



FUSE
Illustration by
Mitz Vah

That Time I Got
Reincarnated
as a SLIME
19

Feldway, caught by surprise, took a step back. Masayuki ignored him as he lifted Velgrynd in his arms.

“...Masayuki?”



THE FINAL BATTLE! ANGELIC VS DEMON LORD FORCES VS ALLIANCE



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME

19.

FUSE

Illustration by Mitz Vah



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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 19

FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by Mitz Vah

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TENSEI SHITARA SLIME DATTA KEN volume 19

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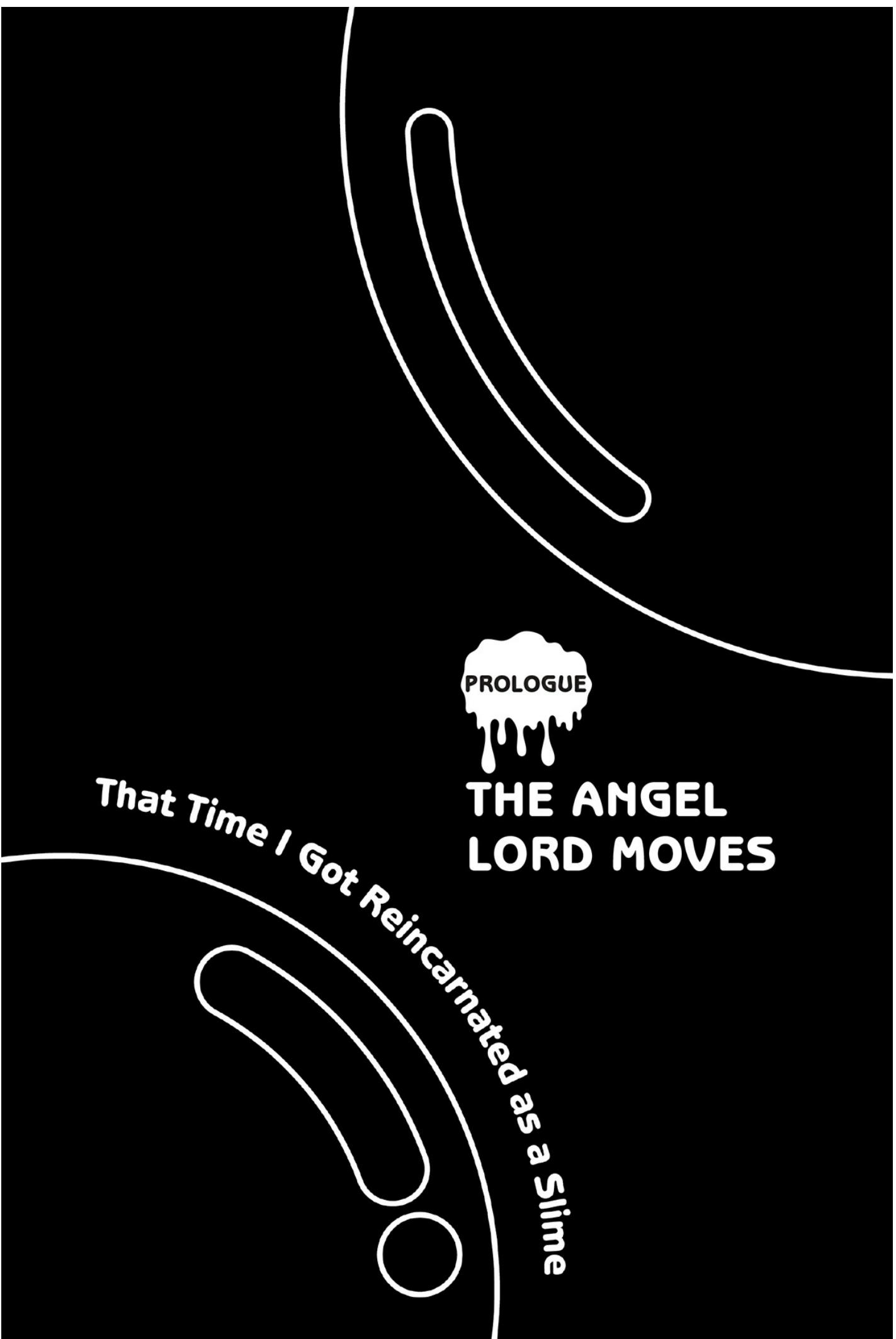
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PROLOGUE

THE ANGEL LORD MOVES

He understood that it was a dream, a dream impossible to realize. Michael, Lord of Justice—a mere skill that worked over certain phenomena—was nowhere near enough to make possible the resurrection of Veldanava the Star-King Dragon.

But even so, he couldn't help but hope for it. Because to Michael, a world without Veldanava was a world with no value at all.

.....

.....

...

Michael opened his eyes, shaking his head lightly as if to rid himself of any lingering sentimentality. The first emotion to lay itself bare in his mind couldn't help but surprise him.

I thought I wasn't as naïve about this as Ludora. I was wrong, it seems.

That was what it boiled down to. Trust no one. Treat them as nothing but pawns. If he had done so from the beginning, he could have prevented Obela's betrayal. But he didn't, because he believed in Feldway and trusted him as a friend.

Michael thought that his associates would remain faithful to him as well. That was a mistake. The moment Obela abandoned Azrael, Lord of Salvation—the ultimate skill that Michael had tied to himself—and fled, he realized he had failed. Obela had forsaken him. Using her rights as its administrator, she was willing to erase her own skill Azrael in order to escape Michael's rule.

So, to make up for this, he had gone through Feldway to invoke Ultimate Dominion on the angelic skill-users under him, hoping to strengthen his control

over them...

...And with that, the mystics are not a problem. The insectors may still betray me, yet their interests are nonetheless aligned with ours. They'll need to be closely monitored, but once the battlefield is set up, the rest will take care of itself.

This battlefield was, in essence, the land he and the insectors had forged a pact over. Michael had promised Zeranus he'd be allowed to take possession of this designated area once it was sufficiently cut off from his own. And—yes—if anyone lived there, the insectors would be obliged to wipe them out. In other words, Michael planned to send Zeranus to what he anticipated would be the fiercest of battles.

So he'd keep a close eye on that location, but there were several problems that needed addressing. The first, needless to say, was how to deal with that traitor Obela. The mystics had sworn their loyalty to Feldway, so there was no need to worry about their morale. Considering their threat level, he could simply deal with them later, but Michael had a feeling that was a bad idea.

Obela's role was to watch over Ivalage, the World-Destroyer Dragon, but by this point, the importance of that role had diminished. Michael didn't care what happened to other worlds, and in fact, Ivalage's appearance in a certain key world had already been incorporated into his strategy.

In other words, it made no difference to him if Obela abandoned her post. But if she tried to cooperate with enemy forces—people like the demon lords Rimuru and Guy—that was a different story. And in order to quell that concern for good, taking the first move seemed to promise more certain results.

So who should Michael send out for this task? That was the problem, and the next question weighing upon him was related to it. Should he proceed to the next target as planned? Because if he wanted to dispatch Obela, he wondered if they would need to revise the overall plan.

It was far from a trivial question. Obela's army, after all, formed an entire wing of Michael's own force. Losing this strength due to his own mistake made Michael uncomfortable, another new experience for him. As a manas, things like emotions were difficult for him to process—and yet they had been

disturbing his thoughts as of late, like noise overlaying a piece of music.

Thus it suddenly occurred to him that he might as well try to enjoy the feeling.

If this is what emotions are, I ought to consider myself quite lucky indeed. There may only be one perfect answer, but there are countless ways to reach it. Running the shortest path may not always be the right way, after all. It should be perfectly fine to enjoy the process, not just the destination.

If he should feel emotionally disturbed whenever a problem arose, it seemed much healthier to simply take in the experience. Impatience has a way of narrowing one's vision, and anger can dull the brain's thought process. There was no point in having regrets—it was far more constructive to use that experience to avoid future failures. And if so, it led to one possible solution for his current concerns.

"...Yes. I know. I should take down these rebels myself."

If you make an error, best to compensate for it on that same day. Instead of imposing his failures on other people, he should try to atone for them as soon as possible. That would give him a calmer outlook on his next problem coming up, without having to worry about opening further wounds.

Reaching this decision immediately lifted Michael's mood—another first-time experience for him. And it made him think:

Perhaps emotions aren't such bad things after all.



In this other world, there was no such thing as gravity. There was no concept of "earth" or of "heaven," making it quite similar to outer space in a way. All that existed in this empty space were objects composed of condensed magicules. These objects were as strong as magisteel—strong enough to generate their own powerful gravitational force, which was why they were turned into bases.

The mystics, as former angels, used these bases for habitation—so they could live as they did in their key world and not forget what life under the force of gravity was like. Obela's base, comparable in size to an asteroid, was the stronghold for their anti-Ivalage efforts; its strength was unrivaled, and it was

one of the most important parts of the mystics' overall living space.

This was where Michael was headed.

Upon completing his Spatial Transport from the Celestial Palace, Michael found that the base was already an empty shell. However, he also sensed a large army in the immediate vicinity.

Is he there?

Michael turned his gaze. Obela, likely sensing Michael's presence, immediately responded, taking up a return-fire stance. In one fluid movement, the army had formed a full formation across the space, their bare hostility turned toward Michael. Since there was no ground or sky, this formation would never occur on a planetary surface. This kind of full-space tactic was built on the assumption that the enemy was few in number; it aimed to encircle the target from every direction before annihilating them.

It had worked well against the cryptids, which were geared toward fighting as individuals and almost never formed groups. Overwhelming them with sheer numbers was a proven tactic against them, and given how much frontline experience Obela had, she was an expert in employing this strategy. The soldiers and officers under her, too, demonstrated laudable competency in carrying it out.

Ah, such a waste. If I had the choice, I would much rather make good use of this force...

Michael sighed. These were battle-tested warriors who'd kept the cryptids bottled up for a long time now. Their merit was undeniable and losing them here was quite regretful. But there was no room left for negotiation. Even with Obela and her force directly in front of him, Michael didn't doubt his decision to eliminate the traitors and make up for his error. Not for a single moment.

"You were faster than I thought you'd be," Obela said.

"Your actions are meaningful to me," Michael replied. "They've made me aware of my blunder. But you will soon know that I will never forgive you."

"I wasn't planning to beg you for forgiveness, of course. And I don't know if this is your will or that of the 'Michael' thrall over you, but I had no obligation to

follow the orders of someone as shady as you."

Both sides had confirmed their intentions—and just like that, the battle was underway.

Obela was the first to move. Hundreds of thousands of troops moved at her will, filling this world with the light of utter destruction. All her forces occupied the space, creating a three-dimensional formation shaped like half of a sphere. Her defensive specialists were up front, with layers of rear soldiers taking turns lobbing a constant stream of attacks.

The entire dimension seemed to brim with light that focused itself on Michael from every point in the half-sphere. An army so well-trained to deal with cryptids had no problem retaining its function during an all-out attack like this. Efficiency was the watchword in this energy-wave offensive, one force after another unleashing its own wave, and it was naturally unavoidable.

All their concentrated fire struck Michael. He wasn't panicking, however. No matter what kind of attack it was, there was no way it'd work against Castle Guard...

...But then a problem arose.

"Ngh. Is this...pain?"

Castle Guard, which was supposed to nullify all strikes, failed to activate for some reason. The layered attack from Obela's army, and all the unthinkable amounts of energy it stored, seared Michael's body.

It was a difficult turn of events for Michael to believe. Little by little, his body began to take damage. Instead of losing his cool, Michael pondered over the cause behind this.

...No energy is reaching Castle Guard? I see... So nobody has sworn their allegiance to me?

Michael was convinced this was the reason, and his guess was correct. The naturally charismatic Ludora had a huge following of imperial subjects. Michael, on the other hand, had no one truly loyal to him. And that made sense. Very few people in the universe were even aware of Michael's existence, and those rare few already had their own masters to serve. And those masters were

connected to them merely by common objectives; there was no trust involved, no oaths of fealty made.

The only exception was Feldway, but that was a friendship, not sworn allegiance—and since the ultimate skill Michael, Lord of Justice (one of his own Parallel Existences), had been transferred to him, they were treated as essentially the same being. How could Castle Guard work on the power of Michael’s loyalty to himself? It was meaningless; that much was logically clear.

I see that I knew nothing about my own skills.

It can often be surprising how little people know about themselves, and Michael was just as befuddled by his own Lord of Justice skill. When he confronted Rimuru’s team earlier on that airship, he thought he was protecting Feldway with his own Castle Guard, but that wasn’t the case. Feldway was tapping into his own skills—and unlike back then, Michael couldn’t take advantage of people’s loyalty to Ludora now.

That’s why Castle Guard was no longer effective for him. It could protect him from any kind of attack and that had to come with a strict set of conditions. And it was the pain Michael felt right now that let him understand that on a deep level.

Obela, the attacker, was shocked by this unexpected event. She had been briefed about the skill Castle Guard, so she knew that any attack on him would be meaningless—but Michael plainly looked damaged, and this puzzled her greatly. Nonetheless, she still recognized this as an opportunity, so before pondering over it any longer, she gave out her orders.

“Continue the all-out attack! Stay in sync with each other! Don’t give Michael a moment’s rest!”

The soldiers, seeing what was going on, didn’t hesitate to keep attacking at full force regardless of their orders.

As Obela saw it, Michael’s pursuit of her was to be expected. The moment she banished that angelic skill, she was prepared for the likely chance that her disloyalty would be discovered, and that some sort of action might be taken. Had she been in Michael’s position, she would’ve done the same thing—hence she staged this all-out assault while secretly continuing to retreat.

The original plan was to flee into enemy territory, the domain of the cryptids, and force Michael to engage with them instead. Now, however, that no longer seemed necessary. Obela considered Michael's energy level to be several times greater than her own—truly a formidable force in any battle—but his combat experience wasn't nearly what she assessed it as at first.

Could we maybe win like this? No, no, that's far too optimistic. I'm sorry for the soldiers at the end of the line, but they'll need to serve as bait for me.

Obela was a brilliant, coolheaded commander, one willing to treat her forces as statistics and sacrifice the weakest under her command. Making decisions like this—giving up a few in order to ensure the vast majority survived—was a prerequisite when commanding such a large army. She could order her soldiers to “die” without hesitation, and in fact, she had already chosen who would remain alive. As long as Michael wasn't making any moves, she'd just transport them out of there when the opportunity presented itself. Michael's presence, after all, allowed her to open Heaven's Gate, that gigantic portal, from the inside of the other world.

With all that in mind, Obela the tactician had organized this vast escape.

“Ohma, lead the First Corps away from the front. Take them to our master, the demon lord Milim,” Obela ordered her faithful follower. Obela herself intended to stay here, giving commands until the end.

The First Corps was the most elite force under Obela. Ohma was an excellent second-in-command, boasting outstanding skills in combat—skills further strengthened by acquiring the body of a walking dead. Ohma would be an asset to the demon lord Milim someday.

It was with that level of trust that Obela gave the final order. But Ohma wasn't ready to nod its approval. Upon entering that walking dead's body, it had regained the power of speech, and now it spoke fluently to her.

“Surely you must be joking. Only you, as a Primordial, can operate the key to the gate. And there is hardly any way I could leave my master, the one I am obligated to protect in battle.”

A quiet smile emerged on its face. Obela's generals and soldiers shouted their agreement.

“““Our glory is with you, my lady!”””

Without Obela, their survival meant little. That was the unvarnished truth, the pride they all held. If Obela had access to Michael, King of Justice, the resulting Castle Guard would've given her the ultimate protection, powered by an unbroken command and thousands of loyal underlings—but this, alas, was only a hypothetical now.

“You...”

Obela was troubled. The worst possible outcome was them all dying here. At the very least, *someone* needed to reach Milim and tell her everything they knew, including the current situation.

Should I stay, or should I leave Ohma to handle the rest?

Feelings no longer mattered at this point. She had to decide which approach would have the best chance of success. And Obela, upon making her decision, was just about to announce it when:

“All of you, spread out at once!”

She gave the order as quickly as she could, sensing something unusual. Her focus remained on Michael as she pondered it. He was still under concentrated fire, and she wasn't foolish enough to allow for a gap in the battlefield.

And that's why she picked up on it. Out of nowhere, Michael's energy had stopped decreasing. That meant that he was no longer taking damage, but before she could determine the cause, she sensed that Michael was starting to condense an enormous amount of energy into a single place.

Before guessing what it was, she promptly gave the order. Hundreds of thousands of troops began to move in unison. The closer they were to the outer edges of the hemisphere, the quicker they operated, allowing the entire force to spread far and wide without any traffic jams.

But, as if mocking all these maneuvers, Michael activated his skill.

“Cardinal Acceleration.”

The power he obtained when he captured Velgrynd was now completely his own. A great, multi-headed crimson dragon overran Obela's army, killing more

than ten thousand in an instant. It was a nightmarish scene, but even so, it still could have been far worse. If Obela had picked up on it a moment later, everything would have ended all at once.

“D-damn youuu...!!”

Seeing her troops be murdered like this infuriated Obela. But still she kept her cool. Analyzing this most recent attack, she used its strength to calculate the relative power between herself and Michael. Her conclusion: The gap between them was nothing short of overwhelming. It was clear that if things kept going like this, the worst possible outcome was looming—and in fact, the tens of thousands of rays of light that her force fired out during their scattering maneuvers were harmlessly deflected by the icy barrier Michael had put up.

It's not only Lady Velgrynd, then. Perhaps that was Lady Velzard's power at work...

The beautiful, pallid layer of ice enveloped itself thinly over Michael's body like a layer of diamonds. The lack of any atmosphere in this other world didn't matter at all. Michael's divine aura was enough to generate truly supernatural things—and the power of Velzard's Snow Crystal defensive wall was unmistakable. It was an absolute shield, vaunted as impervious to any kind of attack, and while it was based on natural phenomena, it could block and repel anything that bounced off it at any wavelength. Attacks driven by spiritual particles would work, but penetrating a Snow Crystal shield would require Velzard-level amounts of energy.

Michael in his current state was, indeed, comparable to Velzard, or perhaps stronger. And that made it impossible for Obela alone to break down the Snow Crystal. Only a few of her soldiers could perform any sort of spiritual particle-driven attack, such as Disintegration. She could have gathered up the strength of all her surviving forces to perform a Disintegration, and even *that* wouldn't work on Michael now.

“Ohma, I will entrust this mission to you, then. Please flee at once. And tell Lady Milim—”

“I cannot agree with this, Lady Obela. As your chief of staff, I have the authority to disobey your orders, and I can think of no better moment to do

that!"

Ohma was once again demonstrating its rare disapproval of Obela's command. She could sense the determination in her aide's words. There was just one thing to do.

"Then I leave this fight to you. Everyone, you must stake your lives on this!"

Obela ordered her force to die. And yet everyone under her command looked overjoyed.

""Our lives are for you, my lady!""

That declaration was the signal...and then the merciless assault began anew.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
1

THE FIRST SKIRMISH

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST SKIRMISH

All of us were transported to a frigid wasteland, a world entirely white and silver. It was almost like I had blundered into Guy's stronghold.

I had tried to use our transport magic circle, but the magic didn't activate on it, so I instead used Spatial Transport to travel to the far limits of what I could see with the monitoring magic Argos. The moment we were on the other side, though, we were greeted by this piercing cold air. It was so frigid, I thought my heart was going to freeze.

And that's the thing, right? If it's cold enough to even shut *me* down, it had to be Velzard in action.

There was a presence that made the atmosphere seem to tremble. It told us that this was unmistakably a battlefield, and the greatest source of this presence came from the spot where Guy and Velzard were facing off. They had created such a vast space of death and destruction where nobody else could intervene.

So I let them be. It seemed like someone had their eyes on me, but I ignored it. I felt a brief wave of anger from this someone, like, "God dammit, how dare you ignore me?!", but there was no point dwelling on it. As an outsider, I was in no place to butt in here.

...

I detected a hint or two that someone was dismayed by this, but it wasn't about to shake the conclusion I just reached. Jumping into a location that you know is dangerous isn't a choice that an intelligent human being would make.

So I looked a bit more into where else I should poke my nose. The next nearby sign I picked up—oh, that's Diablo, huh? It looked like it was him against

Zarario, but again, let's leave them alone. I mean, Diablo's right there and all, so leaving matters to him shouldn't be a big deal. If *he* couldn't do anything about this, it's not like *I* could do very much more.

No, I really don't think that—

Hee-hee-hee! You don't get it, do you, Ciel?

This is something that I've picked up on only lately, but you know what the thing is with Diablo? It's the way he slacks off whenever I'm watching him. I don't think he even realizes it, either. I feel like he stops making a full effort because he's eager to see what I'll do instead.

...Ah yes. That does make sense to me.

Wow. It's been a while since I beat Ciel in a debate.

Feeling a little emboldened by this, I began to give everyone my orders.

"Let's leave the outside alone. I wanna head for Leon. It looks like we got a few battles going on at once, so join in as you see fit!"

Benimaru, Soei, Ranga, and Kumara nodded at me. These weren't exactly precision orders I was giving, but we were in an emergency. *If we all went out together, I thought, that was likely our best bet.*

By the way, there was another pair (?) engaged in battle outside. I had sensed the remains of heavy magic usage from close to the surface...but my instincts told me to let it be. Why was that? I had absolutely no reason or basis for my choice, but I decided to trust that voice in my head. This was no time to be preoccupied—I needed to take quick action.

So, with no objections from anyone else, we made for the castle.

*

The visibility was terrible. I had Universal Detect turned up to max, but I couldn't even get a feel for the distance. The reason was simple: Velzard's blizzard was contaminated by magicules, and that was easily enough to neutralize my Cancel Natural Elements skill. Since I judge distances by the way magicules in the atmosphere reflect off matter, everything becomes ambiguous if there're swarms of magicules going every which way.

So all we could really do was travel in the direction where the magicules were being tossed and thrown around the most. That turned out to be the right call, too, for we were soon at Leon's castle.

Things were a lot better inside. Having my full vision back was a relief. Now it was time to look for signs of a fight.

"Okay, I'm sensing Leon's presence," I said. "Me and Benimaru will head there, so you guys go cover the rest of the battlefield."

"At once!"

"I hear you!"

"On it."

Ranga, Kumara, and Soei set off. I didn't bother watching them leave, instead invoking Spatial Transport to get myself and Benimaru out of there. The moment we stepped inside, after all, the sheer aura of this battle seemed to explode in my mind. It chilled me. There was this intense energy, even greater than my current full strength, and I could tell things were getting pretty rough.

The scene greeting us post-Transport was truly a race against time. I tried using Haste Thought to read the situation, analyzing matters hundreds of millions of times faster than normally, but things were clear enough already.

Yuuki, exerting what looked like the last ounce of his energy, was taking the lead position as Laplace and Teare were behind him, protecting a woman. She looked familiar to me—Yuuki's secretary, the body possessed by the demon lord Kazalim. Kagali was her name, and the last time I saw her, she was under the control of Lieutenant Kondo. I couldn't guess what happened to her, but it looked like she had her free will back... That wasn't really the issue, though. The real issue was the large fireball the enemy was about to unleash. Enhanced by an ultimate skill, this massive blast, with its boosted, purified heat and destructive power, would shatter even spiritual particles into nothing. In other worlds, it could destroy souls...and it had already been unleashed well in advance of my arrival.

I was safe. With Azathoth, God of the Void, devouring this destructive force, I was well-protected against any kind of projectile strike. Benimaru was naturally

under Azathoth's influence as well, so no need to worry about him, either. But Yuuki and the others had been directly exposed to that huge fireball—and directly hit by it, in fact. By the time we came in, they had already been taking damage.

By this point, I'm just not sure—

No. Perhaps, if you consumed it with Azathoth, God of the Void—

Okay, do it!

I sent Ciel the order before it could finish explaining everything, and in no time at all, it was on the move. The result, however...was a huge explosion that tore the castle apart. Yuuki disappeared, swallowed in the light, and so did Laplace. The explosion was so wide in scope that it distorted space itself. I managed to suppress quite a bit of it with my power, but as for the two people who took a direct hit from it...

"I know I've caused you a lot of trouble, but I never hated you at all, Rimuru."

"Yeh, me either. And now that yer here, I'm sure it's all gonna be fine!"

I felt like I could hear those voices. I think I just imagined them, though. Yuuki and Laplace were gone without a trace.

And, yeah, they *did* cause me nothing but trouble. But Yuuki was a traveler from my homeland, someone who Shizu entrusted me with. And by *this* point, I couldn't really hate Laplace, either. In fact, I thought we might be able to build a friendship of sorts...

But both of them are so stubborn, there's a nonzero chance that they're still alive somewhere.

No need for condolences, thanks. It's obvious from what I saw that any hopes for their survival were a pipe dream.

Still, Ciel's words did bring me back to reality. I thanked it as I turned the page. Yuuki and Laplace may have made the ultimate sacrifice, but they had nothing to do with our objectives this time around. Besides, they were both about the most stubborn bastards I'd ever met in my life, so for all I knew, there really *was* a chance. I could get sentimental about things later—I had work to

do and getting caught up in regret without completing that job would just be an insult to them.

Clearly, the time Yuuki and Laplace earned for me hadn't been in vain. The barrier they had exerted every effort to put up (and Teare had exerted every effort to support) had saved her and Kagali from serious injury. I knew that because I had already isolated them in my Stomach to observe their condition. Ciel was doing all the work, but either way, thanks to Yuuki and Laplace's actions, Teare and Kagali were rescued in time.

After confirming those two were safe, I turned my attention to the enemy. One was Feldway, and the other was Footman...or not. Just looking at him, he seemed like a different person. And Leon, who I was just wondering about, was fighting against someone I didn't even recognize. She looked a whole lot like Elmesia, but I could tell it was someone else. She had the same powerful presence, but there was a different essence to it. I could tell she was on our side, but in what way exactly, I'd work out later. Regardless, this woman seemed to be fighting on an even keel with Leon, so I decided to leave them to it and concentrate on our more present enemies.

"You know," I began, "I expected you guys to go after Leon, but this was a much lower turnout than I anticipated."

That was my attempt at stirring them up. I wasn't showing it at all, but failing to save Yuuki and Laplace was frustrating. It angered me a lot, in fact, and I had no intention of showing any mercy.

"Who are you? You dare interfere with me? Outrageous!" yelled the guy opposite Feldway.

"Jahil," said Feldway, "that's the demon lord Rimuru, one of the most important people out there. You'd be wise to remember him."

All right. The guy who I'm assuming took over Footman was named Jahil. He's the one who unleashed that huge fireball just now, so he's definitely trouble.

So it's two of us against two of them. I'll deal with Feldway, so Benimaru can take care of Jahil. However, by the looks of things...

"Jahil, you say? I'll take you on."

Oh, um, Benimaru? Wow. He's so overjoyed to join in, no matter what I thought about it. No point worrying about him now, I supposed. Whatever happens, happens, I figured.

"Heh. I didn't expect to be fighting you in here, but it certainly saves me a lot of trouble," Feldway scoffed.

"I'd say the same thing to you!" I replied, drawing my sword.

*

If I'm in on this, I'm going all the way. Michael's got Castle Guard, which makes him pretty tough to overcome, but luckily he's not here. That was an opportunity, and I really wanted to capitalize on that and get rid of Feldway super-fast, at least.

Besides, I'm a man who never hesitates once he's made up his mind. I'm never going to benefit from long, dragged-out battles or distractions getting in my way. At times like these, you need to decide things with one killer blow. And I had prepared for situations like this. I had special skills—finishers, you could say, the kind that the heroes of *shounen* manga series have had for years.

"Imaginary Blade!!"

What's the most all-out powerful sword technique you can use on multiple targets? If you ask me, the answer is obvious. It's Meltslash, capable of cutting through even spiritual particles. Now, what's the most skillful, deftest sword strike on a lone target? That's got to be Crestwater Hundred Flower Bloom, no doubt about it.

The combination of these two moves, mixing their essences together, is Crestwater Darkflame Hundred Flower Bloom, Benimaru's showstopping finisher. It retained the forms of the very best sword moves, but with more power from the added ultimate skill. That put it beyond the spiritual particle-crushing point, making it comparable to Meltslash. In terms of expertise and sheer might, it was clearly the best out there.

And, you know, thinking about it...I couldn't have Benimaru outdoing me. So I asked Ciel to come up with a finisher more suited to my gifts—and I wasn't shy about offering it my feedback, either. I wanted it to take Void Collapse—a skill

that I still didn't really understand, despite multiple explanations—and adapt it in a way that'd boost my sword powers.

That was how Imaginary Blade was born. It didn't cut through spiritual particles at all, you see—instead, it *ate* them. That's what made it special. There was no blocking this ability that consumed spiritual particles into Complex Space. The only way to resist it was to dodge it entirely. Catching it with your sword ended the fight immediately, making it a literal insta-kill.

My philosophy for things like this is that a finisher isn't really a finisher unless it ends the fight right there. Among my closer friends, after all, nothing ever worked on them twice. Show them a skill, and they'd take countermeasures against it. I couldn't show them my *real* finishers until it really, *really* mattered. And, of course, you could counteract Imaginary Blade with things like Parallel Existences, the way Velgrynd liked to—but in a battle between two high-ranked spiritual life-forms, the main focus is on energy management. Whoever exhausts their opponent first is the winner, kind of. Even if you failed to truly finish with your best move, that didn't make Imaginary Blade any less dangerous.

So, now that we were at this point, I wasted no time revealing that finisher of mine, so strong was my desire to finish Feldway off immediately. And yet, with the sound of what felt like the air groaning under the pressure, my sword was stopped.

...?!

I could tell Ciel was surprised. I bet it was. I was pretty damn shocked, too.

I never thought the jinx you feared would be proven like this, Master...

Hmm? The jinx, you said?

Yes. It's a common trope in shounen manga that if you break out a finisher for your first move, it'll always be blocked...

Pfffft!!

Look at you! Making me laugh out loud when things are *this* serious?

And yes, I said that, all right? I know I did. But...come on, did you ever

expect...*this*?

...

...

Phew. Okay, let's move on. Stuff happens. It was just such a joke, how easily my blade was stopped, that it threw me a tiny little bit.

I got my head back into gear and focused my attention on Feldway. Ciel, always one step ahead of me, had begun investigating why the attack had been blocked. It'd be useless to attack until I got the results from that, but I still had to pretend that this didn't faze me at all. I decided to converse with Feldway a little bit, bluffing all the way.

"Wow. Nice job blocking that," I said.

I slashed at him, pretending that I wasn't disturbed at all. I thought he'd ignore me, but surprisingly, he didn't.

"I knew you had gained Noir's good graces, so I wondered how powerful you were...but you don't seem to be any threat at all."

He knows how to press my buttons, doesn't he? I don't care if he compares me to Diablo or whatever, but here he is, not giving a damn about this great new finisher I came up with...

No, this is too unnatural. Anyone else would feel threatened. The only person I could imagine reacting that way was Michael protected by Castle Guard—

Yeah, you say that, but it didn't work one single bit, dude.

I wasn't even sure Abyss Annihilation (which I saw Carrera bust out in the labyrinth) would even work. It was looking like Feldway was fighting with a God-class sword, too, and if Imaginary Blade didn't work, maybe some kind of divine force was in place. Meltslash, being on a lower level, was unlikely to fare any better against him.

So I thought about just slashing him up, all normal swordfight-style, but that wasn't a walk in the park, either. Feldway was strong in the regular sense, too, something I could sense just crossing swords with him like this. Looking purely

at his swordsmanship alone, he's just as good as me, or better. I bet he'd give Benimaru a pretty even match. I'm a pseudo-True Dragon myself now, which has greatly enhanced my physical abilities. Movement-wise, I was capable of several times what I could do before, and that wasn't a metaphor at all. I also thought my training made me a better swordsman by now...but nothing worked on Feldway.

I was still holding up all right (thanks to a few cheats I was resorting to), and I could always ask Ciel to take my place in an emergency. But in a fair-and-square fight, I was beginning to feel like I had no chance. That suggested a need to shift to magic attacks, something you can't deflect with a sword—but any large-scale magic would cause untold damage to Leon's kingdom. Any spell I cast needed to be sized for just one person.

Abyss Annihilation, like I just mentioned, was destructive enough to affect the very future of this planet, so it was pretty much off the table to start with. I bring it up because it's one of the strongest skills out there in terms of sheer power...but I really couldn't think of anything stronger than that which targets individuals. Disintegration could compare to it, albeit barely, but otherwise the writing was on the wall. Nuclear Cannon and other handy single-target nuclear magic couldn't hold a candle to Disintegration anyway. And I could enhance any strike with an ultimate skill of mine, but if my opponent had an ultimate, too, he could deal with that. Really, I wasn't sure I had anything against this guy.

If there's any silver lining, it's how Feldway was taking a wait-and-see approach with me. If he tried going on the counterattack, I'd be stretched to the limit. For now, the best course of action seemed to be chatting him up and looking for some kind of breakthrough. So I kept speaking, just so he wouldn't realize how irritated I was getting.

"I'm a harmless slime, after all. No wonder you don't see me as a threat."

"Heh. Still looking to talk to me? Now I think it's clear why he's serving you."

"I'm not exactly glad to hear that."

"No? Well, you're a thorn in my side, so I don't have any reason to butter you up. If you're starting to resent this, that's fine by me."

I expected him to shut me down, but he was oddly open to conversation. It

made this all the more disappointing. If he wasn't willing to talk at all, I could whip his ass without any regrets...but I'm still looking for an effective approach for the moment, so it's not like I can really lord it over him anyway.

But now I'm wondering a bit. Why isn't Feldway trying to fight back at all? That's helpful for me, really, but at this rate, we're gonna cycle through the same basic moves until the end of time. I'm using Void Collapse, but that's an absorption-type skill, not one I release myself, so it's not really tiring me out much. The same was true for Feldway, however, as he hadn't taken any damage yet. It felt like he was using some skill to shore up his defense, but parrying everything I threw at him like this was keeping him from being gassed too much.

One approach I *could* take was to bust out some kind of sword move that even Feldway couldn't catch. And, in fact, I did have one more *real* hidden trick left in my bag, something new I developed based on Benimaru's and Carrera's Hundred Flower Bloom. It's a super finisher move, one that I can't even fully use without Ciel's full support. That meant it was beyond what I could bust out on my own, so I hesitated to use it, since it seemed like such a cheat. But I couldn't whine about that now, so I was thinking about whipping it out if the opportunity presented itself...

...but I just couldn't picture it working, somehow. It was kind of eerie. And Ciel seemed to agree, too. So for now, job one was to figure out Feldway's secret. It meant we were just going through the motions in this fight for now, but on the other hand, it gave me a chance to calm down and check out our overall situation. I was worried about everyone else's safety, so—while keeping a close eye on Feldway—I turned my attention to my friends.

*

Benimaru was a concern of mine. His opponent was clearly superior, so I tried using Universal Detect so I could watch them without turning my eyes toward him.

Hmm... Oh?! Wow, look at that ominous crimson spear Jahil's carrying. I don't know when he got it (or where from), but I could sense an incredible amount of force from it.

It seems to be called the Demigod's Bloodspear. Earlier, he bragged that "I will run you through with the spear my most beloved demigod gave me!"

Oh, um, okay...

Unlike me, Ciel must have been keeping tabs on how Benimaru was doing. And, yeah, I can't let my guard down right now, but I'm not in crisis mode at all. Worst-case scenario, I still have Veldora, so I can come back to life if I die. Maybe I was lacking in urgency a little, but I couldn't afford to hurry things until I figured out a strategy. So I kept observing.

I didn't know what kind of thing Jahil was, but it certainly seemed appropriate that he took over Footman's body. His nimble footwork and spear aptitude were both exemplary. With my perception sped up millionfold, I could tell he was a master of both. It was hard to believe this was someone else's body at all, which proved how much of a menace Jahil could be.

What's more, Jahil had over three times the existence points of Benimaru. And, unbelievably enough, that weapon, the Demigod's Bloodspear, was estimated to have at least ten million EP. What a cheat weapon that is! We were outside of Ramiris's labyrinth so I couldn't give exact figures, but between weapon and owner, we're talking over four times what Benimaru would rate. Benimaru was a much more skilled fighter, but that's the only reason this was still a match at all—and without his Shimmering Haze skill, he would've been beaten long ago.

That's how much trouble that bum Jahil was. And if all that was true, I really wanted to go pitch in a little bit. But the truth was that I just didn't have the free time right now, so I had no choice but to count on Benimaru to keep up the good work.

As for the other group—well, they too were at a strategic stalemate. The mysterious Elmesia clone who was taking on Leon at the moment (I assumed she was related to the emperor in some way) was as good as an awakened demon lord. Maybe better, actually? She seemed to possess an ultimate skill, and that let her keep up with every step Leon took.

She and Leon have very similar fighting styles. One could conjecture

that they are teacher and student, perhaps.

Hmmm.

I didn't pick up on that because they're using different weapon types, but now that Ciel mentions it, they *are* almost exactly alike. Maybe this woman was Leon's military instructor or something.

That, and the way Ciel put it, their ultimate skills were from the same lineage. They must've been reading each other's moves, which was why they fell into a stalemate at the moment. I didn't see this getting resolved anytime soon, no. We couldn't expect any outside help, either, but at least we didn't think reinforcements were a necessity quite yet.

"Rimuru, right? If you have the time to observe us, I wouldn't mind a little help here, you know."

Oh. Wow, she's pretty perceptive. Guess she noticed me staring right at her. I wasn't exactly free, either, but I admittedly *was* watching her every move, so I was finding it hard to say no to her. Instead, I decided to be frank.

"Sorry. I'm at an impasse here, too, but I couldn't help but peek at you."

"Huh? You're that preoccupied and you *still* just stared at me? What kind of person would do that? El told me you had no common sense, but you really need to quit with that, got it?"

She was absolutely right, of course. I didn't think she was on to me—but, yeah, getting distracted like that during battle wasn't the smoothest of moves.

"I'd like to take your comments back to my home office and give them the consideration they deserve, yes."

"Hmm... Doesn't sound like you want to do anything at all, but okay. So you think you can win?"

Boy, is she sharp. I was trying to make a joke, but she saw right through me.

...Yikes. Better get serious pretty soon. Now Feldway's staring at me with this crazy look on his face.

"For now," I replied, steeling myself for a counterattack from him at any moment, "it's not looking good. I don't see any gap to exploit at all."

Feldway snickered at this, suddenly joining our little back-and-forth. “Heh. First you turn away from me in battle, and now we’re exchanging casual banter? Very impressive. And yet you claim I’m showing you no gaps. Ridiculous. Where do you get off, if I may ask?”

“Oh, shut up! I gave you my top finisher and you just blocked it like it was nothing! That’s why it’s like this now! I wouldn’t be going through all this trouble if you’d just lie down and get your ass beat!”

“Don’t make me laugh. Our plans would have been realized quite a bit earlier if you had not interfered with me. That, and of course your servant Noir’s crushed a *number* of our other plans as well!”

Guess I riled him up too much. He was losing his temper.

“I have nothing to do with whatever Diablo did,” I insisted.

“Yes, you do. You’re his master.”

“No, like, I haven’t even known him that long.”

I’m not about to take responsibility for something I have no business handling. I’m not the one to blame there—that’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.

“He’s just so *brazen*,” I offered.

“Mmm, I agree with you,” the woman replied. “And by the way, I’m a little awed at how you can act so relaxed in this situation!”

Something told me she didn’t mean that as a compliment. Why wasn’t *she* concentrating on Leon, then? I wanted to ask, but it’d be shaking the hornet’s nest too much.

“Who are you, by the way?”

“Oh, me? I’m El’s mom. Call me Sylvia!”

Rather surprising self-intro there. I mean, I know elves have long lifespans, so maybe this is perfectly reasonable to see...but not only is she basically Elmesia’s identical twin, she’s her mom, too? I still retained enough of my common sense from my previous life that this felt incredibly weird.

I stole another peek at her. She was engaged in close combat—so close that I

didn't think she'd be relaxed enough to chat. It was almost like everything was choreographed down to the last millimeter, Leon and Sylvia dodging each other's strikes by a hair's breadth and leaping straight into the counterattack. If she had the capacity for banter under these circumstances, she must've had a whole lot of guts.

"So you think you can handle Leon? You're his teacher, aren't you?" I asked.

"Oh, you could tell? Well, I won't deny that, but I'm not sure 'handling' him is on the table right now, no. In fact, lemme be honest with you—I didn't expect Leon to be *this* good..."

She was presenting this like it was a joke, but I think she meant everything she said. They had all been walking a tightrope before we showed up, so I wouldn't blame her if she lost focus sometime soon. The equilibrium we had going right now would collapse the moment things leaned too far in one direction, so neither of us could be too casual about our chances here.

So I thought a little bit about Leon. I had certain measures I could take against him, but should I really break them out? I preferred to wait until they were at their most effective, and right now didn't seem to be that moment. We were in a tough situation, but we *were* still maintaining that equilibrium. Try to push it, and I might wind up exposing myself to danger.

Resolving to keep an eye on Leon, I suddenly heard Benimaru lodging his own complaints at me.

"Sir Rimuru, I can clearly tell you're quite relaxed right now, but I'm...in deep over here!"

It was rare to hear Benimaru whine like this... I couldn't blame him, though. That fourfold difference was no joke.

"Deep?"

"Like...*real* deep...!"

Yeah.

Jahil's specialty seemed to lie in flame attacks, which fortunately gave Benimaru an advantage. He would've lost long ago otherwise, so really, it was

kind of a miracle.

So now what...?

This détente could break down at any moment, deciding the battle right then and there, and I wasn't exactly a spectator, either. I had several cards up my sleeve, but I was wavering over when to do that. Leon was one thing, but Feldway and Jahil didn't seem too challenged, either.

We were at a definitive disadvantage. Should we wait for someone else to beat their foes and come running in here? Or should I perform a Demon Summoning—one of those aces up my sleeve—and call Testarossa or someone over, maybe? Ah, but my foes could do the same thing, right? Then it'd really turn into a quagmire.

It honestly *did* seem like the best choice was to wait a bit longer and see how things worked out.

"All right, Benimaru, hold out for just a bit longer!"

"Hey! I *really* can't buy us that much time!"

Haven't heard Benimaru sound that pathetic in quite a long while.

I began to discuss with Ciel whether there was any way to break out of this situation.



Kumara, Ranga, and Soei, working as a team away from Rimuru, each went to provide support against a different opponent. There wasn't any verbal consultation between them; they just naturally decided where to go based on the approximate strength of each foe.

Ranga made a beeline for Vega. He had the largest aura out of anyone in the area, and his momentum made him even stronger than Ranga. As expected, he was presiding over the fiercest battle of them all.

Hmm, he does seem stronger than me..., thought Ranga. But if I stall for enough time, Sir Soei and the rest should finish off their foes and come to my aid...

He trusted his friends enough that he would never doubt them. That's why he

was so unafraid to take on such an awe-inspiring fighter.

"I've come to help!" he shouted as he leaped at Vega.

It was a delightful sight for Maeter, leader of Leon's White Knights. She had been doing her best to serve as a healer, but there was only so much time she could buy with their current strength alone.

The five demons serving Raine and Mizeri—Misora, Squall, Ulrich, Alban, and Georg—were each Demon Peers, as powerful as the demon lords of old. But Vega, their opponent, had an EP of over ten million, which was just too great of a difference.

Misora, the Peer in charge of command, was talented enough to serve as Raine's closest aide. Whenever Raine slacked off (as she often did), it was Misora who looked after her business; it gave her a broad perspective on matters, as well as an eye for detail. But against Vega, who could knock out some of the Demon Peers with one strike, there wasn't much chance to exercise her command skills. The front line still hadn't collapsed, though, thanks to her concerted effort and Maeter's frantic healing support.

These five demons, usually proud and individualistic types, were keeping this line going thanks to their showing unusual teamwork against adversity—that, and a few illusory magic-driven tricks. But once Ulrich and Alban were both felled at the same time, the burden on the survivors increased exponentially. Maeter could no longer keep up with the healing demand, and the team was just about to be wiped out.

This was the critical moment when Ranga joined in.

"Who's this little puppy dog?! Get the hell out of my way!"

Vega was in a state of bliss. He had obtained seemingly infinite power, which convinced him that he was invincible. The addition of a single monster didn't seem like any threat at all to him.

But that was a mistake. Ranga had less than half Vega's EP, but his combat experience could never be underestimated. A constant presence in Rimuru's shadow, he had now borne witness to all kinds of different battles—and that allowed Ranga to rapidly adapt to whatever enemy he faced. A strategic victory

this time meant getting through the battle without suffering any casualties...and now that he understood this, it made his own role in this fight clear as day.

"Use me as a shield as you rebuild your positions," Ranga said, tail wagging. "Reinforcements *will* arrive. My master would *never* be defeated!"

That told the demons what they needed to know. Rimuru was here—and Misora, understanding Ranga's intentions, quickly worked out their next move.

"I will take you up on that offer. Lady Maeter, focus your efforts on Sir Ranga, please."

With that quick change of tactics, the battle now featured Ranga as the key player. From this point on, Vega's unbeaten streak of sorts came to an end. Ranga, whom he had dismissed as someone well below his caliber, performed far beyond expectations. Without any conscious thought, Vega attempted to eliminate him. He wasn't even afraid to tap into his ultimate skill Azhdahak, Lord of Dark Dragons, so intent was he on subduing Ranga with pure power...

Azhdahak, the ultimate skill, was a power acquired from the way Vega lived his life. He had inherited the blood of a "magical inquisitor," one of the triumphant results of the Rozzo family's research, and that gave him both monster and human properties. Part of the former included the ability to heal even serious injuries as long as he was fed. Yuuki had later performed certain modifications to his body to turn him into a sort of imitation slime, or proto-slime—but that was a closely guarded secret.

Thanks to that, Vega's body was an aggregate of microscopic particles known as magi-bacteria; his body could regenerate. As long as a certain portion of his body remained intact, the entire rest of it could be revived without incident. This made Vega a master of mimicry, capable of imitating the structure of any living thing, and he also had a certain chance of acquiring the abilities of whatever prey he fed upon.

This was exactly why he was able to obtain Azhdahak. The essence of that ultimate skill involved absorbing powers from the user's prey, which lay at the core of Vega's will. In practice, it was quite similar to Rimuru's Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony, providing a showcase full of worrisome abilities—Ultraspeed Thought, Parallel Thought, Analyze and Assess, Dominate Organic, Mass

Production, Absorb Skill, Multilayer Barrier, and more.

It was a top performer, no doubt. If Vega's prey had a physical body, he could read data from it with Dominate Organic to obtain its species-specific abilities. If the unfortunate victim was a spiritual life-form, Absorb Skill could steal its energy and make its abilities Vega's own as well. And as long as there was any useful organic material nearby to work with, he could create as many Duplicates of himself as he wanted.

Overall, in the right hands, Azhdahak could offer virtually unlimited strength—but *only* in the right hands. Unfortunately, Vega hadn't built up that much experience in life since he was born. He grew at a frightening rate, his power (and nothing else) increasing by leaps and bounds, but he still had yet to master his skills. All he could really do was power up his body via Dominate Organic, read his enemy's weaknesses with Analyze and Assess, and weaken his foes via Absorb Skill. He also took advantage of Ultraspeed Thought, albeit unconsciously, so he had a certain level of judgment skills...but Parallel Thought hadn't dawned on him yet, so despite his dominant advantage in this fight, he still hadn't secured victory.

And, of course, Vega was enjoying his own strength too much to realize that he had just missed his best chance to win this.

Then Vega's fist, with all its vicious power, crushed its way through Ranga.

"...Mmm?"

Vega was puzzled. It didn't *feel* like he had just torn through flesh. He took no energy from his target, and he didn't even execute Analyze and Assess on it. The reason? Ranga *was* fully utilizing his powers.

The ultimate skill Hastur, Lord of Starwind, allowed the user to transform themselves into a fearsome magical wind that contaminated everything it touched. No physical attacks worked on Ranga—in fact, the moment anyone made contact with him, they took damage from the Death-Calling Wind effect.

Ranga was now magic itself. Much like how Carillon's Burst Roar skill worked, he maintained his shape and mass, but he had transformed into a mass of conscious particles housing untold destructive energy, just like a spiritual life-form. Even a simple headbutt could become a devastating attack, and it doesn't

need to be said just how fearsome a threat this posed. In Ranga's case, Hastur was classified as a change in status, unlike Burst Roar's "skill" classification. It consumed a great deal of energy, but being in "magic wind" mode didn't put any further limits upon him.

This was the strength one could boast when they could fully handle their skills. Vega might have more EP than Ranga, but in terms of fighting ability, the winner was clear.

"Ha-ha-ha! Looks like your fist doesn't work on me."

Ranga was actually just as surprised. He had been on his guard, assuming that Vega was stronger than him. Rimuru was always a cautious fighter, a habit Ranga had grown to imitate. He didn't dare let his guard down against Vega, what with him having over double his energy. But this? He almost suspected this was some sort of trap.

"Damn you! You're just a stupid dog, and you *dare* mess with me?!"

Enraged, Vega lunged at Ranga, fists flying. Only then did Ranga realize that his opponent was less than intelligent. Wildly flailing at Ranga in "magic wind" mode was no different from inflicting wounds on yourself. Vega was willfully damaging his own body, and Ranga didn't even know how to respond.

The correct countermeasure to Hastur was to wrap one's fist in a skill-driven aura before attempting a punch. The same would be true when attacking with a weapon. Against a skill like this, another skill was the only approach. A spiritual life-form could boost its energy to produce an ultimate-equivalent effect, but Vega hadn't taken any of that into consideration at all. If he had a full mastery of the ultimate skill Azhdahak, he never would have exposed himself as such a dullard.

"Fool. I thought you were tricking me, but it seems you meant to do that. If so, allow me to descend upon you at once."

With that declaration, Ranga began to run at full speed. He was now a jet-black wind that joyfully toyed with Vega, leaving sound behind and filling the air with afterimages of himself, from the ground to up in the sky. It became a great howl that reverberated into deep space.

Combining Hastur with the skill Dominate Sound & Wind, Ranga amplified his speed and destructive force. A quick application of Dominate Space created a force field, and within it he invoked Dominate Weather, creating a Deathstorm for the finishing blow. The storm grew, and grew, and in time it roared across the landscape, becoming the all-destroying skill Apocalypse.

The entire process, from start to finish, was called Apocalypse Howling—the most powerful of single-target attacks, woven together by Ranga himself.

Normally, if he let out a far-reaching howl in this state, it would turn into a damage-dealing directional beam. That was actually an easier way to invoke this—the more correct way, even—but Ranga wanted to deal as much damage as possible, so he deliberately restricted the amount of space the skill worked inside of. Caging his foe within this force field eliminated any energy waste, allowing for a potentially greater effect.

Vega had taken a direct hit from all this, but he was still alive, shockingly enough. He didn't have a firm grip on Azhdahak, but the ultimate skill had already embedded itself deep into his subconscious. That, and Vega was nothing if not obsessively stubborn. He was far from unharmed, but Dominate Organic and Mass Production let him regenerate his body just in time before he ceased to exist. His gigantic magicule count wasn't just for show, in other words.

So he took a deep breath and roared with all his might.

“Dammit! Dammit! *Daaaaaaaammit!!*”

Then he glared intently at Ranga. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he spoke again.

“Tsk! It's been one fight after another. I guess *I'm* getting tired, too. We'll call it a draw for today, so you better watch out next time we meet! See you.”

Vega's cowardice was the reason why he was so good at detecting danger, if nothing else. Realizing the tide was turning against him, he promptly made the decision to flee. Ranga had no objection to that. Vega outclassed him in EP, and indeed, he had just withstood Ranga's most powerful of moves. If that blow didn't finish him off, Ranga knew there was no way he could ever defeat Vega. There was no need to push this any further. Their tactical mission was to stall

for time, and if he forced Vega to retreat, he couldn't ask for a much better result.

Thus Ranga's decision not to further engage Vega was a tactically sound one—and so the fiercest of the current battlegrounds finally simmered down.

Ranga's allies were naturally overjoyed to receive this support...but Misora had other ideas.

Ranga, that demon wolf... He was the demon lord Rimuru's pet, wasn't he? How did he ever get that powerful?!

It almost seemed unfair. Misora had a rough idea of how much energy Vega and Ranga boasted; anyone at his level of strength needed to keenly judge his foes if he wanted to survive another day. As Misora saw it, Ranga was hardly a pushover, but Vega was still a more formidable opponent—and yet Ranga dominated him. Misora was still busy reworking her tactics on the supposition that Ranga would shield them, but this seemed incredibly anticlimactic.

Misora was reminded of what her boss told her once: “*You'll always find more amazing things than yourself, Misora. Just look at Sir Rimuru, and I think you'll know how I feel.*”

“...Oh. They say a pet can tell you a lot about their owner. I never doubted Lady Raine's words, but now I understand them from the heart.”

