Charys together are getting pushed around by that Zarario guy! If we gotta deal with this Cornu character along with that, Venom and his friends don’t stand a chance...”

Ramiris had reason for concern. Having become a Demon Peer, Venom’s EP had shot up to 400,000. However, the leader of the overcomer trio was 300,000 at best, and his two partners were 200,000. Minitz and Caligulio, both stragglers from the imperial army, had lost most of their powers; they could manage an EP of just over 10,000. Expecting them to put up a fight was foolish—in fact, one

had to commend their bravery for attempting to join in at all.

Still, the pair was brimming with enthusiasm. Minitz, oddly enough, was using his unique skill, Oppressor, something everyone assumed he had lost. The fashionable suit he sported was another concern (he sure didn't *look* like a prisoner of war), but Ramiris's mind was more on Oppressor at the moment. Caligulio's own EP had also been rapidly rising as of late, topping 400,000 just a moment ago. The rate of acceleration was finally tapering off, but the number was still increasing.

It was totally incomprehensible and tremendously fascinating to watch. But unfortunately, there was no time to explore it further. Suppressing her bewilderment at all these concerns happening at once, Ramiris barked out her orders.

"Dahhh! If they did, my power will just resurrect them anyway! They can act as my throwaway pawns all they want! The *real* problem is Masayuki!"

"...How do you mean?"

"I mean, he'll be transported back here if he dies, but if he's taken away, it's over for him! Right? So I think we need the surest method possible to ferry him back to safety."

"I see."

"Actually, it looks like Bernie and Jiwu are trying to extricate him from the scene."

"Oh!"

Ramiris was impressed. They had acted before she could direct them, apparently reaching the same conclusion she had. It did a lot to rehabilitate their image in her mind. Masayuki, she knew, was way too much of a chicken to try something like take his own life in the labyrinth. No matter how bad things got, he'd never even think about using that most deadly approach to escape. With Bernie there, however, Ramiris's mind was much more at ease.

"Get in contact with Bernie! Tell him to flee back to this room for me. Also, I think he knows this, but if push comes to shove, he needs to off the guy himself!"

“Roger that.”

Alpha promptly sent a Thought Communication, perfectly encrypted and reaching Bernie with zero delay. Confirming that, Ramiris finally breathed a sigh of relief.

“All right. Now we’ve done what we can, at least.”

The large surveillance screen was divided into sections, showing off the state of battle across the labyrinth. The fight was tough in every video feed; things weren’t looking too sunny for them.

“Ugh, I am so useless when Rimuru isn’t around.”

“It was the worst possible timing. If our floor guardians were awake, we wouldn’t be nearly as outmanned as we are.”

“Well, I know that, but...”

Beretta was certainly right. If their entire lineup was deployable right now, they wouldn’t be so far behind in this fight. But even so, Ramiris felt a sense of responsibility as she watched things unfold. That was how irreplaceable the labyrinth had become in her life.

Just then, Beta, who had been monitoring magicule amounts, shouted out in a strained voice.

“Emergency!”

“Oh, now what?!”

“This was anticipated, but the magicule supply from Sir Veldora has been cut off. Unless it’s restored, we have less than an hour until the city is deposited back on the surface!”

“Gehhhh!! Does that mean my master lost?!”

It was a hard reality for Ramiris to swallow. But if Velgrynd was their adversary, it was a reality she had to admit was possible. They had proceeded with the evacuation with that possibility in mind.

For now, Ramiris opted to believe that Rimuru would figure something out for Veldora. Getting impressed wouldn’t improve matters for anyone, so all she

could do was think positively and proceed as best she could.

"How's the evacuation going?"

"No problems there. Masayuki successfully persuaded the stragglers before he headed out."

In any crowd of people, there's always one group that's good at griping about anything and everything, and the Tempest capital of Rimuru was no exception. Around 10 percent of the population had refused to evacuate, including residents and visiting merchants trying to profit off the situation. But even they were swayed by the voice of Masayuki. "Well," they said, "*if that's what he wants*"—and then they finally got off their asses and left. The effect, close to brainwashing, startled even Ramiris.

Gamma, tasked with overseeing evacuation-related matters, avowed that there was nobody left in the city. Her mind assured, Ramiris prepared to separate the city from the labyrinth.

"But if nobody's there, none of our defenses will function. Sadly, we will have to expect untold damage to the town and its buildings."

"Wh-whoa, Beretta! You're gonna make me second-guess things if you say stuff like that!"

But it was the unavoidable truth. Ramiris's own magicule count wouldn't comparatively amount to much—although the labyrinth had been expanded, she didn't have the wherewithal to accommodate any extra structures inside it by herself. That was the harmful side effect of relying purely on Veldora for their energy needs, and Ramiris sure didn't have a quick fix for it right now.

"I am fully aware of that, my lady. But then, I am sure Sir Rimuru would say something to the effect of, '*We can always build it again.*'"

"Right? I suppose that's what we'll have to commit to..."

Seething over her own lack of power, Ramiris ejected the city to the surface. Now they'd just have to pray some stray bolt of magic didn't level the thing. But:

"Urgent report! A new enemy has appeared on the surface, two in number.

Precision measurements outside the labyrinth are not possible, but their EP is estimated to be at least one million!"

The report came from Delta, who was monitoring the surface. The small window on the main screen was enlarged, revealing two angels—or *fallen* angels, to be exact—bearing black wings. One was a large, muscular woman while the other was a smaller, handsome young man. Each of them sported three pairs of wings.

"Oh, no way! If they have the same number of wings, are *they* seraphim, too...?"

Ramiris flew around the room, fidgeting. All hope seemed to be truly lost now. But, remembering something that was on her mind, she turned to Delta, a glimmer of hope on her face.

"Delta! How can we be so sure they're enemies? Maybe—"

*Maybe they're not*, she thought. *Maybe they're allies, even*. But Delta offered no solace.

"Because they are keeping us from covering the hole opened up by Lady Velgrynd. Victory is ours if we can close off the labyrinth...but sadly, it is not to be."

The answer was obvious, beyond reproach.

"R...right. Thank you."

Ramiris stopped flitting around in the air and slumped onto Beretta's shoulder. There was something obscene about the enemy deciding to put four of the Million Class into the field; she wanted to spend all night cursing to high heaven about it. But then a reliable ally woke back up.

*"Allow me to handle things on the surface. I will not let them destroy the city crowned by Sir Rimuru's name without a fight."*

Geld, the Barrier Lord, had completed his evolution.

"Gel!!!!!!d!!"

Ramiris was crying.

"Geld's EP is over 2.37 million!" said Alpha. "All his gear is included in that, but even so, it's doubtful he'll lose to these invaders now!"

Geld's Legend-class equipment had itself ascended to God-class with the evolution, driven to greater heights by Geld's aura. Rimuru hadn't factored that into his calculations, but everyone witnessing this assumed he'd expected this to happen.

"That's Rimuru for ya! Even with my own two eyes, I could never have seen this one coming."

Ramiris was bodily confident about how imperceptive she was. Beretta couldn't have agreed more.

"Indeed. Such *deep* forethought."

And that wasn't the only one awakening.

*"I am here as well. Let me handle the other one."*

This was Kumara, the Chimera Lord.

"Lady Kumara's EP is measured at approximately 1.9 million. Reaching this figure with no auxiliary equipment is simply unbelievable!"

Cheers erupted in the Control Center at Alpha's report. Then, as if to prove his statement true, an intense battle broke out on the surface. Even more amazingly, Geld's underlings fanned out across key areas, forming an all-powerful barrier to protect the city from any of the battle's fallout.

"We can win this!"

"For now, I'd say we have a chance."

Ramiris was already declaring victory. Beretta was similarly relieved. But it was too early to rest easy yet. Feldway, the Mystic Lord, had yet to fully execute his strategy. In fact, everything up to now had been a feint. His true aim was elsewhere.



The nervous tension spread across the Control Center had subsided a little. Ramiris, declaring victory atop Beretta's shoulder, was quieter now, like she

needed a nap. Beretta, used to his role, kept his calm demeanor as he tended to his ever-frantic master.

Shinji, watching this from a distance, had been taking in all the previous chaos like he was a spectator at a sports meet. The battle unfolding was so completely beyond his understanding that it seemed to transcend the limits of reality itself. Paradoxically, it helped him stay calm. He understood why Ramiris was freaking out, but—really—she should collect herself a bit more, he thought.

*I wish she'd learn a little from Beretta...*

That's what he truly felt, but he'd never say it out loud. If he did, it'd lead to needless strife and likely a pay cut.

Yes, Ramiris's labyrinth was truly a mind-boggling invention, but she herself was weaker than Shinji—weak beyond compare, even. No matter how much she panicked and carried on in here, she couldn't actually do very much.

*Besides...*

Shinji recalled the victory celebration held the other day. All those magic-born titans, boasting untold stores of power—and they each pledged their loyalty to one man, the demon lord Rimuru. Shinji was an otherworlder, a capable one, rated Special A by the Free Guild. He had something called his “existence points” measured, and right now it was more than 120,000. He even possessed the unique skill Restorer. In the imperial army, he was treated as an ace commando, and he admittedly allowed his superiority to get to his head a little. Here, though, he was nothing special. Even the beautiful sisters manning the operator controls had EPs of more than 150,000. It quickly, and understandably, made Shinji stop dwelling on his own strength so much.

Furthermore, Marc's EP was pegged at 130,000, while Zhen scored 120,000. They seemed pretty equal overall, and none of them would even register in the minds of the monsters being shown on-screen here.

But despite that, even with Tempest's main force unavailable, they were still making a competitive fight out of this. That alone, Shinji thought, was amazing. Looking back, the force that laid waste to the Empire's proud Armored Division was not even 30 percent of the Tempest force's full power. That, too, was before the victory party where the demon lord Rimuru rewarded his top magic-

born officers and they fell into evolutionary sleep. Now they were seeing guys graduate into the Million Class.

Shinji's mind could barely keep up with this. Monster evolutions, including Geld's just now, made no sense to him.

*I am so glad that I left the Empire for Tempest!*

He gave a sincere mental thank-you to Lord Gadora.

Then his eyes moved to the monitor, where his former commanding officer, Minitz, was leading a group fighting off Cornu, one of the Three Mystic Leaders. It looked like something from a movie.

*I mean, what can they even do against these kinds of monsters? I can't believe freaks like that are up there in the first place.*

In Shinji's mind, Minitz and Caligulio must be insane if they were charging into battle despite losing all their power. He wondered if they were scared—but seeing this movie-like plot of two fallen warriors charging back up against their foes made him think that not everyone in the Empire's officer corps was a waste of space.

It just felt so unrealistic. So much so, he wondered if these two thought they were the heroes of their own little movie plots or something. And that was perhaps why his mind wandered away from the danger at hand—to escape reality. Now his attention was focused on Shuna, who was busy providing refreshments to everyone.

*...But, man, Shuna's just as sweet as always, huh?*

There was no point dwelling on his employer—she didn't matter to him. This vulgar fighting didn't occupy his mind; instead, it was all about the incredibly fetching Shuna. Just recalling her as she politely bowed and left the room made Shinji feel happier. She was so dignified, so flawless. She looked like such a fleeting figure, who would fade into the wind if you touched her, but she was notorious for being a scary woman when riled. Shinji was hardly the only one who looked up to her—Marc and Zhen were fellow members of Shuna's fan club, alongside the new recruits Lucius and Raymond.

On the other hand, there was Ramiris, his employer. He sighed.

"Uh, Shinji?" she said. "If you wanted to say something, I'll hear ya out, but...?"

She was so keenly sharp only when it came to stuff like this.

"No, it's nothing."

Shinji hurriedly denied it, wondering if it was showing on his face.

Lord Gadora, his master, told him all the time that "*if you want to be a wizard, you must always keep your presence of mind. You've got much to learn there, my boy!*" Now he could see the wisdom in that. Yes, Shinji could get emotional by comparison, and he was poor at the type of self-control that all wizards needed. Zhen always kept it cool, never revealing how he felt, but he wasn't suited to magic. "*Too bad it wasn't the other way around,*" Gadora always told him—and now Shinji had to admit to his shortcomings.

*Well, if Lady Ramiris is unoccupied enough to yell at me again, maybe she'll forgive me for it this time...*

He knew he was dreaming. Besides, comparing Shuna with Ramiris was ridiculous from the start. It was like comparing a grown woman to a child—or not even that. Shuna still exhibited traits of innocent youth, but the way she held herself was as a truly refined woman. Ramiris had been alive for millennia, but her mental age was still as low as her physical body's. She was a kid, in looks and in mind, and she couldn't even compete in the same arena as Shuna. The juxtaposition was so stark, Shinji even felt a little bad for Ramiris.

Shinji's mind was far away from pressing matters. And that's why he could notice: One man among them, usually too lazy to lift a finger, had stood up from his seat—and Vester, his dedicated boss, was sprawled over his desk, fast asleep.

"Oh? Deeno, what are you doing—?"

It was sheer coincidence that Shinji posed the question...but it turned out to be the MVP performance of the day. Shinji, the least dedicated to this war of anyone in the room, wound up contributing more to it than anyone else.



Deeno stood up and attempted to carry out the duty handed to him. It was with a great deal of reluctance, given how much he hated working, but an old acquaintance of his had asked for it, and he couldn't turn him down. Besides, he had been taken by the compulsive idea that he *had* to do it.

But something unexpected got in the way.

"Oh? Deeno, what are you doing—?"

The moment he heard Shinji's voice, Deeno realized his mission had failed. He had intended to get everything over with before anyone could notice, but the exact right kind of interference showed up at the exact right time. It was a colossal blunder. No one could have ever predicted this act from Deeno, either...

The hand that had reached out to grab Ramiris was now caught in Beretta's iron grip. It all happened in a single moment. If Shinji hadn't spoken up, nothing would have stopped him.

"What are you trying to do, Sir Deeno?"

"That's a surprise. I didn't expect anyone to get in the way. Eesh... I was waiting for everyone to relax and stop being so tense because *you* were around, too..."

"..."

"Seriously, Shinji, you really got a lot of potential, y'know? You could be big."

Deeno was griping, but he half meant it as well. He knew only a handful of people in the world could spot his moves. That was why he'd had so much confidence this would work—confidence that was fully shot now.

Rolling his eyes, Deeno sighed and stole a glance at Shinji. Then he shook his head and looked back, sneering at Beretta. By now, people around Shinji were seeing the weight of the situation—but there wasn't much they could do.

Alpha and the other dryads stepped up to surround Deeno, ferrying Ramiris away from Beretta's shoulder and into their protection.

"...Huh? Huhhhh?!"

Ramiris, left behind by these transpiring events, looked at Beretta, then

Deeno, trying bravely to understand her predicament. Shinji stepped away from Deeno to attend to Vester—but Marc and his other friends were just crouched over in their seats, not moving. They were asleep as well, despite everything going on, and now everyone could tell something was wrong.

“Hey! Deeno!” Shinji shouted. “You did something, didn’t you?!”

“Yeah, kinda,” came the listless reply. “But, like, if you got resistance to my power, you must have a pretty excellent skill there. You caught me off guard, Shinji.”

“I’m not exactly happy about the compliment.”

He actually was a little happy, but Shinji didn’t say that.

Deeno merely shrugged. He’d offered Shinji praise, but otherwise he didn’t seem to care about him much, because he didn’t even offer him another look. Instead, his eyes were on Ramiris, behind Beretta’s shoulder.

“Ramiris, sorry about this, but you think you could maybe work with my team? I don’t wanna get rough...and if you agree to help us, I promise I’ll treat you well. Neither of us wants to shed needless blood, right? So, you know, you mind coming with me?”

It was about as serious a statement as Deeno had ever delivered. Ramiris’s reaction to it was predictable.

“Huhhh? Have you gone loony or what? Rimuru’s gonna beat your ass silly once he gets back, y’know.”

Ramiris was always keen to rely on someone else’s reputation to defend herself. But she wasn’t wrong, either. Deeno had to chuckle.

“Yeah, I’m sure. I figured you’d say that. But, you know, I’m not just gonna sit here and accept that. I’m reluctant to do this, like, a *lot*, but I’m a Monitor and all, so...”

“A Monitor...? You mean one of the Seven Primordial Angels, the closest servants of Sir Veldanava?”

“Well said. And yes, I used to be one of those Primordials. Ever since Feldway and the other leaders left for that alternate world, I’ve been taking care of

monitoring activity in their place.”

“Oh, no way!”

“No, I mean it.”

This was a sheer bolt out of the blue for Ramiris. Deeno, a demon lord who even he himself admitted was mostly baggage, actually turned out to be someone important—in fact, someone named by Veldanava himself, the Creator. Ramiris never saw it coming. (Veldanava had also named Ramiris, but after reincarnating herself too many times, she had wholly forgotten that fact. It would pop back into her memory once she attained her complete form, but when that would be was anybody’s guess.)

“I mean, I thought the Primordials all went over to the other world!”

“Of course not, man. Once the surface world was repressed and everything was peaceful again, Sir Veldanava wanted that other world to become stable for him. You know that.”

“Oh? Well, yes, but...”

Ramiris was acting a little strange, but Deeno brushed it off. Pursuing it would just cause more strife for him, and trying to explain it all was even more of a pain. So he continued, assuming Ramiris knew the whole story.

“So Feldway and three other Primordial Angels were assigned to do that. Which left the other three, me included, to handle things here. We’re serving as Sir Veldanava’s boots on the ground.”

“You included?”

“Yeah, I get it if you don’t believe me, but I used to treat the job really seriously at one point. But then some stuff happened, and I went from a seraphim to a fallen angel, that sort of thing. My partners are kind of the same way, too, so there’s no ‘pure’ Primordial Angel left any longer, actually.”

“Whoa, hey, you’re forgetting the most important part! I wanna find out what kind of stuff happened! That’s more important than anything!”

Ramiris’s patience was clearly wearing thin. Deeno just sullenly sighed.

“Look, stop, all right? It’s too much of a pain to explain it. That stuff doesn’t

matter to me anyway. Just use your imagination to fill in the blanks, okay? For now, I want to bargain with you.”

*Don’t make us fill in the blanks*, thought everybody in the room at once. But Deeno’s indolence was world-renowned by now. There was no point, everyone knew, in asking him to explain himself, so they just gave up and listened to Deeno’s demands.

“So what do you want, huh?” Ramiris asked, speaking for the group.

“Like, what I just said. If Ramiris will work with us, I swear we won’t lay a finger on anyone in this labyrinth. If you refuse, well, my hands are tied. I’ll have to take you away, and I’ll kill everyone in my way if I have to.”

“You think I’m gonna say yes to that after what you did?”

“Nah, I guess not. But really, that’s not a problem at all. Ideally, you’ll wanna work with us, but if it comes to it, I’ve been told they’ll let this go if you shut down the labyrinth.”

“That’s what you want, huh? Who gave you those orders?”

“Mm, I dunno if I can tell you...”

“I mean, it’d take someone like Guy, essentially, if you’ll actually listen to someone’s orders.”

“Yeah, well, I dunno about that, y’know? Guy and I are appointed to the same post, kind of. Why would I need to listen to his—?”

“That doesn’t matter!”

“It does to me...”

Ramiris, ignoring Deeno’s rantings, thought for a moment.

“If it’s not Guy... I know! It’s Feldway, the Primordial Angel leader, isn’t it?! He came back from that other world and caught up with you while you were bumbling around, I bet. And you couldn’t say no to him, right?”

Like a broken wall clock, Ramiris’s deduction skills were right only sometimes. She would make all these incorrect assumptions and observations, then somehow use them to reach the right answer in the end—and this was one of

those times.

"Wow... You're right."

Feldway had deployed numerous people for this plan, waiting for just the right moment to step forward. He had two goals in mind: one, assassinate Masayuki, and two, destroy the labyrinth.

Trying to conquer the labyrinth by force would be a gargantuan endeavor, one likely to falter and damage the plan in unpredictable ways. To prevent that, Feldway thought that capturing Ramiris first was vital. It was Feldway's aim to eliminate all potential random elements, and that's what led to this strategy. Deeno was just helping execute it.

"Hmm... And you're a real punk, I know, so you've had a falling-out with Feldway, right? He's a smart man, so I'm sure you guys never got along to start with."

"H-hey! I'm not a punk! I just procrastinate a lot sometimes, is all. But yeah, I hate it when he orders me around like he's my mom or something, so having him off the planet's been a huge weight off my chest..."

As Deeno explained, they had fallen out of contact for a long time, but they still maintained an acquaintance.

"Uh-huh. So the attackers this time are the Primordial Angels?! That's, like, *terrible* news for us! C'mon, Deeno! Stab Feldway in the back for me and join our side again!"

It was a pretty outlandish offer from Ramiris, an act even Deeno found all too charming. But he couldn't agree to it.

"Well, it's a sad thing, I know, but I got my stuff to deal with."

Deeno found it impossible to defy Feldway's will, for reasons he had some difficulty articulating. That was why he didn't hesitate to turn her down.

"Boy... I guess you're serious about this, huh? You sure got guts! All right, then—I'll take you on. I'm part of the Octagram, I'll remind ya! And I'm ready to protect this place until Rimuru comes back!"

Her mind was made up.

"Yeah? I *really* don't wanna have to work for this, you know. Ideally I'd like to live in a world where I could get three hot meals a day doing nothing, but ah well. I sadly can't go easy on you with this, but—hey—I won't kill you or anything. So go ahead. Try to chase me outta here."

Deeno went back to his usual languid, carefree expression, waving a hand as he replied. Plainly negotiations weren't working. The conversation was over, and the battle began...

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"Take care of this for me, Beretta!" Ramiris shouted, perhaps channeling another demon lord she knew.

It was taken for granted that Ramiris herself wouldn't be fighting. Deeno knew that, so instead of playing dumb, he turned toward Beretta, waiting to see what he'd break out.

The Control Center was now a battlefield, and although it was a pretty big space, it was full of desks, chairs, and other obstacles. It wasn't too suited for battle at all, and Ramiris honestly wouldn't have minded settling this elsewhere. But Deeno wasn't going to allow that. There was every chance Ramiris would try to get away as they changed locations. Thus, Alpha and the other dryads briskly put away all the more important components of the room as the two combatants looked on. When they were done, battle began between Deeno and Beretta, neither of whom really cared where they duked it out.

Deeno was now carrying a broadsword about his height, produced from parts unknown. Its name was Fangsmasher, a thick, single-bladed weapon that could cave in a foe's skull with sheer blunt force.

It was a ponderous weapon, one that poorly matched with Deeno's normal outfit of a robe and chest plate, but it somehow seemed to match him anyway.

"What's that sword capable of?"

"In terms of EP, its value is...one million!"

Alpha was at a loss for words in her report.

"What, a God-class blade?! From *Deeno*?! That's so cheating!"

Ramiris's complaints made little sense. Deeno let them pass, holding Fangsmasher up high ahead of him. Beretta, right in front of him, was unarmed—but his body was composed of the magisteel frame Rimuru had created for him. It was now well infused with Beretta's own magic force, transforming it into adamantite. It looked exactly as Rimuru had made it, but it was now far tougher and sturdier than before—and it even had Beretta's aura surrounding it, ensuring no run-of-the-mill weapon could touch him. He was a walking weapon at the Legend class or higher, the toughest thing in the whole labyrinth.



But even so...

Deeno casually brought his sword down in an arc. Beretta immediately crouched forward to dodge it. Being unnamed wasn't a disadvantage per se, but in this battle, it perhaps wasn't the best bet for him. His EP was a bit over 400,000, which *would* have made him even with Deeno at one point, but if his opponent had a God-class weapon, he was hopelessly outclassed.

So the empty-handed Beretta focused on dodging, avoiding Deeno's frontal sword attacks. If he took the brunt of that blade, he would instantly be destroyed. And if worse came to worst...

"Sir Deeno's existence points have ballooned from four hundred thousand to two million! The combined total is three million... It's overwhelming..."!

Alpha sounded like all hope was lost. But Beretta wasn't shaken. Neither was Ramiris, who acted like this much was obvious.

"I don't know how you did it, but you're tricking the EP measuring device, huh? Guess there's still some work left to be done on it. Regardless, Alpha, you don't have to go calling Deeno 'sir,' treating him like royalty or anything."

"What? Hey! I *am* a demon lord, aren't I?"

"Oh, shut it! Beretta, no need to hold anything back—give 'im a dose of your full powers and grant him the divine punishment he so desperately yearns for!"

"I don't have the power to give divine justice, but if those are your orders, I will fulfill them as best I can."

*Long-suffering* couldn't even begin to describe Beretta by this point. One's existence point count was just a yardstick, but facing down someone whose EP was seven times yours wasn't exactly reassuring. He thought to himself how ridiculous this was as he sized up Deeno, figuring out a way he could satisfy his master.

"You got it tough, too, huh?"

"I don't enjoy hearing that from my enemy, but I will not deny it, no."

As he spoke, Beretta danced around Deeno, evading any advance. His lack of defense wouldn't matter if Deeno couldn't hit him. It all came to how you

thought about it, and Beretta was a living weapon, head to toe. Fighting barehanded wasn't a hindrance—in fact, it opened a variety of attack approaches to him. Deeno, meanwhile, was just lightly equipped, and only his large sword required any major attention. It'd pack a wallop if it hit him, but the same was true for anything Beretta unleashed. Thus, he had every opportunity to win—such were his thoughts as he awaited his chance.

As a chaos golem, transforming the elements he attacked with was child's play to Beretta. He used the unique skill Reverser to constantly switch them around as he searched for a weak point on Deeno, calculating every move he made in order to secure an advantage. But Deeno wasn't about to take this barrage sitting down.

"*Tsh...* Right, right, you come from the 'dirty' school of battle, don't you? I heard no one was a tougher fighter once you got on your opponent's nerves, and I gotta say, they're right."

"I appreciate the compliment."

"I wasn't complimenting you!"

Beretta was even using conversation as a weapon as he attempted to turn the tables on his disadvantage. He had no time to waste. He may not have been panicking, but as things stood, it took everything he had to just barely maintain this détente.



Deeno, meanwhile, had correctly surmised that he no longer held any great advantage. His attempted ambush had failed, and now he was paying for it with this pointless round of combat, completely wrecking his plans.

Beretta and Deeno were miles apart in terms of ability, but in terms of combat skill level, the difference wasn't all that wide. Despite that, though, it was clear Beretta was near his limits. Here in Ramiris's labyrinth, he could be resurrected as often as needed; he didn't have to worry about running out of energy, and overloading himself power-wise wouldn't cause him any damage. He could constantly fight all out with no restrictions, and that was the sole reason he could hold his own against Deeno. His environment was also

protecting him, but that had its limits—he simply lacked the power needed to find a decisive edge.

*Impressive, though, Deeno thought. No wonder he's part of the black tribe. I didn't think he would hold out this much.*

Deeno had to revise his opinion of Beretta. If Charys and Treyni had stayed in this room, the battle would've ended with a lot less trouble—not that either of them were pushovers, but angels held an overwhelming advantage against spirits by default. Besides, the two sides' battle experience were incomparable. As befitting his membership in the black tribe, Beretta had top-tier fighting skills—enough to take on Deeno, even. Beretta would die instantly if he took a hit, but he still had the courage to calmly handle Deeno's strikes.

Not only had Beretta not given up on winning, he even seemed to enjoy this, in a way. Whenever Deeno deliberately let his guard down a bit, Beretta didn't react at all. That was praiseworthy, but the fact that Beretta landed a cut or two on him with his occasional counterattacks was a major surprise. As a "fallen," he was weak against the holy element, but that wasn't a fatal flaw to him. And yet Beretta's attacks were dealing actual damage. He was mixing the dark and holy elements with each other, transforming his attacks so that Deeno's defensive barrier couldn't block them fully. They were, Deeno realized, impossible to defend. Much like spirit-based attacks, they would always deal damage unless one could repel them spiritually.

Deeno was a former seraphim. He knew how things worked with this world. That's why a mere unique skill causing damage to him was such a shock—and it was Beretta's stunning sense for battle that deserved the most praise of all.

But now Deeno was growing used to those moves. His sword swings were leaving him more open than necessary, but he would accept that. The way Beretta was attacking every weakness he showed was unexpected but still within what he could handle. While it may have looked like Beretta was pushing him around—none of Deeno's strikes was even scratching him—the Fangsmasher could easily slice through even an adamantite body. One clean hit would turn the tide, so to Deeno, this was no major concern whatsoever.

Beretta, perhaps realizing this, was focused entirely on stretching this out as

long as possible. He was beefing up his defenses, apparently concluding that the “death by a thousand cuts” approach wouldn’t work.

*He’s choosing the right tactic, though. After all, if Beretta keeps Ramiris protected, he wins.*

Deeno was no fool. He could see how Beretta’s mind was working. As long as Ramiris survived, nobody inside the labyrinth would ever die—but if she died, it was game over for everything. The labyrinth couldn’t be guaranteed safe if she was kidnapped, either, so it was obvious why Beretta was trying to bank as much time as possible.

As things stood, Beretta was getting everything he wanted. But it wouldn’t stay that way. Unfortunately for him, Deeno still had one last trick up his sleeve. He was only putting up with Beretta’s stalling because he needed to neutralize him right here, right now.

Fighting a foe who could resurrect himself infinitely was such a pain that way. If Deeno could capture Ramiris before Beretta revived himself, then all was well, but everyone else in the room was certain to dogpile on him then...and if he started aiming to kill everybody in the Control Center, Ramiris was likely to get caught in the crossfire. Deeno said he didn’t intend to kill her, and that was the truth—the truth, and also a pair of shackles holding him down.

*This is soooo annoying. I can’t believe merely neutralizing Beretta is taking this much work. It’d be easy to just kill him, but...well, all the prep work’s done, so it no longer matters.*

“Beretta, you’ve done well. Take a nap. Fallen Hypno!!”

So he unleashed his power. This was Fallen Hypno, a nonlethal, broad-range neutralizing attack derived from his unique skill Sloth. It lured any living creature into a sleep from which they would never awaken until the caster removed the curse. Attempting to mentally resist it was pointless. It was a deadly sin of a move, at the top levels of power...but as the word *Sloth* would suggest, it took quite a long time to trigger, a painful weakness. Still, despite that time lag, one needed to have an ultimate skill on hand to even think about resisting it. It was a truly fearsome attack, one that fully deserved to be called the strongest of unique skill-driven moves.

Deeno wanted to neutralize Beretta and the others as quietly and peacefully as he could. He truly had no desire to harm anyone else in the Control Center—Shinji, his friends, the dryads—even if they stepped up to protect Ramiris.

Even Vester, the first target he'd put to sleep, was someone he respected as a boss. Shinji's gang were acquaintances of his; there were even the buds of friendship sprouting. He really didn't want to do anything to betray them like this, but Feldway's orders were as absolute as they were incontrovertible.

"I can't believe how much work this is. Don't hate me for this, okay? I'll try asking Feldway to let you guys in here go, so..."

Deeno muttered to no one in particular once he saw Beretta collapsing to the floor. Taking a glance at the sprawled-out and snoring Ramiris, Deeno extended a hand, assuming his mission was complete—

"Not so fast."

But he was stopped by an icy voice.

"Are you kidding me...?"

Deeno turned around to find her standing there. Her cilia were shining in yellow and silver, the exoskeleton protecting more vulnerable sections of her body made of glossy black adamantite. Her wings, gleaming blue like an exotic butterfly's, comprised two pairs; they were the same color as the compound eyes on her forehead, giving her an otherworldly charm.

This was Apito, freshly awoken from her evolutionary slumber, and while her colors had changed appreciably compared to before, she still looked largely the same. If anything, though, her beyond-human beauty was even further polished—there was an air of authority to her aura, like she had reached even greater heights as Insect Queen.

"...Apito? Perfect. Can you destroy my chaos core for me?"

Since demons had zero need for sleep, Beretta was just barely able to resist Fallen Hypno. He was conscious enough only to ask Apito for the favor before descending into sleep mode.

"Sir Beretta..."

"You're still conscious?! But you can't move!"

Deeno's shock caused him to react a beat late...and that made him miss Apito's next move. Without asking why he made that request, Apito shot out a poison stinger and broke Beretta's chaos core to pieces. The Osiris Rapier, a self-regenerating weapon she was justly proud of, easily penetrated through the thick adamantite. She could produce this rapier within her own body, creating as many of them as she pleased. Without this evolution, though, there was no way she could have done the job.

Beretta laughed.

"Heh...heh-heh-heh. Impressive. Now I will die, only to be reborn in perfect condition. I must ask you to hold down the fort for a little while, Apito."

He had stepped down as leader of the Ten Dungeon Marvels, but he remained Ramiris's personal aide, and thus he had the authority to give orders to the other Marvels.

"Very well. Sadly, I fear I cannot defeat this adversary alone, so I hope you will return shortly."

Despite her words, Apito's voice lent credence to the idea that she was sure she'd win. Deeno, apparently sensing this, scowled.

"Come on... What a decision. You didn't even give me a moment to intervene."

He was right.

Leaving him to Apito, Beretta disappeared into a swarm of light particles. Then Apito sprang forth at light speed—and the battle inside the Control Center grew even more intense.

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*This really sucks.*

That was Deeno's unadorned impression of the situation. Apito was no sweat as an opponent...but in the labyrinth, he just couldn't kill her.

He wanted to finish her and secure Ramiris ASAP, but Apito was leveraging her speed to constantly get in his way. She didn't try to seriously engage Deeno

at all, preferring a stick-and-move approach. In her evolved form, she had perhaps grown more specialized for speed-based tactics, and she fully understood what made her unique. There was no waste to her moves at all; her EP was probably around 700,000, but in speed, at least, she was easily Deeno's equal.

Even worse, once Deeno finally thought he killed her, Beretta would be revived by then. It hadn't even been a minute yet, and already he had teleported himself back in. Apito was doing a perfectly fine job buying time for Beretta, because even against someone as overwhelming as Deeno, she didn't need to stall ten seconds.

At this point, Deeno had nothing left to work with. His best bet was to put Beretta and Apito to sleep simultaneously. Calming himself, he tried breaking out the unique skill Sloth once more. Whether against one target or many, Sloth took its time before it deployed.

Deeno stopped panicking and gauged the current situation, remarkably calm for someone in the middle of combat. The first thing he noticed was the image on the Control Center's screen, depicting Rimuru fighting Velgrynd after she defeated her brother in the *kaiju* battle.

*Dude, how the hell did he escape?! And, like, he's an even match for Velgrynd?!*

This was the biggest surprise of the day. The way Feldway put it, the demon lord Rimuru and his generals were all locked away in an alternate dimension of Velgrynd's creation. The escape was actually pretty simple—Rimuru used the soul corridor with his friends to determine his physical location, and that was all it took—but Deeno, not aware of that, was absolutely dumbfounded. The even greater surprise, however, was Rimuru's strength. Velgrynd seemed all but invincible, and Rimuru even seemed to push her around a bit.

Concern crossed Deeno's mind. *We're gonna be in big trouble unless I make some progress soon, maybe.*

His attention tuned toward the others. Capturing Ramiris first was the main keystone of Feldway's plan. Deeno was stationed in the labyrinth because Guy had ordered him in there; that was a total coincidence, and unfortunately for

Deeno, it attracted Feldway's attention. Deeno couldn't be more reluctant about it, but he was the only ally who had free access to the highly secured Control Center. It was simply the hand he was dealt, and he accepted it.

Feldway had put together a grandiose plan to secure an invasion pathway for him and his minions. He had goaded Velgrynd into destroying the labyrinth so Veldora would come out from hiding. That worked brilliantly, much to Deeno's surprise, and now Feldway himself was taking the lead to carry out this invasion.

Feldway was accompanied by two of the Three Mystic Leaders, along with five generals Zarario took along with him. They were eight people in all, and deploying not one but two of his highest officers for the job was nothing short of lavish. Only Obela, the last remaining Mystic Leader, was left, and she was presumably handling guard duties over at the Mystic Palace deep in the other world. Hearing this plan, Deeno could only conclude that Feldway wanted this thing to succeed at all costs.

But Deeno wasn't the only Primordial Angel on this planet who had been contacted about the project. Two others, living undercover in human civilization, had also been called up. They technically worked under Deeno, but Feldway didn't bother going through him for this. Their job was to keep the destroyed labyrinth going—a safety valve just in case Deeno somehow failed in his mission. It took only a passing thought from Ramiris to turn this labyrinth into a prison, and then getting out of here would be a huge undertaking that Feldway wanted to avoid.

These were the two people Deeno was most concerned about at the moment. He scanned the screen for them.

*Oh, for... Come on! They're in an even bout with Pico and Garasha...?*

Pico was a tiny young woman, Garasha a much more imposing warrior type.

With Velgrynd victorious over Veldora, the city that had been isolated in the labyrinth was now back on the surface. Geld had stepped up to defend it, but he never expected Geld would be asked to fight the likes of Pico and Garasha.

*Geld the Barrier Lord...and Kumara the Chimera Lord? Wait, Kumara's a cryptid, isn't she? She's not descended from Ivalage, the World-Destroyer*

*Dragon, is she? Nah, no way...*

Deeno quickly banished the ghastly idea his imagination gave him. *They call 'em the Twelve Lordly Guardians for a reason, I guess*, he thought to himself as he checked on the other battlefields. There he saw Zarario, another one of the Three Mystic Leaders.

*Wow, Zarario's kicking ass like usual, huh? He doesn't even seem to take this seriously, either. Way to make it look easy against Charys and Treyni.*

His old partner, Zarario, was as strong as ever. It always struck Deeno that he had this creepy underside he never revealed in public, but clearly he'd been improving himself over the past few millennia. Concluding he was in no trouble at all, Deeno moved on.

*And here's...Cornu? I heard he screwed up the invasion a few decades ago big-time. Maybe that's why he looks so distressed?*

As Deeno keenly observed, Cornu seemed to be panicking, and it was clear why. That previous mistake had cost him his entire army and injured him so badly that he needed several decades to fully recover. If he blew it again this time, Feldway was likely going to do away with him entirely. Even worse, if all was going to plan, Feldway was traveling alongside Cornu incognito as well. The pressure must be so intense, Deeno reasoned, that it kept him from exercising his full powers.

*He's got bad luck is all. But Masayuki's a wimp in real life, and I don't think anyone else opposing him is a challenge, either. Venom's membership in the black tribe is a concern, but I guess he came on the scene way later than Beretta. He'll probably be okay.*

Deeno wasn't too concerned, in part because he wasn't that friendly with Cornu to start with. If he messed this up, Feldway would probably step up to wipe his ass. Things were still going to plan.

It was perhaps this sense of relief that caused Deeno's lazy mind to play tricks on him.

*Hmm... It's odd, though. Why am I here worrying about if this operation will work? Like, what's gotten into me?*

A pretty important question. Something bothered Deeno about this whole plan, something he couldn't get out of his mind. He couldn't put it into words, exactly, which irritated him, but he figured he'd put his finger on it before long.

Unfortunately:

*"Why are you playing around, Deeno? I am going on the move shortly. Carry out your mission at once."*

The calmer part of Deeno's day had come to a close.

*Pfft... I really hate working...*

Deeno had no argument with Beretta or Apito. In fact, he liked them. That's why he resented these orders so much...but there was no defying them. *Ah, well*, he said to himself as he decided to get serious about this.



Feldway, fresh from reminding Deeno about his orders, was in hiding as he watched Cornu fight.

Cornu tended to be overconfident in his abilities, but he was still a reliable ally. He had received his name from Veldanava, just like Feldway had, and Feldway considered Cornu a valuable asset. But Cornu had put in a terrible showing last time, losing a third of the entire army despite possessing overwhelming power against the piddling planet they invaded.

That was more than enough reason for Feldway to forsake him, and Cornu knew that full well—clearly he was fighting for keeps right now, not toying with his foe like he usually did. It wasn't a sight Feldway welcomed. The Three Mystic Leaders were expected to be all-powerful dominators in battle, not people to be toyed with by far weaker enemies. These were enemies Cornu should finish off in one blow, and instead he was letting them run all over him. He had completely fallen for the enemy's trap, not even realizing that Masayuki had been replaced with an impostor.

It was beyond exasperating at this point—it almost made Feldway want to kill him, in fact. But he somehow contained himself. Then, ignoring Cornu entirely, he stepped up to take out Masayuki.

Meanwhile, Masayuki left the scene with languid steps. The idea of fleeing the battle alone didn't sit well with him.

He was, of course, quite scared, but the idea of abandoning his friends was even scarier. If something happened to him, he'd spend the rest of his life beating himself up over it.

Masayuki stopped for a moment and turned around. From far away, he could see his friends fighting for their lives. Minitz was keeping the enemy contained, the vampires were capitalizing on their immortality to divert their attention, and Caligulio and Venom were attacking whenever they found a hole to exploit. Jiwu, in particular, was putting on a masterful show, setting herself up in just the right place to prevent Cornu from uncorking any super-destructive attacks. For such a hastily assembled crew, they were showing real teamwork—but if they lost even one person, the whole thing was likely to crumble.

"Hey, Masayuki..."

"Bernie, I gotta head back. Like, I never really talked about this because I didn't wanna blow my cover, but—really, I wish I coulda gotten friendlier with all you guys. I know I'm a coward, but I don't want to be a backstabber, too, you know?"

Then, with that admission of the truth, the World Language spoke up in Masayuki's brain.

*The heroic trait of "courageously refusing to run" has been detected. Now that all three conditions have been met, a hidden power of the unique skill Chosen One has been unlocked. Invoke?*

Yes

No

Huh? thought Masayuki. He was afraid he had gone and screwed up yet again, sighing in relief when he realized he hadn't. He didn't really care about any more "hidden powers" within him, but there wasn't much point in turning back on this whole thing now. So Masayuki agreed to it.

*Confirmed. New power added to Chosen One... Successful. Heroic Recourse is now permanently activated.*

A long, complicated description flashed across his mind. It gave him an ache of nostalgia as he marveled at it, gradually grasping his new ability.

He was already in possession of Heroic Aura, which awed his targets into submission; Heroic Compensation, which offered near-impossible levels of luck; Heroic Charm, which granted courage to his companions; and Heroic Action, which was still kind of a mystery but seemed to massage events so they always worked out to his benefit in the end. Heroic Recourse, the recent addition, apparently made him into a kind of magnet for Heroes.

*Um... Guide the souls of the dead? I became a “vessel”? What’s up with that? I don’t really need that skill if it requires all my friends to die...*

Masayuki saw it coming. Yet another totally useless skill in his quiver. He hadn’t expected much in the first place, so it was no genuine disappointment. As long as it didn’t actively make things worse, that was enough.

“Masayuki, you...”

“So c’mon, Bernie, how about we go back?”

Returning to the subject at hand: This new ability of his was already lost to the ether.

“All right. If that’s what you want, I’ll join you.”

Bernie scratched his head in defeat. Then, sharing a grin with each other, they turned around—and things kicked into high gear.

\*

Feldway was on the move. Bernie meant nothing to him, but he was blocking him from taking Masayuki away. His fighting stance was full of holes; Feldway could off him with one swing. Or, really, Bernie’s actual ability didn’t matter. He was just garbage in Feldway’s mind.

Without so much as a breeze, without even revealing his presence, Feldway attempted to decapitate Bernie with his drawn sword. But all that resulted in was a sharp, echoing sound—blade clanging against blade.

“You’re stopping me?! Who are you? What’re you doing?”

For an instant, it surprised Feldway. He was answered by a young girl in a

mask.

"I am Chronoa...and what I'm *doing* is being a Hero."

A moment of silence. Then Feldway's burst of laughter.

"Look at this! A Hero gracing us with her presence. Let me give you my name, then. I am Feldway, the Mystic Lord!"

The name didn't faze Chronoa. Her mind was now in perfect sync with Chloe's, and she was a cold steel machine of warfare.

"Mystic Lord? Hmm. So you're the boss of these magic-born? I came out because I couldn't let this injustice go on in front of me, but if you're a threat to humanity as well, I'll just eliminate you here."

"Heh-heh-heh... Pretty brave talk. Let me put you in your place, fool!"

The moment he stopped speaking, Feldway—dressed in his scarlet-red uniform—took action. Chronoa, in her white-themed Holy Spirit Armor, also disappeared. Flashes of red and white light streaked before the eyes of Masayuki and his friends. They had all but gone invisible to them, but the sounds were deafening. There were no shock waves, however, not even a slight breeze. The battle was taking place on a dimension beyond anyone's comprehension.

This masked girl had come to Masayuki's aid once before, and now she was doing it again. He understood that, but as he was now, he doubted there was much he could do to help this girl.



"Um, what should we do...?"

"This is on a level far beyond anything we can intervene in. No point dwelling on it. We just gotta do what we can. C'mon, let's go help everyone out!"

The sounds reaching his ears told Bernie that he was being targeted. The fact that he couldn't even react to it at all told him just what sort of realm this fight was unfolding within. It wasn't because some spell had weakened him; he was simply isolated, incapable of putting up a fight, no matter what he did. If so, he couldn't just run around like an idiot here. He had to take action—a thought drilled into him by his military experience.

"All right. I don't know who that Chronoa person is, but let's leave this to her!"

Masayuki, meanwhile, was used to having exceptional events take place around him. Clearly, getting out of Dodge was his best bet.

So, regardless of what Bernie and Masayuki were doing, Chronoa and Feldway were crossing swords. But the fight didn't last long. Countless strikes and parries occurred in the space of a few seconds. The witnesses wondered if there would ever be any resolution to this at all—but then Feldway noticed.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! So *that's* where it was! It seems Lady Veldanava's will is for me to win after all!"

"What're you talking about?"

"Heh! None of your business. Then again, I *could* tell you, since you'll be joining me shortly."

"...?"

"Bow to my will...Sariel, Lord of Hope!!"

It was an absolute order—and even an angelic ultimate skill couldn't resist Michael's Ultimate Dominion.

"What...did you do...?"

"Oh? You're still conscious? You live up to your reputation as the world's strongest Hero, Chronoa. But resistance is useless. It's only a matter of time

before you fall under my rule."

Feldway rejoiced at his sheer luck. Chronoa the Hero's exploits were legend across the world, even in the Empire. Having Sariel work its way into her was truly a gift from the gods.

Chronoa fell to her knees, just as Feldway had willed her.

"I am Sariel. Your orders, Sir Michael..."

Her mask came off, revealing her face and the beauty it held—and those were the words that came from her sweet, pinkish lips.

Now Feldway was sure of his victory. And that assured confidence led him to make a serious mistake. Here he had control over Cornu, Mystic Leader and his close confidant, and Chronoa, a powerful Hero easily his equal (despite not being the "real" version of her). With the two of them, he reasoned, completing his mission would be simple. So:

"Very good. I want you to work with Cornu to kill the young man from before. I have other business awaiting me on the surface, so please take care of this for me."

With that, he left the labyrinth.

\*

Seeing Masayuki and Bernie come running back, Venom wanted to curse the heavens themselves. Not that he minded them here. He could sense the rising, menacing presence lurking in the direction they had fled to, so he thought they had fallen dead by now.

"Way to survive, guys. What a relief!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Little early to be saying that. The enemy's still around."

"Yeah..."

Venom had to admit it—Cornu was strong. They had an immense advantage fighting in the labyrinth, but it wasn't a matter of whether they could win. They weren't even sure they'd survive. But despite all that, one look at Masayuki's face, and Venom felt tremendously relieved. Baseless confidence filled his veins, and he couldn't help but think it'd all work out somehow. Minitz and

Caligolio, apparently feeling the same way, looked much healthier than before.

"Heh-heh-heh... Maybe it's not appropriate, but I'm really having fun here."

"Right you are again. I feel so light on my feet...as if His Majesty himself has joined me on the field."

The two imperial officers shared a laugh. Even the vampires, who had no reason to be that involved in this, seemed eager to continue the fight.

Cornu, meanwhile, was confused. Just when he was about to attack, a second Masayuki appeared out of nowhere. He looked closer, wondering if he'd misjudged his foe's position, but it was definitely Masayuki. One of them had to be a fake, which was exactly what the disguised Jiwu was.

"How dare you trifle with me! All you worthless insects and your stupid tricks...!"

As enraged as Cornu was, he had no way of telling which Masayuki was real. His senses told him both were about equal in strength; each of them was a little hard for him to grasp. That's what made this so maddening. If Cornu got riled up enough, he might easily kill them both at once—but then they'd get revived in parts unknown and he'd have to find them. Thus, Cornu faced an even more nerve-racking battle than before.

But then a helping hand arrived.

"Is that you, Sir Cornu? My name is Sariel, in the service of Sir Michael."

An unfamiliar girl flew in faster than anyone's eyes could follow, offering her help. Cornu had no reason to doubt her words. This girl, Sariel, was infused with the aura of Michael, just as she'd hinted.

"Thank you. You aim for the Masayuki on the right. Don't kill him. He must be captured alive."

Whether it was a stroke of luck or not, Cornu had just pointed out the real Masayuki.

"Yes, sir."

Sariel nodded, her eyes turning toward her target. Masayuki, sensing this, began sweating a little. Then their eyes met.

*Um... "Sariel"? That girl called herself Chronoa, and I'm not really sure what her deal is, but she turned traitor on us that fast?! Like...*

Masayuki was lost for a moment. Then he gave up all hope. But Chronoa's beauty was so flooring that he hardly felt any fear. In fact, he was too preoccupied to feel anything.

*What's with that girl? She's so cute!*

It wasn't very appropriate, but the shock made him forget all about being on a battlefield. There was only one way to describe her—a beauty for the ages, the same conclusion a certain blond-haired demon lord had also made. It made Masayuki wish she would keep the mask off for good, among other stupid complaints that ran through his mind.

But as stupid as these thoughts were, they offered him a glimmer of hope.

Sariel's hand reached for her sword. Masayuki mentally prepared to die. His life flashed before his eyes in a sort of sloppy, haphazard manner.

*Man, I can't get over how hot this lady is. Seriously, she's gotta be the hottest woman I've seen so far in my—*

Then a frigid chill came over him. His self-preservation instincts were shouting at him to stop with this train of thought. He decided to trust them.

*...Second hottest, actually. Yeah, probably second hottest. Because number one has to be...*

The face in his mind belonged to a blue-haired beauty, the last one he'd seen in his original world.

*Right, yeah, that one! She looked really sweet and everything, and way sexy, too...*

Not even the threat of imminent death deterred Masayuki from his delusions. But that was actually the right answer.

*Heroic true love detected. Now that the fourth hidden condition has been met, the unique skill Chosen One will evolve to the ultimate skill Lord of Heroes.*

*Huh?*

Masayuki was lost.

This wasn't "love" he was feeling. It was more like primal lust than anything. Why was this voice in his mind trying to pass it off as virtuous or whatever? It was so embarrassing. He wished he could complain about it to someone.

And besides:

*Why do I get an ultimate skill even though I didn't even do anything?!*

He screamed to himself internally, accusing the World Language of stretching way too far out to justify all that. But nothing could change these results. Besides, getting an ultimate skill whose purpose he knew nothing about didn't exactly seem like a winning edge against Sariel in front of him.

*I'm glad I got this and all, although it's coming a little late, y'know? But hey, I've made it this far. If I'm done for, I wanna go out with a bang.*

So Masayuki let a bold smile spread across his face. The effect was dramatic.

"Protect His Majesty!!"

The imperial soldiers on the scene, who had kept their distance up to now because they'd just get in the way, began an all-out suicide assault, like their lives no longer meant anything to them. Even those on the far outer edges of the field were doing this, and the results were even more awe-inspiring on soldiers closer by.

"I can feel it teeming within me! This must be what it feels like to be completely sure of your victory!"

With a shout, Caligilio thrust at Cornu. His hands had been full just defending himself before, but this self-sacrificial attack made Cornu flinch for just an instant.

Minitz was no slouch, either.

"Listen, imperial soldiers! Let His Majesty bask in your courageous force!"

Driving his army on, he kept his eyes on Sariel, applying Oppressor to keep the pressure on her. A unique skill would normally never work against an ultimate skill, but this time, the attack was just enough to force Sariel back a little.

Even the vampires were springing into action.

"Strange, huh? I feel so omnipotent right now...and it feels *nice!*"

So shouted one of them, a smile on his face, as he leaped at Cornu and had the lower half of his body blown off.

"Hyaah! Taste the heat of my full-power energy beam!!"

Not a single care was given as they pressed forward, died, revived, and repeated the process again.

"Hyah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I love this!!"

Some of them were even using their perpetual resurrection skills to serve as human (vampire?) shields for the other soldiers. *Intense* wasn't the half of it. This was a vast, vicious attack like nothing before.

What made it possible? Masayuki's new ability, of course. Unlike his unique-level skills, Lord of Heroes (while firmly in the lowest rank of the ultimate family) granted him the chance to compete against anyone else's ultimate skill. It took someone with an EP of at least 100,000 to even withstand the effects of casting it, but even if Masayuki lacked that, his luck was giving him enough of a bonus to make up for it—and anyone who followed in his footsteps was given similar protection.

Truly, it wrecked the whole balance of the fight. Just him alone on the field could reverse the tide of battle; it was an unbelievable ability. And if Masayuki hadn't had the chance to see Chloe Aubert's unmasked face just now, he never would've awakened to it. Now, perhaps, it should be clear just how terrible a mistake Feldway had made.

Either way, the battle was now firmly at a stalemate. This very delicate balance held reign over the scene for a bit more than ten minutes. Naturally, that wasn't going to be enough to defeat the tag team of Cornu and Sariel—but realistically speaking, the battle was already decided. The moment Masayuki unlocked his ultimate skill, all the paths came together.

Now, with the warriors finally buying enough time for themselves, the moment had come. Velgrynd had just been erased from this world...and at the same time, the gears of fate began to turn.

\*

*Confirmed. Trans-dimensional soul corridor with the subject Velgrynd established.*

*Huh?*

Before Masayuki could think of anything else, she appeared.

At first, it felt to him like a wall of pure energy. But it wasn't. It took the form of a person—a beautiful woman, one from his own past. The cardinal aura she emitted, framed by her almost blindingly beautiful blue hair, belonged to Velgrynd the Flame Dragon, manifested right here on the battlefield.

Her eyes contained the force to make all of creation bow to her. No one dared move; it was like time had stopped. Sariel was the same, silently waiting for Cornu's orders—little more could be expected, given how this new presence had only just been born within her body.

All the imperial soldiers on the scene immediately recognized what this was. This was the most powerful figure in existence, the one who kept the Empire safe over so many years. Word had spread that she was locked in combat with Veldora right now, but apparently that was a false rumor, because here she was...in an embrace with Masayuki. There was just one explanation for this tender move. She was in love with him.

*"I was looking for you, Ludora. I've wanted to see you for so, so long..."*

She turned her closed eyes toward Masayuki as she held him close. Then she brought both hands to his head and gave him a warm kiss.

It wasn't how Masayuki had thought this would work out.

*Ah... Whoa, soft. Or sweet? Or...wait, aaaaaahhh?!!*

His head began to boil. In a flash, all reasoning ability was erased. A terrifyingly beautiful woman was hugging him—which was fine and all. But:

*M-my first kiss!!*

The casual outfit, just a simple T-shirt and jeans, combined with Velgrynd's natural beauty created a supremely hip look. And she was kissing him. He'd be lying if he claimed not to like it. But he couldn't forget one important issue here.

This stunning woman had just called him Ludora.

*Oh God, she totally thinks I'm someone else...*

Now wasn't the point where he could stand there and tell her, *Sorry, I think you got the wrong guy*. For one thing, she'd need to take her lips off his face before he could say anything. Masayuki needed to get a breath of air soon.

*C-calm down... You need to stay calm in moments like these...*

He reassessed the situation. This was a battlefield. His enemy was right in front of him. He was making out with this world-beating beauty. And thanks to being this close range to her, he couldn't help but notice her ample chest against his. It was sublime, almost heavenly bliss—but he couldn't let himself enjoy it.

*What am I even doing?* he thought as his mind grew more muddled. One thing he knew for sure was that once she realized she had the wrong guy, his life was over right then. With all the many, many people witnessing this, it'd be impossible to talk his way out of it. Even with Masayuki's preposterous luck, he couldn't expect this to turn out in his favor at all. He was experiencing the sheer bliss of enlightenment, but he knew that his promised doom was just around the corner.

So he stopped thinking. He was about to die anyway, and he just wanted to appreciate the fact that he got to experience this kiss at the very end. So he defiantly enjoyed his final few seconds of life. His consciousness grew hazy, like he was having a dream...and then the misunderstandings began to spread.



"Ahhh, His Majesty's a shrewd man indeed!"

"Not to be vulgar, but yes, I agree. Looking at the two of them, I can feel a certain love that none could interfere with...and bonds that none could break!"

"Hee-hee... Lady Velgrynd looks like a young girl in love, doesn't she? Hee-hee-hee! So the Empire's guardian dragon was smitten with His Majesty, was she?"

"Indeed! Truly, good tidings await the Empire in its future!"

Not one member of the audience harbored negative thoughts about Masayuki. In fact, none of them suspected he wasn't Ludora himself. He wanted to shout to them all about how wrong they were, but his lips were still occupied at the moment.

*But I've never even had a girlfriend...much less been married...*

He had to laugh at the absurdity of the world. But then salvation came—in the form of Cornu, his enemy.

"Velgrynd! Enough of this nonsense! Why?! You're supposed to be under the thrall of Sir Michael! Why are you getting in my way?!"

In Cornu's mind, Velgrynd was a useful pawn, one fully captured and belonging to his side. Her interference right now was making him explode into an irritated rage.

"My, how boorish of you. You'd have to be an idiotic man to get in our way."

Velgrynd, finally removing herself from Masayuki, gave Cornu a dissatisfied frown. Her gaze was bracing, but it didn't stop him.

"Silence! Stop playing around and help me out! Take that man you're embracing and choke the life out of him!"

It was the most taboo thing he could have said. And Cornu did not know how much wrath it inspired in Velgrynd.

"You're saying you want me to kill him?"

All sound vanished from the battlefield. Only Cornu continued to shout, failing to realize what was going on.

"Am I hearing an echo, Velgrynd? I don't care how strong you are; I'm your commander here. All you have to do is follow my orders!"

And Cornu never realized what was happening, right up to the very end. He just didn't have the mental capacity to realize Velgrynd wasn't who she used to be.

"No, you die."

It was a merciless strike. The reborn Velgrynd was incomparably stronger than before, her magic now refined to a hilt. It precisely, accurately turned Cornu into a pile of ashes. Without a chance to counterattack or even get another word in, he was no more. And even more astounding, the attack worked its way across dimensions—a trick brought about by Dimensional Combo, part of her newly found ability Trans-Dimensional Leap. Cornu's "real" body, in the other world he now called home, disappeared before it could even detect any danger.

"I let it slide last time, too. Such a fool. I had almost forgotten the grudge I had against Feldway. I should never have let myself do that."

She spat out the words, then turned toward Sariel.

"Oh, uh, her name is really Chronoa," Masayuki chimed in. "She saved my life a second ago—"

"It's okay. I won't do anything; I don't need to. Michael's influence made the ultimate skill Sariel take root within her psyche, but she's resisting it all by herself. That's why she's motionless like that. But if you're still worried, you can have Rimuru look at her afterward. I'm sure he'll have just the right remedy for it. Not that it'll be necessary, I don't think..."

Velgrynd turned away from Sariel, the occupier of Chronoa's mind. Realizing she wasn't wary of Chronoa at all, Masayuki finally relaxed.

\*

So the battle came to a close. Many of its combatants were just as relieved as Masayuki, while others were so anxious that they could barely walk straight. Now everyone here knew what Velgrynd really was.

It was Bernie, standing next to Masayuki, who drummed up the courage to act first. He was the closest to Velgrynd, and now he flew out and kneeled

before her, almost on all fours.

"Marshal, I am Bernie, member of the Single Digits and ranked number seven! I only hope that you are glad to see me, my—"

"Enough. Thank you. What do you want to say to me?"

"Yes, my lord! I disobeyed the orders of my captain and refused to end the life of Masayuki, the young man here. I understand this is punishable by death, but before the execution begins, I beg you to listen to what I have to say."

The scene fell quiet again. It was another bombshell for the crowds of soldiers watching. The Marshal, the chief commander of the imperial military, was Velgrynd herself. This threw a lot of the crowd for a loop, but far more of them were quickly convinced it was true.

Now, as they grasped the concept, reality set in with them. They were all on the losing side of the war, and that meant Velgrynd would see them as worthy of execution, a fate it was pointless to struggle against. Faced with the power of a dragon who could destroy this entire labyrinth, all they could do was wait for their fates to unfold. They instinctively formed lines, nervously awaiting their judgment, as the conversation continued.

"Right. What is it?"

"All of us before you remain just as loyal to the Empire as we always have. No matter what the emperor decides, we are ready, willing, and able to carry it out to the letter. It is with that in mind that I beseech you, my Marshal, to allow this army to return home! You are free to pin the blame for this on myself and the officers; none of us would breathe a word of dissent against that. But—"

"All right, all right."

Bernie was crestfallen, his most earnest begging cut off midway. There was no avoiding fate. Tears flowed as he realized just how powerless he was.

Velgrynd rewarded that with a little snicker.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I give you the wrong idea? Maybe you're all not the brightest lights out there, but you did work hard for us. I appreciate that. Thank you for protecting my beloved Ludora."

All the soldiers immediately took a knee, lowering their heads.

"S-so then...?!"

"I wasn't thinking about *doing* anything to any of you. Only Ludora truly matters to me, but I know Ludora thinks the world of you all, so I'll grant you my protection. I always have, and I always will."

It was like a gospel from heaven. Cheers erupted across the crowd; some broke down in sobs, Caligulio and Minitz among them. They believed in, and were moved by, everything Velgrynd told them.

"Glory to the Empire! Glory to His Majesty the emperor!!"

The excitement was palpable, the noise deafening. Masayuki wondered what had gotten into these people.

*By the looks of things, this throng thinks that I'm Emperor Ludora. Like, come on, Bernie, tell them! If the truth comes out, it's me who's gonna pay for it, you know. She even kissed me... I'm so gonna be killed, aren't I?*

His name wasn't even Ludora, but nobody on hand doubted that it wasn't. He wondered if his sanity was beginning to slip on him. That kiss was a sheer joy, but honestly speaking, Masayuki didn't want to get caught up in any of this.

"What's wrong? You don't look too happy. If there's something on your mind, by all means, tell me."

The desolate Masayuki was a bit shaken when Velgrynd directly addressed him.

"Oh? Um, no, there's nothing on my mind..."

He had trouble assembling the words. The awkward display clouded Velgrynd's face. "Could it be," she gingerly asked, "that you don't remember me?"

This felt like a test to Masayuki. But what was the right answer? Get it wrong, and he was in huge trouble. *Gimme a break*, he said to himself as his mind raced. If this was a yes/no question, then yes, he remembered her. She was definitely the beautiful woman who became the last thing he ever saw in his original world. But did he know her name?

*That guy called her Velgrynd. Isn't that the name of Veldora's sister? Crazy-strong and everything? And the "guardian of the Empire" and stuff, too...*

This internal struggle was paying off. More and more facts came into his head, and based on how the imperial soldiers had reacted, his supposition was likely correct. So he placed his bet.

"You're...Velgrynd, aren't you?"

Velgrynd's face erupted into a broad smile.

"Yes... Yes! You *do* remember, Ludora!"

Even now, Masayuki's luck didn't abandon him. Simply being called by her name elated Velgrynd. And that wasn't all.

"Ah, now I realize why you had that concerned look. I was so overjoyed to see you that I forgot, but your name right now is Masayuki, isn't it?"

"...!!"

Things got better and better for him. Any concern that Velgrynd had the wrong guy was now firmly in the past.

*Wait, whaaaaat? This girl knows that I'm Masayuki Honjo?!*

Sheer relief. The kind of relief he hadn't felt since the day he was born. He was so relaxed, he almost lost control of his bladder right there. Then he tensed up again before things went hairy on him.

"That's...that's right. I'm not Ludora right now; I'm Masayuki. And, you know, I think I'm a little confused about all of this and stuff, ha-ha-ha..."

As he chuckled, he kept a careful eye on Velgrynd's reaction. But she wasn't the only problem.

*Based on how this has transpired, I'm totally sure the crowd here thinks I'm Ludora. If I say I'm someone else up here, it's just gonna confuse them, won't it? I can't have people accuse me of posing as the emperor... I gotta tell them I'm not the guy!*

He wasn't sure if it was something he'd go to jail for, but either way, Masayuki wanted to set the record straight. So he decided to come clean—but Velgrynd

wasn't having it.

"Oh, it's not a problem. The Empire's worthless. It's simply a possession of Ludora's—kind of a hobby of his. He just kept it safe because he needed it for his competition against Guy. If you don't think you want it, I could raze every square inch of it for you?"

Truly, it was the words of a god, an existence beyond human perception. The imperial soldiers turned pale. All eyes were on Masayuki.

*No! Stop! Don't! Quit acting like it's my fault!*

Feeling the heavy burden of this responsibility—and the eyes burning holes in his skull—he spoke up.

"No, I *do* cherish the Empire! Like, even Rimuru wants to be friends with it in the future and stuff. Once this war is over, you know, we could sign a treaty and be friendly and so on, right?"

At the very least, he pleaded, he didn't want the Eastern Empire to experience a border-to-border nuclear winter. The soldiers looked up to him like he was a god. If Velgrynd said she could do it, she *would*, and probably with a casual flick of the wrist, too. If Masayuki didn't protest, the Empire was doomed for sure. Everyone knew that, and now everyone deeply appreciated Masayuki.

"Oh? Well, if that's how you feel, I'll keep helping with it, then," Velgrynd replied with a smile.

The soldiers heaved a collective sigh of relief.

Caligilio spoke for the crowd. "There is, if you don't mind, just one matter I would like clarified for us..."

His face was pained. Clearly, he didn't want to say what came next.

"What's that?" Velgrynd asked, her voice indicating that she wanted this over with already.

"M-my lord, I wanted to inquire about Sir Ludora, our current emperor. What will, er, happen to him?"

A spark of recognition crossed her face.

"Ah, right. I guess none of you can visually see the essence of a person's soul. Ludora, right now, is nothing but a shell. The soul of the true Ludora has gathered here...inside my beloved Masayuki."

"Erm, me?"

"Yes, you. You may not recall it, but you absolutely were Ludora. That's why I love you. I love you, and I'll do my best to make you love me as well."

"Um, okay?"

Would a beautiful woman saying this fail to rouse the spirits of any man? Of course not! And Masayuki was no exception. But just because she was crazy for him now didn't mean that it'd last forever. He swore to himself that he'd work harder than ever, if only to ensure his luck held out. Exactly *what* he'd have to do, he'd work out later.

It was with this newfound resolve that Masayuki quickly had to face another problem.

"Well, if Sir Masayuki is our true emperor, it's up to us to offer our support to his claim, isn't it?"

"Huh?"

"Indeed. But it'll be tricky. In terms of bloodlines, he's a completely different person. Claiming he's an illegitimate child will be unlikely to work. I'm not sure it's something we can fully sweep under the rug."

"Hold on...?"

"Does it matter, though? You can handle the issue with the military, Sir Caligilio, and I can smooth things over with the nobility. I'm certainly not about to accept any dissent on this issue, after all! We can't afford to waste time on this, either. If we fail, the whole Empire will collapse."

Caligilio immediately threw in his support, Bernie brought up a potential issue, and Minitz offered a solution. All three leaders were ready to devote their full powers to this—and so Masayuki, through no fault of his own, saw himself inching closer and closer to the throne...

"Well, Masayuki, you've got a big job now, I'd say."

*Um... Do I have the right to refuse?*

*...Probably not.*

He gave up. It was, after all, the opening to yet another new phase of his hapless life.



Deeno was finally ready to get serious. Having this much trouble against such an eminently beatable opponent annoyed him greatly, but that was coming to a rapid end.

"Think you have the time to look away?"

Beretta's sharp fist brushed past his cheek.

"Acting so distracted around us... I truly am offended, you know."

Apito's Osiris Rapiers rained down. Deeno doggedly avoided them. One hit was sure to hurt.

*I kind of assumed that I way outclassed these guys, but maybe that was just my ego talking? It's two-on-one, but still, I didn't expect to struggle this badly.*

Deeno was losing confidence. Maybe all that lazing around had weakened him? The silly thought showed that his heart still wasn't really in this, perhaps, but he didn't care.

All her training with Hinata gave Apito incredible intuition, something dangerously close to clairvoyance. Deeno was clearly the superior fighter, but even he couldn't let his guard down around her.

Beretta was now serving as a tank, with Apito attacking from the rear, although Beretta put up some offense as well. Their twin barrage had what it took to reach Deeno. Even worse was Beretta's magic. Very little magic worked on Deeno, but Beretta's mainly involved support spells that boosted his own specs. Deeno could shoot down magic attacks that weakened him, but if the spells boosted Beretta's and Apito's speed, strength, or endurance, he had no way to intervene. He could try interrupting the spellcasting process, but Beretta was a magically gifted demon who could fire off spells before Deeno could react. Even worse, the sleep function of Sloth wasn't working on Beretta.

That's why he was having so much trouble in this fight. But at long last, everything within him was fully built up. It was time to strike back.

"Shut up! Quit acting so superior even though it takes two of you to bully me like this! I'm only putting up with you because I'm so patient, okay? You oughtta be thankful! Here, eat this and take a nap for me!"

By the time he finished speaking, Fallen Hypno was already underway. As underhanded as Deeno was, this was about as unsportsmanlike as you could get.

"Phew... Finally over."

Watching Apito collapse, Deeno was assured of his victory. Just in case, though, he shot a look at Beretta—and hurriedly dodged his advancing fist.

"Whoa! Did you resist my sleep?!"

"Of course. Falling for it once was enough of a blunder. I could hardly let myself fall asleep again."

Beretta could come up with countermeasures because he was a demon, a creature with built-in resistance to status effects. With his unique skill Reverser, he could rework sleepiness to its natural opposite.

"No way..."

"Now, I know it doesn't make Apito look very good, but let's have her die and get revived for us."

Beretta stood boldly in front of Deeno. Seeing him find a guaranteed way to victory and stick to it so doggedly almost impressed the demon lord more than it exasperated him.

*I can't believe he's kept it so even against someone like me. It's not that I'm underperforming—it's that Beretta and Apito really are that good. Guess it means I'm gonna have to use that now...*

Deeno had the perfect way to end this. He preferred not to resort to it, since it brought up some annoying memories, but now was no time for complaints.

"All right. I admit it. You're good. In fact, you should be proud that you made me take this seriously."

The moment he shouted it, he unlocked the ability stored within him. The ultimate power granted to him by Veldanava—the ultimate skill Astarte, Lord of High Heaven.

*Confirmed. Using the Creation ability of the ultimate skill Astarte to evolve the unique skill Sloth... Successful.*

Deeno's Sloth skill had the unique trait of building up its force the less its owner physically moved around. It could hold a store of energy for later use, and that's what Deeno now used to evolve Sloth into the new ultimate skill Belphegor, Lord of Sloth.

That was his last option—Evolution, a subset of the ultimate skill Astarte. With Astarte in hand, he could evolve his skills (but not anyone else's) to have whatever effect he desired. That wasn't all there was to it, of course, but either way, Deeno wanted to keep Astarte hidden as much as he could. There were eyes everywhere within the labyrinth, with all kinds of data being constantly recorded. As a Monitor himself, he had a natural inclination not to fully reveal himself.

Besides:

*I know Rimuru. He's crafty, constantly working on a vast scale with deep insight. When he killed off Clayman, he even presented that screen with his evidence on it. If he sees my power, I'm sure he'll try to take measures against it...*

The demon lord Rimuru was underestimated at one's peril. There was no such thing as being too careful, a credo that had baked itself deep into Deeno's bones.

So Deeno created Belphegor, a power he didn't mind showing around. It was aimed straight for Beretta.

“Go to sleep! Fallen Catastrophe!!”

The laws of nature were rewritten, its positive elements being reversed and turned negative. The temptation they created lured everything, living and dead, into ceasing all activity and going into stasis. But it wasn't a forced effect; it was up to the targets to take the lure and walk down the path to destruction

themselves. That made it a type of hypnosis, albeit one that worked on a whole other dimension—there was no waking up from a Belphegor-driven sleep, for it destroyed both your spirit and your physical body. Of course, while the destination of this lure was “doom,” Deeno could turn the intensity down and put the target into a more traditional hypnotic state.

It was a really versatile skill that way, and it didn’t use sound to transmit itself, so it couldn’t be blocked by a barrier of any sort. It was impervious to many defenses, one of its strongest points. In short, Belphegor held rule over all intelligent, feeling things.



Deeno felt a little proud of himself. This was truly a fearsome, ultimate sort of evolution—a perfect symbol of sloth, one of the seven deadly sins.

He attempted to systematically destroy Beretta, preventing him from making any moves for a while. Destruction was his aim with this invocation, but the results were even more powerful than expected. Beretta had disappeared into a cloud of dust, so it’d undoubtedly be a while before he could resurrect himself. The Bracelet went missing along with him, but that didn’t bother Deeno—Ramiris could probably make up for that. Besides, if he let up at all, he might have failed to complete his duty.

So he didn’t feel much responsibility for Beretta’s fate.

*Don’t hate me for that, Beretta. But...man, even Beretta’s maybe just mid-tier compared to the guys working directly under Rimuru, huh?*

Deeno had a right to complain, perhaps. Someone as tricky as Beretta was on a decidedly lower echelon, not even possessing an ultimate skill. He wasn’t even a demon lord, in fact—just an underling. The thought made Deeno shiver a bit. What if one of the top-tier guys was still alive? Would he be able to win against whoever it was?

His troubled eyes turned toward Ramiris, making sure she was still fast asleep. Then he touched her.

...Or he thought he did.

Then Ramiris turned into a swarm of light, taking the form of a butterfly and

fluttering its way around Deeno, almost like it was snickering at him.

*...Whoa, whoa, was that just a mirage?!*

He couldn't believe it, and he didn't want to, either. But there was no explaining this otherwise. This battle really *was* being monitored.

*I'm glad I thought enough ahead to be careful, but still...*

Even so, he had revealed one of his most powerful moves to the enemy. And what's more, his next opponent was bound to be even worse—

The sound of lumbering footsteps echoed across the chamber.

The beautiful butterfly of light flew toward the composed figure walking in, touching his arm. Then it became a smudge of light once more...and transformed again. Now it was the innocently sleeping Ramiris, looking blissfully unaware of anything. She was atop the forearm of this figure, and Beretta, who had revived in the meantime, respectfully took possession of her.

"Sir Beretta," the figure quietly said, "please watch Lady Ramiris for me."

"By all means. Do you need any backup?"

"Not at all. I can handle this myself."

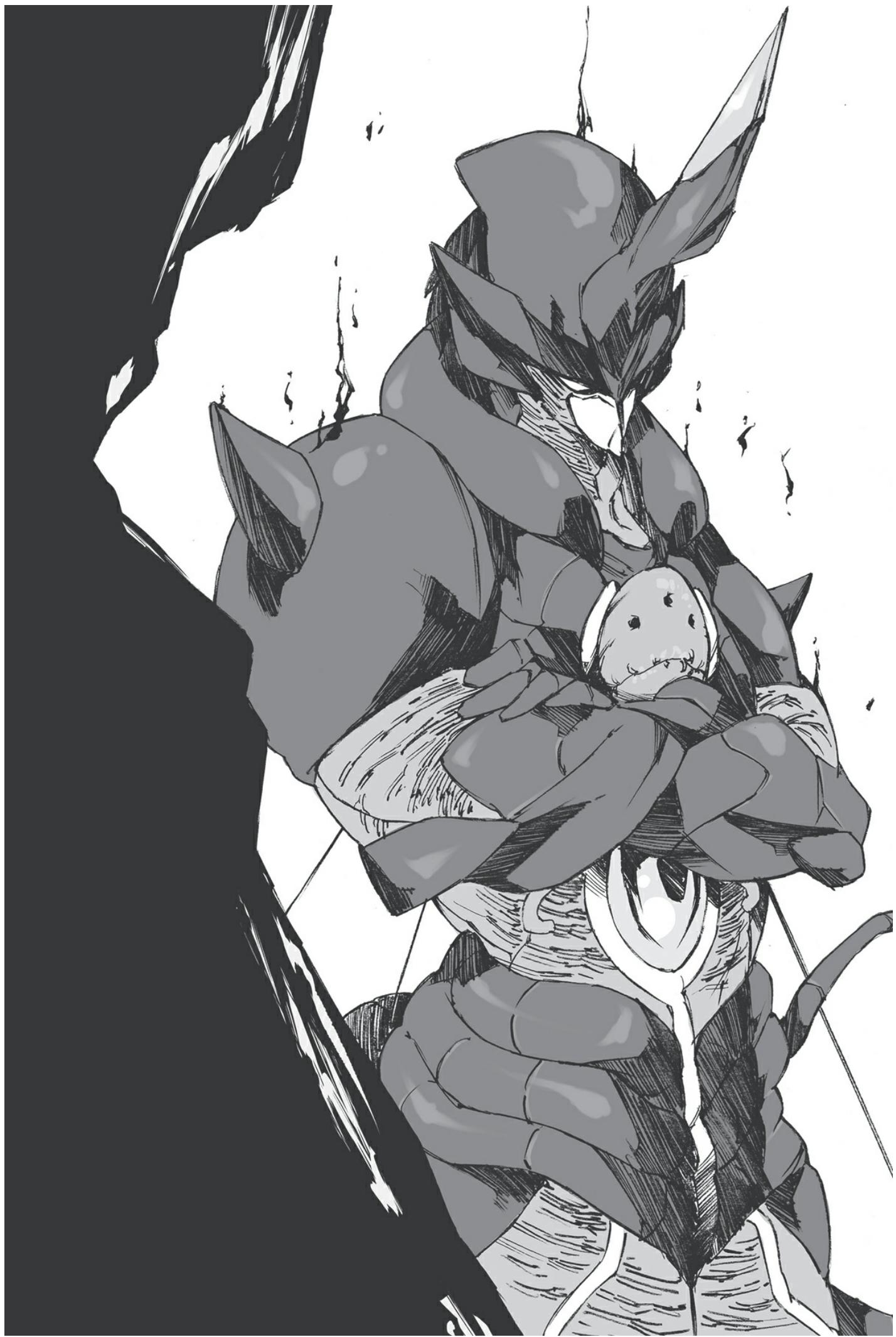
Ramiris had perfect coverage from the start. In the bottommost part of the safest place she could be, a certain person had laid several layers of traps, ordering the team to fight the advancing enemy in small bursts so their abilities could be laid bare. Most of all, however, this labyrinth had the world's strongest guardian inside. Before Veldora departed, he left Ramiris's protection to the man he saw as his top apprentice. Only Ramiris was unaware of all this.

And now this figure went on the move.

This man standing before Deeno was Zegion, the Mist Lord and the undisputed champion of this labyrinth.

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Zegion had entered a cocoon in order to strengthen his abilities, but he'd remained conscious the whole time. Answering Veldora's call, he had a firm grasp of everything going on within the labyrinth, using his overwhelming Absolute Defense to guarantee Ramiris's safety. And now Deeno realized it.



*I really wish people would stop joking with me...*

That was exactly how he felt. He'd thought he was victorious, and here came this brand-new enemy—and apparently the point behind all this was to make him show off his skill set.

*I knew it! Rimuru's so damn treacherous that way. He was bound to try something like this!*

His mission was clearly a failure. He had failed to score Ramiris, and now his own escape was looking questionable.

*I mean, when did they get Ramiris out of here anyway? I was in this room the whole time, and I saw her talking to me. Was she long gone by the time she turned into that butterfly?*

If it wasn't that, Zegion must've gotten Ramiris out of there in a way Deeno couldn't pick up on.

*But then...have I been talking to an illusion this entire time?*

That, too, was a problem. Deeno possessed an ultimate skill and a brilliant talent for hypnosis, and yet he'd fallen for some magic illusion? That was unthinkable...but he couldn't call it impossible. If Zegion had an ultimate skill geared toward mentally oriented attacks...perhaps he could conjure something that even Deeno would be fooled by.

And he knew just how strong Zegion was. He was a humanoid magic-born, a powerful insectoid type and potential demon-lord seed. Thanks to the favor of the demon lord Rimuru, he had gained near-impossible levels of fighting force. With Veldora as his master, his fighting level might even surpass the Primal Demons.

This made him the undisputed master of the labyrinth. When the Empire invaded this realm, his overwhelming strength had driven them all away, a feat Deeno was around to witness. In his eyes, Zegion was all but unbeatable in hand-to-hand combat...but physical attacks were all he had showed off. He never tried any kind of spirit-based strike, and it seemed to Deeno that he lacked even a unique skill, much less an ultimate.

*...I mean, his Distortion Field was impressive enough to reach the “ultimate” realm, maybe, but...*

But that was still a physical ability. To Deeno, more gifted in mentally driven strikes, it felt manageable.

The only explanation for this was that celebration the other day. Rimuru infused some sort of people into Zegion then, in the name of providing a reward. He was awakening his servants and calling it an “evolution ceremony” or the like. Some of them, like Gabil, really *did* gain a bunch of power, with others going into an evolutionary sleep. It was all eerily reminiscent of a Harvest Festival, and if Zegion emerged from it with a new skill or two, it certainly made sense.

*But isn’t this weird? How can those serving Rimuru reach the same levels that he has?! I get it if an awakened demon lord’s underlings reach seed proportions themselves, but if they’re all as powerful as awakened demon lords, that’s just cheating way too much!*

Deeno, with all the years he had lived, could never have predicted this. Not even Guy could ever pull off something like that.

*...Well, I could go on and on about him. The moment he made a Primal serve him, I knew he was crazy right then. Nothing’s off the table with him.*

Internally, Deeno ranted against Rimuru for a few more moments. Those three girls, the most powerful of living demons, probably could’ve stopped him in his tracks. Regardless of what their EP stats were, it didn’t really matter if they were Primals. And Rimuru had recruited them like he was running a bowling team. It was just *weird*, and he wanted to be involved with him as little as he could.

And now Zegion, standing before him, was every bit a Primal’s equal. Clearly, something strange was up. It wasn’t just that he was Million Class—his sheer aura hummed with endless force. His ability defied all numbers. It was the atmosphere that only someone who obtained ultimate power could exude. It suggested that he, too, gained an ultimate skill, just as Deeno had.

*This is exactly why I hate working so much...*

He wailed inside at the bad hand he'd been dealt. Then he sighed, a clear tinge of resignation to it, as he groped around for a potential best solution, but no good ideas came to him that easily. And then time stopped waiting for him.

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As Deeno spent a short while pondering, the unaffected Zegion strode forward.

"Did you have any last words?" Zegion asked.

"You were hiding here, watching until I revealed my secrets, huh? Come the hell on, man. That's dirty!"

Ignoring his own dirty deeds for the moment, Deeno vented his frustrations to start with. It was little more than lashing out, but if it riled his opponent at all, that'd be to his benefit.

"Ha. It's called war."

Zegion was, of course, undeterred.

"I know!" Deeno countered, and that was the end of the exchange.

Tension coursed between them. Deeno knew how strong Zegion was—a fact he could call an advantage. But Zegion now knew the full extent of his own skills. A frontal assault was the only option...but close-range combat was Zegion's specialty, and although it wasn't confirmed yet, he likely possessed an ultimate skill, too. Deeno, meanwhile, was more about spirit attacks—unless he used his *true* finisher move, but he wanted to avoid that in the labyrinth.

*Well, I already blew my cover in a lot of ways, but yeah, that really needs to end here...*

Besides, Deeno kidded himself, if escape was all that mattered, he was probably still safe on that count.

"Not coming for me?"

Zegion's words were heavy. The question seemed to bolt him to the floor, but Deeno used his willpower to fight back.

"Ha! Don't you look down on me. I'm part of the Octagram, you know, and I've lived way longer than you. No way am I gonna lose to a little kitten like

you!"

He whipped his large blade up high and swung it down toward Zegion.

"Take this, and breathe your last! Fallen Strike!!"

This was no tit-for-tat exchange of blows. He meant to end it here with this massive move, as befitting someone as lazy as Deeno was.

And Fallen Strike certainly had the punch for it. By infusing his sword with his unique skill Sloth, Deeno had created an ever-changing illusory battle style that tricked his opponent and allowed him to control the fight. Now that skill had evolved into Belphegor, its effects multiplied many times over, so his illusory sword style was more polished than ever. He may have hated taking action, but Deeno's battle sense was undeniable.

Even so...

Deeno had decided that close-range combat with Zegion was a little too dicey. If his abilities failed to work on him, the illusory sword style would fail on him. Now, he figured, was no time to hold anything back—so he broke out one of his special moves. That was Fallen Strike, one of the few traditional sword moves in his illusory style, and he packed all of his muscle into it.

His intention: to defang his opponent. Now his blade was infused with negative waves of emotion, robbing his foe of the will to live if it so much as scraped his skin. It wasn't an illusion or hallucination someone could ignore; for the weak-hearted, it was impossible to resist.

Only those with a strong enough mind to obtain an ultimate skill could fight it off, and even then, they wouldn't emerge unscathed. The slothful will Deeno infused in the strike packed a physically destructive effect inside. Even if you dodged it, it emitted negative waves in all directions, and simply being exposed to them would sap your mental drive...and thus, your ability to battle. He could capitalize on that to strike the final blow off the follow-through, and then it'd be over. The move cornered his foe in so many ways, making it one of the best Deeno could make, a masterpiece he had complete confidence in.

If Deeno wanted to leave this room alive, his best bet was to defeat Zegion without holding back. He liked to hide all his best moves, but if it made life

easier for him, he wouldn't skimp on them, either.

*Not even Guy would look all that great if he took a direct hit from this. Think you can fare any better?*

Deeno grinned, all but assured of his opponent's death. It'd be impossible, he reasoned, for anybody to expect this major strike from someone so demonstrably lazy in life. Now, he thought, singing his own praises in his mind, everything was back on track.

Zegion didn't move. Not because he couldn't react in time but because he had no problem dealing with this. Reading the path of Deeno's blade, he stopped it just before it landed on its target. Fangsmasher, the mighty God-class greatsword, had enough force to crush any type of matter in the world—but even when it was swung down on him, the exoskeleton covering Zegion's left hand, now converted into crimson steel, easily blocked it.

"Damn fool!" Deeno shouted. "You didn't even try to dodge my blade! The battle is mine!"

Now, he thought, acting like such a lazy bum all this time had finally paid off. It wasn't really an act, to be honest, but he kidded himself into thinking so.

Zegion, as expected, had stopped his high-speed strike. Swords this big lost out in velocity, so that was no surprise. The damage, however, would be untold. Zegion blocked it with one hand, as if swatting something away—it was impressive to see. But now an intense shock wave was coursing through his left arm.

*Looks like it didn't crush it outright, but it'll be useless for a while to come, for sure. I love how he's just standing there, not even quivering. So much fake bravado!*

It was almost hateful, how unaffected Zegion looked. But Deeno had won. Zegion's Distortion Field was an excellent invention, but it could block only physical strikes. Fallen Strike, upgraded to its ultimate level, could penetrate any physical obstacle as it delivered its payload.

*I put him off guard, made him think it was a sword attack, but actually delivered a lethal spirit strike. My strategy won the day.*

Yes, Zegion was strong. That, Deeno predicted, was why he was likely to look down on him and try to act as superior as possible. He was best in close range, and this chamber was a perfect arena for that; the way Deeno saw it, there was no way he'd try to evade anything.

"Hmph," he spat. "I wish you guys would knock this off already. I know that bracelet's gonna revive you anyway, so I *really* need to retrieve Ramiris soon..."

He headed for Beretta. But then he stopped. Something felt off. For one thing, Beretta wasn't even wary of him. After all this battle (plus revealing several of his trump cards), Deeno was running short on magicules. He still wouldn't lose, but Beretta was acting like he was assured of victory out of nowhere. His face wasn't visible under the mask, but it still felt creepy somehow.

"You think you can beat me?"

"Heh-heh-heh... Don't be silly. Whether I could or not is irrelevant; I am not your opponent."

The moment he heard that, Deeno was struck with an intense chill. In a frenzy, he turned toward Zegion—and yes, there was something unnatural about that stationary figure. The fact that he wasn't pulverized by a God-class strike proved that his left arm was God-equivalent. That meant he could have a will strong enough to work as a spiritual life-form. All that deliberating over whether he had an ultimate skill seemed pointless now. The evidence was clearly on the "yes" side.

"No way...!"

"Let me ask you—does your attack have a delayed effect? Because otherwise, did you think a passing breeze like *that* strike could defeat me?"

*Goddamn it*, Deeno thought. Zegion really *did* have an ultimate skill. Exactly what kind was unclear, but if it could nullify his spiritual attack, it had to be exceptional.

"You were wondering if I possessed an ultimate skill, weren't you? If so, you should have pieced several attacks together instead of that meager swipe. You need to realize that your laziness cost you the victory."

*Don't act like you won this*, Deeno almost screamed. Instead, Zegion thrust his left fist at him. His fingers opened outward, and from them, five beams of light shot out.

It was his Dimension Ray.

"Owww..."

Leaping away to dodge it, Deeno just barely avoided lethal damage. It came, however, at the cost of his right arm, which was now severed at the elbow.

The pain made him want to cry, but there was no time for it. His instincts were warning him that he truly *was* in danger if this continued.

"You really *did* find an ultimate. Didn't you, you bastard? I didn't expect you to neutralize Fallen Thanatos as well... Are you telling me spirit attacks don't work on you?"

Fallen Thanatos was a lethal spiritual attack Deeno had instilled in his Fallen Strike just now. It acted strictly on the minds of its targets, so even if his foe was a Replication or the like, it would still impact the actual person, no matter how far away he was.

It was a sure-kill move, no escape possible, but Zegion was totally undeterred. Deeno could hardly believe it, and he was right to. If he wanted to win—or, really, if he wanted to escape here alive—he needed to solve this mystery. So he asked Zegion, knowing full well an answer was not likely to arrive.

"I have no duty to inform you why."

Zegion, naturally, was unmoved. But his bitter voice continued.

"...But you are so pitiful, I will dignify your question with a reply. I am an illusion, a ghost. From the very beginning, you were wrapped around my finger. I have been granted the title of Mist Lord, ruler of the phantom realm, and now you realize that no spirit attacks can faze me!"

It was the strong offering mercy to the weak. Hearing it, Deeno quickly arrived at the truth—and then he was shocked. If his skill had been nullified, it meant his foe's was stronger. Zegion, he now realized, had evolved into something as good, if not better, than him—the him right *now*, even.

*You've got to be kidding me! He was this good at close range, but now he's even better at spirit attacks?! And he's the ruler of the phantom realm? So he can, like, create independent worlds of his own? Oh man, how much stronger did that bastard get?! No damn way I could beat him with no preparation!*

Deeno possessed the strongest of sin-based skills, one freshly evolved into an ultimate, but Zegion had shut it completely down. His skill was still unfamiliar, but that was no excuse. Zegion didn't have an ultimate skill until just recently, either. Deeno was hardly weak, but this time, he had picked the wrong opponent. All too wrong...

The whole idea around attempting to kidnap Ramiris, in fact, was wrong at the core. The moment Zegion completed his evolution, its failure was all but ensured. Realizing this, Deeno turned his face upward—and just then, he was stunned by a person he saw on the screen.

*Ah, Velgrynd...*

The beautiful woman was Velgrynd. There was no mistaking that blue hair. She was supposed to be fighting the demon lord Rimuru outside the labyrinth after taking out Veldora, but now she was standing next to Masayuki for some reason. Even more concerning, Cornu was nowhere to be seen.

*No... No, no, no?!*

He had a bad feeling about this, and those tended not to lie to him. He knew that from experience.

*Dude, wait a second. Th-this is too much information to handle at once. I can't keep up with it. So, like, Velgrynd was supposed to be under Feldway's thrall, but was that all a lie? Or did she escape it somehow? Either way, I guess she did Cornu in, huh? That... Wait, wait, this is going way beyond a failed mission now, isn't it?!*

Deeno ran Haste Thought as hard as he could, trying to understand the situation. Soon, though, he concluded that it'd be impossible to keep this operation going, no matter how hard he tried. He might've been ready to turn tail and flee a while ago, but now, he'd lost all will to go on. In his mind, he had done well to survive this far.

"Say your prayers. You have touched the nether reaches of sin, and now you will die and struggle against the weight of your own! Dimension Storm!!"

Zegion had held rule over this space from the start. And that meant only one thing. No matter what Deeno did, he could never leave.

If he had made full use of the abilities he still kept under wraps, perhaps he might've found hope somewhere. But the chances of that were too comical to even bother trying, so Deeno felt no qualms about giving up instead. In fact, if there was any chance at all...

A storm of dazzling colors engulfed Deeno, whisking him away into a realm where nothing existed nor would exist. It was a supernatural storm of highly energized particles, and Deeno could do nothing against it as he was erased from the world, leaving not a trace of his body—or that's what should have happened.

"Huh. Your prayers paid off, then? You've got impressive luck, at least," Zegion muttered to himself.

The soft sound of something, somewhere, breaking could be heard, and he could feel Deeno's existence being regenerated. Zegion could accurately see this, his voice calm. All of it was within his predictions.

\*

Deeno woke up outside the labyrinth.

"Phew! I won the bet, huh?"

He breathed a sigh of relief. His equipment was all there, completely undamaged.

"This must be, like, Ramiris letting me go out of kindness, isn't it?"

Deeno looked at the broken bracelet in his hands. It was a Resurrection Bracelet, a cheap one he'd purchased at the labyrinth's shop long ago. He had never made use of a save point, so his location was reset to the surface after he died. He kept it on as an escape route, figuring something like this was entirely possible.

"Well, she never gave me an unlimited-use bracelet, so she must've been

pretty suspicious of me from the start. She coulda canceled *this* one on me, too, though. She sure went easy on me."

He wistfully reflected on it. Here he was, secretly carrying an insurance item created by a girl he was sent to kidnap. It took someone like Deeno to justify an act so unprincipled in his mind. The bracelet was a cut-price, one-use type, something Ramiris produced in mass quantities. He had staked his life on it, and apparently the heavens were on his side.

*Fallen or not, I'm still an angel, I guess.*

Deeno let his mind wander a bit as he looked around. He wanted to find his companions (who were presumably fighting Geld right now) and get the hell out of there. He also sent a Thought Communication to Zarario to report on his failure. His angelic partners had set up an escape route so he wouldn't be locked in the labyrinth, so none of them was likely to leave until Zarario got out. But with things falling apart like this, sticking around was a bad idea.

*Still, though, that dude was way too strong!*

It sucked so bad. Even recalling Zegion made him want to whine to himself. Feldway was gonna be seriously angry, but still, he was lucky to be alive.

*Like, this might be the first time any of Feldway's plans didn't work out. I guess Cornu screwed up again, but... Well, I dunno where he is. We really should never have opposed Rimuru...*

He had never been too eager about his role in this. Now Deeno wondered why he ever accepted it in the first place. Thinking about the future just depressed him.

Really, if Zegion had become that much of a monster, a conventional assault on the labyrinth like this was hopeless. He, along with all the other top-level people in Rimuru's government, was a total monster. Deeno couldn't say exactly what had happened to Rimuru and his team yet, but he was sure it was nothing he'd be glad to hear of.

*This is why I didn't want in on this!!*

Deeno just wanted a tranquil life in the labyrinth—and now look at what had happened. Perhaps it's what he deserved for what he did, but it was still

depressing.

*I dunno what's going on in Feldway's mind, but I doubt he'll give up. Not that this is ever gonna be possible...*

If he had to guess, the best chance they'd ever get had come just a moment ago. That was wholly gone now, and Deeno knew it wouldn't come back.

Plus, there was one more problem.

*Ah, man, and now that I've made myself an enemy, there's no way I can go back...*

To someone as lazy-minded as Deeno, life in the labyrinth was about as comfortable and easygoing as it got. It might have been "work," but helping Vester was fun. Gabil got along with him, too, occasionally doing favors for him and so on. Whenever the research team made a new discovery, it gladdened him as well. These were engaging days he had spent with Vester and the gang—and in time, he saw them as friends.

That, and something else Deeno almost forgot. He only came here because Guy ordered him to. He was functioning as a spy for him, reporting back on goings-on inside the labyrinth. Deeno didn't think Guy expected much from him, really, but that just soured his mood even further.

*He can be such a pain when he's mad...*

He truly was. But now fretting over all this seemed pointless, too. So Deeno headed over to his companions instead.

\*

By the time he reached them, the battle was at a stalemate. Geld the Barrier Lord and Garasha were locked in combat, and amazingly, they were equals in sheer muscle. Deeno could hardly believe what he saw.

*If he's equal to Gara, that makes him stronger than me, huh? And if he's like that right after his evolution, that's just... Ugh.*

Geld was bloodied. Exactly who the blood belonged to was unclear, because he had no obvious open wounds. Injuries dealt with magical damage couldn't be healed with a potion, and Garasha was clearly throwing around enough

magic to destroy him. If Geld was unhurt by all of that, either he had crazy defense or superhuman healing skills.

As Deeno thought about this, Garasha swung her longsword. It slashed through Geld's scale shield and cleaved into his arm. Geld didn't respond. Throwing away his broken shield, he took a new one out from his Stomach and returned to his fighting stance. And there Deeno could see it—there wasn't even a scar on Geld's arm any longer.

*Ahhh, it's Ultraspeed Regeneration. And it's advanced enough to even heal Garasha's attacks...?*

Now he had an answer. But Deeno wasn't too happy about it.

"Ugh! Why are you so stubborn? None of my attacks is even fazing you! Are you crazy or something?"

"Mm? Am I? I'm not sure myself. Perhaps I should give more praise to your attacks?"

"Oh, sarcasm, huh? Gah! I have to kill you in one stroke or you'll just heal instantly. I oughtta be praising *you* for how damn tough you are!"

Such was the exchange as Geld and Garasha flew back into battle, gouging into each other's openings without caring how much it damaged them. Geld's Meat Cleaver was deflected back by Garasha's circle shield, generating an intense flurry of sparks and a shock wave that traveled along the ground.

Deeno was too dazed to use his chance to speak up. Geld always existed behind the scenes as this revered figure. He did nothing flashy in the war against the Empire, and Deeno didn't see him as much of a threat. That was a serious mistake.

*Now I'm sure of it! Everyone in this damn country is just totally insane!*

He forced himself to accept this as fact, a truth finally dawning on him, even as a fearsome aerial battle erupted above him.

"Ughhh! Stop irritating me with all that flying around!"

"That's what I wanna say. You got a lot of nerve, flying with no wings!"

"Heh... A simple matter if you have control over gravity. But I'm getting bored

with this game of tag. Can we put an end to it?"

"Again, that's what I wanna say!"