The other four Demon Peers nodded their agreement.

Meanwhile Maeter, the White Knight, was stunned. She was almost out of magic, but she assumed she'd play *some* part in this fight.

I love dogs, she thought, trying to escape this reality. I always wanted to have one. If they'll do this much for their master, I'm marching right down to the pet shop after this is over!

This was just too much to attempt parsing at the moment.

Pet shops in this world, by the way, didn't sell little lapdogs or the like. They dealt in animals (and monsters) that had undergone professional training and would literally fight to the death for their master. This made them rather expensive investments, although that didn't deter Maeter—she would go on to

name the forest wolf she later purchased “Ranga II,” but that’s another story.



Fran, leader of the Red Knights, and Kizona, who headed the Yellow Knights, were struggling against Orlia. “Struggling,” in fact, didn’t begin to describe it. If Orlia seriously intended to kill them both, victory would’ve been decided at that very moment.

“Ngh...she’s too much,” Fran muttered, biting her lip.

Kizona, fending off another attack, agreed. “We’re being toyed with. Is the mace next? It was a dagger earlier. She keeps using weaker and weaker weapons—I think she’s testing their performance on us.”

She was right. Orlia began combat holding her morning star up high, and one blow from it shattered Kizona’s entire suit of armor. She was prepared to die at the next blow, but then Orlia decided to switch weapons. Clearly she saw the two knights as nothing to fear, but in a way this was a lucky break.

“I hate being treated like such an idiot, but if *this* is how wide the gap is between us, what can we do...?”

“Let’s think positive. If we keep stalling for time, I’m sure Sir Leon will come to our aid!”

It was an impossible hope, but Fran and Kizona held it in their hearts, never giving up as they faced Orlia—no matter how much they realized that such hopes were an illusion. Their master, the demon lord Leon, was no doubt facing an even worse situation; there was no way he’d abandon his own knights otherwise.

All they could do was try to survive until help came along...but they were well past their limits. The difference in strength was just too much. Not even ten minutes had passed since the battle began, and both of them were already bruised from head to toe.

Orlia, too, was satisfied. She had tested out all her skills by now, to some extent.

“Okay. Is that enough?”

With those words, she transformed her weapon into a trident—the preferred weapon of the woman once called Orca, when she was ready to fight for real.

Fran and Kizona could sense the change in their foe.

This is it... I did my best, but I am sorry I failed to fulfill my mission—

Fran was lost in despair. Kizona took a more pragmatic approach:

I wish I could've had cake as my last meal...

They waited for their final moment to arrive, in their own ways. Instead...

“Looks like you’re in trouble. I thought it’d be tactless of me to intrude, but please allow me to handle things.”

Kumara, transformed into a beautiful woman, stood before Orlia, as if to protect the two knights.

So began the battle between them, which—once again—proved one-sided. Now it was Orlia who was hopelessly outmatched.

“No! Why is this?!”

Orlia couldn’t help but cry out in astonishment. Her ultimate enchantment Multi-Weapon let her create God-class weapons of any type, and she had God-class armor on to match. But Kumara’s Nine-tail Gouge Thrusts totally ignored that armor as it inflicted damage on Orlia. Her gear wasn’t shattered, but the sheer impact of these tail-driven strikes hit home, sapping her strength.

“Quite weak, aren’t you?” said Kumara. “In that case, I hardly need to deploy my Eight Legions.”

Kumara had considered whether to send out any of her tail beasts to gauge her enemy’s strength, but after their initial clash, it just didn’t seem necessary. Orlia was a first-rate fighter and a menace with her advanced magic, but her moves were no different from what any human could do, and she didn’t surprise Kumara in any way. After gaining experience against powerhouses like Carillon and Frey, this opponent wasn’t nearly enough to challenge her.

She needed to keep Orlia’s equipment in mind, but not even that was a threat. That’s because Kumara had undergone another evolution—a change in species from nine-tail to divine fox—and this new divinity had greatly enhanced

her might. Orlia, too, was divine by nature, what with the seraphim inside of her. In terms of existence points alone, there wasn't that much difference between them. Kumara's had grown a bit, but it was still a little under two million, while Orlia's was a bit past that. In terms of sheer numbers, Orlia had the edge.

But Orlia had one distinct disadvantage. She had only experienced the world as a human being, and thus, she had far too narrow a view of how to use her powers.

Orca and Alia, the two humans that formed Orlia, were two of the most senior officers in the Yuuki-led Composite Division. They were as strong as the Imperial Knights, the mightiest group in the Empire—and now their souls were mixed together, placed into a walking dead and even granted a seraphim's power. Alternative, the ultimate enchantment Michael granted her, had even turned into Multi-Weapon, reassuring her that no one on this planet could defeat her.

Her experiments with Fran and Kizona seemed to confirm this, too, giving her even more confidence. The weapons her skill created were just as good as any God-class item in existence. The way Fran and Kizona's attacks completely failed to work on her was proof enough of that. They couldn't even touch her body—her God-class armor completely repelled them, and one swing from her weapon shattered her foes' gear.

Orlia had accumulated too much confidence in her power. And now it was making her struggle against the reality she faced.

"Don't you dare mess with me! I'm about to get real serious!"

The experimentation was over. Orlia swung her trident with all the skill in her possession. Transforming the magic Aria excelled at into lightning, she wrapped it around the spear Orca once swung with such sharpness. Even Kumara would have to be fatally wounded by it...but her nine tails, covered in an aura of divine energy, independently moved to block the trident.

By this point, the difference in actual ability was abundantly clear to anyone. Just as people with similar bodies can boast differing levels of strength, there was a clear gap here, like a martial artist tackling an amateur street fighter—or

even wider than that.

Even Fran and Kizona, helplessly watching the fight between these two great powers, could see the difference.

"W-wow..."

"Hey, is that girl serving the demon lord Rimuru, too?"

"I don't know, but she's certainly on our side, I think."

"How to put it...? I sure don't want to get on her *bad* side. I mean, here's this girl we don't know at all, and she's destroying her..."

"Don't say it. I know exactly what you mean already."

They were smitten with Kumara's heroic figure. She was just standing there, in all her bewitching beauty, not even taking a step. Once you knew the truth behind her, there was no point debating who was the stronger fighter at all.

"Now," Kumara said, her smile widening, "are you ready?"

"I can't accept this. I'll *never* accept this. I... We have the greatest power there is. The power we need to serve the almighty Michael!"

"Hmm. You do, huh? But it doesn't work on me," she mercilessly told the agitated Orlia. This much was proven fact, but the insult was enough to enrage Orlia further.

"Don't give me that crap! I am Orlia...ready to destroy the enemies of Lord Michael!"

She staked her pride in this final stand, giving Kumara all she had. But it was nothing short of thoughtless. A suicide attack with no plan behind it had no meaning against Kumara. One tail whacked the spear out of her hand; another four caught each of her limbs—and with the dull sound of snapping joints, Orlia met what must have felt like a cruel end.

"My name is Kumara—Kumara the Chimera Lord. And may you take this memory with you to the afterlife."

It was perhaps a bit late for Kumara to announce her name as she smashed her tails against the inert Orlia over and over again.



Arius had the ultimate enchantment Sandalphon, Lord of Judgment, and he used it well. It was overpowering Oxian of the Blue Knights, who fought alongside Mizeri's chief officer Khan. The one-handed sword Arius carried was God-class as well, on loan from Orlia. He had earned the kind of strength he never could have imagined as a human being, and it made his sword more lethal by the moment.

That was why Arius had put off killing them. These two lower-ranked fighters were the perfect playmates for testing his power again.

Both he and Orlia knew that bullying the weak was far from praiseworthy behavior. Unlike Vega, they still had their common sense, and they wouldn't engage in personal affairs like this during a mission. But this was different. Their shared thought was that if they didn't test their newfound powers—things far different from what they had before—it'd only hinder them in future battles. Learning what they could do, and how far they could push themselves, was necessary for any first-class warrior. He therefore saw it as perfectly valid to have a bit of playtime here.

Oxian and Khan, of course, could see right through his intentions. It was a humiliating ordeal for these two proud men, but this time, it was also rather convenient. Their goal here was to buy time, a tall order given their abilities—so even though they knew this was just a cruel experiment, they had no choice but to face Arius with all their might.

But while Oxian still had his wits with him, Khan, the ancient great demon that he was, was boiling like hot lava on the inside.

I will kill him. This must never stand!

As the first to ever serve Mizeri, Khan was normally a calm, collected man. But he didn't have Misora's level of patience. He was always in awe of his colleagues, wondering how they could ever endure all the hardships Lady Raine gave them. Being subjected to *this* level of humiliation had pushed his anger to its peak.

However, there was a merciless wall between him and Arius. In terms of

battle competence, there wasn't much difference—in fact, Oxian and Khan were probably superior to him. But Arius had several times the EP of either of them, all but guaranteeing this would be a one-sided battle. Even worse, Arius had the fearsome Sandalphon. A God-class weapon was one thing, but they had nothing to offer against an ultimate-class skill.

The fight hadn't lasted for long, although it seemed eternally painful to the participants—but it would be over soon.

The look on Arius's face had changed. He sensed something.

"Heh-heh! Well, that ought to be enough. You guys were pretty strong, too, huh? I had a lot of fun, so I'll just kill you instead of causing you any more pain."

He probably thought it was time to call it a day after all that testing. Oxian took him at his word. There was nothing he could do now.

Sir Leon will have to find a way. I'll have to apologize in the afterlife for failing in my mission!

Khan, too, was etching his anger into his very soul.

Even if I die here, I will never forget my grudge. I will remember your name, Arius—and when I am resurrected, I will kill you!

For a demon, death is merely a status change. As long as their heart core was intact, they could be resurrected over the course of several years. It could take a few centuries if they were damaged that badly, but even then, they'd always come back to life. Thus Khan swore his revenge, confident he'd be able to act on it someday.

Damaging a heart core required spiritual particle-level interference. Without destroying them with Disintegration or the like, no one could touch the corresponding data particles. Arius had Sandalphon, so if he was aware of this fact, he could've crushed both their heart cores...but Khan wasn't too worried about that. Arius's swordsmanship, physical strength, skills, and everything else were all top-notch; that much was no exaggeration, but his spirit hadn't deviated from that of a normal human being. His experience with non-human fighting seemed to be close to nil, and he didn't appear well-versed in how to finish off demons. Thus, Khan thought pretending to be dead would give him a

chance to escape.

Arius held his sword up to Oxian and pointed the gun in his other hand at Khan. Khan's body was at its limit, and now that Arius was serious about this, it was impossible to continue. He felt bad for Oxian, but Khan's strength always did lie in his ability to make calm decisions.

Well, this is it. Now to make my retreat—

As he thought this, Arius laughed loud and hard. He looked at Khan, his finger on the trigger.

“Yah-ha! Let’s start with you—”

Go ahead, laugh all you want, thought Khan. But then his eyes opened wide. Someone had appeared from the shadow at Arius’s feet, swinging a sword—and with that, all the danger was gone.



Khan recognized this man. He called himself Soei and served the demon lord Rimuru. Oxian recognized him at almost the same time.

“Sir Soei! The reinforcements arrived in time?!”

The Yellow Knight might have been overjoyed, but Soei scowled bitterly.

“Tch. I meant to kill him with one blow, but perhaps that was a little too optimistic. He’s still alive, so stay on your toes.”

Soei was a perfect gentleman around Rimuru, but at his core, he was both supremely confident and supremely self-centered. Heads of state were one thing, but he wasn’t going to waste time flattering anyone else, even senior officials. This was an emergency, so he decided to take charge and place Oxian and Khan under his command, as if he had every right to.

Arius had been taken by surprise, but he was still alive, just as Soei said. He had regained his footing, although there was no small amount of blood coming out of his mouth. He had seen the assassin’s strike—an Insta-Kill aimed at his blind spot—and he barely managed to avoid this attack before it pierced his heart.

“Well, look at what *you* did...”

"Very good reflexes, I see. But I won't miss a second time."

With only these words, the two men launched into battle.

Arius was an arrogant man, but he was also cautious. Before his rebirth as a mystic angel, he was a decently powerful otherworlder, well-versed in assassination missions, and a keen student of all manner of techniques. He was an expert at fighting human targets, and he knew what to do if someone was targeting him instead. He never let his guard down, no matter the situation, and even as he brought Oxian and Khan to their knees, he never forgot to keep a vigilant eye on his surroundings.

That vigilance saved his life—but that was it.

"Hmm. More powerful than me? A standard approach would be risky."

"What'll you do, then?"

It was power competing against power, lives staked against each other. Arius had never felt more alive. The injury he just received had already been fully healed. His life force had been boosted beyond imagination, and he had even made a seraphim's force his own. He hadn't quite shed his old habits from his human days yet, but Arius was already residing on a plane well beyond any human being.

I have power beyond even demon lords! No matter who faces me, they'll never make me break a sweat!

With this self-praise, he gauged Soei's next move. He was aware that he outclassed Soei in force, just as he himself admitted, and since the skill difference didn't seem all that great, he didn't doubt victory for a moment. That wasn't him letting his guard down...but he approached this fight with far too much of a chip on his shoulder.

No, from the very beginning, Soei had no intention of staging a serious fight with Arius. Battles were meant to be *won*, first and foremost—no matter how entertaining the match was, if he lost it, it was over. Soei was therefore not very picky about his methods. From the beginning, he kept his Separate Body hidden, looking for an opening from Arius. He kept himself close to his foe, giving him the impression that he was gradually beginning to struggle, inviting

Arius to slacken a bit.

Thus, while making it look like he was exerting his utmost effort, he relieved Arius of all his winning cards, one by one, as he built the surest path to victory.

Then the moment arrived.

"Hya-ha! You're a strong one, I'll give you that. That's why I'm gonna kill you with the best thing I got here!"

With that warning, he fired Sandalphon's most killer blow—a Judgment Bullet. It ripped through Soei's Separate Body, making it vanish in a puff of smoke, and Arius immediately assumed he won. How could he not have? Judgment Bullets can only be fired once per day, but it was the most powerful means of attack he had. Maybe not as strong as the bullets Lieutenant Kondo shot, but still, nothing could take that bullet and *not* be torn apart.

He couldn't be blamed for thinking that Soei was destined to die. But that's exactly what Soei wanted.

"Thousand Shadow Death."

"Huh?"

The shadow extended, seizing Arius.

"W-wait—"

And so, after pinning him down helplessly, Soei used the pair of swords in his hands to destroy his opponent's heart.



It was initially a word from Feldway that got us out from this stalemate.

"...Well, it's about time. Any further combat seems meaningless."

Hearing that, the first words in my mind were: *Say that sooner, dude!* If I could've cornered him right here and now, that would've been best...but, sadly, we were the ones without much of a leg to stand on here. I *think* backup would've come our way if we kept fighting like this, but honestly, I couldn't be too certain about that. I didn't think Ranga or anyone else was about to lose, but I couldn't deny that this might be overly optimistic of me. The whole castle

had this aura of danger around it, so now I was getting nervous. Were they struggling?

Generally speaking, I didn't want to fight at all unless I knew for sure I could win. This time, though, we came in without amply preparing. We had flown over to enemy territory without fully analyzing their forces—I didn't expect our communications to get cut off like that, after all. We had at least an image to work with thanks to Deeno's tattling, but *this* was a lot more resistance than I anticipated.

I mean, Jahil's just overwhelming Benimaru over there. It's not fair. I was *kind of* running on the idea that Benimaru would whip his guy real fast for me, like usual. But this was hard to believe. If anything, it's a wonder he's still on his feet, even.

So, yeah, if he's ducking out, I'm not about to stop him. I'm not...but I won't neglect to egg him on a bit.

"Oh? You think I'm about to let you go *that* easily?"

Sylvia, still fighting Leon, seemed the most surprised by this. She glared at me, all but screaming not to press my luck. I got the idea she wasn't as socially tactful as her daughter Elmesia. It's better to hide your true feelings at times like this. When you're struggling, say the opposite of what you think to trick your foes. Right? That's textbook stuff.

"Heh. Not only have we achieved our goal of bringing Leon—possessor of Metatron, Lord of Purity—into our fold; we've also rooted out and eliminated the traitor in our way. I've even examined your full skills from start to finish. We've accomplished quite a bit here."

Hmm... He wasn't about to put up with that kind of goading, huh? But then, that's my whole mission here. Not to sound like a sore loser, but I want my opponent to feel good about leaving. If he says "Actually, never mind" at this point, that's trouble for me. So, as I continued saying *Go away, go away!* to myself, I kept on ribbing Feldway.

"Oh, what, you scared of me? Well, my friends are gonna run in here pretty soon. Then I win for sure, so I get it if you want to run!"

I launched another onslaught as I spoke. Feldway, perhaps a little shaken by my words, slowed down for a moment. I could feel my sword graze him, but he was unharmed. Or was I wrong? No, no, I feel like I've grazed him a few times by now...

"You are annoyingly impertinent, you know that? Just like the master of Noir should be. The next time I see you, I'll crush you with the kind of force you've never seen before. I hope you're prepared."

"Not if I do it first! You seem to have a pretty hard time with Diablo, so I'll just pit him against you next time!"

"..."

I was sounding like a character from a comic about juvenile delinquents, but now Feldway seemed mortified. He looked like this was the last thing he ever wanted in this world—that expression of his was impossible to miss. My most secret of techniques—leaving it to someone else! But it was so effective this time, I thought I really *would* push Diablo on him, no matter how much he whined about it.

You know, for a grown-up like me, being able to read the atmosphere and gauge people's reactions are essential skills. Keep a careful eye on people, and you can gain a basic idea of what they like and don't like. After working in the construction industry for over a decade, a scene where social skills made all the difference, I was pretty comfortable throwing this kind of harassment around.

It was obvious from Feldway's words and actions that he had a hard time dealing with Diablo. I kept worrying that I was mistaken as I spoke to him, but I didn't seem to be, which was a relief.

"You really *are* a thorn in my side..."

"I'm quite honored by your praise."

"...Tsk. Enjoy it while you can, then. Jahil! Leon! We're pulling out."

Feldway, running away from our debate, announced his retreat to the room. This was a mental victory for me—and, well, a tactical victory for all of us, joking aside.

"Hmm? We're not going to settle this here?"

"No. We're under Sir Michael's orders."

"...All right. I *am* in your debt, and I'm not in the best of shape, either. I'll obey you this time."

Jahil was dominating Benimaru at the moment, but still he grudgingly agreed to this. If he wanted to make this a big debate, that honestly would've been trouble for me, so this was a real help.

But then Benimaru decided to goad Jahil.

"Heh. Running away? I was this close to securing a path to victory, but I suppose I wasn't experienced enough to finish you off here. You can bet on me winning next time, though."

I pondered over what the hell he could have been thinking, but I suppose he was just following my lead, so I couldn't really whine at him. I could sense Sylvia's *What is wrong with you people?* glare on us, and I knew just how she felt. From a third-person perspective, I probably would've thought we were a bunch of idiots.

"Know your place, you little gnat! If you dare to taunt me, the sorcerer dynast —"

"Jahil," said Feldway, "this is how that slime works. If you let him take your sound judgment from you, it'll cost you a battle you could have won."

Thanks for misunderstanding that for me! I felt like we were going a little overboard with our taunting, but if he took it that way, then all the better. For the first time today, I started to think Feldway might be a pretty nice guy. I don't know if it's the result of all the clean living I've done around here, but it looks like I've made him more cautious than he needed to be.

"Hmm... Yes. I will defer to you here. And you two... Don't expect to survive next time."

Jahil seemed surprisingly thoughtful as well, despite his short fuse. I was prepared for him to lash out one more time, but instead he was meekly following Feldway's lead. Leon, being mind-controlled and all, didn't argue,

either—so, now that they all agreed with each other, the trio flew off through the broken ceiling and into the heavens.

Benimaru and I watched them go. Then, finally succumbing to our exhaustion, we went to the ground. I always feel like the *real* winner of a fight is whoever winds up their opponent the most, but I think I went too far here. I'd need to be more careful next time, lest it blow up in my face.

"Sir Rimuru," whined Benimaru, sounding completely drained as I thought over this, "trying to stir them up in *that* situation was far too dangerous!"

I wasn't sure I needed to be told that.

"Like *you* have any right to say that! You started poking at Jahil just when things were settling down! I wasn't sure *what* was gonna happen!"

"I was just following your lead, Sir Rimuru. If my master isn't backing down, I'm hardly going to do it for him. Besides, I would've felt too defeated otherwise."

He smiled at me, which told me he really meant what he said. That, and I saw Sylvia shooting us a stern look of dismay, but Benimaru and I pretended not to notice that.



Vega might have fled from Ranga, but he didn't consider himself defeated at all. This lack of reflection was one flaw of his, but his boundless optimism, at least, was commendable.

It was with that attitude in mind that Vega arrived at the site of Kumara and Orlia's battle. Hiding his presence, he looked on at the proceedings—and before much longer, the fight was over. A swarm of tails struck down Orlia, inflicting fatal damage upon her—but, fortunately for Vega, her body was blown in the direction of his hiding place.

Well, how lucky! It's like the very heavens are demanding I eat this!

Camaraderie was never in Vega's dictionary; he'd never do anything as laudable as lend a hand to others, especially if he perceived them as having no value.

Licking his lips, he crept toward Orlia. “Well, aren’t you looking good...”

“V-Vega? Whew. Great to see you. She’s so much stronger than I—”

“Yeah, I saw. But don’t worry. I’ll get revenge for you later.”

Orlia thought that Vega might just have a nicer side to her. Only when she felt a sharp pain immediately afterward was she forced to realize her error.

“Ahhh! Wh-what are you—?”

“I’m going to eat you and your soul...so give me that skill of yours. Then I could wipe up that wimp easy.”

“S-Sir Michael would never allow this—”

“Shut up! It’s eat or be eaten in this world, you know. And the stronger I get, the happier Michael’s gonna be!”

Vega let out a loud, vulgar laugh. Then, showing no mercy to the greatly suffering Orlia, he upped the pace of his consumption. Only when he eventually reached her neck did she finally breathe her last.

“Truly the work of a monster... An ugly sight indeed, isn’t it?”

“That’s a compliment to me.”

In fact, as atrocious and brutal as eating an ally like Orlia might seem to others, Vega saw it as a natural, life-extending act. He was just following his instincts, using his ultimate skill Azhdahak, Lord of Dark Dragons, to its fullest.

As a result, Dominate Organic completely decomposed and disintegrated Orlia, turning her into part of Vega’s body.

“Good... Good! I can feel myself getting stronger and stronger!”

Vega was elated as he tried out the power he took from Orlia. The alien-looking armor that covered his whole body—crafted by applying Control Metal to his Azure Dragon Spear—glowed a bloodred color. His hands, his feet, his knees and elbows—all of it was armored to the hilt, like the fangs and claws of a beast. It was at that moment when Vega’s magic-born form evolved into something even more hideous.

Kumara, watching this unfold, was on maximum alert from the start. She had

thrown Orlia away without putting the finishing touches on her because her hands slipped at the persistent gaze that seemed to pierce straight through her. That was how little Vega could hide his ominous, all-powerful presence—and thanks to that, Orlia was dead, and Vega was further enhanced. And given the wounds applied to Orlia before she fell into Vega's hands, this clearly seemed to be all Kumara's fault.

That was my mistake, thought Kumara. What matters is quality, not quantity—but here I am, strengthening my own enemy. I could hardly measure up to Sir Rimuru.

Inwardly breaking out in a cold sweat, Kumara wondered how she could make up for this. Having tasted defeat at the hands of Carillon, then Frey, she wasn't one to be overly confident about her strength. It would've been best if she finished Vega off right there and then, but she understood that this was perhaps too much to ask of her.

When you meet a strong adversary, you need to accurately assess their strength before anything. Fail to do so and all that awaits is defeat—in other words, death. This, Kumara knew from the bottom of her heart, was absolutely unforgivable. She had been let out from the labyrinth, where death was never permanent, and she wasn't about to do something as foolish as get herself killed. Thus, while allowing Vega to power up was beyond shameful, it was best to not drag it out and just make sure she didn't commit an even more egregious failure next time.

A single moment made a huge difference here. If Kumara lost her temper and attacked Vega, she too would've been beaten down and preyed upon. But Kumara's wait-and-see approach provided enough time for a third party to intervene.

"We have orders to retreat, Vega. The battle is over."

A woman suddenly appeared, stopping Vega even as he prepared to fight again. It was Mai Furuki, who had been watching in silence. Feldway had ordered everyone to pull out, and she had used Instant Motion to reach Orlia's location. But Orlia wasn't there, and Mai instead wound up preventing Vega from going into a berserk rage.

Vega meekly obeyed her. He had just obtained untold powers, and he instinctively understood that he wouldn't be able to absorb any more food at the moment. Thus, with Kumara no longer in danger, the battle was over.

After reeling Vega back, Mai headed to the very place where Arius was dying. His defeat was already set in stone, his heart completely destroyed by Soei. But as a mystic angel, not even losing his heart would cause Arius to die. It wasn't pumping blood, but rather magical or spiritual force—the origins of his power. With enough skill, he could use it to control his force any way he liked...but without a heart, he couldn't exert much of it at all. It was certainly a critical situation, and in Arius's case, he was growing lethally weak, the remnants of his human days still not fully leaving him. If something wasn't done, his injury would be lethal before long.

"Who're you?" Soei asked.

He'd leaped back as soon as he felt the presence and now turned toward it.

"My name is Vega...and you should be glad I gave my name to a minnow like you."

Soei's face collapsed upon hearing this. He was aware that he tended to easily lose his temper, but that was ill-advised for a Covert Agent like him, so he had learned how to separate his head from his heart and turn his anger into energy. Normally, despite his anger, he'd flash a cold smile as he calmly tormented his enemies—but that seemed difficult right now. One look at Vega, and he knew he had grown freakishly strong.

This is Vega the Power, one of the heads of Cerberus, I think. He doesn't match our previous investigation results. What happened in such a short period of time?

In this world, a chance event or two could grant enough power to turn someone into a completely different person. Rimuru, the master of Soei and others, had experienced similar super-enhancement as he became first a demon lord, then a True Dragon—a fact Soei was quite aware of. But that didn't mean he was just going to nod and let this go. Something had clearly happened to Vega, and Soei thought it necessary to figure out what.

But he'd already missed his opportunity. Mai, who never liked saying more

than what was necessary, had already made her escape.

"...She escaped my notice when appearing here," Soei muttered to himself, "and then she disappears without warning. She might be even more trouble than Vega."

"It's likely Instant Motion," Khan said with a nod as he walked up to Soei. "When traversing space, whether via magic or a skill, you always need to perform certain preliminary steps first. Skipping those and instantly leaping away without a trace should be impossible for anyone other than a Primal. It's theoretically doable, yes, but no one has achieved it yet. It'd take a miracle."

He might have been battered and bruised, but Khan was as imposing as always. He was a grand demon back in his realm, but he didn't neglect to thank Soei for his assistance. Oxian did the same once he came up to them.

"No need to thank me. I was only following Sir Rimuru's orders."

Soei didn't seem to appreciate the gratitude. Letting his enemy go was a major loss in his book.

"And I even failed to finish off Arius there," he matter-of-factly added. "We have to assume the enemy has more intelligence on us now. It'll be a tougher battle next time. Our tactical goal of survival may be accomplished, but we can't be too happy about it."

Khan and Oxian looked at each other. As far as they were concerned, simply surviving today went well beyond expectations. Soei, meanwhile, didn't have time to dwell on this; it was his job to consider what would come next. He, too, had obtained intelligence on the enemy—and as he reflected on his failure, he realized that this new intelligence called for a new strategy for the future.



The battle was over. The forces fighting outside the castle had withdrawn and left the scene at the same time as Feldway's retreat.

So we were all assembled in the castle's meeting hall, which was still untouched. Me, Benimaru, and Soei were joining in the discussion midway, with Diablo joining us; we were met by the knight captains of Leon's force, along with Guy and the demons. Sylvia, our mysterious ally who claimed to be

Elmesia's mother, was also sitting in.

I also shouldn't forget about Kagali, a.k.a. the ex-demon lord Kazalim—a vital witness to all of this. I managed to isolate her just in time, so she survived without any serious injuries. But Teare, who protected Kagali, was much worse off—not even the best healing potion helped her much, so she was down in the medical room at the moment, with Maeter the White Knight (an expert in healing and recovery) personally attending to her. The only way to overcome an ultimate-level attack was simply to weather it through sheer force of will. For now, we'd just have to pray for a speedy recovery.

So, yeah, while Teare's a concern to me, there's not much I can personally do about that. What matters right now is the future, and that's why we gathered here. We'd need to give our reports to each other, sharing information about the enemy, and once we were done, we needed to stage a full strategy review.

One member of the conference began haranguing me the moment we made eye contact.

"Rimuru..."

It was Guy. He must've held a grudge about me ignoring him on the battlefield, so I'm sure he was about to whine at me. Time to use my "plausible deniability" skills to the fullest as I weather this out.

"Way to just ignore me earlier, you bastard."

"What? Oh, come on! Ignore you? I have no idea what you mean."

"We locked eyes with each other!"

"W-well, I sure didn't notice anything. But isn't it nice that everybody here's all right?"

"Whoa, don't change the subject. And we're *not* all right, are we? They took Leon!"

True. But we've already taken that into consideration, haven't we?

"I know, I know, but that was pretty much the plan for Leon anyway, right?"

"Oh, *that* idea you floated? All it sounds like to *me* is kicking the can down the road, but are you *sure* it's gonna be okay?"

“...Probably?”

Guy was drilling his eyes into me. But I actually did have a plan in mind for Leon before all this. As Ciel suggested, I could always use Predation on Leon to destroy the override circuit inside of him—a surefire approach. I didn’t go with that because I trusted in Leon.

...Okay, not really. It’s more because I just had this visceral aversion to it.

...I’m only being about 10 percent serious when I say that (maybe more?), but there *was* a real reason for letting him be. First off, I didn’t want to make Michael needlessly wary of us. By leaving Leon to himself, I wanted Michael to think that we had nothing in our arsenal against him. Secondly, and this was more of a “wouldn’t it be nice” strategy than anything, but:

“But you agreed with me when I brought it up, didn’t you? If Leon comes back and attacks us, then we strip away the enemy’s control of him, we could turn the power gap around in one fell swoop.”

“Sure. That assumes Leon is safe, but yeah, that’s a sound enough strategy. If you’re there wherever Leon is attacking, that alone gives us a big advantage.”

So Guy saw my side of this, too. And yes, we were kicking the can a bit, and I couldn’t guarantee that I could magically be wherever Leon showed up—but if it worked, we could easily take down one of the enemy’s most vital strongholds. No matter how many troops they had, if a Leon-level force suddenly switched sides, the battle would be as good as won. I made up my mind about that the moment Ciel suggested as much.

In any case, the die was already cast. Leon was already taken away, so I had no choice but to trust that this would all work out.

“Um, so is Sir Leon all right?” Arlos asked.

I gave him a firm nod. “Don’t worry. We’ve got a way to free him.”

It’d suck really bad if they suddenly executed him or whatever, but I don’t think even Michael would do something so senseless. That’s why I agreed to Ciel’s plan in the first place.

“Well, there was nothing else *we* could do for him. I will trust you on that, Sir

Rimuru. Now we need to discuss our next steps.”

Claude seemed ready to change the subject. Guy still didn’t look too happy, but at least his focus wasn’t on me any longer—

“Yes, ignoring Leon for the time being...you *did* make eye contact with me back there, didn’t you, Rimuru?”

Ugh... That dolt just *has* to drag that along, doesn’t he?

“Um, when are you talking about...?”

“Don’t play dumb with me! I was fighting for myself against Velzard, and you ran off without even stopping to help for a moment!”

“I didn’t run away. I— You know, I was entrusting her to you!”

“What? Boy, you are *such* a smooth talker, you know that? If you had come to my rescue early on, I wouldn’t have needed to go through anywhere *near* as much trouble!”

Hold on. I don’t see how any of that is my fault.

“Hey, hey, what’re you talking about? You didn’t even contact me. I had my ears up, you know. I would have responded as quickly as I could.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, wasn’t that what the transport magic circles were for?!?”

“Yeah, and it was never activated! I mean, if you had this ring, you would’ve been able to contact me under any circumstances, right?”

Right. The Octagram could contact one another at any time using the Demon’s Ring we all received upon becoming demon lords. And yet I had received nothing from either Guy or Leon. If Deeno hadn’t tipped me off, I would’ve been even slower to respond. I really deserve more credit for that.

“Oh, about that. Those rings were crafted by Velzard, so it’s easy for her to sabotage them. Sorry. I forgot about that, too.”

...Wow. At least he’s being open about it. Can’t really offer a witty response to that.

“Oh...um, yeah. Well, I guess we’re both partially at fault, then.”

“Exactly. And I don’t want any lingering tensions between us, so how about

we drop this argument?”

That’s what we opted for. I wasn’t sure I was fully happy with the results, but honestly, I was getting a little sick of all this. It’s time to be the adult at the table.

So, moving on:

“By the way, why are these two kneeling on the floor like that?”

I looked at Raine and Mizeri. They had been made to sit down there since they were invited in—and Leon’s castle was all stone materials, so the floors were made of marble. Sitting like that was tough enough on tatami mats; marble must’ve been even worse.

“Oh, them? You want to know?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. I didn’t like the look in Guy’s eyes, and I sure didn’t want to get dragged into anything.

“No, not really—”

“Well, while we were all fighting for our lives, *these* fools were out drinking and having a blast. It ticked me off, shall we say. I’m still figuring out what to do about them.”

Oh, that sort of thing? I said I wasn’t interested, but I think Guy still wanted to whine and moan a bit more. But did they really do something like that?

“Is that true?” I asked, addressing Raine and Mizeri instead of Guy. Mizeri remained silent, a distant look in her eyes, while a teary-eyed Raine looked straight at me.

“No, it’s not. It’s all a sad misunderstanding, Sir Rimuru.”

Hearing that convinced me that it wasn’t a misunderstanding at all.

“Don’t listen to them,” Guy told me. “They’ll just pollute your ears.”

“Roger that. We’re short on time, so let’s trade notes a little, shall we?”

I leaped at Guy’s words. Everyone else in the room was silent on this matter, with only Diablo shaking his head in exasperation. He wasn’t about to interrupt us, though. So I turned away from the sobbing Raine and the newly meditative

Mizeri so I could get down to business.



It was time to ask for everyone's feedback, one at a time. And, despite one rather unnecessary scene in the middle of things, it all went smoothly.

This unnecessary scene was an exchange between Khan and Misora when they gave their reports. Khan and Oxian both stood up when it was their turn to speak—but then, after Khan excused himself from his audience, he bowed his head to Guy.

"I know, my lord, that it would normally be an unforgivable cardinal sin for me to address our master Rouge directly. However, I hope you will lend me your ears..."

He sounded sincere enough about it, so Guy allowed him to speak.

"My lord," Khan said, "I beg of you to forgive my master Lady Mizeri for her transgressions."

I was all for that, too. She had been kneeling on bare marble this entire time, and maybe that's okay for demons, but I was starting to think it was about time to give her a reprieve. But instead of Guy, it was Mizeri flying into a rage, despite being the victim here.

"Khan, you dunce! Who allowed you to say such things—?!"

She was reprimanding Khan with quite a lot of force, considering she was still on the floor. But Guy stopped her.

"Well, hang on. Khan, you must've grown a lot if you're daring to talk to me now, aren't you? All right. In consideration of that, I will let Mizeri free."

With that, Guy forgave Mizeri and ordered his servant to prepare drinks for everyone.

That was all well and good, but it led to other problems. We had only been talking about Mizeri so far—and, as expected, Raine jumped to conclusions. It was now Misora who stood up to speak, and much like Khan, she wanted her master Raine to be released. But Guy was having nothing of it, and probably not because he didn't like people rehashing matters in front of him, either. I'm good

at reading a room, so I could tell that Guy was growing irritated. Misora must have picked up on it, too, because she quickly backed down once he told her no. Knowing when to fold is a good sign of talent. Misora seemed like a pretty capable person to me, despite serving under Raine and all.

But some people really *can't* read a room.

"But why, Misora? Why did you give up so easily? You're far more talented than Khan! Try harder to help me, why don't you? Why am I still kneeling here after Mizeri got released? This makes no sense!"

And on and on. Now I was sure of it. Raine was the youngest child of this family—a spoiled brat.

"Please give it up," Misora said, admonishing this child. "If you keep adding to your list of crimes..."

That was enough to calm Raine down. She glanced at Guy, realizing how poor of a position she was in.

"You need to truly reflect more on what you did, all right? Do you even understand why what you did was wrong?"

"What?"

Raine vacantly stared at Guy. It was cute, but now that I knew how she *really* was, it just seemed needlessly sly to me.

"This really isn't the time for this," Guy said, looking utterly exhausted, "but it's always trouble for me if I let you get away with these crimes. We found some empty bottles lying around that igloo—those were some of the finest, rarest liquors around, weren't they? How did you get those? I doubt you stole them, so you must've hit up your subordinate demons for them, right?"

Oh. If she was up to *that* much, she really *is* nothing more than an insolent little girl, huh? And what's with a demon "hitting up" her servants for booze? I figured she had enough money to not have to resort to stuff like that...

"May I speak?" Misora asked as I pondered. She looked like she was unable to take any more of this.

"Go ahead," replied Guy.

"My master is many things, but she is not *that* underhanded."

"Under..."

Raine sounded like she wanted to say something, but everyone ignored her. It reminded me of the old credo about respect breeding respect.

"She *does* have at least the bare minimum of principles, something I hope you will trust her in."

"Mm-hmm."

"Besides, Lady Raine was hardly in need of money at all for this liquor."

"No? Then how did she...?"

Guy didn't have any time for Raine, but he took Misora's appeal very seriously. That made Guy feel surprisingly decent and normal to me. But then something strange happened.

"Well, isn't this enough? We're in the middle of an important conversation about the future. Raine's punishment is of little importance compared to that."

It was Diablo stepping up for Raine now. It was so clearly unnatural of him that both Guy and I stared at him. Something was going on. My gut told me as much.

"How suspicious of you," Guy muttered, agreeing with me.

"Diablo, you shouldn't try to hide things from us."

"Keh-heh... Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I'm not hiding a thing from you, Sir Rimuru. I just felt sorry for her, so I thought I'd extend a bit of a helping hand."

Uh-uh. No way. He just doesn't have that kind of personality. I was about to say as much to him, but I held it back. Instead I just stared at him—a very effective strategy in times like this.

As expected, Diablo began to look away from me. I always thought he was kind of mentally frail by demon standards, and I was right. Flustered, he finally told us the truth.

"That fine liquor, you see... It was a gift from me to Raine."

"Huh?"

"Well, *that's* weird, isn't it? We may have forged a pact, but weren't you fighting against us until not long ago? Why would you be showering Raine with presents now?"

Guy was absolutely right. Now I get why Diablo was so eager to come to her defense. If we had the empty bottles as physical evidence, it'd be easy to trace where they came from. I had Soei on hand, too.

Diablo must've decided there was no more getting away with this. The real problem, though, was how the seller was related to the buyer.

I shot a glance at Soei while Guy and Diablo were arguing. He knew just what I wanted from him, promptly securing the evidence for me. There was sweet *amazake* made from blackspell rice, pseudo-sake, dark sake... Bottles of all this, lined up in order of alcohol content. There were even a few low-production-quantity test batches.

None of this stuff was for sale in the marketplace, making it literally priceless. They were only available within the borders of Tempest—and I certainly didn't need Soei to pinpoint the culprit here.

And, really...

"Um, you mentioned earlier that you were having some drinks, but you went through *this* much in one go?" I asked.

"You see?" Guy said. "I have every right to be mad, don't I? You need to chew her out more for me, Rimuru."

True, that *would* make a person mad.

"You're kidding me! When everyone was fighting hard, you were sitting around doing *this*...?"

I never thought I'd end up feeling sorry for Guy...but it's a boss's job to clean up the messes his employees make. If anything, Guy was being pretty lenient here, only forcing Raine to kneel on the bare floor like this. But Raine wasn't done with her excuses quite yet.

"No, no, these were necessary for the advanced psychological warfare we were engaged in. We weren't just enjoying it all on our own!"

“Psychological...?”

“That’s right. We painstakingly procured these bottles in order to make Pico and Garasha reveal their secrets. If anything, I think I deserve a little praise for this!”

Incredible. In *these* circumstances, she’s still insisting this was some great accomplishment on her part. I couldn’t believe it. When these Primals slumped it, they sure went all the way. Diablo seemed to share in Raine’s “if I never admit to it, I never lost” mentality, too—I assume it’s kind of baked into demons like them.

“So, Diablo, I’m curious. These can all be bought with points at the shop, right? And I doubt you gave these to Raine for free. What kind of deal did you make?”

Leaving it to Guy to judge Raine’s testimony, I pursued Diablo’s involvement on my own.

“W-well...”

Diablo was hesitant to speak—I guess he thought it unwise to lie to my face—but it didn’t last long.

Soei was here, too, after all. “Spit it out,” he told him—and then Diablo finally gave up. It turns out he had been passing these bottles to Raine in exchange for some paintings from her.

“Oh, so the unknown artist passing portraits of me around was *you*, Raine?”

“No wonder...”

That explained why we couldn’t trace them. But at least I knew Diablo wasn’t involved with making that artwork—that would’ve been the worst ending ever. If he was just a distributor, not a painter, that was all legitimate behavior, nothing I could chide him for. That didn’t mean I was going to leave my portraits out in the wild, though, so I ordered Soei to take care of those for me.

“No need to worry,” he said. “I have already ordered Soka to search Diablo’s chambers.”

“Isn’t that going a little too far?”

"No. This is an infringement of your publicity rights, a serious crime that deserves a serious response. We've already issued a search warrant, so everything about it is legal."

He works *fast*! Soei strikes again, I see. Diablo was now on the floor in shock, but I pretended I didn't see that.



While Soei and I were solving this mystery, Raine was finishing her explanation to Guy. Much to our shared annoyance, she had actually acquired some pretty useful intel—the location of the enemy's base, what kind of force they had assembled, and so on. We didn't know how trustworthy this info was, but it all seemed pretty legitimate. I had only been partially listening in on this, but what I heard made me turn toward Raine, astonished.

"...so that's how I obtained the intelligence from those girls! And it felt like the battle was over by then, so then Pico said, 'Oh, I got a call from Feldway saying it's time to go back,' so that was the end of our girls-only retreat—um, I mean, interrogation!"

I got the feeling that the true aim of this rendezvous was something else, but we couldn't ignore what Raine told us.

What intrigued me was how Pico and Garasha reacted to them. Michael's full domination had made Leon fall to the enemy, and Diablo reported to me that Zarario had been taken over in similar fashion...but Pico and Garasha didn't seem affected whatsoever. Otherwise, it made no sense that they enjoyed this drinking party right up to the end.

I think I had an answer, though. Perhaps Michael's domination wasn't so effective on people when they were isolated from the pack.

This was pretty trustworthy intel, in my opinion. This domination took effect only when it had a clear target, whether Michael had a visual on them or used Magic Sense to track them down. This likely meant that once someone controlled by Michael left his sight, he wouldn't *really* know if they were controlled at all. If Michael used Thought Communication or the like to send out regular orders, checking whether they were properly executed, perhaps he could check if his control was still working that way. But if we secretly released

Leon from his spell while Michael wasn't there, we could very likely finish up the subsequent battle without the enemy ever knowing.

I glanced at Guy. He was already looking at me.

"Raine has done much for us," I said, and Guy reluctantly nodded back.

"True. She's a complete dimwit who never helps when it matters the most, but sometimes she surprises you like this. I hate to admit it, but she's done it again."

I hated to admit it, too, but some people in this world just have a knack for getting things done. The kind who act like they're just screwing around, but still keep putting up results. Something like a genius, maybe, but it takes a pretty tolerant boss to truly recognize the work of people like that. If they were taking away someone else's achievements, that'd be a problem, but if not, they deserve to be praised.

Raine, listening in on us, looked on, her eyes tearing up like she knew she was about to be saved. I could even sense her gratitude toward me, like she was shouting, *Well said, Sir Rimuru!* from her mind. Or actually, it was coming from her mouth, too.

"I knew that Sir Rimuru would see me as how I truly am. If you ever need anything in the future, Sir Rimuru, just say the word!"

It might have been heartfelt, but it looked a little weird, coming from this woman kneeling on the floor. She needed to work on that. It made me realize all over again that she still wasn't all that commendable a demon.

"You realize that carrying on like that just angers Guy more, right? You should show a little more remorse."

I couldn't help but offer her that advice...but, yes, this was quite an achievement coming from her. I couldn't really commend Raine's behavior, but she *did* put up results. I saw no need for further punishment.

"Well, praise and punishment in equal measures seem to be in order here. Along those lines, why don't we let her off the hook?"

"Yeah... I think she's taken enough."

Guy and I nodded at each other—and now Raine was freed from detention.

Misora and the others all gave Raine their congratulations.

“I’ll admit,” Mizeri said as she offered her a cup of tea, “you’re the classic slacker type, aren’t you? Even *you* do good work, sometimes. I wish you could adjust your usual attitude, though.”

“Hee-hee-hee!”

Raine sure was proud of herself.

“What do you think, Misora? Even Mizeri’s offering me her praise now. A capable woman like *me*, you know—we try to hide it, but our talent just keeps bubbling out from the pot!”

Listening to this exchange firmly convinced me that I wanted nothing to do with this woman in my life. And Guy seemed to agree. “Being called a slacker is *not* a compliment,” he sternly said. And, yeah, I thought she was an excellent maid at first—or until recently, actually—but exasperating Guy *this* much must really take a special kind of talent.

But as I was just about to write her off, Raine and her demon servants were having a little party of their own.

“Brilliant work, Lady Raine!”

Even Misora was egging her on. Why was she doing that? This is exactly why Raine gets so carried away. It was giving me *déjà vu*, actually—it was exactly like how Treyni treated Ramiris. If you spoil her that much, *of course* you’re going to raise a disappointing child. It was too late to change Raine much now; trying to correct her path seemed fruitless to me. I pledged to myself that I’d try to steer Ramiris more in the right direction, while we still had the chance.

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So although we got kind of sidetracked there, the rest of the feedback exchange went pretty smoothly. Let’s summarize everything we’ve figured out so far about our enemy.

Vega, who I thought was a friend of Yuuki’s, had apparently grown a whole heck of a lot strength-wise. He would have wiped out Misora and her team if

Ranga hadn't scurried in and driven him off. However, he later consumed Orlia, an enemy that was defeated by Kumara, and that healed all his wounds and further boosted his fighting power. We didn't have any concrete numbers on him, but comparing the existence points, he was likely stronger than Ranga or Kumara.

Personality-wise, he was a classic lowlife, sucking up to the powerful and coercive to the weak. He had excellent survival instincts, though, as shown by his continued growth and maturation. Overall, my impression was that we were gonna have some trouble with this guy.

Incidentally, this Orlia girl was apparently able to create God-class equipment with the skill she possessed. It seemed like she was just materializing stuff from thin air, not actually crafting them like Velgrynd could, but even after Vega consumed her, Orlia's weapons didn't fade from existence.

All this we learned from Fran and Kizona, two of the knight captains serving Leon, and I confirmed with Kumara as well. It was safe to say that Vega now had this "weapon creation" skill as well. Leaving someone like him unaddressed was bound to get real dangerous for us soon, so I resolved to take action as soon as possible. I'm kind of like him, after all, in a lot of ways, so the threat seemed awfully more realistic in my eyes.

Soei told us that the enemy he defeated by surprise was a warrior who called himself Arius. Unfortunately, he managed to escape before Soei could finish the job—a rare blunder on Soei's part, but after hearing how things transpired, I'm not sure there was any way to salvage that.

The enemy's got people with Instant Motion, after all, a fact Khan testified to as well. They both reported that it wasn't a magic spell, but a skill, making it possible to jump through space without any preliminary calculations. Very powerful indeed, in a way that was hard to quantify but still made me worry. If they were well-versed enough in that skill, they could catch us completely unawares. Simply knowing in advance that Instant Motion was in the enemy's hand of cards was a huge gain for us. This Instant Motion was invoked by a girl named Mai Furuki, and we'd certainly need to incorporate that power of hers into our future strategy.

We had now covered four enemies, all on the weaker side—but each one had their own quirks and idiosyncrasies, which only added to the headache. Some people on their side—like Pica and Garasha, Raine and Mizeri’s partners during their bender—weren’t all that loyal to the cause at all, but Michael’s Ultimate Dominion skill forced them into fighting against us anyway.

The question of how we could break this mind control would become a key part of our future plans. I mean, I’m pretty sure Ciel could work something out, but it was likely going to be a pretty arduous procedure. It might be possible for victims to break the thrall by their own will, so we needed to carefully evaluate the enemies we encountered.

That left the enemy’s core force to discuss—Velzard, Zarario, and Feldway. The only way to describe these guys were as lethal threats. I had already fought Feldway, so I had a first-hand view of his strength. It never seemed like he was taking our battle seriously, so I *really* thought it was a good idea to let Diablo handle him.

Let’s save him for later, then.

“By the way, Guy, you think Velzard’s going to be all right?”

“Oh, sure, treat it as *my* problem. Not like *you* lifted a finger to help...”

“No, I mean, it’s more like a lover’s spat than anything else between you two, so I thought it best not to intervene...”

“Are you kidding me?!”

What I don’t know won’t hurt me and all that! But I knew saying that would *really* cheese him off, so I shoved the thought back into my mind.

After a few more heartwarming exchanges like this, Guy finally let out a frustrated sigh. “Well,” he reflected, “I don’t think she’s lost her mind or anything. I think she’s been building up a lot of stress, and she just wants to harass me a whole bunch.”

It sounded like Guy was exerting a lot of strained effort to prevent her from destroying this whole country.

“Normally I’d craft another dimension for us to fight in, but not even I can

fully control Velzard that way. If she's not in any shape to agree to it, it's not like I can impose my will on her."

I see. No, I don't think the Barrier we put up during the Walpurgis Council would fend off Velzard too much. There were stronger spells we could cast, maybe, but Guy just didn't think they'd be enough.

"Sounds like you're taking on a pretty tough role there, Guy."

"Whoa, hang on—"

"I don't think any of us could handle it at all, so...you know...keep on showing us all your cool moves, okay, Guy?"

Guy was about to say something, but I ignored him and kept the conversation going. I had to, because my instincts told me that he was going to drag me into this True Dragon battle. Luckily, Guy seemed to agree with me, despite the grim look on his face as he shot me a nasty glare. Relieved, I flipped the page and brought up our next enemy.

"Now, Diablo, how was Zarario?"

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... To be honest, he was formidable. If I were to compare him on the basis of strength alone, I would call him stronger than Feldway."

"Wow, really?"

"Yes. Feldway is the type that reacts and responds to taunting, but Zarario is a cold, seasoned warrior. Psychological warfare doesn't seem to work on him. There is nothing very interesting about his battle approach at all, but that's exactly why it will all come down to actual skill against him."

"Yeah." Guy nodded. "Zarario isn't like Cornu or whoever. He's been strong from the very start. Pretty helpful in the fight against Ivalage the World-Destroyer Dragon, too."

Uh-huh. So he's a solid opponent that's not likely to veer away from his own style too much. I guess it's the conventional wisdom in this world, too, that having a clear head is one hallmark of real strength. If someone runs away as soon as he thinks he's in a losing battle, he'll never be a threat, no matter how

good he is. On the other hand, an opponent who never gives up no matter how rough things are going is a handful to deal with, because he won't let you off the hook until the very end. If Cornu was the former type, Zarario was definitely the latter. Cornu, in particular, was an excellent second-in-command, even gaining the cautious attention of Guy at one point...but his gang is all wiped out, so no point bringing him up now.

Regardless, it was clear enough to me that Zarario was a threat. Then Diablo said something rather interesting.

"But right after Feldway reappeared, Zarario suddenly became far more monotonous in his moves. I wondered if something happened to him."

So Diablo cautiously watched him a bit, then concluded that it wasn't a trap—some kind of anomaly was taking place with him. But why did this happen right after Feldway went on the move? And what were Feldway's goals there anyway?

"He didn't even join the fight against you, did he, Kagali?"

"No, he didn't. I was put under Michael's control the moment I saw Feldway, but he himself did nothing but watch the proceedings."

Benimaru and I exchanged glances. If Feldway had joined the fight earlier, Kagali would've been killed before we could make it over to her. Even Sylvia would've been in danger. But he did nothing, which was just strange. If he didn't plan to take action, why would he travel to where Kagali was fighting in the first place? Why travel anywhere at all?

"I imagine he had *some* sort of purposes."

"I suppose so, yes. Also, like—"

"Hmm. One possibility is that our theory was correct."