The bewitching Kumara was taking on Pico, who looked like a young child by comparison. They actually made a good-looking couple, but their battle was pretty intense. Pico's Black Thunder, launched so often that it seemed to cover the ground beneath them, had blackened the surrounding area—but somehow, it never quite reached Kumara. It made sense. Raiko, the Thunder Tiger and one of the tail beasts that Kumara kept as a pet, was born to handle lightning, making defense a simple matter.

Then Kumara went on the move, as if declaring it her turn. Using eight of her tails in an elegant, flowing pattern, she unleashed Nine-Tail Slash, only to have it blocked by Pico's lance.

A shrill *clang* shot across the battlefield. They were an even match for each other, and once again, Deeno had to revise his opinion of Kumara's fighting skill upward.

*She's one of the Twelve Lordly Guardians, isn't she? Man. Better not mess with any of them.*

He had to admit it. There wasn't any need to point out this or that member—they were *all* threats. That was the safest way to think about it.

As former seraphim, Pico and Garasha were up there with awakened demon lords. They had been away from battle for a while, so their capabilities couldn't be compared that simply, but they clearly weren't pushovers. With Tempest's leaders out of the picture, Deeno figured he and these two women were enough to take over the labyrinth—and yet Feldway was ever so careful, deploying two Mystic Leaders and even joining the fray himself. Victory was completely assured, but look what they had here now. The reality of it all made him feel dizzy.

Pico and Garasha seemed to be gradually losing their cool, perhaps because their battle skills were so rusty. But whatever level they were at now, they used to be top-level seraphim. If two out of the shining Seven Primordial Angels were struggling this much, their pride must've been in tatters. Deeno wasn't helping much, but he ignored that for now.

"Hey! Guys! Retreat! We gotta retreat!"

The two of them reacted angrily to Deeno's shouting.

"But we're just getting to the good part! Stop talking nonsense when I'm about to get serious with this!"

"Shut up! This entire operation fell apart the moment *you* joined the melee!"

Pico and Garasha's role was supposed to be rear support. There was a large blank in their battle experience, so they were playing it safe this time. If they had been dragged into a fight, it proved the enemy was more powerful than expected. A tactical victory here meant nothing strategically for the war.

"...Wait, is the mission off?"

"Huh? Yeah, it is. I wouldn't have fled the labyrinth if it wasn't!"

"What? But didn't Fay come up with our plans? A perfectionist as careful as him misjudged the enemy, you're saying?"

"Guess so."

"Don't be stupid. How could we have failed this if we had both Zarario and Cornu on the scene?"

"Because we lost. I sent word to Zarario to pull out, but I'm pretty sure Cornu is dead. We didn't achieve any of our objectives, but there's no point fighting this out any longer!"

"Are you serious...?"

"This is really blowing my mind..."

Pico and Garasha were speechless. Geld and Kumara couldn't have been prouder.

"Oh?" Garasha looked at Deeno. "So does that mean *you* lost, too?"

"Huh? Look, can you stop asking that over and over again? Get the picture! Can't you be thoughtful enough to pretend not to notice?"

Deeno was as detached from his problems as usual. Garasha was stunned—not by the news but by how nonchalant he was about all this. Regardless, there was no reason to doubt him. Their minds were calm, and they both realized

that retreat was the only acceptable way.

"Eesh! This doesn't mean you won, got it?!"

"I am aware. Even during our battle, you were funneling some of your powers toward maintaining the labyrinth, weren't you? Next time, I want to take you on at your full force."

"Heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Now you're speaking my language. I like that. In that case, see you!"

Recognizing each other's strength, Garasha and Geld made a friendly parting of ways. Pico and Kumara, on the other hand...

"Your name was Pico? You're lucky to escape alive today."

"What? C'mon, I wasn't even trying that hard. *You're* the one who oughtta thank their lucky stars!"

They glared at each other, then huffily turned away.

It was two opposites attitude-wise, but either way, it heralded the end of battle. With that, Deeno and his allies managed to escape in one piece.



Zarario was always coolheaded. His job on this mission was to serve as a diversion, and he carried it out with perfection.

The troops he brought along with him were fighting on the same level as the resisting forces in the labyrinth—literally. But, surprisingly enough, they would need to reconsider their enemies. That was the conclusion Zarario made as he sized up the battlefield.

Most impressive of all were the two people in front of him, Charys and Treyni. Those were the names they gave, and Zarario felt it was worth his time to memorize them. Even so, he reasoned that it still wasn't worth his time to exercise his full powers against them.

*I was told only the most insignificant of resistance remained for us, but that appears not to be the case. I thought my counterattack wiped out their forces in the labyrinth, but that powerhouse Zegion was still in there? Hopefully Cornu and Deeno wrapped up their missions before he awoke.*

It was a cause for concern, but Feldway's plans never went awry. That's what Zarario trusted in as he enjoyed this battle.

"Lord Veldora is going to laugh at us for being toyed with by these half-engaged foes."

"I wouldn't worry about that. Veldora's lost to Velgrynd and fallen into our hands."

"That's not a funny joke."

"It's not meant to be. You saw it, too, didn't you? They're a little panicked."

"..."

The magic-born Charys boasted superb strength. He was a rare talent, even given all the many dimensions Zarario had seen and destroyed. Treyni was impressive, too—a magic-born infused with an elemental lord—but she couldn't beat out Charys. Her gifts lay in high-intensity magic, but none of it worked on Zarario, so she wasn't a problem. Charys, too, could fire rays of heated light by nimbly controlling and compressing heat energy, but Zarario's Distortion Field could neutralize it all.

No, the thing he had to watch out for was Charys's calm and precise decision-making. Unlike Treyni, he seemed to size up Zarario in this battle, proceeding carefully and testing out how every move of his worked. Zarario's experience told him that a foe like this couldn't be trifled with.

But it was just about over now. Once Charys panicked a bit, he lost his careful style. The battle was about to get a lot less enjoyable, and Zarario thought it time to wrap things up.

"I hate to say it, but let's bring matters to an end, shall we? You are both quite heroic warriors and extremely strong to boot, but sadly, you do not pose a challenge to me."

The difference was apparent. Zarario had a much larger energy store. But the deciding factor was how they matched up. Angels held an advantage over spirits, and Charys and Treyni, whose powers were based in the elements, had no decisive measure against a seraphim (even a fallen one) like Zarario.

"I hate to say it, but Doreth appears close to her limit. I cannot keep my elemental lord for longer than a handful of seconds. Sir Charys, do you have any strategies left?"

"No, sadly. But Sir Rimuru and Sir Veldora taught me nothing if not the core strategy of never giving up. So don't worry."

Despite it being a hopeless situation they had no way of clawing out of, Charys grinned, as if the battle had just begun. Treyni smiled back.

"In that case, let me join you. We can't allow these insolent intruders to do as they please in Lady Ramiris's labyrinth!"

They were heavily damaged but still ready to fight. Their hearts showed no sign of breaking—which made Zarario roll his eyes.

"Oh, come on. I don't think you're foolish enough not to see the writing on the wall, but are you planning to pathetically cling to life until the very end? Because if you think you can resurrect yourselves regardless, you are very much mistaken."

By Zarario's calculation, Deeno would have ferried Ramiris out of the labyrinth right around now. Any immortality the labyrinth granted you worked only because Ramiris was inside it. To be exact, her leaving the labyrinth wasn't enough to turn that off, but if she did so and lost consciousness, all her memories would instantly be reset. Thus, the moment Deeno carried out his job, Ramiris's servants would lose their immortality. Zarario knew that, and that's why he went easy, piling damage on Charys and Treyni instead of killing them outright.

"In recognition of your valor in battle, I could grant you a proud, painless death if you like?"

That was his way, as one of the strongest of warriors, of offering mercy. But Charys and Treyni were obviously uninterested.

"Heh-heh-heh... Think you've already won, fool?"

"Indeed. You never know what could happen in a battle. As long as we don't give up on victory, we will never lose. Don't you know that?"

That sore-loser stance was enough to rile Zarario—not enough to make him lose his calm, but he didn't appreciate this sass.

"How annoying. I was trying to grant you mercy."

"Mercy? Ah, so many people lose their fight after trying to act so undisturbed! Do you know what we call talk like that? We call it a death flag."

Charys recalled the "things never to say list" he'd discussed with Veldora once. There were a few absolute no-nos, but the worst of all was "trying to act cool just before you secure the win." If you're out to kill, you have to take action, not get distracted. Otherwise, you're simply giving your opponent time to strike back.

"Oh, stop it. Are you expecting a miracle to—?"

"They *do* happen. Sir Rimuru's engineered quite a few of them in his time, and his troops are so used to seeing them, they often imitate them for themselves. And look what we have here...!"

In the labyrinth, merely buying time in a battle often held little strategic significance. The same was true for this one...

"Exactly. And if you wish to strike at Lady Ramiris, friend and servant to my god, let it be known that Adalmann the Gehenna Lord will take you on!"

...but instead, all that stalling allowed for the birth of another warrior.

*What does throwing one more body into the fray achieve?*

Zarario was far more concerned by Deeno's delays reporting back to him.

*He's late. I know he's lazy by default, but whenever he procrastinates like this, it only creates more work for me...*

That, combined with things not going his way in this battle, irked him more. And now this knightlike man was standing in front of him.

"I hate to fight in a large group against a single opponent, but I am no longer a righteous paladin. Deeds matter to me more than chivalry, and I hope you'll forgive me for that."

This was Alberto speaking. He bore a suit of God-class armor gifted to him by

Rimuru—and after the more metaphysical gifts he'd received thanks to Adalmann's awakening, he had evolved into a Gehenna Paladin. Now, as the rightful owner of the shining armor he wore, Alberto pointed his sword at Zarario.

"There's another one...?" Zarario said.

He could tell that the aura Alberto emitted was a fearsome sight to behold. His movements were the mark of a seasoned swordsman, and the God-class blade in his hand contained the potential to seriously wound Zarario. One look, and it was clear he shouldn't be ignored.

"I'm here, too."

This voice belonged to Venti, the Dragon Lord of the Underworld, who had awoken from her evolutionary slumber, reborn as a Gehenna Dragon. She offered Zarario an elegant bow, a trick she must have learned from somewhere. Zarario rewarded it with a blank stare. Now he realized just what sort of fix he was in.

Even against this lineup, if it was a yes/no question, then yes, he could win. But victory alone wouldn't be meaningful. Unless Deeno took Ramiris out of the picture, Zarario wouldn't even *have* a victory.

*If I go all out here, I'll simply reveal my hand and have nothing to show for it. But if I don't, I'll be in trouble against this crew...*

Against Charys and Treyni alone, Zarario could go easy and still hold his own. But if three titans on an awakened demon lord's level joined in, not even he liked his chances. But he still needed to serve as a diversion, or Feldway's entire strategy would fall to pieces. Zarario enjoyed a perfect record for carrying out his missions. He refused to allow that to happen.

*So be it. I'm going to kill them all anyway. Let's show them what I've got.*

But just as Zarario steeled his resolve:

"Ah, yes... Allow me to relate something that I think you'll find interesting. The area I normally guard is on Floor 70, but why do you think I've been ignoring the intruders in there?"



“What?”

“...Well, no point keeping you in suspense. Let me sum it up for you. It’s because there isn’t even any need for me to show up.”

“...What are you getting at?”

Adalmann, the undead in the mage’s robe, flashed an evil grin. Zarario was getting peeved.

*Hold on. There was no need for him to show up? Cornu was supposed to be invading that floor. Did something happen to him?*

There was no need to ask. Zarario quickly deducted the truth. But since Adalmann was here to divert Zarario from his mission, he said it out loud anyway.

“The foolish intruder has been eliminated by Lady Velgrynd. That’s why I came here without a trace of concern in my mind!”

“...”

Zarario wasn’t dumb enough to doubt his foe’s words. Working on the assumption that Cornu was defeated, he probed further about their number one aim.

“Heh-heh-heh... I see. I’m sure Cornu was defenseless against Velgrynd, then. It seems some strange events have been taking place, but enough about that for now. So is this pittance of a force all that remains from your side?”

Why wasn’t Velgrynd here? Probably because of Masayuki, Zarario figured. Masayuki must have inherited Ludora’s soul after all. Feldway, poring over the Imperial Information Bureau’s records, had ordered Masayuki killed in order to eliminate the possibility...but now the possibility was the truth, and Velgrynd must have realized it.

*Bad luck for Cornu, then. This wouldn’t have happened, either, if we hadn’t swapped roles as planned. But Velgrynd can be safely ignored. As long as Sir Michael is with us, it’ll be easy to rule over her. Right now...*

Right now, Deeno was the key factor.

"You seem undisturbed. Well, perhaps you were strong enough to take on Lady Velgrynd if needed, then? We really *have* been underestimated, haven't we?"

"Heavens, we could have taken you on en masse and lost, even."

Charys and Adalmann were being clever for a reason. Based on Zarario's attitude, they could tell he was hiding some great, unknown power. Despite that, however, the advantage was still with their team, as Adalmann was about to explain.

"I think I understand the reason for your question. Your true aim is Lady Ramiris, is it not? Our standing orders always tell us to place Lady Ramiris's safety above all other concerns."

When he woke up, checking on Ramiris was the first thing Adalmann did. As long as she was safe, everything else could work itself out. Besides, it was Rimuru's supreme order. They were all floor guardians tasked with guarding the labyrinth, and that meant keeping Ramiris safe.

"So is Lady Ramiris safe?"

"Of course, Lady Treyni. Sir Zegion came to her aid, and I'm sure he won't let anyone touch Lady Ramiris."

"Ah. Quite a relief, then."

Treyni smiled. The rest of the group looked just as relieved. Now they could focus entirely on the enemy right here.

For Zarario, meanwhile, the mention of Zegion's name made him fear the worst about Deeno.

*Zegion can cast Distortion Field, as far as I recall. If Deeno got serious... No, there's no point expecting that much from him. He was never too enthusiastic about this to start. By now, I'm sure he's...*

He had a notably accurate picture of matters. And it was at that moment when Deeno sent him a Thought Communication.

(Hey, Zarario, you hearing this? The mission's a failure. Velgrynd got into the battle, and Cornu screwed the pooch, I guess. I'm running into some serious

hombres here, too, so I'm splitting. You better run before the labyrinth closes up. See you around!)

It was all so one-sided, Zarario couldn't help but chuckle at it. *How very Deeno-like of him*, he thought. But the time to retreat was here. Winning this battle would be pointless, and he had a reason to avoid pointless maneuvers.

"I have to say, I've never been so humiliated before. Look at me, forced to retreat against this rabble I could knock over with a flick of my finger... It won't be the case next time. Remember that."

After matter-of-factly playing the sore loser, Zarario took his team and teleported out of the scene. The group he left behind was filled not with the glory of victory but a sense of sheer relief. They had kept the labyrinth safe.

\*

Now all threats were gone from the labyrinth.

Zegion turned off his Fantastical World ability, then faced Beretta, who had just finished laying Ramiris out on a couch.

"Did we let Sir Deeno get away?"

"Looks that way."

"Hee-hee! No need to put it like that. Lady Ramiris was merciful enough to allow Sir Deeno to leave."

Beretta was right. Zegion had noticed that Deeno was wearing a Resurrection Bracelet, but he still let him go. It was a sort of experiment—would Ramiris's protection work against someone openly hostile to her?—and the results were now clear. Deeno placed his bet, it paid off, and he was alive.

To Zegion, it was the same thing either way. Carrying out this experiment was a pleasant bonus, but his victory condition here was to keep Ramiris safe, and that was now complete.

"If Lady Ramiris wills it, I have no objection."

Beretta nodded. If they had fended off the enemy, there was no need for further bloodshed. If the enemy couldn't realize what a merciful act this was, though, next time would be different.

Depending on how Deeno reacted, Zegion was prepared to pursue him. He was prepared to kill him if he didn't get the hint and run away, but that no longer seemed necessary. Deeno was now convincing his allies to retreat, and two of them had accepted the invitation and left the area.

"So what about this Zarario?"

"Sir Adalmann is dealing with him. His presence has disappeared, so presumably he gave up and left."

Adalmann and his cohorts were awake and back in action, and that was apparently enough to dissuade the remaining enemies.

"Excellent news."

"Yes. And we would've easily lost if Lady Ramiris wasn't here."

"Indeed. Even if we didn't, we likely would have lost many—and that's as good as defeat to us."

"Exactly."

Zegion and Beretta exchanged nods, agreeing to consider ways to beef up their security measures later.

With this, the continued safety of the labyrinth was assured. Checking one more time to ensure Ramiris was safe, Zegion returned to his usual domain.



*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
2

THE INTERVIEWS

## CHAPTER 2

### THE INTERVIEWS

“So yeah, I was in a real dilly of a pickle for a second there!”

I had just finished hearing the report from Ramiris’s team. Sounded like things got way hairier than I expected.

“Is Chloe all right, then?”

“No problems there,” Shuna said. “The moment she reverted to her child form, she regained consciousness. We’ve placed her in the medical center for observation just in case.”

That was a relief. I had been told first thing that we had no casualties, but I couldn’t really breathe easy until I saw things for myself. She was probably sleeping, so I decided I’d stop in to visit her the next day.

Still... What an enemy we had to deal with. That diversion posing as an invasion, luring us into lightening the guard around Ramiris—and Deeno picked *that* moment to turn traitor. He was more powerful than Beretta, and not even Beretta and Apito together could stop him. Apparently he was *this* close to scoring Ramiris, but Zegion popping in just in time had saved the day.

One false move and it would’ve been a monumental disaster. The thought of what would’ve happened if Zegion *hadn’t* woken up then made me shudder. I couldn’t thank him enough for being on time.

I have to say, though, it was a surprise to see that Velgrynd came back. I’d been told she was working with Masayuki and the Empire’s top commanders to discuss their future direction. I’d need to meet and talk with her later, and no doubt she’d want to collect her thoughts before then as well. But if Velgrynd stepped up to protect Masayuki, I guess that pretty much proved it now, huh? It made sense to me, but it also just added to the pile of questions I had.

But we could tackle that stuff later. For now, I was going down my list of people due to brief me.

"Well, Ramiris, I'm glad you're okay, at least!"

"Oh, you don't need to tell *me* twice. And, ya know, it's not like Deeno tried anything funny with me at all, but if I got trundled out of the labyrinth, I woulda been in a heap of trouble. Right? I mean, if I *really* tried at it, I could kick that kid's butt six ways to Sunday, but still!"

Good to see this ordeal didn't shake her at all. She was clearly angry about it, but now that she was safe, she was back to issuing idle threats like usual. In fact, she had still been peacefully sleeping when I got back, mumbling along the lines of, "*Mmmm, damn you, Deeno, I'm gonna execute all forty-eight of my sure-kill moves on you...*," and so on. She always aggrandized her strength in her dreams, and that was apparently just as true when the target of her ire was safely far away from her.

"Yes, Deeno should be grateful that Lady Ramiris didn't break out her forty-eight death strikes!"

Treyni, looking after her, wasted no time propping up her ego.

"Right? Right? I know!"

Ramiris eagerly nodded back. This was exactly why she got carried away all the time, you see. I asked Treyni in my mind to cut it out a little.

"My sincerest apologies, Sir Rimuru. I was negligent in my directorial duties. I never imagined Deeno would turn against us..."

Vester, meanwhile, was hanging his head low. He had shown up here ahead of everyone else in order to say sorry to me, in fact. He always had a strong sense of duty that way, and this event had shaken him pretty hard. So I smiled back, trying to soothe him.

"Nah, nah, quit worrying about it so much! We all had our doubts about Deeno from the start, so..."

Ramiris, Treyni, even Beretta—they all eagerly agreed with this.

"He's a demon lord, you know. I didn't trust him from the start!"

"No. And I did not expect him to try anything this bold, but I always made sure he was kept on careful watch in case he tried something."

"And he *was* more dedicated to his work than any of us expected. That surprised me more than anything."

They were trashing him pretty badly. I kinda wanted them to trust him a little more, but that was all shot now. Deeno only came here because Guy told him to, besides, and he didn't even try hiding the fact that he was a spy. No wonder we always had our eyes on him.

But the way I saw it...

"There's no need to dwell on it, Vester. I don't think Deeno did all that out of malice against us."

That was my honest take. I'd expected him to pull something like this the whole time, yes, but in some ways, it felt like he'd all but asked us to keep a constant watch on his behavior. Maybe he thought it'd come to this eventually —I couldn't help but suspect that.

"Yeah, well, he could've picked a less awkward way of dealing with us," said Ramiris. "I would've been happy to talk with him about it..."

"Right? If we were all getting along that well, don't you want to give him another chance? Deeno might've had his own obligations to deal with, too," I offered.

My conjecture seemed to convince Vester.

"Indeed. Well, if you want to continue trusting Deeno, I will as well. I've made mistakes in my career, but thanks to you and King Gazel, I've returned to the right path. Nothing is more reassuring than having an ally on your side."

Vester relaxed his expression a bit. He seemed to be over whatever was bothering him, and I was glad for that.

Besides, I really did want to believe in Deeno—and I had another good reason for that, although I planned to keep it a secret until I had more confirmation. There was a distinct possibility Deeno possessed an angel-type ultimate skill. The reports said he'd evolved an ultimate skill from a unique one during battle,

which sounded a little too convenient to me, but if it was true, it meant he could conjure skills out of nowhere like that.

*I firmly agree. Evolution mid-battle like that is normally unheard of.*

Ciel, my heartfelt friend and partner, was on my side here. I relied on it more than anyone else.

I had given a name to Raphael in the heat of the moment while I was fending off Velgrynd, and the result was Ciel, this new manus core of intelligence. This was far more than just some simple thinking engine. Much like Chronoa, it performed its calculations independently from its master, kind of like I had a second mind operating in my body. It was clearly sentient, and now it was far more humanlike in its reactions.

That, I suppose, was why I felt so assured after Ciel backed me up just now. It had made plenty of mistakes as well, but no reason to bring that up now. Besides, if it had remained in its unevolved Raphael form, I would've been in serious trouble, right? And looking back, it hadn't been operating too well when I was faced off against Ludora (or Michael, I guess?), apparently because of Ultimate Dominion's effects.

...

That habit of falling silent whenever the conversation wasn't going its way was as strong as ever.

Basically, what I'm saying is that I likely would've lost if it hadn't become Ciel for me. Looking back now, it made me shudder how close to the brink I had been for a moment.

*This strikes me as pointless theorizing at this juncture.*

*Wow, it's more of a sore loser than I am.* Force the conversation into a conclusion and leave it at that—a page from my book. I know we both march to the beat of our own drums, but still.

Anyway, it seemed clear to me that Deeno was hiding some kind of special power I'd like to know about.

*It is likely he was trying to disguise it. However, given his unnatural behavior, I*

*am certain he possesses certain other abilities as well.*

Mm-hmm. If Ciel says so, it's likely true.

Deeno was probably being controlled by Ultimate Dominion, what with having an angelic-type ultimate skill and all. He and I weren't connected by a soul corridor, so I couldn't just go and remove it from him that very moment, but I might be able to do it if we ever faced off against each other. That being said, there was still a chance Deeno had betrayed us out of his own free will, so I couldn't be too optimistic. Either way, though, I wasn't going to write him off as a hated enemy just yet.

It would've been nice if the topic ended at this point, but Vester wasn't the only person down in the dumps.

"I sincerely apologize, Sir Rimuru, for exposing Lady Ramiris to danger..."

Now it was Beretta taking a knee and bowing his head before me.

"Whoa there, Beretta!" Ramiris yelled. "You did a real good job for me!"

I think Ramiris was right. Beretta did an excellent job against Deeno, an opponent who far outclassed him. No mistakes were made at all—in fact, I wanted to thank him for buying us so much time. I was concerned that Beretta would blame himself for any setback he'd faced in battle, and it looked like I was right. He and Vester are good reminders that there's such a thing as being *too* dedicated.

"No, no, you successfully stalled for time like you were trained to do. You did a great job for me!"

"But Lady Ramiris granted me the post of Dungeon Master, the keystone to all our defenses. You, as well, directed me to keep Lady Ramiris guarded. And now look what happened..."

Beretta was still arguing vehemently against himself. I'm sure he was frustrated about this, but Beretta had done all the right things down there. He'd sized up Deeno, decided whether he could beat him, and then carried out his assigned role. If he had made the wrong call and tried charging into a fight he could never win, Ramiris would be well away from Tempest by now, and I wouldn't want to imagine the resulting carnage.

"So look, Beretta, you need to be more proud of yourself."

I think my praise was getting through to him. He seemed calmer finally. And why not? The enemy's strategy had failed miserably in the end, and that meant Beretta and his cohorts had put up a brilliant performance.

"If you say so..."

Beretta was calmer but apparently still unconvinced.

"Still worked up about it? All right. Let's talk about this more later, okay? Come visit me in my chamber."

"...! Y-yes, my lord! Thank you!"

If Ramiris was safe, then all was well—but Beretta refused to accept that. He got preoccupied with things way too much. Regardless, we'd have time to dig deeper into this later, so I moved on for the time being.



Ramiris and Vester were done with their briefings, so I turned toward Geld and Adalmann.

"Great job protecting the city, Geld! You have my sincere thanks."

"I hardly deserve the praise, sir. I love this city, and I'm not about to let all our hard work be torn to pieces that easily. All my companions feel the same way, and I promise we'll improve ourselves so you never have to be worried about us!"

"I'm glad to hear that, but don't push too hard, okay?"

Even now, I felt like Geld was overworking himself. If he went further overboard with it, he'd make everyone look like they were slacking off by comparison. It must put all his underlings on edge, I imagine. Their boss deserves some rest when he needs it.

After I reinforced this with Geld, he moved on to his report. It seemed our enemy was closely involved with Deeno; Geld had dealt with two of them, both women, named Pico and Garasha. As Ramiris also confirmed with me, they were part of the Seven Primordial Angels, serving the dragon Veldanava directly. Before then, they were seraphim, the loftiest and most powerful

echelon of angels, tasked with preserving stability in the world. Deeno once belonged to this group as well, apparently, but we were running on the assumption that the foes who appeared on Floors 50 and 70 were a different force from these Primordials.

"I'm pretty sure the Primordial Angels govern over this other world, monitoring this powerful, unstoppable monster they banished there, y'know? But the way Deeno was talking, there are three of them left here as well."

Those three, I imagine, were Pico, Garasha, and Deeno—former seraphim who became "fallen" and now lived on the surface world. They kept watch over things, but we didn't even know if they were ordered to or just did it because they wanted to. All we could do was use the pieces of information we had to guess at their motivations.

"They were fairly powerful. If I hadn't evolved, I doubt I could've fended them off."

If that's how Geld put it, they must've been pretty damn fierce. Pico was handled by Kumara, but that battle got pretty heated, too, they said. But given how the enemy was also meddling with the labyrinth at the same time as this fight, we could assume they weren't putting their full force into the battle.

"Hmm... Sounds like trouble."

"Yes."

*I'd prefer not to antagonize them, but it's too late for that. Let's bet on the assumption that Deeno's being controlled and work out our strategy from there.*

Now for the other force we'd run into.

"So what about Zarario, then?"

I listened to Adalmann explain.

"He was a fearsome foe indeed. Sir Charys and Lady Treyni were handling him until I showed up, but they said they were all but helpless against him."

This dude was even scarier, it turned out. I looked into the labyrinth's archives to check out the battle, but he was clearly a different type of creature from the fallen. He called himself part of the Three Mystic Leaders, too, a servant of the

Mystic Lord—and that meant Feldway, that haughty Mystic Lord, was once the leader of the Seven Primordial Angels.

The three Primordials who joined him in the other world were now working with him as the Three Mystic Leaders, I suppose. While they were gone, though, Veldanava disappeared on them, so they had no way to return here. Then, somewhere along the line, they transformed from angel to mystic.

Now it made sense. They must be lending a hand to this effort for reasons apart from Deeno and his friends—maybe a friendly favor or whatever. That was my wishful thinking, at least.

*I agree with you.*

Well, that was reassuring. If Ciel thought so, too, it had to be the case.

“Either way, the Three Mystic Leaders and their crew are definitely enemies to us. I want all of you to keep that in mind and stay alert!”

With that warning, I related everything I knew to my audience, mostly regarding Michael and the Mystic Lord Feldway. The exact nature of Michael’s abilities was a key issue for us, so I revealed it all without hiding anything.

“W-wait! So...so you think Deeno is...?! That’s why you said we should trust in him, Rimuru?”

So Ramiris finally noticed. I wasn’t going to bring that up until I was surer about it, but this worked.

“Hopefully it’s not premature to say that, but there *is* a possibility he’s being manipulated, yes. If that turns out to be the case, Ramiris, let’s forgive him, okay?”

“Sure, all right. I hope you’re correct!”

Ramiris gave me a cheerful smile. She seemed in brighter spirits than before, so I suppose taking this approach was the best thing for us. Now I’d just have to hope I was right about Deeno.

\*

So as we exchanged this information with one another, the party went into full swing. Rigurd was crying his eyes out, joyous as he was that we were all

safe. Rigur extracted enough funding from Mjöllmile to ensure we had plenty of food to go with all our drinking—and Mjöllmile was an eager participant himself, showing off some parlor tricks for the guests. It's always nice to know I have such well-adjusted people working for me.

With all the major briefings over, we were a bit more relaxed now. Relaxed and having some serious fun.

"I don't know who these Three Mystic Leaders are, but let me at them, and they'll be eating dirt in no time!"

*Great to hear, Benimaru.* And really, I could barely recognize him compared to before he set off to battle. Wonder what'd happened to him?

"Gwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! And with me on your side, our next war is guaranteed to end in victory for us!"

Gabil was boasting away as well...and much like Benimaru, his boast was backed by a sudden, unexplained boost in his strength.

"Woooo! So cool, Sir Gabil!"

"Indeed."

"You're an even greater man than ever. I'll follow you my whole life!"

His forces were as jubilant over him as always.

"My brother, *please* don't get carried away. You nearly got yourself killed this time, didn't you?! And all of you realize that heaping all this praise on him is exactly *why* he gets so full of himself, don't you?!"

Soka wasn't as appreciative of this, but I hoped she'd let it slide for today. Gabil *did* do a lot to worry her, though, so I wasn't gonna step in and stop her. That wasn't just me running away from trouble, either; I want to make that very clear.

A bigger concern was the dude next to me domineering over the entire crowd.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! I understand you got your rear end beaten, Charys! I keep *telling* you that you need more training!"

"I have no defense, my lord."

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! No, you'd *better* not make excuses! Be brave enough of a man to admit your defeat!"

*He already did, dude.* And didn't Veldora lose to Velgrynd, too? Was he in any position to laugh in people's faces about their losses?

"Didn't you lose, too?"

"Huhhh?! Wha...? What are you talking about, Rimuru?! I—I didn't lose at all. I was just a little out of shape!"

*And he was making excuses about it, too.* For all his lecturing Charys, he was barely one to talk, either.

"B-but, my master, you know... He couldn't help it! The enemy interfered with him in, like, the most cowardly way ever! It doesn't count at all!"

"Y-yes, indeed. Well said there, Ramiris! No, my winning record remains unblemished!"

They haven't forgotten that Velgrynd is right there, have they?

It was such ugly excuse-making, I thought about bringing it up. I wouldn't have needed to worry so much if Veldora didn't lose, but we all knew how *that* turned out...

"Charys, I know Veldora can be a pain, but I hope you won't abandon him, okay?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Don't worry about that. Sir Veldora is my master now, and I intend to improve myself so I can earn more of his favor."

So serious-minded. Kind of reminds me of Geld, in fact. That sure went to waste serving someone like Veldora...but still, I was really glad Charys had decided to serve Veldora for me.

The party continued on, and with it came a wealth of fine drinks. I was worried we were letting our hair down too much, but I was the only one—my officers, after all, had no problem neutralizing alcohol in their bodies. That made me wonder what the point of drinking was at all, then...but as they put it, they could still enjoy the feeling of inebriation and the way it loosened their

tongues. I was the same way, so I decided not to go too deeply down this rabbit hole.

“All right, Sir Rimuru, allow me to fill you up!”

“Hold on, Diablo! It was my turn next!”

Diablo and Shion were bickering with each other behind me. I really had a lot of trouble figuring out whether they loved or hated each other. They squabbled over the weirdest of things...

“Now, now, quit fighting over pointless matters and have something to drink yourselves, won’t you?”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I’d be happy to.”

“You can’t trick me! I fall asleep when I drink, so I’m going to worry about attending to Sir Rimuru first today!”

Diablo was a wine person, it looked like. I can’t speak intelligently about how wine tastes, but yeah, that suited his personality well. As for Shion, well, it wasn’t that booze put her to sleep so much as it made her blackout drunk—getting tangled up with other people, causing a scene, you name it. Shuna had to keep a sharp eye on her, and the fact that she remembered none of it afterward made it harder to deal with. I’d usually offer her grape juice at times like these, but if she was abstaining today, that was fine.

Actually, looking closer at the two of them, hadn’t *they* gotten stronger, too? In fact, all my top officers had grown in one way or the other, actually. Not just awakened—it was like something else happened to them...

*Please stop being suspicious of me.*

*Oh, sorry.*

But... Yeah. Not even Ciel could help people with their evolutions.

*I just provided a bit of a helping hand.*

*Wait, you did?!*

I really wanted to dive into this, but we were in the middle of a party. If Ciel could do that now, it’d still be able to tomorrow, so let’s just enjoy this moment

for all we can. So, procrastinating on all my problems until the next day, I immersed myself in the feast.

\*

All my officers took the next day off.

I felt bad for working Rigurd and the administrative staff, but I asked them to check on the condition of our city's infrastructure and relay to our citizens what was going on. The city was back on the surface now, but we needed to see if things like the water and sewer system were damaged at all. Once our safety checks were complete, we'd allow evacuees to return to their homes. We had just wrapped up a major war, so I wanted our administration to get the rest it needed, but we also had to consider everyone else's lives as well.

Thinking about it, working in government really *is* like being a slave to the people, isn't it? You have enough problems crop up in normal times, but whenever an emergency comes up, time off is the first thing to go on you. Things had gotten easier now that Testarossa and her pals were pitching in with governing, but we still needed to work on finding more personnel.

Me? I'm an amateur, of course, so my job's more about reading through our documents and stamping my seal of approval on things. If something seemed like too much for us, I either rejected it or sent it back down to the relevant department for further consideration, that kind of thing. It only worked, really, because I had Ciel handle all the detailed explanations for me. If it was only me, this structure would've collapsed long ago.

So while it was the day after a big party, I still had a lot of stuff to check and approve. Rigurd and his team were busy scurrying around the city, so this way, at least I wouldn't feel guilty about being lazy.

But first...

Before I got to work, I decided to see how Chloe was doing. The moment I stepped into her room in our medical quarters, our eyes met.

"Mr. Tempest...um, I mean, Rimuru!"

"Hee-hee! You don't have to try so hard to talk like a grown-up. To me, you're the same Chloe you always are."

"Oh, come on! I know I look like a kid, but I'm every bit as grown up as you are. In fact, Rimuru, I'm even older than you."

I get that, but...I dunno, exteriors *do* count for a lot. When a total stranger sees me, they apparently think I'm a cute little girl, after all...which was becoming a big hang-up for me. Careless words can really sink ships—that's important to remember.

So I told Chloe how happy I was to see her safe, although she was blushing and pouting at me. She reacted by hiding her face in a pillow.

"Ugh! That's so unfair, Rimuru!"

*Um? How should I be interpreting this...?*

*Unclear. It is too difficult a question to answer.*

If Ciel didn't know, I certainly didn't have a chance, either. So I just said, "Now, now, now," to try to assuage Chloe.

After waiting a while for her to calm down, I asked for her story—what had happened in the battle and what had resulted from it.

"Well, I'm perfectly fine, but I can't talk to Chronoa anymore. The ultimate skill Sariel almost went out of control, so she's suppressing it for me."

So Michael's rule was influencing her after all. Trying to take over something *this* precious was all but picking a fight with me. I'd seen Michael as an enemy before, but I didn't think I needed to show any mercy at this point.

"How do you feel now?"

"Hmm... I dunno. I can't fully handle Yog-Sothoth, and Chronoa isn't around to talk to, so I don't really know what's going on."

Things sounded more serious than at first glance. I hadn't been relying on Chloe's battle skills from the beginning, but I guess I kidded myself into believing she could defend herself well enough. I rued that thought now, but the way things stood, Chloe's safety took first priority.

*As I am now, I have the right to interact with data particles, so I can influence Chronoa as a manas. If I go into Chloe's spiritual space and invoke Ability Adjust, I could likely remove Michael's influence.*

Oh? So Ciel could act upon her.

"Chloe, I think I can improve things for you if I act upon your skill a little..."

"You can't do that, Rimuru. Back then, right at the end, Chronoa told me she couldn't exist independently if I relied on you any longer. Like, '*If I want to stand hand in hand with that man, I have to get out of this situation by my own power,*' and stuff. And I agree with her, too, so I can't have you help me, Mr. Tempest."

Chloe stared me in the eye as she spoke. Her own eyes were sharpened upon me, despite her childish exterior, and I could imagine the beauty they'd have when she was an adult woman. It was more than enough to leave an impression on me. Not that I'm into kids or anything. It's just that Chloe was so incredibly— Ah, better stop there. I was gonna be following in the footsteps of a certain blond-haired demon lord before long, and that'd be a big downgrade in my book, so I turned my mind elsewhere.

"All right. But if anything comes up, tell me, all right? I'll always be happy to talk things over with you."

I patted Chloe on the head. She smiled appreciatively at me and gave a slight nod.

\*

The moment I was back from my visit, Vester asked to speak with me on an urgent issue.

"What's up?"

"Thank you for taking the time to see me. I know you must be exhausted by now...but I've received word from King Gazel."

"Oh!"

"That's right." Vester propped his glasses back up on his nose. "As you likely surmise, he's demanding an explanation for all this."

Great. We staged a gigantic war in the backyard, then unceremoniously left without even bothering to clean up. No wonder he was mad at me. We didn't confine this whole deal to my territory, after all. We got the Dwarven Kingdom

mixed up in it...

"Yeah, um, did he sound angry?"

"I'd surmise he wasn't elated about it, no."

Vester wiped the sweat from his brow. I'll *bet* he was nervous. He had been partying it up with me over beer last night, after all, so this was kind of his fault, too. I was sure that with all the stuff we'd dealt with, he simply didn't have the time to deal with Dwargon matters, and it'd be mean to press him on that. But I was also sure Vester felt irresponsible for not letting me know sooner. I was the most at fault, but...

"Can you send a reply saying I'll explain matters at a later date?"

"I think we'll need to add an acceptable excuse, sir."

That's Vester for you. Sharp as a tack about this stuff. I love how much I can rely on him.

Either way, we needed to organize a lot of things before we could give him or anyone else a coherent explanation. The first thing was to work out a schedule for this meeting. For now, I was leaving King Gazel in Vester's capable hands; once we had everything worked out, then I'd discuss matters with the king.

\*

Now I was on my lunch break. Banishing all troublesome issues from my mind, I focused on enjoying my favorite meal of fried *karaage* chicken and *yakisoba* noodles in sauce.

Then the thought occurred to me. *What kind of stuff has Ciel been up to behind my back?* Ciel had mentioned last night that it "provided a bit of a helping hand," and I thought I needed to work out exactly how much of a hand it was and what exactly it involved. Ciel's "bit of" help could often be far, far more than a bit, after all.

*Mm, being treated with such suspicion is quite upsetting to me.*

So began Ciel's testimony. Just as I thought, it had been up to all kinds of nonsense.

The first thing it did was upgrade my skills without permission. That was

based on the ultimate skill Shub-Niggurath, Lord of Abundance, and I did receive a report about all that...after the fact. When Velgrynd's Ability Adjust wrapped itself up, her skill Raguel, Lord of Relief was integrated with the remains of Uriel, Lord of Vows, the essence of both being inherited by Shub-Niggurath. Ciel had gone over all that with me, but I was too focused on Velgrynd to pay any attention.

So I went back over the documentation we had and listened to Ciel explain Shub-Niggurath for me again. It was, in a real way, the crystallized result of the bonds I shared with the monsters who served me.

Create Skill: craft new skills using information taken with Food Chain or Analysis.

Copy Skill: create a copy of an acquired skill.

Grant Skill: give a copied skill to a qualified target as a gift. (It can also be revoked later.)

Save Skill: digitize an acquired skill and instantly re-create it.

That was the gist of it.

My "soul" had a limited capacity, so I could only memorize so many skills at one time, it seemed. That's why some of my skills were more attached to my physical body than to my soul, but that type could express themselves only weakly. In my case, I had four ultimate skills at once, so I was sure my capacity was pretty close to maxed out.

*No, you have actually attained five, not four.*

*Oh, right.* I had taken in and analyzed Velgrynd, so she'd be the same sort of living thing as Veldora was, and that earned me the new ability Velgrynd, Lord of the Flame.

Yeah, I was probably way over capacity, then. I guess Ciel transferred Uriel over to Velgrynd because I was filled up.

*Yes, exactly! I had no other choice but to optimize your skills as much as I could!!*

This was astoundingly fishy. Was Ciel—actually, I saw this trend back in the

Great Sage era, even—treating skill collection as a hobby? My space was full right now, but I didn’t want to drop anything. *Was that why you forced this evolution?*

*...Allow me to continue my explanation.*

It changed the subject! Not only did turning into Ciel make it feel much more human—now it was acting even more like a reckless freak, it seemed. But...no. *It's all right. It's okay, isn't it?* Please be okay, I prayed to myself as I resolved to trust in Ciel.

Anyway, as Ciel put it, all the many skills taking up needless space in my soul had been dismantled, digitized, and streamlined for peak efficiency—and Shub-Niggurath had been crafted to oversee this process. With this ability, I could now influence all monsters connected to me via soul corridor—to be exact, I could grant them abilities. I think it goes without saying how insane a power this was.

Now Ciel was using Shub-Niggurath to “*help a bit*” with Benimaru and the others. It was hard for me to complain about this, given that we stood a much higher chance of losing if this didn’t happen. In fact...I decided to thank Ciel.

*Not at all. I simply acted upon the wishes of my master.*

We had talked a lot, but Ciel really did help me out. *Keep up the good work*, I said, thanking it one more time.

\*

With that in mind, I now had a better picture of what had happened to everyone.

Considering we had enemies like Michael and the Mystic Lord at hand, we needed to build up our powers—but I couldn’t dole out my strongest abilities as gifts to just anyone. Too much power in the wrong hands can destroy a person, after all, and I trusted Ciel in the choices it made. It was addicted to tinkering with people on extreme levels, I knew, but I didn’t think it’d try any truly impossible enhancements on anyone.

It didn’t seem like Ciel gifted anyone with skills they couldn’t fully use, but I still wanted to confirm that. But as I thought about that, Ciel mentioned

something out of nowhere.

*By the way, my master, we had talked earlier about running Ability Adjust on you. Would you like me to execute that?*

I had totally forgotten. And I could tell Ciel was practically dancing around, incredibly eager to push the button. Guess it had come up with even more incredible improvements after much fumbling around.

If I recall correctly, it talked about integrating the ultimate skill Veldora, Lord of the Storm with Uriel to create the new ultimate skill Hastur, Lord of Starwind. But Ciel had given Uriel to Velgrynd in the meantime, so I suppose this “Ability Adjust” would turn out different now. Knowing Ciel, it certainly wouldn’t be a downgrade.

On that topic, I had heard nothing about it, and Ciel didn’t mention anything, but I was willing to bet it had fully analyzed Raguel for me by now, right?

*Of course.*

*Thought so.*

So I basically had six ultimate skills, then? That, and my evolved officers were providing me with power via Food Chain. No wonder Ciel needed Shub-Niggurath to manage all this stuff. Integrating and combining skills certainly seemed like the right thing to do—no point juggling a bunch of skills and not being able to fully exercise them.

It looked to me like it’d try to integrate Velgrynd, Lord of the Flame with Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony to create something new. I was also wondering what happened to Raphael, Lord of Wisdom, now that Ciel had decoupled itself from it. If Ciel said it could optimize this extensive collection of skills I’d amassed, I had no reason to say no. We weren’t at war right then anyway; I didn’t see the problem.

*Okay, let’s go through with it— Ah!*

*Acknowledged! Executing with haste!!*

I was just about to say, *Wait*, but it was already too late.

Looking back, I’d committed a lot of mistakes in life. I’d regret them, but then

I'd go commit more, never considering the consequences...and here I went again, huh? Why did I give out permission so carelessly like that? I never even checked exactly what kind of fearsome modifications Ciel would perform on me. I never should've given it carte blanche like that...but Ciel already had all its preparations in place, and it pressed the figurative Ability Adjust button instead of letting me hem and haw over it.

*It's too late to stop it now,* Ciel bragged, whistling a tune as it went.

I think I'm safe in saying that Ciel expected all this—the way I'd casually give permission, then immediately try to walk it back in a panic. It had accepted my request with dizzying speed, and now it was happily at work on it, like a dog with a biscuit on its snout who'd been waiting an eternity for the "go" signal...

So, without offering another reply, Ciel was immersed in its work. I was all but resigned to my fate. I mean, I was sure it'd pull some kind of crazy-ass new results for me, but...

...well, if Ciel was busy, I wasn't gonna get anywhere with my government paperwork. Best to turn the page for now and concentrate on my other duties.

\*

While Ciel was beavering away, I wanted to engage my top-ranking officers in personal, one-on-one discussions. I sent Shion and Diablo out of my room for privacy reasons, and so I was alone for a little while.

Shion needed to check on her own troops, so she left without complaint, but Diablo was a brat about it, talking about the need for a guard and whatnot. Finally, I told him, "You know, depending on how these conferences turn out, I might relieve you of your secretary duties. Wouldn't Testarossa be much more qualified anyway? She's strong *and* beautiful, and any secretary/bodyguard of *mine* needs to be strong—you see what I mean?" That seemed to get the point across to him, and he left my office in a hurry.

Heh-heh-heh... I had no intention of that at all, but he was *so* susceptible to this kind of talk. I was sure he was desperately staging practice combat with Testarossa and the other evolved demons right now. I doubted he would lose, but it could be a pretty good fight, actually. Losing would be a good lesson for him anyway—he needed to feel in danger *some* of the time.

Now I was going to use this moment to interview my officials. I called Shuna and had her work out the schedule. That evening, I would have them visit this office in order, starting with those freest of obligations.

First up was Beretta. I'd promised we'd have more time to talk later, so I invited him in first. With interviews like these, the first and last ones up tended to be the most nervous, but apparently in Tempest, people saw being picked first as the greatest of honors. I didn't really understand that, but that's apparently how it worked, and Beretta was in a really chipper mood over it.

"So about your concerns—you really have nothing to answer to about being defeated this time. Like, it's not even a defeat. You prevented the enemy from achieving their objectives, and I'd call that a victory."

A *great* victory, really, seeing how nobody died. I tried to drive that point into Beretta, but he was still unpersuaded.

"I understand that, my lord, but a loss is a loss. To those of us in the black tribe, any loss is a hard pill to swallow."

So he recognized we won, but he himself felt like a loser? He was *so* serious about this. So was Charys. If it were me, I'd be telling everyone I knew about how I sealed the victory. Maybe it's quibbling, but if *I'm* convinced I won, then I did. Even a moral victory is fine by me.

The "black tribe," by the way, was a family tree in the demon race. I learned this only recently, but it turned out Beretta was a member, with Diablo (back when he was simply known as Noir) at the top. They *did* resemble each other in areas, especially in what sore losers they were. It made sense.

Thus, I could certainly appreciate Beretta's frustration over this...but he really couldn't help how this turned out. I "awakened" my troops as an award for victory in this war, but the recipients had to be both demon-lord seeds and connected to me via soul corridor. And Beretta wasn't—

*He satisfies these conditions.*

*Whoa! You scared me!*

Ciel was busy with its own work, but I guess it was lending an ear to our conversation. So maybe it could help with my paperwork, then—

*I happen to have enough souls gathered here to awaken just one person. What is your decision?*

*...Are you dodging my questions again? Maybe I shouldn't have evolved that ability of Ciel's...*

*Negative. No fact like that has been detected.*

*No, Ciel, stop acting like you've suddenly been downgraded back to Raphael.*

But in *that* case...

It looked like we'd gained some more souls in our fight against the imperial force. Using those, I could make all of Beretta's dreams come true. He worked real hard, after all, and I gave him no reward for it. I mean, he *was* technically serving Ramiris, not me, but I still saw him as a cherished friend. Protecting Ramiris was a tremendous job, and I wanted to keep counting on him for it. How about I show him how much I care—and ease one of his concerns while I'm at it?

"Well, I can understand if you're despondent about your lack of power. Let me give you further powers, then!"

I stood up, mustered the most demon-lordliest pose I could, and extended a hand toward Beretta.

"Remember, all I can do is offer you assistance. What happens next is up to you."

So I used my 100,000-souls trick on Beretta and carried out the evolution ceremony. Since I was the one who named him, he no longer could evolve by himself, and maybe this was necessary to karmically make up for that.

"Wha—?! You wouldn't...!!"

"Beretta, you are likely to evolve now. May Ramiris continue to enjoy your protection!"

He was pretty surprised, but the evolution completed without a hitch—and much like the rest of Diablo's tribe, he wasn't put to sleep by it.

As for how this evolution turned out...

Name: Beretta (EP: 1,978,743)

Race: High-level chaos elemental Chaos Metalloid

Protection: Labyrinth protection

Title: Guardian of Ramiris

Magic: Dark magic

Ability: Ultimate skill Deus Ex Machina, Lord of Machine Divinity

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack



*...There it is.*

Beretta's body had also transformed into Crimson Steel, the divine metal, equivalent to God-class equipment. That explained the huge leap in EP, and it resulted from his adamantite body absorbing the massive number of magicules pouring out of him. ("EP," by the way, stood for "existence points," not "energy points," for reasons I wasn't let in on.)

Beyond that, the biggest shift was giving up the unique skill Reverser for the ultimate skill Deus Ex Machina. This skill encompassed the abilities Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Mineral Domination, Control Earth Attribute, Inverse Fusion, Control Space, and Multilayer Barrier.

*I worked hard on that!*

*Yes, I'm sure you did. Good job.*

*You certainly don't hold back when someone grabs your interest, do you? My skills are important and all, but your hobby's never far from your mind, I suppose. You've been messing around with this skill set, too, I see... It's very like Ciel, I suppose.*

But enough about that. Look at Beretta! Combining Mineral Domination with Control Earth Attribute let him freely control and manipulate any kind of mineral. He'd need some materials to work with, but there was a storehouse of magisteel in the labyrinth that was also connected to the surface world, so we should be able to spot him some. This ability was a side effect of evolving his body into Crimson Steel, it seemed.

So it was kind of like control over the earth element, then? It let him transform metal into any shape he wanted, no matter how tough it was. Any weapons that hadn't been enhanced with magic or an aura hardly mattered to Beretta any longer.

But even more vicious than that was how it allowed Beretta to freely make his body any shape he wanted. He could give himself an invincible body of liquid metal, like the bad guy in a classic action movie, impervious to pretty much any type of weapon. Sneaking up on foes like a slime, enveloping them, suffocating them to death... Just thinking of the possibilities made me shudder. He'd

normally keep his usual form—that moving work of art, ball joints and all—but that was no longer what he looked like, so you had to be careful.

Thus, Beretta was now a kind of derivative spiritual life-form. Call it a metallic life-form, if you want.

It was actually a pretty moving moment, wasn't it? Seeing this doll I made on a whim evolve to this level. Looking at him, letting my emotions swell, I realized Beretta was now kneeling before me.

"I will never forget the great gift you have given me, Sir Rimuru. By my very life, I promise I will carry out the mission you have granted me!"

He was ready to go. I wanted to tell him not to push it too much, but with the dangers facing Ramiris, he may not have a choice. He'd have some tough battles ahead of him, no doubt, but I was sure he'd live up to my expectations. His protection, after all, was what let me sleep at night.

"Thank you," I said, nodding at Beretta. Now he was no longer troubled. My job was done, so I told him to return to his station and concentrate on recuperating for the time being.

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As I waited for my next interviewee, I thought about skills for a moment. Between the evolution festival I'd held earlier and the information I gained fighting the Empire's best, a couple of questions had formed in my mind.

Skills were a type of power that took root in one's soul, following the rules this world worked under. One could also receive them from the World Language after training hard enough or performing an impressive feat. I never gave them much deep thought, but really, it was an odd phenomenon. I'd just written it off as "that sort of thing" before...but during all this, I now had a question I couldn't ignore any longer.

Basically:

What was the *true nature* of skills?

I'd had possession of a unique skill from virtually the moment I came to this world. In fact, I heard the World Language in my mind just before I died in my old world, which showed that skills weren't exclusive to this one. That

supposition only added to the questions...but now I couldn't stop wondering if people over in my *other* world could use skills, too.

Unique skills were something that only heroes, or champions, could ever obtain. As "unique" as they were, their effects ran the gamut, but they were all extremely powerful. They were physical manifestations of the user's desires, unleashing their effects based on what the caster wanted. In my case, I started out with Predator and Great Sage, the latter of which I never even asked for, which was funny.

*How rude. I very much was desired by you, Sir Rimuru!*

*Huh...?*

No, I think it was mainly because I was a virgin who wanted— Ah, never mind. Out of my mind with it! If that's what Ciel claimed, maybe that's what I hoped for, deep in my subconscious. Any further investigation would be dangerous, so let's leave it at that.

But back to the topic.

Skills latched on to people's souls, but that hadn't always been the case. Those obtained by pushing the physical envelope with your body could be etched into your body, not your soul. That's often what happened when a skill was obtained from monsters—sometimes you gained a skill just by consuming them. These were called race-intrinsic skills, possessed by all members of a race and passed down across generations.

If you wanted to earn a skill through hard training, the best you could hope for was an "extra" one. What mattered more came after acquiring it. If you could boost your mastery of that skill, or perhaps combine it with your sword talents to create original moves, you could have a powerful force in your hands. Magic, too, was a kind of skill, as proven by all the spells I had consumed and learned.

So there were many things that the term *skill* could cover, but the most important among them were unique skills. These were abilities created strictly within individual people, and each one was different. Some unique-skill families were like each other, but it's believed that no two unique skills were exactly alike.

They *would* sometimes be repeated over great lengths of time, but that was a special exception. Ravenous, the unique skill possessed by the orc lord that had attacked us, was one of those. It's a race-intrinsic skill passed to awakened members of the race, something that existed only within certain bloodlines. Ravenous was also attached to its owner's physical body, so other races likely could not handle it. I had combined it with Predator immediately upon ingesting it, so I never had to worry about any of those issues.

Shizu's unique skill Deviant was believed to be derived from her soul. She'd entrusted it to me, and that's why I became able to use it, but otherwise I wasn't sure I would've been able to get it at all. I had the impression by now that soul-derived skills were the stronger kind.

By the way, the ultimate enchantment Alternative that Ludora gave me was, as you'd expect, rooted in the body. You needed to be at least a Saint to have the energy required to work it, so unless you created that ability yourself, it'd be pretty inefficient to use. Maybe that's what gave you a chance to defend against even powerful unique skills.

Jiwu and Bernie had ultimate skills, but Diablo had defeated them anyway, which was normally unheard of. Unique skills didn't work on ultimate skills; only other ultimate skills did. There were exceptions—Chloe's Unlimited Imprisonment and Absolute Severance, along with Masayuki's Chosen One—but trying to beat an ultimate skill-wielder with just a unique was insanely reckless. Even uniques could vary widely in power, but when stacked up against an ultimate, the difference was like heaven and earth.

Someone who gained an ultimate had gained a new insight into the world. It therefore existed on a higher plane than magic based on the world's rules. Resisting it would require something like Disintegration, the most powerful of all holy magic, or the kinds of ultimates the Primal Demons threw around.

That's why I thought Diablo might've beaten them with an ultimate of his own, but something told me that was wrong. I mean, he probably could've just steamrollered straight through all that and won anyway. It proves there are no absolute locks in the world, I suppose...but regardless, under the right conditions, it was possible for someone without an ultimate skill to defeat an ultimate user. Someone with completely mastered Arts could do it—maybe

holy-level sword moves were stronger than your average skill in the end. Still, if you wanted to take on ultimate force, the best way was definitely to have an ultimate force of your own.

To sum up:

- Skills may be etched into your soul or stored in your body. Unique skills, based on my experience, could be awarded when you have a strong desire or craving for one. This process is more about compatibility than talent; no matter how much you want one, you won't earn it if your EP count isn't high enough. Wishing really hard wouldn't work alone; only when overcoming challenges and obstacles in your way could you earn one. Skills are stronger when you earn them for yourself, rather than being awarded them by someone else. Skills that manifest themselves within one's soul also outclass ones that take residence in the body.
- No two skills are identical. Even skills with the same name are likely to be different in terms of capability or rules of operation. They evolve based on the user's wishes, so they may change in many unpredictable ways depending on that.
- The difference between unique and ultimate skills isn't necessarily insurmountable. The strength of a skill is easily swayed by the owner's mind; it likely took a stronger will to extract better effects from them. Skills are, at the core, the ability to affect the laws of the world simply by wishing it were so. Activating such power, the kind that impacts the very root of the world, is impossible without a steel will.

It's clear how important the power of one's will is. That, and the ability to size up a skill and work out how to use it correctly.

I'd had Raphael with me, always ready to explain how to use a skill the best way. Other people may use their skill incorrectly and fail to get the most from it, even if the skill was born from their own wishes.

*Hee-hee-hee! Among more recent examples, Deeno certainly made some amusing mistakes with his.*

*Oh?*

I asked for more details, and Ciel was excited to offer some.

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Deeno's skill evolved itself mid-battle, as I stated earlier. Sloth, the sin-based skill that's among the strongest of uniques, had turned into the ultimate skill Belphegor, Lord of Sloth. This would normally be a truly fearsome force to reckon with, but Zegion still thoroughly thrashed him. Zegion's overwhelming strength was one reason, I'm sure, but there was another, more fundamental issue at hand: Deeno wasn't using Belphegor correctly. (He was using it for disguise purposes, though, so maybe he didn't try to fully examine it at all.)

Belphegor—evolved from Sloth, itself the result of Deeno's lazy personality—had the trait of growing weaker the more its owner moved around. It was thus meant more for supporting the user's friends and underlings. It was a skill that could've granted the power Deeno stored inside himself to his companions, and that would've been the most useful way to use Belphegor.

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This all happened while we were gone, but video from the entire battle was stored in the labyrinth archives. Analyzing it was part of Ciel's hobby, and now it was kind enough to report the results to me.

Guy definitely wouldn't have made that mistake. He'd grasp the essence of the skill and use it correctly each time. But someone as lazy as Deeno would judge the book by its cover and never notice what was really lurking inside.

If anything, the biggest mistake our enemy made this time was making Deeno do actual work. If they had let him goof off all day like usual and made his friends Pico and Garasha do all the work instead, Geld and Kumara might've gotten into real trouble.

Maybe we were lucky that way. My giving Deeno work and helping him see

that labor can be satisfying might've been the break that led to our victory in a way. But if he got a rep for screwing up more often as he worked, it'd be awful for his future, so if we ever bury the hatchet, I better explain all of this to him.

So gaining a correct grasp of your skills can be far from straightforward. Sometimes they triggered without your even wanting them to, like with Masayuki. Skills like that were frustratingly difficult to control and even harder to fully master. Understanding and mastering the essence of a skill was really the same thing as grasping your own mind. It was tricky, something you had to dedicate yourself to your whole life.

If you just saw a skill as a handy weapon, you'd never extract the true worth from it.

*You are exactly right. So face up to me more and treat me nicer, please.*

*Hmm...*

I felt like this was the wrong interpretation, but I decided not to dwell on it.

\*

Right when I was reaching this conclusion, I heard a knock on the door. Benimaru came in, guided by Shuna.

"You called for me? I understand this is a one-on-one interview, but what did you want to ask me?"

He spoke up the moment he sat down on the sofa facing me. Perhaps he thought this was some sort of classified conversation, but it wasn't.

"Oh, I apologize; this is just kind of a whim on my part."

"A whim?"

"Yeah. All of us gained a lot more power in this war, didn't we? We can measure people's existence points in the labyrinth, so I thought we'd take a moment to grasp exactly how much war power all of us have."

"I see. Yes, that *is* important!"

Benimaru's face brightened up. I guess he was prepared for a grilling about life as a newlywed.

"Well, no, I mean, I *am* curious about that stuff, too, but it'd be abusing my authority if I asked you point-blank, wouldn't it?"

"It would? Because Soei is all like, '*Ha-ha, if you evolved that well, you must be taking care of business at home; you're such a late bloomer that I thought I'd need to give you some help*' and so on—"

"Big brother?"

Shuna interrupted us with a smile and a tray with some slices of cake. The sheer impact sent shivers down my spine.

"Are you speaking untowardly to Sir Rimuru?"

"S-sorry..."

Even the tough-as-nails Benimaru couldn't beat Shuna.

"And look at you, too, Sir Rimuru. You need to rebuke my brother, not play along with his silly talk."

"Y-yeah, uh, okay. I'll be sure to."

Firing back would achieve nothing. Understanding that, I waited for Shuna to get in a better mood.

The cake was nice and all, but thanks to how anxious we were, I could barely taste it. The moment Shuna took the tray away and left, Benimaru and I both let out a mighty sigh.

"Phew... *That* was a mistake."

"Yeah. Next time we talk about things like that, let's make sure it's the right time and place."

"Roger that. I was *trying* to say that I didn't like that talk, either. Why'd it turn out like this...?"

True. Although the way he was phrasing it, it was sounding dangerously close to bragging. But we could go in-depth on that later. For now, as we planned, I wanted to examine Benimaru's current state.

Name: Benimaru (EP: 4,397,778 + 1.14 million for Guren)

Race: God-ogre; high-level chaos elemental Flamesoul Ogre

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Flare Lord

Magic: Flamesoul magic

Ability: Ultimate skill Amaterasu, Lord of Shimmering Flame

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Cancel Ailments, Resist Spiritual Attack, Resist Chaos Attack

...That's how things turned out.

*Damn, he's strong!* The ultimate skill Amaterasu was obtained in exchange for giving up the unique skill Born Leader. It included the abilities Haste Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Regulate Thought, Dominate Heat, Dominate Space, Multilayer Barrier, and more. Some of Velgrynd's abilities were reflected in this list, Ciel told me, but Benimaru was also very close to getting an ultimate skill by his own power. Ciel just gave him a *little* nudge in that direction, it claimed.

Still, if Benimaru's EP count was more than four million, and *that* got bumped up another million when he had Guren out, wouldn't that make him stronger than Luminus by now...?

I should note here that you (probably) couldn't fake your EP. Or, to put it more accurately, the existence points of someone in the labyrinth could be measured to a high level of accuracy. If you wanted to try faking it, you'd need to do something like carry a concealed God-class weapon on you or keep a Separate Body elsewhere like Velgrynd. A mere Replication would produce much smaller EP counts, so it'd be spotted as a fake pretty quickly. Outside the labyrinth, there were lots of ways you could fake EP, but trying to bring that game into the Dungeon was like trying to sneak up on someone in a swimming pool by keeping your head underwater. Ramiris's appraisal skills would easily spot it.

She was good at detail-oriented work like that, despite all her many other shortcomings. Unfortunately, she didn't really understand what she could and couldn't do. We could only perform these exact measurements because someone had mentioned in idle conversation, "*Boy, it'd be nice if we could get*

*more accurate with people's EP counts.*" I think it was Shinji, but anyway, Ramiris replied, "Oh, we can!" The scene was pretty awkward after that, I was told. I'm sure everyone was like, *Why didn't she tell us sooner?* Then we would've been able to measure Luminus, and Guy and Velzard, too.

Hell, if we'd gotten stats for Deeno instead of skipping them because he was a trusted guest, we would've realized just how much stronger he was than he looked. Of course, even if we knew, it wouldn't mean much unless we were sure he'd betray us. We should've been more on alert overall, but I don't think we could've avoided how this turned out.

Anyway, although they were just reference figures, EP was a useful yardstick for measuring someone's strength.

I was now certain that Benimaru, at least, could hold his own against Deeno or the Three Mystic Leaders. He was near the top of the Million Class, and I couldn't be gladder to have him at my side. But there was one thing bothering me.

"Hey, so don't monsters get weaker when they conceive children?"

"That's right. Your magicule count goes down, generally."

"So why did *you* get stronger?"

"Ha-ha-ha! That *is* strange, isn't it?"

Huh. What a breezy smile on him. He might've been trying to laugh it off, but I wasn't about to let him.

"No, man, what's going on with you?!"

"I don't know, either! Soei's been hounding me about it, too, asking why all the time. It's a real pain."

So I wasn't the only one interested. If we could find an answer to this question, it'd be great news for monsters. I mean, a lot of hobgoblins get married and none of *them* complain about getting weaker...but the impact's bigger the more high-level you are, so I wanted to search for a solution eventually.

"Well, if you see something, let me know, okay?"

"All right. I'll go call Soei in, then."

With that last doubt, I wrapped up the interview.

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Soei came in right after Benimaru left. The moment he sat in front of me, I voiced my complaint to him.

"Okay, first off, can you not pick on Benimaru so much, please?"

"Heh... Well, he's always been such a late bloomer in so many ways. You have to light a fire under him or he'll just sit on his hands forever, I thought."

Hmmmm, he might have a point. Benimaru had said something about having to conceive a successor before he could evolve, so I could understand Soei's concern.

"All right. Let's leave it at that. Now, about your evolution..."

Soei had been affected by Benimaru's own evolution.

Name: Soei (EP: 1,281,162)

Race: God-ogre; mid-level chaos elemental Darksoul Ogre

Protection: Flare Lord's shadow

Title: Dark Shadow

Magic: Darksoul magic

Ability: Ultimate skill Tsukuyomi, Lord of Moonshade

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack

Mmmm. Pretty strong. And pretty resistant, too. Defeating Soei would require some sort of ultimate-level attack, maybe chaotic-or sword-based in nature.

Ciel had awarded him the ultimate skill Tsukuyomi, and it came with quite a list of abilities: Haste Thought, Universal Detect, Eye of the Moon, Insta-Kill, Ultraspeed Action, Spiritual Control, Parallel Existence, Control Space, Multilayer Barrier, and so on.

"Whoa! You can use Parallel Existence now?"

I blurted out the question, much to my surprise.

"Yes," Soei casually replied. "I cannot control multiple selves simultaneously like Lady Velgrynd, but even if it's just one existence, I'm certain that it's still a useful skill."

Yeah, I'd be pretty certain, too. Now Soei was another step closer to de facto immortality...but maybe Eye of the Moon was even more worth diving into. It let him control shadows in any way he wanted, allowing him to do many things without being spotted by a target. It was notable for its broad effective range—it could cover an entire town, even. Nothing was better for intelligence gathering, not to mention assassination missions.

*Soei's skill is quite an achievement. I packed it full of things he wanted in order to re-create the ninja in my master's memories.*

I thought it was a pretty big heap of abilities. That was the reason, huh?

*One impressive aspect of Eye of the Moon is that Soei's Replication can use it as well. He could send Replications across the land, share information among them with Eye of the Moon, then use Thought Communication to spread this intelligence worldwide!*

I could tell Ciel was proud of it. The more I heard about this skill, the more amazing it sounded.

Basically, it was an upgraded version of Argos, my surveillance magic. He could monitor the situation in locations worldwide, then capture it in video (with sound, even). Now I could rely on Soei for just about anything, and he definitely had a job leading our intelligence for as long as he wanted it.

"Okay! I'm going to give you a new title while I'm at it—you will now be known as the Darkness Seer. I hope you'll continue to lead Team Kurayami and serve our nation!"

"Yes, my lord! I'll do everything I can for you, Sir Rimuru!"

*No, do it for my nation, not me. But whatever.*

"Great. I appreciate it."

I offered Soei my heartfelt thanks.

We spent the next hour or two discussing an assortment of things—his grievances, how Soka and the gang were doing, that kind of thing. He told me that his team of five, Soka included, had grown to attain an average EP of just under 200,000. Soka herself was at 261,898—quite high. Once upon a time, that'd make you the adjutant to a demon lord; even now, you could fight off some pretty high-level foes.

She must have grown her force a lot in this war. “There is no better training than war,” Soei told me, a line I thought I’d heard somewhere before. But I wanted to remind him not to assume someone could do something just because he could. Everyone is different, with their own talents and things they’re not so good at. I knew all about Soei’s talents, but I didn’t want him putting a similar workload on his troops. Do that, and we risked losing some real talented personnel.

“But isn’t it natural for us all to make every effort possible for you, Sir Rimuru?”

*...Well, no, it’s not.*

“I mean, if you stick to that way of thinking, you’re gonna lose followers eventually, you know? You need to value your troops more than that. Consider ways they can find their work more fun and stick to it for longer. That’s the job of a boss, after all.”

I always think people will follow you if you give them real motivation to. This is work, of course, so just having it be fun won’t be enough—but I think offering some sense of achievement is important. If you’re constantly struggling under an impossible workload, you’ll never get the joy of achievement. And when someone achieves something, giving them even more work after that is a definite no-no. I know that’d piss *me* off. *You do it*, I’d say...but with Soei, he’d actually do it all, which would lead to self-loathing and a lot of mental stress. That was my concern.

“You need to treat your tools well, in other words?”

“Stop calling your coworkers ‘tools.’ Look, it’s great to take pride in your work, but it’s nothing that’s forced on you, okay? As their boss, you gotta recognize

people for their achievements. They'll be happier that way!"

"...I see. Indeed, receiving praise from you provides me the ultimate in joy, Sir Rimuru."

*Hmm. He's pretty serious-minded, too. Or maybe just tiresome.*

"Anyway, why don't you take this opportunity to hold a little get-together with your troops?"

"Understood. As the boss, it's my job to grasp my staff's mental state. I will endeavor to provide more care for them."

"Don't go overboard."

Well, I'd expressed my concern to him, at least.

A few days later, Soka and the gang sent me a letter of thanks. It was literally stained with tears of joy, so I patted myself on the back for that. Job well done!

\*

My next interview was with Gabil, who arrived after dinner.

"Gwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I, Gabil, have come at the bidding of my master, Sir Rimuru!"

Today (or tonight), as always, Gabil was in high spirits. I invited him to sit, reminding him to keep it down in the evening like this. Once Shuna provided some tea, I got straight to business.

"You certainly performed well this time. Everyone got back alive because of your hard work. Great job holding out until the end! I wanted to personally thank you for that!"

I was grateful to Gabil on a personal level, not as leader of Tempest. If he had given up at any point, we definitely would've lost some people.

"S-Sir Rimuru! Even those words are enough to move me to great heights!!"

Gabil sobbed. I waited for him to calm down, not wanting to ruin his reverie.

"The fact that we survived this war, much less emerged victorious, is all because of you, Sir Rimuru. That voice—I was sure of it when I heard Lord Gadora's whispering, but that was your voice, wasn't it?"

Oh, did he pick up on Ciel's voice?

"Mm? Uh, kind of."

It'd be a long story to explain to him, but really, Ciel was my joker card. I didn't want to use it for no reason, so I played along with Gabil's confusion.

"Aha! I knew it! And if that wasn't around to give me the strength to soldier on, I know the battle would've been impossible to win. I am constantly told by my peers not to get carried away, so I absolutely refuse to lay exclusive claim to this victory!"

Now Gabil was composed. It showed me he meant what he said.

"You've sure grown."

"Yes, my lord! Hearing those words from you, Sir Rimuru, I'm just so *thankful*, so *inspired*..."

He broke down in tears again, just like before. His handkerchief wasn't going to cut it, so I handed him a towel.

But his stats really *did* impress me.

Name: Gabil (EP: 1,263,824)

Race: Dragonewt; mid-level chaos elemental Waterspirit Dragon

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Dracolord

Ability: Ultimate gift Moodmaker

Intrinsic skills: Magic Sense, Keen Sense, Dragonskin, Flame Breath, Thunder Breath

Tolerances: Cancel Pain, Resist Ailments, Resist Natural Elements, Resist Melee Attack, Resist Spiritual Attack, Resist Chaos Attack

While I wasn't paying attention, he had grown about as strong as Soei.

Gabil's ultimate gift Moodmaker was another masterpiece from Ciel. He hadn't earned it by himself, but I wouldn't hate on it for that. He got it only

because it was such a perfect match for him. It included five main abilities—Hasten Thought, Alter Destiny, Control Unforeseen, Control Space, and Multilayer Barrier—but if he could learn how to fully control the aura that leaked out of him, he'd also gain Lord's Ambition in time.

Alter Destiny was the real killer among them; it could be invoked only once per day, but it could completely turn the tables in battle, even against foes who outclassed him. What would've happened if someone besides Gabil got this? If someone like Diablo had Alter Destiny, he could've been the strongest dude on the planet.

Gabil really *was* an amazing person that way. What impresses me the most, however, is his performance in battle. He bragged about this to me for a bit after he finally wiped away all his tears.

"Yes, the enemy's spear was coming at me with screaming force. But I just grinned a little and used my lance to deflect it!"

That's the thing. Gabil wielded the Vortex Spear, a Unique-class magical weapon. It was once the secret treasure of the lizardman race, he told me, and while it was strictly Unique in quality, it had deflected away the God-class Azure Dragon Spear, which I thought must have been a joke.

"It's not just difference in ability that decides the fate of a battle, eh? Gwah-ha-ha-ha!"

He was laughing about it, but I thought that decided a *lot* of it, no? If Gabil deflected a Legend-class weapon, I'd concede that *maybe*, one in a thousand times or something, that would be possible. But God-class? Impossible.

The only real explanation I could think of was:

*Gabil likely has full unconscious control of his skill, effectively upgrading the Vortex Spear. Being protected by an Ultimate-level ability is believed to be why the spear survived without being shattered.*

I suppose so, yeah. Another reason Gabil really impressed me sometimes. He was dedicated to hard work, too, something that his usual behavior didn't make very clear. Between research and battle, he was capable of just about everything. I bet we could expect a lot from him in the future.

"Hey, speaking of that, do you mind if I keep your Vortex Spear for a bit? I wanted to ask Kurobe to give it a new birth, so to speak."

"What?!"

"Right, he'd craft it again and transfer the old weapon's experience into the new one. I'm planning to provide some Crimson Steel for the materials, so I bet he could evolve it into a God-class weapon, y'know?"

Crimson Steel was still a rare commodity, but I wasn't gonna cheap out with Gabil. I really did want to upgrade his weapon, too—as a reward and to prepare for the grueling battles of an age to come. If he was reluctant to let go of a weapon passed down by his family, I'd do something else for him instead.

"Yes! Yes, please, I beg you to do that for me!!"

He was bawling yet again as he handed the spear over to me.

With this God-class weapon in hand, I was sure Gabil would grow even stronger in time. If it recognized and accepted Gabil as its master, that would boost his existence points as well. He could even become a half-spiritual life-form, which would do a lot for his resistances. Also, the Heaven Fliers that had served under Gabil in the previous battle boasted an average EP of over 120,000, with the best of them surpassing 200,000. I sincerely hoped that they continued giving Gabil their support.

So our interview came to a close, although Gabil practically cried the entire way through it.

\*

Late that night, I was in a private room within a certain exclusive, members-only club. Normally, a beautiful elf would share a seat with me, but I turned them all down this time. Tonight, it was just Geld and me, sitting face-to-face.

"How are you feeling?"

"Just fine. I've grown used to this power, so I shouldn't be breaking any more glasses."

Geld smiled and nimbly emptied his drink. A normal-size glass looked like a child's paper cup in his hands.

"Now, I wanted to see you so we could drink the night away—and also to formally recognize you for your services."

"I'm honored, Sir Rimuru. Simply hearing those words from you couldn't make me happier."

He usually acted so cool and unaffected, but I could tell he meant those words from the heart. I nodded back and shared a toast with him. We then spent a little bit talking about Geld's work and life issues before tackling serious business.

"So I wanted to talk about something that I'm afraid might offend you a little—is that okay?" I asked him.

"Go right ahead. I would consider nothing you do offensive."

No, like, I can be pretty insensitive to people sometimes, so I wanted him to cut me off if he didn't like it. I'm the sort who gets pretty cutting with his joking around without meaning anything by it, so if I went too far, I hoped he'd stop me.

I'd always had the gift of gab like that. This one time in grade school, I went to this girl and— Actually, never mind. It's beyond embarrassing, and we've both long since moved on. I'm aware that I'm lacking in tact even now, but I'm trying to improve on that, avoiding any witty rejoinders that bring people down. Whether I'm succeeding or not is another thing, but if Geld's all for it, let's press on.

"All right. I'll say it, then, but if it doesn't sound like something you like, don't be afraid to say no, okay?"

With that preface, I made the proposal. It was, of course, an offer to accept a round of Ciel's Ability Adjust—but I was hiding Ciel from everyone, so I framed it with Geld more like, "Mind if I futz around with your skills a bit?"

But Geld immediately told me to go ahead. "Perhaps," he said, "my weakness has caused some concern? If this will strengthen me, there is no need to ask permission. I look forward to it."

He stressed his point by emptying his drink. He didn't seem too resigned about this; rather, he was showing his resolve in his own way, like it was natural

to accept this whether or not he liked it. I gave him an approving nod as I refilled his glass.

Name: Geld (EP: 2,378,749)

Race: Boar-god; high-level chaos elemental Earthsoul Boar

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Barrier Lord

Magic: Recovery magic

Ability: Ultimate gift Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony

Tolerances: Cancel Pain, Cancel Ailments, Resist Natural Elements, Resist Melee Attack, Resist Spiritual Attack, Resist Chaos Attack

The moment Geld accepted my offer, Ciel swooped into action, going crazy without waiting another moment.

Geld had obtained the ultimate skill Belzebuth, which included a wide variety of abilities—Hasten Thought, Magic Sense, Lord's Ambition, Ultraspeed Regeneration, Predation, Stomach, Isolate, Demand, Provide, Rot, Iron Wall, Grant Protection, Standin, Control Space, Multilayer Barrier, Keen Smell, and Armorize Body. It was a slightly inferior version of my Belzebuth with a lot of other stuff thrown in.

Using Grant Protection on his troops would provide a full layer of defense for them, and Geld himself could use Iron Wall and Standin to take damage in place of his companions. Rot was both offense and defense; it wasn't just a straight-up wall but could put up a much-appreciated attack as well. Perfect for someone as defense-oriented as Geld, and I was sure he'd master it shortly.

What's worth noting here is that Geld himself is an amazing fighter; it's definitely not just his skills at work. His armor was now God-class, practically a part of his physical body; it worked the same as the clothing on demons, summonable whenever he willed it. His Meat Cleaver was similar as well; he could create a new one whenever it broke, and the next time we had Kurobe work on it, it'd stay in that condition whenever summoned. It honestly felt like

cheating a little.

Either way, Geld's EP went up with this gear on, but his core stats were just fine as well. With Belzebuth now in the picture, his strength could easily overwhelm Soei or Gabil. He should be able to hold his own against those Three Mystic Leaders, even, or stall for time at least. Defeating Geld when he was 100 percent devoted to defense would be tough without one serious attack.

"Now I can rely on you more than ever, huh?"

"I am glad to hear that. I swear to you I'll exert myself as best I can to protect everyone!"

We smiled at each other. He'd be an integral part of my scheme for a while to come.

\*

I was at my private residence, in my usual chambers, thinking over the interviews I had planned for tomorrow.

I didn't begin this day's round until evening, so I only got to five people. We were all busy at the moment, so I couldn't devote whole days to this. We had nine out of the Twelve Lordly Guardians to go, not to mention a few other people I hoped to talk to. At the very least, Dr. Ciel wanted an audience with Apito; I guess it was eager to tinker with her skills, too. I wasn't sure if being so devoted to its own desires was such a good thing, but I couldn't deny that it'd probably help us all out.

There was no reason to say no, so I'd be pretty occupied tomorrow. Ciel wanted to do the same with Shuna, so we arranged for that. I told Diablo and Shion that I'd see them later, so hopefully I could be efficient with things the next day.

Masayuki and his friends were a concern of mine, but it sounded like they were kind of caught up in lengthy meetings as well. I received a terse report from them, and honestly, I wasn't sure if I should intervene. Until Masayuki and the Empire officials talked things over, at least, I would merely observe instead of butting in.

Of course, I was also having trouble relaxing because Velgrynd was still

around. Floor 70 was a little hard for most people to set foot in these days. Veldora had quickly fled into his own chambers, too, which made me nervous. She and I hadn't been separate for that long, yet I couldn't help but wonder what kind of experience she was getting down there...but I'd have to wait for her to reach out.

In the meantime, I had to do what I was capable of.

Suddenly, I felt someone's presence. Ranga was watching me, his head fully popped out from my shadow.

"Whoa! You scared me! Great to see you woke up, Ranga!"

I was happy enough that I switched to human form and gave him some scratches on his head and ears. He responded with a happy, yet saddened sort of look, ears kept down.

"What's up? Not feeling well?"

I worried that the evolution had gone awry somehow. But it wasn't that.

"My master, I fear I have overslept and missed the entire war..."

Ah. He was just moping, then.

"Oh, is *that* it? It's no big deal!"

"You say that, master, but thanks to me, Gobta and the others lost their chance to contribute as well, did they not?"

He was right, but what do you want? If he was safely through his evolution, he could kick ass for us later on and it'd all be good.

"Gobta and his team were helping serve tables and entertain people at the parties. Nobody voiced a word of complaint about you, Ranga. So don't worry about it!"

"It is deeply touching to hear that from you, my master."

With a whine, Ranga extracted himself fully from my shadow and rubbed up against me. I gave him some more scratches; it was my first chance to experience all his fluff in a while, and I was happy for it.

But back to business. Since he's here, let's check him out.

Name: Ranga (EP: 4,340,084)

Race: God-wolf; high-level chaos elemental Windsoul Wolf

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Star Lord

Magic: Windsoul magic

Ability: Ultimate skill Hastur, Lord of Starwind

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Cancel Ailments, Resist Spiritual Attack, Resist Chaos Attack

Oh, Ranga's race went all divine, too, huh? And, like, he looked a lot stronger than, say, a local god worshipped by some tiny backwater. This wasn't a problem, was it? I suppose Soei would be treated as a kind of supporting god to Benimaru, but I guess once your EP passes two million, you take on divine properties. I couldn't be sure of it, but that's what it felt like.



\*

*We will need to collect more sample data, but it seems like a valid assumption.*

Right. You become a Saint upon reaching one million, so maybe two million was the magic number for demigod-hood? Taking on divinity didn't make you a de facto "god," really. You weren't omnipotent or anything, but you'd be seen as a symbol of strength, at least.

And, sheesh, Ranga was past *four* million. That was, like, equivalent to a swordless Benimaru. What a fearsome evolution he'd had.

"Wow, Ranga! Great job!"

"Ha-ha-ha! It is all thanks to you, my master!"

He chalked it up to constantly being in the presence of my aura. Staying in my shadow and absorbing all those magicules must have streamlined the evolution one heck of a lot.

And look at all the amazing abilities he got out of nowhere! The ultimate skill Hastur wound up being scored by Ranga in the end, not Veldora. And if I had to guess...

*Correct. I lent a little bit of a hand.*

I knew it.

It wasn't a "gift," so I understood that Ranga had earned it himself, but there was no way Ciel didn't offer a helping hand. The ability suited him fine, at least, so I had no complaints.

This skill included seven abilities: Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Dominate Weather, Dominate Sound & Wind, Dominate Space, and Multilayer Barrier. Being able to control weather itself said everything you needed to know about how amazing this was, I thought. Truly a skill befitting Ranga. Now my only worry was whether Gobta could make full use out of the guy.

\*

It was time to go back to work. I spent the night hanging out and playing with Ranga, but I was feeling just fine.

My first visitor was Kumara, and these were her first words after we said hello:

"I heard you were making adjustments to our skills? Sir Ranga was bragging about it to me earlier. If you have new abilities to provide me, I'd love to have them!"

She was in her little-girl form, looking as cute as possible while wheedling me. Ranga had earned his skill himself, but I guess he was aggrandizing my role in it. I really thought he should be more proud of himself than me, but for reasons I didn't quite understand, Ranga emphasized my involvement in it most of all. It was all Ciel, actually, but that was a secret, so I just gave Kumara a vague nod.

So now what?

*I'll allow it.*

I thought it'd say that. Ciel had no interest in holding back, I knew, and I hated to leave everything to it...but I knew we still had enemies in this world, and we needed to get as prepared as we could.

"All right. A lot of it will depend on you, but let's see what we have here."

Ciel couldn't make the impossible possible, after all. If there wasn't a skill compatible with her, I'd have nothing to provide. Once I made that clear with her and she agreed to it, I passed the baton over to Ciel.

Name: Kumara (EP: 1,899,944)

Race: Nine-tail; high-level chaos elemental Earthsoul Beast

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Chimera Lord

Magic: Earthsoul magic

Ability: Ultimate gift Bahamut, Lord of Fantastic Beasts

Intrinsic skills: Dominate Beast, Unite Beast

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Resist Natural Elements, Resist Spiritual Attack, Resist Chaos Attack

It took some time, but we were successful.

Kumara obtained the ultimate gift Bahamut, Lord of Fantastic Beasts. This includes six abilities: Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Dominate Gravity, Dominate Space, and Multilayer Barrier. That let her interact with the planets themselves, giving her control of gravity over a wide range.

And Kumara herself had changed races from Nine-Head to nine-tail. It sounded kind of like a downgrade, but it wasn't. She previously held sway over eight magical beasts, but now there was only one head controlling them—she held complete command over the menagerie. As before, eight out of her nine tails contained the will of a beast, so Kumara could also order them to act freely as well.

Once she did, they would separate from her. Each of them had an EP count of around 200,000, but Kumara still kept her count at more than a million afterward. This wasn't a miscalculation; it just kind of worked this way. They were more than doubling their EP once they separated from her, which was clearly a pretty beefy upgrade.

Kumara's new race didn't have divine elements to it, but her EP was close to two million with no extra gear, so I bet she could make the leap before too long. Her element was earth, like Geld, and she was a half-spiritual Earthsoul Beast, so gravity was a good match for her.

Looking solely at the stats, Kumara—when combined with all her beasts—was close to the upper echelon of the Twelve Lordly Guardians. Sadly, however, she continued to lack experience. Soei would still beat her, but maybe she stood a chance against Adalmann or Gabil? She clearly had some disturbing potential, though, making her one of our best prospects. She was still young, after all. *Let's see how she grows.*



My next visitors were Apito and Zegion, arriving as a pair. Apito came into my chamber first, leaving Zegion waiting in the hallway. I didn't mind having both of them in at once, but they were all about sticking to the "one-on-one interview" script, so I respected Zegion's wishes.

The moment we were seated, Apito gave me a small gift-wrapped box. "I have some freshly harvested honey for you, Sir Rimuru."

“Oh, how kind! Thanks!”

I smiled warmly. *Her* honey was a panacea, and even better, it tasted astonishingly good. The way I had immediately brought Milim under my thumb with just one taste was now a famous story among my companions. Real popular stuff. I was laughing heartily over the memory as I put the box in my pocket. I can’t be bought with a bribe, mind you, but I *did* want to pay Apito back for the favor.

Speaking of Apito, here was her current status:

Name: Apito (EP: 775,537)

Race: Star wasp; mid-level chaos elemental Windsoul Wasp

Protection: Zegion’s protection

Title: Insect Queen

Ability: Unique skill Motherly Queen

Tolerances: Cancel Pain, Resist Melee Attack, Resist Natural Elements, Resist Ailments, Resist Spiritual Attack

If you asked a typical adventurer to take down a bug like this, they’d think you were stark raving mad.

Apito’s on-the-field strength was well beyond that of the old-school demon lords. She couldn’t quite reach the Special S ranking we defined here in Tempest, but she seemed stronger than the pseudo-awakened Clayman I saw. What’s more, Apito claimed that Motherly Queen allowed her to give birth to a total of nine insectors. They were still in pupae form at the moment, but it looked like they’d be pretty powerful magic-born once they matured.

“Well, we should hold a celebration for them, then!”

“I would be happy to attend! And I hope you will bestow names upon them as well.”

*Names, huh? Hmm.*

“Mm, yes...”

I tried to change the subject, not wanting to commit myself to anything yet. A

name could be a dangerous thing for me to give...

*That will not be a problem. I have gained the ability to fully control the procedure with no danger to you.*

You “gained” it...? Well, I guess that was how it worked with Charys, so whatever. I was hoping to avoid having to name nine at once, but if that’s the way it is...

“Okay, how about...Zero-One, Reiji, Remi, Reyon, Rego, Remu, Rena, Reppa, and Rekku?”

Please don’t accuse me of laziness here. I knew this was little more than starting with “re,” then going down the Japanese names for numbers, but she’d have to be satisfied with that. I didn’t even know what gender they’d be yet. Once they were born, I’d pass out the names as appropriate, I suppose.

“Goodness! My children can feel the affection you have for them already. They’re all delighted!”

“Um, they are?”

“Yes, of course. My children and I are linked in our minds by powerful bonds.”

This was Dominate Insect in action, the skill that let Apito give orders to the children she produced, and the speed of these transmissions was apparently instantaneous. Unlike the more general-purpose Thought Communication, the links also made it clear who was giving the orders and who was taking them.

That sounded neat to me...but Ciel sure had been griping at me a lot the past few moments. What was up with that?

*How upsetting. All I’m asking for is permission to run Ability Adjust.*

You guessed it—Ciel was itching to dive into Apito’s skill set, too. I was sure it could just do it anyway without my or Apito’s permission, though. If I was connected to someone via a soul corridor, I kept the right to as leader, after all. But this wasn’t some kind of urgent crisis. We were at peace, and Dr. Ciel was kind enough not to act out of line without my okay. (Apito was also in Zegion’s family line, which made me more of a distant relation by comparison. I figured getting her position would make things easier, given our weaker link.)

So, knowing full well what the answer would be, I posed the question.

“By the way, Apito, if you’re interested, I’d like to readjust the future direction of your skills, but what do you think?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I was told that—er, I *mean*, I can see that your skill set has the potential to be further evolved. You could become a commander type, leading the insects as you do now and directing your clan in battle...or you could become a champion type, leading them yourself into the fray. The difference between the two is simply that you can continue spawning new follower insects as a commander, but not as a champion. On the other hand, being a champion would boost your physical abilities, and your skills would be geared more toward battle as well.”

I parroted out everything Dr. Ciel had told me. That’s when I realized why Ciel didn’t just do it—there were two distinct possibilities to choose from, and Apito had the choice. If it wasn’t her call, her skills would never unlock their full potential.

“That,” I added, “and you have the option to stay as you are, of course.”

“If I chose champion-type,” Apito immediately responded, “that means I would never bear children again?”

*Does it?*

*The Birth Insect ability of Motherly Queen would be lost, but her non-skill-based reproductive ability would be retained. She could still give birth to successors.*

“No, I think you’d be able to have kids like normal. You’ll just have to do it the traditional, no-skill way.”

“I see... In that case, I have nothing to worry about. My children have obtained the Birth Kinfolk skill, so as queen of my army, I can have them create as many troops as I desire.”

Ah, so Apito’s already given part of her skills to her kin? In that case...

“Therefore, I think I would like to stand on the front lines myself!”

She made exactly the declaration I'd thought she would. And Ciel, eagerly awaiting this moment, sprang into action.

*Apito's Ability Adjust is successful. Her unique skill Motherly Queen is being evolved into the ultimate skill Proserpine.*

It was over in a moment. The whole thing didn't take a second—I guess Ciel had everything analyzed in advance.

"Okay, it's fine. Now your job's to check over everything and make sure you can use it to the hilt."

The ultimate skill Proserpine featured abilities like Hasten Thought, Magic Sense, Keen Sense, Dominate Insect, Army Command, Ultraspeed Action, Lethal Attack, Control Space, and Multilayer Barrier. These were just boosted versions of powers she already had, so I was sure Apito was comfortable with them. I was sure she'd train all of them without my ordering her to, but I gave her that piece of advice anyway.

"I am filled with elation and gratitude. With this sheer joy in my heart, I once again declare my exclusive loyalty to you, Sir Rimuru."

Apito kneeled on the floor. I gave her the most fatherly nod I could, and our interview came to a close.

\*

So she left, and Zegion came in. He humbly picked a wooden chair to sit on, rather than my guest sofa. The strongest dude in the whole labyrinth, but he was so polite and thoughtful as well—I guess his exoskeleton would scratch up the leather, so that's why he'd made that move. How refined.

I have to say, though, Zegion did an incredible job for us. Powerful beyond measure, he could've formed a twin barrier with Diablo even before being evolved. He was already a level above the rest of the Twelve Lordly Guardians, and this new evolution only added to that. In fact, looking at the labyrinth archives, he'd defeated Deeno without even revealing his full abilities. Scary kid. Honestly, I'm glad he's on our side.

"Zegion, you performed brilliantly for us. If you hadn't woken up in time, I'm not sure how it would've turned out."

"Oh, don't be silly. You no doubt calculated the exact time I would awaken, didn't you, Sir Rimuru?"

*Yeah, sure I did!*

"Not really, no. I did suspect Deeno of wrongdoing, yes, but I didn't think he'd take action just when we were the most lightly guarded."

"Heh-heh-heh... And that's why you had me wake up exactly when things would come to a head, then?"

No, man, I didn't think *any* of that would happen! Like, I didn't even know Velgrynd was there—like, I *did*, but I wasn't expecting her to enter the scene the way she did. If I knew *that*, I never would've thought about taking my inner circle to go talk with the emperor. That choice had us playing catch-up this entire war, and we emerged with the win only because luck was on our side. But no matter how I explained matters to him, Zegion thought everything was part of my so-called brilliant plan.

I quickly gave up on convincing him otherwise.

"Either way, thanks for being there. You helped a lot."

"No, no, I still have so far to go. I am sure, Sir Rimuru, you could have finished Deeno with a single trans-dimensional attack without my entering the scene at all. But you provided me with a stage to perform on nonetheless, and I answered the call for you."

*What are you talking about? "Trans-dimensional"? What? I can't do that, dude... I mean, what kind of monster am I in his mind anyway?*

"Uh, sure. Yeah...um, maybe I could have, yes."

"Ha! It would have been child's play for you, I am sure."

Zegion eagerly agreed with my half-hearted reply. I felt like he looked at me with much more than mere respect—to him, it was like getting a personal audience with his god. Not that I could really tell, given his compound eyes and all, but it was easy to imagine.

Gathering myself, I continued with Zegion's interview. He gave me his interpretation of the fight against Deeno, and while I thought Deeno had gotten

away scot-free from them, it turned out that wasn't the case. Zegion assumed he'd try to flee, and so he placed a curse on him—a scary curse, one that had life-and-death power over the guy. So *that's* what Zegion could do now? How did he evolve, exactly?

Name: Zegion (EP: 4,988,856)

Race: Micro-god; high-level chaos elemental Watersoul Insect

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Mist Lord

Magic: Watersoul magic

Ability: Ultimate skill Mephisto, Lord of Illusion

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

*Hwuh?!*

I kept myself from yelping out loud.

The stats Ciel read out for me were far beyond my imagination. Zegion was now divine in nature, and I could see why. His existence points were a hair away from five million, a shocking figure second only to Benimaru. His element was water, but Ciel informed me he could wield the “space” element as well. As a half-spiritual life-form, he had every resistance you could think of; I saw zero weak points, and he was high-level in all of them as well. A real powerhouse.

It seemed that Zegion could construct a placeholder body for himself by gathering and condensing the water particles in the air. The magisteel I gave him had evolved to adamantite, then Crimson Steel, and it was that fantastical metal that had let him pull off that trick. I'm sure he stuck to his exoskeleton by default because that's the form I crafted for him. Otherwise, he might've shown it off long ago and ascended to a completely spiritual life-form.

He obviously had a great fondness for his current body, and I couldn't be happier to see that. Plus, given how he was geared for close-quarters combat, he was more than strong enough as he stood now. After all, that combat style wouldn't work if he went fully spiritual and shed his physical body. In fact, his

current form was about as complete as it needed to be, wasn't it?

*Exactly! This Zegion is our greatest masterpiece, as crafted by myself and my master! I allowed Veldora to lead the project, but I guided him with my knowledge in key sections, so there is nothing to worry about.*

Um? I'm not sure I understood all of that. Not that Ciel cared, bragging away as it was.

Zegion held rule over water, which meant he boasted unparalleled strength wherever water was present. This included the water vapor in the atmosphere, which meant he held a battle advantage well near anywhere on the planet that contained air. Water composes a hefty percentage of most living creatures, too, and Zegion could freely manipulate that as well. I thought that made it clear how much of a bad dude he was now. The human body's around 65 percent water, in fact, and any human trying to take Zegion on was basically committing suicide.

But that was only the beginning of the danger he posed. Zegion's ultimate skill Mephisto included a wealth of high-level skills, such as Haste Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Dominate Water & Lightning, Dominate Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, All of Creation, Spiritual Domination, and Fantastical World.

Quite a few of those were fearsomely lethal, but nothing on that list had caused the curse placed on Deeno. That was the work of something called Dream End—the curse was an Art woven by Zegion himself, not any skill. That meant it'd even work against Yuuki's Anti-Skill. Fending it off required a powerful will, and I doubted anyone could out-will Zegion right now.

Anti-Skill, after all, was a technique driven by three separate abilities—Dominate Water & Lightning, Dominate Spirit, and Fantastical World. He'd use Fantastical World to create an environment favorable to him, a place where he was all but invincible. This was a world-type ability, Ciel told me, and those were exceedingly rare. Not even I had one, and I bet they're pretty neat things to have.

*Would you like me to set one up?*

...

I wasn't sure what the correct answer was, so I pretended not to hear it.

But back to Dream End. This move made it possible for the caster to immediately snuff out the life of the target whenever they did something the caster didn't want. It couldn't forcibly restrict the target's movements, however, so it wouldn't take effect until their behavior triggered it. In this case, Deeno was free to do whatever, as long as he didn't defy Zegion's will.

"So how do you trigger this curse?"

"Well, I don't have to do anything. The moment Deeno takes a certain predefined action, it will automatically go off."

Zegion's curse was the automatic type, requiring no supervision. If triggered, he'd be made aware of it, but otherwise he never even had to think about it. The key to it all lay in what Deeno did. What was the trigger? Basically, if he ever showed the intent to kill any of my companions, the curse would go off. The moment he committed to murdering any of them, it would destroy his very heart core, and not even a spiritual life-form could escape that trap.

Now, this wasn't foolproof. It wasn't like I remembered the name and face of every single citizen of Tempest. But if he tried some large-scale, indiscriminate attack on the city, that'd be treated as "murderous intent," and I think that worked well enough as a check on Deeno. I was amazed we could restrain someone with an ultimate skill like that.

"Wonderful work, Zegion. Anything that reduces the threat to our nation is more than welcome."