Guy picked up on the same thing that just occurred to me. I didn't like it very much, but this was the only real explanation.

"We'll need to conclude that Feldway can use Ultimate Dominion as well," said Diablo.

Guy didn't look too happy about having his thunder stolen.

"What do you mean?" Sylvia asked. Kagali spent a few moments thinking; this might have reminded her of something. Then:

"Um, I'm not sure you would believe me when I say this, but..."

Kagali sounded a bit reluctant; she must have realized she was in a delicate position here. But Guy wouldn't let her stall any longer.

"We trust you, all right, Kazalim? Don't hold back on us."

One look at Kagali must've been all Guy needed to know she was the former demon lord Kazalim. Despite that, he didn't seem to care at all. He just wanted to hear Kagali's story, and this struck me as a magnanimous gesture, coming from him.

"Confident as ever, aren't you, Guy? I'm not that demon lord any longer, so Kagali is fine."

With a smile, she began to haltingly speak her mind.

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To summarize her story, she said that she was in full control of her own mind until Feldway appeared. While she was, she had consulted with Leon in secret about turning traitor against him. After working her way through a gauntlet of hazards, she was just about to jump into the transport magic circle when Feldway showed up. Right after that, she was immediately taken over, not even given a chance to resist.

The timing was so incredibly inopportune, but all we could do was chalk it up to bad luck. Yuuki had regained his own self-will by that time, she said, and if they had been able to escape into Tempest, it would've been a happy ending for all of us. These were what-ifs at this point, though—no use dwelling on them.

Anyway, there was no doubt now about the close relationship between Feldway and mind domination. This lent more credence to Diablo's theory, but I was kind of loath to admit that, so I played devil's advocate.

"The question is how Ultimate Dominion is triggered," I said. "It looks like Michael can transfer a certain amount of his skills to other people. Maybe he could trigger that from far away, as long as he has someone on the scene to

work through.”

In my case, I could exercise my skills to some extent on any area I could see with my Argos surveillance magic. Doing that let me stage surprise attacks from long distances, a little trick that I’d like to keep as secret as possible. But I should have realized that if I could do that, others probably could, too.

That was the reasoning behind what I said, but Guy flatly denied me.

“Hmm, it’s possible, but we’re talking about a skill that interacts with people’s very minds. I’d think the conditions for activating it are more stringent than that.”

The logic seemed sound to me. As I’ve mentioned, Spatial Transport requires that you know the positional coordinates of your destination. Once you have that, you can apply that info to trigger skills in that location—that, or launch a magic spell targeted there. It’s easy once you know how, and now it didn’t seem like such a fancy “secret trick” to me after all. Besides, Michael may be using more people than just Feldway as his “eyes.” It’s kind of a wonder that Kagali was free of Michael’s control at the time he gave Feldway those powers; presumably he got more vigilant about that sort of thing once Obela betrayed him. Any use of Ultimate Dominion after that wouldn’t rely on Feldway in the first place...but if he was going through Feldway anyway, why was that? Or is Diablo right and Feldway was just given Ultimate Dominion?

That, or...

I have a theory that Michael has taken on the draconic factors of Velgrynd. If so, it would not be surprising if he had access to Parallel Existence.

Ahh, there’s a chance of that, too?

I had thought that Michael was just lending out a subset of his domination skills, but I didn’t think he could duplicate them at full power. I can’t ignore Ciel’s opinion, though—and, looking back, it *did* almost feel like I was fighting Michael himself back there.

That’d certainly explain why he had access to Ultimate Dominion. He even had Castle Guard, too, so it’s only natural that I couldn’t land anything on him.

He was only fighting me as a bluff; he didn't actually need to defend himself at all. Good thing I didn't show him any of my most secret moves. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"That's true, Guy, but if Feldway could use the exact same skills Michael had, wouldn't that explain things?"

"Oh? You're saying that Michael lent Feldway his own skills?"

"No, not that, I hate to admit it, but I mean that maybe both of them had control over the same skills."

"Huh? What are you talking about—? Oh, wait! You mean Velgrynd's Parallel Existence?!"

That's Guy for you. Always so quickly picking up on what I'm trying to say.

He and I both winced at this unwelcome theory. It would be nice if I was wrong, I thought, but I was pretty sure I was right about this.

"At least we weren't all mind-dominated at the same time. That's a silver lining."

The fact that domination doesn't work on everyone simultaneously was evident from the time gap between Zarario getting mind-dominated and the same thing happening to Leon and Kagali. There's a limited range this skill can work within, you could say, and not just in terms of inside or outside the castle. Pico and Garasha, isolated from the outside world by their igloo, were dominated anew only much later—a clear piece of evidence. And whether the igloo played a role in that or not, this was invaluable information to us. It pretty much confirmed that the mind control couldn't work without some kind of way for the target to pick up on it.

"Yeah. I don't much like Raine shirking their duties, but this is more than enough to make up for that. We now know that you need to directly see and recognize your target in order to dominate it."

Guy agreed with me, but he didn't sound thrilled about it. Raine's reputation was being quickly repaired now, which I'm sure he wasn't the greatest fan of. Either way, though, we now had a more proper knowledge of our enemy.

"Um, I'm not keeping up with any of this..."

Sylvia had reservedly put her hand up, so I gave her a quick rundown. Elmesia was sharp as a tack, but Sylvia didn't seem quite as intelligent to me—or maybe it's mean of me to compare them in the first place. Leon's knight captains in attendance seemed similarly lost, and besides, it was pretty hard to wrap your head around this topic at all unless you possessed an ultimate skill.

Elmesia was the emperor of an entire country, so it's a given she'd be more skilled than her mother with this stuff. Sylvia was the more powerful of the two, but Elmesia outclassed her in intuition and adaptivity, to say nothing of her political abilities. Both of their roles were pretty distinct from each other.

So I explained matters to Sylvia and the knights, ensuring we were all on the same page. It looked like Michael was duplicating his skills and giving them to Feldway, so there was effectively no way to defeat Feldway unless we could break through his Castle Guard. He also had control over domination-type skills, Ultimate Dominion included, so no one but an ultimate skill owner could compete with him. That very much limited the pool of people who could take him or Michael on.

"But, well, it's not all bad news, either."

"Oh?"

"None of my attacks worked on Feldway, but at least I know why now. That makes me feel a lot better. Plus, Velgrynd told me that skill is powered by the energy of those loyal to the skill user. When Ludora was using it, he was pretty much invincible as long as his imperial subjects were loyal to him, but Feldway doesn't have any of that. No, it's probably the mystics powering it for him, so I feel a lot less guilty about potentially having to do them in."

Killing innocent imperial subjects was, for me, a nonstarter. I mean, if that was *really* the only way, I'd have to do some "needs of the many, needs of the few" mental gymnastics in my mind...but even if I fully resolved to do it, I doubt I ever could've gone through with the deed. I was bluffing a lot around Michael, but I don't think I could actually do anything like that.

The mystics, on the other hand, were invaders, likely ready to sacrifice their lives for the cause. Resisting them with all our might was the polite thing to do,

and it wouldn't hurt my conscience at all, either.

But being so straight with those thoughts made Guy roll his eyes at me.

"Ha! You're still being that naïve, huh? It's in character for you, yeah, but if you keep overthinking everything, it's *you* who'll die."

I appreciated that friendly advice, at least. He can be "kind" to his friends that way.



Now that we had discussed our primary enemies, there was one person left to tackle.

"So who was that Jahil guy?"

"The bastard I was fighting?" Benimaru chimed in. "To tell you the truth, I like to think I'm pretty strong by now, but that bum was shockingly powerful. I was able to survive him mainly because we share the same fire attribute."

He was always so enthusiastic and dominating in a fight, but here he was, praising his enemy. Although it wasn't really praise—it was a cold analysis of Jahil's strength.

"It's rare of you to honestly admit defeat like that, Benimaru."

"I didn't *lose*, though. All I'm saying is that I won't go on record saying I'll win next time yet."

I wasn't sure there was much of a difference, but it's nice to see that Benimaru hadn't lost his confidence. But given the fourfold difference in EP, outclassing Jahil in battle skill just wouldn't be enough. Benimaru's gone through a ton of training to reach his current level, so I wouldn't expect any more rapid growth from here...

...

For certain, he was gonna keep standing up to him until he truly admitted defeat in his heart. I'd need to be sure he doesn't try anything too reckless.

"Well said! That's the spirit!"

Guy always did like Benimaru, I guess. Then Guy nodded, remembering

something.

"Oh? Come to think of it, what was the name of that bastard who summoned me?"

Mizeri and Raine stepped up to answer.

"It was a man who called himself the sorcerous dynast Jahil, leader of the Supreme Magic Empire."

"Yes, a High Human created by that freak—er, that is, the demigod. I believe that demigod classified him as a failure due to certain mental deficiencies."

This is the man who summoned Guy and got killed long ago; he had been mentioned in assorted grimoires and history books I read. His name didn't come up in anything published in Englesia, but he was a pretty infamous man, this fool who unleashed the worst demon possible on the world. We're talking Primals like Guy and Diablo, of course, so maybe it's no wonder that Elmesia and Gazel were so wary of him at first. No point worrying about that now, though. That "worst demon possible" was on our side anyway.

So if that fool's name was Jahil, that could hardly be a coincidence, right? As I thought that, Kagali mentioned something surprising.

"It couldn't be... That Jahil was definitely my father."

Jahil had lost his body and become a wandering soul, and that was when Feldway took him under his wing and implanted him into the body of Footman. The conversation we had made it clear that he was Kagali's dad anyway. But Sylvia wasn't so sure.

"No, that doesn't make sense. He saw me as his colleague. He was the first high disciple of the demigod, and I was the third. Luminus was the second, by the way."

Apparently Jahil was at the top of the High Human race created by the demigod. Luminus, for her part, was the creator of the vampire race. Would that make Sylvia the first of the high elf race? There were other disciples like this, I heard, but they weren't confirmed to exist at this point—like Jahil himself, they've vanished into history.

Incidentally, Gran Dwango, Gazel's grandfather and the first Heroic King of the dwarves, was a sort of throwback to the age of the original high dwarves, having inherited quite a lot of their blood. He was also a friend of Sylvia's. It's funny how people from long-lived species could have all these historical figures as acquaintances, isn't it? Sylvia and Guy are like living witnesses to history, and I doubt they were getting this wrong at all.

"Huh? But that's just strange... My father was unmistakably a high elf."

Kagali sounded puzzled, but she understood that people weren't buying her story too much. She was racking her brain, trying to figure out the cause of this discrepancy—but the two of us reached the answer at the same time.

"He was taken over..."

"By Jahil, right?" I said.

"Well, he *was* a bastard that way," Guy added. "No wonder Raine and Mizeri couldn't get rid of him. What a lot of trouble *that* caused us."

We all agreed with this, and that seemed to confirm Jahil's true identity.

"So my father is..."

Kagali leaned back in her chair. I wasn't sure what to say to her, so we decided to just leave her be for now.

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That night, Guy and I were having a drink in another room. The sake we were having was actually being served up from my Stomach storage. Guy demanded a sample or two of the bottles Raine and the gang enjoyed back at their little party, and he wouldn't shut up about it, so I relented. I really wish he would get out of my hair like that, but it's not like I can say no to him. Trying to stick to my guns with Guy just led to a lot of exhausting hassle, so I just gave in and had him owe me a favor.

Raine and Mizeri joined us in this tasting, as were Diablo and Benimaru. Sylvia was there too, and with that group, our late-night tryst began to roll along.

What were we going to do with Leon's domain now that he was gone? That's what we were discussing here. Our daytime talks had given us some idea of the

enemy's strength, so we needed to go back over our future plans.

The town was fortunately not all that damaged, but Leon's castle was a huge mess, and many people were now without homes. Not having anywhere to receive evacuees was a problem. The consensus of the knight captains was to stay local and rebuild the town and its castle, but if Aggressors targeted this land, they'd have trouble coping by themselves. They didn't have enough forces to counter an attack like that, and they'd be helpless to prevent being overrun in short order. Such an invasion might be unlikely now that Leon's gone, but doing nothing seemed like a bad idea to me.

"If they want to stay," opined Guy, "why not let them do what they want?"

I disagreed, but saying that would be too dangerous.

"There's no use speaking in ideals," Sylvia added. "You could ask El, but I don't think there's anywhere in Thalion that'd take them."

The total population of Leon's domain was just under twenty million. Trying to feed this many people at once wasn't exactly realistic. Maybe we could keep it going for a few days, but not indefinitely. Being sheltered without any work to do would put a psychological strain on the people of El Dorado, too—being away from your job for too long would make anyone uneasy. No one really needed to point it out, therefore, that evacuating the whole nation was impossible—but should we really devote personnel to protecting them here?

"By the way, Guy, you're not going to stay here, are you?"

"Oh? I don't mind if I do."

"Yeah, I didn't think you— Wait, what?"

"What do you mean? What choice do we have? El Dorado is a pretty low priority for them now, but you never know. Maybe they'll try attacking us to blow off some steam."

Eesh. Are you kidding me? I never thought Guy would so readily agree to this, so I wasn't sure how to respond at first.

"Wow... Here's Rouge, the cruel, coldhearted despot, and it turns out he's one of the most sensible demons out there..."

Sylvia must've heard the rumors, but Guy had just disproved them all. I was just as surprised.

"Look, are you guys trying to pick a fight with me, or...?"

"Oh, no, no! Why would I do that? There's no way I'd win one!"

"Aw, don't be that way, Guy. We're relying on you here!"

"..."

He glared at us. Sylvia and I looked at each other, then attempted to assuage him with a smile in unison.

So our concerns about who'd defend Leon's domain were no longer. Then Kagali showed up.

"Oh, Kagali. Feeling better?"

"Yes. It was so long ago that I don't remember all the details anyway. It'd be a waste of energy to get all emotional about it now."

She was clearly just putting on a strong front. Mizeri thoughtfully set up a seat for her; she sat down, thanking her.

"So did you want to talk about something?" Guy asked. His ability to be so direct like that is a strength, I think.

"I just thought that I'd tell you everything I know," Kagali replied with a wry smile.

She looked much more refreshed than before, like she had just blown off some steam, as she warned us that this talk would probably take a while. She had given some snippets of it earlier in the day, but I'm sure a lot of this was going to involve Kagali's personal life, so I thought fit to confirm with her first.

"Are you sure it's okay if we listen in on this?"

"Yes. I'm grateful to you, Sir Rimuru, so unless you don't want to..."

I had no reason to say no, so I fell silent and lent her an ear.

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She basically gave us her life story—a summary of her long life, starting with being born the princess of a large nation. She told us about her guilt toward Milim, her awe toward Guy, her resentment toward Leon, and how things advanced from there.

Listening to her, I almost began to feel guilty for killing Clayman. The Clayman from Kagali's story was a kind, attentive man, one that seemed to be well-loved by his companions—or so it sounded. Things only went off track when he assumed the role of demon lord, and in the end, he was used and abused by Lieutenant Kondo. Thanks to that, he began spreading misfortune far and wide, and that made Guy and the other demon lords abandon him en masse.

And then I, you know, killed him.

"So about Clayman..." I began.

"Ah, no need to apologize. I myself devised the plan—you were just better at executing it, Sir Rimuru. It's survival of the fittest in this world, after all. No need to show mercy to the vanquished."

Kagali was right. From our point of view, Clayman was pure evil, and failing to eliminate him would've caused us tremendous damage. If someone had told us back then about this other side of him, all I could've said was, "Yeah, I'm sure." I did need to consider that he'd been mind-controlled...and maybe I was developing some sympathy for him, as illogical as it was. So I decided to tell Kagali something that I was on the fence about discussing at all.

"You know, I wanted to tell you about Teare..."

Teare, too, had given us all kinds of trouble as part of the Moderate Jesters—not as much as Clayman or Footman, but she'd still been a thorn in my side. With the agreement we worked out, though, we were no longer enemies. I wouldn't call us friends, but it was natural for her to help us as a partner. That's why we rescued her when Jahil was about to do her in, but she wound up seriously hurt defending Kagali. She was still recuperating in her hospital room, and Ciel was offering its assistance with her case as well.

The data particles that formed Clayman's heart core have been kept in

place with Isolate. Should I gather them up to replace Teare's missing parts?

I gave Ciel my permission. Thinking about it, I had swallowed up Clayman right at his final point of existence. I thought I had absorbed it all as energy, but apparently I had used Isolate on his remains. I honestly didn't want his remains to be bumping around inside of me forever, and besides, I thought Clayman would've much preferred to be back with his friends than stay where he was.

Actually, maybe Ciel could revive Clayman completely, for all I know. If I planted the remnants of his data particles into a pseudo-soul and gave him a temporary body, there's a pretty decent chance that it'd work.

But I wasn't about to inquire about that. Clayman was dead, and I wanted him to become part of Teare to help her out. This was completely my own egotistical decision, so I wasn't sure whether to tell Kagali or anyone else, but now I felt obliged to.

"Oh... I see. So he'll be with Teare... Thank you for that," Kagali whispered with a sad smile.

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I know it was just ego-stroking on my part, but I'm still glad that Kagali seemed to approve of it. Unfortunately for me, the conversation didn't end there.

"By the way, Rimuru," Guy began, "I can't help but think—aren't you acting a little *too* self-indulgent?"

"Yeah," said Sylvia, nodding at Guy. "Taking pieces from a dead man and transplanting them into another person... Not even the demigod himself tried anything that crazy!"

I had forgotten those guys were here. I wish they could have just glossed over that for me, but they were hanging on to my every word.

"Hey, since when were you two so buddy-buddy?" I asked.

"Huh? We're not friends. I don't *mind* her, but..."

"Y-yeah! And I have to say, *you* chatting so casually with the Lord of Darkness,

this personification of terror, is a *lot* more incomprehensible to me!"

Well, what do you want? Guy's, like, a lot more broad-minded than you'd think. He doesn't get angry over trivial things, so as long as you know how to deal with him, he's a lot easier to get along with than he lets on.

"You really *are* extraordinary, Rimuru. Even more so than how El described. I mean, I thought that Guy Crimson over there was the kind of scary demon who killed Jahil, my fellow disciple, in seconds to become a demon lord. If you can be friends with him *that* easily, I wonder what all the fuss was about."

Sylvia was talking so rapidly, I couldn't defend myself. But the man we were talking about laughed at the exchange.

"*You're* pretty shameless, too, saying all that in front of me."

Ah. Looks like Guy's taking a liking to Sylvia, too. I like how he respects people who don't cower in fear of him. Considering the future, the two building a friendship was probably a good omen for us.

Anyway, I thought we had sufficiently diverted the conversation, but that wasn't the end of it.

"Now, Rimuru, what did you do with Clayman's remains again?"

Unfortunately, Guy hadn't forgotten about all of that. I had no choice but to explain.

"Well, it's all really just a coincidence, you know. Like when I saved her from Jahil's attack..."

I strung together a random bunch of thoughts to buy time. It's a little sad how used to this sort of thing I've become, but I had no intention of revealing my skills here, and if push came to shove, I wasn't above using my right to remain silent.

"Sounds pretty suspicious to me," remarked Sylvia. "Are you hiding something?"

"Yeah, you tell him. He always omits the most important part of the story at times like this."

"Sh-shut up, guys! There's a lot *I* don't understand about it, either! I have no

idea how it even worked this time!"

It was really Ciel who did everything anyway. This is exactly why I didn't want them to pursue this topic...and, really, why are Guy and Sylvia so in sync with each other? They haven't even met before, and I didn't know Sylvia until today, either, but she looks so much like Elmesia that she doesn't seem at all like a stranger to me.

So we had a surprisingly lively, friendly talk at this late-night meeting. Sylvia's lips were loosening a bit, too.

"By the way, Lady Kagali," she began, "I wasn't sure if I should ask you this, but I was wondering if you could tell me about your friends a little."

She sounded friendly enough about it. I didn't sense any ulterior motive.

"Huh?" replied Kagali, similarly puzzled at Sylvia. But then she seemed to recall something. "...I think I know what you're trying to get at. That's fine. And you don't have to use titles with me, either."

"No? Thank you. In that case, just Sylvia is okay with me, too. So—"

"You want to know about Laplace?"

"Yeah. I guess you heard that, huh?"

"Yes. When you said 'Thalion,' Laplace definitely reacted to that. And if the name of the Sorcerous Dynasty was also Laplace's real name, then I suppose I was friends with quite a lofty figure..."

Their conversation continued for a bit. I had no idea what they were talking about, but I guess they were conferring over Laplace's true identity.

And...

"Wait—Laplace was formerly a Hero?!"

"Yes, he was. And also, he was my husband. El's daddy, too."

"...Are you serious?"

"Oh, *super* serious."

I looked at Kagali in astonishment. She calmly nodded back at me. I suppose she had already worked through all of this in her mind, although I wonder if the

same was true for Sylvia. I'm sure all these events happened ages ago, but despite discovering that Kagali had turned her long-lost, presumed-dead husband into a walking dead, she didn't show any sign of resentment at all.

"I should apologize for that," Kagali said. "I would completely understand if you resented me for it...but still, I'm really glad I got to meet Laplace."

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that! It made me think, you know—even after death, his personality never changed, did it? And when I saw him protecting you in the end, it was like...wow, the man I loved isn't here any longer..."

The way Sylvia phrased it, Laplace could have fled that scene if he wanted to. But he didn't, and I suppose it showed that he had some pride as a member of the Moderate Jesters. We'll never know the truth now, but...

"Well, not necessarily."

I wasn't trying to offer them comfort or anything, but I couldn't help but let that fall from my lips. Maybe it's selfish of me, but I wasn't about to give up hope. Even Ciel told me there was a nonzero chance he was still alive, so that's what I chose to believe when it came to Yuuki and Laplace. Yuuki had caused me all sorts of trouble, but he's still a fellow Japanese man and a student of Shizu. I thought that witnessing his death would come as a shock to me, but there wasn't really any sadness—maybe because I suspected that his death never actually happened.

I mean, I know it's silly. I saw him vaporized right before my eyes. But there's just no trusting him that way. He tricked me a million times before. *That's* why he's alive. And as long as I believed that, I didn't see any need to mourn.

"No, maybe not. The boss was always stubborn that way."

"Right? Thalion was living for *that* long without ever contacting me, too. There's just no saving him, is there? Abandoning me just because he got reborn as a walking dead and lost all his memories. No point worrying about someone *that* useless, no. Time to flip the page, I say!"

I suppose my words weren't in vain after all. I worried that I'd sound crass to them, but if I could lighten Kagali's and Sylvia's minds even a little, then good on me.

Our late-night chat continued—helping us work past the day's sorrows, so we could win tomorrow's war.

INTERLUDE

FORCE OF JUSTICE

Feldway got back to the Celestial Palace just in time for Michael's own return.

"You sure got beaten down, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Michael replied. "We ran into some unexpected events. I set off to purge Obela for her defection, but my Castle Guard didn't work on her."

"What? I had no problem at all..."

"That's probably why. There's only *one* of that skill, at the core. Only the mystics swear their allegiance to me, and there was nobody on *this* planet who knows me..."

"There's me, isn't there?"

"Hee-hee! That'd go against the basic principle of the skill, though. It's pretty natural that any allegiance from you wouldn't count."

The two of them updated each other like they were having a casual, everyday conversation. It was a surprise to Feldway that Michael couldn't use his Castle Guard, but at least he didn't suffer any major damage in the process. His concern was more about Obela the traitor, and what happened to her.

"What of Obela, then?"

"She escaped on me, sadly. Obela's troops are outstandingly loyal to her. They fought well to protect her from me. It's a valuable asset that we lost."

Michael was being frank about this. He had killed them all, but his attitude made it seem like some event unrelated to him.

"Yes, Obela commanded an excellent force. Truly, a regrettable loss."

Feldway's reply was so indifferent that it was hard to believe he really thought so. Obela's troops were loyal only to her, not Feldway, so he didn't

consider them any major loss. It had no impact on his Castle Guard, so he didn't see the problem. This coldness was one reason why Feldway wasn't very well-liked by his peers, but he didn't care about that, preferring an unflaggingly rational approach at all times. He wasn't that way in the past, but there was no trace of the past to Feldway now.

"So..."

Michael looked at Leon and Jahil, the newcomers. Noticing that they were back here with a smaller number of people than when they left, he nodded and began to talk.

"I think our forces need to implement a chain of command as well. You'll remain chief commander, Feldway, but I think you need to decide exactly whom to deploy where. What do you think?"

Feldway nodded back at him. "Hmm... Well, I've worked things out with our final negotiating partner, so yes, let's decide that before we start our full invasion."

So the main members of the heavenly force, save Zeranus, were once again assembled in the audience chamber.

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Feldway began by presenting the results of the current operation. Michael was open to this, but he had already heard all of it, so this was mostly a formality for Deeno's sake.

"Oh, so Orlia was killed in action?"

Deeno wasn't emotional over it. The fact that she'd been consumed by Vega was carefully omitted. Deeno never knew her, but she was still part of the team, so he closed his eyes and prayed she'd rest in peace. He assumed that much was allowed anyway. Pico, Garasha, and Mai followed his lead, although nobody else in the group cared enough to. Then the meeting continued, with no one seeming to care about how little camaraderie there was.

Feldway was chairing this meeting, while Michael remained silent and showed no sign of interjecting. The main item on the agenda was appointing people to positions, clarifying the hierarchy to prevent hassles during the full-on invasion.

Vega was geared up for this, eyes burning with ambition, but the others were less than enthusiastic—Deeno looked like he couldn't care less. He kept as low a profile as possible, so no one assigned any responsibility to him.

These were the circumstances when Feldway began his announcement.

The person at the top of the hierarchy was Michael, the overseer. Feldway then named himself supreme commander and chief executive. Velzard was his advisor; they decided that she'd be allowed to run free, checking Guy's movements.

Among the others, nine people were strong enough to take command roles, Zarario chief among them. Or ten, actually—including a longtime friend of Feldway's who wasn't present at this meeting.

Normally, a commander is asked to bring a tactical viewpoint to battle, but in *this* fight, the only thing that really mattered was individual strength. The way Feldway saw it, once a strict hierarchy was in place, everything else could be handled as they pleased. This was a very unsound way to run a military, but it worked for them up to now—so, without further hesitation, Feldway set up the pecking order based strictly on strength.

The strongest here besides Feldway were Zarario, Jahil, and Feldway's absent friend. These would be named to a new group.

"First, I will be establishing a new post called the 'Three Stellar Leaders' to replace the Three Mystic Leaders. They will serve as Sir Veldanava's generals, and I expect them to use their powers to the fullest."

He saw a need to change the name since two of its members were not mystics. The new title played off Veldanava's role as the Star-King Dragon, and the trio that served in this group would take general-style roles in the effort to revive the dragon.

"Cornu is dead, and Obela has betrayed us. We are adding Jahil to our ranks to replace them, and another is due to join us shortly, so I will appoint him then."

A dissatisfied voice rose up from the audience. It was from Vega. "Whoa, whoa, you're going to appoint some random guy from nowhere to command

the heavenly armies instead of me? What's up with that? I'm not too sure I like to see that!"

Vega, having just gained new strength from consuming Orlia, was getting carried away again. He didn't seem to have a shred of remorse in his mind, much to everyone's chagrin. Only Yuuki could handle someone like him, but Feldway wasn't here to play along with him.

"Silence. My decisions are final. The next time you express your own opinions, you will be punished. Are you prepared for that?"

Feldway wasn't exactly a shrewd utilizer of human resources. Are you useful or not? That's all that mattered, and if they were useless, he tossed them aside. He was thorough with that mindset, which is why no one liked him, but he didn't care about that. The next time Vega sassed him, he was deadly serious about doing away with him.

Vega, with his excellent instinct for survival, sensed this well enough. He might have felt like an almighty being now, but Feldway's strength was on a whole other dimension. He knew he was still no match for him, so he had no choice but to sheepishly retreat.

"Tch! Sorry. I just want to be a little more appreciated, is all. That's why I interrupted you."

With that, he said no more, stifling his frustration. But he'd be grinning all over again once Feldway continued.

"Don't sulk like that. I think very highly of you, I'll have you know. That's why I'm naming you leader of the Seven Heavenly Generals."

As the name suggested, this group was meant to comprise all of their ultimate skill-bearing angelic members, but they didn't have enough to fill all seven seats. Feldway was never one to fret over details, so he just put their remaining top powerhouses into this group. Kagali and Obela were supposed to be Heavenly Generals, with Vega joining what was meant to be the "Four Stellar Leaders"; Mai and Orlia worked as support soldiers, diving in wherever they were needed. Unfortunately, this all needed to be revised from the ground up.

Regardless, Zarario, Jahil, and an as-yet-unnamed third member would be the

Three Stellar Leaders, and the Seven Heavenly Generals consisted of Vega (the leader), Leon, Deeno, Pico, Garasha, Alios, and Mai Furuki.

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The Stellar Leaders were each meant to command their own corps, while the Heavenly Generals would engage in maneuvers either solo or with a group of people. With that system in place, it was time to explain the operation.

"Now that we have brought Leon into our ranks, it is safe to say that we have taken down one of the demon lords and his forces. That means one less point for us to attack."

As Feldway spoke, Mai projected a miniature version of the key world with five points of light on it. One of them, the white spot on the lands controlled by Leon, faded away, leaving four behind. Feldway then pointed at one of them; it changed color from white to red at Mai's direction.

"This area will not need to be addressed. My friend has promised to help me, not Guy."

The now-extinguished light was in the far west of the land—the domain controlled by Daggrull.

"Don't tell me Daggrull's switched sides?" Leon asked.

His question was addressed by none other than the third Stellar Leader, who had just stepped in—a slender man with an exceptionally large physique.

"Here I am, Feldway. Pretty bold of you to release me from the seal like that."

This was not Daggrull. He had long, shaggy, green hair, not the dull blue color of the demon lord's. His eyes shone like jade, too, while Daggrull had blue eyes. The resemblance was still clear, however.

The man's name was Fenn. He was the younger brother of "Earthquake" Daggrull, a man with godlike powers; people called him "the Mad Fist," after an event where Veldanava sealed him away after he went on a rampage in ancient times. Deeno, still barely paying attention, was the first to react to him.

"Oh, no way! You took off his Gleipnir chaos bonds?! What are you thinking, Feldway?! You know how wary Daggrull was of him!"

It was rare for him to get this confrontational with Feldway. He was so shocked that he couldn't help but raise his voice.

"Heh... Don't worry. Fenn and I are friends. We share a common mission. Besides, his strength... It's astounding."

He didn't need to say it. Fenn made no effort to hide the overwhelming aura of his magicule-driven force. His existence points numbered over sixty million, so large that he'd be comparable to a True Dragon.

But Deeno wasn't the only one displeased by Fenn's presence.

"Tsk! This evil god, sealed away in ancient times? A demigod would be one thing, but not even *I* would want to take on a tyrant like this!"

Jahil spat out those words in disgust. He wasn't directly acquainted with this man, but the demigod said plenty about him. As he put it, he was an evil god who had been sealed off by Veldanava due to his destructive rampages. In Jahil's mind, he was a living disaster, the greatest after Ivalage the World-Destroyer Dragon—and now that myth was standing before his eyes. The sight nauseated him.

But Fenn didn't care. With a grin, he put an arm around Jahil's shoulders and whispered in his ear.

"Hey, c'mon, we're buddies, right? Why don't we just get along? I hear that I'm being appointed to the Three Stellar Leaders, just like you. You got real potential, too, not like these other wimps. You're more than qualified to be my lackey."

He was completely looking down on Jahil. It was humiliating. Jahil believed that he should be ruling the world as its rightful king, so this kind of disrespect was completely unacceptable.

But he couldn't lodge any complaints. He felt a doom-inducing pressure from the arm around his shoulder. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead as he sat back in his chair.

"Hmph! I'll allow this for now. I don't intend to have things end like this, but no need to make a scene right now."

With that, he agreed to be Fenn's servant for the time being. He wondered how Zarario would react to this, but it didn't look like he had any intention of fighting it. It wasn't Ultimate Dominion doing its thing on him. Zarario was a warrior, and he knew well enough how he stood against this man. Would he beat him or not? He couldn't know unless they fought, but all-out warfare between them would cause massive damage to the planet and endanger the whole operation. It was just a waste of time.

So Zarario resolved this situation by tempering his expectations—and with that, Fenn was now head of the Three Stellar Leaders.

With everyone assigned their ranks, all eyes turned back toward the miniature key world.

"Now, Feldway, what did you mean when you said Daggrull is not a problem? I can see that Sir Fenn has joined us, but that doesn't explain everything."

Fenn smirked at Jahil's question. "Wow, that's pretty sad. Are you underestimating me that much? If you know me, then you know *this*, too, right? Daggrull might be my older brother, but I'm far better than him."

"I don't need to hear your bragging," Jahil bitterly replied. "If you truly claim there won't be any problems, I want to see it in the results you put up."

Jahil was an arrogant man. He recognized that Fenn was talented, but he wasn't about to give up all his imperial pride and lick his boots.

But Fenn grinned, apparently liking this attention. "You know me, and you still act like that? All right. I'll be happy to live up to your expectations!"

He accentuated this with a laugh. He barely had a chance to so much as talk to anyone since Veldanava sealed him up all those years ago, but scenes of the world had continually floated into his mind, like he was dreaming—the result of his connection to his brother Daggrull, deep in his soul. That gave him a certain degree of understanding of world affairs; he knew they were on the tipping point of a great war between nations, and that he'd soon have an environment to rampage in once more.

Feldway was the only person to visit him in prison. He was only taking care of Fenn because Veldanava had entrusted him with his care, but over time, they

began chatting about things and came to each other for advice. As the supreme leader of his own domain, Feldway had nobody close to consult with, and all this time sealed away was making Fenn lonely as well. It was only natural, perhaps, that they'd confide in each other so much.

Now Fenn had a field to play in, along with companions he could show off his power to. How could he not be enthusiastic about that? It's not that he was any less vicious than he used to be, it's just that he had come to value his friends more. Having these friends made him happier than anything, so despite how it looked, he was truly, honestly grateful to Feldway.



So Fenn declared to the group that he'd take care of Daggrull, but Deeno was less than convinced.

"Wait, wait, wait! Hey, Feldway, are you sure about this? If you release Fenn, Daggrull will no longer have any reason to protect Skyspire Tower, right?"

Skyspire Tower was a stairway that led to the Celestial Palace. For those without the key to the large gate leading to the Palace, navigating the Tower was the only way in. Daggrull was its guardian, put in place to keep Fenn from ever returning to the world. If Fenn attacked him, Deeno said, they might run into some serious trouble, depending on the results.

Despite being under Ultimate Dominion, Deeno still had free thought. It'd be a different story if he was more strongly influenced by this thrall, but he at least had the right to say what he wanted. The same was true, by the way, for Leon; his actions were restricted, but he still thought like he always did. That's how he refrained from using wide-range attacks while fighting Sylvia, keeping any damage inflicted on her to a minimum. He had also sent out signals with his eyes, but sadly, Sylvia didn't pick up on those. Not that Sylvia was imperceptive —she was just too occupied with a lot of other things. But even if she spotted it, she couldn't have learned much more than "Leon still has his free will," so it wouldn't have meant much anyway.

At any rate, Ultimate Dominion may restrict their actions, but it still allowed for free thought to a certain extent. This was more convenient for Feldway. He couldn't hold a strategy conference if people couldn't engage in flexible

thinking, so Deeno's comments were more than welcome.

"That does deserve to be looked into, yes. What should we do to address that concern?"

"Well, I don't know what, really..."

Deeno quickly lost steam after having the question bounced back at him. He spoke up more out of shock than anything, but it's not like he stood to lose anything here. Now he was back to his usual slacker self, wondering what he got so worked up about.

"I mean...if you ask me tough questions like that...I dunno what to say, you know?"

He tried to sit back down, hoping to have all this blow over for him. But Feldway wasn't about to let him.

"I trust in Fenn, but I do understand your concerns, Deeno. So I think the best solution here is to send out some other people as well."

You were planning to do that all along, thought Deeno. Feldway must have seen his outburst as a godsend, since suggesting this out of nowhere would make it look like he didn't trust Fenn. Deeno now feared that he'd be forced to join in on this...and he was right.

"I know you're worried, Deeno, so why don't you go see for yourself how strong Fenn is?"

"Oh, um, I'm good..."

"Aw, don't be shy. I doubt you'll get much chance to do anything this battle, but if you wanna see how strong I am, I won't stop you."

That wasn't at all what Deeno wanted, but it was already too late. Resigning himself to his fate, he reluctantly nodded.

"Y-yeah... Well, if you're offering, I'll join in with Pico and Garasha."

"Whoa! Deeno! Don't drag *us* into this!"

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? I'm still fresh from a life-or-death battle with Raine, and you want me to fight some more? How is *that* fair?"

Deeno's companions were roaring their disapproval, but he ignored them. He figured they were probably slacking off at work, too, so he roped them in to lighten his own load a little.

Feldway approved it, offering no particular objection. He really *did* trust Fenn, but he also knew that Daggrull was no pushover. This wasn't a man to take lightly, to be certain—and besides, Daggrull had another younger brother, too. Stories of these three gigantic brothers causing all kinds of havoc in ancient times were well known, and Feldway—knowing the truth behind those old tales—was ready to pull out all the stops.

"Here, you join in too, Leon. We'll stage an attack on Skyspire Tower with Fenn and four Heavenly Generals. That ought to be enough."

So they had their member roster for the next target.

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That seemed to mark the last item on the agenda, but Feldway wasn't done.

"All right. Now let's decide on the other targets to strike."

"Huh? We're not deciding on a time yet?"

"No. The plan is to use our attacking superiority to stage multiple invasions at the same time. In fact, no offense to Fenn, but this Skyspire Tower attack is really just a decoy."

"A decoy? So who're we *really* striking?"

Deeno wasn't all that interested in the details behind the operation, but if he was getting *this* involved, he thought, he may as well hear the whole thing. It'd at least make him feel better if the other attack sites looked a lot tougher. Besides, if he could work things right and run into Rimuru, he could ingratiate himself with him with some new intelligence. So, knowing full well that this wasn't how he usually acted, he asked Feldway that question.

"First all, I want you to recall what our mission is."

That was the answer he received. Deeno didn't know what that "mission" was. He recalled it was something absurd, along the lines of resurrecting Veldanava. Which, yeah, if they could do that, Deeno thought it'd be cool to see

it, but...

But doesn't Sir Veldanava have his own motivations? Maybe he got tired of Feldway being such a pain, or maybe he wants to stay back until the human race matures more...

Here was Veldanava, the Creator and a truly transcendent being. It seemed selfish to Deeno for people to make their own assumptions about what he wanted.

It's always so annoying when someone says he's speaking the word of the gods. They give their own interpretations, distorting the original intentions all the time. Luminus had the worst time with that, didn't she? That's why she opted against naming a human Holy Emperor.

The exact same words can often be interpreted differently depending on how people perceive them. Humans are creatures that believe only what they want to; even when they're wrong, they're not very open to admitting it.

For one thing, Luminus never once referred to herself as the "only god" of this world. Yet, for some reason, her followers have come to believe that Luminus is the sole deity out there. She didn't go out of her way to deny it—apparently it was more convenient for her that way—but truth's habit of changing depending on one's interpretation of it leads to all sorts of issues if mishandled.

Deeno, having observed the human world for a long time, had fully internalized this. But if one of his coworkers was exploiting this in a bad way, he really wanted no part of it.

"If we want to resurrect Sir Veldanava, all we need now are the draconic elements of Veldora. But there's one other obstacle we shouldn't forget about. Isn't there?"

Was there?

Deeno sure didn't know. But Feldway's eyes were right on him.

Oh, come on! Me? Ask someone else!

He looked around. Everyone else had stern, expressionless looks on their faces. Zarario appeared to be completely ignoring Feldway; maybe he took

offense at being mind-dominated. Leon, having just joined the team, wasn't following this conversation and didn't seem interested in it in the first place. Fenn and Jahil were the same way; this was all new stuff to them, so no way did they have an answer. Pico and Garasha were less than interested, hiding behind Deeno and keeping their heads down. The other Heavenly Generals were more useful pawns than actual friends of Feldway; he never went to them for feedback. No, this question was lodged squarely at Deeno.

Are you kidding me?! Now that Kagali and Yuuki are gone, I'm supposed to be the brains of this outfit?!

Then something occurred to Deeno. Shouldn't this really be Zarario's role? It was, but—as he was just realizing now—he had drawn the short end of the stick. But it's not like he could do anything about it. So he decided to dodge the question, lest anyone get their hopes up about him.

"Do you even need to ask?" he said, grinning suggestively. That was all it took to receive a satisfied nod from Feldway.

I knew it. He's soooo smart that he doesn't even want other people's opinions, right? Just give him a pat on the back or two, and the conversation goes merrily along!

Comfortable in his success, Deeno nodded back.

"Yes, indeed," Feldway replied. "As Deeno surmised, we have to get rid of this wild card Masayuki. On the off chance that he becomes the medium Ludora uses to resurrect himself, there's no guarantee that won't negatively impact Sir Michael."

Not that I said anything, Deeno thought, being careful not to let it show on his face. Then he briskly nodded. This logic seemed faulty to him, but he wasn't enough of a team player to point that out. If Feldway wanted to do that, let him.

Nobody else offered any feedback, either, so Feldway continued.

"As long as Veldora is embedded deep within that meddlesome labyrinth, our next target should really be Masayuki. We'll be gradually sapping away at their capacity to fight, and once we take away enough, he'll have no choice but to

come out of his lair.”

That was Feldway’s plan—if he won’t come out, we’ll just cut down the rest of their forces.

I’m kinda friends with Masayuki, too, though, Deeno absentmindedly thought. He wanted to find a way to let him know he was being targeted, but now that Michael had tightened his control over him, he couldn’t think of any way how. He couldn’t even send a Thought Communication to Rimuru, since it’d be a clear act of betrayal. His only option was to hope for some miraculous encounter on the field, but Deeno wasn’t counting on that. All he could do was pray for his safe escape.

“Do we know where Masayuki is?”

“Good question, Deeno. I’ll let Velzard tackle it.”

“Yes, based on the location of Velgrynd’s presence, I do have a rough idea of where Masayuki is. I’ve picked up Velgrynd’s presence in several spots within the imperial capital, along with one in the Kingdom of Englesia. She’s fully concealed her aura, but that’s not enough to fool *my* eyes.”

Velzard the Ice Dragon’s tracking and recognition skills were as good or better than Dragon’s Eye, Milim’s skill. And this wasn’t some random face in the crowd she was looking for. It was her own sister. Tracing her was child’s play to Velzard.

It looked like Velgrynd was using her Parallel Existences to fortify the Empire’s defenses while presumably keeping Masayuki under guard. In response, Mai moved the lights on her miniature planet around. The one in the central west of the continent, not far from where Luminus ruled, joined Daggrull’s dot in turning from white to red.

Feldway pointed to it. “So that means Masayuki is here in Englesia. Vega, I’d like you to attack that site. Any objections?”

That wasn’t a question so much as an order. He only said that to make Vega think he was part of the debate and keep him enthusiastic—and, of course, Vega was too simpleminded to pick up on this.

So he grinned and shook his head. “I’m on the job. Englesia is an old haunt of

mine, besides. It's got a lot of hidden passageways nobody knows about. I'll use those to sneak in and kill that kid."

Feldway nodded his affirmation. The actual plan called for Vega to serve as a distraction while Arius slipped in and killed Masayuki, but Vega's vision of this operation was fine by him, too. Either way, Feldway planned to visit Englesia's capital as well, as he wanted to see how the enemy reacted to an uninhibited Vega.

But it didn't end there, of course.

"Zarario, you'll be leading our entire army to provide support for us. Track Luminus's moves, and if she takes any action against us, stop her."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Then stand by. Once I give the order, you will be conducting an all-out assault on Englesia."

"All right."

Feldway's orders were the law. Zarario put his dissatisfaction aside and meekly nodded back.

Now the only official not assigned anything so far was Jahil. He waited for Feldway's words, bracing himself for the worst. There's no way he'd let one of the Three Stellar Leaders remain idle.

"Then, to be completely safe... Jahil, you'll be our mobile force. I'll provide you with troops. You'll be expected to do whatever it takes to help Fenn."

"Yeesh. You'll go *that* far? I really don't see the need..."

"Don't be that way, Fenn. It's just for the worst-case scenario. Remember, if you subdue Daggrull, you'll have that army under your command."

"Right, right."

"But as long as Daggrull is out there, his legions of giants are gonna get in the way."

"It's our job to stop them, isn't it?"

"Yes, exactly."

Fenn crowed to his peers that it was unnecessary, but Feldway was in the right here, and Jahil had nothing to lose either way. If Fenn was an active part of this, he could just sit back and watch; if he got into danger, he could swing in to the rescue, and then Fenn would owe him one. He'd have his chance to shine in battle either way, so there was no need for impatience.

"Hmph! I wish I had my own trained soldiers at my side here, but so be it. As soon as I see Fenn's victory for myself, I'll attack from the west and advance toward the center. Is that all right?"

"Sure. Do whatever you like."

Jahil shut his mouth the moment he heard that. As far as he was concerned, he was done talking. He was an ambitious man, and he resented being treated like a lapdog here, but he also owed Feldway. Between that and the obvious difference in strength between them, Jahil thought it wise to follow him for now.

Velzard, by the way, reported directly to Michael, so Feldway had no authority to give her orders. She was a free thinker by nature, so their doctrine called for her to do whatever she felt like.

With that, everyone had their roles in place.

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Now that they had a firm direction to take, Michael spoke up.

"Allow me to add one thing as well. The labyrinth under the demon lord Rimuru's control presents major problems if our enemy holes up inside of it. Like Feldway said, it's far better to lure them out of there. Thus, I have decided to give the lands in the former nation of Eurazania, currently under the demon lord Milim's control, to Zeranus. Whether it's Milim's domain or the Englesian capital, if war breaks out in those areas, Rimuru could never ignore it. They'll be sure to send troops out, and it'll be your job to crush them. There will be no doubting our victory then."

Michael addressed them with palpable conviction.

This was, in fact, their greatest advantage as the attackers. Destroying their bases, one by one, gradually takes apart their power to fight. Repeat that for

long enough, and victory is all but guaranteed. Once they take down all their enemy's bases apart from the capital of Rimuru, they'll be ready to conduct a punishing siege. Ramiris's labyrinth is still an enigma; there might be more than one way in and out—but cutting off their supplies would be enormous. They might still be able to get a few strategic assets into Tempest, but once they were separated from the rest of the world, it'd be easy to break their influence.

Of course, they couldn't sit on their hands forever. The ultimate goal was to procure Veldora's draconic factors, and they couldn't do that by waiting. However, Michael still decided that once they had that situation in place, they could take their time working out the rest of their strategy.

It might have been the right way to go, but Deeno was unconvinced.

"Whoa, Milim's the daughter of Veldanava, you know. You understand that, right?!"

He was fully venting his frustration now. But Michael didn't let it bother him.

"...Is that a problem?" he asked, keeping a cool expression.

"A problem? I mean, wouldn't that displease Sir Veldanava?"

It was a natural question, from Deeno's point of view. Attempting to do anything to Milim really *was* nothing but an act of betrayal against Veldanava. What could Michael be thinking? His response was so matter-of-fact that he didn't seem to think it was any kind of problem at all. And Feldway agreed with him.

"Yes, Deeno, the demon lord Milim is the daughter of Sir Veldanava. However, the way I see it, we are no different from her, in terms of being created by that dragon."

That's likely what Michael and Feldway truly believed. Their respect and loyalty were pointed at no one but Veldanava. They didn't even have a shred of affection for his daughter.

Jahil, presumably agreeing with them, sniffed as he mockingly glared at Deeno. Having met his end at the hand of Milim's wrath in the past, the idea of invading the former Eurazania filled him with joy, and here's Deeno raining on the parade. It wasn't what Jahil wanted to see at all.

Deeno looked back at Feldway.

This is exactly why Obela turned traitor on us! These guys have the craziest ideas about stuff...

And if he questioned it any further, he might be branded a traitor, too.

"Don't worry about it, Deeno. If it turns out I was wrong, I am sure he will resurrect himself to correct our path. If his beloved daughter is in danger, after all, he is bound to come to her aid. Thus, we are doing the exact right thing here."

Deeno had nothing left to say. His old friend was dead now. If this had only dawned on him sooner, he could have fled—and now he was regretting that he didn't.

So, with the general outline of the Temma War worked out, things were ready to kick off. The day would soon come when a great calamity would engulf the world in a whirlpool of chaos, drastically changing it forever.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
2

BEGINNING OF THE WAR

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After our late-night discussion, it was decided that we'd take care of Kagali and Teare over in Tempest. Teare still hadn't come to yet, so it'd be safer to care for her in the labyrinth. We'd be able to get more detailed information on her in there, and the labyrinth would be helpful in determining if something malicious was taking its toll on her. Kagali was bound to join her there, so I decided to accept them both without complaint.

Sylvia, meanwhile, returned to Thalion. She could help us out a lot in the event of war, but to Sylvia, Thalion—the home of her daughter—was more important. I certainly couldn't impose our problems on her, so we promised each other that we'd work together if something came up. I also gave her one of my "cell phones," just in case. Elmesia has one already, but I thought giving one to Sylvia would be good for backup purposes. We just saw that the Demon's Rings weren't the all-powerful communications tools I thought they were, so the more ways we have to reach out, the better. We can use them for fun purposes, besides, once all this strife is over.

So, after exchanging contact information, I watched Sylvia head off.

Now here I am in my office.

So much paperwork had accumulated on my desk that I thought I was back to my daily grind for a moment. Just looking at these piles made me around 30 percent angrier at Feldway. I'm not just doing this for funsies, you know. I've got loads and loads of projects that need my approval, and stacks and stacks of minutes from meetings to decide this or that measure to go through.

The minutes, at least, could be put on the back burner. That's finished business anyway, so no need to try rushing through them. So I looked over the new projects that needed my approval, quickly deciding whether to proceed

with them.

I was busy, but there wasn't much I could do about that. After all, they were holding the World Congress over in Englesia in two days. Yes, the World Congress—a regular holding of the Council of the West, but with the emperor of the Eastern Empire participating as well. A truly unprecedented event in world history!

What's more, I was also due to attend this congress after meeting up with Mjöllmile over in Blumund. Thanks to some idiot invading Leon's domain, though, my schedule's in a total shambles right now. I was having to use my little bits of free time here and there to plow through all this paperwork, which sucked.

Now, though, it was all behind me. I could sit back, have a cup of tea, and enjoy some unstructured free time. It'd be a good chance to calm down and gather my thoughts before the big event.

"Your tea, Sir Rimuru."

It was Diablo bringing it this time, not Shuna. He was really giving his all as my secretary, presumably because Shion wasn't around.

"Thank you very much. You take a break, too, okay?"

I motioned at Diablo to sit across from me. He went on for a bit about "what a great honor this is" and all that tearful crap, but I ignored it.

"So, tell me—what's Feldway like from *your* point of view?" I asked him.

From what I could tell, Feldway seemed uniquely unpopular even amongst his own forces. If he wasn't, Deeno wouldn't have been so cavalier about two-timing him. Regardless, I needed more intel on the enemy. If I knew more about his personality, it'd help me decide on things like how far I could bluff with him when the time came. I knew he was a cautious leader, but I thought it wise to ask if there was anything else I could exploit.

Diablo thought for a bit before answering.

"Well, he's a very serious-minded man. Some might call him hardheaded or inflexible, but either way, once he makes up his mind about something, nothing

can make him change it. He doesn't seek out other people's feedback, not even for reference purposes, so opinions about him are generally split among his troops."

So for bootlicking yes-men, he'd be an easy boss to have—just do whatever he orders you to do, and it's all good. For talented, creative people, though, he'd be a headache-inducing tyrant who shut you down at every possible moment. Not having your feedback be acknowledged at all is always super stressful. If a boss has a reason not to take my advice and can explain it to me, that's great—but if he just dismisses it out of hand, all that does is encourage grudges.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Well..." Diablo seemed concerned. "I'm not fully sure about this," he said, "but..."—and then he revealed something a lot more important than I expected.

To put it simply, he was talking about where the enemy was based, and how they traveled between there and this world. They—the Aggressors—were originally expelled from this world by Veldanava. They changed greatly over time, as did the angels assigned to watch over them, and now here they were.

Their base, of course, was on another world, connected into the "key world" that we're on via special power fields called Underworld Gates, of which several exist worldwide. It was the responsibility of the demons to protect (or rather, manage) these Gates, which the demons used to expand their spheres of influence in a pretty aggressive manner. The only Underworld Gate known to exist right now is located near Leon's domain and is guarded by Carrera; Testarossa and Ultima used to guard Gates of their own, but they were lost following a massive battle.