"I appreciate the compliment, my lord. I still have much to learn, but nothing warms my soul more than receiving such kind words from you."

Geez. So *serious*. Him, Charys, Geld, and Soei. Beretta too, I suppose. I guess I had a lot of all-business types in my crew, but Geld and Zegion really took the cake. Guys with so much talent like that, never resting on their laurels, constantly putting in hard effort...and that's why they became such a threat with every new breakthrough they made. I hoped they'd continue that pursuit for a long while to come.

So, to sum up, Mephisto was one firecracker of an ultimate skill.

Deeno had no way to undo the curse on himself, I was assured, but you could never say never in this world. Maybe he had some unknown ability that'd let him slip out of it like a loosely knotted rope. But even if he did, that wouldn't harm Zegion's rep at all—it'd just mean we were dealing with a shrewd enemy.

Because, honestly, Zegion was the best all-around package I could think of. He took advantage of the brief moment Deeno was dead to place that curse on him, and I thought that was where his *real* scary genius lay. Having fancy-pants skills isn't a threat—being able to fully leverage them is, and along those lines, I didn't think anyone was better geared for battle and more attuned to his skills than Zegion.

Maybe call it covering all the bases? Many people in this world boasted skills that boosted their already extensive abilities, but Zegion's skill set was more about covering for what he wasn't intrinsically good at. He could use all of them well, even working them into new, original moves. Amazing. What else could I say? The battle sense he had and the level of training it took. He could bust out Fantastical World, create an advantage, and expand his tactical edge rather than boost what he was already great at. Truly top-class among my companions.

I realized now that not even a so-called fighting race like the Primal Demons could beat Zegion. He was just so *fearsome*. No wonder Ciel called this its masterpiece. Even the strength he showed off up to now was no doubt just a tiny glimpse into everything he had. I suppose it's a little unfair of me, though, getting to check on all my team's stats and abilities, but still.

I had given Zegion the fairly generic name "Mist Lord," but now I could see a double meaning there. Besides "mist," there was also quite a bit "mysterious" about the depth of his abilities. Or maybe Zegion took "mist" literally and steered his skills in that water-oriented direction? No way. Dr. Ciel would've said so if he did. Right?

*...Of course!*

*Oh, great!*

That slight delay in the response worried me a lot.



Hiding the concerns in my mind that Ciel was going off-kilter on me, I waited for my next interviewee. Adalmann was the next person in my chamber.

"Sir Rimuru, I hope you are well. And let me tell you that I, Adalmann, am cherishing every moment of this private audience with you already!"

Adalmann was something beyond serious. I just nodded and motioned him toward my sofa. If I didn't make him wrap up his spiel fast, he'd be at it all day, so I sat him down as quickly as I could.

"So how are you feeling now that you're awake?"

"Excellent, sir! My spirit feels enriched, and I can feel holy force penetrating every pore of my body."

He really *did* have a glow to him, too. I feared what I was about to discover.

Name: Adalmann (EP: 877,333)

Race: Wight; mid-level chaos elemental Lightsoul Bones

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Gehenna Lord

Magic: Necromancy, holy magic

Ability: Ultimate gift Necronomicon

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

Thought so. Here he was, this servant of the dead, and he'd gone all in on the *light* element. If I had to name the one person on my team who looked the most like a demon lord, it'd have to be Adalmann. Seeing him boast the light element was almost too sweetly ironic. Still, given that he could use Holy-Evil Inversion to twist his elements any way he wanted, maybe it wasn't worth being surprised about at that point. It felt like the exact opposite from the element he *should* have, but no point fretting about it.

There was a lot of other stuff about him to occupy my attention anyway. He had the existence points of an awakened demon lord; his stats were so ridiculous that I was getting a headache just looking at them. But the biggest

issue was Necronomicon, his ultimate skill. Where did it even come from?

*I gave it to him.*

I didn't need to ask. I couldn't think of any other explanation, but yes, Ciel was fiddling around again.

"And the best thing of all is Necronomicon, this power you gave me," Adalmann happily noted. "It is a font of knowledge for me, the very root of my newfound strength."

Necronomicon included a bevy of abilities—Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Cast Cancel, Analyze and Assess, All of Creation, Mental Strike, Holy-Evil Inversion, and Dominate Dead. In addition to things he already had, he could now also invoke necromancy and holy magic with no casting time required. In addition, his rule and protection over the dead had been boosted, giving his armies a jolt of additional force.

Adalmann was gleefully explaining all of this to me now, and if he was happy about it, so was I. I didn't want to rain on his parade.

*By the way, Necronomicon is in the same family as Grimoire, the skill I gave to Gadora. I removed the items unsuited for Adalmann from Grimoire and added abilities he would find more useful.*

Ciel sounded like it was fishing for compliments. That was the first I'd heard about it giving Gadora any new abilities. Amazing, certainly, but I wasn't sure I welcomed this news.

Clearing my mind for a moment, though, I recalled that Adalmann and Gadora were both researcher types. They were close friends as well, I'd heard, and they'd often go diving into magic tomes together. They were magic-obsessed maniacs, really, but they weren't hurting anyone, so I let them do as they pleased. They might discover the meaning of life or something for all I knew, and devoting yourself to your passions is never a bad thing.

As Ciel put it, Necronomicon and Grimoire were natural complements to each other. They certainly seemed to suit those two well, and yeah, I guess this was the right move to make.

That was the end of Adalmann's interview, and now I was headed down to

see how Alberto and Venti were doing. They were so awed by the idea of meeting with me that they'd initially turned down the request—apparently they needed to prove themselves more in battle before they'd feel deserving of the chance. It was beyond dedicated of them; in fact, I couldn't understand the logic at all. Who did they think I was anyway?

Still, I had to check up on the people serving me. Alberto was Adalmann's dedicated servant, and so was Venti—or call her Adalmann's pet, if you like. If their master ever died, they'd probably take the ride with him—but as long as Adalmann was all right, they were immortal.

That, Ciel told me, was why it had granted both of them an ultimate skill.

*It took a lot of work.*

*I'm sure it did. But it's your hobby, right?*

No doubt this was just Ciel's gentle personality manifesting itself.

Trusting in that, I looked over the stat reports.

Name: Alberto (EP: 682,639 + 600,000 for his Spirit Sword)

Race: Wight; mid-level chaos elemental Flamesoul Man

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Gehenna Paladin

Ability: Ultimate gift Immortality

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

Name: Venti (EP: 984,142)

Race: Gehenna Dragon

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Dragon Lord of the Underworld

Ability: Ultimate gift Eternality

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

The effects of their evolutions certainly goosed their EP. They also canceled a lot of attacks now; their resistances were looking real sharp. It worked that way for Adalmann as well, so I guess dying once could earn you a bunch of those.

The ultimate gifts they had were largely identical, despite having different names. It included the three abilities Hasten Thought, Full Reincarnation, and Servant Immortality—there was room for more, but Ciel told me it was still considering the options. I still wasn't completely thrilled about giving Ciel carte blanche, but I was reasonably certain it wasn't the wrong move to make.

Alberto's and Venti's bodies would never perish, because their souls were in Adalmann's possession. I'd had a hunch they'd kick it if Adalmann did, and I was right—but given Adalmann's undead status, they all seemed pretty invincible to me. I couldn't help but wonder how unfair a team I had.

Alberto, by the way, still had a lot of room to grow. A weapon that broke a million EP was firmly in the God class, so if Alberto's own EP kept rising, that'd open him up to more capabilities. Given how handy he was with a blade, I didn't think we'd have to wait too long—and it was with great anticipation for the future that I saw Adalmann off.

\*

After lunch, I went back to the interviews. At long last, it was Shion's turn.

"Finally, Sir Rimuru, I am here! I am sorry it took this long!"

"Right," I said, nodding. I wasn't really waiting for her with bated breath, but I'd better not say that.

Name: Shion (EP: 4,229,140 + 1.08 million for her Goriki-maru Divine)

Race: Battle-god; high-level chaos elemental Battlesoul Ogre

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: War Lord

Magic: Divine Battlewill

Ability: Unique skill Master Chef

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel

## Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

She proudly went over her new powers. Ciel was providing me a running explanation as well, but the two of them rarely agreed with each other.

Shion's strength didn't rely on skills. Her weapon was God-class, so she didn't need an ultimate skill to hold her own against someone who did. Her body itself was a threat, and with Infinite Regeneration, that threat became a nightmare. You could try to drain her energy in a fight, but her EP was as out-of-the-park as Benimaru's; that meant a huge number of magicules, so attempting to exhaust her was a bad idea. Her resistances were perfect as well, making a frontal onslaught your only option—and if *that's* all her opponents could try, I really sympathized with them.

"You've gotten stronger, huh?"

"Hee-hee! I'm humbled to see you think so!"

"*Humbled*" wasn't the way I'd describe her abject joy. But it was the truth. Just one thing—considering all the ultimates my crew had now, I was kind of surprised Shion still had nothing but a unique skill.

*Did she turn you down or something, Ciel?*

*No. Shion is still packed with untold potential, so I am carefully observing her for the time being. The unique skill Master Chef is incomparably powerful as it stands now, so there is no special need to do anything else right away.*

*Hmm, yeah, no doubt about that...*

Lately, I thought I'd grown adept at reading Ciel's emotions. It was just a gut feeling, but it turned out accurate pretty often—and if I was reading Ciel correctly right now, I'd say it was hesitant about messing with Shion's skills.

*...That is correct.*

Wonders never cease around here.

I asked why, and Ciel reluctantly gave me the answer. Amazingly enough, if Shion's skill was boosted any further, she might obtain abilities capable of killing even me. Ciel, seeing that as something to avoid, opted to shut off any further skill evolution on her instead. If a skill freak like Ciel opted for that, well, I guess

this was no joke.

It was hard to picture Shion ever trying to hurt me, but giving her skills *that* scary gave me pause as well. I didn't want to be saddled with problems like that, so I supported Ciel's decision.

After her stat check, I enjoyed chatting with Shion a while longer, listening to all her bragging and politely throwing in a "yes?" or "oh, neat" now and then. Shion had put in a stellar effort during our war against the imperial forces, and I thought it was nice to sit down from time to time and talk about things like this.

Looking back, I realized I was either angry or exasperated with Shion a lot of the time. I knew full well that she was always working hard, and the fruits of all that effort were starting to show up, but she really *did* have a penchant for going way overboard, so I couldn't help but poke at her all the time. That's why an occasional calm, pleasant conversation like this was nice, I thought.

So there I was, playing the father figure to Shion, when:

"...Oh, right! I had forgotten to mention this in my report, but I ran into Masayuki at the dining hall just now. He was looking rather downtrodden—"

...?!

"—and given how troubled he seemed, I advised him to talk things over with you soon, Sir Rimuru!"

*Don't act all smug about that, Shion!* There she goes, acting out of line again... and if Masayuki was in trouble, I knew I didn't want to get too involved with it, either...

But this was exactly it! She was always butting in where she shouldn't, and I paid for it in the end. I *hated* being dragged into stuff like this. Like, Velgrynd showing up here after she vanished was enough of a surprise, but really, if you sat down and thought about it, she had no reason to be there, did she? She was just crossing dimensions in pursuit of Ludora—she had only one person waiting for her.

*And, ugh, Masayuki looks identical to Ludora, too...*

It didn't take a genius to connect the dots at this point. But even though I had,

I couldn't betray the trust Shion had in me.

"We'll have to work out a time, then."

I was just delaying the inevitable, but I said it anyway.

"Oh, all set there," Shion told me matter-of-factly. "I set up a meeting first thing tomorrow morning!"

*Well, I'm not all set in the slightest! You want to stage a full meeting before we've even prepared for it?*

Now this was getting blown way out of proportion. These sorts of problems always happened when Shion played intermediary. You could never let your guard down around her.

But who was even gonna join this meeting? I was in the midst of my man-to-man interviews, and *now* look at what had happened. I still had all the demons to meet with; if I didn't finish things up today, we'd have to postpone it for some other day that may never come. Would that anger them? Or drive them to violence? I just didn't know.

"All right. In that case, tell Rigurd and Benimaru to be fully prepared for the meeting!"

"Very well. I'll be on my way, then!"

Shion all but skipped out of my chambers. Bringing a head to my hand, I hurriedly called for Diablo and his cohorts.

\*

The last people on the interview list were Diablo, Testarossa, Carrera, Ultima, and their underlings. I wasn't sure I'd get to them all, so I wanted to speed things up—but this turned out to be dangerous.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I'm finally up, am I? You have no idea how long this wait has felt to me."

*Way to exaggerate.* I had booted him out of my office yesterday afternoon.

"Quit acting stupid, Diablo! We still haven't settled our score, so it oughtta be fine for me to see Sir Rimuru first!"

Carrera, looking pretty beaten up and ragged, was at Diablo's throat, with Ultima not far behind.

"She's right! I haven't thrown in the towel yet, either, y'know. Don't think you can weasel your way out of this!"

Ultima, too, was so hurt that I was amazed she could stand up. Wasn't their clothing part of their bodies, technically? If they were *this* ripped up and they didn't have the energy to restore them, it had to be a pretty serious injury, right? But they were still cheerfully bickering with one another. Demons really *are* built tough.

"Enough of this. Arguing in front of Sir Rimuru is simply rude."

Testarossa finally intervened, bringing some much-needed quiet to the room. She acted so elegantly, ignoring the three quarreling demons and even providing some tea for me. Her outfit was in perfect order as well, presenting a kind of dignity that was otherwise absent.

"Now, Sir Rimuru, we were told that you'd fire Diablo and name one of us as your second secretary...but sadly, we have not completed the selection process yet. What do you think we should do?"

I *really* don't think I said that. Maybe leaving the demons for last was an error on my part. I now had extra work coming up thanks to Shion, but even before that, I still needed to report to King Gazel. Looking back, I should've tackled my thorniest problems first, but it was far too late now. I was short on time, so let's exercise some of my soft power to get through this.

"Well, I hate to say this, but I've run out of time for a long conversation with you guys. I gotta call all your servants in, too—"

"No need for that, my lord."

"Yeah, I don't think you have to. It'd just go to waste on them."

"Right? If you want information about our underlings, I'll give you whatever you need!"

"Exactly. And no servant of *mine* is foolish enough to try butting into the precious time you've devoted to us, Sir Rimuru."



Diablo, Carrera, Ultima, and Testarossa replied to me with a smile. “Um, okay...,” was about the best response I could muster.

\*

Ciel, too, said there wasn’t any major need to summon every single demon. Diablo and the three demonesses, it noted, had already said to “*go ahead; do whatever you want with us.*” That still felt like I was ignoring all the other demons, but Ciel had a grasp of each of them already—which was news to me, but I convinced myself that of course it would; it had to manage all my people and stuff. So I moved on.

Anyway, the first person I interviewed was Diablo, it goes without saying. Kicking the three others out of the room, I had him sit down. He could barely stay put in his seat, so excited he was.

Name: Diablo (EP: 6,666,666)

Race: Demon-god; Primal Demon—Devil Lord

Protection: Rimuru’s protection

Title: Daemon Lord

Magic: Dark magic, elemental magic

Ability: Ultimate skill Azazel, Lord of Temptation

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

*C’mom,* was my first thought.

The fact his EP was all the same number was a dead giveaway that he was gaming the system. I didn’t say anything, though, since Ciel didn’t.

In the end, I didn’t think there was much doubt that Diablo was the most powerful person in my entire hierarchy, between that EP (fake or not) and his resistances. His Azazel skill contained Hasten Thought, Lord’s Ambition, Control Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, All of Creation, Dominate Punishment, Dominate Charm, and World of Temptation—mostly the same abilities I had. He carefully went over these with me, clearly looking for someone to brag about them with, and Dr. Ciel gave him high marks for his understanding of them.

Though, really, Diablo was stronger than me, wasn't he? Given how I couldn't *really* use my skills without Ciel's help. His magicule count was immense, his level high, and the quality of his skills beyond question. He was an exceptionally omnipotent demon in every way, and why he decided to serve under me was a total mystery. He had an unquenchable thirst for battle (not to mention a fixation with me that bordered on problematic), but I enjoyed being able to count on his seemingly infinite stores of strength.

With this evolution, I now wondered how he'd do in a practice battle against Zegion. I was sure it'd turn into a great fight. He and Benimaru, too; I felt like Benimaru was always going easy on anyone he fought in training, in part because if he got *real* serious, it'd raze acres and acres of land and kill off thousands. But that was no issue in the labyrinth. I suppose Benimaru didn't enjoy revealing his skills much, either, but still. Water would win over fire element-wise, so I'd think Zegion would have an edge over Benimaru...but there was no telling unless they actually duked it out.

Then again, there was no need to rank my troops like this. I could just call Benimaru, Diablo, and Zegion my "Top Three," and that should keep any strife to a minimum.

That was all I needed from Diablo. As for his servants, he told me that Gadora had joined Venom as his apprentice.

"Apprentice?"

"Yes. Adding him to my team eliminates any worry that he'd betray us, you see."

I thought we were safe from that by now, probably, but still, it was a relief to hear. Gadora was already kept in place by his role as labyrinth guardian, so Diablo wasn't free to make him his twenty-four-hour gofer, but he didn't mind that. If he named Gadora an "apprentice," I guess that meant he saw him as different from a run-of-the-mill lackey.

"That's good and all, but why did you sign him on?"

"Well, he may lack suitable piety for you, Sir Rimuru, but his curiosity for magic is the real thing. He has potential by human standards, so I thought I would initiate him by interacting with his Mysterious Art of Reincarnation."

"And then?"

"Ha. Pathetically enough, he nearly died in our previous battle. That would go against your orders, Sir Rimuru, so I reincarnated him as a demon to prevent that...but oddly enough, he became a 'metal demon,' a species I am unfamiliar with..."

Diablo stopped speaking for a moment. He turned toward me. I hadn't heard of that term, either. Did I do something or what?

*Oh, that was me.*

What do you mean, "oh"?!

This was exactly why I wanted to hold these one-on-one discussions. Ciel had been really busy, it sounded like. I really wished it'd think these things over more. If he was a "metal demon," that sounded close to Beretta, too...

*No need to worry about that. The concept is completely different.*

Good? Whatever. I wasn't going to get worked up over it. Not that I needed to, but either way, I was getting sick of all this.

"Hmm, maybe it's thanks to the little push I gave him?"

I had to be honest. There was no other option. This elated Diablo, as I expected, so we wound up talking about it for a while.

Summing up, Diablo had taken a liking to Gadora as well. They had an ongoing promise that should something happen, the demon would have him join his family. Gadora was famously obsessed with magic, being the teacher of that magic-born Razen and all, and I was sure he wouldn't hesitate to become a demon to satisfy his intellectual curiosity. That's the kind of guy he was, and as long as he didn't bother me, it was best to let him have his way.

Besides, I didn't mind having that old man nearby, either, so it was all good to me. It'd be gross if he started goin' around looking like Adalmann, though, so I made sure to officially forbid any Rimuru worship on his part. No way was I gonna allow another wacky cult member in my midst, apprentice of Diablo or not.

"All right. Well, he's your responsibility now, so take good care of him."

Old Man Gadora looked pretty aged to me, honestly. It felt kind of weird phrasing it that way—but then again, Diablo was even older, old enough that concepts like “golden years” were thrown right out the window. So maybe all of this was fine.

Regardless, Diablo now had two personal assistants to watch over.



With a bow, he left the room, Testarossa quickly taking his place. She was as elegant as ever as she sat down in front of me. Mm... I had no intention of following through on it, but part of me wondered if I really *could* name her my secretary— Actually, no. I’d need to name Diablo my chief diplomat then, and I was sure he’d go berserk in that role. I got enough problems already. Let’s stick to this.

Besides, I had other business with Testarossa. I wasn’t sure how to bring it up yet, but before I could, she presented me with a sheet of paper. It contained statistics on the demons in her family.

Name: Moss (EP: 1,079,397)

Race: Demon Peer, archduke

Protection: Blanc clan

Title: Empress’s Aide

Magic: Dark magic, elemental magic

Ability: Unique skill Gatherer

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

Name: Cien (EP: 286,596)

Race: Demon Peer, viscount

Protection: Blanc clan

Title: Empress’s Secretary

Magic: Dark magic, elemental magic

Ability: Unique skill Recorder

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements

That was the long and short of it, including some information that only I could read off them. Moss and Cien had seen no direct action in our recent war. They weren't exposed to any danger, and thus they were saved from the ever-curious hands of Ciel.

As for Testarossa herself:

Name: Testarossa (EP: 3,333,124)

Race: Demon-god; Primal Demon—Devil Lord

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Killer Lord

Magic: Dark magic, elemental magic

Ability: Ultimate skill Belial, Lord of the Underworld

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

Compared to before the fighting, her existence points had ballooned beyond comparison. It was a good three times the figure from back when she fought Velgrynd on that airship.

"Looks like your magicule count grew a bunch, huh?"

"It did. If it had done so in time for my climactic battle with Velgrynd, I'm sure it would have been a more interesting performance. It's a pity."

*Hmm, I'd hesitate on calling war a "performance," all right?* Not that she'd listen to me if I told her.

My experiences here have really convinced me that in battle, quality matters much more than quantity. In this war, too, battle experience sealed a lot more people's fates than magicule counts. Testarossa had put up a decent fight against Velgrynd because they were both almost equal in experience level. She stood no chance in an extended fight, but she could drag it on and stall for time well enough, at least.

If Testarossa's magicule stores were larger, that meant she was much more capable in battle now. That was tremendously reassuring, but it also placed even more responsibility on me to watch over her and ensure she didn't go out of control. I was leaving all that to Diablo at the moment, but now I thought I should pay a bit more attention to her.

Belial, though... It just *oozed* a sense of danger, much like Testarossa herself. It had a pretty handy slate of abilities—Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Control Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, All of Creation, Dominate Life, and World of the Dead.

Yep, another world-type ability, and judging by the name “World of the Dead,” I wouldn’t subject myself to it for a billion dollars. I’d let Ciel maintain that one for me, I think. Scary.

“So if you wanted to talk alone with me, is this about something that can’t be stated in public? What would that be exactly?”

Testarossa, after handing me the stats on Moss and Cien, got right down to business. I was glad she was so quick on the uptake. Mentally flipping the page, I brought up an issue of mine—the meeting we’d have with Masayuki tomorrow morning.

“I’d like to think I’m reading too much into it, but I wanted to bring something up with you. I’m actually going to be meeting with Masayuki and his people, but I’m not sure how to approach it.”

“Ah, I see. Is this about how we’ll deal with the Empire?”

Again, so quick on the uptake. It was surprising.

“Yes, exactly. I guess he’s pretty troubled about it, and if they’re asking me for solutions, I don’t really know what to give them, sort of...”

I doubted Shion had thought even that far, but assuming Masayuki was the reborn Emperor Ludora, that still didn’t mean they’d just let him take the throne. We still didn’t know where the current Emperor Ludora—or the now-transformed Michael—had run off to. If Masayuki was to name himself the leader... But then again, I was sure he’d do anything to get out of that obligation...and it’d be weird for my nation to push him in that direction.

Besides, there was no breaking Michael's Castle Guard ability as long as people put their faith in Ludora, so we'd also need to consider how we'd handle the Empire's citizens.

Worst of all, I was given, like, zero time for this. Trying to smooth things over with King Gazel would be hard enough, but this was even worse. Like I kept on saying, I didn't want to get too involved in any of it, but I doubted I'd be afforded the luxury.

"In that case, allow me to join the talks. The eastern lands the Empire calls home used to be my domain. As your diplomatic attaché, I wouldn't hesitate to help with this."

Sweet! How reliable she was turning out to be! I couldn't leave something like this to Ciel alone—I could relay whatever solution it came up with, but I'd still need people on the ground to execute it. And even if Ciel was absolutely correct, if the Empire refused to accept it, we'd have to go for something else. Unless we were gonna make the Empire a vassal state of Tempest, I didn't think we had the right to meddle in the administrations of other countries.

Along those lines, I was sure Testarossa had the mental powers to deal with whatever came up. She did well with the Western Nations, and once we came up with our direction, I'd feel safe leaving the rest to her.

"Okay, see you tomorrow morning, then."

"Very well. I am on the job!"

Testarossa's smile reassured me once again. I was feeling a tad better.

That was all I had for her, so I stood up to see her out the door when:

"Sir Rimuru, there was one more thing I wanted to report."

"Oh?"

"As I think you recall, the former imperial general Caligilio has filed a request for clemency..."

That jogged my memory. It was another theory issue, but I didn't see anything impossible with his request.

"All right. Why don't we deal with that right now?"

Good thing Testarossa had remembered for me. Her attention to detail was another reason I felt so secure with her. So, hoping to finish up that job before dinner, I joined her on the way to our research lab.

\*

There were two people to go. After a quick meal, I called in Ultima.

"I was about to die waiting for you!" she said, all cutesy as she plopped onto the sofa. It made me smile a bit. I'm sure she'd make a darling little sister for someone. It made me want to break out some tea, along with a few of my favorite cookies.

"Ooh! Ooooh! You'd do that for *me*, Sir Rimuru?!"

"Hee-hee-hee... Hey, I can make tea, too, you know. Not very *good* tea, but still. Hell, I could even make some coffee..."

Or, really, I could turn on a coffee maker. When it came to fancier approaches, even Shion could do a better job. It's sad, but that's the truth. Shion was actually pretty decent at making both tea and coffee these days. I tried myself, since it wasn't nice to constantly complain about other people's cooking...but it's harder than it looks.

I'd gotten takeout pretty much all the time in my previous life; cooking a meal from scratch was something I had zero experience with. Work kept me too busy for it, and considering all the dishes and cleaning up, it just wasn't worth it efficiency-wise. So the kitchen in my apartment was just as spotless as when I'd first moved in. I'd buy a cookbook occasionally, figuring I'd give something a whirl when I was free, but of course I never did. That memory was serving me well now, at least, so I guess it wasn't a total waste of money.

Regardless, if all it involved was grinding some beans and adding hot water, even I could whip up some coffee.

"Oh, not at all! I'm more than satisfied just with this tea!"

If she was *that* happy about it, then so was I.

"Well, no need to say no to coffee, though. It'll take some time, but we can talk in the meantime."

I wanted some as well, so I put a filter in the maker and added hot water. This whole coffee-maker setup was the work of Kaijin, and mass-produced versions were now on the market, so the cafés were doing pretty decent business, too.

The fragrant aroma of coffee beans filled the air as I presented as suave and sophisticated an air as I could to Testarossa. I was sure this would do wonders for my rep. Making good impressions about things like this was so important.

*I personally find it petty.*

And I personally don't give a crap! This was a broad, advanced strategy, nothing petty about it. Besides, there was no point acting all strong around a bunch of battle-addicted Primals who lived for war every waking moment. Better to compete with them in a different genre entirely.

*Ah... You have already showed your dignity to them well enough, so I feel you do not need to worry.*

*It's fine, all right?* I didn't mean to look dignified in their minds in the first place. But it didn't matter. Let's get back on topic.

"So can I hear your report, then?"

"Certainly. First, let me give you this."

I was given a written outline of her clan's stats.

Name: Veyron (EP: 882,869)

Race: Demon Peer, duke

Protection: Violet clan

Title: Poison Princess's Butler

Magic: Dark magic, elemental magic

Ability: Ultimate gift Artist

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

Name: Zonda (EP: 301,316)

Race: Demon Peer, viscount

Protection: Violet clan

Title: Poison Princess's Chef

Magic: Dark magic, elemental magic

Ability: Unique skill Fusionist

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

Veyron's strength grabbed my attention first, but what *really* threw me was Zonda's unique skill Fusionist. This wasn't in the same family as Shion's wacky Master Chef skill; instead, it was designed for situational awareness and supporting allies. Via its "fusing" process, it could heal any sort of wound on anyone. It didn't meddle with the laws of cause and effect the way Shion's skill did, so that was a relief.

Next up, Ultima herself.

Name: Ultima (EP: 2,668,816)

Race: Demon-god; Primal Demon—Devil Lord

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Pain Lord

Magic: Dark magic, elemental magic

Ability: Ultimate skill Samael, Lord of Deathly Poison

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

Ultima, much like Testarossa, had grown a lot, and her magicule count had been constantly rising since her evolution completed. She was well into Million Class territory, but how much stronger would she get? I was glad to have her on my team, but too much would be a threat.

And we can't forget about Ultima's abilities, either. The ultimate skill Samael gave her Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Control Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, Detect Weakness, Craft Poison, World of Destruction... All geared for killing, huh?

Craft Poison was the nastiest of them. Combine it with Detect Weakness, and she could instantly create just the right poison to kill her opponent. But I was even more curious about World of Destruction. It was a vicious world-level ability, one that could unconditionally kill anyone and anything except for spiritual life-forms. Kind of a supercharged version of my own Merciless skill, I think. It wouldn't work against the truly powerful, so maybe it was best to have that one sealed away.

"Ultima, my apologies," I began, pouring coffee into a cup to calm myself down.

"What about?"

"So, about your World of Destruction ability..."

"Yes?"

She gladly accepted the cup I handed to her. I had to come out with it now or I never would.

"You're banned from using it."

"All right! I was just thinking that I didn't need it anyway. I guess you really *can* read my mind, Sir Rimuru!"

"Huh?! Oh. Um, yeah. Of course, right? Ha-ha-ha..."

I laughed it off as I internally thanked my lucky stars. I'm not sure why, but I guess Ultima wanted to stay hands-off with World of Destruction. But maybe it should've been obvious. She was such a battle-obsessed girl that winning every single battle by default probably didn't excite her.

If she was willing to accept that, then wonderful. Relieved, I sat down and enjoyed some conversation for a while.

\*

My final interviewee was Carrera.

"Lemme tell you, my lord, if you didn't step in to help me, I'm not sure I could've ever beaten Kondo. That man was *real* strong. I can hardly believe he was human."

She ended her report with a light laugh.

Ciel had told me this much, but hearing it from Carrera's own mouth made it even more vivid. She had won that battle by the tiniest of margins, and her praise for him was the unvarnished truth. And she was right—Kondo was something else. Benimaru had taken out Granit, number three in the Empire's internal list, but even he was pretty wary of Kondo. In fact, he was confident he could've beaten anyone in the Empire *except* for that guy.

Taking out a menace like that would've been a feather in anyone's cap, really. But Carrera said it was all thanks to the power she was granted.

"Receiving my body, surpassing my limits, evolving further from that... I've done nothing but take, take, take. I want to repay the favor. I'd like you to understand that my loyalty forever belongs to you."

Carrera usually had an arrogant streak a mile long, but this was probably a more sincere side of her. I mean, a Primal Demon born in antiquity should really outclass a freshly born demon lord, but regardless of that "loyalty," I knew exactly how to reply.

"Well, keep up the good work, then. By this point, if you weren't here for me, our entire court system would collapse."

Monsters really *did* tend to follow the will of the strong. Anyone could arrest a criminal, but judging them required someone powerful to fill the post. I'd like to institute a jury-style system in the future so we could leave cases to the people outside of serious, vicious crimes, but that would come once our nation was stable. Tempest was still a developing country, so Carrera's strength was helping me a lot right now.

"Oh, I'd be glad to! I'll do whatever you ask of me, and I know my clan will, too!"

She seemed to relish the chance.

I then looked over her overview of her clan and their stats—to be exact, Agera's and Esprit's.

Name: Agera (EP: 733,575)

Race: Demon Peer, marquis

Protection: Jaune clan

Title: Tyrant's Master

Magic: True Battlewill

Ability: Ultimate gift Blade Transform

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

Name: Esprit (EP: 552,137)

Race: Demon Peer, count

Protection: Jaune clan

Title: Tyrant's BFF

Magic: Dark magic, elemental magic

Ability: Unique skill Observer

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

Pretty good. Like, this met the old standard for demon lords, didn't it? Agera was equivalent to the pseudo-awakened Clayman, and if I had to guess, he'd win if he fought him back then... I really felt like this business of having multiple old demon lord-level underlings working for you was wrong in some way.

I also wondered what "Tyrant's BFF" meant. Carrera had given her that title, so I assumed that's what their relationship was. Esprit *was* kind of like a net-savvy, fashion-conscious teen in some ways, and they certainly acted like fast friends together. It was less a master-servant thing and more like two girls from different years in the same high school. Carrera, it felt to me, treated her clan a lot different than other demons did.

But the real surprises came next. Carrera herself was insane.

Name: Carrera (EP: 7,013,351 + 3.37 million for her Golden Gun)

Race: Demon-god; Primal Demon—Devil Lord

Protection: Rimuru's protection

Title: Menace Lord

Magic: Dark magic, elemental magic

Ability: Ultimate skill Abaddon, Lord of Destruction

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack

More magicules than Diablo? It made my eyes turn into little dots. Her growth had finally come to a stop, but she was clearly on top among my troops.

But even scarier was Abaddon. Its abilities included Haste Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Control Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, Surpass Boundary, and Dimension Rupture—nothing world-level but all suited for attack force.

Dimension Rupture, in particular, could work its way through Distortion Fields to kill off enemies. If Carrera combined destructive magic with her own power and topped it off with this ability, only a very few people could withstand it, I think. It could even destroy the floors of Ramiris's labyrinth, which further proved how crazy it was. Frankly, not even I wanted to fight her any longer.

"You're...stronger now."

My true feelings fell from my lips.

"Yes, thanks to you. That, and to Kondo for ceding this to me. I want to kill Emperor Ludora for his sake as well."

I almost said, *Right, right*, until I remembered. Kondo, too, was being controlled by Michael that whole time.

"Actually, the real Ludora is no longer in this world... Or, well, a lot of stuff's happened, but the Ludora you fought was actually a skill that took over Ludora's body for its own purposes."

I explained to her that Ludora was actually Michael, the manas body. She nodded, unsurprised.

"I see. And that's why that bastard Feldway called Ludora by the name Michael? Now it makes sense, my lord."

Glad to hear. I *definitely* didn't want her picking a fight with Masayuki by mistake. Making sure that was clear with her, I ended the interview.

...But just as Carrera was about to exit, she turned around.

"Oh, I forgot... There's this thing I needed to tell you about, my lord."

"Mm? What is it?" I asked, taking a sip of coffee.

"To be honest, I wasn't sure whether to tell you..."

If Carrera was this distressed about it, it must be something big. Maybe I should invite her to sit down again—

"...but it looks like Agera was once Hakuro's grandfather."

*Brppph?!*

I almost did a comedy spit take there. That was avoided just in time, but if it was something *that* shocking, I wished she wouldn't just float that up on the way out the door.

"That... Hey! Carrera!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Pretty serious stuff, eh? It's more than I can handle, so I wanted to leave the decision on what to do with him to you."

And with that, she smiled and left the room, tossing the ball into my court. I was sure that was a smile of relief, now that the load had been taken off her shoulders.

But I couldn't ignore this news. Diablo and the demonesses said I didn't need to interview their clan members, but Agera definitely deserved an audience later.

\*

He'd have to wait, though, as I needed time to gather my thoughts. For now, at least, the one-on-one interviews were over.

I had our meeting with Masayuki the next day, so that was all the work for today...but it wasn't like I needed sleep. So I reverted to my casual, comfortable slime form and climbed under the covers. I always found sitting in the dark like this oddly comforting.

*In that case, I will now give you my report.*

*Um, I'm off work for today...*

*This report involves my master's skills. It is not work.*

Ciel might see that stuff as a hobby, but to me, it wasn't much different from work. Not that it'd listen to me. I'm sure I needed to know about it, so let's give up for now. I was actually looking forward to it a little, in fact. Better brace myself—no doubt it was gonna be something ridiculous.

My latest round of skill and ability integrations went extremely comfortably for me. I wrapped them all up without being forced into sleep mode, and while it took a day and a half to cover everyone, I was still lucid and alert enough to conduct all the interviews I had scheduled. And why not? Ciel had asked me to invoke Ability Adjust in the middle of battle, and no way would it allow me to go offline in *that* situation. If it did, I'd be really pissed off.

So I asked Ciel in my mind to go ahead, and the data began flowing in. So what did we have here, then?

Name: Rimuru Tempest (EP: 8,681,123 + 2.28 million for his Dragon Sword)

Race: Highest-level chaos elemental Ultimate Slime

Patronage: Grace of Friendship

Title: Chaos Creator

Magic: True-Dragon magic, High-Level Spirit Summoning, High-Level Demon Summoning, others

Ability: Manas Ciel

Intrinsic skills: Universal Detect, Dragonsoul Aura, Universal Shapeshift

Ultimate skill Azathoth, Lord of the Void

Ultimate skill Shub-Niggurath, Lord of Abundance

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Resist Chaos Attack

That's how I turned out.

It didn't really feel this way to me, but I was sportin' some serious EP there. Add in my straight sword, and I was pushing ten million. I was well used to this weapon by now, and it sure lived up to its God rating. It had transformed its shape, influenced by the unique traits of my species, and for now I was simply calling it my Dragon Sword. There were two holes in it for upgrading purposes now, so clearly it was evolving without a hitch. I was happy with that.

Maybe it'd evolve more if I gave it a more formal name? Ahhh, no way. Forget it. Impossible. Part of me did want to try it out, but I didn't want just any old name for it. I'd try the name change once I thought up something really cool.

But just because my EP—or magicule count—was way ahead of the pack, that didn't mean I could rest easy. Benimaru, Diablo, and Zegion were hot on my heels, and people like Testarossa and the other two demonesses were monsters in battle. Testarossa, after all, gave Velgrynd a run for her money despite having ten times the magicule energy. It proved that stats weren't as important as how well you used your powers, I suppose...and by powers, I meant your magicule count, fighting level, and abilities put together.

In the battle against the Empire, they had all made maximum use of that power. If I wanted to prepare for the battles to come, I certainly couldn't let myself fall behind. For now, at least, I was ahead of Carrera and clearly living up to my reputation, so let's focus on other matters.

The protection I received from Veldora was gone, taking the form of a “patronage” instead. Had I grown to where I was offering my patronage to others, rather than accepting their good graces?

...Anyway, I'd better quit trying to escape reality. It was fine that my stats got streamlined and all, but I had only two skills left?

Luckily, Dr. Ciel couldn't wait to explain matters.

*First, I integrated the obsolete Raphael and Belzebuth—*

Whoa! Wait, wait, wait, wait! What was that? What did it just breathlessly spit out? It integrated Raphael, practically my parent at this point, because it was *no longer necessary*?

*Is that a problem?*

So I wasn't mishearing this. I knew that, of course...but I never thought Ciel would go through with it. Like, could Ciel even exist without Raphael?

*Yes. I am already independent, so there is no need to worry.*

Ciel calmly answered my doubts.

Even Raphael, something at the core of my being, was just more grist for Dr. Ciel's mill. Its deeds were a shock to me, but as it was explained to me, this wasn't a big deal because Raphael was a shell of its former self anyway. What mattered was what was inside, and so Ciel had gone to work—no feelings, no deep emotion. The way it so thoroughly cut away all unnecessary skills was clear to me now.

If it wasn't a problem, then fine, but did it need to consume Belzebuth as well?

*Of course!*

*I really should've had it check with me first,* I weakly replied, but Ciel kept on explaining like it knew it was in the right.

To sum up, my skills had transformed beyond recognition. It was way more than mere "adjusting" at this point—I mean, adjusting skill was what it did, but it still made no sense to me.

So what were these skills now?

The first one—Azathoth, Lord of the Void—was born from integrating Raphael and Belzebuth. Veldora, Lord of the Storm, as well as the just-acquired Velgrynd, Lord of the Flame, were also sacrificed for the cause. All the related abilities were carried on, however, so Ciel claimed it was no problem at all.

That meant Azathoth contained the abilities Soul Glutton, Void Collapse, Complex Space, Release True Dragon (Flame/Storm), Coreify True Dragon (Flame/Storm), Control Dimensions, and Multidimensional Barrier.

My old Summon True Dragon was gone, but turning Release True Dragon on and off had the same effect. Besides, now that Veldora and Velgrynd were free, they could come to my side with no magical coercion, so I really didn't need it.

Coreify True Dragon piqued my interest, and that turned out to be literal. It allowed me to turn the True Dragons into blade cores I could put into the holes in my straight sword. I repeat, it took the massive energy cloud known as a True Dragon and condensed it into a little ball for my sword. I was afraid to even imagine what sort of incredible force that would unleash. I'd need their permission for this...but really, I was too scared to even picture when I might need to bust this out.

*Better seal it away for now,* I thought, shutting it down before I even tried using it. I mean, no way Velgrynd would agree to it—but I bet Veldora would be up for trying anything once. That concerned me, so I kept it a secret.

More to the point, the *real* killer abilities here were the ones provided by Azathoth itself.

Soul Glutton: a superpowered version of Predate and Glutton. Consumes the target, soul and all.

Void Collapse: the ultimate destructive force, driving a world of chaos. Requires a manas to fully control.

Complex Space: a world of chaos. A superpowered version of my Stomach and Isolate abilities; a prison cell that locks away anything that must be isolated.

Control Dimensions: gain a grasp of time and space, allowing for instant transport with a single thought. Can even impact time.

Multidimensional Barrier: a multilayer barrier kept on at all times. Provides absolute defense via dimensional faults.

That was how Dr. Ciel explained it, and now things were sounding pretty intense. It tried to do all this to me during battle, even. It's nuts.

That talk of "*absolute defense via dimensional faults,*" though—doubt I could trust that one. This was passing itself off as stronger and safer than a Distortional Field, but there were no absolutes in this world. I wouldn't be tricked that easily.

Of course, I should've realized the moment Ranga obtained Hastur that I was due for some serious ability upgrades. So it wasn't a surprise so much as a feeling of sheer exasperation. With Azathoth in hand, I really *didn't* need any

other abilities, did I?

The second ultimate skill in my inventory was good old Shub-Niggurath, and those were the two skills this round of Ability Adjust had left me. These were clearly power-ups from before, but at first glance, it felt like I had lost some abilities. Haste Thought, for starters...but I could still use that one just fine. What was up with that?

*That family of skills—Haste Thought, Predict Future Attack, Analyze and Assess, Parallel Operation, Combine, Disassemble, Cast Cancel, All of Creation, Food Chain, Dominate Thought, Dominate Laws, and Transform Element—are calculation-based abilities that have been integrated with myself. They are thus available to you at a faster reaction time than before.*

I guess I should praise this as a massive leap forward. Something told me this was going too far, but think of it this way—I was probably gonna need it for the next war. Wimping out now would lead to more losses later. That was the resolve I needed here. If I wanted to enjoy peace in the future, I couldn't leave anything behind, and I couldn't show any mercy.

\*

So that rounded out my strength, but how did I stack up with Veldora these days?

Name: Veldora Tempest (EP: 88,126,579)

Race: Highest-level chaos elemental True Dragon

Patronage: Grace of Abundance, Protection of the Storm

Title: Storm Dragon

Magic: True-Dragon magic

Ability: Intrinsic skills Universal Detect, Dragonsoul Aura, Universal Shapeshift

Ultimate skill Nyarlathotep, Lord of Chaos

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Resist Chaos Attack

That was his current state.

His resistances were perfect, of course, but worthy of note was his off-the-charts existence point count. The only thing you could really do at this point was laugh. All that crap he did while he was being measured, you know...

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It had happened just a bit ago, right after dinner. I was about to meet with Ultima, so I'd made to stand up and leave when Veldora got in my way.

"Kwaaah-ha-ha-ha! Rimuru, I understand you've been conferring with Benimaru and his fellows? I happen to be free right now—"

"Huh? I'm busy. Sorry, but I'll play with you when things calm down a bit."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! It's not that. I was just wondering when you'd confer with me!"

Pardon? I didn't *need* to interview him. Like, Veldora wasn't my servant or anything, and if I wanted his stats, I could ask Ciel for them.

"But we talk all the time anyway. Do we need anything that formal?"

"What?! Stop being such a stick-in-the-mud!"

"Yeah! You need to realize how lonely you're making my master and me here!"

Great. Ramiris was joining in now.

But seriously, we really *did* talk all the time. And yeah, I'd love to break out my avatar core and play with you guys, but work's more important. Besides, we were in the throes of war right now? Remember? We didn't know where Feldway was, so things had simmered down at the moment—but I didn't want to fully kick back until we at least had our troops ready to intercept the enemy.

"Stop being selfish, all right? Once things settle down, I'll—"

"No, no, no! I don't mean it like that! I've grown stronger, you see, so I wanted to brag about it to you. I know you are busy, so you only need to be with me for a few moments!"

"Yeah, he's right! You're the only one who can produce pinpoint EP readings, so help a dragon out, won't ya?"

"Hmm?"

"What I'm saying is that I can trick Ramiris's measurements to produce anything I want, and I want to *prove* it to you!"

*Oh.*

"That's completely impossible, you! I know I can't measure it down to the ones digit, but you can't fake the entire system on me!"

Okay. So I was being dragged into an utterly pointless argument. Once it reaches this point, they refuse to listen to anybody else. It's faster just to play along a bit than defy them.

"All right, all right. Let's go to the Control Center, then."

So I measured Veldora's existence points. The equipment for this was connected to the monitors all around the labyrinth, but only the main panel in our Control Center could operate it. Ciel could synchronize itself with the labyrinth, allowing me to take measurements anywhere we wanted, but that's my little secret.

I was short on time, so we quickly trundled over to the Control Center.

"Right! So I measured my master, and I came up with an EP of eighty-eight million! And that's impressive enough, but he insists he can push that figure higher whenever he wants. I want you to yell at him not to be so full of himself!!"

It *was* an unimaginable figure. No human could beat him, not even a Million Class-level Saint. But was the number accurate?

*Yes. Veldora's existence points are exactly 88,126,579.*

Pretty close. Measuring these high numbers came at the cost of precision, but since we mostly used our equipment to evaluate labyrinth challengers and invaders, there was no pressing need for a system upgrade.

But if Veldora really *could* cook the figures to say whatever he wanted, it proved there was something wrong with our measurement gear. I didn't want

that to go unaddressed, so it was a good thing I'd bothered to check just now. At least this brief diversion wasn't a total waste of time. Now we'd have to see if Veldora really *could* cheat the system.

"Well, my measurements say 88.12 million. That's pretty much the same. So are you saying you can bump that number up at will? Or is it underestimating your score?"

Either way, I wanted to ask how he'd do it and come up with countermeasures. When I asked Veldora for a sample, he smiled the biggest grin ever and removed his coat.

*Oh, great,* I thought. A bead of cold sweat felt like it was running down my skin, even though I'd stopped sweating long ago.

Then that laugh came roaring through.

"Kwaaaaah-ha-ha-ha! Behold, and look closely, as I unleash my true power!!"

With a loud, echoing *whump*, the coat fell to the floor. It was followed by the wrist and ankle bands he had on his arms and legs, all smashing against the floor and leaving cracks.

*Uh...*

Taking off heavy clothing wasn't going to up the numbers. I'd never let that happen. EP measures the amount of energy within you; it's got nothing to do directly with your battle performance.

But Veldora didn't get the message.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaahh!! Well?! Go ahead! Measure me with that machine of yours! But don't blame me if I brrreeeeeaaaaak iiiiiiiittttt!!"

*Sheesh,* this is embarrassing!

I understood what he was trying to do, but it was just too pathetic to watch.

*I just made another measurement, but there is not even the slightest change to his statistics.*

*Of course* there isn't!

"V-Veldora, listen to me..."

"Master, it's still at eighty-eight million..."

Ahhh, Ramiris just stabbed him in the heart with the dagger of truth!

"D-don't be ridiculous! Rimuru, be honest with me! My EP must have doubled by now, did it not?"

I gave him a sympathetic look. "I know you can hide your aura, but EP has kind of a different nuance..."

Then, as earnestly as I could, I explained that existence points were a measure of your energy store, not some kind of "battle level" from action manga. Veldora turned bright red upon realizing his error.

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It was an amusing story at this point, but he didn't need to fake anything. This really *was* an incredible reading. Nothing apart from an ultimate-level attack would scratch him.

And the abilities he'd gained were incredible, too. Dr. Ciel's adjustments had evolved his skill into Nyarlathotep, Lord of Chaos, which included Hasten Thought, Analyze and Assess, All of Creation, Control Probability, Parallel Existence, Investigate Truth, Control Dimensions, and Multidimensional Barrier. That's a wide variety, and Ciel's rearranging and organizing made them far easier to tap into.

He even gained Parallel Existence! I knew from fighting Velgrynd just how much of a pain that was, but with Control Probability in his quiver as well, Veldora really *did* feel invincible. In fact, he *was*, as long as I didn't die. His heart core was still inside me, his memories and emotions backed up inside. Between that and being able to launch a Separate Body at any time, there was practically zero chance of destroying him.

The whole EP thing was a laugh, but I truly was glad to have him on our side.

So Veldora's existence points were more than ten times mine, and I likely stood no chance against him...but I still had questions.

For one, I'd beaten Velgrynd recently. I'd used Predate on her, even. Her EP at the time was reported to me as around 26.87 million. I consumed more than 50 percent of her, by the way. Something like 30 percent was still in recovery, and that would be restored back to what I ate as well. Ciel was certainly careful with this stuff, which I was glad for.

My question was that considering all the energy of hers that I'd consumed, my EP actually seemed kind of low. It was more than enough, of course, and I think battle sense is more important, but it was still something I wondered about.

*The answer is obvious. The energy you consumed was taken into your body at one point, but it was turned into your blood and flesh and then set free via Release True Dragon.*

*And...what does that mean?*

*It means that my master's maximum existence point value can be accurately defined as the sum of Veldora's and Velgrynd's EP.*

...?!

I was forcibly stunned into silence.

So when I had Release True Dragon turned off, *that's* when I could break out my full force.

...Hmm? But, like, the output's the same either way, so maybe having more energy didn't mean anything. I was sure Velgrynd made Separate Bodies of herself because she maxed out what only one of her could produce, too. There's no limit to someone's potential force, but if you can't hit someone with it, it's a moot point. Gain enough to destroy an entire planet, and it gets hard to precisely control it, too.

Maximum power, I concluded, meant little to nothing.

I should also note that Velgrynd's estimated EP when I consumed her was 49,829,987. That was Ciel's calculation, and I'm sure it was perfect, but right now, her count had gone way up.

Name: Velgrynd (EP: 74,350,087)

Race: Highest-level chaos elemental True Dragon

Patronage: Grace of Flame

Title: Flame Dragon

Magic: True-Dragon magic

Ability: Intrinsic skills Universal Detect, Dragonsoul Aura, Universal Shapeshift

Ultimate skill Cthuga, Lord of the Fire God

Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Resist Chaos Attack

That was Velgrynd's current status. She went down by a fifth only to then go way past her initial value—more of an evolution than merely growing.

Her abilities were the same as before after a round of Ciel optimization, but I was sure she was a master at using them. Cthuga comprised Hasten Thought, Flame Excitation, Parallel Existence, Control Dimensions, Trans-Dimensional Leap, and Multidimensional Barrier. A real rogues' gallery.

I had last seen Velgrynd several days ago, so I had no idea what she was going through. Presumably, I'd see her tomorrow, and I really wasn't sure how to approach her. She'd be scary if I riled her, so I resolved never to goad her again.

My interviews—really a way to check on our current state with Ciel—had come to a much-appreciated close.



*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
3

TOWARD  
REBUILDING

## CHAPTER 3

### TOWARD REBUILDING

I was still dreading the talk with King Gazel I owed him, but today was our meeting with Masayuki's band. That's where my attention was fully devoted.

So I met up with Testarossa, feeling a bit relieved. This conference was more of a summit, potentially—a meeting between two heads of state—so we had to pick the attendees at the meeting hall carefully. Benimaru and Rigurd would join my side. Shion and Diablo would accompany me, of course, and Testarossa would round out the pack. Masayuki, meanwhile, was bringing along Velgrynd, followed by Caligulio and Minitz, with Bernie and Jiwu at the rear.

Our participating members were gathered in the lounge-style waiting room. This was all coming together suddenly, but nobody voiced any complaints about it. Shuna was volunteering to serve us all, even, so we couldn't be more prepared.

As for our aims today... Well, I wasn't here to take over the Empire. Michael and Feldway, the main criminals behind this war, were missing—and Lieutenant Kondo, architect of the entire operation, was dead. Kondo's thoughts were likely being controlled by Michael, and I wasn't about to pursue a dead man's crimes.

The Empire's flagship apparently contained most of the higher-up people in their military, or at least the ones who survived. Velgrynd, the once and former Marshal, was the most powerful among them, and since she had no interest in invading us and expanding the Empire's boundaries, I figured we'd be declaring the war over, working on reparations, and figuring out the rebuilding process. We had 700,000 imperial soldiers we could put to work, but how we'd divide them up was an open question. We'd need to appoint the most well-trained of them as foremen and divide the rest into evenly balanced teams to avoid vast

differences in technical skill.

But look at me, getting way too ahead of myself. Before me now, an eye-opening beauty passed by, the breeze flowing past her blue hair. It was Velgrynd, and her gaze shot right into me. Ooof, owww. That really hurt. I had no (literal) stomach, but my stomach was nonetheless churning.

“Did you need something?” I asked her.

For everybody else’s sake, I needed to look at least a little dignified. I thought I deserved some praise for maintaining a steady, non-shaky voice.

“Do you think I could have some time with you?” Velgrynd replied.

There was ample time until the meeting began, so I nodded—and then Velgrynd and I had a private chat.

\*

“Is Veldora doing well?”

“Oh, very much so.”

“Ah. That’s good.”

Velgrynd, despite her gentle smile, was concerned about Veldora. My response seemed to relieve her, but seeing her smile like that tugged at my heartstrings a little. Veldora, after all, still had a lot of hang-ups about his sister. I had asked him if he wanted to go see her, and he mumbled something about, “*Oh, I have errands; I am quite busy,*” and walked off.

It was a pathetic act, but it wasn’t like I was doing much better now. In fact, I felt incredibly awkward. I’m sure Velgrynd was shy herself. Better not pry too much.

“So,” I began, heart pounding, “what did you need?”

“I wanted to thank you.”

*Thank me? I dunno...*

“Why are you looking so pale? Did you think I was going to drag you behind the school and challenge you to a fistfight?”

“Why do you know *that* trope?!?” I shouted.

Velgrynd snickered. "Well," she said, "my journey to find my beloved Ludora proved far more exciting than expected."

It sounded pretty grueling, from what I could tell, but Velgrynd had a mission in mind, so to her it was a journey of hope as well. That must be why she could describe it as "exciting."

"The journey brought me across many worlds, and many ages, in my search for him. In fact, I even paid a visit to *your* own native world."

"Whoa, no way."

"Way."

I was wondering why she was sounding a bit more casual with me. It should've registered with me when I saw her clothing, actually. She was in imperial garb now, but when she first showed up in our labyrinth, she had been in a T-shirt and jeans. That was her look as she beat the crap out of her enemies, and seeing the footage from our archives was just surreal. People on the scene who saw it, not to mention those getting their asses kicked by her, must've thought it was some kind of fever dream.

But if she was bumping around my world, that also meant there was a way to return there from this one. Of course, I died over there, so there wasn't much point in investigating that...or was there? Velgrynd had suggested she could travel through time as well. If I could analyze that ability, then perhaps...

*Roger that. I will begin analysis.*

Ahhh, how kind of Ciel to do that! Maybe I was just giving it a new hobby, but this kind of thing was right up the doctor's alley, yeah. It's wonderful to have a little hope, at least. I was sure at least a few otherworlders on this planet wouldn't mind a way back, and I'd love to make that happen in the future. But we'd pursue that later.

"So Masayuki's the reborn version of Ludora?"

"Yes, he is. There's no doubt about it. His soul is all but completely intact." Velgrynd lowered her voice a little. "Now we have to work on his memories."

Hmm. So Masayuki was still Masayuki even now, huh? Eyeing him across the

room, I thought he looked just as unconfident and lost as he usually did, so that was a relief. No offense to Velgrynd, but to me, at least, Masayuki wasn't Ludora at all.

"Well, I'm...not sure what to say to you."

*Oh, that's wonderful* didn't quite fit, and neither did *aw, that's too bad*, so I talked my way around it. Velgrynd lightly nodded, not angry at all. She seemed a lot less affected than I thought, which surprised me.

"Hee-hee! You look confused. But I've experienced a few things in my time. Dreamlike moments, brief instants that seemed to last forever, deeper and more intense than even my time with Ludora. So I really appreciate this, Rimuru. It's all thanks to you."

She framed the thanks with a blinding smile, one that'd make your heart skip a beat. That frigid dignity that could send you to the floor with one glare was completely gone. She felt so calm now, like a completely different person.

"Well...good, then?"

"Yes. So let me promise you one thing, Rimuru—I will never be your enemy again, as long as Masayuki doesn't wish me to be. So don't betray him, either, all right?"

I couldn't ask for a better pledge. And she didn't need to worry about Masayuki and me. I had zero interest in backstabbing him.

"All right. By my name and that of my friends, I swear I will never betray Masayuki. I might tell a few white lies sometimes, and maybe we'll get in disagreements, too, but as long as that's understood..."

Velgrynd's gaze turned icy again. Icy and terrifying.

"Ummm, okay, okay. I'll do my best not to lie to him, and I won't argue with him unless it's about something *really* important."

Eesh. Why was *I* the one making promises now? I kinda regretted being so honest with her.

\*

Still, seeing Velgrynd express her gratitude to me certainly took the edge off

my nerves. I may've had my reasons, but I *did* do quite a bit to her, and seeing that she wasn't holding a grudge was a tremendous relief.

But just when I thought this summit would be a nice, tranquil affair, I heard someone tearing into the chamber from the waiting room. It was Vester.

"Oh... What's with all the panic?"

"I have good reason to panic, Sir Rimuru! I just received an emergency message from my residence—King Gazel is reportedly on his way here!"

By his "*residence*," he was referring to the family he'd left behind in the Dwarven Kingdom, I assumed. Vester was a big name in Dwargon—a duke, in fact, second in nobility only to the king—and he'd been in upper-class circles since birth. I was sure that's why he was so envious of commoners like Kaijin... but regardless, getting kicked out of Dwargon didn't mean he lost contact with his relatives. One of his dark-agent protégés was keeping his house in order, and they stayed in close contact with each other. Exile or not, Vester was still a duke, after all.

Hearing that King Gazel didn't strip Vester of his nobility or demote him was certainly a surprise to me, though. He only punished Vester himself; nothing at all happened to his name and family. He also didn't have any official successor yet, so his peerage hadn't been passed on to anyone else. King Gazel had to be smart enough to know he'd reappoint him to his cabinet at some point. That's why he didn't punish him that much—he just wanted to see some regret for Vester's actions.

Plus, I doubted he wanted Vester's family rebelling against him, either. If they made a serious effort, I bet they could easily trigger a civil war in Dwargon, so the good king wanted to avoid pointless conflict. He was objectively a talented figure, and his relatives were as popular as they were influential. King Gazel had to consider all of that in his decision, and that's how he wound up serving me.

So the Vester house was still alive and well in Dwargon. Vester therefore kept some connections with the royal palace, and that emergency message came from one of his contacts. But what would drive Gazel to do *that*?

"Um, why? We were going to brief him on things later, weren't we?"

"Yes, we were, but it would appear His Majesty's trust in me has been flagging as of late..."

"Oh, come on. That's impossible, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't be so sure. Between negotiating potion prices, picking out nonmedical technicians to work here, and deploying my entire family to procure personnel for us, I've been up to quite a number of things. If he suspected Tempest was toying with him, I'd have little to respond with. Remember, I'm still resolved to the eventuality I'll spend my whole life here."

Vester really *was* doing whatever he wanted, huh? I saw him as more sober than that, but I guess he *was* an ex-minister. As a politician, he must know everything about that world, along with its seedier side.

But I shouldn't be sitting here admiring him. If King Gazel was coming, now *really* wasn't the time to kick off a summit with the Empire. I couldn't afford to keep him waiting any longer, but I also felt that him storming in with no advance notice was a little rude, too. What does a leader do at a time like this?

"Isn't King Gazel the rude one here?"

I knew he had his grievances against Vester, but that was no reason for me to give him special treatment.

"Exactly. Visiting a foreign nation in secret... He shouldn't be surprised if someone tries to attack him. I'm sure he'll contact you at the border to prevent that."

Vester assured me that His Majesty wouldn't completely avoid custom like that—and, as if to prove him right, one of our communications agents came running in.

"I have emergency news to bring to you! His Majesty King Gazel of the Armed Nation of Dwargon has just requested permission to enter the nation. His group comprises five people in all. What should we do?"

They had no reason to refuse entry, but they couldn't just say yes on a whim—that's why this bureau chief-level agent came in to ask for my take. The right move to make in an emergency like this, I thought. I'd probably be just as flustered. Maybe he should have gone through one of my cabinet-level officials

first, but no need to mention that here. Shuna was also kind enough to bring the agent some water, which he gladly accepted.

“I’ll talk to him,” I said as I set up our messaging magitool.

In the end, we had King Gazel make an unannounced special-guest appearance at this summit—and now here I was, greeting him. Diablo and Shion were on hand to guard me, as usual.

“Heh-heh-heh... I appreciate this, Rimuru.”

“Oh, yeah, like you weren’t expecting this from the start.”

Even on one of their flying warhorses, it took a full day to travel from Dwargon to Rimuru, our capital. However, both of our capitals were equipped with portals that allowed for instant magical transport. The fact that he was showing up at our border despite that likely showed that he wanted to talk to me first.

“Ha-ha-ha! You noticed?”

There was nothing funny about this, but I wasn’t sweating it.

“I’m just glad that Velgrynd agreed to have you participate in the summit.”

“Mm, yes, about that—you’re not planning to join hands with the Empire, are you?”

That was Gazel’s concern? I thought so.

“It’ll depend on how our talks turn out, but that’s my intention, yeah.”

“Huh. Well, can you hold on that for a moment until I can hear your reasoning?”

I had no reason to say no, so we went into a small café located close to the border. The staff set up seating for us in a tremendous rush—and the adventurers who were seated there before us prudently finished their drinks and left for the time being. I felt bad for that, so I declared to the place that I’d cover everyone’s tabs, which made me a pretty popular slime for today.

We had about half an hour before the summit’s scheduled beginning. We could travel there in an instant, but still, we had just enough time to talk about

all of this.

I spoke first.

"So I recognize we forced you to handle nearly all the postwar cleanup for us..."

"That's fine. Our soldiers are still working around the clock on those matters—it's hard work, but compared to dying in battle, it's nothing to complain about. None of them bears a grudge against you about it. In fact, they're quite thankful."

That was good. Nobody likes the guy who doesn't bother tossing his plates and empties at a barbecue, so I was a little worried. But yeah, it had been a tough battle. I was sure the joy of surviving it took all those little quibbles out of everyone's minds.

"All right, so what would you like to hear about?"

There were some things I didn't intend to settle on until after the summit, so I couldn't provide all the answers right now, but still.

"Well, I want to hear it directly from your mouth. You don't have any ambition to team up with the Empire and attack our kingdom, do you?"

*What is this guy talking about? That sounds like work. Why would I ever volunteer to do something like that?* I had no reason to and nothing to gain from it—plus, it'd destroy all the trust I'd built with the Western Nations. That choice was never available to me from the start.

"Not at all. I'd lose all the trust that I've spent so much effort building, wouldn't I? It'd cost me one of my most reliable backers, and it'd put so much needless trouble on my plate. Honestly, I'm wondering why you think I'm such an idiot that you felt the need to ask that question."

Gazel looked legitimately relieved at my snarky reply. Man. He was seriously worried about *that* sort of thing?

"Your Majesty, my sincerest of apologies. This scenario was my suggestion, and it is entirely my fault that I have raised your ire. Please find it in your heart to forgive me."

Dolph, recognizing my indignance, stepped up to apologize. I had him explain his reasoning to me, and basically, it went like this: If Tempest and the Empire were to join hands, Dwargon would find itself sandwiched in between two large rivals. Any military operation would become a suicide mission, so the dwarves were bound to lose a great deal of diplomatic power. If their rivals decided they didn't need to listen to a rival they weren't afraid of, they'd be all but forced to accept whatever conditions they were given. That's why they wanted to tackle that issue in advance.

"Huh? But either way, it's not like this is something Dwargon can stop, is it? I have no interest in going to war, but I *do* think it's possible we could join hands with the Empire."

"Exactly. It all comes down to what you think in your own mind. Dwargon is a large nation, but we don't have the war power that could defeat a True Dragon like Velgrynd or Veldora. Perhaps there was no point in Dolph voicing his concern, but as king, I am in no position to accept a scenario like that."

Gazel looked serious as he spoke. It was a king's job to take responsibility for his people, duly considering any possibility that may arise. Perhaps this was a pointless thing to be concerned about, but they had no 100-percent guarantee we wouldn't declare war on them—and the same was true of the Empire, even if we didn't act. What if we formed an alliance with the Empire and they attacked Dwargon? Which nation would Tempest side with?

These questions were kind of tough for me to answer, too.

"Do you understand now, Rimuru? You tried to negotiate once with the Empire to keep them from waging war. That is perfectly fine, but it didn't consider the needs of Dwargon, our nation, at all. That is not a bad thing, mind you. Your only responsibility is for your own people. But I have to say that I have difficulty accepting it."

Ah. That made sense. It was true that Tempest could form alliances with both Dwargon and the Eastern Empire, but there was nothing at all between Dwargon and the Empire. If they warred with each other, we'd be kept from moving much at all. But hang on...

"Right, but we have an agreement that if one of us is in danger, the other one

will offer military support..."

"But there is no time limit in place for that, is there?"

"Huh?"

"There is no such thing as an agreement that stays effective for all time. Everything must be done in increments, providing safety for only a limited time. In fact, an agreement with a built-in time limit could be seen as safer, actually."

I wasn't sure what this meant, but Ciel clued me in. Let's say you had an agreement you wanted to do away with. Which would be harder to cancel—the one with a time limit or the one without? Without a time limit, you could send out feelers toward ending the deal at any time—but with that time limit, both sides could call the deal safe until it expired. Breaking a deal and attacking the other side hurts your trust a lot more than waiting until the deal ends and declaring war then. That, of course, applies only to your reputation with other nations; someone like the Empire, with its territorial aspirations, likely didn't care about that at all.

Of course, for us, breaking a time-limited agreement was out of the question. The moment we renewed the deal, that gave us the duty of staying compliant with it. If we tried something funny, the Western Nations would abandon us, and that went completely against our strategy, so it was better to set some more formal rules in place.

"Right. So you see a scenario where we'd build an alliance with the Empire and break our agreement with you? And that worry's brought you over here?"

"I am glad you understand our concern," Dolph replied.

"Yeah, I can see that being a worry. Okay! In that case, if we *do* wind up signing an alliance, I'll be sure to carefully go over all the terms related to that kind of thing."

Everyone looked reassured by this.

"See? I *told* you that was too much worrying!"

King Gazel was lording it over his men now. Didn't he have a responsibility for his people and all that? He sure didn't show it to his own officials.

“Sir Rimuru, our time is almost up!”

Shion looked at her wristwatch. That was another thing I’d built with Kaijin and his team for fun. A secretary could probably use a watch, I thought, and she loved it when I gave it to her.

“All right. Ready to go?”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I will open a transport gate, then.”

So our impromptu talk came to a close. We left the café, and in another moment, we were back in the meeting hall.

\*

It was ten in the morning, and everyone was assembled in the hall, sitting around a circular table with a notch cut out of it—kind of like the C in a vision test back in Japan.

*The formal name for it is the Landolt C. Invented by the Swiss-born ophthalmologist Edmund Landolt in 1888, it—*

That was pretty smart of Ciel, but I didn’t need any trivia at that moment. Stick to the main facts.

This notch was in place so people could walk through it and stand in the middle of the circular table if they so chose. We had a large screen set up facing the notch, positioned so nobody’s view of it would be blocked. Since three nations were now taking part in this summit, we decided this arrangement would be better than having each side face each other.

The notch was on the south side of the chamber, and we sat toward the north. I had the true-north seat, Benimaru was north-northeast, and Rigurd was north-northwest. Shion and Diablo, as always, were standing behind me.

The imperial side was seated toward the east—Masayuki on true east and Velgrynd to his right on the east-northeast side. General Caligulio was east-southeast, and Major General Minitz was southeast. Jiwu and Bernie were standing behind Masayuki, guarding him; if they were, I assume they’d worked matters out with each other. Nice to see.

Finally, on the west were Gazel and his band of party crashers. Gazel was

seated true west, Pegasus Knights captain Dolph west-northwest, and Dwargon arch-wizard Jaine on the west-southwest side. Henrietta the Knight Assassin and Vaughn the Admiral Paladin were providing guard duty for their king.

That's how our three sides were arranged, and as I surveyed the meeting hall, I noticed Masayuki looking restless. His face seemed tired, expressing, *Why is this happening to me?* more eloquently than any words. He wouldn't have to worry. I had an affinity for the guy, so if something went wrong, I'd step up to help him.

Testarossa, the chairperson of this summit, got to her feet. Everyone looked at her as she stood in the center and gave some opening words.

"The appointed time has arrived. Everyone seems to be here, so I would like to get this summit underway."

With a bow, she returned to the south side of the table. A chair was in place for her, so she'd have somewhere to sit when her services weren't required. I asked her in advance to lend me a hand if I got in trouble here, and I was sure she'd guide me through whatever might happen.

"I will begin by discussing the aim of this summit. We find ourselves at this event with little in the way of advance preparation, and I think some things might be said without being fully intended. If that happens, I'd like everyone to avoid belligerent behavior, stay calm, and listen carefully to the other speaker's opinions."

Testarossa paused here, gauging the audience's reaction. She represented us in the Council of the West, and she was used to proceedings like this. I just hoped things stayed this smooth until the end—that was my earnest wish as I focused on her.

"Now, I'd like to start by confirming one thing with all our participants. In anticipation of the closing of hostilities, the Empire wishes to forge an end-of-war agreement. In addition, in consideration of our nation's relationship with the Empire, it would also like to ratify a new pact outlining our future direction. Do I have all that correct?"

"No objections here."

Masayuki looked like he was going to say something, but Velgrynd spoke up first.

"Yes, and none from me."

Gazel nodded his heavy head as well. They had both acted ahead of me, so I hurriedly spoke.

"Right, so first, I'd like to go over the current situation with all of us. Anyone mind that?"

I was sounding pretty awkward, but so what? I waited for everyone's reaction, acting like I deserved to be here. Masayuki looked toward me, gaze respectful. I love that guy. Why, yes, I *do* think I'm all that and a bag of chips. Like, this hall's filled up with the most powerful people from the most powerful nations in the world.

It's not like I was having dinner with the prime minister of Japan in my previous life. Hell, I never even saw a member of the National Diet in person. There was this one time when a director from MLIT (the Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism) stopped by to check on our office; they were a client of ours. That's about it, though, and even then, it was just one of those awkward, informal office tours; we didn't wine and dine this person or anything. At first, I would've been nervous even chatting with someone like that about non-work topics; now, I was dealing with kings. *Plural* kings! It was kind of deeply moving, actually.

"If there are no objections, I'll have Testarossa begin, and we can discuss matters with one another when she's done. I'm willing to accept all feedback, and I'll have any mistakes corrected as well. You may begin."

The conversation went as Testarossa had outlined it with me beforehand. I'd tell everyone to stay quiet until we had our say before turning it over to her; she said this would keep things moving along. People on the same level as me—King Gazel, Emperor (for now) Masayuki, and his proxy Velgrynd—could speak up whenever they wanted, but anyone else who did so risked punishment for insulting the words of their kings. I wasn't sure how I liked that, but if it made things easier for me, let's do it.

So Testarossa began her rundown. She went over how things had worked out

atop the airship, stuff Gazel and the other dwarves weren't aware of, although she glossed over the truth at a couple of key points. Then I attempted to explain that Ludora, the imperial emperor, was actually a skill that had achieved sentience—but when we got to the part about how we won the battle against Velgrynd...

"Wait."

...Gazel called for a time-out.

"Oh? You can speak up later—"

"As if I could *wait* for that!"

*Hey! Why's he yelling at me?!*

"Um, King Gazel, is something wrong?"

That came off more modestly than I meant, but Gazel just stared at me, head propped against his hand. He remained silent as his eyes turned toward Velgrynd.

"I know this may be rude of me," he gravely began. "But does Lady Velgrynd agree with Sir Rimuru's statement just now?"

Gazel was being unusually polite. He'd called Velgrynd "*Lady*," even. Pretty unbecoming of a king, I thought. I looked on, wondering if this was going to work, but Velgrynd just offered him a placid smile.

"I have no problem with it, Dwarven King. I know you are a very intelligent man, far superior to Rimuru over there in terms of leadership. Ludora always has wonderful things to say about you—he wanted you on his team ever since you attained the title Master of the Sword. That's why I know you, and I certainly don't dislike you. So don't be so uptight, all right? Relax, and let's mingle with one another."

"Y-yes, my lady! B-but as a True Dragon, the strongest presence, and the guardian deity of the Empire, can you really say such things in public...?"

"No need to worry about that. You're Rimuru's friend, yes? If so, there's no reason for me to meddle with you. As Rimuru said just now, I was defeated by him."

Huh. That was surprising. I thought Velgrynd would claim she hadn't lost, like Veldora did, but she was perfectly frank admitting defeat. It was a shock to me, but much more than that to everyone else.

"Ehhhhh?! L-Lady Velgrynd was *defeated*!?"

"I can't believe it. The legend, the undefeated myth..."

The imperials in the room, raised in the lands Velgrynd ruled over, abandoned their silence and verbally expressed their extreme anguish.

"Whaaaaaaaa...?!"

"Are you serious? That godlike presence, something no mere mortal could ever best in battle... You're saying he *beat* you? I can hardly believe it, but if she admits it, it can't be a lie, huh...?"

Dolph could not speak coherently, and Vaughn was having trouble accepting reality. Meanwhile, Henrietta alone was looking at them and King Gazel, having a little smile to herself.

"Hee-hee-hee... How refreshing to know I don't have to report back to anyone about this. If I told everyone, they would think I've lost my mind."

Sounded kind of rude to me. But that was a Dwargon matter, and now wasn't the time to bring up stuff like that anyway.

In the midst of this, Jaine spoke up, taking a step back and observing Gazel as he was deep in agonized thought.

"Gazel, all of you—calm down. I'm not surprised in the least. The whole matter with the Primals wrung every drop of surprise from my body...and when I saw the evolution ceremony, it taught me that surprise was for the weak."

Sounded like it was an enlightening experience for her. That's why she was the only calm presence left in the room, I suppose. But her words brought the Dwargon entourage back to their senses, and they bashfully recomposed themselves.

As for the response from our gang:

"What?! Sir Rimuru, you emerged victorious against Lady Velgrynd? Unbelievable. We must have another feast tonight, mustn't we?"

There he goes again. For Rigurd, any excuse is good enough for a party. And here I thought he never doubted my victory from the start.

"Yeah, well, I figured as much. I mean, I saw it and all, so..."

Oh, great, Benimaru had been sneaking a look?

But before I could admonish him:

"Benimaru, *what* is the meaning of that? Don't tell me you, and only you, were watching Sir Rimuru at his most gallant and awe-inspiring?"

"N-no, Shion, I...I was tasked with checking on the state of our battle. I merely stopped by for a few moments..."

He was trying to find a decent excuse, but Benimaru never was good at that.

Diablo, meanwhile...

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Oh, you weren't watching, Shion? What a shame. Truly a pity you couldn't bear witness to such a wonderful battle!"

*Don't agitate her; don't agitate her!*

I didn't think anyone was as good at harassing people as Diablo was. I noticed Testarossa sighing at this sorry sight, too. You just didn't want to cross this guy at all costs.

"Quiet, please, everyone."

Testarossa might've been exasperated, but she didn't forget her role. Waiting until everyone was sufficiently calmed down, she spoke up to quiet the room. If she stepped in a moment later, Shion and Diablo might've started arguing. I offered her a silent *good job* for that performance.

Once things were chill again, the summit continued. Testarossa gave me the signal, so I kept going with my rundown.

"...So yeah, after I defeated Velgrynd, I captured her and put her through a thorough interrogation. That made me realize there were a few inconsistencies with her story. It seemed like Emperor Ludora wasn't who he claimed he was, so I put Velgrynd under observation for a bit, and then I discovered a terrifying fact. I'll cut out the details, but Velgrynd's mind was being controlled—

controlled by none other than Michael, the will contained within the emperor's skill!"

Now we were getting to the good part. I was about to continue, all smiles, when:

"Hold it."

Another objection? And from Gazel again, too.

"Um, if you could save the questions for later—"

Gazel heaved a heavy sigh, interrupting me. I was sure he was trying to collect himself with that sigh. Then, slowly, he spoke.

"Listen to me, Rimuru. I know I am speaking out of place...but I can no longer sit here silently."

"No?"

"No! Why are you cutting out the details?! How would we ever accept that a skill powerful enough to control the mind of Lady Velgrynd exists among us?! And what did you say? The will contained within his skill? I've never heard of such a thing. Do you know anything about this, Jaine?"

"...I've never heard of the like."

Gazel was trying to contain himself, but he just couldn't hide his agitation. Jaine, no doubt lost in her own thoughts, was slow to respond to him.

It was odd that nobody was complaining about Gazel's interruptions. Velgrynd was smiling a bit, enjoying all this, like nothing mattered as long as she had Masayuki. The current emperor, on the other hand, had already lost track of the proceedings. He was just sitting there, all but declaring to the world that this had nothing to do with him. I had a feeling such a bold presence would give Caligilio and his people the wrong idea and boost his rep, not that he'd ever notice. But enough about him.

Benimaru and the others looked really curious, too. They hadn't pressed me on this before, given how I didn't really want to talk about it, but I was sure they wanted to. That's probably why Testarossa didn't stop Gazel—but, quickly realizing her error, she tried taking over again like nothing had happened.

“Quiet, everyone, please. Regarding King Gazel’s question...”

Her quick reactions were much appreciated, but this would be hard to recover from. Like, I guess we could just let this slide, but now I was thinking it wouldn’t be so bad to just tell everyone.

“All right. I’ll go over the details.”

“Are you sure, Sir Rimuru?”

“Yeah. We have nothing but national leaders in this meeting hall. I doubt they’d go leaking secrets, and if they did, it wouldn’t amount to anything.”

It’s true. Even if I revealed the existence of a manas, it wasn’t going to hurt me at all. The only thing I absolutely wanted to keep secret was anything related to Ciel.

“I would appreciate that a great deal, Rimuru.”

Gazel bowed his head, expressing his gratitude. He sounded the way he did back in our training-partner days; I guess he stopped trying to put on a formal facade with me. That put me at ease, too, so I dove right in.

I went over the complete story—how the ultimate skill Michael had achieved sentience thanks to the exhaustion of its owner, Ludora, turning into the manas Michael. I also discussed everything I knew about the skill’s vicious abilities.

“An ultimate skill...? And no unique-level skills can work against anyone who possesses one...”

“Not precisely. The strength of skills can vary depending on the willpower driving them, so there are still some uniques strong enough to beat an ultimate. Those are the rare exceptions, though. Arts, too, are direct reflections of the wielder’s will, so those can hit home against an ultimate as well. I think King Gazel’s would, for example.”

“They would...?”

“And magic’s the same way, too. A magic spell is kind of a skill and an Art at the same time, so depending on your strength of will, you could defeat an ultimate-skill owner with it. I think you know what I’m talking about, don’t you, Jiwu and Bernie?”

Having lost to Diablo, I figured they understood. They both nodded listlessly in return. Diablo, meanwhile, was giving us the most distastefully blissful smile as he pondered over something—nothing good, I was sure. I wanted to tell him to stop thinking, but if he was behaving himself, I guess it was no problem.

Shion was mumbling to herself, “I really should procure an ultimate skill for myself, then...,” and the like. She realized they call them “*ultimate*” because they’re really, really hard to get, right? But I had the strangest premonition that she’d actually do it. It kind of scared me, so I stopped thinking about it.

“So that about covers it. Michael’s got a very special ability that lets him take full control over anyone defined as the angelic type. That’s why Velgrynd couldn’t resist it, and it brought her under its thrall without her ever realizing. I think Lieutenant Kondo was also affected by its rule. I was told that he was released from it just before his death, which gave him enough time to pass on his will to Carrera.”

“Kondo? The figure stalking the halls of information? Him as well?”

“It’s hard to believe...but I’m not foolish enough to doubt Lord Rimuru.”

“Oh... So then Sir Damrada...?”

“Yes. I think he realized before any of us that something was wrong with His Majesty the Emperor.”

The Empire side was stirring, although not enough to interrupt me. This normally wouldn’t be allowed, but there wasn’t much point clamping down on it. I kept soldiering on so no one would bring it up.

“Now, we believe that we’ve discovered Michael’s goal as well. It is aiming to revive Veldanava, its creator and true master.”

“““No!“““

The shouting began anew. I wasn’t sure who it came from. Well, I did, but I wasn’t going to start naming names.

“So now that we know they were under Michael’s rule, I have no intention of pursuing the imperial higher-ups for war crimes or the like. If they decide to continue warring with us, though, that’s another story.”

I paused and looked at Masayuki's group. Masayuki himself was unmoved—he was so disinterested in this, it was almost mesmerizing. Caligilio and Minitz, meanwhile, were half chuckling at the thought. They had no reason to fight me and absolutely no chance of winning, either. I'd probably react the same way.

*Looks like they're okay, then.*

"...But I'd surmise that none of the imperials here wish to do that, and we've already worked out our differences with Velgrynd. Michael was disguising himself as Ludora, and now that he's disappeared, they'll need a new leader, won't they? That's part of what today's summit is about, but would the Empire be able to offer their take on that?"

I turned the floor over to Masayuki's group. We needed to know this so we were all on the same page and could figure out what direction the Empire was taking. That's what Gazel's team was most concerned about, and I felt we needed to lay everything out on the table for them.

It was a big bet, of course. Normally, in a summit like this, you'd state your opinions and get feedback from all parties involved before holding any public meeting, apparently. We were flying by the seat of our pants here, though, so I couldn't guess how it'd turn out. In national talks, you weren't supposed to do this...but Testarossa wasn't stopping me. This was just the consensus opinion on running a summit, after all, and she was smiling like there was no problem with my approach, so I ignored my worries and kept things frank.

So how would it turn out?

"Minitz?"

"Yes, sir! I, Minitz, will brief you on this subject. Regarding the current state of the Empire, we have lost more than two-thirds of our war power, making it impossible to continue with hostilities. We are prepared to accept a treaty of unconditional surrender, but there is one problem to address as well—namely, the lack of a fully ordained leader on our side. This is something Lord Rimuru himself mentioned just now, but our most important priority at the moment is establishing and backing a new leader for ourselves. And since we have this opportunity today, I hope that all of you will accept and recognize our new emperor here."

Minitz gave the speech without fumbling over himself once, bowed, then looked at Gazel and me.

"Mm, is that your proposal?" Gazel asked me. "So you were expecting me to appear unannounced from the start, Rimuru?"

*What? Uh, not really.*

"I see we've been outfoxed, haven't we? This meeting isn't about Tempest and the Empire banding together—it's about Tempest backing the new emperor and building a solid base for the Empire to grow on. And in that case —"

"Indeed. We in Dwargon would gladly contribute to this. I would expect something in return, however."

*Whoa, whoa...*

Why did we just go from talking about accepting this new emperor to this weird idea that we'd be "backing" him?

"I am honored to hear you say that, Your Majesty. We, of course, will provide consideration that should prove suitable for both of your nations, as much as we can possibly provide, so please be assured of that."

I have to say—Minitz here was talking and acting like a seasoned politician, wasn't he? Not at all like when he was in battle. He was elegant then, too, but I guess he was the type who looked natural doing just about anything. Meanwhile, I was struggling just to understand what was going on. Nobody could tell because I couldn't sweat, but inside, I was freaking out.

Anyway, if Gazel had given his approval, I guess I was up next. Benimaru and Rigurd were stealing glances at me. I lightly nodded back and began speaking.

"Sure, I approve as well. And depending on how things turn out, I promise I'll provide him our full support."

I was just going with the flow, and now my understanding was catching up with me. Helping Masayuki was my intention from the start, but if you thought about it, that connected to providing aid as a nation, too. If we could make them owe us a favor and build a better future relationship, I was sure that'd be

the end of all wars between us. Even if it didn't go *that* well, we'd be fine for a good while, at least. We'd let the next generation worry about the far future—we needed to build a “now” for the time being.

“Thank you very much. I’m sure His Majesty the Emperor is just as glad to hear your words.”

Minitz bowed to us again. I really didn’t need that formal stuff. Let’s just keep this going.

“So by ‘new emperor,’ we’re talking about Masayuki here, right? Or Emperor Masayuki, I guess I oughtta be saying?”

“Lord Rimuru—”

“Oh, no, that’s no problem. Like, I can keep on calling you regular old ‘Rimuru’ like before, right?”

*Ah, Masayuki, my heartfelt friend!*

“Of course, Masayuki! It’s hard, you know, figuring out the right thing to call people at times like this!”

“Rimuru! I never thought of you as so generous before! I was practically holding my breath the past few days...”

Yeah, I get it. All alone in a war zone, no allies to turn to? Velgrynd clearly didn’t care about the Empire’s common people, besides. She didn’t see the point in worrying about any of that petty stuff—and the nobility were surely busy with their own affairs. Nobody could think about Masayuki’s circumstances, so I’m sure he had to shoulder all that anguish by himself.

That was why I’d wanted to talk things over with him—but asking Shion to relay the message sure backfired on me. I was picturing more of a personal chat, where we’d sit down and think about what both of us would do. That’s what I wanted, and I was sure Masayuki did as well. But there was no turning back now. I didn’t know anything about manners, so I was just gonna do what I wanted.

“May I have a moment, everyone?”

Before anyone could say anything else, Testarossa got the ball rolling.

"Sir Rimuru, our leader, seeks a more informal discussion. I know we all have our own positions to think about, but would you mind conducting this summit more in accordance with our style?"

She surveyed the hall with a smile. I swear, there was nobody I could rely on more right now! And Masayuki looked happy about it, too. Gazel was smirking and shaking his head, but he didn't voice any objections, and his underlings weren't about to, either. That was the end of the formal summit—now to get our hands dirty.

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"Boy, I can't thank you enough. I was about to keep my mouth shut the whole time, too."

"Yeah, I'll bet. That's what I wanted to do, too."

"Fools. We can't have the masters of entire nations acting like that!"

"Feh-feh-fehhh... You say that, Gazel, but you acted the same way, didn't you, once upon a time? Dignity and majesty are something anyone can gain...with experience."

"Jaine, do you really have to bring that up here?"

The tension was instantly gone—and just as quickly, everybody was relaxed.

Masayuki would now be officially named emperor, and we decided that all three nations would back the decision. The rest was just details; we didn't need to act so formal with one another now. I chose to be casual and ask the most pressing question on my mind.

"By the way, Masayuki, I'm glad you're gonna be emperor, but are the imperial citizens gonna accept that? I know we're all for it, but if the people aren't, we're gonna have problems, aren't we?"

Masayuki's eyes lit up. He must have thought the same thing.

"Right?! It'd just be so *weird*, wouldn't it?!"

"Ah-hem! Your Majesty, if you could control yourself a little..."

Caligulio tried to corral him, but Masayuki wanted to clear the air on this—and Gazel was willing to help.

"For that matter, what are you going to do about the lineage? Because you have not a drop of Emperor Ludora's blood in you, right? I doubt the nobility will accept that."

"That won't be a problem," replied Velgrynd. "As our imperial court law states, '*The person so named by Velgrynd, protector dragon of the Empire, is Ludora, the emperor.*' I'm sure many people think that's an archaic law, but it's both the truth and the most important part of the rules."

"Indeed," agreed Minitz. "Emperor Ludora has always been reborn as the legitimate child of a noble lady...but in our long history, there are some miscreants who tried to swap him out with another pretender to the throne. The one who sniffed out these crimes and punished the perpetrators is the Marshal—in other words, Lady Velgrynd here."

Well, yeah, trying to swap out the kid was never gonna succeed. If you knew how Ludora's reincarnations worked, there was no way you'd mistake a fake for the real thing. And I didn't even want to imagine the punishments involved. I didn't have to ask to know they must've been horrible.

"That being said, His Majesty always makes sure he passes on his sense of self to the next generation. Even if Lady Velgrynd never formally named him, I'm sure he'd be discovered in time as an adult."

Oh. So it gets easier to spot the guy once he's old enough to gain some self-awareness?

"Okay. Are you gonna say that Masayuki was an illegitimate child or something?"

"That would never work, Lord Rimuru. Our senators still have their records of the old Emperor Ludora—his blood type, even his DNA information. We might present a suitable standin as his mother, but claiming that Sir Masayuki is the son of Emperor Ludora is all but impossible."

Whoa. Empire tech had advanced *that* far? I thought it was a pretty good idea, but Minitz stopped me in my tracks.

"I had no idea this world had DNA testing..."

"What is DNA?"

"Well..."

Gazel was asking, so I did my best to explain while Caligulio and the others chatted next to us.

"We didn't have that sort of precise testing back in the day, I'm sure. I heard it created some real problems for you."

"Oh, yes. People would come begging to me to help with every single custody battle in the Empire. It was *such* a pain."

That was great and all, but wasn't the Empire in trouble, then? Right now, their "real" emperor was permanently gone, and in his place was Masayuki, a reincarnate with none of Ludora's memories. It'd be difficult to prove his soul belonged to the emperor, and despite our nations' backing, we didn't really have a way to *prove* he should take the throne.

"Well, why doesn't Masayuki just pretend to *be* Ludora? Wouldn't that be easier? He's got the same face and everything," I offered.

Any testing could be faked well enough, given the emperor's powers. Then we could just shove Ludora's memories into his brain, and all would be well.

"Uh-uh."

I thought it was a neat idea, but Velgrynd shot me down again.

"Could I ask why not?"

"You haven't forgotten about Michael's ability, have you? All the faith and loyalty the imperial population places on Ludora is what's powering Michael itself. If we announce that Emperor Ludora is dead, we could theoretically take all of that away."

*Oh? Yes, yes, of course I remember that...*

*She is correct. Simply declaring him dead would achieve nothing, but if that loyalty could be pointed toward a new target, it would shut away Michael's abilities. However, Michael has likely expected this and changed the target of its abilities from Ludora to someone else.*

Yeah. I'd suggested we kill off the Empire's entire population once, after all. If Michael was taking countermeasures, it had probably switched its energy

source to someone I couldn't touch. That, or someone incredibly powerful.

"I'm sure Michael is taking measures, yes, but it's better to commit to this than not to. That way, I won't have any reason to even think about touching the Empire's citizens."

"Yes, of course. That's why, instead of fretting over the details, I'm just going to declare by my name that Masayuki is Ludora. I doubt anyone would dare object to that."

Velgrynd sure had confidence in herself—but then, she deserved to. She's the Flame Dragon, the appointed guardian of the Empire, and the court law stated that Ludora was anyone she said it was. It made sense. Kind of the most arm-twisting approach to all this, but it wasn't like anyone could ignore what Velgrynd told them.

"Are you fine with all that, Masayuki?" I asked.

"Do you think it's fine?"

"...Mm. I dunno."

I figured he wasn't fine with it, but he didn't have much choice.

"You don't have to if you don't want to, Masayuki."

*Yikes!*

Velgrynd gave us a scarily gentle smile. Maybe that description was a contradiction in terms, but that was exactly how it felt to me.

"...Oh, I'll do it. I've been touted as a Hero or whatever up to now anyway, so it's not like yet another title's gonna change much."

Masayuki's declaration was made with glassy eyes, like his mind was on another plane of existence, but he was nonetheless certain. Minitz and Caligulio were happy to hear it—they needed a new leader and symbol for the Empire if it was going to stay operational. And yeah, I thought Masayuki was the right guy for the job. Between his looks and his skill, he was gonna be incredibly popular before long.

"Okay, so we're all resolved here that the Empire's gonna back Masayuki as emperor and take measures to firm up his position?"

Everyone nodded at me. Except Masayuki. He only followed suit once he saw that everyone else was nodding, with the greatest of reluctance. I knew he was a responsible young man despite it all; once he took up a job, I figured he'd see it to its end.

"All right. Then I'll officially announce that we accept this move. In fact, I'll also promise you we'll release the soldiers and officers held prisoner in Tempest in very short order. We won't try anyone for their actions in the war, but we can discuss reparations later on. We'll make all the arrangements once Masayuki's crowned emperor, all right?"

"That sounds wonderful to me."

"We are all moved by your great generosity."

I thought we'd all be in consensus on this, but Gazel looked like he had something to say.

"I have no objection to that approach, but I have one question. Sir Masayuki, you are attempting to take the throne while being a known Hero. How do you plan to unite your people behind you?"

He stared at Masayuki, his sharp eyes revealing everything in the world to him. Masayuki flinched a little at their force, flashing me a distressed look before replying, "Um...? I suppose I'll want to give them a world where we all can smile and live together?"

I snickered a bit. That was exactly my philosophy.

"Yes... That truly *is* the best!" I said to him.

"Right? I figured you'd agree with me!"

"Of course, Masayuki. I actually told Ludora the same thing, but he just wrote me off as young and naive and stuff. I was worried I had the wrong idea, but *that* concern's definitely in the past. I knew I was right!"

"That's great! I wasn't too sure, because I'm not any good at politics and all that. Now I think I can take the throne with some more confidence."

"Mm, yeah. We'll both have to do our best, then!"

Masayuki and I shared in a hearty laugh. The reaction from the crowd was

pretty diverse—Diablo and Shion were smitten; Velgrynd smiled warmly at us; Caligilio and Minitz exchanged an awkward, resigned chuckle; and Gazel rolled his eyes up toward the heavens.

“I’ve had it with you people!”

“Feh-feh-fehhh... I understand your concern, Gazel, but neither of them has any lust for conquest, you know. They are certainly both amateurs, however. You must guide them and make sure they stay on the right path.”

“I know, Jaine. But it’s going to be so much trouble, guiding these people who see governance in terms of these silly, youthful ideals...” Gazel sighed.

He *always* fretted over us like that.

“Aw, c’mon, you don’t have to worry so much,” I assured him. “I’m studying, too, y’know. It’ll be fine!”

I was getting guidance from Vester and Ellie, too, not just Gazel. Everything would work out okay, probably.

“...You’re studying? Really?”

Really. Only when I had the free time, though. But if he was that concerned, maybe I could relieve his mind a little more.

“Besides, I’m not planning to get *that* involved in politics. You could learn from that, Masayuki. Just let Minitz and his team handle all the *real* work.”

“So I *can* do that? I was thinking about it, but I wasn’t sure it was the right thing to do. That’s sure a load off.”

Masayuki and I smiled at each other again.

“...Well, do what you want. You’re not alone, anyway. Spread your responsibility among your peers and grow with them. I’ll help you as I can.”

Gazel was still nursing a headache over this, but at least he was accepting it. Or not. But either way, he was offering his support for the long term.

Then:

“And me as well; I have no objections to the decisions made at this summit. If the lands east of us remain stable, that brings peace to my kingdom. And I’ll

provide as much support as I can for the rebuilding of our border areas as well.”

“I am overjoyed to hear that, Your Majesty!”

“My thanks to you, King Gazel!”

So everything got wrapped up pretty nicely in the end.

In the years to come, the history books would call this the day the Savior Emperor Masayuki Ludora Nam-ul-Nasca entered the scene.

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Our direction was in place. Now it was time for lunch.

Things were already pretty informal by now, so the meal proceeded along agreeably enough. We were offering *kaiseki* today, a traditional multicourse Japanese meal that was usually the domain of super-fancy Japanese restaurants back home. This was the middle of a summit, so I opted for a menu that’d offer our esteemed guests the best experience possible. Shuna outclassed herself this time. I went with this choice for two reasons: one, Gazel was used to this sort of thing with me, and two, chopsticks had spread relatively widely throughout the Empire. A Japanese meal, I thought, would be the best bet.

“The food here never disappoints, to be sure.”

“Yes. It’s making me thirsty for something...”

“Don’t you start, Vaughn! Whether or not you meant that, we still have an important summit to wrap up.”

“You’re so serious-minded, Dolph. Isn’t he, Lord Rimuru?”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t mind some sake, either. But...”

I snuck a look at Shuna. She beamed back at me. Nope. Not gonna happen.

“...But let’s be patient on that for now and finish up this summit. That’s your lesson for today, Vaughn and Dolph. Dedication is important!”

“Ha-ha-ha! How harsh. Should I expect a different side of you tonight, then?”

“Hey—”

“Oh, of course,” I said. “Right, Benimaru?”

"You certainly may. In fact, why don't we break out some of our very finest blackspell sake?"

"Ooh, that sounds nice! Glad to see you know how to have fun, Sir Benimaru."

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, ogres are known for their appreciation of fine drink, as I'm sure Shuna here knows."

"Whoa, Shuna drinks, too?"

I was only half listening, but Benimaru's revelation that Shuna enjoys alcohol was a pretty big surprise to me. Better sort this out...

"Just occasionally, my brother. Don't lump me together with Shion, please."

Huh. So she *does* drink. Shuna struck me as underage—not that age really mattered to monsters.

"Ha-ha-ha! Sorry, sorry."

"Lady Shuna! I don't drink *that* much!" Shion protested.

That was a lie. Alvis was about the only person I knew who gave Shion any competition at the bar.

Benimaru, all too aware of this, had a laugh about it. I didn't really picture him as a drinker, but he *was* married to Alvis now, so maybe he joined her on a fun evening every once in a while. I bet that built up his capacity for drink. It takes some getting used to before you find the taste of alcohol appealing anyway. Everything in moderation, of course. Enjoy the drink, but don't let it drink you up. We could all learn from that, myself included.

So we were all enjoying this lunch together when I suddenly heard someone crying. All eyes turned toward the sound at once, wondering where it came from. It turned out to be Caligulio.

"Um, is something wrong? Did the meal not agree with you?"

Shuna came right to Caligulio's side to offer him solace.

"No, pardon me," he replied. "I just remembered out of nowhere—me, a military man... I know it's silly for me to say such things, but so many people lost their lives because they followed my foolish plans. Eating this wonderful meal, I

couldn't help but reflect on how none of them is ever coming back. I'm sorry; this is my fault... Farraga, Gaster, and Zamdo, too..."

Ahhh, a weepy drunk, huh? Not that we were serving any liquor; I guess he was just getting drunk off the atmosphere. But maybe this was a good opportunity for us.

"Testarossa?"

"Yes, I've already contacted Moss and told him to bring them here."

Well done. Before I even gave the order, she read my intentions and took action. Then, in less than five minutes, several dozen men appeared in our little lunch meet.

"Lord Rimuru! I, Zamdo, have come at your summons!"

This was Major General Zamdo and his men, the exact people Caligulio had just mentioned. They had run full speed all the way here, making them red and sweaty, but they still stammered their hellos to me between breaths.