"We'd all be far better off without those things," he bitterly stated. "If you go to the other world with a physical body, it'll wind up contaminated and transformed. You can safely assume that anyone who comes here from the other side is an Aggressor."

The easiest thing, in other words, would be to just destroy these Gates, since they do nothing but spread chaos worldwide. But Testarossa and Ultima didn't think that way. They protected their Gates for a long time, but they were

already broken by the time Diablo went scouting for recruits, so they readily agreed to join him instead. That sounded a bit like a lie to me, but I didn't say so —the Gate Carrera guarded was on its last legs at best, besides. I think it was just left unattended because it was inaccessible to people with too much power. If anything, I assumed the Gates were broken on purpose.

But getting back to the main topic, Diablo's concern was about how Feldway and his team came to this world. His guess was that a new Gate appeared somewhere in the Empire.

"Or do you think maybe the one Testarossa guarded was restored?"

"That cannot be ruled out, no. But that doesn't match the time frame when Feldway appeared in the Empire, so I think it is safe to assume another Gate is involved."

Hmm. That makes sense.

"So your guess is that the Aggressors' main base is in the Empire?"

That's what I wanted to confirm, but Diablo was focused on something else entirely.

"Not just there, no. From what Kagali told me, Feldway has definitely opened the gates to the Celestial Palace. Normally, a certain key is required to open them, but..."

The Celestial Palace... The Origin Place, as it's also called. The birthplace of Veldanava, right? And as Kagali put it, Feldway's base is adjacent to all other worlds out there. So Diablo's question here was basically about how they got this key—

"There is no point in worrying over how they got it. What matters is that if you pass through the gates of the Celestial Palace, you can go to a key world with the same main body that you have in the other world."

Oops. Good thing I didn't say that, because I was way off. But what's he mean by that "main body" stuff?

"Among the Primordials, only Feldway was given a body by Veldanava. Currently he's occupying a temporary body in this world, so there would be no

point in killing him in that state.”

“Something like Velgrynd’s Parallel Existences?”

“Not like that, no. They are not connected at all times—it is more like splitting one’s consciousness. Your memories are synchronized on a regular basis, I presume, so you may see it as functionally similar...”

And that, as Diablo explained, was what made this so troublesome. The way I understood it, Velgrynd was like a group of synced-up computers connected to the internet, while Feldway was more like a set of terminals sending data to the main computer, no net involved.

That seems to be the correct understanding. In other words, not even a Dimensional Combo would reach Feldway’s main body, making him an extremely difficult opponent to handle.

Yeah, sure sounds like it.

“So we can’t defeat Feldway unless we go to wherever his main body is. That is annoying...but, wait, if that main body’s going out of its way to come to this world, that’s good for us, right?”

It’d certainly save us the trouble of looking for someone when we have no idea where he is. But as Diablo explained, it wasn’t that simple.

“It is, yes, but the fact remains that Feldway is extremely powerful. The fighting ability of his main body may very likely outclass Guy’s. That’s why I believe we need to consider the worst-case scenario here.”

The main body granted to him by Veldanava was like a treasure to Feldway. That’s why he liked using all these temporary bodies, apparently, to prevent his main one from being harmed. But now we might have to think about what’ll happen if he does away with that approach. That was important. We can’t have our plans upended by a single change of direction by the enemy, especially if it grants him that much more fighting power.

“Guy’s an even match for Velzard when he tries, right? So you think Feldway’s up there with True Dragons as well?”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Yes, that would be the case.”

As Diablo explained to me, the Feldway of the past was a really, really bad guy. We thought he wasn't as much of a menace as Zeranus the Insect Lord or Ivalage the World-Destroyer Dragon, but that may be way off the mark. If that wasn't the main body whose EP we measured in the labyrinth, it might not even be accurate at all. So now Feldway's true abilities are an unknown to us, huh?

"Well, I'm still hoping to leave him to you, but you think you'll be all right?"

It was my plan to have Diablo handle Feldway for me. Learning that his actual strength was probably True Dragon-level was a surprise, but I'm sure Diablo could figure out a way through it...or is that just wishful thinking? But as soon as I asked the question, Diablo smiled from ear to ear.

"I am constantly moved by your trust in me, Sir Rimuru. I promise you that I will strive to live up to your expectations!"

Yep. Seems all right to me. Diablo might be way too overconfident, but he never takes on tasks he's not capable of. I have no idea if he can actually win or not, but *he* thinks he could deal with Feldway anyway. It's not right for me to keep doubting him.

If I have a suspicion that a fight's gonna turn out to be an extended stalemate, better to let one of my own trusted men handle it. So, as originally planned, I would have Diablo do his best for me.

Now that I knew just how bad a dude Feldway was, I was curious about his next target.

"What do you think his next move will be?" I asked Diablo.

"Hmm... Well, it is hard to conjecture, but judging by his personality, it seems likely that he would target Sir Masayuki."

"Huh?"

Sure didn't see *that* one coming. But I couldn't dismiss that, either. Part of me wondered what possible point there would be in aiming for Masayuki, but thinking it over again, it *did* seem plausible.

Why would Masayuki be targeted? Chances are it's because they suspect he's the reincarnation of Ludora. Velgrynd's unconditional love for him sure seems

to back that fact up, too. Feldway struck me as a lot warier of Ludora than Masayuki, and I'm not really sure why, but...yes, it *would* make Masayuki a target for him.

"For that matter, Sir Rimuru, I'm not sure the reason even matters. Not to keep repeating myself, but Feldway is a very hardheaded man, the type who refuses to admit his own failures. He is not at all the kind of person who'd give up after a single attempt."

Diablo was starting to depress me. It made so much sense now.

"In that case, this World Congress might wind up being pretty dangerous. Velgrynd's escorting me, so I think I'll be fine unless something *really* bad happens, but I want you to be on the lookout for me too, please."

"You may be assured, Sir Rimuru, that I am always fully prepared for anything."

I could trust Diablo that way. His personality...has its quirks, but he's never disappointed me when it comes to his work. Plus, with his main rival Shion out on business, there was nothing distracting him any longer.

So we continued talking about our problems in detail, going over all my concerns one by one, when I received a startling piece of information.

(Rimuru! I got urgent news!)

It was from Milim, and she sounded like nothing but trouble for me.

(What's up?)

(Well, Obela just fled to my domain.)

(Ohh?)

(She told me Feldway found out she double-crossed them, and she got in a fight against Michael.)

This really wasn't the kind of thing I wanted to talk about over a Demon's Ring-powered Thought Communication. So I decided to head over to Milim's place.

*

Milim's castle was still under construction, but part of it was already completed and habitable. There was a hospital facility in one corner, and Obela was resting in one of its rooms. She was in a pretty bad state when she made it here, about to slip into a coma at any moment, but now she was awake and sitting up in her bed. She had been sleeping the whole time up to now, so they hadn't been able to interrogate her yet. *Yeah, I bet they haven't*, I thought as I went over to greet Obela.

"Hello! My name's Rimuru Tempest, and I'm a demon lord around these parts."

This was our first meeting, so I saw fit to introduce myself. This was greeted with much dismay by Frey, who looked even more bewitching than she did before.

"I know it might be rude to say this to someone as lofty as you, Sir Rimuru, but shouldn't you try to act with a little more authority? If you throw your weight around and show that you can step up to do what needs to be done at any moment, that'll set you apart from the pack with most people."

Frey wasted no time complaining to me—but then, I'm sure he's just worried that I'm a bad influence on Milim. I know whenever Frey yells at her about something, the first thing out of her mouth is usually "*But Rimuru...*" Frey's like a mom worrying about the no-good kids her child hangs out with, isn't she? It's kind of charming, in a way. I couldn't help but smile at the thought, and Carillon was beaming, too.

"Yo. Never fun to get caught under Frey's gaze, is it?"

Guess he saw a kindred spirit in me. Carillon and Frey both talk a lot, but when nobody's watching, they're a lot more easygoing with me. That's what I asked from them; I'd hate it if I had to act all formal around those two. Nevertheless, they seemed like very different people to me now. Benimaru had briefed me on it, but now that I saw them in real life, they really *had* changed a bunch.

"So I heard you've made your awakened power fully your own now?"

"I sure did. Tell Benimaru I appreciate his help earlier."

Carillon and Benimaru are real good friends, after all. Benimaru tried to fight him the first time they met, and I guess that rubbed Carillon the right way. The power balance between them had flip-flopped long ago, but Carillon didn't worry about it much, despite all the talk about catching up and overtaking Benimaru soon. I thought it showed how open-minded he was.

And Frey, too...

"Indeed, *I'm* certainly thankful as well. Now I can be an even greater help to Milim than before," she said with a smile.

She doesn't *really* mean that she can yell at Milim more forcefully going forward, does she? I suspected that, but it went without saying that we needed all the power we could get for the war ahead, so I gracefully accepted her gratitude.

"I have to say, though, Ramiris's labyrinth is such a cheat," Frey added. "I was working with her my entire time as a demon lord, but I had no idea she could use her skill like *that*."

"Yeah, that's for sure," agreed Carillon. "I just thought she stuck around because Guy likes her a lot, but I was amazed that little lady was hiding *that* kinda skill, y'know?"

"I don't think she was hiding it. It's just that nobody noticed."

"Hey, *I* knew about it!"

"Maybe, Milim, but it doesn't mean anything if it's not used the right way. The labyrinth proved that much to me. So don't be a sore loser, all right?"

Frey wasn't about to let Milim take all the credit here. Carillon laughed at her a bit.

"Still," he said, "you can't discount Milim, either. I'm sure us two look like a bunch of idiots, too, besides. But now I'm convinced—you know, when it comes to handling people, nobody's better than you, Rimuru."

"Right? He's sure been handling *us* well."

Frey was agreeing with him—but, really, Ramiris's labyrinth was completely unexpected to me. I just asked her what she could do with it, figuring we could

find some kind of useful application for it, and it was like—*whoa*, you can do *that* kinda stuff?! Then, after some trial and error, our current labyrinth was born. It wasn't like I was picturing that from the start; they were really heaping too much praise on me.

In terms of the results, though, the labyrinth really *was* something. Getting revived whenever you died inside there... That's literally cheating death. It's perfect for real-world battle training, and it's also an impregnable fortress. It was honestly a mystery to me why Ramiris didn't get much credit until I came along. It's not like *I* engineered any of that. But it didn't seem right to bring all that up here, so I just laughed it off.

"Right," said Frey. "Now that the hellos are done with, how about we get down to business?"

The atmosphere in this hospital room suddenly grew somber. Obela, blankly staring at our exchange so far, tightened up her expression. Then she turned toward me.

"I'm glad to meet you, Sir Rimuru. I am Obela, former Mystic Leader in charge of handling the cryptids."

She spoke with a humble look on her face, and I didn't get the sense that she was lying to me. Milim and the others seemed to believe her, and my gut told me she was telling the truth, too. But, just in case, I tried to probe her a bit.

"Now, just to be clear, you *do* understand that you turning traitor just before war breaks out could lead people to think you're a spy, right?"

"Yes, of course. I don't have any way to disprove that, but at the very least, I'll tell you about whatever I know."

She sounded sincere, and there wasn't a trace of doubt on her face. Then, despite still not being back to full health, she explained what happened to her.

After her meeting with Milim, she went back to Feldway and obtained a physical body...but, at the same time, she inadvertently acquired an angelic skill. She feared the worst, assuming that this skill would open her up to mind control, so before Feldway could force her to bow to him, she did away with Azrael, Lord of Salvation, the ultimate skill she acquired. Sylvia had taught me

about that—separating one's heart core from their skill. I thought that was a pretty smart move, but if they sensed that Obela had thrown away her skill, they must've found out pretty quick that she was turning traitor.

It made for a pretty uphill battle for Sylvia and Kagali and the rest, but it might not be right to hold Obela responsible for that. Best to drop that matter instead of bringing it up.

What's more important is the authenticity of Obela's story. Honestly, it sounded pretty credible to me.

I agree. It was consistent throughout and included information she was better off hiding from you. If she was here for espionage purposes, going this far wouldn't be worth the price.

Right? I mean, she told us about getting attacked by Michael, about her skill, and so forth. Telling us about how Michael's Castle Guard didn't activate, and how he was using Velgrynd's and Velzard's skills like they belonged to him, and how he destroyed Obela's army... All this vital info and none of it sounded like lies.

It's kind of interesting to examine information from the standpoint of how it benefits the informant if it's all a lie. I liked searching for opposing opinions on the net a lot, too, finding out which side of the argument's more popular and what sources people were using to see how credible each viewpoint was. This method rewarded me with Obela, too. If she was deceiving us, she'd have Michael's authority over her backing her up—but everything she was telling us was *too* true. Ciel's verification work confirmed it, and most importantly of all, Obela agreed to let me subject her to my Analyze and Assess skill. With that, I could almost certainly tell whether a skill was present or not, and that turned up nothing, either. Obela didn't have Azrael, and Michael wasn't dominating her mind.

After going this far with it, it wouldn't be right not to trust Obela. So I gave her some honey and a healing potion and wished her a speedy recovery.

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Obela would be taken care of by Milim's people.

I shared the info I got from her with the other demon lords. Now was no time to be worried about data leaks. If something happened to any of us in the meantime, it'd be too late then—that's what we all agreed on.

The ensuing two days passed at a crazily frantic pace, of course, and before I knew it, it was time for the World Congress. Benimaru was stationed back at home, protecting Tempest as our commander-in-chief. I was bringing Ranga (in my shadow) and Soei as my bodyguards, with Diablo serving as my secretary. I felt confident that this group could handle a Feldway attack if it came along.

"Yo, Boss! I don't think there's much I can do for ya on the big stage today, but lemme know if you need a hand, okay?"

Yohm was sounding like his usual self. I didn't see Mjurran around; she was probably at home dealing with family stuff. Instead, Gadora was guarding him. I said hello back and promised to meet up with him again later. There was a bit of a dinner buffet party scheduled after today's meeting, and once that was done, I was planning to go out for a drink in the Englesia capital with my closest buds.

I had more than a little excitement in my step as I headed for the assembly hall. I met up with Masayuki at the main square in front of it. He was the real star of the day; I was here as his acquaintance and intermediary.

"Hey," said Masayuki, "did you grow a little, or...?"

I had gained a bit of height after becoming a pseudo-True Dragon, which brought me closer to Masayuki's eye level...but now his eyes were way above mine again.

"Oh, you can tell? I think I did, yes," I told him.

Masayuki smiled. Taking a closer look at him, I realized that his hair was now a dazzling shade of blond.

"And your hair, too..."

"Yeah, it completely changed color on me. I'm used to it now, but it was pretty weird for the first little while."

At this point, it was fair to say something abnormal was going on. I wondered if I was overreacting, but then, maybe it's not so farfetched to say that Ludora

himself was coming back to life. Masayuki was still Masayuki, though, so I opted not to worry about it as we entered the assembly hall.

I had been to this circular chamber several times before, and it was already filled with dignitaries from many nations. There was a lot of chatter, but it all subsided the moment we stepped in. All eyes were on us, but I was used to that by now, and I guess Masayuki was, too. He didn't seem the slightest bit nervous.

"You're really looking a lot more imposing now," I said to him.

"Well, sure I am. During my coronation, there was just this *huge* sea of people beneath me."

He announced his ascension to the throne from the balcony of his castle, and that experience must've helped him mature quite a bit.

"You were wonderful, Masayuki," Velgrynd said, a wistful look on her face.

She was here as Masayuki's associate, but she herself was as imposing as always. Her beauty went without saying, but the military uniform suited her well, too. She might've been the one attracting the most eyes, actually.

As we took in this attention, Chairman Leicester, bushy white beard and all, came up to us and led me and Masayuki to our seats. We were in the front row, as befitting our status, and I took the seat facing Masayuki on the opposite side of the chamber. Testarossa was in her speaker's seat as well. All the arrangements were in place, and as long as nothing got in the way, today would mark a historic reconciliation between the Western Nations and Eastern Empire.

Of course, having those sorts of thoughts is a warning flag in itself. And, of course, things *did* get in the way—but I was still blissfully unaware as I quietly waited for the congress to begin.



The hidden catacombs underneath the Kingdom of Englesia had been dug out over the course of several centuries. Constructed in anticipation of a future attack from angelic forces, they are widely termed a "labyrinth" because of their twisty, intricate passageways. They also incorporate several large, open

halls nearer to the surface, available as public shelters in case of emergency.

But that is only the public face of these catacombs. Deeper down, there exists a secret place known to only a limited number of people. It is a darker side to the capital—a research lab that deals in the kind of evil that must never be known by the world at large.

Research at this lab is handled by a team of magical inquisitors, and their primary focus is incorporating factors of monsters into the human body. It had already produced some results—boosting muscle strength ten times over a normal human's, hardening skin until it's tougher than steel, and developing a skeleton capable of supporting these enhanced body parts. These were clearly successful cases, in other words—but in the eyes of the king, this still wasn't enough to take on the supernatural beings known as demon lords.

“Another failure. That guy was a lot softer than I thought.”

“Ee-hee-hee-hee! We'll need a stronger body than that if we want to incarnate a demon in physical space. The Empire's been working on weapons called ‘battle chimeras,’ I heard, but the concept seems similar to ours.”

“Yes. The difference lies in whether you're directly modifying a human body or using it as part of a chimera.”

The existence of medications that could induce special abilities in patients, known as “medical skills,” was a secret so well-kept that these researchers weren't aware of it. They believed that battle chimeras were the best you could get in terms of organic weaponry, but with the right research, they believed that directly enhancing the human body would be quicker and even more powerful than creating chimeras. That's why, without even a shred of reluctance, they were conducting experiments that'd seem taboo to any normal person.

Still, it hadn't been enough for them. They just weren't getting satisfactory results. They had thoroughly investigated the inherent factors of all the monsters they'd been able to capture, successfully extracting them to some extent. They were seeing their enhancement rates grow as they worked on a series of version upgrades, but now they were running into a new vulnerability—not a physical one, but a certain mental barrier. Healthy mind, healthy body,

as the saying goes—so they decided that an enhanced body required an enhanced mind as well.

This inspired the researchers to explore fusions with spiritual life-forms, and along those lines, they theorized that borrowing the powers of demons would be the quickest approach. Obtaining demon test subjects, after all, was pretty easy. Skirmishes with demons in the northern lands were still a common occurrence, and thanks to capturing weakened demons as prisoners of war, they had procured a decent supply of both Lesser and Greater Demons. These demons were given bodies to incarnate into, allowing the lab to analyze their internal composition, and they had already obtained some fascinating results.

So how do demons incarnate themselves into physical bodies? It turned out to be a process where their magicules eat their way into human cells, remaking them so they're more amenable to magic. However, that only occurred when the demon was taking the initiative on occupying a body; if you attempted to forcibly incorporate demon force into a human body, it'd be rejected as poison. It was just too alien. Demon force obviated the need for energy intake through food, sleep, or even breathing; your lifespan stretched out to essentially forever. It was like being reborn as a wholly different life-form, and trying to control that with the will of a human being was beyond reckless.

And the magic inquisitors were making another mistake. Although the power of a subject's will was important, their focus had been strictly on strengthening the physical body. The way their flawed thinking went, this was perfectly fine because the demon occupying the body would strengthen its mental aspects by itself. This led to a series of experiments that placed them completely in the wrong direction.

That, and one more thing—an even more fatal flaw. By collecting and cultivating cells from a demon-incarnated body, researchers thought they could extract the cells' demonic elements and inject them into another test subject to give them demonic powers. However, a demon takes a body as their own through the power of their will; without that, there would be no cell reconstruction, and the elements would infect the body as a poison.

So this lab was conducting a long string of torture-like experiments that had no hope of succeeding. For the test subjects, this environment was like hell

itself. They were certainly not choosing the best and brightest to experiment on, either—the subjects were mostly orphans and slaves, people that nobody would care about if they were gone. Criminals, too—many serious offenders, scheduled to receive the death penalty, were instead transported to this lab in secret.

Reiner was gasping for breath. Despair and terror ruled his heart. He had once been the honorable head general of the Englesia royal knight corps, but now he had fallen to the point where he was a disposable test subject. Many of the soldiers who looked up to him had been killed; he was enraged by the unfairness of it all at first, but his will was broken soon enough.

The help that he expected had never arrived. His family home was torn down, the knight corps abandoning him entirely. It was no wonder, considering the crimes he committed at a previous Council meeting. Using Elrick (the first prince of Englesia) as his backup, he tried to pick a fight with the demon lord Rimuru and Hinata, leader of the Crusaders. He would've been a hero if he won, but he never had a chance against them.

Reiner had triggered an international incident, so it was a given that he had to pay a heavy price. He was ultimately convicted of treason, and everyone associated with his conspiracy was sentenced to death—in other words, they were being experimented on in this lab.

The help Reiner had hoped for was never going to come, and now that he understood this, he spent his days dreading the moment when it'd be his turn to sacrifice himself for “research purposes.”

Dammit! Why did this have to happen?!

The only reason he still kept his wits at all was because of the anger he occasionally relapsed into as he recalled it. His resentment toward Rimuru and the Paladin Hinata was vast and total.

I'll make them cry, I swear it! They'll only wish they could beg for their lives by the time I'm done with them. I'll make them realize who I really am—and I'll give them the slow, painful deaths they so richly deserve!

Only the intense hatred was holding Reiner's heart together. But a lust for revenge wasn't the only reason he was like this. He had been subjected to

surgery to physically enhance his body...but without the usual demon-driven mental upgrades to go with that. The idea was to perform that demonic fusion only when his body had been strengthened as much as possible beforehand. Reiner, in particular, was a valuable test case, ranked over-A even before all this, so the scientists down here treated him with special care.

Whether you could call that good luck or not is questionable, but either way, Reiner was still alive and well, and in terms of strength alone, he had already reached a special-A rating. And then, one day, the hope that was never supposed to arrive came to him.

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"Hohh... You found it that easy to get in?"

Feldway didn't really expect much from Vega when he allowed him to lead the way in these catacombs. Now he was heaping him with praise.

There were four of them—Vega in the lead, followed by Arius, Mai, then Feldway. After that strategy meeting, they had all gone to make their own preparations. They agreed that, rather than launch the attacks at the same time, they'd strike one target first, then pummel their main objective while the demon lords were still focused on the first site.

This meant that Feldway's team, charged with engaging Masayuki, wouldn't be the first to strike. No, that honor went to Fenn of the Three Stellar Leaders, attracting the attention of the demon lords with a flashy, dazzling rampage. He'd defeat Daggrull of the Octagram and take control of his army—an impactful victory that'd no doubt send chills into the demon lords' hearts. Jahil, Fenn's fellow Stellar Leader, was being sent to help him out, and between the two of them alone, they had a force powerful enough to take down the Western Nations.

The main players today, however, would be Feldway's team. Their objective was to break into the World Congress, held in the royal capital of Englesia, and get rid of Masayuki. To prevent any interference, the Stellar Leader Zarario was placed on standby in the sky, charged with stopping the demon lord Luminus should she attempt anything. If not, he was ordered to launch a full-scale attack on the capital at Feldway's signal.

Furthermore, at the same time Fenn began his attack, the Insect Lord Zeranus was to attack the demon lord Milim's stronghold in the former nation of Eurazania. The Octagram currently consisted of six people—Guy, Rimuru, Ramiris, Milim, Daggrull, and Luminus. Feldway's team believed that attacking two of them at the same time would plunge the rest of the demon lords into panic. Of course, they had word that Rimuru—just as much a concern as Guy—was close by Masayuki, Feldway's current target. His name was on the list of attendees at today's congress, but they couldn't discount the possibility that this was a trap.

Feldway had good reason to be cautious. He'd be playing it by ear should unexpected events develop—and with that in mind, instead of entering the capital by force, he took Vega's advice and used the city's hidden passageways. This turned out to be a great idea. They found one of the catacomb exits in the forest outside of the city, and going through there provided a simple invasion route that evaded the barrier around the capital.

Their luck didn't end there, either.

"Mm? Oh, this lab is still around? Ah, I remember it well. They experimented on *me* a whole bunch too, didn't they?"

As Vega noted, there were signs of life on the other end of the corridor—little, insignificant people from Feldway's point of view, but by human standards, they had a decent amount of strength. He rued having to deal with them—causing a scene down here was counterproductive to their aims—but quickly he realized that this was an unexpected bit of good fortune.

"Ah, I knew it. The guys in these cages are test subjects for the research here." Vega casually approached one of them as he spoke, not even trying to defend himself. He gave a kindly smile to the man inside. "Hey, partner. How are you?"

He was speaking to Reiner, just when the man's heart was on the verge of breaking.

"What...? You... You're not one of those damn scientists...?"

Reiner shrank back in fear once he noticed someone in front of his cage. But then he looked up at Vega, puzzled by this stranger.

Vega laughed. "Looks like you're hurting pretty bad in there, huh?"

"Who're you...?"

"Heh! I'm Vega. One of the alumni, you could say."

"Alumni...?"

"Sure. I got experimented on a lot in here, too. I was lucky to escape, but the memories are bad enough that I still get nightmares."

Now Reiner began to see a kindred spirit in Vega. "You're just like me..."

"Yep, I sure am. So how about we bargain a bit? Wanna get out of here?"

Vega went right to business. Feldway, watching, didn't attempt to stop him. This operation was fully in Vega's hands, and everything had gone well so far. He'd keep a close eye on him, but Feldway didn't think it was such a bad idea to let him call the shots for now.

Besides, he had another idea in mind, too. Reiner was far from the only prisoner being experimented on in here. There were nearly a hundred of them, in fact, all physically strengthened and appearing to be in very fine shape. Perhaps he could use these prisoners as vessels for the mystics who had yet to be incarnated. He thought the idea over as Vega and Reiner kept negotiating.

"Huh?"

Reiner was perplexed at this sudden offer. If he was being offered rescue, there was no way he could refuse. But Vega and his gang were clearly involved in risky business of their own. He thought for a moment whether to trust them, but only for a second or two. If he refused this offer, all that awaited him was his own destruction; he'd go mad with fear and despair and likely die before too long. If Vega was tricking him, well, better that than to die the most painful of deaths in here.

"Help me! If you want my loyalty, I'll swear it to you with everything I have! So please, get me out of here!"

Vega smiled at this shouted plea. Placing a hand on the magically enhanced steel cage, he promptly twisted the bars apart, ripping them off the frame. The show of strength made Reiner realize just how outclassed he was...but even

more surprising was the number of dead magic inquisitors now lying at his feet. They had been quickly, quietly taken care of by Arius. Reiner was wondering why the usual patrols weren't coming as usual. Finding out why made his face turn white.

I couldn't defend myself against Englesia's secret forces, and they killed them that easily... I can't believe this. These guys are true monsters!

But the thought relieved him. Now Reiner felt he had truly made the right choice.

"Great getting to know you, partner," Vega said. "If there's anyone else in here you wanna spring out, lemme know. I'll rescue all of them for you."

The unanticipated offer almost made Reiner jump for joy.

"Y-yes! Yes, all of them! They're all soldiers in my service!"

The only prisoners in this facility were those deemed capable of surviving the enhancement process. The women and children had already been shunted over to other experiments...which had already killed them all. Reiner and the others were told that this, too, was part of their punishment. They all had nothing left to lose, so they didn't hesitate to follow Vega's lead.

"All right. From today on, you're all under my command. We're about to go on a rampage up in the capital above us. You're joining us, and you don't get to say no to me, all right?"

"Yes, of course. I couldn't have asked for a better order. We all got a score to settle with this country."

Reiner readily accepted the request. The knights under his command all nodded their agreement, seething with regret for their dead friends and family members. Knowing their lives were saved now only added to their fury at being subjected to these horrible experiments. At this point, there was no containing their rage—and Feldway was there to egg them on.

"In that case, I think I'll give all of you a little power, too. Are you ready to go, Mai?"

"Any time. Sir Jahil just procured a hundred warriors for me."

Mai had already taken action, in accordance with Feldway's wishes. In just this short period of time, she had invoked Instant Motion to receive a small squadron of Jahil's handpicked soldiers. Jahil wasn't happy about giving up personnel, but this was Feldway's absolute order, and disobeying him was unthinkable.

And so, deep underneath the Kingdom of Englesia, Reiner and his knights were very sudden participants in an incarnation ritual. Whoever had the stronger will would take control of the body. Sometimes they would join together into a single ego, but Reiner and his men still preferred that to any more of this experimentation.

In a few more moments:

"I can feel the power flowing in me. Thank you, Sir Vega! Thank you for not only saving us but giving us a chance at revenge!"

"Hey, no problem. I'll lend you this, too. Go have fun with it!"

Reiner accepted a weapon from Vega, a knightly blade created with the Multi-Weapon skill taken from Orlia. It was God-class, needless to say—and now that he had taken on the power of an officer-class mystic, Reiner should be more than capable of using it. Right now, his power would rate an EP of over a million, and adding a God-class weapon to that would bring it up to two. The knights under him had also been reborn as superpowers with EPs between 200,000 and 500,000, well above special-A level.

These unexpected reinforcements put Vega in a very good mood. Feldway was satisfied, too.

This was quite an unexpected find. I doubt they're about to hold back, either. Why, they ought to be a great help to us!

With a smile, he watched as Reiner and his men merrily walked out of the facility.



A shuddering tremor hit Skyspire Tower. On this day, the Holy Void of Damargania would face an existential crisis.

"Ahh, this looks pretty bad. Is this that guy who was out ravaging the whole planet long ago?"

Ultima's muttered observations rattled Veyron and Zonda, whom she had called over.

"I'll go check with Sir Daggrull at once."

"Good idea. We need to consider the worst-case scenario here, so Zonda, run over to someplace where you can get in contact with Beretta at once. Have him report back to Shion, too."

The two of them immediately went on the move. If this tower should fall, the next target was clearly going to be Lubelius, where Shion was. They'd need to contact headquarters, of course, but they also needed to explain the gravity of the situation to Shion.

Zonda, presumably understanding this, made no objection. There was no "why," no "I want to fight with you": nothing extraneous like that, thanks to his absolute trust in (and fear of) Ultima. Unlike the lower-level demons, he and Veyron were under Ultima's direct control, and thus had an insider's view of exactly what her personality was like. She had no mercy for anyone who defied her, no time to deal with anyone who went against her will.

Besides, Ultima was accurately judging the situation. Zonda had already tested the area and found that it was magically sealed off. All possible means of communications were blocked, making it impossible to reach the outside world.

But they were prepared for this, of course. This was a problem that came up last time, during the attack on Leon, so Rimuru instructed everyone to remain in constant contact. They were asked to reach out to each other on a regular basis, once every five minutes; if these updates stopped coming, it meant something had happened at that location. They'd have an easy way to quickly know if something was wrong, but Ultima must've decided even that was too slow.

If that was the case, all Zonda could do was follow orders as best he could. He certainly wasn't incompetent enough to waste valuable time. So, running like the wind, he quickly disappeared.

Ultima got up and bit her nails. “You know, if my prediction comes true, we’d better keep the escape option in mind, shouldn’t we?”

She’d prefer not to resort to that, but if things went from bad to worse, she was prepared to do it.

Sir Rimuru trusted Daggrull...but at the same time, he doubted him, too.

Rimuru had something of a rep as a pushover. He was sometimes easily tricked, like he was oblivious to other people in a way, but the truth was that he was a sly schemer at heart. Even Ultima, queen of demons, had to laud him for his calculating nature.

One time, Rimuru had muttered something like this:

“The way he kept asking for support from Veldora, even after I explained the enemy’s goals... It bothered me a little.”

As he put it, Daggrull was constantly asking for Veldora to come and support him during their Walpurgis Council. Michael was trying to obtain Veldora’s draconic factors, something Daggrull had heard about and presumably understood, but he still wanted to get Veldora, not Ultima. They knew each other well—that was likely the reason, and it was a good one—but something about it still weighed on Rimuru’s mind.

Ultima didn’t think Rimuru was overthinking matters, either. After hearing his observation, she had pondered over everything she knew about Daggrull, from start to finish. As a result, she came to the same conclusion as Rimuru—there was a nonzero chance Daggrull was ready to stab them in the back.

Besides, wasn’t Daggrull the son of the Mad King of the Giants? He went on a rampage with enough force to destroy the world, so Sir Veldanava had to seal him away...

She didn’t know all the details behind that, but she could venture a good enough guess. This land was adjacent to Ultima’s former domain, so she had ample information on him—in fact, nobody knew Daggrull in more detail than she did. That’s likely why Rimuru sent her over here.

I’m sure he’s expecting a lot from me. It’s exciting to think that.

With that newfound enthusiasm, she had been closely examining Daggrull ever since coming to Damargania, probing to see if any betrayal was afoot. Then she found a clue. Daggrull was said to be one of three brothers, but she had only ever been introduced to one other. The third seemed to be key to this matter...and now they were being attacked by whatever *this* was. A presence that seemed to resemble both Daggrull and his younger brother Glasord.

"The Mad King?" she muttered to herself, a bold grin on her face.



When Veyron entered the throne room, he was greeted with angry shouting. And deservedly so. Skyspire Tower, this building constructed by the gods, had gone back into operation. The door to the heavens was now open. Originally, this tower was a divine fortress meant to protect mankind from any and all of its enemies. This time, though, Skyspire would be the battlefield.

It was little wonder that the people living in this area were so upset. Even worse, the presence felt from above was a familiar one to the older giants. It disturbed them well before they could see the enemy in person.

Although the giants were usually spoken of as a single species, they actually differed widely in terms of lifespan and abilities. The older ones, for example, had no lifespan at all, strictly speaking. They could be replaced by a successor, passing their memories and powers on to them, but even this was a sort of insurance should they be killed in battle. These "spares" or "replacements" did have lifespans, but these grew longer with each subsequent generation, and even a brand-new replacement could expect to live for several hundred years.

Ability-wise, the older giants had powers worthy of being called godlike.

Giants were, of course, large by nature, ranging from six and a half to over eight feet tall, but they could grow several times larger than that during battle. These well-honed bodies were where their true essence lay—and when it came to Daggrull, the oldest giant of all, there was a tenfold height difference between normal and battle mode. In other words, he could grow over sixty-five feet tall when he wanted to.

Among the giants, there was but one person comparable in strength to (or perhaps even stronger than) Daggrull. This was Fenn, his brother. Daggrull had

two younger brothers. Fenn, the youngest, was the kind of tyrant who retained intelligence and reason but had fully lost control of his emotions. He had been sealed away by Veldanava, and Daggrull kept that seal going ever since. That was why he never moved away from this land, even as it turned into a desert.

Fenn was sealed in the Celestial Palace, the only real passage through Skyspire Tower. There were other methods, but those were only accessible to those with the correct “key” for the job. Veldanava’s sister Velzard was the only one allowed to open the gate to this palace, a fact that Daggrull knew, so he didn’t need to be a genius to predict this turn of events well in advance.

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Daggrull was now on the top floor of Skyspire Tower, peering down at the levels below him.

He recalled the most recent Walpurgis Council. All those selfish demon lords were asserting themselves at the table, trying to consider everyone else’s positions as they did. There seemed to be no real harmony to it at all, but strangely enough, their discussion still proved to be constructive.

The demon lord Rimuru’s associates had been going around putting the final touches on the magic transfer circle system just a few days ago, following the stipulation of their agreement. Things were calmer, the system now complete in time for the upcoming battle. Daggrull was impressed at how hard they worked, and the work was done perfectly as well. He couldn’t have been happier with it, so he threw a grand banquet to reward the work crew.

Now that only Ultima was left from that team, things felt a bit lonely. Their transfer magic circle was ensconced at the center of the tower’s lower levels, almost looking like a piece of artwork with all the patterning on it. The real attraction, however, was what it did for them.

The purpose of this magic circle was to help people come and go in case of emergency, but considerations had already been made for other use cases in the far future. They were pressed for time on the construction, but from

Daggrull's point of view, this was already astounding enough as an achievement. If you could transport an entire military squadron at once with it right now, after all, merchants the world over would want to use it for more peaceable purposes later.

Rimuru, eh...? No underestimating him, that's for sure, thought Daggrull. Creating something so complex, running off the magicules in the air, but still usable by anyone, no experience required... It has its limits, but as long as you fill it up with magicules, you're fine. A much safer way of travel than having to traverse that evil desert all the time.

In this abandoned and dying land, it was all he could do just to import enough food to keep his people fed. The giants couldn't live off thin air, after all. They needed enough food to satisfy their, well, giant bodies, and the younger they were, the more energy they required. Life was a wonderful thing, perhaps, but in a sense, it was a curse at the moment. Damargania exported materials extracted from the monsters in the desert, but it was fully dependent on food imports from foreign countries. It forced their young population to be constant travelers, crossing the harsh desert again and again. That's just how life was in the Holy Void.

But with this transfer magic circle, they'd finally be freed from this hardship. Up to now, it was conventional wisdom that food supplies couldn't be magically transported—but going forward, Daggrull was sure they'd find a solution to this.

It's almost scary, isn't it? All the pain I've had to go through, and now there's a potential way we can solve all of it... Now I won't have to go to Lubelius, hat in hand, all the time any longer.

It was a tad unnerving to him, how much of a vision for the future this demon lord Rimuru had. He kept coming up with these ideas that never would've occurred to him; it was kind of amazing. He appreciated his perceptiveness, and he certainly didn't want to make an enemy out of him.

But now someone was here to put a damper on his excitement. A voice, echoing in his head out of nowhere.

(Daggrull, my friend, it has been far too long. I'm glad to see you're still doing

well. I wanted to get in touch with you as soon as I got back here, but I ran into a few things, you know... Now I'm here, though.)

Daggrull didn't panic. He had expected this.

(Ah, Feldway? I appreciate you calling me a friend, but I'm afraid you and I are enemies at the moment. I'm not in the mood for a long conversation right now, so just tell me what you want.)

This reply seemed to slightly disappoint Feldway.

(It's a pity you have to act so coldly toward me. I was hoping you could help me out a little.)

His pretentious tone of voice made Daggrull treat him even more coldly.

(For reviving Veldanava, you mean? I'm not too interested in that. I don't resent him for sealing Fenn away. I owe him for granting us this land and taking care of us, but I don't think it's right for me to help with this.)

Feldway and Daggrull weren't exactly close friends. In fact, Daggrull lost his temper when he saw that Deeno, his true friend, was being mind-controlled by Michael. He had wondered what Deeno could possibly have been thinking when he heard about his betrayal, but looking back now...

Really, why would that idiot sell out Tempest in the first place? It'd give him all the trouble in the world, and he'd never want that.

That's why the mind-control story made perfect sense to him. And it was also why Daggrull wasted no time turning down Feldway's request.

Feldway was less than enthused to hear that.

(Whoa, whoa, I thought they called you the Rebel Giant! Don't tell me becoming a demon lord has defanged you?)

He appealed to his famously wild disposition, hoping to gain the upper hand in this negotiation. Daggrull and his two brothers were godlike giants, so wicked and fearsome that they even tried taking on Veldanava the Star-King Dragon all by themselves. They were tyrannical kings, scattering destruction across the land, and many were the regions they pummeled and plundered until they were nothing but scorched earth.

People called them all-powerful gods of destruction, but ever since they bowed to Veldanava, they had been far quieter. Daggrull lived a quiet life in the territory he had been given, protecting Skyspire Tower as he was assigned to. But that didn't mean he had grown meeker in nature. Even now, with Veldanava blocking most of his power, he was called the Earthquake when angered. Feldway thus thought that Daggrull would be easily provoked by a few choice words from him.

But:

(I'm sorry. The past is past—and now, I have quite a bit more hope for the future than I once thought I did. And now that I have Rimuru to thank for that, I couldn't think about betraying him.)

He didn't need much time at all to turn him down. Then, shooting down any further attempts at negotiation in advance, Daggrull said (I'll see you next time on the battlefield) and shut off the Telepathy-driven chat.

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This is getting out of hand, Daggrull thought.

"I never imagined that damned Feldway would actually break the seal on Fenn. Is he getting back at me for refusing to cooperate?"

"Don't let it bother you, my brother. He's a man stricken by impossible delusions. This was probably bound to happen sooner or later, I think."

Daggrull and his brother Glasord seemed quite calm and composed to Veyron. It irked him.

"Wait. This is news to me, I think. Have you been communicating with the enemy, Sir Daggrull?"

Veyron was prepared to pursue this, refusing to take no for an answer. Ultima ordered him to. Unfortunately, Daggrull was about to disappoint him.

"No need for threats like that. You're certainly a powerful demon, but you're still weaker than me."

The lack of hesitation in that reply told the whole story.

"Calm down, Sir Veyron," Glasord continued. "My brother did receive an invitation from Feldway, yes. But he turned it down—and that's why we're in this situation right now."

"Hmm..."

Veyron nodded his understanding. He had guessed this much in advance, but still wanted to try putting Daggrull on the spot. Nothing about their attitudes suggested the two brothers were lying, so he decided to accept it as the truth. So why was Daggrull making statements back at the Walpurgis Council that clearly would have benefited the enemy?

"My great king was concerned about the many questions regarding your actions, you understand. I would like to hear a clearer explanation for that—"

But just as Veyron was lodging this new accusation:

"Mmm, all right, I get it. You actually wanted to ask Rimuru for help, didn't you? You only made those statements at Walpurgis to arouse suspicions that you were involved with the enemy, yeah?"

Ultima, arriving here after running a little late, wasted no time with her own question...or, really, not a question but an assertion.

Daggrull responded with a loud, hearty laugh. "Oh, how wonderful! I'd expect nothing less from my archenemy. I'm so glad you came here, and not Carrera!"

He meant it, too. Carrera was more brawn than brains; she didn't really have a mind for reading into the backstory of things. If she mistakenly concluded that Daggrull was tricking the demon lords, it would've been very difficult to work around that. With Ultima, though, he was in good hands. They had been bitter enemies for so long, her tormenting him to no end, and that's why he trusted in her intelligence.

With a big smile on his face, Daggrull told Ultima she was right. By suggesting he and Feldway were conspiring together, he was implying that there was a good chance he and the Holy Void would be targeted. He'd never want to be mind-controlled into betrayal like Deeno, but the chance was greater than zero, so he thought fit to communicate that to them. However, giving it to them

straight would likely lead to nothing but misunderstanding, as he saw it. So he merely hinted at the possibility instead of spelling it out.

"Hmmm. So that's what it was, huh?" Ultima smiled as she spoke. "And I guess you got what you wanted, then? Because Sir Rimuru picked up on it just fine, too. He's a cunning man, capable of seeing through anything, and I'm sure all of this was part of his calculations, too. So don't you worry. I'm sure everything will work out."

Daggrull nodded at her, relieved and grinning. "Did you hear that, Glasord? That's how amazing my colleague is. Anyone perceptive enough to play Clayman for a fool like that would realize *exactly* what I was trying to do!"

Daggrull and Ultima really were connected at the heart, a fact that had nothing to do with Rimuru. The reality that this was rooted in a total misunderstanding had evaded their notice, but maybe they were happier that way anyway. Regardless, they had now fully reconciled with each other.

"Well, I better keep working hard until Sir Rimuru shows up."

"I am ready for your orders, Lady Ultima. I will gladly destroy any enemy you instruct me to!"

Ultima and Veyron, trusting in Rimuru, were ready to join the fight.

"Right. I think I'll kick up a little dust, too. Taking on Fenn might be a bit of a slog, but I doubt anyone else can stop him, so..."

"I'll go with you, my brother."

Seeing how resolved the demons were for this made Daggrull and his brother feel more reassured as well. So, before any more time was wasted, everyone prepared to fend off the upcoming attack.



Milim's team was watching the horizon.

"Wow, that ain't good..."

Carillon was the first to speak, while the blood drained from everyone else's faces. The land and the sky were filled with a swarm of insects. Their sheer ferocity was impossible to measure, their threat impossible to imagine.

"Those are eight out of the Twelve Armies of Zeranus, the Insect Lord... This couldn't be much worse. His inner circle, the Twelve Insect Masters, all coming together..."

The convalescing Obela was the first to answer him. Thanks to the care Milim provided, she had now undergone a full recovery. She was determined all over again to fight and even the score with Michael, the man who destroyed her beloved army...but even she was at a loss for words in the face of this abominable swarm coming their way. She just had a thing against bugs, really. Otherwise, she never would've pleaded with Zarario to give her the far more dangerous role of watching over the World-Destroyer Dragon. But regardless of that backstory, this was one reality they could no longer afford to run away from.

"Frey," Milim said, "is it all right if I blow them all away with Drago-Nova?"

"Well..."

Frey thought about it for a moment. It wasn't a bad idea. Obela was giving Milim the most expectant look, too, so Frey was willing to permit this. If Frey was an insectophobe as well, she probably would've said yes without a second thought. But she stopped herself. She had no particular reason to say no, but she also had something of a bad feeling about this.

"Using our most powerful attack first thing might have its tactical purposes, I suppose...but it's not a good idea to reveal our hand before we even know what the enemy's capable of."

So, despite the evasive way she phrased it, Frey dismissed Milim's idea. With such a huge number of enemies, it was certainly tempting to have Milim wipe them all out in one go. But, for now at least, she thought it wiser not to underestimate the insectors.

She knew Zegion, after all. She herself actually fought against Apito the Insect Queen, but she was there to watch Carillon face off against him. Apito, whom Frey just barely beat, was an exemplary magic-born as it stood, but Zegion was on another dimension. And now they were fighting an enemy from the same species as them.

"I know I might just be worrying too much about this, but I think it'd be better

not to write these guys off as pushovers yet.”

No one laughed at Frey for being a wimp. In fact, Carillon agreed.

“Yeah, I think Frey’s got a point. You really can’t discount your instincts like that, so I think we better be cautious, too. I don’t think Milim’s not up to the task or anything, but let’s start with a standard frontal attack first.”

“Hmm...” Middray, Milim’s erstwhile servant, saw fit to comment as well. “Their sheer numbers are a problem, but individually, I’d put them on the upper end of a B grade. If we crush their commanders, who are presumably an A, it’d just be an unruly mob at that point. Their strength is pretty clear visually, so it’d be easy to find the right targets. It might be a surprisingly easy victory.”

He was speaking based on his own standards, which made him a little unprepared to play battle strategist, to say the least. It didn’t even sound like a strategy to Frey, but she kept silent, recalling that the people under Middray were probably used to his reckless streak.

“All right. We’ll take care of the flying ones. Could you handle the ground insects, Sir Middray?”

Frey wanted to wrap this up quick before any more dumb ideas got tossed around.

“I don’t wanna leave them to Middray alone,” Carillon said, trying to help her a little. “I’ll have my warriors take out their commanders, too. Once we decapitate ‘em like that, they’ll be pretty good training for our new army.”

“Mmm, yes, that would be appreciated,” Middray answered with a wry grin. “Not for me to bring this up, but I’m a tad unsure it’s wholly right for priests to be fighting on the front lines...”

I wouldn’t be just a tad unsure about it, thought Obela, but she also saw fit not to bring it up. “I’ll guard Lady Milim,” she offered.

“Wa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes, I’ll expect great things from my Big Four here!”

As usual, Milim was enjoying this immensely. This conversation seemed so relaxed, like everything was normal and they weren’t about to go to war.

“Huh? Big Four? Are you serious?”

"Milim, I think Rimuru is too much of an influence on you. Can't you give them more normal military posts instead of calling them the Big Four?"

"No! I like 'Big Four,' okay?! I've always thought it was so unfair that *he* gets to have a Big Four and I don't!"

"Well, fine by me, but..."

"And me," Middray said, agreeing with Carillon. "Whatever Lady Milim deems fit to do, I will gladly follow."

"I'm happy with it, too," said Obela. "That, and I'm glad she's so accepting of me."

"...Great, so now I'm the bad guy for saying no to her? Fine, then. Do what you like."

It was almost predictable how this debate would work out.



So Milim's forces were out on the field, waiting for this otherworldly enemy to arrive. By this point, this was one of the largest, most powerful armies the Octagram—and the world—had ever known. It was composed of what used to be three different demon lord domains' forces.

Carillon and Frey had both evolved into the Million Class, too, which required a reorganization of their forces.

The role of general was given to Carillon, who now had command over the entire army. Frey was named "chief of the guard," assigned to oversee the forces under Milim's direct control. Middray (as high priest) and his warrior priests were charged with handling logistical support. Obela, the new recruit, became their chief strategist in charge of operational planning. This was the Big Four that Milim was so newly proud of.

Among the military forces they controlled, the first to bring up were the Flying Beastly Knights, the main part of Carillon's army. Sufia was their leader, with Phobio as vice-chief. They led an army that consisted of the remnants of Clayman's force and the Beast Kingdom's warriors, with former members of the Beast Master's Warrior Alliance serving as the officer class. There were a hundred different corps in this force, which numbered a hundred thousand in

itself. Add Carillon's command to that, and here was an army that truly knew no fear.

The next force to introduce was the Milim Guard, an ultra-elite team directly overseen by Frey. Lucia and Claire were her aides-de-camp, providing her with any needed support. This was an aerial knight force led by Frey's treasured Griffin Corps, over three thousand knights in all. The Heaven Fliers, Frey's personal force, served as team leaders overseeing groups of ten to thirty fighters.

Griiffs, as magical beasts, merited a B-plus rank, but under Carillon's training, the griffs of this force had been improved up to an A-minus grade. Bring ridden by elite warriors from across the Beast Kingdom, not to mention the Sky Queen's personal guard, allowed each of them to easily drop the minus from their rank. What's more, the Heaven Fliers had been affected by Frey's awakening, so their individual strength was also equivalent to the top of the A class. Some were even comparable to a special-A warrior, making them a force to be reckoned with.

As of right now, this was the largest military force in the world composed strictly of A-graded troops. Although they numbered only a bit over three thousand, they were all fierce warriors that could fight aerial battles with machine-like teamwork and precision.

The last force instituted with this new reorganization was their hastily assembled rear support guard. Midray was their leader on paper, but it was actually Hermes taking command. It was mainly composed of magic-born stragglers, human mercenaries, and bits and pieces of Clayman's force—a motley crew, now united under Midray and providing battle support. Most of them were primarily involved with construction work up to this point, their individual strengths ranging from D to B at best. They didn't have any disposition for fighting, so their duties included transporting supplies, procuring food, and helping out the priest force as medics. There *were* a lot of them, though—at least a hundred thousand.

Put all of this together, and Milim was overseeing a 200,000-strong force—the combat teams in front, and all the many support crews in the back.

To this was added the reinforcements from Tempest, and Geld's army—comprised of the Yellow and Orange Numbers—was among the most conspicuous of them. They had been summoned here to help construct Milim's home city, but now they were plunging right into a defensive role. Between Yellow and Orange, they totaled around 35,000 troops, although some were reassigned to support other corps as well.

This force specialized in defense, but the Yellow Numbers among them were particularly impressive. After Geld's evolution, the high orcs under his command experienced a dramatic increase in fighting ability. The Numbers also broke ten thousand soldiers by this point, some of them worthy of an A rank, so the overall average for the Yellows was now at A-minus.

The Orange Numbers were a seasoned army by now as well, having gained valuable experience in previous battles. They averaged a B rank, making them as strong as any knight corps out there, and when combined with Geld's skills, they provided an ironclad defense for their allies. However, their role in this war was strictly protecting the rear—they wouldn't see action on the front lines.

Team Hiryu, led by Gabil, shouldn't be forgotten, either. It was still a force of just a hundred, but all of them were special-A in rank, which was frankly unheard of. This team was given free rein to fight any way they wanted, flexibly adjusting and repositioning themselves as the need demanded.

Finally, there was Carrera and Esprit—just a pair of demons, but still fearsome.

These reinforcements would join Milim's army to face off against Zeranus the Insect Lord, but despite all their power, they still pictured a tough fight ahead. After all, they were outnumbered by at least ten times—a three-million-strong insect force, flying and wriggling their way toward them.

That was how things stood before the fight began.

Carrera was the first to move.

"If Milim's not taking action, I guess I will instead."

She marched to the front, giddy with excitement.

"Hmm... I really wanted to show off what I could do, but Frey was against it,

so...whatever. I'll let you take this one, Carrera."

Milim wasn't about to stop her. They had, over time, become best friends. The synergy between them caused even more collateral damage than what either one could do alone, but neither of them cared. As long as they were having fun, all was well, and there's no denying how much better they fought as a team. It was all about power with them, because power means strength and strength means destructive force.

"Get ready to be wiped out, you stupid bugs! My ultimate, most powerful... Abyss Annihilation!"

Unleashing her most powerful magic from the get-go was a classic Carrera move. It, alone, eliminated over two million insects. The over tenfold difference in army size was now reduced to around fourfold. All the soldiers who had been wailing over the hopeless gap in strength were looking a lot more hopeful now.

At first glance, Carrera's actions might have seemed absurd, but there was certainly no better way to cheer people up and boost their morale. Culling the enemy before they could even cause any casualties boosted her allies' will to fight without expending any of their own warpower.

One would think this gave them a huge advantage in this battle...but Frey's premonition was about to come true.