These men had died once. They'd been aboard the imperial flagship, killed by Testarossa's Death Streak nuclear magic and completely disintegrated. But the great thing about Testarossa was that she'd actually remembered that I accepted Caligulio's plea to spare the lives of Zamdo and his team, so she had retrieved all of their souls before triggering the magic. She was modest about it — "*It was only possible because you had me evolve, Sir Rimuru*" — but I was more impressed with the thoughtfulness she'd shown.

So I accepted their souls from Testarossa, installed them into pseudo-souls, then had them placed into homunculi.

"Are...are you Zamdo?! Lady Velgrynd told me you had all died! But you're alive?!"

"Oh, you're right. I doubted any of them could withstand Death Streak. Did Testarossa save them?"

"Precisely, Lady Velgrynd," Testarossa replied. "Sir Rimuru is a very merciful man, you see."

"Indeed, there's certainly no doubting that."

"Very intelligent of you."

"Hee-hee-hee..."

"Hoh-hoh-hoh..."

Now they were communicating via their tittering. It was kind of scary to see, so I looked away.

So Zamdo and his group were together with Caligilio now, celebrating their safety.

Farraga, sadly, I could do nothing for—I'm not omnipotent, you understand. Besides, if someone like Caligilio had the heart in them to mourn their dead companions, I'd hope they would never try something as stupid as war ever again. If you were defending yourself, then fine, but staging an invasion was the height of folly. I know that sometimes you can't solve problems with a bunch of pleasant words, but I still couldn't help but have this thought.

I wished politicians would place their families on the scales with war to see if it was ever really necessary. I hoped that they'd stick to talking as much as possible and try to stamp out pointless wars that way. I didn't say it out loud, but that's what I wanted.

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After lunch, we continued with the summit at three in the afternoon. We had come up with our general direction in the morning; now we planned to go over it again and work out everyone's roles.

"All right," Testarossa began. "I would like to start by reaffirming our positions. First, the Armed Nation of Dwargon."

We ran down the list of what we had agreed on.

Tempest and Dwargon would be joint signers of a document affirming the crowning of the new emperor. That was the first step; after that, under the name of Emperor Masayuki, all three nations would declare an end to the war and a new alliance among them. This would be the basis for a new governmental framework, one separate from the Council of the West.

Dwargon would step up to rebuild the borderland areas between them and

the Empire. This included the highways and nearby buildings—not that much, really, but this pledge also involved helping the victims who lived there.

Once they had built trust with that, they'd get down to *proper business* and begin work on a train line toward the imperial capital. The plan was to take on this monumental project as they refurbished the path the Empire's Magitank Force cut across the base of the Canaat Mountains. We'd deploy teams of foremen from Tempest for the job, working together with dwarven engineers to complete it. Running magitrains across these tracks would open up fresh lines of distribution, encouraging people to travel more. It'd be the first step to an entirely new era of development, and dreaming of that day made me all kinds of excited. It reminded me anew of how much I loved construction projects like this.

Tempest's role in our agreement was mainly to provide our full support to Masayuki. We'd send Testarossa out to establish an embassy within the Empire, with the mission of sweeping away the Empire's old lines of thought and spreading the word about this new era.

The Empire's citizens had no memory of losing a war; Veldora had given them a good thrashing or two over the years, but they had no experience with apologizing to other nations. Anyone who had lost a loved one would understand the pain of that...but those on the home front who weren't directly affected could feasibly demand a second war from their safe enclaves. They turned their attention only toward the profits they could earn, ignoring the pain of others, and chances were they wouldn't like Masayuki's anti-war stance. They wouldn't take direct action against him, considering Velgrynd was there... but they might decide to act all loyal while sabotaging his efforts beneath the surface. It'd be a colossal pain to deal with.

Minitz would help persuade the nobility, and Caligulio would work to unite the military again, but I feared just those two wouldn't be enough to fend off all the seasoned, conniving schemers over there. Velgrynd would probably say something like, *Why don't we just kill them all?* but that was out of the question. The Empire had already lost enough important people; they couldn't afford any more losses in the bureaucracy. Instead, we'd have to take those fearsome opponents and use them to our advantage. It was going to be a tough

slog through harsh terrain, but the past few days of debate told us it was the only way.

That's where Testarossa came in. With the help of the sharp-eared spy Moss, she could uncover those schemers' plans in one fell swoop. They'd be troublesome to deal with as a group, but if she could blackmail them—er, *persuade* them the right way, I was sure they'd grow cooperative. Things were pretty calm over in the Council of the West, so Testarossa reasoned Cien could serve well enough there by himself.

So that was our decision, and along the way, we also decided that Venom would continue to accompany Masayuki as a bodyguard.

"Are you all right with that? We'd be putting one of your clan members on a long-term assignment."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... That will not be a problem. If it will serve your purposes, Sir Rimuru, use and abuse him all you want."

I didn't have any comment about that exchange between Velgrynd and Diablo. Pushing the question accomplished nothing with that demon.

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Unlike in the morning, the afternoon proceedings were comparatively lively. All the Empire's current issues were already laid out in the open, and we all conferred with one another to come up with solutions. It was a really worthwhile use of the time.

"We in the Empire will never forget all this generosity you're showing us."

"Whoa, whoa, we're still just planning this out, you know. Now we're gonna have to step up and make it happen, right? Thank us once all the work's completed."

"Ha-ha-ha! The work, eh? Ahhh, there's just no beating you, Lord Rimuru. Summing up national-level crises so pithily like that..."

Minitz chuckled over it, but his eyes were aglow, his passion set aflame by my words. I was happy to see his enthusiasm.

We had our basic direction set in stone now, but we still had one problem we

couldn't afford to forget. Gazel was the first to mention it.

"So, Rimuru, let me bring up the most important question—can you beat this enemy?"

Right—Michael, Feldway, and their servants. We still had threats stalking us, waiting for their chance to strike.

"Well, to be honest with you, I can't guarantee that I can. But I'm not coming in this to lose."

"I see. Knowing you, I'm sure you'll take any measure necessary to make those words come true."

"You're rating me *far* too highly."

"Hmph! When I saw Lady Velgrynd's strength for myself, I was prepared to lose the war *and* die at the same time. I figured she was strong, but I couldn't have guessed she was *that* much so."

Vaughn and Dolph nodded at this confession from Gazel. Yeah, when I saw Testarossa get taken down, I thought it was over, too. I got kinda angry after that, letting me overcome my fear—and really, the next thing I knew, it was over. But looking back, it's almost a mystery why we won.

At least I had Ciel now. That, and Veldora and Diablo's demons. I wasn't alone, and that in itself gave me strength.

"Well, I didn't think I'd ever let some slime defeat me. But...I'm thankful for that now, and I'm sure my elder sister Velzard could fare no better against you."

Velgrynd seemed unperturbed by Gazel's words. I wasn't so sure I could beat Velzard, given the reports of her beating Veldora in a one-sided whipping, but I knew that was what Velgrynd truly believed.

"Please, you're flattering me too much. I'm a little embarrassed."

"Oh, quit being so modest. You beat me in pure ability, not luck or anything. And it wasn't even close, either. You know that."

Velgrynd wasn't ashamed of her loss because it was all in the past to her, I bet. She had already dealt with it, and now she was accepting of it. *Those* types of people are the scarier ones. I secretly increased my level of caution around

her.

Now it was time for me to give my honest opinion.

"The fact is, we don't know the enemy's fighting ability, and we can't predict how they'll come for us. Regardless of their goals, I'd like to know what they'll aim for—and what methods they'll take."

I placed several people up on the meeting hall's giant screen.

"So these are the enemies who invaded the labyrinth. These existence points are a general measure of their strength, but they're around three million each, which puts them right there with the upper echelon of my own officers. I'd prefer not to fight any of them one-on-one, but they're going to be tough to fend off."

I then revealed as much as I knew about them. After I did, Velgrynd spoke up to provide some details.

"I defeated all of them, but let me give you a word of advice. These are ancient people, servants who aided my elder brother Veldanava, and they're as much trouble to deal with as the Primal Demons. Their actual bodies remained sealed away; what we saw earlier were just the weakened Separate Body versions. They can't be beaten by regular means, so all of us should remain careful here."

None of us really knew how to react. Didn't Velgrynd have no trouble at all destroying them?

*That is the effect of Velgrynd's ability to leap across dimensions. Velgrynd herself can only make her leaps if she has a piece of Ludora's soul to aim toward, but she wouldn't have any trouble directing her strikes at those targets.*

I see... So Velgrynd could just trace the connection Cornu had to his Separate Body to destroy his main body as well?

*I believe that to be correct. This Dimensional Combo, capable of landing attacks across space and time, is impossible to escape even with Parallel Existence.*

*Really? That's crazy. Velgrynd is just too awesome.*

I didn't know how much experience she had built over time, but she used all her abilities to a scary level of perfection. She had been great to start with, and now she was even better. Veldora had earned Parallel Existence as well, which he was delighted about, but I didn't think it'd really *do* anything at all for him. If he knew that...well, I'd pity him then, to be sure.

I wasn't the only one who didn't know how to react to this news. The imperials, along with Gazel and his team, seemed to chew over Velgrynd's words. To the Empire, Velgrynd still served as a last-resort measure; if things got bad, she'd figure something out for them. Dwargon, on the other hand, had problems.

"So we could not beat them...?"

"It seems so. We have no countermeasures, sadly."

"Vaughn!"

"It's the truth. No point trying to act tough about it—we should be frank with one another and work out a solution, shouldn't we?"

"Mm, you're not wrong, but..."

"No, Vaughn's exactly right. We can't beat this enemy, but we still need to think about what we'll do when they appear. Lord Rimuru, based on what you know about Michael and the Mystic Lord's goals, do you think Dwargon might become involved?"

Hmm. Didn't seem too likely, did it?

"I think you're all right on that count, probably," I said. "Not that you'd be safe—I just mean you're lower on the priority list."

"Yes," Gazel agreed. "If the enemy seeks to revive the god Veldanava, I suppose Dwargon isn't even a blip in their minds."

"Rude way to put it, but I suppose that's accurate."

"No matter. Rather disappointing to hear as a man of the sword, but as king of a nation, it does put my mind at ease." Gazel smiled. "Regarding those methods, however... Is the enemy that serious about this mission of theirs?"

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... You mean about gathering Sir Veldora and Lady

Velzard's power to resurrect Sir Veldanava? A foolish idea at best, I'd say."

"Sir Veldanava is immortal as it stands. It's incredibly presumptuous for mere humans to attempt reviving him."

Diablo was sneering at the idea, and Benimaru was enraged by it. It was a mystery why Veldanava wasn't waking up, but yes, True Dragons were immortal. I agreed that the idea wasn't likely to work.

"But in that case, would they try to go for the Dragon Princess, perhaps?"

Caligilio was sharp to notice that. Yes, Milim had inherited the powers of Veldanava, which would certainly make her a target.

"I can't rule out the potential," Velgrynd replied. "But they'd be killing their own chances if they tried laying hands on my elder brother's beloved. If all they sought was his power, that's one thing, but if they truly plan to resurrect him, I'd hope they wouldn't do anything to rile him like that."

Yeah, Milim was pretty strong, and I didn't think she had any angel-type ultimate skills. Carillon and Frey were awakened as well, so I didn't feel I had to worry about any of them. If Velgrynd agreed with me, I think just a warning to tip them off would be good enough. But I still had a concern.

"You're making it sound like Veldanava doesn't care about his brother and sisters at all."

"That's pretty rude of you."

Velgrynd looked at me, more exasperated than angry.

"Um, sorry. Just being honest and stuff..."

"It's fine."

Good. Velgrynd's generosity saved me again. I'll try to be careful next time.

"It's not that he doesn't care. True Dragons simply think in different ways from those with limited life spans. My sister Velzard is the same way; she's obliterated Veldora countless times in the name of '*educating*' him. Thus, I'm sure that once Veldanava is revived, they'll want to release all our powers as well."

*Ah, makes sense.* It'd be like what I did—eating them up, then making them get resurrected. Their memories would be retained as well, and they wouldn't care if their personalities changed or whatever.

"So Lady Milim isn't a True Dragon, and therefore she's not immortal. And if she was killed, that would incite Sir Veldanava's rage."

Testarossa summed up Velgrynd's thoughts for us. It wasn't a lock, but I felt like that was the right thought to have.

"Okay," I said. "In that case, let me at least warn Milim."

Velgrynd nodded and turned toward Masayuki next to her. "You look like you think this doesn't involve you, Masayuki...but you're absolutely being targeted as well. You need to be the most careful of all here."

"Huh?! So they still haven't given up?"

"Your Majesty...unlike the labyrinth we're in, you can't be revived if you die in the Empire! You need to realize that and take better care of yourself!"

"We will stake our lives protecting you, but this is no normal enemy. We need you to take ample care in what you see and do for us."

"Sure, sure. I mean, um, yes. Thank you."

With that half-hearted reply, our afternoon discussions came to a close.



The dinner was pretty luxuriant—a full-course Italian meal.

It began with a beet soup (or something close to beets), then continued with a duck-gizzard confit and *zeppoline*. That was followed by vegetable couscous and a lightly grilled, medium-fatty fillet of spear tuna.

Everything was top-notch, but it didn't end there. There was a *panna cotta* with tank prawn, *involtini* with battleship fish, fortress-crab spaghetti—a truly heavenly menu brought to our tables. After an intermezzo of mushroom risotto, we were presented with a seafood soup containing the essence from all the day's fresh seafood. Every spoonful had a distinct taste, making it an exquisite masterpiece. Crafting it took half a day of simmering assorted soups and mixing them together, an incredible amount of work.

Our cooks put their lives into this menu, filling it with the kinds of hidden delicacies you'd get to enjoy maybe once a year. It was topped off with the evening's main dish—fillet of cowdeer veal. Gently cutting off a piece and putting it in my mouth, I found it melted before I even chewed it.

It was good. It was *so* good!! Benimaru and I gave each other high fives after we were done. No need for words—that was good enough. I mean, I normally talk my head off at meals, but everyone was silent tonight. Maybe that was a sign of just how satisfied we were. Only when the white-wine yogurt dessert was passed out did we express our opinions.

"What is this...deliciousness?! As an imperial noble, I'd like to believe I've enjoyed many good things, but *this* is on another level!"

"I know. Even as a prisoner of war, I was looking forward to the food here, and I don't think I've experienced such bliss in my life. Thank you, Lord Rimuru!"

"Man, y'know, if I get to eat stuff like this, maybe I'll put up with being emperor after all."

"I've studied cuisine myself, but I'll never get *this* good. No waste to it at all, but you can tell they carefully considered everyone consuming this here."

The imperial crowd sure dug it. But the Dwargon panel wasn't sitting there quietly, either.

"Well, Rimuru, it looks like your kitchen staff has improved their cooking skills again. Lady Shuna was her name, wasn't it? I'd love to invite her to our kingdom and have her teach us some recipes."

"So true. I'm more a fan of excellent drink than fine food, but I'll make an exception for this any day. The lack of quantity was a little annoying, but now it's made me want to enjoy it all over again. Everything's so carefully calculated to make me think that!"

"Nah, I'm not so sure about that, but I *do* agree with you on wanting to have more of everything on the menu."

"...Ah! Whoa! It was so delicious, I almost caught myself traveling to the afterlife for a moment."

"If you are, Lady Jaine, at least you cleaned your plate first, huh?"

"Oh, enough from you, Henrietta! You ate just as much as I did!"

"What?! It's rude to point that out, you know! Whether it's true or not!"

With dwarves, pretty much any kind of food worked as long as the drink was good, so I really wanted to wow them with this meal. Thanks to Shuna and her team, I'd call this mission accomplished for sure.

Even with all this, though, Shion and Diablo were the same as always. Diablo was pouring drinks for people, ever the faithful butler, while Shion was standing tall and motionless as my bodyguard. But I knew the truth. Shuna had told me she made a habit of stealing bites from the kitchen, calling it "*testing for poison.*" Tonight she was even taking seconds, apparently. At least I didn't have to worry about her going hungry.

\*

Now we were all relaxing post-dinner in the meeting hall's lounge, chatting and enjoying some coffee. Everyone was excitedly talking about the meals and their personal lives, but then Gazel lumbered right up to me.

"By the way, Rimuru, something is bothering me."

"Mm? What's up?"

"You did it again, didn't you?"

"Um...?"

"You evolved all your close advisers. *Particularly* Benimaru over there."

"Oh, uh, yeah."

Great. He was gonna yell at me, wasn't he? I wished he'd stop springing this stuff on me out of nowhere. Wouldn't hurt him to give me some time to come up with excuses, would it?

But as I feared the worst, Gazel smiled from ear to ear. "Oh, don't be nervous. I'm not angry with you. The blood drained from my head when Jaine first told me, but now I realize what you did was eminently necessary."

"Y-yes, of course."

Phew. If he wasn't gonna yell at me, then great.

"But you're gonna have a lot of explaining to do, you know."

"How do you mean?"

"Didn't it occur to you? The Western Nations, the Western Holy Church, Thalion, all the other human nations—*they* were watching this war closely, too. Declaring an end to it is fine, but you're gonna have to explain what happened during it, too."

"Well, I thought I could just make up some stuff..."

No way anyone would believe an earnest explanation. As long as I didn't tell anyone that my pals got evolved to awakened-demon-lord level, no one would ever find out, I don't think. I figured that fabricating some kinda story wouldn't be a problem, but...

"Yes, well, that would work with the Western Nations well enough. Blumund might have their doubts, but the rest are too peaceful to care about the details—and if anyone has questions, they probably won't press you with them, considering Tempest is pretty much an allied nation to them."

*Right?*

"So no problems, then?"

"*Ohhh*, yes there are! You won't trick *that girl*, for one. She'll ask you for an official explanation, you realize. What will you do then?"

Um, "*that girl*?"

Oh! Wait—that one?

"You mean Ellie? Well, I already told her, so no worries there."

Elmesia was worried about us as well, so Mjöllmile and I talked things over with her. They were considering their moves if we faltered and Thalion had refugees on their doorstep.

The three of us, as the Three Pranksters, maintained emergency contact with one another via a very handy magitool—compact and hinged like a flip phone. It provided encrypted voice chat via electronic and geomagnetic waves, making it

impervious to magical jamming. All of its components used rare, sought-after materials, though, making each handset worth a small fortune. I didn't even have enough to give to my top officials, which should tell you a lot about how much they cost.

But either way, these devices let me chat directly with Elmesia anytime I wanted. Before this party began, I dropped her a quick line just to say, "Hey, we won," and stuff. "Okay," she'd replied, "*that's a relief. I'll stop by again soon to talk in depth, all right?*" So no, Gazel had nothing to worry about on that count.

And yet...

"Did you just say *Ellie*?!"

Gazel shouted that at the top of his lungs as he stared wide-eyed at me, like he couldn't believe what I'd just said. Weird.

"What was so surprising about that?"

"Don't play dumb with me! Since when were you *that* intimate with the Heavenly Emperor?!"

*Oh, that. Well...you know, I'm good at that kinda thing.*

No matter how scary the other side is, I start with a conversation. It's important that you understand what they're trying to say. When I was running construction sites, I'd sometimes get into it with angry neighbors shouting at me with their complaints, but once they calmed down and talked things over, their problems could often be easily solved.

Not that everything works out great all the time. When it does, you just have to listen and keep listening. Then the other side will warm up to you; they'll see you as someone who understands what they're saying. That, and it'll buy you time until a solution comes along. You don't really have to do anything—just listen to the complaining and play along. Then they'll warm up to you, and it'll work out as I described it.

In my life, I always saw communication—the way I interacted with people—as the most important thing. That held true when I met with Elmesia, too; we kind of became friends without my realizing it. You might think it was because of all the drinking we did, but, well, I forgot how it happened anyway. Forgetting

inconvenient truths is another key in muddling through life, although it's also key to sizing up your regrets and avoiding the same mistake next time. It's a tough balance, and I'm still working on it today.

"Well, I have to keep the details a secret, but yes, we get along pretty well."

I didn't need to confess to getting drunk and shooting off my mouth around her. So I dodged the question, but Gazel wasn't buying it.

"Listen to me, Rimuru—merely gaining an audience with the Heavenly Emperor of Thalion takes a monumental effort. You'd be lucky if you only have to wait months for the chance; if we in Dwargon sent a request, we'd be waiting at least six. She's got such a long life span, a month feels like a day to her. But you claim you can get in touch with her *that* easily?"

"Uh..."

"I-indeed, Lord Rimuru! Thalion is very important to us in the Empire as well. Imagine, you having those sorts of connections..."

Now Caligilio was joining the conversation. He explained that the Empire once saw Thalion as its biggest threat, believing them to possess as-yet-unseen magical weapons. The plan was to attack and invade them last.

Gazel nodded at all this. A lot of the Western Nations kept a keen eye on Thalion as well; it was a gigantic nation that could easily take over the entire economy of the west, so they had good reason to. And here's me, talking their leader up on the phone with no appointment. I wouldn't have known, but yeah, I was sure it sounded pretty unbelievable. It was the truth, though.

"Ha...ha-ha-ha-ha. I, uh, I guess you can call it luck?"

"Pfft. It's typical for you, eh, Sir Rimuru?"

"Yes, exactly! In fact, I'm sure Thalion is elated at the chance to stay so close to him!"

Diablo and Shion were singing my praises, but as I saw Gazel sighing to himself, I thought about how nice it'd be if they'd shut up at times like these.

Surprisingly, Minitz agreed with my secretaries. "Yes... If the Heavenly Emperor understands the value Sir Rimuru brings to her, her wanting to keep in

touch would make sense.”

“True,” Caligulio said. “And a leader that fearsome would certainly have the intelligence to see that. Our Empire believed Thalion wouldn’t deploy their Magus corps in this war—but if their Heavenly Emperor expected that, perhaps Thalion would’ve targeted our nation if Tempest faltered in the battle. Perhaps we dodged a bullet after all.”

Sounded like they were warier of Thalion than I thought. I never saw them as that dangerous a presence, but now I was glad I made friends with them. I had a standing invite from Ellie to pay her another visit, and I definitely had a lot I wanted to learn from her nation.

“I’m sure this information was all classified, but now I’m wondering how much our Imperial Information Bureau was keeping from us.”

“Unfortunately,” a smiling Velgrynd said to Minitz, “I didn’t know anything about this, either. Or maybe I simply forgot about it. It was a long time ago.”

Given her mean streak, I was sure she’d forgotten about nothing in the past.

“Oh, did you want to say something to me?”

“No, nothing...”

Scary. It was like she was reading my mind. I hated making people like her angry.

Still, I didn’t expect my friendship with Elmesia to provoke that much surprise. Better not tell anyone that Mjöllmile was in with us. There was the whole REG thing we had going, too, and I definitely didn’t want to blab about that.

I silently swore to keep that to myself as I enjoyed the rest of the night.

\*

Gazel and his team left the next morning. Caligulio was preparing to march our captured imperial forces back to the Empire, following the directions we’d decided upon at the summit. The paths they’d take were still under construction, but Adalmann’s troops would handle the job for us. Some of the imperials wanted to stay in Tempest, but I preferred they went home first to help stabilize the Empire; they could file for immigration after that.

The preparations were done within a week, with the big departure coming soon after. We were working through the remaining issues, thinking up solutions, and checking on progress. Everything was going fine in the Empire, too. Until Testarossa contacted me to say something had changed, I was willing to take a wait-and-see approach with them.

I was slightly concerned about the Dwarven Kingdom, however. If a seraphim-class enemy knocked on their door, Gazel and his armies would face tough going. The urban parts of Dwargon, though, were a natural fortress, further protected by a multilayer defense system, and it wouldn't be easy to break through.

If they could contact us before that system got breached, things should work out well. With that in mind, I gave Gazel one of my "cell phones" as a gift, instructing him to use it when necessary. That, and I deployed Agera, one of our own, to Gazel's side. Gazel said he wanted to redouble his efforts on his martial-arts training, and Agera had expressed a desire to go out and see the world a little. He'd told me that he had some things on his mind he wanted to work through, and Carrera was all for letting him do as he pleased. Knowing Agera's background, I wasn't too sure how to proceed...but I figured he'd need some time off, so I accepted the proposal.

Now Dwargon was better prepared for a protracted war. Hopefully nothing would happen at all, but if it did, we'd take whatever action was required.

Farminus, home to Yohm and company, was also being taken care of. Diablo deployed Gadora to that kingdom to explain matters to them. I hadn't conducted any private interview with him, so he had set off two days ago.

He had his duties as labyrinth guardian to think of, but his Demon Colossus, the thing he needed for his job, was gone. We didn't even have a burned-out shell or anything, so we'd have to rebuild it from scratch. The guys at the lab were all happy about that; apparently, they had some new machine designs they wanted to test out. I was the one funding this, and this research certainly didn't come cheap, but they'd receive money from our treasury as well, so I told them to keep working on it until they were satisfied with the results.

Their work would naturally take time, so we decided Gadora would stay in

Farminus for now.

As for the kingdom of Blumund and the other Western Nations, we had Cien covering those. I had sent Zonda over to assist him, and demons are generally capable of Spatial Transport, so they could handle most anything that came up.

Honestly, I didn't see much strategic reason our enemies would strike at us from this area, so I wasn't planning any further measures than that. I doubted anything would happen, but if it turned out our enemies were in a human-massacring mood, Guy wouldn't take that sitting down. He didn't want to see humanity wiped out, so I was sure he'd take action. He and Luminus, too—if the enemy tried any meddling in the area, nothing that required Guy's attention, Luminus and the Crusaders could handle that.

I had alerted the other REG members of this so Glenda and her team could step up behind the scenes, too. If things got too hot over there, I figured they could buy us enough time until we could work it out. Glenda had one of my cell phones as well—not her own but one I'd lent to her so she could stay in contact with REG. Since that gave us instant contact with the Western Nations, we decided no further action was necessary unless we received an alert.

The only problem that remained was the possibility of an unexpected traitor in our midst, I suppose.

*Regarding that, I believe it rather pointless to mull over—*

Can't say I agree with that, no. When push comes to shove, there's a big difference between being prepared for it or not.

So, as I sat in my office looking through a report of war damage by region, I considered my biggest anxiety. I had told Gazel to be on the lookout if someone in Dwargon had developed an angel-type ultimate skill...but he just stared at me with this hangdog look on his face.

"Listen to me, Rimuru," he said. "An ultimate skill is among the most vital secrets a country can hold. Our folklore says that Gran Dwargo, our first Heroic King, possessed one of them, and even *then* we claim there's no historical basis for it. Only a very few people know it was the truth—not even Vaughn or Dolph are aware! And yet here's you, going on about ultimate skills at this party...as if it's completely normal to run into people like that on the street!"

So yeah. His voice got pretty loud at the end, but I guess that's the conventional wisdom in this world. Only a handful even know about the existence of ultimate skills, and realistically, nobody had any way to track down someone with an angel-type ultimate. It just wasn't worth worrying about, so I decided to quit obsessing over it.

...Then again, if I sat down and calmly thought it through, I couldn't help but feel that special someone might be pretty close to us. Guy and Luminus definitely had a skill like that. Leon's strength was extremely unusual, so I could see him sporting one, too. Daggrull, I couldn't say, but even someone like Deeno had one, so we should at least assume he did, too, just to cover our bases.

Speaking of Daggrull, Luminus mentioned to me that in the future, he'd take advantage of the Empire to start a war—something Chloe told her, she said. This current conflict, however, wasn't related to that. Why would Daggrull do that, I wonder? Or was he doing someone else's bidding? If Michael was behind it, we could take measures against it, and I thought we'd need to discuss it in depth later.

What about Milim? Yeah, she could totally have an angel-type ultimate skill without my knowing. But I bet she'd tell me once I explained the story to her, and I was wondering how Carillon and Frey were doing as well. I thought I'd stop by and chat with them awhile.

As I let my mind wander around like this for a bit:

*“Can you hear me? We are holding a Walpurgis Council right now. I know it’s sudden, but all members are hereby summoned to the site. That is all.”*

Out of nowhere, a voice rang in my mind. Hang on. Was this—?

I looked at my right hand. The ring at the base of my pinkie, something I totally forgot I had on, was glowing. This was the Demon's Ring, which I'd received when I became a demon lord. That meant this was Guy speaking. I had never tried using this ring before, so I kind of forgot it had this feature.

But... Ah, no time to think about that now.

“Shion, bring Shuna in.”

"Yes, sir!"

Watching Shion happily dart off, I looked at Diablo.

"It's from Guy. They're holding a Walpurgis Council right now."

"Oh? With no advance notice? That is rather unlike Guy. And I cannot understand why Guy himself is reaching out to you."

I was concerned about that, too. Guy was the walking epitome of pride and composure; not even his servants could talk to him, I heard. This was sounding pretty bad.

"I am here, my lord."

"Rimuru! What the heck, huh?! Guy himself gathering the gang... This has to be *real* serious!"

Shuna had arrived, but Ramiris, who I hadn't asked for, flew in as well, dragging Beretta and Treyni behind her.

*Yeah, she's a demon lord, too, huh?* I guess it was obvious if you thought about it, but she had a Demon's Ring, too.

As Ramiris told me, it was exceedingly rare for Guy himself to hold a Walpurgis. He occasionally would, back when there were just three demon lords—him, Milim, and Ramiris—but this would be the first time in more than a millennium. If he wanted us right this minute, though, I was sure it had to be an emergency.

"So yeah, Shuna, that's the situation. I don't have time to explain in any more detail, but I'm joining the Walpurgis Council with Shion and Diablo. Tell Benimaru to watch over things for me."

Shuna nodded, quickly picking up on the situation. "Very well, Sir Rimuru. I wish you the best of luck!"

I nodded back and began to prepare. Then I sat there, waiting for my guide to the venue. Before long, Raine, dressed in a perfectly ironed dark-red maid's outfit, appeared through a rift in space. Her wardrobe wasn't on my mind, though. What was were all the wounds covering her body. My bad feeling had been perfectly on target.

“Raine! You all right?!”

“What happened...?”

Ramiris and I were both shocked. But Raine quietly shook her head.

“There is no need to worry about me. We will explain matters once everyone is assembled, so let us make the journey at once.”

No more reason to stall, then. I followed Raine into the rift—and on the other side, we instantly had more problems to face.



*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

EPILOGUE

GUY CRIMSON

## EPILOGUE

### GUY CRIMSON

He had been willed into life eons ago, before heaven and earth were created. It was a simple coincidence. When Veldanava the Creator built seven seraphim out of the great elemental spirit of light, that also gave birth to those associated with the shadows behind them. Those were the Devil Lords, the seven Primal Demons derived from the great elemental spirit of darkness—and he was the first, the king of the underworld, the core realm of darkness.

He was an absolute ruler, darkness personified, from the moment he was born, an arrogant king who forced all other demons to do his bidding. His brothers and sisters, to him, were no different from the many other clans that existed. They fought for supremacy, jostled one another for position; two of the Primals even joined hands to challenge him. But he made them all bend to his will without experiencing a moment of pain.

It was like child's play to him, but through it all, he discovered one thing. The Primal Demons were immortal...but if their heart cores could be crushed, they would be forced to serve the victor when they revived. As spiritual life-forms, they'd be subservient to those they lost to.

Once that truth was discovered, the remaining four independent Primals fell into a stalemate. Not all of them, however. A lone holdout continued to trouble the king, but now that he had been called to the surface, his fate was separate from the others. Was this summoning a mere coincidence, or...? There was no way to tell now—but in fact, that event would change the king's fate enormously.

Called forth, he looked at his surroundings. He had grown lazy in the peace of the underworld, oblivious to the passage of time on the surface.

The world—likely just created—already had civilization developing on it.

Instantly, he understood that he had been summoned. This was magic, the ability to rewrite the laws of the world.

The powers he enjoyed in the underworld were now limited; he could only produce the force of a newborn Arch Demon. That was enough for him, but lacking a body was tremendously inconvenient. He thought over why this had happened and quickly came up with an answer. He was in the demi-material world, not the realm of spiritual life-forms. The space around him wasn't infused with magicules; simply being here consumed his at a ferocious rate.

He had no relationship with the Creator. He didn't understand what changes had happened to the world. It was fascinating, he thought. But he did find the presence wailing about something in front of him displeasing. Back when he was the strongest demon in the underworld, nobody would dare try something so reckless and foolish. So he held out for a bit to see what this was about.

The wizard who called for him gave him a long-winded speech. He was speaking in the First Language, a magical tongue, so he had no trouble comprehending it.

Deigning to hear this wizard out, he found the speech to be quite interesting. The world now had nations, all fighting one another for dominance. A variety of species had been born—the elves, the dwarves, the beastmen, the vampires, the humans—and all of them were fighting for survival. This wizard was known as a High Human.

*"You have become my servant,"* the arrogant man told him. *"You will follow the rules of this world and carry out my orders."*

The man commanded him to destroy the nations that competed for supremacy with the Supreme Magic Empire, a nation attempting to unify the world under its rule. That, to him, was a simple task. The war had raged for more than a hundred years, but with his arrival, it came to an end.

All he did was carry out a single magic spell—the forbidden nuclear magic Death Streak. The fury of this large-scale magic, destructive enough to even destroy souls, turned the largest of the rival nations and its population of more than one million into a city of death.

It was simply the way things were to him, and it didn't pain him at all. But

there was one fascinating change. Earning the souls of all these humans, he realized he had been awakened. As a result, he successfully used these million corpses to obtain his own physical body.

This vessel felt so comfortable to him. Even drowsiness, experienced by him for the first time, was blissful, and he loved trying to resist it. This was the birth of the first true demon lord in the world.

Earning this power, he now realized he was freed from the magic that once held him down. It was a simple curse, one he easily could've torn down, but merely flying off without doing anything else would just make things boring. It appeared now that gathering ten thousand human souls had kicked off his awakening. The seal on his species was released, and he became a Demon Peer.

This still gave him less than 10 percent of the powers he had on hand in the underworld, but on the surface world, he was unparalleled in strength. Then he wondered. What if he gathered an even larger number of souls?

He knew the perfect person to experiment with. The man who had asked him for all those petty favors earlier. He had the perfect way to pay him back for that.

Returning to the original city, he killed anyone who crossed his path, avoiding any mass-destruction magic so his target wouldn't be caught in it. He could feel the screams, the wailings, of the soon-to-be-dead carving themselves into his soul. "*Gi-yaaaaahh!!*" they screamed.

Then he thought:

*Yes... That may just be perfect for my "name."*

The change was dramatic. His name was now Guy, and he evolved even further, becoming a Devil Lord and finally regaining the full power he had enjoyed in the underworld. The souls he obtained gave Guy more power, his greatly expanded vessel filled to the brim, and his magicule count was what it used to be again.

But the transformation ended there. As a result, there was no reason for Guy to continue his work.

He summoned the two demons that served him, giving them his orders. Now

that he had awakened to Devil Lord status and gained a name for himself, he was in a much more generous mood. Enough so that he erased the memory of that piddling wizard from his memory. He wasn't even worth tormenting any longer.

*"N-no! How did you ever escape my secret restraint?!"*

Guy paid no attention to this fool wailing in his presence. That was, perhaps, a lucky break for the wizard, but he was killed by the demons before recognizing it as such.

On that day, several tens of millennia ago, the largest, most powerful nation in human history was born, putting an end to the divisions among the race for good. It was all so simple.

The two demons Guy summoned had deteriorated to Arch Demons as well. Those were the rules of the world; in the transition from the underworld to the demi-material one, they both lost most of their power. It was a simple matter for spiritual life-forms to travel across worlds, but in *this* one, simply staying alive cost them so much energy.

They needed physical bodies, for only when they found one and evolved could they become permanent residents of this world. Realizing that, Guy waited for his servants to evolve. But, strangely enough, no matter how many human souls they gathered, the two of them never changed at all. So he gave them two corpses—and with them, the honor of becoming physical. That, more than anything else, proved just how good a mood Guy was in.

These two demons were Vert and Bleu, and the forms they took were both beautiful women. Guy looked at them as they kneeled before him, pondering to himself. If they would grow no stronger than this, he thought, there was no point in giving them physical bodies at all. He could assign menial tasks to them, perhaps, but their power just seemed far too weak to him. So, generous as he was, he granted them names. Recalling how receiving a name caused himself to evolve, he reasoned he could repeat the process with this pair as well.

*"I'm going to give names to both of you. My pride refuses to allow those serving me to remain this weak."*

Guy made his declaration. For Vert, he would give the name Mizeri, styled

after the misery expressed by the pained wailing of the downtrodden. For Bleu, he would give the name Raine, for the rain that was falling on that day.

Just as Guy hoped, the two of them evolved to Demon Peers. That was the beginning—the first day Guy and his servants left their mark on human history.

\*

The days wore on—fun enough, but still boring.

Guy wandered across the world, enjoying whatever he ran into. There was ample hardship as well, but it didn't bother him at all. Mizeri and Raine were his constant companions, always poking their noses into his business.

"You know you're free to live whatever lives you want, right?"

He constantly told them that. But their responses were always the same.

"No, our duty is to be of use to you."

"Precisely. You are our king. We are your subjects. That is the eternal, unrelenting truth."

So the trio's journey continued.

At the same time, Mizeri and Raine summoned their own tribes, secretly building up their spheres of influence so they could provide all the riches and entertainment of the world to Guy, its ruler. Unlike life in the underworld, which was devoted entirely to battle and refining the strength of their souls, this world was full of exciting things to do. Nothing remained stagnant; everything was constantly growing. Cuisine, music, theater, dance, art, and so much more—Guy and his servants never grew tired of it.

"Hey, this is pretty fun, too, isn't it?!" Guy shouted out as he was joining in a dance, part of a festival held by a minority clan in a small settlement.

He smiled at Mizeri and Raine, a rare sight for his servants that gave them paroxysms of delight.

"How wonderful. I thought these humans were frail and useless, but they have their value after all, don't they?"

"Everything in the world belongs to Lord Guy...and a tool only has meaning when you put it to full use."

Mizeri and Raine were sure of it all over again. To keep Guy happy with them, they learned a wealth of things in the places they visited. Their experiences lived on in their cooking, cleaning, song, dance, and music—the foundation of their roles as all-purpose maids, enabling them to grow and develop further.

In the underworld, the weak were ruthlessly weeded out. Non-demons were exterminated; only those with utility as slaves were put to work. But in this world, even the weak had value—and once they realized that, it seemed like such a waste to destroy this world.

“Humans are truly the cutest little things,” Guy said. “Foolish, yes, but I could never bring myself to hate them.”

Some were foolish, indeed, but some were truly wondrous. Their uglier emotions inspired hate among the demons, yet the more beautiful ones were a delicious sight to behold, the greatest meal Guy’s band could ever hope to enjoy. The difference from one extreme to the other was so intense, Guy began to think that calling all of them “humans” was a tad slapdash.

Guy was very kind to humans. If a fearsome magic beast threatened the countryside settlements, he’d eradicate it. When evil mystics (believed to be survivors from the Supreme Magic Empire) reared their ugly heads, he destroyed them. His deeds were celebrated, passed across generations, and over time became the stuff of mythology and legend.

And then he met him.

The creator of the world. Its supreme master and most powerful presence.

Guy was making the most of these calm, peaceful days, but his senses were constantly sharpened. That’s why he knew. This figure before him was Veldanava the Star-King Dragon, the Creator.

“If you’re a *real* god, you bastard, then use your power to *show* it to me!”

Guy boldly laughed at him. He was sure he was the strongest, and so he taunted Veldanava like it was his right. The results weren’t even close. Guy couldn’t land a single blow against him before being smashed into the ground.

At that moment, the pride he kept as the unbeatable strongman of the world was shattered into a million pieces. So, following the rule that defeat meant

servitude, Guy would now be Veldanava's slave—but shattered though it was, his pride refused to allow that.

"Kill me if you want. I'm satisfied with that. Now I understand—in life, there is always someone better than you out there. There is no limit to this totem pole of strength, for I, too, must exist amid this unbroken rule of law. O great being, I take real pride in losing to thee."

Guy sounded almost triumphant. But Veldanava just laughed back.

"Little man, I love all the things I have created. This world was once boring, but now it's growing more bountiful by the moment. Intelligent beings inhabit it, evolving to where they can communicate with me. And now there are powerful men like you, strong enough to withstand combat against me."

"Ha! You call that withstanding? I landed nothing on you, and then you did *this* to me with one swipe."

"Heh-heh... But you withstood it, didn't you? Millions of people would never even try to take me on, but you did. That alone makes me more than happy enough."

"Sure. We'll leave it at that."

"If you could, please. Also, I need to ask you a favor."

"A favor?"

A comfortable sort of satisfaction now filled Guy's mind. He found himself willing to listen to Veldanava.

"Yes. If the world keeps growing at this rate of speed, it will likely be destroyed within a few millennia. Humans get so carried away with their mistakes, you see. Sometimes doing the right thing isn't true justice, and doing the evil thing can save the world on occasion. They are imperfect, and that's why they're so lovable. It is not my desire to see them meet their doom."

Veldanava was asking him to help prevent the world's destruction. It made Guy recall the Supreme Magic Empire he'd torn apart, a nation driven by lust for power and authority to war against their own kind.

*I see... Yeah, that was pretty awful. If I'd let that nation survive, maybe they*

would've destroyed the world long ago.

Guy was sure about it. But one question remained.

"Hmm... Your prediction is much the same as my own. But something doesn't add up."

"What doesn't?"

"Aren't you the Creator? If you're the god who created us, you oughtta be able to guide the world the way you want it. Why do you need to ask someone like me?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, because I'm not omnipotent. When I was born, all that existed was my will. It was complete, fully, not a piece missing to it—a flawless existence, where all was one and one was all. I was the only thing in the world. Doesn't that sound boring to you?"

It made sense to Guy. It took someone like Guy to understand. Veldanava had deliberately cast away his own omnipotence.

*I'll bet he did. If he could see how everything would turn out, it'd be the most boring thing ever.*

Based on his own experiences, he knew that fighting nothing but battles he knew he could win got old after a while. Everyone in the underworld (except one person) feared Guy. It had been ages upon ages since any of the other demons challenged him. All that, and not even *he* was any challenge to Veldanava. Guy could see why he had thrown out his omnipotence.

"Yeah... I don't hate this world at all, either. I'll help you."

He didn't waver for a moment. Guy liked this world as well. And whether he was now a slave or not, Guy truly wanted to lend a hand.

Veldanava nodded happily at him. "Thank you. You will become an Arbitrator, my representative. I want you to watch the world for me."

"Huh? Your representative? You don't need to order me around?"

"Of course not. I told you I hate forcing things on people."

"Oh yeah? So what should I do?"

"Whatever you want. You can keep wandering around the world, or you could build a citadel to rule from. As long as you remind mankind that threats continue to exist so they don't get arrogant, anything works."

Arrogant. Hearing that word made Guy realize just how suited he was for this job.

"Right... Then I will rule over the humans as a fearsome demon lord. If they have an absolute enemy to contend with, they won't have the time to squabble with one another."

"I like that! My apologies for giving you such a tough job, but thanks for picking it up."

"Sure. Not a problem."

It was at that moment when the shape of Guy's mind took on a new embodiment—the unique skill Pride.

"As the demon lord of this world," he proclaimed, "if mankind grows arrogant, I will judge them in your place!"

Having his own pride crushed only served to deepen it. Thus was born a demon lord with powers equivalent to a god.

Veldanava smiled. "Glad to hear it. Let us continue working on this...as friends!"

"Yeah. I'm gonna have a lot of fun."

So Guy and Veldanava acknowledged each other as equals, becoming friends beyond their social positions.

\*

As he promised, Guy lived life as a demon lord.

To allay his boredom, he monitored the larger settlements that appeared across the land. Over time, they became villages, and then the villages grouped together and grew into nations. It was all crude compared to the supercivilizations of the past, but the magic and technology quietly passed down manifested itself again, and things grew at a fairly decent clip.

Watching mankind go about its business was fun. And over time, multiple

nations took shape—and once again, small-scale conflict began to break out.

*Should I do something?* Guy wondered. But he was always one to prefer taking action over stewing in thought. So he destroyed one nation that had his attention, partly as a warning.

Mankind feared Guy as a demon lord, this visible threat to them. In order to face up to this threat, they fostered a desire to unite.

*Perfect. As long as they don't rile me, I'm not gonna destroy anyone.*

Guy was an Arbitrator, and he enjoyed his work.

As time went on, Mizeri and Raine used their respective underlings to rule over a large domain. They defeated the local gods, monsters, and magic-born in the area, helping their reputation grow.

Mizeri was even using her underlings as spies, having them infiltrate human society. She'd pore over the intelligence they brought back in order to expose those who needed purging. Her mission: give humans just the right amount of terror so they'd stay on their toes.

The demon-lord system was now firmly established, and when it was, Guy didn't have much to do. He wandered around the world, enjoying battle whenever he felt an urge to fight. Once he laid waste to an army of giants that caused trouble even to the Seven Primordials, Veldanava's servants. Veldanava also asked Guy to fight Ivalage, the World-Destroyer Dragon, and that was a pretty fun experience. The dragon had an instinct for battle, something Guy loved to see.

But there were problems as well. This foe was too good an opponent for Guy. He wound up fighting against it for three months, and then he let it flee over to another world. The fallout caused substantial damage to the land, turning it into a waste as far as the eye could see. It was a hard but useful lesson for him. From now on, when he got serious, he'd have to choose his battlefields carefully.

Guy looked down at the land from above. There, he discovered a familiar-looking castle. It was the imperial palace of the Supreme Magic Empire, the place from which he had been summoned to this world.

Sensing fate at work, Guy designated it his own domain. Raine quickly put her servants to work, making the place livable again. With the right magic, the castle was rebuilt in a flash.

It was around then when a white dragon challenged Guy—a beautiful one, with blue-diamond eyes. Guy didn't know what her problem was, but she was itching for battle from the moment she opened her mouth. "My brother may accept you," she stormed, "but I won't!"

Based on the previous lessons he'd learned, Guy wanted to select a battlefield befitting his opponent's abilities. But this dragon was blowing sheets of ice and snow at his castle from above. At this rate, he couldn't afford to worry about the damage. Anyone still alive had long since evacuated anyway, and the castle could always be rebuilt. It'd put Raine and her underlings through some hardship, but that didn't matter to Guy. Besides, after letting the World-Destroyer Dragon get away, Guy was eager for some action—and the sight of a new challenger made his heart soar.

*May as well enjoy this,* he thought, and so he brought out his full force against her. But even when both sides fought all out, neither of them could seize victory.

This was Velzard the Ice Dragon, Veldanava's younger sister and the oldest of the female True Dragons. Only Veldanava outclassed her in magicle count, and even Guy couldn't fully defeat her.

But from Velzard's perspective, it was Guy who was the anomaly. Guy, after all, boasted nothing but a single unique skill. Velzard had Gabriel, Lord of Endurance, an angel-type ultimate skill that Veldanava had granted her, and finishing a battle in a draw against Guy was unfathomable.

"Why are you equal to me when you're only at the unique level?"

"Ha-ha! Because I'm strong is why."

"Don't give me that! My brother lent *me* this power, not you. It proves that he sees *me* as far more useful than you! So why?!"

"Uh-uh. He offered to give me some power, too, but I refused. If we had a master-servant thing going, I would've said yes, but he wants us to remain

equals. So instead..."

Velzard had attacked Guy out of jealousy, so her brother would approve of her. Now, before her eyes, Guy was transforming his power. Seeing Veldanava's force gave him the inspiration—and through his battle with Velzard, Guy came to understand exactly what an ultimate skill was.

"...I figured I'd reach the ultimate level with my own power."

Then, in the next instant, the unique skill Pride evolved into the ultimate skill Lucifer, Lord of Arrogance. It stunned Velzard into silence.

"Oh... No wonder my brother took a liking to you. Then let me see how far you can project yourself...to the bitter end."

Velzard's true goal was apparently to test Guy. Whether he passed the test or not is unknown, but from there on, the two walked hand in hand with each other. That was how Guy and Velzard met.

The battle, which lasted three days and three nights, altered the very axis of the world. But this time, it was all a careful adjustment on Guy's part. The icy, uninhabitable tundra turned into a land of eternal spring—and the land Guy defined as his own became a frozen wasteland instead.

"Well...this oughtta work."

"How wonderful, Lord Guy!" cried Raine. "You've done it again!"

"I doubt it will be a problem," said Mizeri. "There was some damage to humanity, but all the nations in the world are joining hands to deal with this upheaval, so casualties are being kept to a minimum."

To the residents of this world, it was a disaster. To Guy, it was just a funny story. And as long as Guy was happy, so were Raine and Mizeri. The side effects of his recent battle had encased his citadel in ice, which actually made it more beautiful.

"Well, why don't we keep it this way? We'll preserve it as a memorial."

"Allow me to do that. I can help with this much."

Velzard's "*help*" involved plunging the castle's surroundings in frigid temperatures. Ever since, the citadel was off-limits forever to the weak.

Living in this castle would be inconvenient for Velzard in dragon form. When Guy pointed that out, Velzard instantly took human shape instead. In her adult form, she could fully control her aura, but she kept herself just a little younger than that. The slight aura leakage that resulted turned into a chill that perfected the castle's defenses. In this arctic land that no human or monster could ever survive in, nobody would even think about invading Guy's domain.

But:

"How does this look to you?"

"Well, fine...but it's not really my thing, you know?"

"You are *so* mean sometimes, you know that?"

Velzard was griping at Guy, but deep down, she rather liked him. Deep in her heart, she secretly swore to herself that she'd win his heart someday.

\*

Several hundred years passed. Not much changed from day to day, and this particular day was just the same as every one before it.