"No way! He channeled her magic into the other world..."

"Lady Carrera's magic...? I can't believe it, but it looks to be true. This is exactly why I hate insectoids. Some of them cancel out magic, too. They're like natural enemies to us."

Esprit was right. The magic from Carrera had been diverted by a single insectoid—a female one, with long, slender wings that shone every color of the rainbow. Her name was Piriad, one of the Twelve Insect Masters and a fighter who was absolutely superior when it came to magic.

"Well, no time to act all impressed. It's coming soon. Geld, build a barrier directly above us with everything you got."

"Mm... Right."

Carrera's smile disappeared as she gave the order. Geld had his doubts about it, but still obeyed without further question.

As they spoke to each other, Esprit next to them sprang into action. Using her unique skill Observer, she deployed her own defensive magic to help reinforce Geld's defensive wall.

"What is...?"

Before Frey could finish the thought, a strange distortion opened up in the sky.

"Mmm, just as I anticipated."

"Well done, Lady Carrera! You deciphered that complex magic rewrite immediately, didn't you?"

"Of course. This is basic stuff. But can you hold out?"

"Heh! I'll join in, too, then. If they destroy this castle, Frey's gonna be so mad!"

Milim also put her hands up high. With that, their force now had a three-layered defense system—Esprit's magic, Geld's wall, and Milim's protective curtain.

Not a moment later, a wave of destruction poured down from that rift in the sky. It was the exact same Abyss Annihilation that Carrera had unleashed a moment earlier.

"Whoa, is that the—?"

"What's going on here...?"

Frey was sharp enough to spot it right off. Carillon's instincts also told him what happened at once.

"...Aha," Middray muttered a moment later. "So they channeled Lady Carrera's magic into the other world, then connected it to an exit point right above our heads. What an insane thing to see..."

That was the answer. The only leader still clueless about what was going on was Gabil, but there wasn't much to be done about that. As gifted in magic as

Carrera was, she just had her most powerful offensive strike bounced right back in her face. It was nearly impossible to explain to someone like Gabil, and even harder to imagine. In fact, no one here had any idea this kind of thing was even possible.

At any rate, they had no choice but to have Geld and crew defend as best they could. Everyone awaited the impact with bated breath.

Then, for a few moments, there was an intense flashing light, followed by an impact that felt like the world had turned upside down. It subsided as rapidly as it came, eventually quieting down to nothing. Once the shaking had subsided, Carrera finally spoke up.

"Funny to think they could do *that*, huh? If that was Milim's magic, I'm not too sure *what* would have happened."

Only after they somehow blocked her own Abyss Annihilation did Carrera breathe a sigh of relief. She was acting all casual about it now, but the people around her gasped in horror at the idea. The power of that strike had been reduced to less than a third of normal, which allowed everyone to somehow withstand it, but the terrain around the castle had been all but stripped bare, the roads and other landmarks barely recognizable now. Rebuilding all of this was a headache-inducing idea, but there were no casualties, at least.

What if that blast just now was a Drago-Nova, though?

"Wa-ha-ha-ha-ha! People can't meddle with my magic *that* much, y'know. I bet she only would've been able to bounce a small chunk of it back at us."

"Even a small chunk would've been impossible to weather, though, maybe. How to put it? We don't even know how that spell *works* yet. I don't think we could defend against it too well...not unless we could change the laws of nature."

Carrera was being honest. She might be something of a magic whiz, but Milim's spells were on another level. And given how they were always competing to see who was more powerful, Carrera knew just how dangerous that could be.

"In that case," interjected Gabil, "the enemy wouldn't have been able to

throw Milim's magic back at us, would they?"

That was a good point. Gabil's perceptiveness made him seem pretty smart now and again.

"No, they could," replied Milim. "That enemy had an immaculate command over Dominate Space. She must have pretty good coordinate calculation skills. I bet she could change the path of any kind of directional magic, no matter the type, huh?"

"I think you're right," Carrera said. "And I hate to say it, but the bigger and more complicated the spell, the easier it is for her to manipulate, I assume. And even if it was a spell that activates on a set point, like Nuclear Flame, she could probably cut off the space around it to cancel it out."

If a magic spell featured no delay in activation time, the enemy might not have enough time to deflect it, but spells like that wouldn't be able to deal a fatal blow to these guys. Demons specialized in reading their foes' magic and tossing their own against it, and now Carrera felt like that approach had been stolen from her. And more to the point, the presence of such an exceptional mage on the enemy's side was troubling in itself.

"I apologize," Obela offered, lowering her head. "If I was more familiar with insectors, I would have stopped you before you could launch that..."

Nobody here was about to chide her for that, though.

"Well, it's behind us now," said Carillon.

"Exactly," Milim agreed. "And if you just look at the results, look at how many enemies we cut down with zero damage to us!"

"True... We're safe, after all, so no reason to complain about this," added Frey. "What we need to do now is consider our next step."

Both Milim and Frey were correct. Carrera's blow *did* greatly reduce the enemy's strength, and their soldiers, unaware of what just happened, were still riding high morale-wise. It'd be a better use of time to stop playing the blame game and try to keep this momentum going.

"Okay," Frey announced, "no magic from now on."

"No objections here!" said Carillon. "We'll just attack them up front, the old-fashioned way!"

"That would be fun, I bet," Middray added. "I don't see the enemy's king here, but I'm looking at about eight commanders, perhaps? The same number as us, coincidentally. Why don't we each try to take down one of them?"

It was a kindergartner's approach, but Carrera was into it.

"Ha-ha-ha! That does sound like fun, actually. Okay, how about I take that arrogant-looking bastard over there?"

She was looking right at Zeth, seated on the back of a flying insector. He was the chief insectoid general of this army, and the presence he projected proclaimed as much to the world.

"Aw, no fair! In that case, I'll take—"

"No, Milim. You're our leader, so you need to stay above it all."

"Right, right. If we get in trouble, we need you to jump in and help us, okay?"

"Awwwww...all right."

After stopping Milim just in time, Frey surveyed the battlefield before her.

"So," she said, "along those lines, I'll take that flying bug over there."

Her eyes had settled on Torun, the flying drone beetle.

With Carrera and Frey setting an example, the rest of the team hurried to catch up.

"Okay, I'll take—"

"I will go for—"

"As for myself—"

Carillon, Gabil, and Middray all spoke up at once. They looked at each other.

"First come, first served, then?"

"Hmm... Very well. I haven't had a chance to go all-out in far too long."

"Indeed, it's quite true for me as well! Now, time to settle the score!"

There was no time to stop them. In a flash, the three leaders shot out from the castle, attempting to get a leg up on their rivals. Their armies, inspired by the sight, moved to catch up with them—and so the curtain was raised on this great battle.

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With a nod to Milim, Geld stepped away to command his own force. All that remained were Milim, Obela, and Esprit.

“You’re not going?” Obela asked.

“Well, to be honest,” Esprit reluctantly began, “I’m not up to their level at all, so I think it’d be safer to watch how things unfold and provide support to someone else’s battle. If I bite off more than I can chew and blow it, it’d be a drag on our whole force, so...”

It was a wise decision. For once, this wasn’t just her trying to dodge responsibility.

“...Fair point,” Obela said. “Underestimating the insectoid commands would be a bad idea. I don’t have much actual fighting experience, either, but I can tell that you don’t want to let your guard down around them.”

Many of Obela’s friends, after all, had been killed by insectors. Zeth, the target Carrera picked, was said to be a challenge even for Zarario; even Obela wasn’t sure she could take him on and win.

So the three remaining leaders decided to wait and see how things shook out.

The first to meet their enemy was Carrera.

“Move.”

Slashing her way through the rabble of soldiers, she zoomed across the battlefield. In a flash, she reached Zeth, calmly poised in front of her, and fired her Golden Gun at him.

Zeth easily avoided it. Even a supersonic bullet at point-blank range was just a warm up for him.

“Heh. Not bad,” Carrera said, impressed.

In a quick motion, she transformed the Golden Gun into a military sword, its

blade a shining shade of gold.

"I'm Carrera...the one who will take your life."

"Ridiculous. You can talk such nonsense only after you make me stand up from here."

The battle began.

Frey leaped out at the same time as Carrera, the Heaven Fliers escorting her without waiting for an explicit order. The Milim Guard followed suit as well, of course—they weren't focused exclusively on guarding Milim now, in order to allow for fluid role changes as needed during battle. Besides, Milim didn't need bodyguards anyway. Obela was still with her, so Frey could concentrate on going all-out without any worries.

So, kicking away the flying bugs that tried to accost her, Frey confronted Torun, an insectoid commander who was protected by an exoskeleton with a metallic sheen to it. He was stocky, not exactly aerodynamic, but surprisingly large from up close like this, nearly seven feet long. There was no denying his power, though. Making full use of his two pairs of dragonfly-like wings, he buzzed through the air with remarkable nimbleness. He dodged the first strike Frey attempted, and she knew then and there that Torun wouldn't be going down easily. She then tried a high-speed talon slash; Torun flitted away, easily avoiding it. These were two fighters with two different methods of flight, and in the air, Torun had an advantage.

Torun's compound eyes were able to capture Frey's movements like she was going in slow motion. He wasn't as fast of a straight-line flier as Frey, but he could easily predict where she'd go, which made evasion a snap. He didn't possess any special skills, his strength instead relying on his thick exoskeleton, prediction skills, and flight speed—a simple but effective package. His fists also contained a special substance called alionium, the strength of which surpassed even adamantite and went into the God-class level.

Between reaction speed, defense, and offense—the core elements of any battle—Torun lagged behind Frey in existence points, but outclassed her in combat ability. Frey was planning to use her momentum to wipe up this enemy in quick order, but this strategy suddenly seemed like a major miscalculation.

Or it should have been. But then Torun just had to open his mouth.

“Ee-hee... Ee-hee-hee-hee-hee... You, slow. Me, fast.”

“Huh?”

That was enough to make Frey lose her temper.

As Milim would say later, there was nothing mild-mannered about Frey’s personality at all. Anyone who says something stupid about her would learn how dumb a move that was *real* quick—and Milim should know, considering how much Frey yells at her.

Now it was Torun’s turn to learn that...with his own body.

Gabil had followed Frey, his Team Hiryu in tow.

“All of you! Our enemies are insectoids, much like Sir Zegion or Lady Apito! I’m sure you realize how strong they are, but do not let your guards down!”

His loud warning was met with broad nods from his crew. They were always getting beaten to a pulp down in the labyrinth. That made the danger here crystal clear, so they were all on (perhaps excessively) high alert.

So Gabil pressed on, using his breath to cleanse the sky of the clouds of bugs surrounding him. Kakushin, Sukero, and Yashichi, his erstwhile yes-men, followed close behind.

“Ah! Hey! Hey, Sir Gabil! Are you going to help Lady Frey?”

“Mmm? I am ready to, yes, if she is having trouble, but...”

Yashichi’s suggestion didn’t fill Gabil with enthusiasm. Frey might not appreciate the attention, he thought. Besides, someone else was occupying his own.

“Oh... Sir Gabil! I see someone tough-looking over there.” Sukero just noticed it, too.

“Indeed. He resembles Lady Apito somewhat, but I sense something far more sinister about him!”

And Kakushin was now taking the words out of Gabil’s mouth. Yes, even he thought this guy was more of a threat than Apito. The Insect Queen’s EP was

below his own, but they were an even match in a fight. His record against her wasn't that great; it was always a slog whenever they clashed. *This guy*, though, portended even more disaster for him than Apito. His instincts told him the whole story: *This is bad.*

This insectoid was Beethop, a cross between a bee and a grasshopper, and Gabil had absolutely no idea what to do about him. He had to think about both himself and the lives of Team Hiryu. Rimuru always ordered him to not even *think* about dying, so he couldn't take on a fight when he didn't know the odds of survival. He could often get carried away and be driven to a frenzy by Carillon and Middray's bloodthirsty ways, but he wasn't *that* much of a combat enthusiast. He did want to test his skills as a warrior, but risking his life in a fight wasn't on the menu for him.

And besides, if I were to get seriously hurt, Soka could very well stop talking to me for good. I made her cry last time, and I know full well how hard it was to get her in a good mood again after that...

The bitter memory almost moved Gabil to tears.

Every battle pairing came with its own set of compatibilities, and he saw no need to give up the advantage of flight here. He didn't have to go out of his way to challenge a dangerous opponent; he could just find one easier to beat. With that thought in mind, Gabil tried looking for another enemy commander...but it wasn't going to work out that way.

"Yo! Don't run on me!"

Beethop was a fearsome commander. In an instant, he had closed the long distance between them.

"Wha—?!"

Gabil reacted to Beethop's subsequent kick because he was used to Apito's speed by now. That, plus the upgraded God-class performance of his Vortex Spear, made it possible to withstand that strike.

Beethop, like Torun, had his limbs covered in an alionium exoskeleton, along with the vital parts of his head and torso. His slender body let him fly faster than even Torun. He had that beetle's defense, plus even more of an offensive

punch—an almost cheat-level set of abilities. A simple EP comparison put him above Gabil. Frey was one thing, but this was probably too much for Gabil to handle.

Now that it had come to this, though, there was no escape. Gabil steeled himself. The only way to survive was to fight and win.

"Aha! A worthy opponent! My name is Gabil! The one deemed the Dracolord by Sir Rimuru!"

With that introduction, he turned to face Beethop.

Carillon was sprinting. Behind him was an insectoid with spiderlike legs on his back.

"My name is Abalt," the insectoid said. "I will kill you."

"Yeah, right. You talk big for someone so weak!"

They were engaged in battle while running at full speed.

Carillon's divinity-derived strength was no joke. If this was a one-on-one fight with no consequences to think of later, he would've unleashed a Burst Roar to knock off Abalt long ago. He hadn't because he was on a battlefield. With other insectoid commanders potentially watching him, he couldn't carelessly break out his most powerful secret moves. Besides, unlike in the labyrinth, if you die, it's over. Survival is everything in a fight, so he needed to figure out an approach that conserved energy and didn't require excessive effort.

If this was *truly* a formidable opponent, Carillon would have flung himself into battle without worrying about the future—but his instincts told him that victory was beyond doubt here. Abalt's existence points were less than half of his. Like the other insectoid commanders, his skill set was geared for combat—but so was Carillon's. In this match, he had a clear advantage.

Middray's opponent was Sarill, whose body glistened with a toxic liquid. His reddish-purple glossy exoskeleton was, needless to say, infused with alionium, and a deadly poison oozed from his tail that'd kill anyone with a single touch.

He was a scorpion literally dripping with poison, and for hand-to-hand fighters, he'd be pretty difficult to handle. But not so with Middray.

"Hmm, this is trouble..." Middray muttered.

"Keh-keh-keh! You're one unlucky fool, standing in front of me."

"Unlucky? I think you might be misreading this, so let me inform you: In battle, luck is never a factor."

"Huh?"

"Yes, you may occasionally encounter a lucky punch, or someone beating a far superior opponent. But such apparent miracles are the results of honest effort, occurring only because you've polished just the right sorts of weapons for that superior fighter. If you simply chalk that up to luck, it hardly makes all that effort seem worth it, now does it?"

"What're you trying to say?"

"Well, let me put it more briefly for you. I, you see, am strong."

And as soon as he said that, Middray disappeared. Or not. Using Instantmove, he closed the distance in a flash, faster than Sarill could follow. The scorpion went flying as Middray smashed his fist into his face.

"Hmm. That hurt a little, but I can get used to it."

Purple smoke was wafting up from his fist as he spoke. This was Sarill's poison. Thanks to Battlewill, Middray's whole body was covered by a protective curtain. This poison was strong enough to eat through even that, but Middray didn't care.

"Wh-who the hell are you?! My poison did nothing on you..."

"Call it having the right attitude. If I couldn't do this much, I'd never survive a day as Lady Milim's playmate!"

Regardless of how sound this logic was, Middray's shout was unnerving Sarill. This man certainly didn't *look* strong. It confused him immensely.

This is crazy! There's no way anyone could punch my exoskeleton and emerge from it unscathed. What's going on with him?!

Despite that concern, Sarill still thought his victory was inevitable. He was an insectoid commander, and this was just some wimpy human.

But that was naïve thinking. Middray may have looked like a human, but deep down, he was a true dragonewt, just like Gabil. And although he used Battlewill to hide his full abilities, his existence points were actually twice as high as Gabil's.

Now, facing Sarill, Middray was truly in his element.

Geld, back to the front line, bellowed at his men.

"Our mission is to keep even one enemy from breaking through!"

""""Yeahhh!!"""

All his fighters shouted back at him. There was no fear on any of their faces as they coldly watched the advancing enemy.

Their opponents took many forms. They were monsters that seemed to boast traits from a variety of insects. Few of them were humanoid, but—strangely—the closer they were to human form, the stronger they seemed to be.

Then Geld's gaze fell on a single point—a figure sitting on the back of a centipede that must've been a hundred feet long. The overwhelming presence he projected made it easy to infer that he was one of the insectoid commanders.

"I'll take him on," Geld muttered. Several of his aides nodded back.

"Good luck, sir!"

He took a step forward, buoyed by his supporters behind him.

Esprit had her sword in her hand as she headed toward the window.

"Are you going?" Milim asked.

"Ah... Yeah. Lady Carrera appears to be struggling, so I thought I'd provide what assistance I can."

She made it sound as casual as going out for a walk.

From their observation point here, it looked like Zeth, Carrera's opponent, was a terrifying force. Piriod was also blocking her magic, further putting her on the defensive. Esprit no longer felt she could stand idly by and watch just because she was "too weak." It was time to take out the sword she had hidden

up to now—a Legend-class blade forged by Kurobe.

After years assuming that all non-magic weapons were useless to demons, Esprit had secretly begun honing her swordsmanship. Carrera, her boss, had grown addicted to it as a hobby, and as her servant, she felt obliged to master it as well.

More than that, though, fighting with Agera piqued her interest. She felt it seemed attractive to have a demon specialized in swordfighting, so she began to secretly develop a magic sword for herself. This blade wasn't quite ready for actual combat yet, she thought, but now wasn't the time for quibbling. Pirod's clampdown on magic was working outstandingly well—too well for Esprit to counter. It was humiliating, but that was the truth. So instead of magic, why not just take the world on with a magic sword instead?

"And...well, I don't think the enemy's too picky about keeping this a one-on-one fight, so it'd be silly not to join in. So, yeah, see you later!" She smiled at Milim.

"Right! Do your best!"

Then she set out, Milim seeing her off.

Now only Milim and Obela remained in this sky-high keep Frey was so proud of.

"Well, Lady Milim," Obela said, "it's time for me to join them out there."

"Oh? You're okay health-wise?"

"I'm sorry to cause you so much worry along those lines. I'm already completely healed, though, so please don't concern yourself about it."

"You're a stubborn one, huh?"

Obela chuckled at Milim's exasperated reaction. "It's in my nature, I suppose. And I think you've already noticed, but..."

"Mmm, yes, you're the one behind this kind of viscous aura across the battlefield, aren't you?"

"Yes." She nodded, her face tightening. "Zeranus the Insect Lord is an incredibly powerful foe. I'm not sure I would be able to handle him, so I would

advise you to please be careful.”

It would be best, she thought, if Milim never had to wade into battle. But if Zeranus made a move, there’d be no way to stop him otherwise. She might not like it, but they’d all have to count on Milim then.

That’s why Obela hoped they could eliminate as many enemy commanders as possible first. And just now, she caught sight of a single free commander—Tishorn, an insectoid with mantis-like blades for arms. Her plan was to defeat him, then keep the momentum going as she helped someone else.

This was a race against time. They had to take out as many commanders as possible before Zeranus acted...but they knew too little about the enemy’s powers. It was going to be far from easy.

“I’m thinking there’re at least a few *real* dangerous ones out there, Obela. Do your best to ensure everyone gets back here safe, okay?”

“Yes, my lady!”

Obela experienced a rush of elation. It just felt so *good* to receive orders from her master! She fought her previous battles out of a sense of duty, but now Obela could feel strength welling up from the bottom of her heart.

Oh... Is this how it felt for all my troops, too? I wish I could have rewarded them more for it.

She grew sentimental for a moment...but only for a moment. Obela was alive because she took on the wishes of her beloved army. And now, she could no longer stand still.

“I’ll be back.”

“Right! Put up some results for me!”

With Milim’s final words of encouragement, Obela was also off to fight. And so the war began to intensify...

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
3

CAPITAL IN FLAMES

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CAPITAL IN FLAMES

The World Congress had proceeded smoothly so far. That, of course, was thanks to the prior arrangements we made. We already secured all the votes we needed to pass our resolutions, so nothing unexpected was about to happen there. Besides, there's no way anyone would be foolish enough to oppose this legislation right when we worked out a deal with the Empire.

Masayuki, as Emperor, stood up to sign the document. Loud cheers and applause filled the room as everyone watched him step up to the stage. It was all going just like we planned. Testarossa, and everyone else who worked so hard toward this day, were showing off contented smiles. She was the MVP behind the curtain for all this, so I'd definitely have to reward her later.

So! Sign it. Come on, hurry up.

Then we had that fun dinner thing waiting for us. I knew Hinata was going to change into a fabulous dress for it again, like she did at my last party. I knew because I'd arranged the whole thing, even putting in a good word with Luminus—she'd be tailoring a, shall we say, very *provocative* design for Hinata. The whole thing was perfect. The bribe wasn't exactly cheap, but then, we *both* wanted to see this happen. Luminus, being the kind, understanding woman she is, wound up agreeing to a very reasonable price.

And as I was having these prurient thoughts—I even considered ditching this ceremony entirely so I could get to the party venue early—I heard a loud explosion from the direction of that venue. A beat later, the assembly hall began to shake.

"Masayuki! Are you all right?!" Velgrynd cried.

"Huh? What's going on?"

Whoa. Don't get all touchy-feely with him.

Velgrynd was right next to Masayuki, the perfect bodyguard, but I couldn't have her trying to make out with the guy every chance she got.

With her around, Masayuki's safety was a given, but I at least wanted to show a *little* concern.

"You okay, Masayuki?"

"Oh, I'm fine. And I guess everyone else is, too—"

Masayuki was looking around the chamber as he spoke. I joined him, and I have to say, these guys were handpicked councilors for a reason. Every one of them remained calm.

"Oh, of course. If *this* was enough to rattle them, they'd never be able to work alongside me."

Before I knew it, Testarossa had already sprung into action, getting everyone organized like nothing was amiss. The knights guarding the chamber were also moving to-and-fro, following her precise orders.

"I've ordered the Crusaders to go on full alert. They've been sent to investigate the venue and surrounding area to find out what happened."

"Oh, thanks."

As Hinata stepped up to tell me that, a serious problem suddenly occurred to me.

Is the dinner venue all right? Maybe we can salvage all the rare, exotic food we prepared for it, but if the site itself is badly damaged, it might affect tonight's party. We wouldn't have to cancel, would we? Oh, no waaay! If that happens, I'll never get to see Hinata in that dress.

I almost rushed right out of there from the anxiety. But then:

(Sir Rimuru! I just received a call from Lady Frey. The Insect Lord Zeranus's army has begun their invasion! War's going to break out soon!)

Benimaru sent me a report so cruel and merciless, it shattered any tenuous hope I had left of salvaging this day.

...No, but wait, if I flew over right now and took care of Zeranus, maybe we could still make tonight work—

(Whoa, Rimuru, we're in big trouble here! I've been sending out my regular contacts to the demon lords, but I haven't heard back from Damargania! That's, like, really bad, isn't it?)

Yes, Ramiris. Yes, it is.

Out of all the possible scenarios we pictured, having no contact at all was among the most dangerous. *This is why we set up a procedure for handling this*, I grumbled to myself as I ordered Ramiris to keep gathering info via Thought Communication for me. She must've recalled that whole procedure we worked out just then, because she said (Oooh, right! I'm not panicking at all, I promise!) and went back to chatting with her operators.

Anyway, I couldn't make a decision without some more info. Maybe I ought to officially give up on the dinner party...

At times like this, I can't help but be reminded of this one incident in my previous life, back when I was still in my twenties. I was working a foreman job at this construction site, and I had my eye on the clock the whole shift because my favorite MMO was scheduling this huge content update for that day. And, of course, just *minutes* before I could clock out, one of our heavy machines broke down. Like, are you *kidding* me? We hadn't even finished cleaning up the work site, and our stupid excavator wouldn't start up. All the other work had to stop until it was repaired, of course...and that pretty much guaranteed mandatory overtime for me.

So I arranged for night lighting, called the local city hall and police to explain the situation, and wrapped up all the work we could do without the machines. There were also local residents that I had to keep updated about all of this, and really, I didn't even have the free time to cry about it. There was so much to do that the next thing I knew, my regular workday had long passed.

And, yeah, that's how I feel right now.

It was time to give up on Hinata's dress. Just *one* invasion, I could maybe deal with, but *two* at the same time meant I had to prep for a real long battle. Pretending I could finish this by nightfall was just kidding myself. One of these

attacks was very likely a decoy, too, so I couldn't act all carefree about this.

Still, I resolved to never forget the resentment currently filling my heart. These fools needed to be taught a lesson—deprive me of my fun, and you'll pay a *dear* price for it...

So, mentally turning the page, I began to consider our options.

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The sharp-sighted Hinata immediately noticed the change in me.

"Something up?" she asked.

I nodded back. "Yeah, my enemies are on the move. It looks like something's going on over here, too, but..."

"Ah, yes, we can take care of things here for you."

Hinata never fails to impress me.

Now that I was assured I didn't have to focus on Englesia for now, I contacted Benimaru again for a fuller report.

(Hey, so what's up?)

(We're still checking on things, but it looks like a pretty bad scene.)

He didn't seem agitated, but it sounded pretty tense over there. I waited for further news, hoping the damage wasn't too far above what we anticipated.

(We have contact. Surprisingly, it sounds like a pretty even battle so far. It was apparently kicked off by a massive magic blast from Carrera, but someone among the enemy had a way to bounce the magic back at our forces. They've avoided casting magic since then, so now it's just one big melee, she said...)

They bounced Carrera's magic back at us?! How could they do that? Her magic is, like, beyond crazy...but would something in the Dominate Space family do the trick?

It would depend on the caster's computational power, but it's possible. The size and power of the magic is another factor, but with a directional, destructive magic, distorting the space around it would be an effective way to change its path. It would not be recommended, though, since one

mistake would lead to friendly fire.

Aha. So if you run into trouble calculating the point of impact, your own allies might get caught in the middle, huh? Fail to predict how the magic will move, too, and you'd suffer terribly from it. I bet Ciel could manage all that fine, but I wouldn't touch that move unless I had no other choice.

Thinking about it that way, it sounded like the enemy was expecting casualties as a given with their strategy. There must be some pretty daredevil gamblers among them—mess it up and the risks were sky-high.

Thanks to this move pretty much taking magic off the table, the two sides were now engaged in physical melee combat. A total of eight commanders were among the enemy force—they were called the “Twelve Insect Masters,” but there were only eight surviving, so this was the whole gang in one place. There were also signs of Zeranus the Insect Lord in the area, which prevented Milim from making any major moves. Her Big Four, along with Carrera and the other demons, were all engaged in combat now, fighting against these commanders.

...What's this about Milim's “Big Four,” by the way? I wasn't sure, but way to find four people to volunteer for that crap, I guess.

(So does it look like we can win?)

(Unknown as of yet, but it's likely going to be a tough battle.)

(All right. Let's put in some reinforcements.)

(I thought you'd say that, so I've already sent out three hundred members of Team Kurenai.)

Benimaru really *is* a talent, isn't he? The man never wastes time when it comes to decision-making.

Our transport magic circles could only hold around fifty people at a time, but we could run them 24/7 as long as we powered them with magicules. Our labyrinth had a ton of those, of course, so we didn't have to wait long at all between transports. Veldora was helping them out as well, so the three hundred troops were already at the battlefield. Gobwa was commanding them, and Benimaru assured me she was fired up and ready for action.

(It turns out that she and Phobio had started dating at some point, so she saw this as her lover in mortal danger...so, well, I don't think much is going to discourage her, no.)

(Well, great, but I'm worried if we have enough firepower.)

If the enemy force totaled over one million, an extra three hundred allies didn't sound like much. Each Team Kurenai member was an over-A in rank, which was reassuring, but if they're exhausted and start making careless errors, they could start to crumble in short order.

(Should we send Gobta over as well?)

Hmm. Him and his hundred Goblin Riders? Our nation was already amply protected by the labyrinth; Gobta and his team wouldn't have much to do on that front. If they *were* asked to defend Tempest, well, that'd mean we were in a pretty dire situation anyway. With the Goblin Riders' mobility, a large battlefield was much more suitable for them. Things would be a lot tighter for them if put into a labyrinth fight.

No point saving them for some rainy day, I suppose.

(Okay, let's do that. Ranga, go with Gobta and keep him safe!)

(At once!!)

Ranga's presence disappeared from my shadow. That was a relief, but then I heard Benimaru laughing about something.

(Heh-heh! You constantly spoil Gobta, Sir Rimuru.)

(Oh? How so?)

(Well, he's quite capable by himself, too, you know. You don't have to worry so much about him. He'll be just fine.)

(Yeah, but you know how he trips up sometimes.)

(Ha-ha-ha! In normal life, yes, but he's all business on the battlefield. Then again...maybe being a little overprotective is the right call for this war...)

Benimaru didn't sound so jovial any longer. I suppose he sensed something disturbing about all this.

(So you think our enemy's pretty strong, too?)

(It's weird. I can 'see' them through the eyes of Geld and the others, but there's no fear at all among the insects. They just keep tirelessly attacking, even climbing over the corpses of their comrades.)

(Wow, creepy...)

(As Geld put it, they remind him of himself and his orcs when they were being ruled over by his lord.)

(Oh, the unique skill Ravenous...?)

That was more of an unpleasant memory than a nostalgia trip. But I got the picture.

(Regardless, I'll pray that everyone's okay. Keep monitoring the situation. If things look really bad, don't hesitate to jump in, too.)

(I'm aware, sir.)

And that was the end of our chat.

*

I next reached out to Ramiris.

(Any response yet?)

(Hang on one sec, I'm in the middle of something important... Oh! Rimuru! Hey, listen, this is, like, way, way beyond bad!!)

Pipe down, lady. I didn't know who she thought she was talking to, but how could she get her Thought Communication signals mixed-up at a time like this? She hasn't been lazing out on her training, has she? But, oh... Right. Treyni and Beretta were helping out. As long as they were, I trusted Ramiris and all, but now I was wondering if I should've placed her in a command role...

(Hey, can you put Beretta on the line for me?)

(Aw, hang on, you can trust me—)

(Just do it, please?)

(Roger.)

This wasn't a debate. I wasn't being gruff with her because I was still pissed off about Hinata's dress or anything, but this *was* an emergency. I'm not playing around here. Let's hear what Beretta has to say.

(We received a contact from Sir Zonda a moment ago, sir. Lady Ultima had ordered him to travel to a region where his communications wouldn't be blocked.)

That's Ultima for you. Unlike a certain lazy bum of a fairy, *she* at least stuck to protocol.

(So what're they looking at?)

(He described the enemy as fearsomely strong and asked for immediate backup...but what do you think we should do? Would it be better to call on the other demon lords and have them bring their forces back?)

Hmm... That's one option, yes, but the words "fearsomely strong" stuck with me. Any ill-advised troop movement could make us fall into an enemy trap. If possible, I'd like each of them to keep at least a small force on hand. Besides, Englesia was under the rule of Luminus, and I couldn't borrow anything from her. Leon was in enemy hands, and Guy was ensconced in El Dorado and not in a hurry to move out. Unless this was a Velzard attack, I felt everyone was better off staying where they were.

So does that mean I'm the only demon lord with any deployable troops to spare...?

I wondered what I should do. Break out some of our labyrinth forces? Or just head out myself? Englesia was a worry, but I didn't sense any major hostile force nearby. Testarossa was here in the capital, too, and Hinata's Crusaders were on the scene. Luminus would certainly send reinforcements if necessary, and if all else failed, there was always Velgrynd.

Which meant—

(Oh! Sir Rimuru! I have a follow-up on the enemy. They've confirmed the presence of Sir Deeno and Sir Leon!)

That made my decision for me. If Leon was there, I was due to engage him. Now I had no reason to waver. We had to stick to the plan—it was my job to

bring Leon back on our side. I might've had some regrets, yes, but I'd use them as my motivation as I kicked some ass over there.

(All right. I'll head over. Benimaru will take command here. Also, tell Ramiris to stick to her damn training for me.)

(...Understood.)

There was an overwhelming melancholy to Beretta's voice, but I took it at its word. I wasn't gonna ask Ramiris to suddenly become this brilliant military commander, but I really needed her to do things by the book.

Now I can't help but think it was a mistake to remodel the Control Center. I tapped into all my memories to make it into the most luxurious, atmospheric war room I could picture, fancier than anything you'd see in some sci-fi manga or anime. But thanks to me wasting so much money on whatever I wanted to do, now *everybody* wanted to sit in those fancy commander's chairs, which was annoying. I even prepared a special Ramiris-size seat for her, and I'm sure she's probably glued to it now.

But, yeah, playing "big army man" is great and all, except now we're in an actual war. I better make it clear to everyone that they're expected to do their duty.



A gentle-looking man stood in front of Daggrull. His name was Fenn, and he only looked kindhearted when compared to his brother.

He had a giant's height, but he was more slender, with supple, well-toned muscles. His skin was a milky shade of white, like all pigmentation had forsaken it—the result of being kept in an isolated, sun-free room for an inordinately long time. His green hair was long and shaggy, and his eyes shone like jade. He wore a long, loose-fitting robe that revealed his chest, along with chains wrapped around his waist and shoulders as an accent. These were Gleipnir bonds, the chains that held him down for many years, but now he had taken a liking to them.

Fenn loped his way toward Daggrull, his body swaying back and forth in an inscrutable motion. He seemed completely open to attack, but he wasn't. He

was moving like an expert fighter, ready to answer any potential strike.

He smirked at Daggrull. “It’s been too long, huh, brother?”

Daggrull heaved a sigh. “I’ve missed you, yes. But I also never wanted to see you again.”

“Aw, don’t be mean like that. It’s only us three brothers, ain’t it?”

“Exactly. That’s why I’m so sorry that things went awry like this.”

“Ha! You’ve sure changed, haven’t you? You used to be so cool, too.”

Fenn looked displeased with his brother. He used to look up to Daggrull. Now he was this doddering old retiree in his eyes, and that annoyed him.

“We all once tried facing up to Sir Veldanava, didn’t we? And that gave us a sobering lesson in reality.”

“That’s just an excuse, isn’t it, Daggrull? I’ll never see *that* as a defeat.”

“Are you kidding?! We only stand here today thanks to his mercy!”

“I *really* don’t like how weak in the knees you’ve gotten, brother! What’s the big deal with Veldanava? Once Feldway revives him, *then* I’ll show everyone who’s better.”

“You goddamned fool! You say that because you don’t know him—”

“I’m not here to debate, all right? Not like we’ll ever agree anyway. Let’s get it on. I’m gonna beat you, and then maybe you’ll wake up.”

“Fenn...”

Daggrull and Fenn’s bodies were enveloped in a whirlwind of fighting aura. Skyspire Tower, which was supposed to be indestructible, shook under the tremendous pressure. Then, the next moment, Daggrull’s fist slammed into Fenn’s face with an impact that seemed to cut into all of creation.

But Fenn held his ground. Returning the favor, he planted his hips down and shot a heavy, sharp uppercut right into Daggrull’s solar plexus. It lifted his body into the air, and Fenn wasted no time following up, smashing a sharpened kick into him.

The impact of Daggrull’s enormous body against the wall made Skyspire

Tower groan like it was about to collapse. But Daggrull got up like nothing happened to him.

"Tsk... You haven't gotten soft, huh?"

"You neither, brother. That shot would've ended most people."

"I'm not most people. They didn't let me join the Octagram just for fun."

"You actually like all that?"

"Kind of!"

Daggrull released all his fighting spirit as he spoke. His existence points numbered over forty million, and while Fenn's count was greater, the sheer pressure he imposed on him was on the level of a True Dragon. Now the match would come down to one thing: Who was the better fighter?

Leon quietly stepped onto the battlefield.

Standing before him was Glasord, the middle brother between Daggrull and Fenn. At nearly seven feet tall, he was large compared to other races, but rather diminutive for a giant. His skin had a yellowish tone to it, somewhere between his two brothers' in shade, and his purple eyes shone with an intelligent glow. Being sandwiched between the broad-minded Daggrull and the born-rebel Fenn made life hard for him sometimes, but he saw the importance of standing up for himself, too. He knew what his natural disposition was, and he wasn't about to try defying it.

This was why Glasord preferred to use a large two-handed sword, a weapon that required skill to use—a rarity for giants, who preferred bludgeons or bare hands. This was an all-out offensive style with no shield, showing just how confident Glasord was with it. His EP was a bit under two million, making him look positively wispy compared to his brothers, but he was still a full-fledged member of the Million Class. His battle technique, meanwhile, was by far the best among his brothers.

"You are the demon lord Leon, I presume. My name is Glasord, second-in-command of the giant legion. I had hoped to test my skill against you when you hadn't been robbed of your free will, but that will have to wait for another time. For today, at least, you will be giving victory to me."

He took a step toward Leon.

Deeno, looking as listless as ever, was standing before the very gentlemanly-looking Veyron. As a duke-class Demon Peer, Veyron was the second most powerful man in rank under the grand duke-class Moss—but against a Primordial Angel, easily comparable to a Primal Demon, he had to admit that the odds were more than against him.

Still, it was a better situation than what his master Ultima faced against not one but two Primordials. He had a role to play, and he intended to fulfill it. He had to stall for time.

(Deeno isn't going to seriously fight anyway, so I think even you would be fine against him. If he took me on, he might make it more of an actual scrap, besides. So how about I leave this one to you, Veyron? ♪)

Being asked so cutely like that, Veyron had no right to refuse. He was determined to do whatever he could to live up to his master's expectations.

"Oh, um, do I really have to fight, too?"

"If you don't mind helping me stall for time, I'd appreciate that quite a bit."

"Ooh, sorry, can't do that. As much as it annoys me, I'm really not allowed to skip out on work any longer, sadly."

Deeno was taking this approach to his answers because he was still feeling things out, seeing just how far he was allowed to go. It was frustrating, not being able to convey exactly what he meant—but then he tried this phrasing, which thankfully made it out from his lips.

"Ultima's one thing and all, but with *you*, all I need is my sword skills."

In other words, he wasn't about to break out any other latent skills. He had seen from Leon's own approach that it was allowed for him not to go all-out in battle. If Leon was being serious about this, the resulting fight would've been far more intense. Deeno had a chance to see Leon fight for real once, and his sword, speeding as fast as light itself, had the power to slice through even microscopic spiritual particles. As long as that memory was fresh in his mind, he couldn't believe that the current Leon was being serious at all.

So Deeno followed his lead. This wasn't slacking off, he told himself. It's just to avoid turning his back on his friend.

Veyron, observing this, understood what was going on. Demons can be very sensitive to the subtle emotions of people that way.

Hmm... Just as Lady Ultima thought, Sir Deeno is hardly keen to fight this out. If so, I should more than suffice as an opponent for him.

Now they had a plan of action. He pretended to be offended at Deeno's prodding as he fought back at him.

"Is that how little you think of me? Then I cannot wait to wipe that insolent grin off your face."

With that, Veyron broke out Artist, his ultimate gift. It changed him, allowing him to imitate—of course—the young Byakuya Araki, the former incarnation of Agera.

He was also wielding a sword forged by Kurobe, a Legend-class blade made in the shape of a walking stick. Even at this point, Kurobe was still improving as a weaponsmith. For every ten swords he crafted, seven or eight were now Legend-class, including the one he gave to Esprit, making him a master craftsman of near-unbelievable talent. It may not be long before they start calling him a *divine* master, even.

This Kurobe-crafted sword fit well in Veyron's hand. He was starting to understand the appeal of weapons like this, although only used one while in Artist mode.

"Wow, neat. I better start to get a little serious, huh?"

Deeno was lying. His eyes wavered anxiously. *We're good, right?* he desperately asked his partner. *You're getting what I'm trying to say, aren't you?*

Veyron gave him a reassuring nod. "I look forward to the experience. Let us begin!"

Deeno gave him a smile—and this one was no lie.

Ultima stood alone in front of Pico and Garasha.

"Wow, Violet, huh? Oh, but your name's Ultima now, isn't it? I think you get

what's going on, but don't tell me you're going to take both of us on alone here?"

Ultima smiled back at Garasha. "Well, I certainly don't see the problem. The two of you should provide just the right amount of warmup for me."

"Oh, *would* we? Glad to see you think that much of us..."

"Ooh, she's *really* pushing my buttons. Don't expect to come crying to us for forgiveness later!"

Unlike with Deeno and Veyron, the demons meant every word they said. And, really, Ultima found it more amusing than anything. After carefully assessing Pico and Garasha's fighting ability, she concluded that both of them were weaker than her—and she was right. Neither of them were pushovers; they were both card-carrying members of the Million Class, but their EPs topped out at around two million, a full level below Ultima. Plus, Ultima already had experience winning a battle to the death against an opponent of equal strength—a rare experience for a high-ranked demon like her to have. She gained a lot of confidence from that, and she thought these two would be a nice pair of test cases to polish her skills with.

"Well, maybe you'll both get your free will back if I punch you hard enough. Why don't I give it a shot?"

"Like *that*'ll ever work."

"Yeah! Who asked you anyway?!"

With those casual remarks, the full-on battle began.

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The battle between Daggrull and Fenn was, to an outside observer, beyond intense. In reality, though, neither of them were 100 percent serious about it yet. If they were, anyone else in the room would've been flattened by the waves of fighting spirit shooting off them—some for good. They wouldn't be able to continue the battle, for certain.

But this feeling-out period was about to come to an end. The other groups were moving over to other battlefields, not wanting to fight inside a cramped tower. Now it was only the two brothers left in Skyspire.

"I haven't gotten this heated up in a while, brother. I think it's time to get real about this."

"Hmph! Whenever you like."

Fenn's fighting spirit swelled. That power, comparable to a True Dragon's, became a visible sort of pressure as it blasted its way toward Daggrull. But his brother wasn't about to be outdone.

"*Nnngh!*"

With a groan, he infused his own fighting spirit into his body, transforming his muscles into something specialized for combat.

Now this was a full-on fight between brothers, with both sides playing for keeps. Fenn wanted Daggrull to go back to his old rampaging days; Daggrull, on the hand, wanted stability and order. He wouldn't hesitate to go to war if necessary, but he was no longer the type of man to get violent for violence's sake. There was no way to bridge this gap between them...but whoever won this fight would make the loser his personal servant. Why? The answer would become clear later.

The fight intensified—and as it did, the formerly even contest gradually began to tilt in Fenn's favor. The difference in core strength was evident, and to that was added a key advantage—the Gleipnir chains that Fenn could now control at will. Veldanava created these bonds with his own hands, and they were truly indestructible, boasting the strength and flexibility of a high-end God-class weapon. Fenn had been bound down by them for so long that he had grown able to manipulate them like they were part of his own body.

"Hngh! Impertinent little... If you've cornered me this much, you've grown even stronger than before—?!"

Daggrull left himself open just long enough to have his hands and legs firmly bound up by Gleipnir. He grimaced in pain as he spoke to the grinning Fenn.

"Come on, brother... Have fun enjoying the bitter memories of the pain I experienced!"

With those words, Fenn delivered a bone-breaking headbutt. The moment he did, Daggrull and Fenn's "souls" touched, their memories and emotions

intersecting. This was how they shared memories, and then...Daggrull remembered.

"Do you recall it now, brother?"

"Whew... I feel like I've just woken up."

"You do? Well, great."

Fenn's smile widened. Then, with all the brotherly love in his heart, he extended a hand to his opponent. Daggrull clenched it tightly.

"Now it is time for war. Let us show the world the might of our legion of divine giants!"

"By all means, brother. That's exactly what I hoped to hear from you!"

Fenn appreciatively smiled at Daggrull's bellowed order. The demon-lord giant who protected Skyspire Tower as part of the Octagram was no more. In his place, the evil god of ancient times had returned.

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Daggrull's shouted command summoned the rest of the warriors in the giant tribe. This band, freshly renamed the "Bound Titans," began to march into the Barren Lands, ready to recreate the violence of ancient times anew.

It was hardly an orderly advance. Each of them took up their own choice of weapons as they heeded their king Daggrull's order, obviating the need for prep time and letting them take collective action with a speed that laughed in the face of modern army logistics.

Glasord, who was lashing away at Leon, was no exception to this.

"Hmm. It seems I have no reason to be hostile toward you. I look forward to serving as your comrade-in-arms from now on."

The moment he said it to Leon, Glasord left the battle. Unfazed, Leon took prompt action. If Fenn won his battle, this eventuality was a foregone conclusion.

It was Ultima who felt like crying now.

"Whoa, are you kidding me? No matter how much stronger I've gotten, this is

just a *little* too much..."

She couldn't be blamed for griping about it. An entire allied force had just jumped ship on them. The enemy was executing the very strategy that Rimuru was trying to make happen.

Fortunately, the now-hostile Daggrull ignored Ultima and the others as he joined the giants' march. Maybe this wasn't all *that* fortunate, but if they stopped to attack them, defeat would have been inevitable, so "lucky" was the only way to describe it.

Outside of that, things couldn't be much worse. Even Veyron, who was carrying out a very balanced, no-sweat sword skill demo with Deeno, couldn't hide his concern.

"What are we going to do, Lady Ultima? Our numbers will keep dwindling if this keeps up. Perhaps we had best retreat and regroup."

He was willing to invite Ultima's ire upon him for this suggestion, so concerned was he about this. But Ultima was silent as she thought it over. Garasha and Pico, who were indeed losing pretty badly against her, took this opportunity to rally a bit.

"Hey! You're stronger now, I'll admit it, but you don't stand a chance now that Daggrull's joined in, too, huh?"

"Right, right! So why don't you just say uncle and retire to the demon realm for us? We won't follow you in there. We can just call it a draw due to injury, okay?"

Much like Ultima, both of them had been fighting without using any of their special skills. Thanks to that, they had suffered the humiliation of going two-on-one against a foe and losing—but now they saw a chance at a comeback. No matter how bad things looked for them, this new development was like a ray of sunshine.

"Ah, shut up... I know that, all right? But if I retreated at this point, I'd never live it down with Sir Rimuru..."

Ultima was getting grumpier and grumpier. She was fighting an impulse to just abandon all restraint and go wild on the battlefield, no matter if they could

win any longer or not. Rimuru told her that Deeno and the others were simply under Michael's control; that's why they were trying to neutralize them without getting really serious about fighting.

But now there was a thornier question: If they went all-out here, could they defeat all the enemies in front of them? If they didn't care about killing people, that'd up the chances—but even then, Ultima didn't think it was a sure thing. Out of Leon, Deeno, Pico, and Garasha, she believed Deeno was the most difficult enemy—and if Leon and Ultima fought a serious battle, it wouldn't be surprising if either of them won, too.

In other words, it just didn't seem worth it. Ultima was screaming at Veyron right now because she knew, deep down, that he was right. She wanted time to ponder her next move, but time was the one thing she didn't have.

So she firmed up her resolve.

"We have to trust in Sir Rimuru! I'm sure he'll be there soon, so just try to keep our enemies pinned down until then. Any objections, Veyron?"

"No, my lady!"

The plan was now in place...

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... A truly wise decision. You have my praise, Ultima."

...and, just in time, the long-awaited reinforcements arrived.



I opted to take Diablo and Soei with me to the Holy Void of Damargania. I performed a Spatial Transport to the point where Zonda was, and after we ran into each other, we rushed to Ultima and the rest at once.

The scenes we saw along the way were just dreadful. A throng of giants had gathered, almost like a mobile mob, but before we knew it, they had formed into a disciplined army. Daggrull was at the head of the group, but he seemed different from the man I knew. Our eyes met for a moment, but he just gave me a threatening sneer. Honestly, it was frightening.

So I thought a bit about what I should do, but really, there was just one answer. Now wasn't the time to deal with Daggrull. I contacted the relevant

people via Thought Communication about him, and then I promptly left.

I had just met up with Ultima and Veyron. Combined with Zonda and the three-person team I brought along, there were six of us now. On the opposing side were Leon, Deeno, Pico, and Garasha—four in all. We outnumbered them for the time being, and if I could win Leon back like I planned to, nothing could prevent our victory.

“Huh? Whoa, Rimuru’s here, too?!”

“That I am, Deeno. But I’ll deal with *you* later!”

I focused my attention on Leon. It seemed to me that he understood my intentions well enough. He showed no sign of defying me, which I took as evidence that Michael’s mind domination wasn’t quite up to the point of brainwashing. I didn’t really think it was possible, anyway, to make anyone like Leon—holding a will strong enough to acquire and wield an ultimate skill—swear allegiance to you through the power of your own skills alone. Any attempt at it would just be a front, really. What I saw here was Michael placing certain restrictions on behavior that went against his will—but nothing else.

So I decided to do something about it. Like I just told Deeno, he’d be taking a back seat for now. Leon came first.

“You better get ready, Leon! Complex Space—consume him!!”

I wasted no time busting that out. Complex Space, managed by my ultimate skill Azathoth, God of the Void, guided Leon to the land of ghosts—and then Ciel wasted no time performing a forced Ability Adjust.

And with that, Leon was—

“Whew... It went as planned, yes, but I never want to go through *that* again.”

Yeah, he was back to normal.

Now Leon was on my side again. The next order of business was the ever-lethargic Deeno. I saved him for later because I assumed he’d be a cinch to bring back, and now I was ready to wrap this all up real quick...but apparently it wasn’t going to be that easy.

Out of nowhere, I felt this incredibly ominous presence, a wave of pressure

that felt like a True Dragon strutting its stuff. At the exact same moment, Soei—who was responsible for staying in regular contact with the Control Center—reached out to me.

(Sir Rimuru, the area around the Holy Void of Damargania has been cut off from the outside world by an impenetrable barrier.)

Now I was sure of it. The enemy boss was on the scene.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Coming here all alone? Clearly he thinks rather little of us.”

Diablo might have been laughing, but in front of him was a person just leisurely standing there. It was Michael, the thing that had taken over Ludora—and thanks to that, he looked quite a bit like Masayuki.

“I got Leon back from you now,” I told Michael.

“Very well. It hardly matters. Metatron, Leon’s skill, is in my hands. He himself functioned merely as bait.”

“Bait...?”

He’s sacrificing the rook to take our king. Almost impressive, how he went for the same tactics we did.

Took the rook to...? Oh! Like a chess sacrifice!

And in this case—

Leon would be the rook, but what he’s really after...

...Is Masayuki!

...That’s correct.

He got us. Offering Leon as the sacrificial rook, weighing his value against Masayuki the king. And I did exactly what he wanted me to do.

The moment I was lured into Damargania, Michael’s strategy paid off. I knew Masayuki was important, but I didn’t expect Michael to be *that* preoccupied with him. Still, this plan was going to fail unless he could keep me pinned down...

“Don’t you think it’s a little too early to celebrate?” I asked Michael.

“Oh? Now that I am here, I don’t see how you have any chance to win.”

Talk about confident. Deeno and the rest were still on the enemy’s side, but I could wrest them from his control easily enough. I’m impressed he could remain so aggressive despite that. Or did he have some other winning strategy in mind?

“Heh! You look like you have your own plans. But don’t worry—you are less than nothing to me. I only joined in this because Feldway wouldn’t stop worrying, but really, I should have done this from the beginning.”

The moment Michael finished speaking, Diablo suddenly collapsed. I was watching him via Magic Sense, so I knew this wasn’t some kind of cheap backstab attack. I gotta say, though, this was the first time I ever saw Diablo fall to the ground like a sack of potatoes. I’d like to think he wasn’t dead, but he wasn’t moving an inch down there.

“Hey—”

Soei was about to run up to him—and then he collapsed on the spot, too.

Huh?

This wasn’t making any sense.

Leon, faced with this completely abnormal situation, readied his sword—then crumpled to the ground.

Are you serious? I had no idea what was happening. And it wasn’t just me—Deeno and everyone else looked just as confused. I suppose the only one who knew what this was about was Michael, the presumed attacker.

So how am I supposed to—?

...Oh no.

“Oh no”? Great, so even Ciel doesn’t understand? This is beyond bad. We’re facing a complete unknown and there’s no escape. But simply abandoning Diablo and Soei wasn’t really an option from the beginning. Leon, too, for that matter.

“Ultima, grab them and take them away from here.”

“B-but—?!”

“It’ll be fine. I got an idea!”

I didn’t, but still.

“Keh... Keh-heh-heh-heh... One moment, Sir Rimuru. I can still fight.”

Oh, so Diablo’s okay after all?

“Hmm,” Michael mused. “I could sense that you weren’t dead. I really should have finished you off when I had the chance.”

Seeing Diablo back on his feet didn’t take the wind out of Michael’s sails. He seemed supremely confident that he could beat him as many times as necessary.

Now I had to admit it. This really *wasn’t* good.

“Okay, Diablo. Let’s retreat. Take Leon over there and get moving.”

“But—!”

“That’s an order, okay? You got no hope of winning, so running’s the only option.”

I pulled out my sword as I gave the order. Michael was gunning for me; he’d never let me go. Might as well use myself as bait and let the others escape. Diablo understood this, naturally. He still seemed pretty conflicted but calling it an “order” appeared to have the intended effect. Teaming up with Ultima, he worked with everyone to pick up Soei and Leon before retreating from the scene.

“Hmm... I thought you would intervene.”

“I’m not too interested in the bit players.”

Wow. Good thing Diablo wasn’t around to hear Michael. Say *that* around him, and he totally would’ve been added to his “kill” list—and he’d actually *do* it sooner or later, too. That’s how dangerously vindictive he was.

So now that I was alone, that made it one on four. I was already fairly doomed against Michael, but with his cronies right here, too, I was beyond dead. I mean, at worst, we still had Veldora, so I could just revive myself...I think...but I kind of

dreaded actually testing that out. Like, even if I revived myself that way, would it still really be *me*, as I existed now? It wasn't something I wanted to consider. That was why I didn't want Veldora to die on me, either, but...

But as I thought about this, Michael made a move.

"Deeno, leave this matter to me. All of you can return to our base."

Whoa, how nice of him, making this a one-on-one duel. Maybe Michael saw that I planned to bring Deeno and the rest back to my side when I saw an opportunity, but I didn't like my chances of making that work too much, so I really had no objection to this at all.

"Oh? You sure?"

"It's fine. If I took complete control over your mind, that would rob you of your flexibility in battle...and in your *current* state, you wouldn't make an effort anyway, now would you? Pawns like you are useless to me."

Ah. He's aware that Deeno and Leon aren't bending over backward to heed his will, then.

So does this mean that Michael's completely played me this time, or what?

...

Aw, don't bother. Even you make mistakes sometimes, Ciel.

No. This is going just as planned.

Again, people don't like a sore loser, you know. Ciel's overcompetitive attitude really needs to be addressed sometime.

Anyway, enough banter. I was ready to struggle as much as I could.

Really, knowing I was doomed to lose felt surprisingly freeing. I didn't want to look like a fool, but with Diablo and everyone else gone, that was no longer a worry. Now I was free to just give it my best shot.

Steeling my resolve, I took a closer look at Michael. I could sense that the presence he oozed had expanded even further from before. Maybe it was even several times larger than mine?

We are not in the labyrinth so I cannot give precise figures, but I would

be confident putting his EP at over one hundred million.

You expect me to beat *that*? Come on! If he had over double mine, that'd be absurd enough, but over ten times? Simply impossible.

No, it'll be all right. It's your output that matters, so an energy difference alone will not decide the battle.

Okay, so it's all about *wanting* it more? What are you, a sports coach?

Ciel was really being way too stubborn right now, but maybe it had a point. You win none of the matches you don't show up for—give it a try, and maybe it'll work out somehow.

The most present issue, though, is that mystery attack of Michael's, which is powerful enough to even take down Diablo. I had no idea what he did at all, and it was giving me the weirdest sense of *déjà vu*.

By which I mean...

Yes, it was a familiar-looking phenomenon. That sense... I feel like I was pretty close to understanding it...

Oh? Ciel's coming through for me after all? So did that mean you had already anticipated that strike from Michael?

No. That much was a complete miscalculation.

Oh.

Well, no worries, then. You can never perfectly predict the enemy, so let's try using this experience to work out the mystery and connect it to victory.

And so, with this defeat, we'd—well, hang on, we haven't lost yet. Again, I wasn't completely sure my revival trick would actually work, so we'd better struggle hard for survival here.

Deeno and the others had filed out as I thought all of this over. Only Michael and I were left. Here, in the main hall of Skyspire Tower, a one-on-one battle between me and Michael was about to begin.



After seeing Rimuru off, Hinata tried to get a grip on the current situation. The

assembly hall where the World Congress was being held had meeting rooms and guest quarters on another floor. She had reserved one of these rooms as a temporary control center, and that was where she went now, to collate and digest the reports from her fellow paladins.

Once the situation was fully clear to her, she let out a sigh, her head aching.

“What in the world is going on...?” she couldn’t help but mutter out loud.

The assembly hall was well-guarded, of course, to ensure the safety of all the foreign dignitaries visiting it. The building was protected by not only the Crusaders, but knight corps from other countries, as well as adventurers hired for the event. If the hall fell into enemy hands, that would cut off the chain of command, so they’d evacuate everyone inside to a different location. The main Holy Church building in Englesia was open to receive them, but there were plenty of other designated shelters across the capital.

A Temma War—the angel invasions that occurred approximately every five hundred years—was something this city had always prepared itself well for. The same was true for the Western Nations at large, with underground bunkers and caves on nearby mountainsides opened up to house evacuated residents. This was why enhanced evacuation guidance was on the agenda today.

Even now, residents were being evacuated to these shelters in the capital, in an attempt to mitigate human casualties in the wake of these terror acts. The goal was to prevent mass panic, as well as ensure that the proper authorities could concentrate on the enemy before them. The regular training events held across the capital were clearly paying off now; the city’s civilians had already been successfully guided to safety. The evacuation was complete, and all the evacuees were staying calm for the moment.

But that, of course, didn’t solve the problem. This was no natural disaster; there were people in the city causing this disturbance.

According to reports, explosions occurred in multiple locations across the capital, leading to fires. The direct cause of these was a group of magic-born rated special-A or higher.

With the many VIPs attending this congress, all the Crusaders were deployed to the city. This allowed their paladins on patrol to address this situation at

once, but things still weren't looking too rosy for them. It irked Hinata to no end, but in her position, she couldn't let even a hint of this distress reach her face. It'd just make her team anxious and lead to even more work for them. She also knew well that getting emotional around the evacuees had to be avoided. Agitating people who were already concerned for their safety would lead to nothing but trouble.

So Hinata didn't waver for a moment. Her job right now was to keep evacuee anxiety to a minimum and ward off any mass chaos before it began. The shelters were comfortable, at least, and stocked with ample supplies of food, but the best option right now was to deal with the enemy at once and ensure the evacuees didn't start panicking.

"I'll leave the hall in your hands. I want at least one paladin assigned to each shelter. Make sure the Temple Knights work with us, too."

"""Yes, Captain!"""

These outside invaders weren't their only enemy. The evacuees could potentially turn into a mob at any moment. Things were calm now, but if they were delayed in eliminating this enemy, there was no telling how they'd react. Some may be stricken with fear; others could start shouting and rioting—and there'd be more and more of them as time passed. It'd depend on how things went, but in the worst-case scenario, they might need to divert troops to quell the rioting.

Hinata had to consciously keep a melancholy sigh from reaching her lips.

Some time had passed since the explosions. At long last, they had a fuller picture of the enemy.

"A prison riot?"

"Yes. Furthermore, the enemy has freed Prince Elrick, who was under house arrest in the castle's north tower. He's now serving as the group's leader!"

"Prince Elrick... I see he's got no remorse at all."

Elrick was undergoing a re-education process after the disgrace he made of himself at the Council. He came extremely close to losing his rights to the throne, but both Rimuru and King Aegil of Englesia wanted to put a cap on the

controversy as soon as possible, so they reduced the prince's sentence on the pretense that he was just being taken advantage of. It was still a scandal for the royal family, however, so he had been confined to the north tower of the castle for the past year...and now the enemy had his hands on him, apparently.

Even worse, he was actively cooperating with them—and not only that, he was calling out Hinata by name.

"My beloved countrymen! I have been tricked by a witch! She framed me for a crime I didn't commit, costing me my position in the Council. Then, not satisfied with that, she has murdered my father, in an attempt to spread chaos and misfortune from border to border. Do not be fooled! This evacuation order is nothing but a pretense, part of their mission to rob all of you of your freedoms! I love all my citizens...and I believe they are intelligent enough to understand who is telling them the truth!"

That, apparently, was a snippet from the speech Prince Elrick gave in the city's main square.

"Is that true?"

"I heard it with my own ears, my lady."

"Is there any evidence?"

"The castle is off limits to outsiders at this time. We are confirming the facts through the Luminism congregation, but there seems to be a great deal of confusion among its ranks at the moment..."

"So there's a good chance King Aegil is dead now. God, this is terrible..."

Hinata could feel a headache coming on. She had expected people to be incited to riot, but she couldn't believe that the prince would make the worst possible decision at the worst possible time. And the cause of all Hinata's stress right now was none other than the royal family here in Englesia. Prince Elrick was the man behind all this, but the family wasn't releasing any details at all, further complicating the situation.

So here was the prince, using his position as royalty to the fullest to mobilize all his state's power. Plus, this emergency was disrupting communications with the other countries involved, which not even Hinata expected.

"Well, great. Now what?"

As Hinata sat there thinking, a beautiful white-haired woman in a military uniform appeared. It was Testarossa, elegantly leaning back on the sofa like this office belonged to her.

"We've obtained proof," she told Hinata. "Moss has confirmed in person that Aegil has been murdered."

"...So we can't trust anyone in high government any longer. Could this even be any more chaotic?"

"That's how I would describe the castle, yes," Testarossa said with a laugh. "The entire chain of command has been shaken to the core. It's wholly non-functional at the moment."

"I'm sure," Hinata replied, nodding. "Well, I've ordered Gadora to keep the assembly hall protected, so at least the attendees are safe."

Testarossa agreed with that move. It'd at least buy them some time, she thought, and that was high praise coming from her. Perhaps Gadora was more appreciated than he thought.

"Well," said Testarossa, "*that* provides some peace of mind, at least."

Hinata and Testarossa nodded at each other.

They were now dealing with both an unknown invader and a prince who actively had it out for Hinata. He was denouncing her by name, accusing her of being a mind-clouding witch, and defending her from this would be difficult. If this was some regular citizen attacking her, or even a noble, it wouldn't be such a problem—the Luminist faithful would defend her. But this was royalty, and worst of all, Prince Elrick remained extremely popular among the people. Women, in particular, loved his handsome looks and gentle manner. His political abilities notwithstanding, his natural magnetism gave him a universally favorable reputation in Englesia. (His Council antics didn't affect this rep, either, because they were never divulged to the public.)

Hinata, while also a well-known figure, was seen as aloof and detached by comparison. In terms of popularity, she couldn't hold a candle to Prince Elrick. She *did*, however, enjoy fervent support (although she wasn't aware of it) from

a certain subset of people with a certain subset of tastes—a rather gentlemanly club, with enough common sense to know that it'd be the end for them if she ever found out.

Either way, Prince Elrick was the most pressing issue of the moment. Hinata's paladins gave her nervous looks, and they had reason to be on edge. The prince of this country was loudly berating Hinata to stir up people's anxiety. She was a regicide, a witch charmed by a demon lord, a monster who led people to ruin—the whole bit.

I never thought he'd be this much of a fool...

Hinata cursed herself for being so careless. She failed to read him for the weak-willed charlatan that he was. She never thought Elrick had it in him to do something as outrageous as kill his father to usurp the throne.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. It opened to reveal a knight—Arnaud Bauman, one of her trusted Crusader commanders.

"Lady Hinata," he began the moment he was in the room, "we've also confirmed the presence of Reiner, former head general of the Englesia royal knight corps. He's been joined by several dozen of the knights that were imprisoned with him as co-conspirators."

"So it was Reiner who killed the king?"

"I firmly believe so, yes."

"Well, I'm being accused of it, and I doubt I'll have a chance to defend myself in court." Hinata sighed as she mulled this over.

"Reiner... That bastard again, huh? He's *that* intent on getting back at Lady Hinata for flooring him at the Council?" Fritz, one of the commanders on standby in this office, sounded enraged by the idea.

According to Arnaud, Reiner—who had literally peed himself when faced with Hinata's overpowering aura at the Council—was looking to avenge this disgrace at all costs. His plan was to challenge Hinata to a public duel to clear his name.

It was beyond ridiculous—committing serious crimes for the sake of your personal vendetta. But the root of the problem lay even deeper. Reiner may

have been taking drastic moves to cover for his Council blunders, but proving that to the public was impossible. This whole thing was a setup, and any inconvenient evidence was likely already destroyed. They could perhaps get testimony from some of the foreign councilors, but that was only really possible in peacetime. In an emergency like this, putting councilors in danger was out of the question, and nothing Hinata and her associates said would be trusted anyway.

And Prince Elrick's popularity was the most galling thing about this. If the choice was between Hinata and the prince, she knew who the people would believe.

"I can't say you ever had the best reputation, Lady Hinata..."

Fritz might've meant that as a joke, but Arnaud agreed.

Hinata glared at them both before attempting to deflect the subject. "Still... this has certainly placed us in the corner."

"To be honest," Arnaud replied, "I never thought he'd kill the king, his own father, much less pin the crime on you. Of all the reckless things to do..."

Prince Elrick and Reiner's objective was obvious. They wanted to take advantage of this chaos to make their past crimes and blunders disappear. Taking revenge on Hinata, in this case, didn't matter as much as keeping other countries in check, they believed. Hinata was known to be the strongest in the Western Nations, and if they could defeat her, that would shut down any international protest in a hurry.

"I don't get it, though," said Hinata. "I didn't think this man Reiner had the talent to assassinate the king."

The Reiner Hinata knew wasn't a weakling, but he wasn't all that strong, either. He was about as good as an over-A-ranked adventurer, and a nation as large as Englesia would have several knights comparable to him. The magical inquisitors that appeared in the Council on that day had no problem subduing him then, and they shouldn't be having any trouble now, either. It was almost strange that this tragic plot succeeded at all.

But the cruel answer came from Cardinal Nicolaus, who had stopped in to

visit.

"It seems all the magical inquisitors have been killed. We have information that they had been conducting mysterious experiments in the catacombs beneath the city, but it seems their test subjects went out of control on them."

"Ah, Nicolaus?"

"I came here with a message from Lady Luminus, but I also made some inquiries of my own along the way."

The cardinal was as capable a man as ever. He was always a bit like Hinata's faithful dog, willing to do anything to receive her praise. He acted mercilessly toward everyone else, but he was always good at putting up a sensible-looking front. That mild-mannered face of his made him well-liked among the worshippers he presided over, but those who knew his true nature preferred to have nothing to do with him. Even Arnaud and Fritz were silent now, avoiding eye contact with Nicolaus as he ignored them and began brewing a pot of tea. Nicolaus always *did* like flattering Hinata with little acts of courtesy like this. He put a cup out for Testarossa as well, and she looked quite satisfied after her first sip. That was a five-star review coming from her, proving that Nicolaus was no ordinary man at all.

Hinata enjoyed the tea for a moment, collecting her thoughts. "But what if this isn't Prince Elrick 'taking advantage' of the chaos? What if this chaos is exactly what he and his conspirators want?"

"Huh? But those are monsters running rampant in the city."

"Well, that's strange, isn't it? How did monsters break through the barrier covering the city? And they're crazily powerful, too, aren't they?"

The monsters in the reports appeared not individually, but in small groups at the same time. They were rampaging throughout the city for reasons unknown, apparently just destroying whatever randomly caught their eye. They also had Ultraspeed Regeneration, it seemed, which immediately repaired any wounds they incurred. Each of them outclassed a paladin in fighting ability, which made them an estimated Calamity-or Disaster-level threat, but they fortunately didn't seem very intelligent, so the Crusaders had put out decoys to minimize the property damage.

Since it'd likely be dangerous to deal with them one by one, Hinata had ordered his team to keep them boxed in for the time being. They'd work out a plan later, with Hinata herself coming out if need be, but with all the problems that popped up since, they were becoming a thorn in everyone's side.

"Regarding them," Testarossa said, "they apparently defeated several of my servants. I strictly ordered them to retreat before dying, so they weren't able to obtain much information, but..."

When she said "my servants," she was referring to several of her Diable Chevalier-class demons, all of whom ranked special-A and boasted EPs of 100,000 or so. If people of their caliber were forced to retreat, the magic inquisitors likely never had a chance.

"So it sounds like, as part of those experiments, they granted a physical body to an angel."

"Pardon?"

"The failed test cases in that experimentation are the so-called monsters that are running wild right now. The ones that retained their sense of self, on the other hand..."

Testarossa was convinced that the enemy that defeated her Diable Chevaliers had to be servants of Michael. Hearing that, Hinata tapped her fingers on the desk.

Arnaud and Fritz were the two remaining Crusader commanders in the room. Vice Captain Renard was taking command on the field, along with Bacchus and Litus.

Thanks to their training in Tempest's labyrinth, even the ordinary, non-officer paladins had grown into one-person armies. Their commanders were now powerful enough to defeat a Clayman-class opponent on their own. But if they had to take on these weird human-angel fusions crafted by the magic inquisitors, a frontal attack would be very dangerous. And with the shadow of Michael—declared an enemy by Rimuru—lurking in the background, any undue meddling with these monsters was seen as not worth the risk.

"But you had a message from Luminus, Nicolaus?"

"Ah, yes. He said it wasn't an urgent problem as of yet, but she can't send reinforcements at the moment."

"So there are enemies elsewhere, too?"

Luminus would never abandon Hinata. If she was unable to send more troops her way, it likely meant another threat had made itself known. If so, they'd need to protect order in this capital with only the forces they had on hand.

"This is gonna be tough..."

That was the only conclusion Hinata could draw. No matter how much stronger the paladins were now, it'd be asking a lot to have them take on a clearly superior enemy. Even worse, these monsters had taken on the power of angels, which meant they bore the light attribute. The paladins' Holy Field barriers, usually so effective against normal monsters, would be useless.

"So what's our next move?" Testarossa asked. "It doesn't look like any of our surefire tactics will work this time."

"No. And the monsters are one thing, but we've got Reiner and his men to deal with, too."

"And *they're* likely the successful test cases, too."

Only Hinata and Nicolaus understood what Testarossa was driving at.

"Um, what do you mean?" Arnaud gingerly asked Hinata.

"I'd suggest you think for yourself a little, but there's no time to argue. If Reiner was sentenced to death, then *he* was likely subjected to those experiments, too, wasn't he?"

"Ah!"

"Oh. So he might have taken on angelic powers, too..."

Arnaud and Fritz realized this at the same time. The blood drained from their faces.

"There's no 'might' about it," Testarossa coldly told them. "We might as well start treating it as a fact."



Now it really *was* impossible for the Crusaders alone to address this. It inevitably meant that support from Testarossa and her demons would be indispensable.

"So what do you intend to do?" she asked.

"I know it's exactly what they want," Hinata replied, "but we're gonna have to go and deal with them personally."

According to Prince Elrick, Hinata was the criminal behind the king's murder. But thinking about it for a moment, Hinata naturally had no reason to do anything like this—and her presence at the World Congress made for an airtight alibi, so there was no way she was going to accept this accusation. But, again, that only applied in peacetime. The capital was embroiled in a crisis right now, and the people of Englesia, accustomed to a strife-free world, were caught in a disaster that must've felt like a bolt from the blue. If Hinata were to be killed here, it'd likely prove to the people that the real killer's claims were all true.

If so, fleeing was one potential option.

"Why bother engaging in hostilities with them when you could just escape to Lubelius instead? There happens to be a transfer circle in the capital's main church, and once you're outside of the city, you can use any kind of transport magic you like. You can defend yourself all you want later, Lady Hinata, but only if you remain safe right now."

Cardinal Nicolaus's suggestion made a lot of sense. But Hinata couldn't sign off on it.

"That won't work. I *could* escape, yes, but we couldn't take the World Congress attendees with us, could we? If they get taken hostage under us, we'll be sunk either way."

It seemed logical to everyone in the room.

"You're right. And we can't forget that our true enemy lies elsewhere. If we let all these dignitaries get killed right when a force of angels is on the attack, what'll we do then?"

Nicolaus scowled. "True, true. If that happens, international relations will come to a standstill. Certainly, no nation would ever trust Englesia again."

"Oh. And if *that* happens, we'll have much bigger problems than the angels, huh?"

Fritz seemed to agree, judging by his wincing face. Thus, as Hinata said, confronting them here was the only option. She was a woman who stuck to her credo, and it was time to do what she could. She wasn't out to save everybody or anything similarly grandiose, but if there's someone in front of her that needed help, she wanted to reach out. That was how she lived, and Hinata knew that connected to people trusting her and her troops.

"So are we all in agreement? In that case, let's decide how we'll divide up the roles here."

For starters, Hinata declared that she would take on Reiner.

"I'll join you," added Testarossa with a nod. "And as for the monsters on the streets—"

Arnaud and Fritz, standing bolt upright, didn't wait for her to finish.

"You will not need to bother yourself with those, Lady Testarossa. Please allow us to attend to that!"

"If these monsters lack any self-will or intelligence, that opens up potential ways to engage them. Having the light attribute is a nuisance, but we've trained hard in the labyrinth, and we're ready to show you the results!"

Hinata glared at the two of them.

Why are they being so conscious of Lady Testarossa? she wondered.

They must've been trying to look all heroic in front of this beautiful woman. It irked her.

But that actually wasn't the reason. To tell the truth, Arnaud and Fritz were scared stiff of Testarossa. If they didn't step up and perform here, they'd be branded forever as useless. It'd undoubtedly put any future labyrinth training into question.

Testarossa had a lot of supporters in high places, too, including in the Council of the West. One false move here, and they may never be allowed to freely speak in public again. That was how much Testarossa had built her influence

around here, but Hinata had no idea of any of that, since she had fully lost interest in politics.

For Testarossa, on the other hand, this was a tense, trying situation. Rimuru had ordered her to make the World Congress a success, but here she was, allowing enemies to invade the capital. Even worse, she had failed to stop these marauders from damaging the city. People's lives came first, yes, but that wouldn't suffice as an excuse. Behind her fetching smile, Testarossa was seething with rage—and that's why she allowed Arnaud and Fritz to make their offer.

"Well, I'd like to see you do that, then. I'll lend you a few of my servants as well, so go ahead and incorporate them into your force."

She was even lending them a hand.

All of this was in preparation for her own moves. Arnaud and his force would be given command, with the task of restoring order in the capital. While they did, Testarossa intended to strike at the mastermind himself.

So now everyone had their roles.

"Shall we get going, then? Anyone who acted foolishly during this emergency needs to be given their just punishment at once."

Hinata's voice was cold. She needed to clear her good name, and Reiner therefore needed to be taken care of right now. That, and Elrick needed to be captured alive and made to confess. Besides...

"...Well, we can worry about the evidence later. Once we eliminate all the criminals, we'll be able to offer a corrected story as the winners."

That's how Testarossa saw it. If the enemy wanted to write the history of this incident, well, she would do it first. Ethics was always the last thing on a demon's mind; to them, winning allowed them to do pretty much anything. That assertion couldn't have been more in character for her.

And so, despite knowing full well it was a trap, Hinata and her team set out for the waiting enemy.

*

The scene outside the assembly hall was a travesty. The royal castle, visible in the center of the city, had partially collapsed, ruining its majestic appearance. The noble quarter, home to the assembly hall and Holy Church, was relatively better off, but the downtown area facing the city's main street was already burning.

"I know we put the general evacuation first," Hinata said, "but this is gonna be a mess to clean up."

"Well, full-scale battle is only getting started in much of the city," Cardinal Nicolaus reminded her. "We'll see a lot more damage than this. The king is dead, and knowing the state his successor is in, Englesia will need a lot of time to recover from this."

This wasn't the sort of curt tone a man of the cloth usually took, but it was perfectly normal for Nicolaus. To him, Hinata took priority over anything else—and nothing else really mattered anyway. He had reached the rank of cardinal, second only to the pope himself, mainly because he wanted to serve Hinata as best he could. That's who he was, and that's why he was with her at this most dangerous of moments.

There were people in their group. Hinata and Testarossa led the way, Cardinal Nicolaus joining them out of an abundance of worry for his favorite. They were joined here by Moss and Cien, who had been summoned to the spot. They discussed their strategy as they headed for their destination.

"Moss, you don't need to fight. Just go into search mode and keep an eye out for surprise attacks."

"Yes, my lady!"

Moss was a yes-man that way. He always obeyed Testarossa, never saying more than strictly necessary. He sometimes veered away from this credo, shooting off his mouth and paying dearly for it, but after being Testarossa's chief aide for this long, he knew how to behave himself.

The "search mode" she mentioned was a kind of protective barrier. He took a Replication of himself, divided it into a large number of tiny pieces, and dispersed them in a circle with a half-mile diameter. This let him instantly react to any surprise attacks from a quarter mile away. It may not seem much

different from Universal Detect, but the detection speed was incomparably faster than that, and Moss paired that with his own analytical skills to nimbly respond to enemy strikes.

A quarter of a mile was a perfect distance for Testarossa, who could accelerate her perception up to a million times faster than normal. Even if an attack came at light speed, if Moss's "search mode" was activated, it would feel like she had at least a second to react before the moment of impact, which made it possible to deal with. No one could actually move at the speed of light, of course, and all this did was extend the perceived amount of time before impact—but that was all Testarossa needed to deal with threats.

Moss's "search mode" seemed like a perfect detection system, but it did have one flaw—being the first person to receive the enemy's attack, Moss was in the most dangerous position of all.

And no matter how much that surprise attack hurts me, I'm sure she wouldn't worry about me for a minute...

He was an obedient demon, but he still complained to high heaven in his mind.

One glance at Moss's skill and Hinata saw exactly how it worked.

"So you're wary of a surprise attack? You think all this furor is just a decoy?"

Testarossa smiled. "I think so, yes. If they bothered to strike the congress, that narrows down their potential objectives."

"Oh? Dividing the West against itself? Aiming for Rimuru directly? ...Or is the most likely target Masayuki the Hero, the new emperor?"

Hinata didn't need to think hard to come up with those theories.

Testarossa's smile widened a bit. "Well done, Lady Hinata. No wonder Sir Rimuru thinks so highly of you."

"You don't need to flatter me. That much would be clear to anyone."

"Not necessarily, but very well."

Testarossa chuckled, recalling the faces of certain people she had recently conversed with. A lot of figures in her life were far slower on the uptake,

causing her no end of stress. The very worst were those who didn't bother to listen to others. They only looked out for their own self-interests, which made it impossible to reach a consensus on anything. Some of them would announce their own imaginary agreements after their meeting was over. She had an inside view of the hassle of political negotiations, and she didn't like it.

Demons were experts at working out pacts and contracts, and they couldn't suffer fools who didn't understand those things. Testarossa would make people like that bend to her will, but it was a lot of extra trouble that she wished she could avoid. In that respect, this chat with Hinata was quite pleasant.

"You're exactly right when you said they're aiming for Sir Rimuru."

"I'm sure. Rimuru was headed over to some other disturbance the moment all of this broke out. They must have prepared a pretty big lure for him."

"They certainly did." Testarossa nodded.

They had agreed in advance that the next time Leon showed up, Rimuru would personally address him. Testarossa was told about that, but Hinata guessed it without prompting.

Since she had worked out that much already, Testarossa decided to divulge part of their plans to her. Hinata pointed out some of the potential problems with their approach, and it turned into a fun little back-and-forth debate.

I heard she was sharp, but now I wish she was serving under me. I'm sure Sir Rimuru would never allow it, though...

The fact that Rimuru allowed Hinata to omit the "Sir" appellation with him showed how special Hinata was in his life. Whenever he was with Hinata, he always reverted to his "true" self, in a way. He found it fun to be with her. Testarossa knew that, and it made her respect Hinata a great deal.

I truly do envy her...but I'm also glad this woman Sir Rimuru's introduced into his fold is no fool.

Since antiquity, there had been countless instances where the fortunes of a country shifted due to the woman its king loved. With Hinata, at least, there was no such worry needed. Besides, Rimuru and Hinata weren't lovers in the first place. Testarossa was really overthinking all of this, but a surprisingly large

number of people *did* see them along these lines. Only the two of them didn't know, you could say.

Regardless, the focus now was on the enemy's goals. Their core mission at the moment was to restore the demon lord Leon's independence and get him back to their side. They knew, however, that the enemy was aware of this goal.

"Feldway's a shrewd man. He's likely seen that it was Sir Rimuru who brought Lady Velgrynd back to her senses. And if so..."

There was no doubt in Testarossa's mind that Feldway was an extremely competent leader. He had many shortcomings as well, but there was no doubt that he had some countermeasures in mind for Rimuru.

"You have to assume that using Leon to lure Rimuru out would be a winning strategy for them."

Testarossa nodded in agreement. Rimuru couldn't have failed to see that. His broad, deep vision could see down to the bottom of the abyss—surely he had some scheme in mind to foil Feldway's schemes.

"Sir Rimuru was no doubt aware of that as he went to rescue him," she said with absolute confidence. It made Hinata raise a concerned eyebrow.

"Well, maybe they think they could beat him as long as they could call him over. They said this Michael person has True Dragon powers, but could Rimuru really defeat a monster like that?"

Her concern was understandable enough. Testarossa, of course, thought that Rimuru could never be defeated. Without actually seeing the enemy, though, there was no answer to this question yet.

But what if Feldway or Michael were waiting for Rimuru where he showed up?

Well... I'm sure he would manage somehow.

He had Diablo and Soei bodyguarding him, besides. All she could do was believe that Rimuru would make it work.

If the enemy wanted to strike at Rimuru, there wasn't much Hinata or anyone else here could do about that. They'd have to leave that to him...but what if the

enemy had other objectives as well?

"Attempting to capture Council members seems like a valid idea," said Hinata, "but it doesn't really make sense."

"I hear you. Trying to divide the Western Nations against themselves wouldn't accomplish much at this point. If this enemy is in a position to potentially defeat Rimuru, not even a coalition of nations like that would be worth caring about."

They were in agreement on that. Some other options were considered as well, but still they concluded that Masayuki was likely the enemy's number-one objective.

"So where did the emperor go?" Hinata asked. He had disappeared from the assembly hall not long after the first explosion. His guards from the Empire were likely outside, and Velgrynd the Flame Dragon was with him as well. If anything, Masayuki might be the safest out of them all.

That's why they didn't think about him too much at first, but if the enemy was actively targeting Masayuki, that was a different story.

"I bet Lady Velgrynd picked up on the enemy's intentions and evacuated him out to some other location."

Or, really, no matter what she thought the enemy was doing, Masayuki's safety came first for her. Testarossa knew that's what Velgrynd would do before anything else.

"Sounds like we're safe in assuming he's okay, then."

Hinata thought he was at least under better protection than what they could give him.

The next thing to consider was what counted as a victory for their side.

"If the enemy's after Masayuki, then we're all being used as bait here. Do they think Masayuki's going to come in and rescue us if we're about to be killed?"

Hinata was acquainted with the boy, so she knew what kind of mild-mannered softy he was. Now that he was emperor, though, he had to put himself first, and Hinata figured he was clearheaded enough to realize that.

Testarossa agreed with her. “That’s the question, isn’t it? Not that it would ever happen, but if we were somehow close to death, we can hardly expect him to swoop in and help out.”

It wasn’t even really Masayuki’s call to make. Velgrynd was with him, and she would doubtlessly put his safety first—they were both pretty sure of that.

Thus, they could make only one conclusion.

“Well, if the guys we’re about to face see us as nothing but bait, we don’t need to play along with them, do we?” said Hinata.

“Not at all,” replied Testarossa. “We’ll just take care of them all and lure out whoever’s trying to ambush us.”

Win, and all their problems were solved...as usual. So, assuming that a sneak attack was in their future, the group arrived at their destination.

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Moss was gone, which meant there were four of them left.

“Nicolaus, you stay here. If we win, you need to capture Prince Elrick at once.”

Hinata didn’t verbalize it, but if they lost, he was meant to flee really fast. Nicolaus wasn’t a weak man, but he wasn’t made for battle, either. That was Hinata’s judgment of him, and the reason behind her order.

“Very well. Good luck to you!”

The cardinal, to his credit, didn’t want to be a drag on them, either. He’d willingly be a human shield if it meant saving Hinata from danger, but here, he meekly agreed.

It was only Hinata and two companions out there on the capital’s main square. They were met by a team of fully armed knights—nearly twenty of them, excluding Elrick and Reiner.

“It’s about time you showed up! I was getting sick of waiting!”

Reiner, a man Hinata knew well, stood there with a smirk on his face. One quick look was enough to see that he was far stronger than before; his aura alone indicated that he was bursting with more energy than even she had.

Now I'm glad I left Nicolaus behind. In a real fight, I definitely wouldn't have the capacity to worry about him.

If that happened, Nicolaus would likely get dragged into the fight—and, as a normal human being, he'd never survive it. That relieved Hinata a little, as he listened to Reiner and analyzed her enemy's strength.

Elrick doesn't have any sort of aura. He's still a normal human. But the others...

The prince was just the public face of this, apparently. He was exactly as he was before his house arrest—a little rougher around the edges, maybe, but that was to be expected. His entourage, however, posed a problem.

There's nothing normal about that presence they're projecting. They've surpassed the Crusader commanders. They might even be powered up to my level...

The naked eye couldn't tell that much for sure, but Hinata had the unique skill Measurer. Using it for her analysis, she found that they were all at least Calamity-level threats. Some of them even seemed to merit a Disaster rating, putting them alongside people like Louis and Roy, and with nearly twenty of them in one place, even Hinata the Saint was facing a grueling battle.

But that wasn't the biggest problem.

Reiner is just scaring me. He's almost certainly a level above me.

She could feel a huge amount of power from him, although not as much as Testarossa next to her. This was a clear danger, and she put herself on even higher alert in response. If she could leave him to Testarossa, that'd be the safest option. But she couldn't do that, because another man here was even more dangerous.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, ain’t we lucky, Reiner? If we got two beauties here, I guess you and I won’t have to fight over them, huh?”

“No doubt, Vega. I’ll take Hinata, like we discussed. Are you still okay with that?”

“Of course. Consuming a woman *that* wimpy won’t boost my power at all. I

could enjoy her another way, but we're in the middle of a mission, sadly."

Vega was belting out his vulgar laugh. He was sitting on the edge of the main square's fountain, legs spread wide open, not bothering to hide his sinister presence. He had taken in an angel, a spiritual life-form with the light attribute, but Vega was still as evil as ever.

"There's nothing I could do against that one. Maybe I could hang on for dear life, depending on how skillful he is, but I likely have near zero chance to win."

Hinata could see that right off, and in fact, Vega's EP exceeded ten million, over ten times that of his opponent. She might have a hidden move or two of her own, but not even those would boost her chances too much. There was nobody here who could fight Vega apart from Testarossa, so that meant Hinata would have to take on Reiner.

"Heh. Disgusting. I hate it when I run into fools who don't know their place." Testarossa sweetly smiled, looking down upon Vega. Her confidence encouraged Hinata a little.

"Cocky, aren't you? All right. Allow me, head of the Seven Heavenly Generals, to show you how serious I can get!"

Vega all too easily reacted to her taunting. He and Testarossa were now paired up to duel, and Hinata was ready to keep this momentum going.

"So," she said, acting as unhurried as possible, "who's going to be *my* opponent? One glare from me seems to have glued you to the spot, so maybe you're gonna send all *these* guys at me?"

She wanted to goad Reiner into challenging her alone as well. If everyone came at her en masse, Hinata had almost no chance. Even with her and Cien together, they'd be lucky to take out ten of them at most. But if she could get rid of Reiner first, that would no doubt crush the will of the remaining knights. They likely couldn't tap into their full powers, which dramatically increased her chances of victory.

Hinata believed that Reiner would have no choice but to accept this challenge. That was because there were magic devices installed in various locations across the capital that connected to the underground shelters,

allowing people to see what was happening above ground. The stone statue towering above the fountain in the main square was one such device, so their conversation was being overheard by potentially thousands of evacuees. Elrick knew that, which was why he made that big speech here earlier, and Reiner must have known, too. If he walked away from the fight at this point, he'd never live it down his whole life—Hinata was sure he thought that way.

And her bet paid off.

"Heh-heh-heh... That's how much of a fool you think I am? I wasn't in my best condition last time, you could say...but how about I prove my worth by beating you here?"

And so Reiner and Hinata became a dueling pair as well.

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Hinata drew her sword. It was a gift from Rimuru, not the Unique-class rapier she'd had before. It had seen some upgrades since then, and Kurobe himself had become a better weaponsmith, so now it was Legend-class. Its name was Phantom Pain.

Although it was Legend-class like Moonlight, her previous sword, it wasn't quite the same quality. However, Phantom Pain allowed her to fully recreate her Dead End Rainbow finisher. Back when she dueled with Rimuru, the sword she had at the time could fully destroy her opponent's spiritual body after striking for the seventh time—but *this* one could destroy their astral body as well. That made it more powerful and durable, of course, putting it above Moonlight in ease of use.

"Ready to take me on?" Hinata asked.

"That's *my* line, you fool!" Reiner roared.

And then the battle began.

Hinata, as usual, began by analyzing her enemy's strength, pinpointing all his weak points. Reiner might have looked human at first glance, but his essence seemed to be that of some other creature. The way he carried his body proved it—apart from walking, he could effortlessly glide horizontally, or propel himself up and then lunge right at you. There might be some secret hidden in the soles

of his shoes, but what caught her eye was his shoulders. They seemed to bulge upward in an odd way, and clearly something was concealed in there.

"Die!!"

With a great swing, Reiner slashed downward at Hinata. She spun to the side to avoid it. That dangerous premonition she had turned out to be correct.

His sword seems well beyond a Legend power-wise. It was God-class all along...

She had no idea how or where he got it, but now she had more than a glimpse of Reiner's power. Now she was even at a weapon disadvantage with him. If they had a proper swordfight, Hinata's Phantom Pain could wind up shattering in her hand.

There was, in fact, a large gap in existence points between them. Hinata was a Saint with a so-called "hero's egg" inside of her, but she had given that up to Chloe before it could hatch. Her Saint-class powers were still there, but in terms of EP, she was at just over a million. That was more than strong enough for a human being, putting her about at the level of King Gazel, but Reiner was closer to two million, a long way away.

Still, that was only in terms of physical strength. Hinata also had all those memories and experiences from traveling with Chloe, and all of that was still present in her pure skill. That skill difference was like night and day the last time she fought Reiner—add that to the mix, and despite her concerns about her weapon holding out, Hinata had grown far stronger than him.

Once she made it a one-on-one fight against him, Hinata had all but assured her own victory. But that applied only if Reiner stuck to his knightly code of chivalry and fought fairly.

That was the one thing she overlooked. She assumed that Reiner was a lowlife, but the levels of cowardice he'd stoop to surpassed even Hinata's imagination. She might be cautious enough to never let her guard down, but some people out there hit rock bottom with their foolishness and just keep on going down from there. That's who Reiner was. Whether it was his innate nature or all those experiments warping his mind, he didn't know, and he didn't care. What matters is that Reiner never intended to stage a duel with Hinata

from the beginning.

After several back-and-forth clashes, Hinata was still having little trouble dodging Reiner's sword. Then, striking at just the right time, she knocked Reiner's blade out of his hand, smashing it against the ground. That gave her the victory, but it also gave Reiner an opening.

"Heh. All bark and no bite, huh? If you want to surrender—"

She was ready to arrest Reiner for treason and haul him into court, a show of mercy that she really didn't need to offer. It doomed her.

Reiner had fallen to the ground at a spot where his knights were standing behind Hinata. As if aiming for that moment, they all attacked her from the rear. Hinata, of course, had Magic Sense at the ready to deal with sneak attacks, and Moss had used Thought Communication to alert her as well. But Reiner was the one to watch out for, and she just didn't have time to deal with this rabble.

This is why Hinata assumed she had no chance if it was her against the whole crowd. She was forced to accept being attacked, to some extent—but it all happened in an instant.

"Lady Hinata!"

Before Cien could scream, a cloud of light rays slammed into Hinata. Reiner, roaring with laughter, followed it up by striking the final blow. There was no sword in his hand, but his body was fully covered in God-class mail. The shoulders were left exposed, though, and from them, two pairs of thin, tough hands covered in more God-class armor sprouted out. They transformed into four spears, each of which penetrated one of Hinata's limbs.

Hinata smashed against the ground, the sword falling from her hand. She didn't have the strength to hold it, much less stand back up.

"Ha-ha-ha! All that bravado you were giving me, and I guess *you* were all bark and no bite, huh?! Someone as cocky as you *deserves* to be sprawled out like that!"

Reiner kept laughing—a shrill, rankling cackle.

"You! You call that a fair duel?!"

Cien's angry shout was met with a snicker from Reiner. "Criminals don't have any human rights, okay? But I'm a merciful man. If she cries and begs for forgiveness, maybe I'll think about postponing her execution date for a little while."

His lips curled up in a sinister grin. He didn't wait for Hinata to respond before continuing his speech.

"Of course, I *do* need her to show a little gratitude to me..."

That wicked smile seemed to telegraph all the vulgar thoughts in his mind. His knights flashed similarly wicked grins.

"Hya-ha-ha! Now *that's* what the best in the West oughtta look like!"

"So much for that witch's unbeaten record, huh?"

"Nah, we've just gotten too strong, is all. It only looked like a close match because Sir Reiner was toying with her."

They weren't shy about speaking their minds. Maybe they were always like that; it was impossible to know. But clearly, they were all utter fools.

Hinata was hard to look at in her current state. The back of her Holy Spirit Armor was torn to shreds, the bare skin underneath appearing badly burned. The tendons of her arms and legs had been severed, making it impossible for her to move them. But despite that dreadful state, her sweat-soaked face remained as beautiful as ever. Her eyes never lost their shine, and her imposing expression revealed the strength of her will. She had not given up yet.

"Now! Start crying! I want to see you beg, or I'll kill you right now, all right?!"

Reiner was shouting, eyes bloodshot with madness. The sight of Hinata inert on the ground had triggered a rush of sadistic pleasure in his brain.

He had long since lost all sense of reason. Someone like Hinata was akin to a flower on a high cliff, always out of reach. Being able to trample over such an exalted Saint surpassed any pleasure Reiner had ever felt before. No matter how much of a self-kidding fool he was, he knew that he was inferior to Hinata. In fact, he realized it the moment they faced each other. No matter how much he outclassed her strength-wise, there was no overturning the difference in

sheer fighting level. Her swordsmanship alone was far above his.

Being confronted with all this so vividly almost drove him mad with jealousy. That was why he didn't hesitate to carry out the trap he set up in advance, just in case. It didn't go exactly as he first planned it, but it certainly worked out well.

Lucky thing her face wasn't hurt, either. Such a beautiful, pristine face... Come on! Lemme see it twist in pain! Let me hear you cry out with it!

Reiner could feel his power surging, his blood boiling. Just the thought of how pathetic Hinata looked made this dark, thick ball of joy well up from the depths of his stomach. Now that it had come to this, his victory was truly unassailable—and now he was going to hurt Hinata so much that she'd beg for her life. Then there'd be another sort of fun waiting for him...which made killing her seem like such a waste.

"C'mon! You better hurry up, or I really *will* kill you."

His horrifying voice delivered the ultimatum. He was serious about it. He *did* want the thrill of tormenting her, but her strength was the real thing. If this wasn't enough to break her heart, he should have just severed her limbs entirely.

He was a coward at heart, so he was always thinking carefully, wondering if he forgot about anything. Even if Hinata was somehow calling for help, it'd take a while for anyone to show up, and he doubted a force strong enough to stand up to his team even existed. Besides, if he sensed that coming, he could just give the order to attack then. He held an absolutely superior position here; there was no possible way to lose.

Hinata kept staring at Reiner, never replying. Her eyes told him that she hadn't lost yet.

Damn, you really are a cocky girl, aren't you? I'll lop off one of your legs, then...!

Growing increasingly frustrated, he raised his sword, then swung it down toward Hinata...

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Hinata was in dire straits, but Testarossa didn't have time to help her. Handling Vega took everything she had, and Hinata's eyes told her that she hadn't given up yet. All she could do was believe in her.

She's one of the few people who fought Sir Rimuru to a draw. I doubt she's going to bow out that easily.

If she did, then so be it. Rimuru would be furious, but Testarossa hadn't been ordered to protect Hinata. She may or may not feel obliged to help her, but it didn't seem like that's what Hinata wanted at the moment. Aiding her anyway might even hurt her pride—and, again, incur Rimuru's wrath.

As Testarossa saw it, if she was going to forcibly offer Hinata her help, it still wouldn't be too late if she waited until her defeat was set in stone. So, without further deliberation, she focused on Vega for now.

He was, after all, beyond a handful. His magicule count was several times greater than Testarossa's, but if killing him was her only objective, that seemed simple enough to her. That, however, turned out to be a gross misjudgment.

This guy's digging his roots underground, isn't he? He's absorbing corpses to make his damage disappear, maybe?

She was correct. Vega's skill had spread itself throughout Englesia's capital, taking in and absorbing the corpses of the monsters being defeated across town. They didn't increase his power, but it was a good way to replace his damaged (or missing) parts and replenish his energy. Through that, Vega made himself close to immortal.

This is so infuriatingly annoying...

And she meant it, too. She might be able to destroy him by using nuclear magic to raze a wide swath of the city. To do that, though, she needed a full grasp of Vega in his current state—a pain even in the best of times, but it was impossible here. They were fighting in the capital, and anything that led to the destruction of the city was forbidden as a rule. She was permitted to run, but resorting to any means possible to win was off the table.

Thanks to that, killing Vega was almost unfeasible. She couldn't even beat him to the point of defeat, really. If she did, there was a good chance he'd try

feeding on the evacuees who fled underground to regenerate himself. For now, he still had his own monster-fied crew to absorb, which was enough for him so far—but if he ran through all of those, Vega might resort to any means necessary after that.

For Testarossa, it was like being forced into a battle she had no way of winning. And what made it even more annoying:

“Hey! Hey, what’s wrong, huh? After all that big talk, you ain’t nothing special at *all*, are ya?!”

His attitude was way out of line.

It takes a lot to make me want to kill someone from the bottom of my heart like this. He should be proud of that, at least.

Internally, she was furious. But she was also walking a tightrope.

She flicked her flame whip to toy with Vega, thinking two or three moves ahead. As long as she couldn’t bring this to a definitive end, she had to keep the stalemate going. Breaking this deadlock would require some kind of external factor—and since it seemed clear that the enemy still had some of its force hidden, she and her allies were at a palpable disadvantage. If anything could tip the scales in her favor, it was Velgrynd—but she’d never abandon Masayuki.

It’s probably Sir Masayuki that Feldway is after. Lady Velgrynd isn’t naïve enough to do exactly what the enemy wants.

She must have picked up on Feldway’s intentions, and so Testarossa assumed that she wouldn’t come in to help them. But at the same time, she knew they were being treated as bait to lure Masayuki out. This stalemate was exactly what Feldway and his cronies were hoping for.

This is so frustrating. I know what’s going on, but I just have to live with it? Carrera and Ultima seem to have their hands full, too, and none of our other top leaders are in a position to move. If only someone like Zegion was here—ah, but Sir Rimuru would never allow that.

She knew via the emergency contacts from the Control Center that her colleagues were all struggling at the moment. That center was in battle mode right now, after declaring a state of emergency. They were preparing for an

enemy invasion, so Zegion, the keystone of their defense, couldn't move from his post.

But the only free member of their team who could make a difference in this fight right now was Zegion—that was it. The others were far from weak, but they couldn't turn the tide here. There *was* that superpower Veldora, yes, but not even *he* would be foolish enough to leave the labyrinth when Michael was clearly after him.

In other words, no reinforcements were coming. The only conclusion Testarossa could draw was that she had to figure something out on her own. But then something unexpected happened...

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Reiner raised his sword, then swung it down toward Hinata. And just as he did:

Tiiing!

With a clear, metallic sound, it was caught in midair by another sword. Or not a sword, actually. The ravishing lady was carrying a feathered fan, something that could hardly be considered a weapon. The name of this woman, her shining blue hair shimmering in the air, was Velgrynd the Flame Dragon.

"Hinata was her name, yes? My foolish brother stated that the skills you've devised and improved were proven to affect True Dragons as well, right? Isn't that true, Testarossa?"

If so, she was not-too-subtly implying, then there's no way she would lose a battle like this. Her eyes were on Testarossa as she continued to ignore Reiner.

"Yes, Lady Velgrynd, that is true. Honestly, I didn't expect you to come here for us."

"Hee-hee-hee! I'm sure. I had no intention of butting in myself, but Masayuki, you know..."

Velgrynd turned toward Masayuki with her affectionate eyes. And there, before her—

"Are you okay, Hinata?!"

"Ah—"

—Masayuki had his hand right on top of Hinata's breast.

The man himself appeared to be making a rather bold move here, but internally he was panicking.

Wh-what just happened to me...?

It had occurred so suddenly, Masayuki lost all sense of reality.

And what's this feeling on my right hand...?

There was a soft, squishy sensation being transmitted from his right palm. Only then did Masayuki's brain begin to understand what it was.

It all started when Masayuki was taken aback by the alarming sight of Hinata. He tried to help her up, but in the process, his foot managed to find a pebble in the exact position to get himself tripped up. Thanks to that, Masayuki fell forward, pushing Hinata down on the ground—and, regardless of his intentions, his right hand had cupped Hinata's chest. If he was looking to cop a feel, he certainly chose an unlikely way to do it.

As if that wasn't enough, he had a close look at Hinata's bare face, now that they were so close that their lips were almost touching. Her wide-open eyes were shimmering like a pair of dark purple crystals. The bridge of her nose exhibited a soft, gradual incline, and her lips were full and vivacious. Her skin was clear and beautiful as well, without a trace of makeup on it.

Boy, is she pretty. No wonder Rimuru can't resist her.

The sight was all Masayuki needed to escape from reality. And no wonder. Hinata's breath was tickling his nostrils, her sweet smell making his brain melt. If it hadn't been for all his experience being closely embraced by Velgrynd, he might've fainted from the rush of joy.

It seemed like a lifetime to him, but it lasted less than a second. Masayuki's brain rebooted, and then he realized there wasn't any time to keep staring at each other. Hinata's eyes widened in surprise, which Masayuki kind of expected. She's probably thinking something like *What the hell is he doing?* or the like. He feared what would happen once she came to her senses. A

fearsome gauntlet was awaiting him, no doubt. The thought terrorized him.

"W-wait, it's not like that!"

It's not! It's not! he kept screaming internally. He stood up, his face pale, and tried to come up with an excuse, but—

Huh? Just now...

Feeling an impact on his back, Masayuki realized that something had just crossed over both of them. Then a shuddering fear engulfed him.

"...Masayuki?!" Velgrynd screamed.

She wasn't angry with him. Her voice demonstrated sincere, frantic concern.

What just happened? In fact, someone had tried to attack Masayuki at the very moment he was falling down. Velgrynd was the only one there to sense it; not even Testarossa could detect the attack. After all, she was too busy checking with Moss about what was going on.

There was no time to warn him, but Masayuki just happened to dodge it with that fall. If he hadn't tripped on that pebble, that surely would've been the end of his life. Lucky stiff. He always had good fortune like that, and it paid off in flashy fashion this time.

Oh, wow! Was I being targeted just now?!

Realizing this a moment later, Masayuki's face went pale for another reason. But he didn't mind, after what he apparently just got away with.

Then Hinata moved. Standing still when an attack was underway was as dangerous as it was foolish, so she rolled over, holding Masayuki in her arms. It moved him emotionally. Feeling the happy sensation of being embraced like this, feeling Hinata's silky, pleasant-feeling hair on his cheek... It was so ticklish, so fragrant, that he wanted to escape reality again. But it just wasn't going to happen...or, really, it wasn't the time for that.

"Tsk. I can't believe...you dodged my assassination strike..."

The astonished voice belonged to a man in black, pure white wings on his back—Arius. The unique skill Murderer—the progenitor of the ultimate gift Sandalphon, Lord of Judgment—contained a skill known as Conceal Presence.

Anyone under its influence was impossible to detect until they engaged in some kind of activity, and so here he was, hiding with Feldway this whole time, waiting for his chance.

Just now, Arius had made his surefire assassination attempt the moment Masayuki appeared on the scene...and it failed miserably. He readied himself for a second try, but now two men were standing in front of him.

"If you're an enemy of Masayuki, you're an enemy of mine."

"He said it. You're not laying a finger on His Majesty."

Venom and Minitz were now in the battle. Bernie and Jiwu appeared a few moments later.

"I was charged with protecting His Majesty, but I completely overlooked this assassin. I must pay for this mistake later—"

"No, no, it's fine!"

They, too, had been watching over Masayuki from a hidden location, but they never realized that Arius was there the whole time. It wasn't really their fault, but it was certainly an embarrassing blunder for them.