Guy, bored beyond belief, had guests—a party of three. They had breezily made their way through this forbidding land and walked right into the castle. Guy watched them intently, his interest piqued.

Then the blond, blue-eyed young man leading the party screamed out.

"I am Ludora! Ludora Nasca, crown prince of the Kingdom of Nasca and Hero bearing the hopes of humanity! Evil demon lord, prepare to taste my blade and the destruction it will bestow upon you! And give me all the treasure you're supposed to be hoarding, too!!"

It wasn't the noblest of declarations. But that pure, refreshing ambition of Ludora's charmed Guy.

"Ludora, my brother! You're sounding every bit the demon lord *he* is!"

"Yeah, you're useless. It's all greed with you, isn't it? If you wanted money, I can make all the money you want."

"Oh, come on, Gryn! Stop spoiling my brother like that, please. At this rate, we're bound to lose, and *then* what will happen to us?!"

Guy watched as they talked to one another. They were certainly daring, or at least foolish. But one thing was sure. If they stood before Guy now, it meant they had defeated Mizeri and Raine. This funny trio must've been far more powerful than they looked. And now Guy could see that one out of the three was the same kind of existence as his own friends and partners. He could no longer blame Mizeri and Raine for losing to them. It was the correct way of things—the laws of nature in action.

But right now:

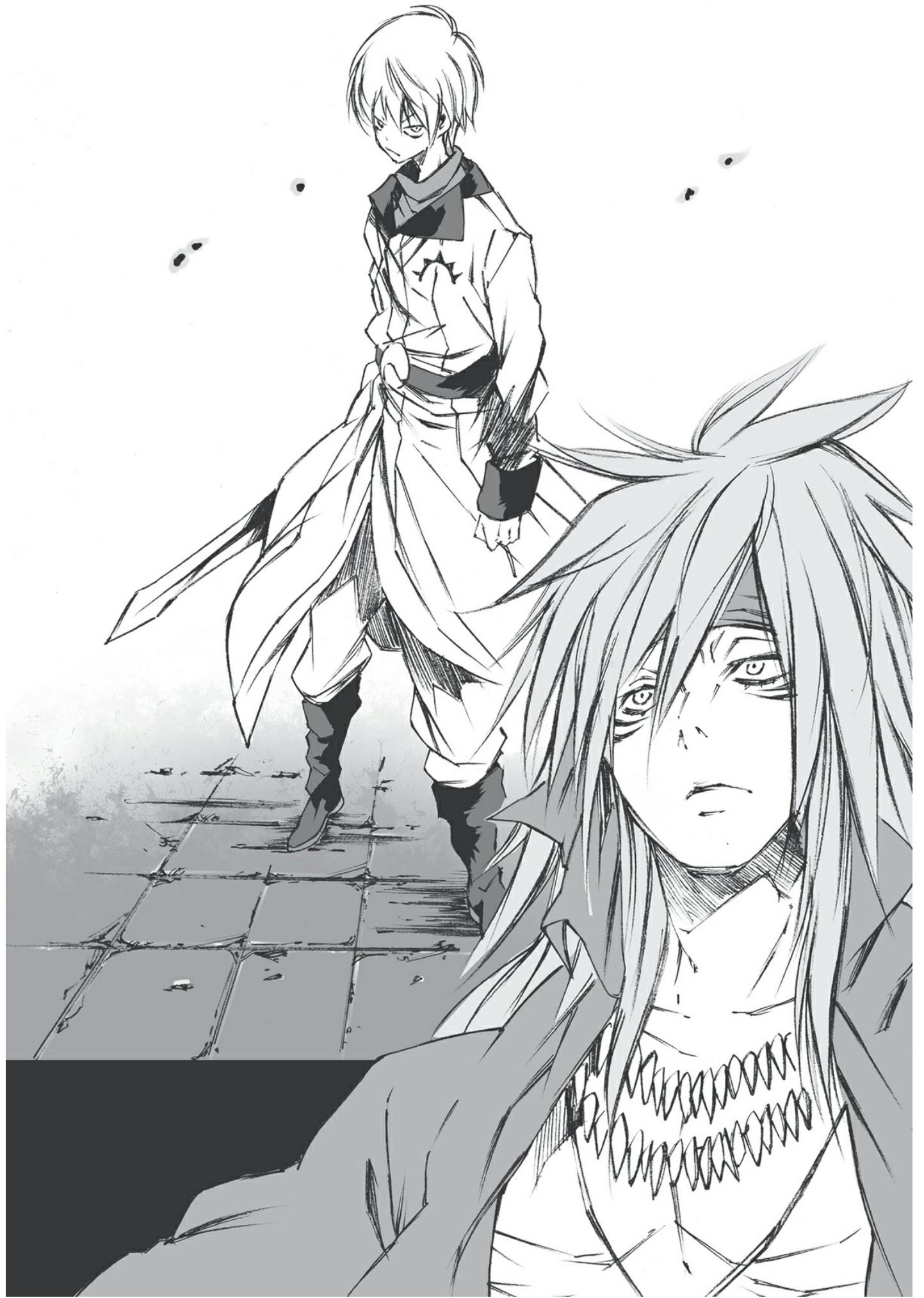
A “Hero,” *he said? What is that?*

It was the first time he had heard that term. It had a sweet ring to it. Something that could keep his days from being so boring from now on.

Excited, he faced up to the man called Ludora.

“Huh, I like it. Let’s see what this Hero power of yours is like!”

Guy accepted Ludora’s challenge.



"Heh! I don't need any help—I'm the strongest there is. Let's fight a one-on-one duel, demon lord! Fair and square!"

Ludora was a handsome young man, but something about his smile was a little vulgar. His goals were tilted a bit more toward robbing Guy of his treasure than defeating him, it felt like. But that, too, was so cutely humanlike of him, Guy thought. People didn't take action unless they were driven by desire. They studied hard and worked hard because they wanted a better life. Ludora was absolutely human—a human with the sweet emotions Guy adored.

"Ha-ha! Try to resist me!"

And so the battle began.

Guy observed Ludora as he lunged at him. It was a sharp, quick attack, but there was no gravity behind it. Once Guy realized that, he grew frustrated that Ludora was holding back, not giving his all.

Ludora was protected by an intricately crafted set of full-body magic armor. It looked pretty valuable, so Guy decided to destroy it first. Apparently, this upstart was obsessed with money; he'd hate it if his belongings were all broken up. Guy was toying with him, in other words.

Easily dodging Ludora's sword, Guy segued into a punishing knee—but it was a feint. Instead, he executed a side kick. Ludora was trying to dodge it within a hairbreadth, so he couldn't adapt to the sudden change. The kick hit home, shattering his armor.

"Aaaaaaaahh?! This armor is worth our nation's budget for the entire year!"

"Are you all right, my brother?!"

"You are *such* an idiot, Ludora. If we all fought together from the start, you wouldn't have a broken set of armor right now."

"Shut up! Th-this is a necessary outlay, all right?!"

Ludora was on the brink of tears. The kick must've worked better than Guy thought. Realizing this, he grinned.

*Now I'll bend up his sword and make him cry for good.*

He observed the trio again. But just then:

“At least let me cast some support magic, my brother... Holy Blade!!”

The girl with the platinum pink hair—the one Guy marked as the least threat of all—invoked an unbelievable magic spell. The sword in Ludora’s hand glowed. It was an evil-dispelling light, a dazzling, divine aura that smote the darkness.

*That’s not good. That light has the power to cut through my barrier, I think.*

He should have stopped the spell before it was cast, but Guy was enjoying the battle too much. It’d be boorish of him to impede a good time.

“Heh! I’ll allow this—it’s just my little sister cheering me on, after all. But don’t give me any more help, Lushia!”

Ludora was the type to be more interested in results than personal pride. Having his own sister help him out wasn’t about to damage his ego at all.

*I’m liking this guy’s personality.*

He wasn’t in any real danger, but things were looking worse for Guy. But, for whatever reason, he was enjoying this.

“That much isn’t even a handicap for me. In fact, all three of you can fight me at once!”

“Nonsense! Now I’m getting serious. Prepare to die!!”

It might have been a fairly generic thing to say in battle, but Ludora really was hiding a secret power. His sword sped up in the air, advancing upon Guy. However, Guy was expecting this. He smiled, wanting to keep it fun, then reached for Temma, his own blade.

“Wha—?! A demon lord using a weapon? That’s dirty!”

“Huh? I don’t care what *you* think about it. But congratulations on making me unsheathe my sword.”

Ludora had a vibrant, dazzling manner with his sword. It could also wound Guy if it hit him, so of course Guy would resort to weaponry. He was a proud demon lord, but he wasn’t foolish enough to go too easy on a foe and lose.

"Ha! Like I'd ever want praise from a demon lord!"

"No? Then I take it back."

"...Wait. If you *want* to praise me, go ahead."

Ludora was actually happy about it.

"Well, I could probably count the number of people who *crossed* swords with me on one hand. Ludora, was it? I've noted your name now. You should be proud."

Guy, in a jovial mood, fulfilled Ludora's wish. Ludora replied with an earnest smile.

"*You're* pretty impressive, too, y'know. I didn't think a demon lord could parry an evil-smiting blade like this so easily. I owe you one for recalling my name. Let me hear yours before I destroy you."

"Pretty cocky for a human, eh? But all right—I like you, so I'll tell you. When you reach the underworld, state my name. I am Guy. This man screamed, '*Gi-yaaaaah!!*' at me before I killed him, and I use an abbreviated version of it as my name."

Ludora gave Guy a funny look. Then he snapped out of it. "...Wait a minute!" he shouted. "That's not a name. It's *not a name!* Nobody's gonna be impressed at all if I defeat a demon lord with *that* kind of name. I want a cooler name than *that* to be written in all my legends!"

"Huh? Why's a name matter so much to you?"

"It matters a *lot!* All right, then. One second—let's call a time-out. I'll think of a better name for you."

Ludora withdrew his sword. Guy had no reason to agree to this, but he wasn't about to kill this intruder when he was doing such a good job staving off his boredom. He wanted to enjoy this all the way, so he agreed to Ludora's offer. Besides, he was a little curious.

So Ludora's party formed a huddle and began talking to one another.

"He's got pretty hair. Bright red and all."

"Wait. They already call me cardinal aura, you know. I don't wanna give *that* up."

"I know, I know! You get so worked up over the dumbest things. Your hair isn't even red. It's blue."

"*You're* the one who started calling me *that*!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

"You're so bad at dealing with women, my brother. I bet Gryn's going to dump you before much longer."

"What? No way!"

"Hee-hee-hee! Don't worry, Ludora. I might do a lot of things, but I'll *never* abandon you."

"Right? Yeah. Good to hear. So let's give him something else... Crimson! How's that? You won't say no to *that*, will you?"

"I like that as well, yes."

"I have no complaints, no, but are you sure? A Hero naming a demon lord... If you build too much of a friendship with him, you're gonna make people pretty nervous, aren't you?"

"Oh, it's all right! Nobody's watching us. If we don't tell anyone, nobody will ever know!"

Not that Guy was one to complain, but Ludora felt like a pretty irresponsible guy to him. That much was clear from this exchange. It honestly worried him a bit.

"Have you decided?"

"Yep! Sorry it took so long. From now on, your name is Guy Crimson!"

So began the reign of the demon lord Guy Crimson.

Incidentally, Ludora lost consciousness the moment he gave the name. Giving names to monsters was a taboo in the human world, but Ludora had the rather wishful thought that it'd be okay because his enemy was a demon lord. Instead of magicules, he was drained of holy force, walking the line between life and

death. After he woke up, of course, he was practically lectured to death by his sister Lushia and his lover, Velgrynd the Flame Dragon.

Thanks to that, the final duel between him and Guy got postponed...but that, of all things, was how their strange relationship began.

\*

So Guy waited for Ludora to recover, and then they held their promised duel. The results were inconclusive, so they fought again many more times.

Ludora, as befitting his title of Hero, was strong. He was an awakened Hero, and Guy was an awakened demon lord. He had mastered his technique in battle, while Guy fought only with brute strength and talent. They fought evenly with each other, but Guy slowly gained an edge over time, a natural result of his superior stamina.

Three women watched these proceedings—Lushia, Velgrynd, and Velzard the Ice Dragon. Velzard wasn't too interested at first, but as the battle heated up, she grew to enjoy the action.

"My, I see Guy's become stronger again."

"That's right, my sister. But Ludora's no slouch, either."

"It looks that way. I almost wonder if he's human at all."

"No doubt. And of course he's strong. Ludora's become my brother's apprentice, and he's been given some of his 'ultimate' force as well. He's gonna get stronger—trust me."

"Oh? It makes sense, then."

"I'd prefer if nobody got hurt, though..."

The audience got along well with one another.

"I have some tea ready."

"We have enough for Sir Guy and Sir Ludora as well, since it looks like their battle's about to end."

Mizeri and the demons under her were providing the tea service.

This had become an almost daily occurrence as time went on. That, or

sometimes the sisters would bicker with each other so much that nobody even wanted to fight. Velzard and Velgrynd got along with each other, but apparently they had their differences about education practices. Veldora the Storm Dragon, their newborn younger brother, was a selfish brat, storming around like a spoiled toddler.

Why was that?

“Because you’re way too hard on him, my sister! Why can’t you give him a little love for a change?”

“Oh, don’t be silly! I love Veldora so much! I play with him all the time! That’s why I keep on replacing his heart so he’ll have a more serious-minded personality!”

By “*replacing his heart*,” Velzard was talking about physically destroying Veldora and resurrecting him—a rather heavy-handed approach to child-rearing—and Velgrynd wasn’t a fan.

“I’m saying that you shouldn’t do that. Reach out to him with words, not violence. If you *have* to get rough, then so be it, but I know he’ll understand if you talk with him.”

“You’re *so* easy on him, Velgrynd! In that case, next time I won’t beat him to death, all right? I’ll just beat him *most* of the way there and put some obedience in his brain!”

“I’m not talking about that. Just...hug him a bit more. Show him the ropes. Bring him to town and let him see how to go around in human form. Or how to defeat enemies. That sort of thing.”

“Velgrynd... You just like spoiling children, don’t you? Spare the rod and spoil the child, as they say. At this rate, Ludora over there’s gonna be ruined, too, you know.”

“No he won’t! Ludora and I are the best partners ever. If I could educate Veldora, I know he’d grow into a wonderful, respectful little brother. So can you leave this to me, please?”

“Huh? No way. I can train him a lot better. In fact, I’ll take care of him for as long as he needs!”

"Oh, who's the one giving him too much attention now? Come on! It's my turn!"

And so they kept laying the blame on each other—Velzard was too harsh, Velgrynd was too easy on him, that sort of thing. To Guy, it was all the same.

*You need a balance of both. The problem with these True Dragon sisters is that they don't know how to level it off at all...*

He was exasperated with them, although he'd never say it out loud.

"Whoa, whoa, we can't fight like this."

"Yeah. Better not bother them when they're trying to claim Veldora for themselves."

Guy and Ludora got as far away as they could from them. The dragons put up a barrier for them during battle, but if they were too busy bickering, Guy and Ludora had to do it instead. Otherwise they'd sink the entire continent.

They were all used to it by that point, but even so, Guy wished the sisters would argue someplace where they wouldn't bother everyone else. One man's fault is another man's lesson, as they say, but Guy and Ludora weren't getting any lessons from them at all.

One day:

"Dammit, you're back again?!"

"Shut up! This battle isn't over until I win!"

Fighting was now the way Guy and Ludora said hello to each other. They started going at it like usual, and they'd keep going until they were exhausted. It'd always end in a draw, and then their usual arguing would start up after that.

"You keep talking about keeping it fair and square, but you fight pretty dirty, don't you?"

Guy was right. Throwing sand into his opponent's eyes was a given. The moment Ludora began fighting, he'd always put up a Holy Barrier to reduce Guy's force. Guy didn't bother checking for traps before the fight began, and Ludora knew that, so he tried to break out every type he could think of.

Even his excuses were just awful.

"Look, if I win, that means I'm right, okay? Or more like if I *don't* win, then I'll never be on the side of justice! That's why I have to win, no matter what!"

As he proudly declared, a win was a win, no matter how it looked.

"Don't give me that crap! Do whatever you want, but at least stop calling it '*fair and square*' all the damn time!"

Guy had a valid point. But Ludora just snorted at him.

"*'Don't give me that crap'?* Don't give *me* that crap, man! That move you tried: I used it on you last time, didn't I? How many years did you think I spent mastering that, huh?!"

Changing the subject—Ludora's secret skill. Nudging the conversation off the rails was how he kept Guy from putting him in a corner all the time. Ludora had received a royal education, so he had a knack for verbal gymnastics like this.

"Years? More like three weeks, if I recall."

"Right. Sir Veldanava was very impressed."

The commentary from the audience made Guy roll his eyes. This move that was supposedly Ludora's life's work was nothing very intricate at all. He shot a look at Ludora and sighed.

"Stealing people's moves... *You're* the dirty one here!"

Ludora was still airing his grievances, but he had his own reasons, too. His arguing resulted from a certain panic in his mind. They were still equal in terms of raw power, but lately, he could feel himself being pushed around a little. Ludora could sense it most of all, and he knew that this couldn't go on.

*If I could fight fair and square and win, you know I would, man!*

He wanted to scream that out loud. But now, despite the lofty ideals he kept spouting, he was forced to use whatever trick he could to eke out victory.



\*

Guy looked pretty exasperated about it all, but he knew exactly what Ludora was thinking. In fact, he actually enjoyed the verbal arguments he shared with him. That's why he allowed Ludora to try whatever he wanted, and he also agreed with Ludora's "victory at all costs" approach.

He had accepted Ludora as an equal long ago. Simply having someone who could fight evenly with him delighted Guy. Besides, just like Ludora said, Guy was growing stronger the more he fought. When you get an ultimate skill, that's not the end of the road—only when you master it does it truly shine. Guy learned that while battling Ludora.

Right now, he was matching Ludora's style, fighting only with a sword, but even then, he was starting to overwhelm his opponent. If he added skills and magic to the mix, Guy was bound to win. But he never did that. Somewhere along the line, he started hoping for a tie instead of an end to their competition. That's why he welcomed Ludora's dirty tricks...but it was still just a matter of time.

So Guy asked the question.

"Hey... The first time you fought me, how come you didn't strike a lethal blow on me? If you seriously tried to kill me instead of naming me and stuff, you had a chance, you know."

That was the one question Guy just couldn't figure out. He was a proud man, and under normal circumstances, he'd admit to no chance of being defeated. A spiritual life-form admitting that was as good as a loss. That's why Guy had avoided thinking about it all this time. He didn't believe he was being shown pity, and he didn't want to believe that. If that was the answer, he was afraid he'd kill Ludora in a rage.

Much like Guy had the skill Lucifer, Ludora had one of his own named Michael. If Ludora had broken that out from the start instead of saving it, there was no telling how the fight would've gone. Guy would certainly have been injured, at least, and maybe—just maybe—he'd have been defeated.

"Oh, that?" Ludora smiled at the serious question. "You're so stupid, aren't

you? If I killed you, it wouldn't *mean* anything! I need to make you admit to my greatness, renounce your evil ways, and join me."

"Huhhh?"

Guy couldn't comprehend this.

"Heh-heh! Someday, you know, I'm gonna take over the world. That was the promise I made Veldanava the Star-King Dragon, my friend and master."

Ludora was apprenticing with Veldanava; Guy knew that much. The True Dragon himself said so, and he didn't doubt it at all. But Guy never imagined Ludora had aspirations of world conquest.

"So, you know, the job Veldanava asked of me was to prevent idiots like *you* from trying to conquer the world, okay?"

"I know. That's why Veldanava told me to make you accept me."

*Dammit, Veldanava, Guy thought. You pushed him on me because he annoyed you too much, didn't you?!*

There was the answer. Guy could hear Veldanava in his mind, asking him to teach Ludora about reality. Ludora bragged about how he'd make Guy answer to him, but he only came here because Veldanava wanted him out of his hair.

But it was already too late. Guy was in the dragon's trap. And since he knew he liked Ludora, he was now forced to see him through to the end. If he *didn't* like him, he would've killed him from the start, but no point bringing *that* up again.

*Great, Guy thought wistfully. What an idiot he is.*

"Like, seriously," Ludora said, "I couldn't fully control Michael at full power when I first approached you. Even now, I can only harness it for about half a minute."

It was a surprising confession. Guy didn't hide his shock.

"Oh? Come on. There's no way that's true."

"No, it is. The ability's something I borrowed from Veldanava, so..."

Ludora shrugged as he continued. Guy listened to him speak, and as he did,

he felt two things—one, none of this mattered to him, and two, Ludora truly was a powerful person. An ability from Veldanava had the power to defeat someone like Guy, after all. But as he heard Ludora continue, Guy realized he had the wrong idea about him.

"This is a secret, you know, but I'll tell you and only you about it. The skill I earned by myself is called Uriel. Like, all the companions of mine who swear to me to follow my ideals and conquer the world and so on—all their emotions get pooled together and become this incredible ultimate power."

He said he'd earned it himself, but apparently, Veldanava lent a hand as well. Still, it was impressive. Uriel was the manifestation of Ludora's own heart, and even among angel-type skills, it was on the highest level of potency.

"So I'm kind of trading that one in for Michael, but that one's a big handful as well. Uriel was really straightforward, you know? The 'slay' and 'protect' abilities that come with it couldn't be easier to handle. But Michael has this ability called 'rule' that I just can't wrap my head around."

The ability let him borrow any skill possessed by those he ruled over and take control of that person—truly befitting a leader ruling his people. But right now, when he was ruling nobody, it didn't pose that much of a threat. He couldn't use his ultimate skill on Guy; instead, he had to rely on his own tested strength.

"Wow," Guy said. "That's pretty neat."

The more people he ruled over, the more abilities he'd have access to—and then Ludora would get stronger and stronger.

*Eesh. I thought I was gonna grow more and more powerful until I finally beat him for good...but now we can have fun for a long time to come!*

The fun times would continue. Realizing that energized Guy. But Ludora continued.

"But look, I'm not really interested in ruling over anyone. I'm a man, you know? And I want to fight people using my own strength. I'm just not really in a position to do that and stuff..."

"You're not?"

"No. I guess you're friends with Veldanava, too, so you got a right to know."

Guy grew nervous. With his long life span, he hadn't given it much thought—but he hadn't seen Veldanava lately, come to think of it.

"Did something happen to him?"

"Well...*normally*, I'd be celebrating it, but..."

"Mm?"

"He got married to my sister Lushia. Married or...like, Lushia has his child at the moment. They're gonna be a genuine family."

"His child? A True Dragon's child?!"

That *was* a surprise. But a dragon eccentric enough to throw away its omnipotent perfection out of boredom might just decide to do *that*, too. It made sense to Guy.

"I guess these things happen, huh?" he said.

"Yeah. And like I said, normally I'd be happy for them. But that's where the problems begin."

The revelation Ludora had for him after that was beyond surprising. It was firmly disquieting news. It made Guy stand up and say, "Really?" staring Ludora in the eye.

It seemed that Veldanava was little different from a human being at this point. He had told Ludora, with a slight chuckle, that he was now bound by a "life span," something he never had before. It was a heavy truth to accept, one hard for Ludora to keep to himself, so that was why he told Guy.

"I guess that's in character for him, yeah, but what's he trying to do...?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm all worked up about this. But I think it's clear that I'm not gonna be able to hang out here and fight with you all day for long."

"Yeah..."

They looked at each other and sighed.

\*

"Stop, stop! I like you, all right? I have no interest in killing you, and I don't

want to fight for real any longer. But I need to continue being a demon lord to keep the world from being destroyed. That was my promise to him.”

Guy really did like Ludora. Anyone who was friends with Veldanava was friends with him, too. He could never seriously try to kill him, and there wasn’t much he could do about that. But he had to carry out his role as demon lord. That was the role Veldanava had asked him to carry out. As an Arbitrator, he couldn’t afford to place his thumb on the scales the world rested on.

So Guy looked him in the eye as he said that. Ludora looked right back at him.

“All right. Wanna play a different game, then?”

“A different game?”

Ludora nodded. He wasn’t acting all bashful like usual, face deadly serious.

“Yeah. We’ll stop directly fighting each other. Instead, we’ll just use pawns and fight for control of the world that way.”

“Hmm...”

“Honestly, I don’t want to use Michael very much, but I don’t have any choice. Veldanava gave me this skill to support my dream of conquering the world. I’m going to keep gaining followers, and as I do, I’m gonna keep getting stronger.”

“I’ll bet.”

Guy nodded. He knew that was correct.

“And I don’t want to kill you, either. Remember what I said? I wanted to make you accept me. I... You know, I believe that humankind can unite as one. Veldanava is all about diversity, but that doesn’t mean we have to keep fighting each other, does it? If two people with differing opinions can respect and interact with each other, then great. And if you can’t accept someone else’s outlook, just keep your distance from them. War keeps breaking out because these different races, these different nations keep getting weapons they shouldn’t have, but if they were all part of the same nation, we could just talk everything out instead, right?”

“You think so? Because as far as I know, humans are way too foolish for that.”

“Oh, I know. But I became friends with *you*, didn’t I? Demon lords and Heroes

are supposed to be mortal enemies, and even they can get along. If we humans are all part of the same race, it's *got* to be much easier than that!"

Ludora argued that no Arbitrator was necessary at all. But Guy couldn't agree with that.

"That's pretty wishful thinking. Humans are greedy little creatures—which isn't an 'evil' thing per se. You *need* greed in order to explore all the grand opportunities before you. But if those desires come into conflict with each other, that naturally leads to infighting. Dumb animals know how to deal with each other a lot better, don't you think?"

If animals who became monsters through magic were kept constantly well-fed, they stopped killing other creatures. They weren't all crafty that way. They just lived day by day, seeking as much pleasure as they could. But not humans. They were always thinking one step ahead, getting nervous, trying to build their fortunes so they could hold out in any situation. That's what their instincts told them to do, and that's why the world Ludora wanted was a fairy tale.

Guiding people through words alone was the most difficult thing in the world. Even getting your will across to other people in words without being misunderstood was a gigantic challenge... Guy knew that, and that's why he believed Ludora's dream would never come true.

"Yeah, well, I know that. Veldanava laughed it off as idealistic...but I'm convincing people, and I'm earning their support. Like, '*The chances of it working are all but zero, but go ahead, try doing what you want.*' And between you and me, Michael has this ability called Armageddon that summons this army of angels that destroys everything in its path. *That's* what I can use to rescue humanity. I'll destroy all the world's military might, all its civilization, and I'll suppress everyone's hyped-up desires. And as I do, I'll unify the world. We can do it! We can build an ideal world together!"

Ludora was asking for Guy's help now. He wanted him to stop killing humans all the time and make this feeble possibility grow as much as he could.

"Ha! Massacre isn't my hobby or anything, you know. If I don't like someone, I just rub them out, is all. Whether they're good or bad, it doesn't matter to me. If I like you, you live. If I don't, I kill you. That's all."

"That's what I'm telling you to stop doing!"

"Pfft! I'm not patient enough for all the world's evil people to realize they were wrong from the start. People say, like, '*Hate the crime, not the criminal,*' but are you kidding me? Crime *needs* punishment. And it's up to the criminal to be responsible for that!"

"I know. You're right! I think so, too! But I want to give them a chance to see the light."

"Oh, sure! Don't worry about that, then. I'll send the souls of the damned to the underworld and give them all the torment they need."

"Not like *that!*"

Ludora fell silent, gathered himself, and bared his soul to Guy once more.

"Look, I don't want to be king so I can act all high and mighty. I want to bring smiles to everyone's faces. If people have safe places to live and friends they can talk with, that'll reduce the number of criminals, won't it? I want to get rid of poverty and inequality. I wanna make a world where everyone can smile as they live. That's what I want! And I know there are some idiots out there you just can't do anything with, but I'll try to keep the casualties as low as I can."

He was revealing his ideals to Guy, never imagining that someday in the far future, one of his enemies would say similar things to him.

Guy responded with a pained shake of his head. "No wonder Veldanava laughs at you. I didn't know you were *that* much of a kid. But...well, all right. Tell me more about this game you're thinking of."

"So you'll do it?!"

"I was getting bored anyway. That game could be more fun for me."

It wasn't that Guy was persuaded. He wasn't denying Ludora's ideals; he just wanted to see this to its conclusion. With a friend this stubborn, there was no getting through to them with words alone. Guy was exactly that type, and here Ludora was, trying to do just that with him. It was a contradiction from the start, doomed to fail—and then Ludora would open his eyes.

If he actually pulled it off... Well, it'd mean less work for Guy regardless. The

way he saw it, he'd benefit either way. There was no real merit to any of it. But if Ludora would give up on this reckless idea for him, that was enough for Guy.

"So my ambition's just a game to you?" Ludora asked, laughing. Then he carefully went over the rules of the game he proposed. They were pretty simple: The players wouldn't touch each other but instead let their underlings do the fighting. Guy and Ludora wouldn't engage in direct confrontation. If all Guy's friends fell, Ludora won, and Guy had to serve him. But until that happened, Guy could do whatever he wanted, and he was free to keep his promise with Veldanava and serve as Arbitrator as well.

Guy had almost no restrictions, but Ludora still felt he had a decent advantage. The original role of a Hero is to prevent a demon lord, the principal threat and culler of humanity, from going on a rampage. Guy was a calm, careful thinker, but his power was almost too much. One move from him, and the damage would be staggering. Ludora had stuck with him to prevent that, but that alone wouldn't make his dream a reality. If he wanted to begin his quest to take over the world, he needed to keep Guy from acting against him.

But Guy could read this well enough.

"All right. I promise I won't touch you, then. I'll just gather up some demon lords to take my place and have *them* directly punish humanity for me."

"And I'll stop them from doing that. And then I'll unite the world before you start building a demon lord agency on me!"

"It's gonna be tough, you know. It's kind of an ideal, after all. One even that softhearted Veldanava gave up on."

Veldanava might've been a romantic, but he was also a perfectionist. Ideals were fine and all, but he had a colder side to him that immediately cut away things that had no chance of happening. Thanks to him throwing away omnipotence for the sake of experiencing genuine change, the ideal society he envisioned was no longer possible to implement. But to Veldanava, that was the right decision to make. A world that moved strictly on his own will didn't seem remotely interesting to him.

Ludora understood all too well how the dragon's mind worked. That's why he shouted it out now.

"But even so! I want to put his mind at ease. He's got a limited life span now. He hasn't got any more power than a normal human being. He was so happy about the idea of dying together with Lushia...but he really *was* worried about where the world is going! And he's so preoccupied about the future his child will see..."

"Mm..."

"So I need to ease his worries, you know? I'll make this a world where anyone can live happily so he won't have any anxieties left when he expires. Then the world he made will mature in the most wonderful way. It'll be an amazing, perfectly harmonious world—that's what I wanna reward him with!"

Ludora had sworn to Veldanava that he would establish a single, unifying nation. He wanted him to make his sister Lushia happy, and to do that, he swore to eliminate all unhappiness from the world.

"We're all part of this human world, too. I want us to decide how it works. You guys with your infinite lives will be the arbitrators who get to see how it all works out until the end."

"Yeah...?"

Guy didn't have any response to Ludora. He had concluded in his mind that it was impossible. But he could understand Ludora's feelings, and it made him hesitate to deny his words.

*Why is he such an idiot? You'll just wind up being the one shouldering all of that alone...*

Guy hated how his mind was so needlessly sensitive to emotion like that. He was arrogant but kind to those he liked. But now that was keeping him from stopping Ludora's incredibly reckless endeavor. This foolish man, this friend he needed to love—and Guy had no words for him.

*I'm sure you're gonna fail at it, man.*

His mind coldly calculated the results. The chances of success were too ridiculously low to even express as a probability. But Ludora, this man Guy saw as his best friend, would never give up on it. A Hero needed an unbending heart. And Ludora—carrying all the pain alone, aiming to build an ideal world—

was a true Hero.

Guy couldn't help but think that maybe he could actually do it. Ludora had that something that made you think so, and that was the tiny possibility Guy placed his bead on.

But the result of it was...



Guy and Ludora's game had seen a long cycle of tragedy ever since its beginning.

The first misfortune came soon after the birth of Milim, Veldanava and Lushia's child. A terrorist attack occurred while Ludora was out on a campaign, the world of a rival warring nation, and the dastardly act took the lives of Lushia and Veldanava.

At that moment, Ludora's dream audibly collapsed.

*"I...I just wanted to relieve Veldanava's worries. I wanted him to accept us..."*

He shut off his mind. All his wailings would no longer reach him. And all that remained were his rudderless ideals.

*"You're gonna keep going?"*

*"Yeah. The only thing I have left is my game with you. And the only goal I have left is to make you accept me."*

*"...All right. I'll take you on."*

So the game continued.

The next misfortune befell Veldanava's child, Milim.

She grew up never knowing her parents' faces or even knowing she was related to Ludora. The only family she had was the pet that guarded her, and it was killed by a rival nation's scheme.

Milim wailed over it in a blind rage. Guy devoted everything he could to soothing her. If he didn't stop her, she could destroy several nations before she was done.

*"So do you still want to continue? If I had taken action sooner, none of this*

*would've happened to Milim."*

*"It is my fault. But even so, if we stop here, all my sacrifices will have been for nothing. I have a duty as emperor not to throw in the towel."*

*"I really don't think you do, but all right. I'll keep it going until you're satisfied."*

If they stopped here, Ludora seemed ready to crumble to pieces. So Guy put off the conclusion until later. It was all he could do. An unhappy future was guaranteed for them, he thought, but nothing was set in stone yet.

And so the game went on.

The hardships kept transpiring, the ugliness of the human world thrust into their faces. Ludora kept serving as a Saint because of the ideals sought by his heart and the tenacity in his mind. But even that had its limits.

Somewhere along the line, Ludora's mind began to get infected, robbing it of his initial ideals. Perhaps it was the fate of all who lost sight of their goals, but now he was willing to take any measure to defeat Guy.

He was cold and cruel. Beating Guy was all that mattered, and in the end, it cost him more bloodshed than ever before.

It had turned out exactly as Guy thought.

Then, finally, the day arrived. Guy bet on the last possibility available under the rules. The final judgment would be made by Rimuru, the most unpredictable pawn on his side and the one with the most hope to him.

Honestly, he wanted to make the move himself. But Guy stuck to the rules to the very end. And thanks to that:

*Not even that bastard Rimuru could do it...?*

Guy lamented the fact. Not because he hated him or was frustrated over the result. He just missed the man he called his friend.

*"...I told you, didn't I, you dumbass? It was up to us. Demons. People whose emotions would never waver like that..."*

As he muttered that to himself, Guy failed to notice the sensation running

down his cheek. He simply sat there, praying for Ludora's final peace.

So the game between Guy and Ludora, played over several thousand years, came to a close.

Guy, flashing his usual bold smile, was adrift in sadness. A pair of blue-diamond eyes coldly looked at him, a twisted smile on her face. Even after the game ended, the embers of conflict were still smoldering. And soon they would form the signal for the Temma War, a war involving angels and demons that would dominate the entire world.



**PRESENT  
STATUS**

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

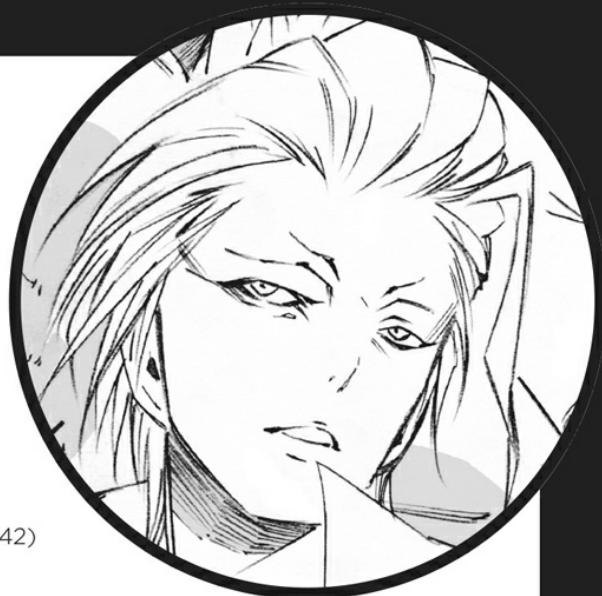
※ For Reference

# Clayman

EP

361,423

(after pseudo-awakening: 788,842)



Race

Walking Dead

Title

Marionette Master

Magic

Illusory Magic

Dark Magic

Spiritual Magic

Mysticism

Other

Abilities

Unique Skill: Manipulator

Tolerances

Resist Melee Attack

Resist Spiritual Attack

Resist Ailments

# Rimuru Tempest



**EP** 8,681,123  
(+ 2.28 million for his Dragon Sword)

**Race** Highest-Level Chaos  
Elemental—Ultimate Slime

**Patronage** Rimuru's Affection

**Title** Chaos Creator

**Magic** True-Dragon Magic    High-Level Spirit Summoning  
High-Level Demon Summoning    Other

**Manas** Ciel

**Intrinsic Skills** Universal Detect    Dragonsoul Aura    Universal Shapeshift

**Ultimate Skills** Azathoth, Lord of the Void.....Soul Glutton, Void Collapse, Complex Space, Release True Dragon (Flame/Storm), Coreify True Dragon (Flame/Storm), Control Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier

Shub-Niggurath, Lord of Abundance.....Create Skill, Copy Skill, Grant Skill, Save Skill

**Tolerances** Cancel Melee Attack    Cancel Natural Elements    Cancel Ailments  
Cancel Spiritual Attack    Resist Chaos Attack



# Benimaru

EP

4,397,778

(+ 1.14 million for Guren)

Race

God-Ogre; High-Level Chaos  
Elemental—Flamesoul Ogre

Protection

Rimuru's Protection

Title

Flare Lord

Magic

Flamesoul Magic

Ultimate Skills

Amaterasu, Lord of Shimmering Flame.....Hasten Thought, Universal Detect,  
Lord's Ambition, Regulate Thought, Dominate Heat, Dominate Space,  
Multilayer Barrier

Tolerances

Cancel Melee Attack

Cancel Natural Elements

Cancel Ailments

Resist Spiritual Attack

Resist Chaos Attack

# Soei



EP 1,281,162

Race God-Ogre;  
Mid-Level Chaos  
Elemental—Darksoul Ogre

Protection Flare Lord's Shadow

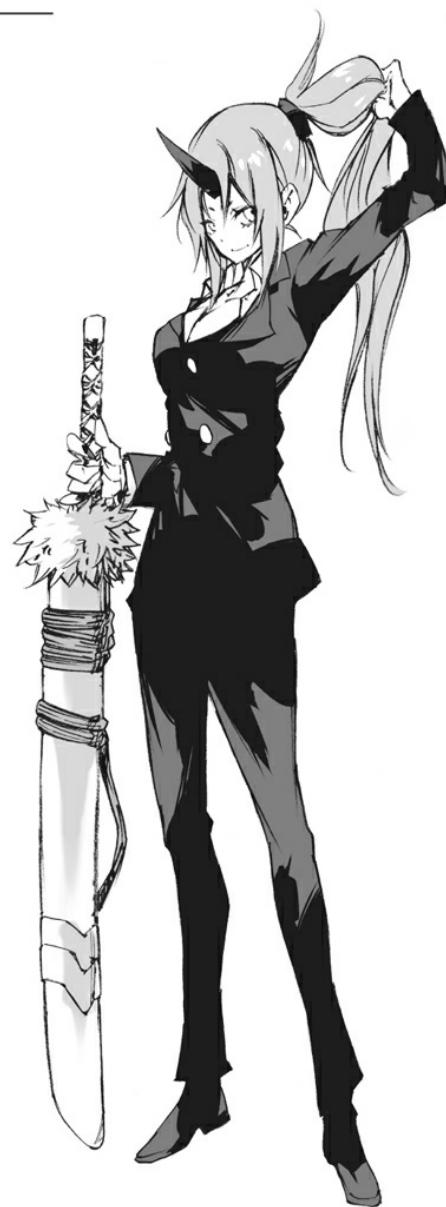
Title Darkness Seer

Magic Darksoul Magic

Ultimate Skills Tsukuyomi, Lord of Moonshade.....Hasten Thought, Universal Detect,  
Eye of the Moon, Insta-Kill, Ultraspeed Action, Spiritual Control, Parallel  
Existence, Control Space, Multilayer Barrier

Tolerances Cancel Melee Attack Cancel Natural Elements Cancel Ailments  
Cancel Spiritual Attack

# Shion



**EP** 4,229,140  
(+ 1.08 million for  
Goriki-maru Divine)

**Protection** Rimuru's Protection

**Race** Battle-God; High-Level Chaos  
Elemental—Battlesoul Ogre

**Title** War Lord

**Arts** Divine Battlewill

**Unique Skills** Master Chef.....Guarantee Results, Optimal Action, ???

**Tolerances** Cancel Melee Attack   Cancel Ailments   Cancel Spiritual Attack  
Cancel Natural Elements   Resist Chaos Attack



# Gabil

**EP** 1,263,824

**Race** Dragonewt; Mid-Level Chaos Elemental—Waterspirit Dragon

**Protection** Rimuru's Protection

**Title** Dracolord

**Ultimate Gift** Moodmaker.....Hasten Thought, Alter Destiny, Control Unforeseen, Control Space, Multilayer Barrier

**Intrinsic Skills** Magic Sense Keen Sense Dragonskin Flame Breath Thunder Breath

**Tolerances** Cancel Pain Resist Ailments Resist Natural Elements Resist Melee Attack  
Resist Spiritual Attack Resist Chaos Attack

# Geld



**EP** 2,378,749

**Race** Boar-God; High-Level Chaos Elemental—Earthsoul Boar

**Protection** Rimuru's Protection

**Title** Barrier Lord

**Magic** Recovery Magic

**Ultimate Gift** Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony.....Hasten Thought, Magic Sense, Lord's Ambition, Ultraspeed Regeneration, Predation, Stomach, Isolate, Demand, Provide, Rot, Iron Wall, Grant Protection, Stand-in, Control Space, Multilayer Barrier, Keen Smell, Armorize Body

**Tolerances**

Cancel Pain

Cancel Ailments

Resist Natural Elements

Resist Melee Attack

Resist Spiritual Attack

Resist Chaos Attack

# Ranga



**EP** 4,340,084

**Race** God-Wolf; High-Level Chaos Elemental—Windsoul Wolf

**Protection** Rimuru's Protection

**Title** Star Lord

**Magic** Windsoul Magic

**Ultimate Skills** Hastur, Lord of Starwind.....Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Dominate Weather, Dominate Sound & Wind, Dominate Space, Multilayer Barrier

**Tolerances**

Cancel Melee Attack

Cancel Natural Elements

Cancel Ailments

Resist Spiritual Attack

Resist Chaos Attack



# Kumara

**EP** 1,899,944

**Race** Nine-Tail; High-Level Chaos Elemental—Earthsoul Beast

**Protection** Rimuru's Protection

**Title** Chimera Lord

**Magic** Earthsoul Magic

**Ultimate Gift** Bahamut, Lord of Fantastic Beasts.....Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Dominate Gravity, Dominate Space, Multilayer Barrier

**Intrinsic Skills** Dominate Beast, Unite Beast

**Tolerances** Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Resist Natural Elements  
Resist Spiritual Attack, Resist Chaos Attack



# Zegion

**EP** 4,988,856

**Race** Micro-God; High-Level Chaos Elemental—Watersoul Insect

**Protection** Rimuru's Protection

**Title** Mist Lord

**Magic** Watersoul Magic

## Ultimate Skills

Mephisto, Lord of Illusion.....Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Dominate Water & Lightning, Dominate Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, All of Creation, Spiritual Domination, Fantastical World

## Tolerances

Cancel Melee Attack

Cancel Ailments

Cancel Spiritual Attack

Cancel Natural Elements

Resist Chaos Attack



# Adalmann

**EP** 877,333

**Race** Wight; Mid-Level Chaos Elemental—Lightsoul Bone

**Protection** Rimuru's Protection

**Title** Gehenna Lord

**Magic**

Necromancy

Holy Magic

**Ultimate Gift**

Necronomicon.....Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Cast Cancel, Analyze and Assess, All of Creation, Mental Strike, Holy-Evil Inversion, Dominate Dead

**Tolerances**

Cancel Melee Attack

Cancel Spiritual Attacks

Cancel Ailments

Resist Natural Elements

Resist Chaos Attack



# Testarossa

**EP** 3,333,124

**Race** Demon-God;  
Primal Demon—Devil Lord

**Protection** Rimuru's Protection

**Title** Killer Lord

**Magic** Dark Magic Elemental Magic

**Ultimate Skills** Belial, Lord of the Underworld.....Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Control Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, All of Creation, Dominate Life, World of the Dead

**Tolerances** Cancel Melee Attack Cancel Ailments Cancel Spiritual Attack  
Cancel Natural Elements Resist Chaos Attack

# Ultima



EP 2,668,816

Race Demon-God;  
Primal Demon—Devil Lord

Protection Rimuru's Protection

Title Pain Lord

Magic Dark Magic Elemental Magic

Ultimate Skills Samael, Lord of Deathly Poison.....Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Control Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, Detect Weakness, Refine Poison, Exterminate Life

Tolerances Cancel Melee Attack Cancel Ailments Cancel Spiritual Attacks  
Cancel Natural Elements Resist Chaos Attack

# Carrera

**EP**

7,013,351

(+ 3.37 million for  
Golden Gun)**Race**

Demon-God;

Primal Demon—Devil Lord

**Protection**

Rimuru's Protection

**Title**

Menace Lord

**Magic**

Dark Magic

Elemental Magic

**Ultimate Skills**

Abaddon, Lord of Destruction.....Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Control Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, Surpass Boundary, Dimension Rupture

**Tolerances**

Cancel Melee Attack

Cancel Ailments

Cancel Spiritual Attack

Cancel Natural Elements

Resist Chaos Attack

# Diablo



**EP** 6,666,666

**Race** Demon-God;  
Primal Demon—Devil Lord

**Protection** Rimuru's Protection

**Title** Daemon Lord

**Magic** Dark Magic Elemental Magic

**Ultimate Skills** Azazel, Lord of Temptation.....Hasten Thought, Lord's Ambition, Control Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, All of Creation, Dominate Punishment, Dominate Charm, World of Temptation

**Tolerances** Cancel Melee Attack Cancel Ailments Cancel Spiritual Attacks  
Cancel Natural Elements Resist Chaos Attack

# Veldora Tempest



**EP** 88,126,579

**Race** Highest-Level Chaos  
Elemental—True Dragon

**Patronage** Protection  
of the Storm

**Title** Storm Dragon

**Magic** True-Dragon Magic

**Intrinsic Skills** Universal Detect, Dragonsoul Aura, Universal Shapeshift

**Ultimate Skills** Nyarlathotep, Lord of Chaos.....Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Dragonsoul  
Aura, Analyze and Assess, All of Creation, Control Probability, Parallel  
Existence, Investigate Truth, Control Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier

**Tolerances** Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Cancel Ailments  
Cancel Spiritual Attack, Resist Chaos Attack

## AFTERWORD

Well, my humble little work has made it to sixteen volumes on sale.

Looking back, it's been a long journey. Starting out, I was producing one volume every five months, but now that's stretched to six. I think I've been able to stick to even *that* schedule only because of everyone who's cheered me on so far.

Time really *does* pass by quickly, doesn't it? But I'll do my best to keep this pace going and produce two volumes a year.

SPOILER ALERT: Time for some commentary on this volume's content.

.....

.....

...

Starting in this installment, I've gone down the forbidden path of providing statistics for everyone's strength in battle.

I actually wanted to do this earlier, but I, my editor, was dead set against it. I understood his take on the subject, so I've avoided anything related to it so far...but really, I can't use Clayman as a yardstick forever. I mean, Clayman put in a real good effort. Along with Gelmud and Carillon, he's helped me describe how strong other characters are for a long time. He's since been out of the story picture for a while, but I feel like he still gets name-dropped quite a bit in the series.

This yardstick is getting impractical, though. If I write that someone's "as strong as a hundred Claymans," nobody's gonna appreciate what that means. So enjoy your retirement, Clayman! I think we'll see his name a *lot* less from

now on.

“EP” was something that appeared in the original web novel version of this series as well. I call it an acronym for “existence points” in this book, but you can consider it to be “energy points,” and that’s fine. Think of it as just a quick and dirty reference, not something that directly correlates to someone’s strength in battle.

Moving on, let’s talk a bit about future plans.

This volume got filled entirely with the cleanup work after the Empire saga, so before I dive into the final story arc, I’m going to produce a collection of short stories written from the perspective of people besides Rimuru. I have a lot of stories I want to tell, and I think this collection will feature several of them, mostly behind-the-scenes views of events from the main tale.

Depending on how many pages I get and how I’m feeling, I might write some breezier stories as well. As always, it’ll just depend on where things go in my mind!

So that’s what we’re planning for Volume 17.

Volume 18 is when we’ll kick off the final saga, so I hope you’re ready for that. I’m planning to divide it into three parts—The Quickening, The Collision, and The Conclusion—but again, that might change depending on how I’m feeling. That’s how it stands now, though, and it’s the way I’m thinking about the story arc, but don’t take it as gospel yet.

Then, after I complete that saga, I’m thinking I could jump around and write some extra stories. There are two of them in the web novel version, and I’ve got other things I’d love to write about, too. So thanks in advance for your support of *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*, so I can keep writing everything I have planned out!

Finally, allow me to thank everyone involved with this series—and give out particularly big thanks to all the fans who support it! I wanna do my very best to keep you guys entertained.

Till next time!

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