Still, Masayuki wanted everyone to just forget about it. If he didn't, they might've started talking about paying for this disgrace with their lives or something, which would be a huge pain in the ass. So he told them to just focus on the enemies, trying to put all this behind him. Now there were four people here ready to face off against Arius for Masayuki's sake.

So the battle underwent a reset.

Testarossa and Moss were more vigilant now. Cien was continuing with his lone battle against the knights. Hinata was struggling to somehow stand up, and the still-bewildered Masayuki found himself lending her a shoulder. Venom, along with some of the Empire's top leaders, had rushed in to protect him. Nicolaus had called Velgrynd and Masayuki in—or, really, ran into them on the way here—and seeing Hinata like this made him fly into a rage. Velgrynd, meanwhile, was smiling brightly as always.

Meanwhile, Reiner looked quite frustrated about failing to finish off Hinata.

Vega was smiling, finding all of this incredibly amusing. The attack Arius was most proud of had failed. Feldway was massively peeved, seeing his perfect plans fall apart at the last minute. Reiner's knights were still there, unscathed.

All in all, with Masayuki and Velgrynd joining in, this fight suddenly got a lot more complicated.



The capital's residents anxiously listened to the broadcast. If they were lucky enough to be in a shelter with a video screen, their eyes were all on it.

Reiner's statements weren't making much sense, but if Prince Elrick was siding with him, there was no doubting who Reiner was allied with. Yet as the battle raged, Reiner's brutality turned off much of the audience. It was a cowardly, vile sort of fight, most unbecoming of a knight. What's more, it wasn't even Reiner's knights trying to defend the capital from those monsters—it was the Hinata-led Crusaders and Temple Knights.

Regardless of who was telling the truth, people wanted to place their trust on Hinata and her team. Some of them still supported Elrick, but their numbers were rapidly dwindling.

Then, when Hinata fell into deep trouble, everyone watching prayed for her safety. That wish was granted with the appearance of a certain savior. When his glowing figure appeared, the audiences around the screens began to whisper.

"The Hero..."

"Th-the Hero...?"

"It's the Hero!"

"S-Sir Masayuki! Masayuki the Hero has returned!"

"Yes! He's returned...as an emperor!"

And it didn't take long for the chorus to ring out, louder and louder...

"Maaa-sa-yu-ki! Maaa-sa-yu-kiiiii!!"

The ground rumbled as the people cheered across all the underground shelters.

But it wasn't just the common folk engaged in this. The surviving royalty did the same thing, as did the kingdom's influential nobles.

None of them were foolish enough not to know whether Elrick was in the right. Hinata had been a guardian of humankind, an upholder of law and order across the land; she had no motive whatsoever to kill the king. Plus, the World Congress was in full swing, and the security apparatus in the capital where it was held was nothing short of perfect. Even if someone really *did* want to target the king, there was no way they'd take action now. If anyone dared to try it, they'd have to be a force seeking to plunge all of human society into chaos.

Even REG, the "Three Wise Drunks" group that ruled the seedy underbelly of the world, was working on the down-low to ensure the World Congress was a success. If human society wasn't prosperous and expanding, the underworld had no future, either—a very logical fact, if you thought about it, one that convinced even the upper echelons of the kingdom to join hands with them.

As a result of all that, anyone who tried an attack like this must have been totally unaware of the situation in the capital. That certainly applied to Prince Elrick, being kept in his tower day and night—and that made him a prime suspect in this conspiracy.

"This has to be perplexing for our people, but Sir Masayuki's certainly helped them calm down, hasn't he?"

"It's a good break for us...even if it does put us in a difficult position."

"Indeed. If the ringleader escapes and we have to rely on some other nation for help, we're bound to be raked over the coals for it."

"The palace knights have been routed, but we've got other forces left, don't we?"

"Deploy the capital's armies. Everything we have on hand."

"""Yes, sir!"""

Now Englesia's most powerful people were scheming to wrap all this up immediately. Masayuki was a Hero, but he was also emperor of his own country. They couldn't turn to him for this, so it was time for a little sweat equity.

REG was also on the move.

"Our three leaders don't want this land to fall into chaos. It'd be stupid to waste our strength on something like this. I'll go out alone with my Musketeers."

Glenda Attley had made up her mind. She had her hands on a certain set of weapons—test items developed in secret by Tempest, never meant to see the light of day. These had *somewhat* found their way into the hands of REG—and, in particular, the Musketeers, a team led by Glenda herself.

She was proud of this group, composed of surgically enhanced soldiers from the Empire. Each of them ranked an A in combat individually, and they were skilled in handling all manner of arms, including stuff as vicious as small anti-tank rifles and portable Gatling guns. The ammunition used for them wasn't the normal type, either; it was made from hazardous materials that required specialized knowledge to handle. Its power, of course, spoke for itself.

"Now, let's get going!"

"""Yeahhh!!"""

"Good luck to you."

"Even in death, your soul will surely be reborn as a magic-born with the blessings of God!"

I didn't really ask for that, thought Glenda, but she just smiled. Her colleague was just trying to be nice to her—and with that, she took her force of under a hundred away to battle.



Masayuki was daunted at the whirl of events around him. He had been completely left behind, and now Hinata was making him feel even more trapped.

"So how long are you going to keep feeling me up?" she asked.

Bwohh?!

He choked on his own spit a little.

I wasn't feeling you up! I just brushed against them a little! was the excuse he was prepared to give, but being face-to-face with Hinata and seeing all that beauty made him tense up.

There were lots of pretty girls in Tempest, but that was more of a non-human type of beauty. Velgrynd was the same way—well beyond the human realm. Hinata, meanwhile, had a style he was very familiar with, having grown up in Japan and all. Becoming a Saint had refined her beauty even more, but she still had a unique sort of charm that felt relaxing to him.

But Masayuki wasn't about to let looks deceive him. Rimuru had told him again and again—whatever you do, don't make Hinata angry. Even Veldora had echoed his agreement. "*She holds a grudge,*" he and Rimuru had said, their faces deadly serious. "*She'll get revenge on you, no matter what it takes.*"

Any poorly advised moves made against someone who once made both a demon lord and a True Dragon cry would, to say the least, be trouble for him. Masayuki understood that well, so he hurriedly jumped to the side and apologized to Hinata.

She, by the way, was keeping calm, but her mind was racing just as hard. She had never had someone fondle her breasts like this before, so she wasn't sure how to react. If this was on purpose, appropriate action had to be taken—but in Masayuki's case, it was clearly more of an act of God than anything. That made it a tough call for Hinata, and thanks to that, Masayuki lived to see another day.

"S-sorry about that. I—I swear I didn't do it on purpose..."

He couldn't think of any good excuses. Hinata interrupted him midway.

"I'm kidding. I know you couldn't help that."

She was all smiles with him, but Masayuki couldn't stop the cold sweat running down his spine. He still had no idea what was happening to him. His brain couldn't keep up. He wanted to say as much, but doing that seemed like it'd seal his fate for good, so all he could do was keep quiet.

"Oh, just a little touch isn't going to make anyone *that* angry, Masayuki. You can feel *me* up anytime you like, you know."

Velgrynd was laughing the whole time as she dropped that bombshell.

Masayuki couldn't find it in him to say no. He was a young man, after all. But he sincerely hoped they could pursue this topic somewhere quieter later. More private, too.

Hinata, still glaring at them, grunted in pain as she tried to get up.

"L-Lady Hinata!"

Cardinal Nicolaus rushed over to her, picking her up. Her arms and legs were still badly injured, making it impossible to stay on her feet.

"Let me heal you at once!"

Despite his half-panicked voice, Nicolaus performed High Healing, a holy magic, in superb fashion. Hinata, instantly recovered, zoomed back to the front line.

So, with that temporary reset, the battle began anew.

"L-Lady Hinata...are you all right? Perhaps you should leave this to Sir Masayuki...?"

Hinata brushed off Nicolaus's suggestion. Masayuki was startled for a moment, but Hinata clearly wasn't going to take the cardinal up on the offer, which relieved him greatly. He had already been told not to risk his neck out here, so he had no choice but to ask Hinata to do her best.

Whether she was aware of that or not, Hinata smiled a little. There was a hint of cruelty to it, like this dashing woman in male military dress was relishing the reputation she had gained. She was, in fact, furious with Reiner, but even more upset about letting her guard down around him.

"No problem at all. I'm done just watching from the wings."

It was her declaring victory in advance. After all the torture this opponent had dealt her, there was no need for any more sympathy.

Hinata had completely anticipated and predicted her path to victory now. She looked at Reiner, giving him a benevolent smile—but her eyes remained cold.

"Now then... I'm about to fight for keeps, so get ready."

"D-damn you, criminal! First you murder the king, then you speak of besting

me next... Well, I'm done playing, too! I'll kill you, you coward! You'd never have what it takes to defeat me!"

"That's a funny thing to say. Aren't *you* the coward here?"

Reiner gritted his teeth. Nothing seemed to annoy him more than having the truth pointed out to him.

"Tch! I don't think you understand. I was just going easy on you because you're a woman, you see? Being all gentle so I wouldn't kill you by accident. And *that's* the attitude you give me? You'll pay for that."

The agitation was making the veins in his eyes visible. He was on the verge of having a mental episode. Hinata, anticipating this, kept goading him on.

"Hohh, will I? Well, have fun trying to make me."

She would no longer be caught off guard. She knew now there was nothing chivalrous about this knight; there was no reason to offer mercy to sleazebags like him. Reiner, perhaps understanding this, was now howling at her, his entire face red.

"Don't bother crying for mercy now! If that's what you want, I'll let you have it! I'll slash you, and slash you, and slash you, again and again!"

His only goal now was to crush Hinata with overwhelming force, showing off his strength to his knights and the rest of the onlookers. Expecting sensible judgment from him now was impossible. Hinata, spotting this, gave Reiner a cold look, not a trace of kindness in her contempt-filled eyes.

Reiner rushed toward her. Hinata, in no hurry, readied her Phantom Pain.

Their swords crossed.

"Hyaaaaa-ha-ha-haaaaaaaa! Die, die, die, diiiiiie!!"

The madness was clear in his shouting. The sword he swung down easily had the power to kill...but it could no longer work on Hinata. Even Phantom Pain would have shattered if it took the blow directly, but there was no need to take him head-on in the first place. Nor there was any need to hold back. Reiner might have outclassed Hinata in physical ability, but it wasn't a problem for her. She nimbly dodged his strike, aimed at an opening in his armor, and thrust.

“Gaaaaaaahh?!”

Reiner screamed. Intense pain rushed through his body, snapping him back to reality a little.

What...what is this pain?! I—I gained so much power! This sort of halfhearted attack shouldn’t work on me at all!

Serving under Vega, he had gained the powers of an officer-level mystic. With the God-class equipment he had been given, there was no way he could lose to the likes of Hinata. Just feeling pain at all was seemingly impossible. The Silence Pain skill he owned failed to work, which was bewildering. The damage to him wasn’t actually that serious, but this pain showed no signs of abating.

Reiner gritted his teeth. Earlier, he thought he simply wasn’t sufficiently warmed up yet. Now he began to show serious concern for his own safety.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee... Did that hurt? Well, go ahead! Wail for me some more! Entertain me!”

Hinata seemed like she was in a trancelike state, licking her lips in a bewitching manner. The gesture suited her well, reminiscent of a creature higher up on the food chain preying on something below them. Nicolaus was looking on, the rapture clear on his face, but it turned off Masayuki immediately. That lip-licking move might earn her a passionate fanbase among those with certain fetishes, but for Masayuki, that was a no-go zone.

She’s so scary! Remind me to never piss off Hinata again...

Now he was sure of it. Rimuru was right.

But, not caring about her audience’s appraisals, Hinata tried another attack on Reiner. He desperately tried to defend himself, fearing the sword that delivered such incomprehensibly severe pain before. But this wasn’t the kind of easygoing attack he could find an escape from.

“Time to die! ...Dead End Rainbow!!”

She stabbed repeatedly at Reiner, every move as fluid and precise as the last one. Nerve-racking pain accompanied every strike, punishing Reiner.

This...this can’t hurt me! If I just hold out against the pain... Hraarrrrrgh?!

But as far gone as he was mentally, there was no way he could endure. His physical body may have been strengthened many times over, but his mental strength hadn't caught up. He absorbed a mystic, a spiritual life-form, but that didn't mean his mental armor had toughened up at all.

"H-help me, Vega! Th-the pain won't go away!!"

Reiner tried to heal the damage he sustained, but the wounds in his heart wouldn't heal so readily. He didn't have a skill for that, of course, and now that the pain put him in a state of panic, the severe fear and suffering cost him the ability to make clear decisions. That, and because his spiritual body had expanded so much, and in such an unplanned way, the amount of time he spent in pain was dragging on and on.

He almost began to feel that death would be preferable to this.

*

At the start of the battle, Venom was the main opponent of Arius. The other three were devoted wholly to support as they kept him in check.

Masayuki was standing with his arms crossed, watching Venom take him on—although, really, he was more just spacing out than watching much of anything. There'd be an occasional flash of light or the like to indicate that the fight was still on, but for Masayuki, it was impossible to understand what was going on in the battle. His eyes just couldn't keep up with the speed, making spectating a lost cause. All he could do was pretend to watch.

...I mean, is there anything else I could do?

He had left the fighting completely to others, not wanting to get in anyone's way. By now, he knew exactly what he was capable of. It was almost a sense of enlightenment he had attained here, the fear gradually leaving him.

Still, he couldn't *not* be scared standing here, so he decided to recall a happy memory to drown out the terror. Yes, the feeling that still remained on his right hand—the memory of that softness, that warmth in Hinata's breasts.

I mean, I'm sure Gryn would let me rub hers without even asking, but that's not the same thing. I'd be too afraid of what'd come after that with her. It's just...not for me.

In that respect, Hinata was simply wonderful. She scared him quite a bit, but even she was willing to write it off as an act of God. There was no aftermath to worry about now—he could have been perfectly happy, no concern at all about what would happen later.

And although he may not have noticed, his joyful mood was having a tremendous impact on the entire square. His skill Lucky Field granted extra luck in response to his wishes, a great blessing upon everybody who was on his side. It was Lord of Heroes in full swing—his ultimate skill, the closest anyone had gotten to the truth behind the entire world.

Thus, Venom and his friends had a relative advantage in their battle. Venom was calmly attacking, like this was no different from a stroll in the main square.

“Doom Enemy!”

Venom had long nails on both hands, painted jet-black. Their surface began to finely vibrate, generating waves that could split any kind of matter. Arius avoided them with a click of his tongue, but that wasn’t the end of it.

“Nice try.”

With that whispered rejoinder, Minitz took aim at the now off-balance Arius. He leaned his body over in a most unnatural fashion, ignoring the laws of gravity and inertia as he rushed forward like a cannonball. The unique skill Oppressor let him finely adjust his trajectory, creating a path free of obstacles which brought him straight toward Arius. Then he compressed and exploded the air beneath his feet to gain thrust.

In an instant, Minitz had reached maximum speed. Without giving Arius a chance to prepare, he delivered a barrage of blows.

“You little ants think you can fight me...!”

Arius, who received a headbutt to the jaw and a knee to the gut, glared at Minitz, enraged. He wasn’t given the time to do it for long.

“I’m a good assassin, too.”

A black flash of light erupted, slashing across Arius. Jiwu, who had made herself perfectly invisible, struck the moment Arius’s attention was diverted

toward Minitz. He tried to pull back, but then a lightning-infused spear pierced through him. It was Bernie's finishing blow, a mixture of lancing technique and compressed Thunder Rain.

"Don't forget about me, too!"

He might have lost his ultimate enchantment Alternative, but he *did* have it once. And Bernie was so intent on trying to serve Emperor Masayuki that he had grown able to reproduce his former power to some extent. Jiwu was the same way.

Incidentally, Minitz was also stronger than before; he made no secret about his love of fighting, and the experience he gained along the way had led to new breakthroughs. It seemed to be the rule here that the more abnormal a personality you had, the stronger you became—maybe it has something to do with the strength of one's will, Bernie thought, but he wasn't stupid enough to bring up the idea in public. Besides, he liked having strong friends. They reassured him.

So the four of them were waging a pretty decent fight against Arius, a man they couldn't hope to compare with in existence points. Even when Arius started going at it for real, the trend didn't change at all.

"Heh... I don't have time to play around here. It's time to get serious. I hope you're ready."

He was kind enough to announce it himself, and the next thing they knew, he had two daggers in his hands. This God-class dual-wield approach made the most of Arius's melee combat expertise.

Annoying little bastards... Hardly even competent at all, but here they are, right in my way...

It was incredibly provoking for Arius. He had no doubt these daggers would help him dispatch those pesky flies without breaking a sweat. It became clear by the next attack that he let his guard down.

He slashed at Venom with divine speed, cutting off the black nail that just barely caught the blade. Even vibration-driven waves that cut through all matter were powerless before a God-class weapon—or so it seemed.

Arius kept his casual smile on as he looked at Venom, like he already had this in the bag, like he was staring at an ant on the sidewalk. *That*, his face seemed to say, *is all the power you have*—but now that face was twisted up at the impossible situation that suddenly arose. Pain shot through both of his arms.

“Ha-ha! Look at *that*, huh?! Pretty lucky that I got both of them in!”

Venom’s laugh made Arius tense up his face. Just as he said, there was one black claw embedded in each of his arms. Arius was proud of how superior he was in this battle, looking down from above at Venom and his team...but now they had drawn blood against him. He hadn’t been too serious about this fight before, but now was different. He was sure he hadn’t been caught off guard, either. It made him start to panic a little.

“Were you aiming for that...?!”

“Oh, kind of. I was relying on luck a bit there, but I guess luck’s on my side today, huh? I would’ve been happy if even one of them scratched you.”

Venom certainly wasn’t being shy about this. But it was true. Every day he worked with Masayuki, luck seemed to be in love with him. It wasn’t the kind of luck that made him popular with women or a winner at the gambling table, so he couldn’t sense it very much—he just had this impression that everything he did went better than anticipated.

“Screwing with me, huh...? Don’t expect any mercy now.”

“Didn’t you just *say* you were gonna fight for real a moment ago, moron?”

He wasn’t shy about egging on the angry Arius, either.

Venom was offering himself as bait right now. If this made Arius open himself up to attack more, it’d make things easier for his friends. He might have been mocking him, but Venom hadn’t been letting his guard down at all, quickly regenerating his severed black claws and focusing his attention on his opponent’s moves.

That much was no wonder—Venom was never one to believe in his own power too much. He had been reborn as a demon only a relatively short time ago, and with the dominant presence of Diablo teaching him exactly where he stood, he had acquired the habit of evaluating himself from a thoroughly

objective point of view.

I don't like my chances here. It's all good if my luck holds out, but I'm completely outclassed in ability. I'd really like to swap places with Bernie and focus on attacking instead of being a decoy...

Venom was assigned this decoy role because everyone decided he was the least likely to die. Bernie was usually the main tank of this group, so they were mixing it up a bit with their assignments today, with Venom serving as a kind of dodge-tanker. If one of Arius's strikes hit any of them, it was over, so Venom—who'd never be insta-killed, no matter what—was seen as their best bet for that position.

Of course, if I die, it's gonna take a few hundred years to revive, you realize. I really don't wanna go through that.

He sharpened his nerves as he had that thought. His companions, Bernie included, knew that he was actually walking a fine line here. So they focused on teamwork, not letting themselves get worked up.

Minitz's job was to keep breaking out flashy strikes that distracted Arius's attention. Whether any of them worked or not, he was obligated to keep up the attack, come hell or high water. The best defense is a good offense, as they say, and it was Minitz's barrage that allowed Venom to fend so well for himself.

Meanwhile, Bernie's Inhibit Cognition skill was minimizing—but not canceling out—the effects of Arius's ultimate skill Sandalphon. That gave Minitz an easier time landing his attacks. That wasn't all, of course; he also functioned as an auxiliary tank for the party as needed, making sure Minitz had as much space to roam as possible.

Finally, Jiwu was the party's ace in the hole, in the truest sense of the word. Her concealment skills differed from Arius's in that she could only hide herself... but that was enough for her. It goes without saying how handy this was in battle. The moment she disappeared from Arius's sight, she'd activate her skill, using it alongside her small stature to remain perfectly hidden. Then, right when Arius left himself the most open, she'd go in for a lethal strike. Arius sadly wasn't weak enough to go down with one blow like that, but the damage was still stacking up.

Truly, every member of this fighting force had a meaningful role to play—and that, combined with the impact of Masayuki's Lucky Field, created a combo that couldn't have possibly worked better. Arius dismissed his opponents as low-level also-rans, but unbeknownst to him, he had fallen into a very deep pitfall.

No... How could they push me like this?!

As vexing as this was, the situation was only getting worse. But he didn't pick up on that, letting his foes bat him around, and the clock just kept on ticking. If he didn't do something, he'd surely incur Feldway's wrath soon—he was fully aware of that, and it was making him more agitated and impatient by the moment.

*

Reiner rolled around on the ground, screaming. No one offered to help him.

Hinata had just defeated him—but Feldway was still alive as well. Velgrynd was engaging him, yet as long as Castle Guard was active, no attack would work on him.

Moss and Cien, too, were doing a surprisingly fine job holding back Reiner's knights, both of them calm and composed as they did their duty. Moss would keep them all in line, Cien would force a one-on-one situation, and Nicolaus would casually offer a helping hand now and then. His magic stopped the enemy in their tracks and provided backup for Cien's own strikes, helping them gain an edge in this fight.

Arius was close to his wit's end as well, so nobody on Feldway's side had the time to think about Reiner. Even if they did, perhaps letting him be was the right decision anyway. As proof of that, Vega—the man Reiner was begging for by name—was smiling from ear to ear as he took on Testarossa.

"You don't need to help your friend at all?" she asked Vega.

"Ha! He's my lackey, not my friend. But, yes, now might be a good time..."

Testarossa didn't like the sound of that.

This guy's after something...

She had picked up on Vega's habit of using corpses to recover his damage

during battle. But she had a feeling this wasn't the whole story—that he had some other skill he was hiding. And she was right.

"Look, girl... You got it all wrong. I still haven't gotten serious about this yet. Maybe you've been trying to figure out how to kill me and all, but you don't need to worry your little head about that."

"What does that mean?"

"Ha! You're actually that dumb, huh? I'm saying that there's no way to beat me!"

Testarossa almost lost her temper. But she stopped herself, observing Vega with a cold gaze.

All through this battle...it's like he's been gradually building up his strength. I wonder if all this arrogance isn't a bluff after all?

Seeing through this, she kept herself from lashing back in anger.

"Heh-heh! I'm sure Feldway's getting impatient now, too," Vega said to her. "All right, then. Time to show you a little something special...so you can die in despair!"

He let out a loud, haughty laugh. Then, at long last, he unleashed the power he had just learned how to handle. That was when the nightmare began.

"Awaken, dracobeasts—"

Vega, ignoring Testarossa, put one hand on the ground. This was just an act; there wasn't any need for it, but he deliberately left himself wide open like that, as if to declare that Testarossa stood no chance against him.

She didn't take the bait. She stood where she was, ready to calmly analyze what was about to happen.

A wave of pure evil streamed out from Vega's hand. It traveled through the ground and engulfed Reiner's fallen knights, lying on the ground. It affected all of them equally, whether alive or dead—although it made a pointed effort to avoid Elrick, which deserved note.

"Moss," said Testarossa, "gather everyone up."

The demon promptly went on the move, calling Bernie and the others back to where Masayuki was to protect them from Vega's wave attack. This included Venom and Cien, and in short order, they were all gathered in one place, watching with bated breath to see what would unfold.

Before their eyes, the living and the dead were twisted and folded together. They were transformed into evil life-forms that emitted foul odors...and Reiner was no exception.

"H-hey! Vega! Vega, my brother! Help me—I—the—this sludge is taking me in...?!"

Even confronted by all this pain, he still desperately turned to Vega for help. But Vega, watching him, just smirked back. Reiner was a throwaway pawn from the beginning—and that's why he used him as a test subject for his new power.

"Oh, no need for you to worry. If you'll lend me your aid, I'll help you as many times as you need."

"Y-you will?!"

Vega smiled more broadly at Reiner now, trying to reassure him. It relieved Reiner to see...but the sludge he mentioned, the fetid liquid from the melting corpses, was coming for him. The sight made Arius's face turn pale.

"Hey! Vega! I'm not one of your test cases, too, am I?!"

Vega chuckled. "You kind of *are*, yes!"

"H-how *dare* you...!! You'll pay for this! Heavenly General leader or not, you'll pay for such despotism!"

Arius was fuming, but the sludge had already engulfed the lower half of his body.

"S-Sir Feldway! Please, help me! Vega's gone out of control! He'll take *me* next..."

His desperate wailing was cruelly ignored by Feldway—not because Velgrynd was giving him a hard time, either. He simply wasn't interested. If these useless pawns were about to receive a strength upgrade, he saw no need to put a stop to that.

“Goddamn you all!!!”

With that final screamed curse, Arius sank into the mire.

Now everything was ready. This pool of bodies, all melted and merged together, was now forming into several humanoid figures. It was the moment of birth for some of the most repulsive creatures the world had ever seen.

Vega was using his skills to simulate a Dead Birthday, the ceremony that created new walking dead. The effect wasn't exactly the same, of course, for this was the essence of Dominate Organic and Mass Production at work—the twin titans of Vega's unique skill Azhdahak. It was called Create Dracobeast, to borrow Vega's words—the power to create evil life-forms to serve as his faithful servants.

Four of these dracobeasts were born in total, and while they were modeled after human beings (more or less), they were much deformed in shape. Their whole bodies were covered with black scales, a modified form of God-class in level. Their stomachs had a large slit in them that resembled a mouth—complete with teeth. On their backs were two pairs of black, festering wings, looking like they belonged to some bird of prey—the remnants of the angels that had taken possession of them. But most distinctive of all were their heads—a smooth, featureless mass from the neck up. They had two holes with two beady red eyes floating in the black within.

These were no longer people, but writhing humanoids that simply oozed evil. They had no real head to begin with, and there was no glint of intelligence in their eyes, but they seemed to possess powers of judgment. They glared at Hinata, Venom, and the others with pure hatred in their eyes, perhaps influenced by the malice from before they were born.

“Gaaah-ha-ha-ha-ha!! Well? What do you think of these lovely pets of mine? You little rats have been huddled there, scurrying around all afternoon, but that's all over now. Normally, I'd never waste this much fighting force on you alone... You should be honored to face these dracobeasts!”

Vega laughed. Then, arms crossed, he sent out the order.

“Go and play with them.”

*

Despite being distorted imitations of life, the dracobeasts were very capable fighters. Their “eyes” weren’t really eyes at all, but they were equipped with Magic Sense, so that didn’t matter. They all had an accurate grasp of their surroundings, and they used it to act on their orders.

Each individual had an EP past 240,000. That put them up with the average insectoid commander, which made it clear just how much of a threat they were. The people facing them, of course, didn’t need this explanation to know what they were dealing with.

“Whoa, whoa, you’re kidding...,” muttered Venom.

Now it *really* felt like he was in danger. Fighting Arius was hard enough, but these four were out of the question. It could only be called a fight thanks to Masayuki, but there’d be no bargaining with these dracobeasts.

Emotion has a way of working both for and against you. The proud Arius had grown too agitated to show off his true strength, a negative trait of his that was further aggravated by Masayuki’s Lucky Field. Now, however, those emotional elements were off the playing field. Their lack of intelligence seemed exploitable, but the dracobeasts were all aggressive instinct and exceptional battle force. They were fighting machines, and emotion only would’ve gotten in the way of that. Venom used his super instincts to sense that at once.

“These are too dangerous to deal with casually,” Hinata said, her face in a cold sweat. Her survival instincts warned her that dracobeasts were dangerous menaces, their black scales not likely to give in to her Phantom Pain sword. The only real chance she saw were their eyes and the mouths on their stomachs... but Hinata didn’t see much hope aiming for those, either. So she turned toward the paladins gathered at the square.

“All paladins, commanders on down! Keep your distance from the targets and get in formation! In order to keep these evil things from escaping and Vega from gaining any more power, we need to isolate this square in a barrier!”

The paladins who were on hand immediately reacted to the order. The monsters that had been rampaging across the city had suddenly dissolved into the ground, and they had come to the center of this disaster area to figure out

the cause, but what they saw now was beyond their imagination. Confronted with dracobeasts that were clearly beyond anything they could handle, they were close to losing all of their morale at once. It was only Hinata's voice that gave them a purpose and revived their fighting spirit.

"She's right." Cardinal Nicolaus nodded. "Let's all do what we can now."

"Roger that, Lady Hinata," said Fritz.

"Yeah... If it's us against these guys, all that'd result in is more casualties."

Litus wasn't disagreeing. She was afraid, but she could never run from this.

"Leave this to me! It's time to show off everything we've been training for!"

Bacchus just laughed. Everyone knew he was just trying to lighten the mood, but something about his laughter strangely invigorated them.

"All right... Let's get going!"

And it was that final shout from Arnaud that united them all. The spirit behind it made everyone nod in unison. Whether this enemy was beyond their coping ability or not, they weren't giving up. If they ran away at this point, their future would remain as bleak as ever.

Cardinal Nicolaus, along with the four Crusader commanders and the paladins serving under them, went on the move, marching in the exact pattern they trained in. They spread out in five directions around the center of the square, taking up positions as if drawing a pentagram across it. Then they joined together to build an isolating barrier over the area.

Their enemy this time was evil, yes, but they didn't rely on magicules as their energy source. Or they *did*, to some extent, but they also incorporated other forces, so a holy purification barrier was expected to provide only a limited effect. In fact, given the presence of several demons among them, a Holy Barrier might even be a hindrance to their allies.

Instead, Hinata opted for a Full Isolation Barrier, completely separating this place from the outside world. It was a move supported by Testarossa.

"Excellent work. Cien, Venom, you help them, too. We need this to be as strong as possible, or they'll keep searching for food, even under the ground."

By “food,” she meant the evacuated residents of the capital. In their fighting so far, she had formulated some fairly accurate theories about Vega’s skills. Within their influence, it seemed, any organic matter would become Vega’s feed. The effect had been too faint to notice so far, but for all Testarossa knew, he could kick off a genocide at any time for the sake of restoring himself.

It was that possibility that kept Testarossa from breaking out her full arsenal up to now.

“You guys help out, too,” Velgrynd said, ordering Minitz and the other imperials.

“B-but we have His Highness to—”

“I’m right here, and I’m never letting anyone touch Masayuki. All right? Now get moving.”

“““Yes, my lady!“““

Minitz, Bernie, and Jiwu each ran in a different direction to keep the Full Isolation Barrier going.

Now, here in the center, only the truly powerful remained. Velgrynd, facing Feldway. Testarossa, facing Vega. Moss, about the size of a little boy thanks to his searching skill. Hinata, freshly revived, and Masayuki, just standing there with his arms crossed. Five in all.

Wait, why am I still here, too? one of them pondered. But nobody offered an answer, much less a helping hand.

At long last, things were on the move. When Vega said “go and play with them,” all four dracobeasts set off at once, running at a furious speed. Following their orders, they leaped off the ground, flew through the air, and pounced on the prey they had set their sights on.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
4

GATHERING OF THE GREATS

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GATHERING OF THE GREATS

I was facing the biggest crisis of my life against Michael. I feel like I ran into these life-threatening crises a lot, but this time it was for *real*. His unknown attack had even taken down Diablo, and I really felt like I was at the end of my rope. The only reason I was still all relaxed like this was because Veldora remained on standby in the labyrinth. As long as he was safe, I could always resurrect myself.

But, really...am I all right here?

There are no problems. But if you're worried, all you have to do is not lose.

Well, yeah, I know that. Ciel's being so logically correct that I'm not even sure how to respond. If I could *do* that, this wouldn't be as *hard* as it is. But it seems kind of impossible, all right? That's why I'm getting anxious.

It's all right. I have already taken certain steps, in anticipation of something like this... Shall we take immediate action?

Whoa, whoa!

I've heard nothing about any of this. You've already taken steps? Why were you hiding that? Or I guess you're *not* hiding it now, huh?

I'm sorry. While we're on the subject, it's okay if I activate emergency response mode, I assume?

Was it even asking me at all? It sure seemed eager to activate it...but all right. If Ciel's behind it, it can't be bad for me. I guess it's got some kind of hidden trick it's working on, so I'd like to think we have a little hope after all.

I will make an earnest effort to meet your expectations.

Ciel seemed to get a bit more motivated now, like it realized I was ready to accept all this. I had no idea how it'd impact the mess I was in...but instead of worrying, I had to take action. It's not like thinking will give me a solution anyway...so let's just try to attack.

I was ready to try my best to the end, never giving up, but I felt remarkably at ease about that. I wanted to test out everything I could, figuring it'd give me valuable data for what came next. Maybe this strategy wouldn't get me anywhere, but I didn't want this experience to go to waste. I was risking my life here, so I wanted to get as much useful intel as I could.

With this in mind, I readied my sword. But I guess I was being too naïve after all.

"You deserve praise for not running in despair. But you could never be my enemy."

The moment I heard Michael's way too uppity remark, I stopped. And it wasn't just me, either. Everything in the world stopped. It was a familiar feeling...

So that's what it was after all...

Um, what is?

This is the same type of phenomenon that Guy Crimson and Chloe Aubert triggered—much like the attack that took down Diablo, Soei, and Leon just now.

Uh, so that déjà vu I had was valid all along?

That is correct. This is definitely a Time Stop in action.

Huhh?! How am I supposed to beat *that*?! That *has* to be a cheat or something. Maybe it's okay in manga or anime, but in real life? I take *umbrage*!

If you can't reach the time-stopped world, you can't beat anyone who has, no matter how strong you are. That's how I understood this, and it looks like I was right.

Seriously, I couldn't do *anything*. No wonder even Diablo lost. I didn't think I could ever imagine him losing, but if he stopped time, what could he do?

Right! That's all, folks! I'm just gonna come clean and admit defeat—wait. Hang on. Time's stopped right now, isn't it? So how come we're both talking?

Thanks to emergency response mode, we can perceive this time-stopped world!

We *can*?!

Wow, Professor Ciel! You've done it again! It seemed to be sneering at me a bit when it gave that report, but I let it slide. In fact, I couldn't be more thankful.

So now I was relieved, thinking this would work out after all...but it seems that was all a big misconception. I only realized this when I saw that Michael's sword was coming up *really* close to me. I tried to react in a panic, but my body didn't do anything. I was able to perceive this world, but that didn't mean I could move in it yet—which is pretty natural, actually, I guess. Ciel was acting all smug, so I thought we actually had a way forward...but it's not like any of it was *my* doing, so it's not my place to complain.

I guess my joy was premature, then. Oh well. Even if I give up and let Michael cut me down, I'd at least like to go home with more knowledge of his swordsmanship and battle habits. It'd help for next time and all.

No, it's still too early to give up.

Ciel was offering some sympathy. Then, the next moment, I felt like I heard a clear tone echoing across the air. I was used to this feeling—again, it was kind of like *déjà vu*. And what did it lead to last time...?

"Mr. Tempest! I'm here to help you!"

Yep. It's Chloe.

I was helpless against Michael's sword, but in front of me, that long, silvery-dark hair was flowing in the air. The Moon Mistress sword was in her hand, and she was wearing Divine Spirit Armor. These were once the Moonlight sword and Holy Spirit Armor Hinata entrusted with her, but now, after all this time spent traveling with her, they had evolved into God-class gear.

And—it goes without saying, I suppose—but they were owned by the fully grown-up, wholly beautiful Chloe.

*

So now Chloe was here, which is great, but I still couldn't move. I can't even reply to her, even—

Not a problem. It is known that data particles can transmit information at any given moment, unaffected by the flow of time or space. In other words, even in a stopped world, it can still transmit thoughts.

Okay, I guess?

This “conversation” between Ciel and me took place instantaneously, but there was a bit of a time lag in the voice I heard from Chloe, for reasons I still didn’t understand. If these data particles weren’t affected by time or space, shouldn’t that voice come across instantly, too?

I am part of you, my master, so I am not affected at all by time. However, if I want to know what is happening on the outside in a stopped world, I will need to send out data particles to grasp the information around me.

This is getting pretty hairy.

So basically, data particles aren’t affected by space-time at all; they’re capable of working in any situation. By interacting with *these* particles instead of magicules, we’d be able to perceive the world and communicate thoughts through them.

Therefore, if I wanted to move in this environment, interacting with its data particles wasn’t going to be enough. Chloe seemed to be talking normally, but I shouldn’t be comparing that with the real world, no. It felt a bit like Hasten Thought to me, but that wasn’t quite right, either. Apparently Ciel and I were just exchanging data particles without any time difference, and that was possible because we shared the same “soul.”

If that’s the case, how could I communicate my will to a third party in this stopped world?

Just put your will in the data particles and bash them against the other party.

Sounds a little violent, but I get it. If Ciel could interact with data particles

now, that would make it possible to reply to Chloe. The whole reason I could “see” what’s going on in here is because of the data particles I was bouncing around the area. I’m not sure if these particles went at a constant set speed in this world (among other questions I had), but if I can converse this way, then wonderful.

(Sorry! Thanks a lot! But I don’t see how I can move yet—)

I promptly sent a message over to Chloe. She used Thought Communication to answer.

(Right, I know. But you already have access to Thought Communication, huh?)

(Yeah, somehow.)

(Ah, yes, you have Ciel with you, after all. No wonder you can pull something like that off.)

Oh, Chloe knew about Ciel?

Yes, my existence was exposed through Chronoa. So, this time, she secretly joined in as a bodyguard.

Oh. Makes sense. That was the ace in the hole Ciel kept hidden up to now? But if it went *that* far, it must’ve known just how dangerous this was gonna be.

Yes. I had not been able to determine the enemy’s aims, but there was no doubt that Masayuki Honjo was one target. At the same time, I decided there was a high possibility that my lord was being pursued as well.

Hoh. So I was bait to you, huh?

And Ciel’s always the type to play it overly safe all the time, too. That’s a pretty uncommon decision.

...Oh?

But maybe that “sacrificing the rook” talk earlier...

Yes, that was a metaphor for Michael, after he thought he was ready to capture you.

Ahhh, I knew it! Except I didn’t! And now I’m kind of ashamed about that.

It did feel like Ciel was kind of hesitant to say something. My answer wasn't wrong, but it wasn't right, either. Was it wondering whether to point that out or not?!

...I thought that Michael would naturally assume you would step up to bring Leon back, my lord. I thought that Leon would be used as bait due to that, so I wondered how much importance Michael would attach to this, and how much of a force he would deploy.

R-right, yeah. I mean, that's not surprising if you think about it. I already brought Velgrynd back before this, after all, and Michael and Feldway weren't stupid enough to think she somehow magically willed herself back. As I was now realizing, I didn't think deeply enough about that...

I mean, sure, Michael didn't *want* to lose Leon. Of course he'd take some precautions against that. Leon wasn't someone he cared about *that* much, but I guess he tried using this situation to his advantage—using him as bait to lure me out to other worlds. That was his plan, and Ciel was planning this whole operation in anticipation of that, then?

So there was no room for me to intervene from the start. It sounds simple when it's explained to me like this, but both Michael and Ciel were thinking two or three moves ahead here. The slightest deviation from their predictions would've led to a huge failure for one side or the other.

Or maybe that's why. If I *hadn't* gone to rescue Leon, Michael would've taken some kind of other measure. It'd be easier for Ciel to read the situation if we just pretended that I was tricked and went out there anyway. My safety's assured as long as Veldora's around, so it decided that going along with Michael's plan was the better option for us. Right?

Yes. Of course, I was giving the utmost consideration to the safety of my master.

Sure you were.

It's kind of scary how well Ciel's read this so far. But one thing it didn't count on was the fact that Michael could stop time as well, huh?

That was also taken into consideration as a possibility. That was why I

discussed matters with Chloe Aubert and had her on standby for me, just in case.

Aha. So you figured that Chloe probably wouldn't see any action. But thanks to Michael being so overpowered, here I am getting helped out by her anyway.

If not even Ciel could've predicted that, then I suppose I never had a chance.

The biggest miscalculation was failing to see that Michael possessed Time Stop as well. However, I think that turned out well for us.

Oh? Why is that?

Because there are so few people in possession of this skill that being exposed to it at all is a valuable experience for us. Successfully developing an emergency response mode was a stroke of good luck. As long as we keep observing this stopped world, it will only be a matter of time before we are able to move.

As confident as always, I see. This talk about it only being a "matter of time" despite time being stopped sounded like a joke to me, but I didn't want to nitpick. Ciel deserves credit anyway.

What I'm wondering about is whether we really *can* move in stopped time. I mean, we're gonna get nowhere if I can't do that at *some* point in the future, so addressing that problem seems like an urgent issue to me. All I can do right now, after all, is rely on Chloe, so...

In the meantime, I've got nothing. Time to drop the jokes and see how the battle between Chloe and Michael works out.

*

Michael, perhaps wary of Chloe's arrival, didn't try to move. After a while, though, he lifted up the sword in his hand in a relaxed motion.

"...I honestly have trouble believing something *this* unexpected would happen."

"Oh?"

"I didn't think anyone could move within stopped time apart from myself and Velzard. As a manas, an ultimate being, that much is a given for me...but I am

quite impressed that you reached this domain.”

Ah, Michael brought up the word “manas” himself, huh? Is this a trick? If Chloe reacts to it, maybe we’ll get closer to what Michael really is. I thought about warning her out of concern, but there was no need.

“Hmm...? You think so? It was actually pretty easy.”

She skipped right over the topic. And her response reminded me—I couldn’t stop picturing her as my young student, but Chloe was now a seasoned fighter in her own right. After that long, long journey, she had come to me as the most powerful of Heroes out there. With the manas called Chronoa now included within her, there wasn’t much need for me to worry about this.

“Nonsense. I no longer sense Sariel, Lord of Hope within you. Would you care to explain why?”

Ah, I knew it. I thought Michael might be able to detect angelic ultimate skills, but now he just confirmed it. And if he didn’t see it, that meant Chloe safely sublimated Sariel and turned it into her own skill.

She didn’t even need the help I offered. It was a pity.

I’ll bet. Ciel the skill nerd must’ve been drooling over all of Chloe’s abilities. If it had a chance to probe her secrets, I’m sure I’d be walking and talking in this stopped world all I wanted by now. Not to accuse Chloe of hoarding skills or anything. Ciel’s just being too unfair, is all.

“Do I have a reason to tell you?”

No, she sure doesn’t. Michael didn’t seem to be expecting an answer, either. He silently adjusted the grip on his sword.

“In that case, I will simply eliminate all uncertainties in my way.”

“Same here. You’ll regret making me your enemy.”

And with that final exchange, the battle between Chloe and Michael began.

It was, in a word, awe-inspiring.

One thing I learned watching them is that, as we suspected, data particles *do* move at a set speed all the time. That allowed conversation to work just fine,

and I perceived my vision at a uniform pace as well. It seemed to be a set physical phenomenon, much like how matter can never exceed the speed of light.

So how come data particles could go past light speed, then? Because it wasn't outpacing light in "speed," exactly. Data particles exist on a different coordinate system, which allows them to transfer information with each other with zero time lag. No matter what the distance, if data particles exist within your perceived space, there'll never be any lag. In other words, these particles transcend the laws of time and space, and the transfer of information through them enabled us to converse with each other.

Okay, so next question: How can I move in this? Could it be that...

If you know how to exist as a spiritual life-form, you can likely also become a so-called "digital life-form" by transforming all your matter into data particles.

Thought so. If your mind and spirit were, in the end, just a bunch of data, it didn't seem too impossible to me. Whether I could do it or not was another matter, but having a potential answer now was huge. So, eliminating the idea that it's impossible, it's time to focus on how to make it happen.

Yes, exactly. I could put emergency response mode into full operation with the aim of evolving you into a digital life-form. Is this all right?

Of course it is, Ciel. I'm leaving all this to you, so go wild.

...That was kind of a haughty order I gave it, but, really, I couldn't do anything otherwise. If we had any measures to take at all, I was ready to try them.

Ciel, correctly understanding my intentions, began to energetically take on the job. Now I just had to wait for the results. I was a little worried about how I was constantly having other people do the heavy lifting for me, but I didn't have much choice here.

With my mind made up, I focused back on the battle between Chloe and Michael.

*

So, looking at their abilities, they were actually pretty darn close to each other

in fighting skill. These were just estimates since I had no precise grasp of anything, but I think they were equal in terms of physical ability—or should I say, they were both able to work data particles exceedingly well. Since these particles had a set maximum speed, what mattered was how well you could interact with them. Who could wrangle these data particles better to overcome their enemy? In a stopped world like this, that's what mattered the most.

That, and I noticed a few more things as I watched them.

First, in the stopped world, the concept of defense didn't really exist. If you could move like Chloe and Michael, your handling of data particles functioned as both your offense and defense in battle. If you couldn't move in response to that, you had no defense and would be attacked.

Really, being suspended in time like this meant that all kinds of "forces" were offline. The planet's gravity and repulsive forces were included in this, and there was no binding force to speak of, either. There was no inertia or external forces at work, so you still retained your original form...but what happened if something took an attack in this state? Simple: It disintegrated in an instant. Whether it was a reinforced concrete wall, solid bedrock, or a big chunk of steel, nothing would offer any resistance at all, because the atoms it's made of weren't bound to each other.

In conclusion, then, nothing can retain its existence in this world. It's a place where none of the laws of physics apply at all, which is scary if you think about it. You have no idea what'll happen, and if you carelessly blunder into this world, you're likely to get seriously burned.

There exists a wall between those who can move in this stopped world and those who can't, one as insurmountable as a dimensional barrier. Along those lines, I'm utterly amazed Diablo and Soei survived it at all.

Diablo seemed to have anticipated this and activated a defensive barrier in response.

Oho! There's a new discovery. I'm impressed that Diablo saw this coming at all, but the fact that magic still worked in this stopped world was an unexpected boon for me.

However, magic cannot be invoked when one is already in the stopped

world. Advance preparation is a must, and the effect also ends the moment it is interrupted.

All right. So that's why he survived. When Michael said he "should have finished you off when I had the chance," he must've meant landing another blow on Diablo once his barrier shut down.

But what about Soei, then?

Soei was safe because it was one of his Parallel Existences that was brought into the stopped world. He is still pretending to be defeated as he lurks in your shadow, my master, likely seeking an opportunity to ambush Michael.

But as Ciel explained to me, Soei wouldn't ever see that chance because time was stopped for him.

I had completely forgotten that Soei had access to Parallel Existences. Gotta hand it to him, though. I don't think he'll be a factor in *this* fight, but under normal circumstances, I couldn't think of many people I'd rely on more.

So the first thing to note about this world was that the concept of defense didn't exist.

Another thing I noticed was that whoever activated the time stop first could potentially be at a disadvantage. I wasn't sure about that, but I thought I was correct on that score.

Stopping time, after all, seemed to consume a whole lot of energy. If you had two different parties moving in the stopped world, that eliminated the need for this world in the first place. Michael was only keeping it "stopped" to prevent me from joining this battle, I'm sure.

Not only that—repeatedly stopping and starting time likely consumes even more energy.

Ahh, yes. A bit like an electrical appliance, I suppose. So if we got Diablo and Soei back, Michael must've inadvertently canceled Time Stop on them, right? Because he's still a beginner at invoking this skill?

That seems correct, yes. If someone is capable of perceiving the

stopped world, they would recognize it when someone activates such a world somewhere.

I think I get what Ciel's trying to say.

Time isn't something that flows only in a limited space. If you "stop" the world, it actually affects time and space in every single world in the universe. Ever since Guy and Chloe had their little scrimmage, I had never felt that weird sense of discomfort I felt then—the sense that time had stopped. As Ciel put it, this proves that nobody had invoked Time Stop after that point...until now.

So we have a world that only a limited number of people can perceive...but this skill's actually pretty tricky to handle, isn't it? And if your opponent has that skill, too, it's pointless, so...

Actually, wait a minute. What happens if you aim for the exact moment when your sword strikes your opponent?

That is what Guy and Chloe were feeling out in their battle.

Ohhh...

I hadn't picked up on it at the time, but those two were fighting on a level I couldn't even perceive, huh? And they saw it just as a warmup, too. The more I learned about it, the scarier it got.

So I needed to respond to whatever happened to me here at a moment's notice. Otherwise, I'd never be able to compete with this level of combat.

I will continue my research.

If you could, please. I'm starting to feel a bit overwhelmed, so having you say that to me is a lifesaver. I couldn't tell you how reassuring it was to have a partner like Ciel.

*

As I thought about this, the duel was reaching its climax.

Chloe and Michael were still locked in an evenly balanced battle, but then my fingertips began to twitch. Bit by bit, I could feel the sensation coming back to every part of my body.

Your evolution to a digital life-form will be complete shortly.

Ciel's words sounded like a triumphant declaration of victory. If it was this even one-on-one, we'd have the upper hand once I joined in.

And then the moment arrived.

"Insolent little Hero, daring to get in my way," Michael growled. "It's time to lead you to your doom."

"Not if I do it first," said Chloe. "You seem pretty proud of being a manas and everything, but there's nothing too unusual about that."

The psychological battle was reaching its peak, too. Now Chloe was revealing that she had Chronoa with her. It clearly upset Michael—and that created a small opening.

She wasn't about to miss it, of course.

"Goodbye. Your fate ends here."

A cold gaze pierced through Michael.

"Let all things be as they should—Reverse Fate!"

The minute and hour hands of the clock began spinning in the opposite direction. Even in this stopped world, Chloe's skills were at her fingertips—but she never let on about this until the very end, so she could make that her finisher.

Its effect was dramatic. "Let all things be as they should," as she put it, but it wasn't literally like that. It was more about changing things so they were how Chloe wanted them. It wasn't strictly "going back," so to speak.

And as for Michael, struck with this all-powerful Reverse Fate:

"I—I... What did you...? What...? Who was I...?"

Here was this empty sort of existence inhabiting Ludora's body. It had lost its master; it had no reason to keep existing, and now it had gone mad to fill in that hole. But what it really is—

"The ultimate skill Michael, Lord of Justice, huh?"

Ludora's body, which had been preserved by the effects of this skill, began to crumble, unable to withstand the excessive force held within. It had been

returned to a mere skill by Chloe's hands, and now it had no reason to keep its host going.

In the face of this nothingness, Chloe began to softly speak.

"If you have lost your way...will you come with me?"

Oh? I wasn't sure about this move, but I opted to keep quiet and watch.

"...?!"

Just like me, Michael—or Michael, Lord of Justice; merely a skill now, his self-awareness as a manas long gone—seemed thrown by this. After all, Chloe was offering him two options: stay like this and vanish or remain in this world with herself as his master. It couldn't have been that easy to decide on, and part of me thought that we'd all be better off if Michael disappeared so we could get time going again...but at that moment, the World Language echoed across this stopped world.

The subject Chloe Aubert has been confirmed to possess the three elements of courage, hope, and justice. The missing elements of the skill Sariel, Lord of Hope, have now been recovered. Beginning full integration into the ultimate skill Yog-Sothoth, Lord of Time... Complete. The ultimate skill Yog-Sothoth, Lord of Time, has evolved into the ultimate skill Yog-Sothoth, God of Time.

I didn't need any liner notes to know that this was a huge enhancement. The ultimate evolution took place within Chloe without her even being aware of it.

"Chloe... Are you all right?"

"Yes, Rimuru. I think I've become one with Chronoa now...in a real way."

I thought it might've been something like that. I saw the change myself, after all. That last little suggestion of childhood was now gone, and now she had a more mature, alluring look to her. Maybe that was some of Chronoa's traits coming out, or maybe—

Mwah! ♪

...?!

Huh?

"Whoa, Chloe, what are you—?"

She kissed me out of nowhere. I don't really know how else to explain it. One moment, I was thinking, *Wow, that beauty Chloe is starting to approach me*, and then *wham*, I suddenly felt this soft touch on my lips.

This is an act of God, isn't it? No point debating whether I could have avoided it.

"Hee-hee! I'm grown up now, after all."

Sure. I'll admit that. But you can't ambush me like that, you know?

I mean, it's a good thing she tried that on me first, but if she did that with Leon, it could turn into a police case really quick, right? *I'm cool with it, of course, but...*

So there I was, making excuses to no one as I wondered why Chloe decided to kiss me.

"You needed that, too, didn't you, Rimuru? You kind of looked like you did so...here I was!"

She can be as cute with me as she wants, but...I mean, what did I *need*, exactly?

...Tch. Pretty clever, bribing you like that... I've accepted the remnants of Sariel, Lord of Hope, from Chloe. I'm sure she could have done that some other way, but I will be on the lookout for similar surprise attacks in the future.

Did Ciel just click its tongue at me?

I don't see why it had to be so wary...

Never mind that. It is my secret.

Hokay then.

I don't know why, but I had a feeling that I shouldn't try to defy it any longer. Better to let Ciel do what it wants, I think. Let's just change the subject.

"So now that you're one with Chronoa, does that mean you can't go back to child form any longer, Chloe?"

"Oh, no problems there."

She apparently could change her appearance from a baby to an old woman at will. I'm not sure if there was much point to that, but at least she didn't try surprising Kenya and the gang with that before telling me.

"Okay, I'll undo the Time Stop."

Guess it was Chloe keeping time stopped at the moment, after taking it over from Michael. She maintained it as naturally as she breathed—I wasn't sure just how strong she had become. It felt like she had full control over this new skill, even without the assistance of her manas. At the very least, it confirmed to me that I was way out of her league, considering how much I still had to rely on Ciel for stuff like this.

Ah, but I can't sit here marveling at her forever.

"Just one thing before then. Chances are that, after this..."

"Yeah, I know. I didn't absorb as much power as I thought I would, so I'm pretty sure of it."

"Roger that. So let me handle him this time, okay? Take it easy instead. Get some rest."

I was pretty stern about that. Chloe looked healthy, but after such a rapid evolution, there was no way she was all that stable. She needed some time off, regardless of whether she wanted to rest.

"Hee-hee! Glad to see you're worried about me."

"I won't be fooled again, you know."

She could flash those cute smiles all she wanted, but I wasn't Leon. I needed to exercise some adult authority here.

"But all right. I'll lie low for a little bit, then. Just don't lose, all right?"

"Of course not. I never would've understood these concepts of time without you."

"Hee-hee! I'm sure."

I promised Chloe my victory. I mean, I wasn't about to admit it if I lost, so I

wouldn't be lying to her either way.

So she released Time Stop, and the world began to count the seconds once more.

*

I had been stopped in time while facing Michael, and to an outside observer who didn't know what was going on, it would've looked like Michael suddenly disappeared and Chloe showed up. This much was proven by the panicked Thought Communication Soei shot my way.

(Sir Rimuru, I am deeply sorry. I've lost sight of the enemy—)

(Okay, okay, okay. Don't leave my shadow yet.)

(...?! Yes, my lord!)

That was all the hinting Soei needed to figure it out. He's so competent that way. I never have to spell things out for him.

So I began my pretty shameless performance.

"Well! Chloe! Thanks very much for coming to my rescue. I thought I was a goner for a second there."

"Hee-hee! You're such a bad actor, Rimuru."

Hey, shut up! I just have trouble deceiving people 'cause I'm soooo pure and honest at heart, y'know?

"All right, forget it. No trickery. You can head on back, Chloe. And don't forget to rest!"

"You bet. I believe in you, okay?"

With those words, Chloe kept her promise and returned to Tempest. She'll be in her room in the labyrinth for a little while to come, recuperating from the aftereffects of her rapid evolution.

Then I looked around the now-empty space, grinning.

"Well? Come on out. You're hiding, aren't you?"

"...I thought that my Concealment was perfect. How did you notice me?"

How did I notice? I dunno. It's just the kinda thing you'd do, right? My intuition told me so. Everybody knows that you leave yourself the most open in battle the moment you think you've won. With that in mind, I thought he might have a Parallel Existence lurking around somewhere. If I were him, I sure would. I mean, unlike Velgrynd or Soei, I couldn't divide up my consciousness like that, so I wouldn't do exactly what Michael did...but I would if I could.

So I was pretty convinced Michael would have a plan like that ready. I tried to warn Chloe about that, but she actually told me first that Michael had a Parallel Existence active.

She had taken in only part of Michael. However, that part included all the relevant data for the skill Michael, Lord of Justice, and taking it in enabled her to learn about Michael's plan. We had been planning to wait for him to try surprising us here, but it wound up being too much trouble, so we dropped it. Better to fight and defeat him head-on anyway—the best way to put an end to those foolish ambitions.

"Oh. You may have read my thoughts, but you have not fully penetrated my skill. Still, though..." Michael had an ever-so-slightly surprised expression on his face. "...I never dreamed that you would win against my Parallel Existence."

"Yeah, well, it wasn't me. It was the girl just now."

"Chronoa the Hero? I should have realized she would grow to this level of a presence."

"Chloe. Not Chronoa. But I'm gonna finish this here, so don't bother remembering that."

I stretched my body, fully relaxed. I was planning to fight all-out for the first time in a bit, so I wanted to make sure I was limber.

"Unlikely. You talk a big game after hiding in the Hero's shadow all this time."

"That's one way of looking at it, yes. But Chloe was my student, you know. I need to show off my authority as her teacher, or I'll look terrible, now won't I?"

Michael rewarded this answer with a cold, emotionless stare. It eloquently told me that he didn't understand me very much. I mean, he can literally stop time—I'm sure he didn't see me as a threat at all. But that was then, and now

it's a different story.

"You never learn your lesson, demon lord Rimuru. You have been a constant obstacle to me, but I thought it was clear to you that you are no threat to me at all. Now you will know the truth...and make a quick exit from this world."

Is he telling me to die? I sure don't want that.

"Enough talking. Come at me."

As soon as I finished saying that, time stopped. Michael approached me, looking assured of his victory. Tough luck, though! I, too, was now a full-fledged citizen of this stopped world.

Even in this soundless realm, I almost imagined I could hear our swords clashing.

"No! You—?!"

"Yep! This world may be frozen in time...but *I'm still cooking!*"

I shouted at Michael, a rejuvenated expression on my face. Michael looked back at me. He was having a revelation of his own. Now, in his eyes, I was finally an enemy he *needed* to defeat. All the condescension of the past was gone.

Now—this time, in the true sense of the term—we were fighting with the fate of the world at stake.



Velgrynd was in a bind. She declared that she'd defend Masayuki no matter what, but Feldway wasn't being kind enough to let her.

"Plainly you don't think much of me, Velgrynd. Do you see our duel as a side hobby?"

"Well, yes, against the likes of you— W-wait! What is that?!"

Feldway, who had been focused on defense up to now, unleashed his hidden power before her. It was equal to, or perhaps even greater than, Velgrynd's own.

"I'm sure you assumed there was a Parallel Existence on hand, but I've got access to that, too. If you're looking to help Masayuki, I'll do everything I can to

stop you."

"Pfft. Your disposition's as nasty as usual, I see. I really *do* hate you."

"Oh? That's too bad."

Velgrynd frowned at Feldway's sarcastic reply. He had always been complaining to Velgrynd ever since he began serving as her brother Veldanava's assistant. She was flashing back to those days in her mind, and it irritated her even more.

Things were looking grim at present, too. She had her hands full just dealing with Feldway—and Testarossa, the one she relied on the most, was facing off against Vega's main body. There weren't enough people on their side to tackle the four dracobeasts.

I suppose I underestimated Feldway. Was it a mistake to leave those three out? ...No, it'd be impossible to maintain the Full Isolation Barrier otherwise...

If Minitz, Bernie, and Jiwu weren't handling their current business, it would've resulted in a weakened Full Isolation Barrier. There'd be no way to stop Vega then—he'd forcefully gouge his way into the ground and feed on the capital's evacuees for energy, and they'd be helpless to stop him. So while Velgrynd's orders weren't in the wrong, she cared most of all about Masayuki, and now she was worried she might've made the wrong choice.

The only ones who could protect him here were Hinata the Saint and Moss, Testarossa's servant. But she didn't think either of them could stop the dracobeasts, which vexed her greatly.

"By the way, you probably can't deal with, say, three of them at once, can you?"

"I know you know the answer to that, but could you stop looking so disappointed at me? I'm doing my best here!"

Hearing that conversation between Hinata and Moss did nothing to quell her worries. The two of them were each keeping two dracobeasts in check, but that was the best they could manage, and beating them didn't seem too likely. If anything, they were both running themselves ragged. They only worked this hard because they had never fought against anything like this before; they were

both in over their heads already, and it'd be absurd to expect even more from them.

And Testarossa, too...

"Finally, the Full Isolation Barrier is complete!"

"So what?"

"It means I can destroy you without holding back."

So she began her onslaught, which was great and all, but Vega's apparent invulnerability made things a slog for her pretty quick. Testarossa was by far the more skillful fighter; there was a yawning difference in their EPs, but this was by no means an enemy she had no chance against.

But then Vega evolved in the middle of battle. He consumed Arius and immediately obtained his power.

And now something had happened to make things even worse. Testarossa had no way of knowing, but Michael had just invoked Time Stop. Only she and Velgrynd were caught by that telltale strange feeling when it happened; they both immediately recognized what it was. But they couldn't panic over it once time began moving again, because it was all over by then. They knew that, so they both kept their cool.

It opened just a small gap, though—a gap that Masayuki's Lucky Field should have canceled out. But the *fourth* time that strange feeling ran across them, something unusual happened to the emperor.

"Huh?" he said—and then he fell to his knees. A sudden bout of dizziness overcame him, and at that moment, his power's effect disappeared.

"Masayuki?!" shouted Velgrynd, worried—

"Hya-ha-ha! Don't get distracted!"

Vega attacked, taking advantage of Testarossa's opening.

Hinata and Moss, already struggling, found that their good fortune had worn off—and that put them in an extremely tough predicament. Masayuki's sudden affliction was all it took to make this fight look doomed.

Then the worst moment of all arrived. Velgrynd, her attention turned toward Masayuki, revealed the one opening she never should have shown. And Feldway wasn't generous enough to let it go.

"I win!" he shouted, and his sword plunged into Velgrynd's chest.

*

Masayuki couldn't understand what was happening before his eyes. This woman always had a fearless smile on her face, no matter what; she was endlessly confident, taking care of him—but now she was kneeling on the ground, clutching at her chest.

This should never have happened. Feldway was an unstoppable monster. He could do nothing against him, and if Gryn was going to lose, too, all he could do was run—but none of that mattered.

Masayuki reflected on what he felt in his heart. Violent anger. He sensed a rage that ran through his entire body, from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, and it was threatening to gush out of him at any moment.

"What the hell did you just do?"

A quieter voice than he expected spilled out of his mouth.

"Mm?" responded Feldway. "I *do* want you the most but give me one minute. I'd like to fully destroy Velgrynd while I have the chance—"

He would never finish that sentence.

"I'm *asking* you what the hell you *did* to my girl!"

Masayuki, stepping in faster than the eye could follow, struck Feldway in the side with his rapier. It had been forged by Kurobe with a focus on reduced weight and enhanced strength, and it was Unique in class, at least—a rare find, but no way it would survive being slammed against a foe protected by God-class armor.

That one blow was all it took for it to shatter to pieces. But Masayuki didn't care. Feldway, caught by surprise, took a step back. Masayuki ignored him as he lifted Velgrynd in his arms.

"...Masayuki?" said Velgrynd.

"It's all right now," he told her. "Don't worry."

"It... You couldn't..."

"I'll take care of this. You just rest for now, Grune."

"Ahh...!"

Tears spilled from Velgrynd's eyes. That nickname was used by the one she loved—the only person in the world who called her that.

"Ludora! Welcome back!"

"Yes. I know it took a bit, but here I am."

Ludora, housed inside Masayuki, smiled. From here on, it was time to fight back.

*

Feldway scowled. "Ludora? What a bunch of nonsense—"

"Ha! Feldway, I'll gladly take you on, but it looks like the others are struggling as well. Let's give them a hand. Come on, Gren! You too, Damrada!"

At Ludora's call, the very fabric of space and time shook. Completely ignoring the Full Isolation Barrier, two people were summoned into the town square.

"Goodness. I was having a wonderful time living with Maria, but even after death, you're a tough master to have, aren't you?"

The first to speak, a man with whitish blond hair, immediately started complaining. He looked around with his sharp, eagle-like eyes, and then he snickered.

"Ah, Hinata, my unworthy apprentice... You had the rawest talent out of anyone I worked with, but it's so sad you haven't attained Hero status yet."

The name of this person finally appeared in Hinata's head. It astonished her.

"You're not...?"

"I didn't show this to you back then, but now it's time to provide a better example to you. Watch this carefully and remember it!"

"...Old man Granville?!"

He was a little young-looking to be called that, but it was definitely Granville Rozzo. He was back here, alive, from when he was at his strongest.

“Come to me, Truth!”

He called for his beloved sword. It manifested in Granville’s hand, summoned from subspace and still exhibiting its God-class shine. And the next moment, he casually broke out the Overblade skill True Slash, ripping into one of the dracobeasts and turning it into dust.

“No way...”

It was the most anticlimactic of victories, almost an affront to all the struggles Hinata and her allies faced so far.

*

The one called forth after Granville kneeled before Ludora.

“Your Majesty, it fills with me with joy to see you awaken from your long sleep!”

Ludora gave Damrada a dirty look. “Too formal, Damrada. Was *that* how you always acted?”

“Heh... I’ve missed you, my friend. You made me go through a ton of trouble, you know!”

“Sorry. I don’t remember any of it, so I can’t help you.”

“Ahh, yes, you always *were* like that, weren’t you? I knew that!”

He was acting all indignant with Ludora, but there were hot tears in Damrada’s eyes.

“Oh, don’t cry. I said I’m sorry.”

“It’s not that...but it’s fine now. You kept your promise. I can’t ask for anything more.”

Even in reincarnated form, Ludora was still Ludora. The one Damrada swore his allegiance to had rejected a demon lord-controlled society, aiming to establish a world where everyone could live happily and harmoniously—to build a truly unified nation. But after a series of tragedies, Ludora lost sight of that

dream—and it began to wear out his very mind.

Damrada rued all those years when he was powerless to do anything for his lord. But now, within this boy Masayuki, the Ludora of the past had brilliantly manifested himself. And just seeing his lord, unchanged from those glorious years, was enough to make Damrada happy.

“Really? You still look like you’re half-dreaming.”

“Heh... Your dreams can come true as long as you don’t give up, right?”

“They do for *me*, yes.”

“Heh-heh-heh! You never change, Lord Ludora. Now, we’d best not talk for too long. I don’t want Gren stealing all my thunder, so how about I get going?”

With a refreshed smile on his face, Damara excused himself. His step was unhesitant as he went up next to Moss.

“This great demon that long tortured my empire... What a disgraceful position you’re in.”

“Tch! Even I have my down days.”

“Excuses, eh? Well, I don’t want to hear them.”

“Back to your old self, huh?”

“Of course. I am Ludora’s eternal friend, and His Majesty’s most loyal of subjects. But if His Majesty is gone, I can’t help but loosen up a bit.”

Moss lightly shrugged. “Sure. We’re not enemies right now anyway.”

Damrada smiled back at him, then took a step forward. “Now, time to end this.”

The moment he said it, he lowered his hips and adopted a *nekoashi* karate stance—his left leg against the ground, bearing all his weight, while his right one was balanced lightly in front of him. He advanced like he was skating across the ground—similar to, but at the same wholly unlike, the shuffling techniques of ancient martial arts—and soon Damrada was zooming forward like a cannonball.

He crossed paths with a dracobeast, and then:

“Holy Smashfist!”

When he made contact, he injected a fighting spirit that ran fully across the target’s body. There was no way to cut it off, and at once, the dracobeast fell apart, spirit and all.

“Glad to see you’re as skilled as ever,” Moss said, looking disgusted.

“Well, it’s your turn next,” Damrada replied.

“Guess it is.”

Moss was truly fed up with everything.

*

Moss might have been irritated about his old adversary being alive and reminding him of all these annoying old conflicts and memories, but that didn’t stop him from doing what had to be done. He hated losing. Just losing in itself was all right, but if it meant being blamed for it by his dreaded master, *forget* it. That was the one thing he couldn’t tolerate, so fighting “not to lose” was always his primary focus.

Before, he knew that he wouldn’t win very soon, if at all. He had been fighting mainly to stall for time so far—but now that he had only one opponent to deal with, it was a very different story.

“If it’s just one, I can win,” he muttered to himself—and for the first time in a while, he decided to show off a serious effort. The tiny Replications of himself scattered in the air assembled back together, returning him to his true form. He had grown more powerful by the day as his master Testarossa did. He had reported to her that his EP was 1,079,397, but now he was well beyond that, up to one and a half million.

What’s more, in his hands was the Loop Annulus, a weapon composed of a countless number of chakrams. These had evolved with Moss, reaching the God-class level—and now that he had fully made their power his own, his EP was past 2.5 million, putting him well above the dracobeasts.

And if he was fighting for real now—

“Time for you to die... Infinite Eater.”

As he launched the skill, Moss's body began to shimmer. He turned transparent, segmented, and then fully wrapped himself over the dracobeast.

"...Gehh?!"

It looked at Moss with its emotionless eyes. Realizing it could no longer move, the dracobeast found itself baffled, unable to carry out its orders.

But it was only for a short time. Moss's attack was a dark magic that used his own body as a medium, incorporating technical skills derived from his unique skill Gatherer.

Infinite Eater absorbed energy at a level equivalent to his own. In other words, Moss's magicules were directly converted into offensive power—and while it had the drawback of not being available again until the absorbed energy was fully taken in, it was still the most powerful means of attack he had right now. He couldn't use it in a chaotic, multi-army battle, since invoking it put him out of action for some time to come afterward. Really, the skill had little practical use and was difficult to pull off to boot, but in this case, it guaranteed a dominant victory for Moss.

"As heartless as always, I see. I couldn't say how many of our soldiers you ate up with that."

"I didn't use it that much on the weak, you know. Maybe just when I was in a hurry, you know? Bad luck for the victims, is all. Besides, *you're* one to talk, using poison that corrodes souls enough to kill even demons."

"Oh, sure, whine all you want."

It may have looked like they were having an argument, but this was how Damrada and Moss praised each other's fighting.

*

So Moss was victorious as well. All that remained was Hinata, whom Granville had casually entrusted with his sword.

"Master, this..."

"You can keep it. It's no longer of any use to me."

With that, he handed over the sword called Truth to Hinata.

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The Granville here was merely a fictional being, whether he had physical substance or not. The sword he had just given Hinata had materialized in his hand a moment ago. This was the power of Lord of Heroes, the ultimate skill Masayuki had awakened to—the power to summon the heroes of the past, recreating them as beings of the same nature as digital life-forms. The influence of this force had also given Minitz and Caligulio their old powers.

Now, in his unbridled anger, Masayuki had inadvertently triggered Heroic Recourse on an even more powerful level than before. This had summoned Ludora, the oldest and strongest of the great champions, and it certainly came at just the right time.

Maybe it was coincidence, or maybe Masayuki's natural good luck made it a foregone conclusion—but after Chloe defeated Michael's Parallel Existence, the data that belonged to the physical body Michael was using as a vessel was coursing its way back to the heavens. Before it could reach its destination, however, Masayuki called it all back and joined it together.

Right now, it was Ludora's self-will expressing itself the most within Masayuki's body. And Ludora, in turn, was able to use Velgrynd's skills as his own. That allowed him to utilize her Parallel Existences as bases—temporary bodies—for the champions he summoned through Heroic Recourse. It was a move beyond all rational thought, but that wasn't even all of it—Granville's newly acquired God-class sword, too, was created by borrowing Velgrynd's skills.

"You were tapping into my power without permission again, weren't you?" Velgrynd asked Ludora.

"Is that bad?"

"No, not at all. Everything about me belongs to you, Ludora."

They were the classic couple in love, and they weren't afraid to show that in public. But the things they were doing seemed utterly ridiculous. Feldway

couldn't be blamed for wincing at these proceedings, but that was what Masayuki's Lord of Heroes could do—a truly balance-breaking, nonsensical skill.

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"You should appreciate this," Granville told Hinata. "This divine blade was given to me by my master over there, Ludora Nasca. Don't confuse it with any other butter knife you see. And now that you've inherited it, too, you must prove your ability to me."

"My...ability?"

"Yes. I want to see if you are worthy to hold the sword a Hero will inherit."

He gave the puzzled Hinata a composed nod.

If he was going *that* far, she could hardly pull back now. She had styled herself a determined protector of mankind, and she wasn't about to hesitate over something like this.

"Heh! Well, rest assured, then. Right now, I couldn't even lose to *you*, master."

"Not afraid to talk big, eh? Save that for when you're as old as I am. Now, don't forget—the strength of your feelings is what makes you a better person. Winning isn't important—gaining better results is. Remember that."

Granville put the future of mankind above his own victory. His words held special weight with Hinata, and she mulled them over carefully.

"Yes, I know."

She had entrusted Chloe with her own hope, and now Granville was entrusting Hinata with his mission. She accepted it. It was time to move forward.

Ahead of her was the last of the dracobeasts. She tried to focus her attention on it—then something surprised her. Her consciousness was shifting from focus to focus more smoothly than before, and the more she looked at her target, the

more information from her senses filled her brain. But she could organize this information seamlessly as well, letting her read the dracobeast's movements to a tee.

The sword, and the will, entrusted to Hinata was already bringing about change. Truth had recognized Hinata as its own master, unlocking its power to the fullest, and it had just greatly boosted her existence points.

Granville's own words had washed away all her worries. Just as she said, it was "so sad you haven't attained Hero status yet." Turn that around, though, and it meant Hinata *could* become a Hero still.

And if so, I have to live up to those expectations.

Her master, stricter with her than anyone else in her life, had given her his approval. It was a truly uplifting moment.

"I'll finish this in the blink of an eye," she said, giving the dracobeast a final farewell. "...True Slash!"

Her opponent didn't even realize it had been slashed through. Countless gashes covered its body, and for a single moment, it locked eyes with Hinata.

"Hina...ta... Help—"

The dracobeast was about to say something, but it couldn't put the words together. Before it could finish, its body collapsed into a shredded heap. Perhaps it was the remnants of Reiner's consciousness that tried reaching out to her—but if he already lost his essence as a human being, there was nothing that could be done to save him.

Perhaps Reiner deserved every bit of that, but:

"Good night. Sweet dreams."

Hinata still saw fit to give him a few final words. She could never come to like Reiner, for all sorts of reasons, and she could never forgive his many crimes, but she at least hoped he would find peace in the afterlife.

Her victory was now set in stone, and the dracobeasts were no more.

Granville applauded his victorious student.

"Brilliant."

"No, master, it's only because you lent me your sword."

She tried returning Truth to Granville. He refused.

"That belongs to you now. I am already a dead man. What you see here is just a fake—one with all his memories intact."

"No..."

It didn't look that way at all, but Hinata knew it to be true.

"The boy who inherited my master's soul," he continued, smiling, "has just created an unbelievable new skill for himself."

Hinata agreed. This wasn't like raising the dead. It was an even more terrifying power, perhaps, these champions of the past being recreated from when they were in their prime... Even if it was limited to those with links to Masayuki, it was still a preposterous skill—and perhaps it wasn't limited that way at all. Granville, at least, would never have known Masayuki. He was only summoned because his previous incarnation—the Hero Ludora—had been Granville's mentor. But Masayuki knew nothing about that, and even Hinata was hearing about it for the first time. And who could say how many champions he could summon at once? Truly, there was no guessing at the depths of this power.

It was, perhaps, only natural that Granville, standing here thanks to Masayuki's skill, would have no regrets about the sword he'd be leaving behind in this world. But Hinata still wasn't sure she was worthy of holding it.

"Master, I understand that you are an illusion, but this is a different matter. I failed to become a Hero, in the end. Any right I had to that role, I passed on to Chloe. Sadly, I have no chance of ever awakening..."

The "hero's egg" that Hinata carried in her body was given to Chloe, eventually giving birth to the strongest Hero of them all. Hinata, as she stood today, would never awaken. She never had a chance of living up to Granville's expectations. She knew that, and she wasn't shy about it with Granville. She didn't mind if this disappointed him—such was the strength of her will. This was her way of telling her mentor that, in effect, she had nothing to be ashamed of.

But Granville smiled at her. “Are you sure about that?”

“...Huh?”

“It was the will of my master Ludora that called me here, but perhaps it was destiny at work. I remembered, over in the Promised Land, that I never entrusted you with *my* will, either. Oh, how Maria yelled at me...”

This conversation itself was all an illusion, carried out by a fake. But it felt so vivid and so weirdly specific. And then Hinata realized just what Granville meant.

“...What?! This power...”

The elemental soul of light that guides its holder to victory—the Hero’s qualification that Granville had been carrying—had just been granted to Hinata with the Truth longsword.

“Well, my job is done here. The rest, Hinata, is up to you.”

He gave her another refreshing smile, something he never did when he still lived. Hinata gave it her sworn oath.

“Rest assured, master, I will do my best.”

“Very well, then!”

He flashed her another, smaller smile. Then he turned his back to her, as if his job there was done.

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Granville then walked up to Masayuki, Damrada lining up next to him.

“Did you take care of your unfinished business, Gren?” Damrada asked.

“I sure did. And *you* were able to give Ludora all your complaints.”

“Heh. Not that he listened to me, as usual.”

“That’s just like him, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely.”

They were both clearly on good terms with each other—enough to make observers think that this was how they really were, long ago. And it was true.

Granville studied under Ludora, then parted company with him to unite the West. Once that was done, he was set to return to Ludora's service...but after a long struggle with the powerbrokers that held sway over all those nations, he was exhausted. The Empire, which he had presented to the West as a hypothetical enemy, had become a true threat—enough to give even him headaches. It drove him mad in the end, and he and his former friend Damrada became friends only on the surface as they constantly tried to outmaneuver each other.

That was their history, up to today, but those rifts no longer seemed relevant. Now they were laughing and chatting like long ago. This was nothing a mere set of illusions could do.

Ludora looked at them. "Whoa, whoa, you're griping about me right in my face now? You want a round with me next?"

"Heh! We were praising you."

"Yeah. We never would've done anything without you."

"Pfft. Sure, sure. Whatever. Now it's my turn, so rest up until I call for you next time."

Ludora laughed. Granville and Damrada did the same in return, and then they vanished, satisfied that their role was complete. They trusted in Ludora to finish the job, and Ludora accepted their trust.

"Are you all right?"

He smiled at the concerned Velgrynd, then hugged her around the waist, kissing her lightly.

"I don't think this is the time..."

"Hee-hee! I'll be disappearing once this is done. I was just claiming my reward in advance."

Velgrynd stared at Ludora, rapt with emotion. She loved how naïve and unsophisticated Masayuki was, but Ludora here, just as she loved him before, was something else entirely. One day, Masayuki would become Ludora himself. Velgrynd believed this, but she never thought that dream would come true so

fast.

Perhaps this was all a bunch of contradictions, but that was truly how she felt. She could love Ludora in any form, and that's why she loved the original the most—and Masayuki, who recreated Ludora for her, was now the supreme figure in Velgrynd's life. The word *love* was no longer sufficient.

"I love Masayuki...and you inside of him, Ludora."

"I know. But don't tell me. Tell Masayuki himself."

"But he'll get all embarrassed."

"He's overjoyed on the inside. Trust me. I would know."

That, too, was the truth. This Ludora was no illusion; it was Masayuki himself, with the memories of Ludora inside of him.

He turned toward Feldway, as if trying to hide his embarrassment.

"So... Sorry to keep you, Feldway."

"...It looks like you are the real thing. So you'll ignore all the laws of the world, then? After conquering so many lands, you'll even conquer death itself?"

"No, I'm still as dead as ever. There's no coming back from that. But if someone makes the woman I love cry, I'll come in swinging from the afterlife anytime."

"Ridiculous."

"I'm quite serious, you know. I haven't *really* gone to the other side yet."

He was being playful here, but Ludora was also telling the truth. He was still housed inside Masayuki's body—even if it wasn't *all* his memories quite yet, since Michael's body was still incarnated in this world. As soon as Masayuki's power expires, the Ludora side of his personality will disappear—but the memories and experiences will remain stored in Masayuki's mind. Ludora would continue to come to the surface in the future, too—a fact he didn't feel kind enough to tell Feldway, but he wasn't intent on hiding it, either.

"Now, then..."

Ludora glanced at Vega. Then, as if he had every right to, he ordered

Testarossa and Hinata.

“You guys. I’ll let you handle those rats.”

He wasn’t greeted with much respect.

“Who said you’re the boss of us...?”

“Yeah, really.”

But following Ludora’s will was the smart choice, and these two weren’t foolish enough not to know that. It seemed downright vicious of him, but they decided to just put their heads down and heed his will.

“Shall we form a united front, Lady Hinata?”

“Sounds good, Testarossa. And let me say, having *you* as a partner is greatly reassuring.”

“Hee-hee-hee! Me too.”

So this impromptu duo was now tasked with taking on Vega. It was him against Testarossa and Hinata, alongside Feldway against Ludora—that was the cue for the final battle in the capital.

*

Two beautiful women stood before Vega. Testarossa wore a charming smile; Hinata’s was much colder.

“I’m going to finish him off, so would you mind taking him on for the time being?” Testarossa asked Hinata.

“Certainly. He looks tough to kill with a sword, and we can’t use wide-range annihilation magic in the capital. Let’s divide up the roles here.”

As sharp as they both were, they quickly came to a consensus. Testarossa stepped back, trying to work out the effective range of Vega’s skills. This was something easily overlooked while fighting, but she was being careful with it now, exercising her detection magic to the fullest. They were serious about picking him off today, and this was how they’d do it.

Now Hinata stood before Vega.

“Hey, hey, what happened to old man Damrada and that other guy?” he

demanded.

“They went home.”

“Oh, yeah? They looked like pretty tough folk, but not like they could take *me* on. And *you* ain’t any better. Maybe beating my dracobeasts got you all cocky, but lemme show you how reality works real quick.”

Vega sneered at Hinata. Damara was an ex-colleague of his, someone he recalled as being pretty talented, but Vega didn’t see him as all that much of a threat now. Still, hearing from Hinata that he was heading back home honestly gladdened him. Getting swarmed by *that* many powerhouses at once would’ve been incredibly annoying. This way, at least, there wouldn’t be as much hassle.

“Well, we’ll see, won’t we? You may regret underestimating me.”

Even Hinata could tell that Vega was playing for keeps. Normally she’d be acting all superior and goading her opponent, but Hinata knew attempting that act now would just make her look ridiculous. Better to be honest and prove her ability by winning instead.

Once the exchange was over, Vega made his move. Opting to leverage his greatly enhanced strength and speed, he went right up to Hinata, aiming to make her surrender fast. The shock waves from his steel-like arms could destroy objects without having to touch them, and the same was true for his kicks. His entire body was destruction incarnate, outclassing even wide-range strategic weapons, and one blow from him could cause untold damage to his surroundings. Without the Full Isolation Barrier, the city would have been reduced to ashes in a matter of minutes.

Faced with this much violence, Hinata was clearly in mortal danger. Her EP had gone up significantly, but Vega was powering himself up even faster than that. The difference was over tenfold by now, and he even had an ultimate skill. Even though Granville had helped her awaken as a Hero, Vega was still too dangerous an opponent for Hinata.

But that didn’t bother her at all.

It’s strange. I don’t feel scared in the slightest. And somehow, I can read the flow of his attack...

It was much more accurate than Predict Future Attack, the skill Rimuru learned. Perhaps Predict Future was a better name for it by now. And it made sense, because Hinata's abilities were...

Confirmed. Evolving the unique skill Measurer into the ultimate skill Fortuna, Lord of Misfortune... Complete.

With this evolution to her body, Hinata had reached the realm of the ultimate.

Fortuna, Lord of Misfortune, included skills like Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Holy Ambition, Control Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, All of Creation, Computational Domain, and Virtual World. By making full use of these powers, Hinata had pieced together an almost perfect ability to predict the future. Her mastery of Granville's True Slash sword move was also made possible only through this ultimate skill. It cost Hinata her unique skill Usurper, but the talent that let her earn Fortuna made that moot anyway.

Vega had attempted things like creating body doubles, growing extra legs, and other tricky strikes, but Hinata was now seeing through it all. She was facing an opponent several times her speed, but she wasn't even breaking a sweat as she toyed with him in battle.

"Dammit...just sit *still* for me...!"

No matter how awesome Vega's shock-wave attacks were, Hinata—as a newly hatched Hero—could turn herself into a spiritual life-form now. They could hardly damage her at all unless she took a direct hit. Naturally, given all his God-class gear, Vega still could have killed Hinata in a single blow—but now Hinata had the Truth longsword in hand. She hesitated to even properly parry Vega's attacks before now, considering the difference in weapon performance, but with Truth, there was no need to worry. Combined with the new computational skills that let her predict the future, she now had no problem pushing all of Vega's moves away from her. The difference in sheer muscle still meant she had to choose her angles carefully, but with Hinata's dueling skills, that was a cinch.

"Not hitting me, are you?"

"Goddamn you! But you don't have any way to reach *me*, either, do you?!"

Vega might have sounded like a sore loser, but he was right. Still, Hinata had no reason to be ashamed of that. That's what Testarossa was being kept on ice for.

"It's so helpful to have a talented fighter up front. I'm all set to go."

"All right. When you're ready, then."

"Yes... No penance will be offered to him. Time to plunge him down to purgatory."

Vega, with his keen survival instincts, felt a threat on the horizon.

"N-no! You're insane! W-wait! Wait a damn—"

It inspired him to plea for his life. But Testarossa wasn't listening.

"...White Flare."

This was it. White Flare—the ultimate in single-target magic strikes, created by Testarossa with Belial, Lord of the Underworld, her own ultimate skill. It ate away at life, reaping it until there was nothing but barren land. Anyone targeted by it had no way to escape, their bodies consumed by white flame and sent down to hell. It didn't damage any of the surroundings at all, but its force—and its heat, well above what any nuclear magic could produce—made it a truly horrifying spell. No one had a chance against it, and Vega was burnt away in an instant.

...But Testarossa's face remained grim.

"...Ugh. Awful. I think I messed this up."

Her voice was grave.

"What do you mean?" Hinata asked.

"I failed to take that fool's soul with him. He might trick other people, but he can't trick me that way."

When Vega died, Testarossa obtained a large mass of souls at once. But, she said, none of them had the telltale scent of Vega's.

Such a terrifying magic, Hinata thought. Even I would have trouble withstanding it. Was it really that escapable?

If it were her, she was sure her defeat would be guaranteed once it triggered. Hinata would guarantee it, in fact. But then she retracted the idea, recalling Vega's classic attitude.

"It seems likely... No, I'm all but certain that he escaped."

"You think so, too?" Testarossa asked.

"Yes. It just seemed like he was putting on a performance to me."

"You're right. He wasn't nearly desperate enough—or sniveling enough—to *really* be begging for his life."

She had heard a lot in Moss's reports about just how sneaky a man Vega was. The moment he realized he was at a disadvantage, he wouldn't hesitate to get his ass out of there at once. He didn't stop lording it over them until the very end, and they were sure he didn't think he'd die for a single moment.

"This is awful. I'm so embarrassed, I don't think I could ever face Sir Rimuru again..."

Testarossa's mistake was filling her with shame. Hinata wasn't feeling much better.

"Yes, I can already picture Rimuru's stupid grinning face when he hears this. He always seems to enjoy it when I screw up..."

Hinata had her own reason to hang her head. He always had that personality trait, didn't he? Always loving to see Hinata in trouble, like he was *so* much smarter about everything. She hated him for that, but she also liked how eager he was to help her out of a pinch, too. It was a day of mixed feelings for her.

Moss, listening to these two champions speak, thought, *If I did something like this, I'd never live it down with her for at least the next three hundred years...*

The idea of telling Testarossa that he let an enemy get away was so horror-inducing, he didn't think he could ever do it. But he wasn't foolish enough to point out his boss's mistakes, either. Try that, he knew sincerely, and she'd start pinning the blame on him, yelling at him for failing to keep watch or whatever.

Ahh, but if Rimuru's other officials start railing on her for this, Lady Testarossa's gonna go on the warpath...

It was a distressing moment for Moss. He could already imagine having to deal with an irritated, on edge Testarossa for the foreseeable future. At the very least, he hoped she wouldn't take it out on him too much.

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Ludora leisurely took off his emperor's robe, leaving it in Velgrynd's care. He stared down Feldway, only his undershirt covering his torso.

"Come to me, Deva..."

The call was answered by the sword Ludora preferred to use in his Hero days, a treasured blade from the age of divinity granted to him by his master, Veldanava. It was graded as among the very highest of God-class gear.

The Temma and Deva swords, named after the demons of heaven and the gods of earth, formed a natural pair. For Ludora, he could truthfully say that there was nothing that could ever surpass this weapon. The Temma Sword, received by Guy and later passed on to Milim, was a long, curved, single-edged sword, while Deva was a double-edged sword of typical size, its ease of use making it an excellent match for Ludora.

Feldway's eyes narrowed. "That sword... It belongs to Sir Veldanava..."

"It does. I got it from him."

"...I can't allow this. That's too valuable for a mere mortal to have."

"Like I care," Ludora brazenly said as he walked toward Feldway.

Velgrynd was watching on anxiously, but she didn't think about intervening. She trusted Ludora.

"You're still as much of a coward as always, aren't you? Never the type to try settling a score for good," Ludora taunted Feldway.

"Why does that matter? A leader's job is to outlast everybody else. You know that as well as I do."

"I suppose, yeah. But what if that causes you to miss your one chance to win a battle? You need to keep your priorities straight, too."

"Pfft. Why are—?"

"I'm grateful to you, actually. If you had fought Grune strictly with your own powers instead of relying on Michael, Lord of Justice, I'm sure she would've been even *more* badly hurt."

"..."

"Regardless, I'll never let you live down wounding her. Get ready for me!"

With that statement, Ludora went up close to Feldway—then, with a casual stroke, swung his sword.

Feldway caught it. His own sword, named Ark, was another masterpiece, granted to him by Veldanava. Both swords were of the same quality. Now it all came down to how they wielded them.

The ground shattered with every footstep, the very atmosphere cracking around them with every shock wave that shuddered through it. The impact of each sword clash was so great, it made the air smell burnt across the city square.

"Amazing..."

Hinata, now just another spectator, marveled at the sight. Ludora respected Granville, Hinata's teacher, as his own master, and his own power was clearly the real thing. Despite being housed in Masayuki's fragile body, he was easily pushing out as much force as Feldway.

Or maybe more, actually, for after a few more exchanges, it was Feldway who found himself outmatched.

"You are *so* damn weak."

"Don't rile me, Ludora!!"

"Heh! This is what happens when you rely too much on skills. You might be trying to imitate me, but I'm not about to go easy on you."

Ludora knocked Feldway's sword away as he spat the words at him. The difference in ability was now overwhelming.

"Michael, Lord of Justice, offers full, complete defense, in the true meaning of the term. As long as I've been using it, there is no doubt about that."

“...”

“But while it’s activated, you don’t have any means of attack, do you? No magic, no other skills, no unleashing your fighting spirit. The thing is, though...”

There was a loophole. You couldn’t unleash your fighting spirit, but you could still overwhelm your opponent with your aura. And—this was the main point—it was possible to attack with the weapon in your hand without a problem.

Ludora was well aware of that. He was a master of his skills, fully capable of canceling Castle Guard just when he executed a slash, or using his fighting spirit to boost the power of his attacks.

“You knew that, which made you think you were calling all the shots. But, you see, that approach only worked because *I* was doing it. You need to be the absolute best with your sword, or else you wouldn’t so easily lose all your methods of attack like this.”

He was hitting the bull’s-eye. And Feldway, who had experience serving as one of Ludora’s close advisors, knew all of that. That’s why, once he gained the ultimate skill Michael, Lord of Justice, he attempted to recreate the moves Ludora perfected with it—but it proved harder than he thought.

This wasn’t something Ludora picked up overnight, either, of course. Learning this fighting technique took repeated beatings at the hands of his master Veldanava. Even imitating it was a feat. What’s more, being the inferior swordsman didn’t mean Castle Guard had been broken. Feldway was still unhurt, and his overall superior position hadn’t been affected at all.

“...Yes, I see your point. But don’t think you’ve won because of that.”

Feldway was being deliberately arrogant. He had absolute confidence in his own defense that assured him defeat was impossible. But Ludora was now openly mocking him.

“You really *are* underestimating me, aren’t you? How many years do you think I spent with Veldanava after he granted me Lord of Justice?”

“What are you driving at?”

“I’m asking if you think I never considered that strategy of yours.”

"Don't be stupid. Do you think there's any way to break down the most powerful of angelic skills—of *all* skills, even? Bluffing won't work on me, you know."

Ludora sniffed derisively. Then he narrowed his eyes and thrust his sword at Feldway.

"Then let me show you. I obtained Uriel, Lord of Vows. Do you recall the traits of that one?"

"It's nothing but a bunch of administrative tools. Sir Veldanava used Uriel to manage all the skills he was creating."

Feldway was correct in his answer, but that wasn't the whole story.

"No, that's not all. Maybe you already know this, but Uriel is also for listening to the voices of the people...or, really, the voices of those connected to Veldanava. Wishes for hope, prayers for salvation... All sorts of things. And I didn't lose that skill when I acquired this."

"...So what?"

"It's similar, isn't it? To the Lord of Justice skill you're using now."

Castle Guard was invincible as long as the invoker still had devotees. It "listened" to the voices that were faithful to it—and in that sense, Uriel and Michael could be described as similar.

"And by the way, Uriel has something called Absolute Defense, derived from the skill Unlimited Imprisonment. That skill always tends to get broken through at the worst possible moment, though. It's really a pretty lousy skill to have. But put it to use as part of an attack and...well, not to sing my own praises, but it's not bad, y'know?"

Ludora grinned. He lightly waved the Deva sword in his hand. The blade enveloped itself in light.

"You can see it, right?"

"Mmmh..."

Feldway's complexion changed when he looked at the light. One look, and it was clear—it bore the same properties as the Castle Guard that enshrouded

him.

"The more people who believe in me, the more power it has. How many followers do you have? Because I've got hundreds of millions of citizens counting on me!"

Ludora was telling the truth. Feldway's followers had numbered less than a million, but after seeing his forces mown down repeatedly, there were likely to be under 300,000 remaining. Ludora, meanwhile, had at least 800 million citizens who believed in him, and that was just the beginning. Here in Englesia's capital alone, for example, several million people were now placing their hopes in him. (They were actually pinning their hopes on Masayuki, but he and Ludora were the same person right now, so it still counted.)

In terms of absolute numbers, there was now a huge gap between Ludora and his opponent. Feldway, now seeing this, grimaced in frustration.

"This is the strike I will land, containing the will of all the people who believe in me... Absolute Severance!!"

Feldway sensed the danger.

"You're kidding me! How the hell can you access Uriel's powers?! That's still missing now—"

When Veldanava died, Uriel was supposed to have been lost as well—but here was Ludora, tapping into it like nothing was amiss. It was unacceptable to Feldway.

"You're not paying attention, are you? If you're going to be picky about that, Gren had access to Sariel, Lord of Hope, too, you know."

Ludora admonished him like a lecturing parent. Masayuki's Lord of Heroes was capable of recreating any sort of skill, even those lost long ago. But Ludora just laughed loudly, not seeing any reason why he should tell him that.

"He never *did* suffer fools too much, did he?"

Velgrynd was a little put off by it, but more than that, she was smitten with Ludora's sheer bravery. Nobody ever yelled at Ludora about that apart from Lucia, his sister. This scene had played itself out before in the past, and now

Velgrynd was getting an encore presentation.

“So you—!”

“That’s right. I have access to Lord of Justice right now, too. But what I’ll teach you a lesson with today is Uriel—the most powerful magic force!”

“Ahh...?!”

Feldway, on full alert, pulled out all the stops, ready to defend himself with not only Castle Guard but all the other barriers in his possession. Then, the next moment:

“*Here’s* what I’ve been waiting for. Let’s see just how long you can hold out!”

With that shout from Ludora, the ultimate strike was unleashed.

“Like it’d ever work, Ludoraaaaaa!!”

“...Nova Break.”

A clash—and then, a fury of horrifying destruction raged across the square. The Full Isolation Barrier was meaningless against it. Velgrynd managed to channel the main shock wave and send it upward into the air, but the aftershocks alone shattered the entire area. It was never the sort of power that a mere sword strike should generate, but it was also the epitome of Ludora-style fighting. That’s what made him the “first Hero,” one who could compete with Guy—this truly unfair level of strength.

And, of course, it was Feldway who fell.

“Well...a fair result, I’d say.”

Ludora flashed a refreshed smile and raised his right hand to the sky—an unmistakable declaration of victory.

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Feldway was on his knees, coughing up blood. The dark shade of crimson stained his robe of pure white.

“N-no... How could I...?”

“You were too conceited, Feldway. You always were that way—you refused to accept being anything but the best at whatever you did. That’s what made you

lose sight of what mattered.”

“Shut up... I don’t need to be lectured by this shell of a man before me!”

“True, true. I understand what you mean, somewhat.”

The winner and the loser fell silent, staring at each other for a moment. But it was Feldway who next spoke.

“...There will be no next time. Today shall be my last defeat.”

With that, he stood right up, as if all his injuries never existed. The bloodstains were gone from his robes. It was like the sword wound Ludora inflicted on him was a mirage all along.

“Just as stubborn as always, I see. Well, I’ll keep winning no matter how many times you come to me, so whatever.”

They exchanged one more look, then parted ways. Feldway turned his back to Ludora, then gave an order to Mai, standing by behind him. One Instant Motion later, and they were gone. Both the Full Isolation Barrier and the one covering the capital had been destroyed; it was impossible to keep them from escaping. But not pursuing them was a smart idea. Even wounded, Feldway still had strength left in him. His defeat to Ludora had mentally put him into a corner, but he still had enough ability to fight. If that invincible Castle Guard hadn’t been breached just now, he might not have chosen to flee so readily.

So Feldway swore to take revenge on Ludora sometime. Today’s humiliation would never be forgotten.

As for the victorious Ludora:

“That was brilliant!”

Velgrynd pressed his face up against her chest, something he didn’t voice much objection to. Or maybe not? Looking closer, he was clearly blushing hard, his eyes now little dots.

Ludora was no longer there, and Masayuki had returned in his place. Launching Nova Break had expended the last of his soul’s power, making it harder for Ludora to maintain his persona—another reason he let Feldway escape. It took a lot of concerted effort to maintain his Ludora presence until

Feldway finally left for him.

Hinata walked up to the now-freed Masayuki.

"Nice to meet you, original Hero. My name is Hinata Sakaguchi. Before you leave, I thought I would say a few words to—"

But as she talked to him, she began to hear cheering behind her. Seeing Ludora's strength, the crowds all thought Masayuki had, at long last, gotten serious in a fight. They were wrong, but to those who didn't know all the inner workings of that battle, that's what appeared to be the truth.

Now they were rushing the square, sensing that the battle was over. Once they reached Masayuki, they formed a tight circle around him, Minitz and the rest of his guards holding them back.

"You're so cool, Masayuki!"

"I never saw Lightspeed fight for keeps like that before!"

"Yeah, I had no idea what was going on, but I could tell how mind-blowing that was, at least!"

Once again, Masayuki's rep was ballooning on him. Most of the capital's citizens saw the whole thing from start to finish, much as they did with Reiner's battle.

No, guys! That wasn't me! I mean, it was, but it wasn't...

Masayuki was an emotional wreck, but he tapped into his innate glossing-over skills, successfully putting his "of course I did all that, so what?" face on. But what he really felt inside was:

Why did it all turn out like this?

From his point of view, Ludora did pretty much everything for him. People kept telling him how awesome he was, but he didn't really feel that way at all. It felt like a case of mistaken identity, but those feelings weren't coming across to the throngs.

"Great job, Masayuki. You were wonderful out there."

Velgrynd handed Masayuki his robe back—an imperial piece of garb, jet-black

with gold embroidery. He pondered as he put it on. Having all these eyes on him was quite awkward, but to him, that wasn't the only hint of trouble in the air.

To be exact, the capital's royal knights had just arrived.

Oh, wow, this is gonna be a pain, I bet...

Minitz, as Masayuki's bodyguard, stepped up to negotiate with them, stating that they had to go through him if they wanted an audience with His Majesty the Emperor. Masayuki was glad to have him around, but what the knights were saying disturbed him greatly. It sounded like the king had been assassinated. There was no way he had anything to do with that—but now he was picking up this talk about "material witnesses," and it was making his heart race.

With all the ordeals he had managed to pick his way through, he was able to accept pretty much anything that happened to him by now. He thought so anyway. But now he wondered if he was just kidding himself. The strain of being on center stage all the time, he was accustomed to—but he was still timid at heart. And now he's a murder suspect? That's the last thing he needed...

"I'm sorry," Hinata whispered to him, finally noticing that Ludora was no longer there. "I think I just dragged you into this mess."

"Um?"

"Reiner killed King Aegil and tried to frame me for it."

No way, Masayuki thought. That's, like, a totally big deal!

He certainly wasn't about to accept being dragged into that swamp, but he couldn't pretend that he was some bystander to it all now. If he wanted to complain, well, he had no one to complain to. After all, Masayuki was inarguably the most powerful figure in this square.

He had no choice but to calm things down a little. So, amid all the clamor and loud voices, he took a step forward. He tilted his head to the side, like he had been practicing, and turned his eyes downward. After a two-second pause, he suddenly lifted his face up and looked at the crowd. That sequence was all it took to get the attention of the throngs. It was uncannily effective.

And it works just like Rimuru said it would, too!

Yes, that little gesture was based on Rimuru's instruction—or rather, the choreography Ciel prepared for them. It was calculated to win the hearts of the people, allowing his innate skills to exercise the greatest possible effect—and since his skill had now evolved to Lord of Heroes, the effect was gigantic.

"Everyone," he quietly began, "please, calm down. I want all of you to keep your heads and tell me what happened..."

The agitated crowd instantly fell quiet. Silence fell over the square like a receding wave. The sheer impact he had inwardly frightened Masayuki—this was beyond all expectations. A couple of quick acting lessons gave him all this? It seemed laughable to him, but he stuck to it, keeping up his performance.

Um, don't try to hurry your words, take your time... Even if you stutter a bit, your skill's covering for you, so don't worry... That's what he said, right?

Once it was clear he would become Emperor, Rimuru consulted with him on several occasions. He had a lot of other people supporting him as well, and by this time, he was actually pretty decently living up to his role. He was a nervous wreck on the inside, but all those people passionately gazing at him never would have guessed it.

"My friends! What is right, and what is wrong? One look at this scene should make it obvious, I think. Citizens as wise as yourselves will certainly have picked up on the right answer without me having to tell you anything. So please—I want you to trust in that answer. And I want to believe in all of you, too!"

Not to be too hard on himself, but Masayuki wasn't convinced this solved much of anything. But he was sure even this drivel would have a decent effect. That's what his Lord of Heroes did for him.

He didn't know what was right, but he at least wanted to keep the crowds from getting hostile toward him. It seemed like he was succeeding, so he decided to seize the opportunity. No matter what kind of sneaky double-talking it took, he wanted to guide the people away from asking anything concrete of him.

It's perfect, isn't it? I didn't say anything meaningful at all, so there's no way

anyone can blame me.

He was already patting himself on the back. And with him speaking, the clamoring crowd fell perfectly quiet. As they did, Minitz went up to him. He was joined by one of the knights—a large, gruff-looking man clad in full armor that shone gold in color.

Masayuki freaked out at the sight. But the knight, at least, was giving him the utmost in courtesy.

"My lord, I am greatly honored to have an audience with His Majesty Masayuki, champion of the Kingdom of Englesia and head of the Eastern Empire!"

"Oh, um, sure."

Masayuki involuntarily nodded, looking up in awe at this knight. But he stood strong, knowing what he needed to say.

"Um, I heard King Aegil—"

I heard King Aegil was killed, but Hinata didn't do it, okay? is what he wanted to say, but the knight interrupted him.

"Do not worry, Your Majesty! With you taking Lady Hinata's side, all suspicions are as good as cleared! After all, no knight of Englesia would ever suspect her for a single moment!"

He accentuated this declaration with a loud laugh.

"So did you find the suspect?" Hinata asked, taking a glance at Prince Elrick. He had been trembling under the shadow of the fountain at the start of the battle, but Moss moved him to the side midway so no one would bump into him. (Not out of kindness, of course. Testarossa ordered him.)

Capturing the murderers meant a lot in this case. She had no intention of letting them go, and the sharper among the crowd who witnessed all this should have no problem figuring out who the mastermind was.

The king really was dead, apparently, but could Hinata have actually done it? The question was on everyone's mind. Prince Elrick was a popular figure, yes, but after seeing today's events, it seemed like the whole story had been laid

bare. Masayuki didn't really know anything, but Hinata's behavior made him look at Elrick, too—and then their eyes met.

"Heh... Ha-ha-ha-ha... It's over. I'm *ruined*...!"

One look from Masayuki, and Elrick was suddenly laughing—and then, for reasons only he knew, he confessed to his crimes.

Whoa, what? I'm lost. What the hell's going on?? thought Masayuki.

Elrick mistakenly believed that Masayuki was on to all his misdeeds, so he just blew the door open all on his own. Masayuki didn't know that, but he decided to bottle up his internal turmoil for now and keep acting like he was in control.

Things rapidly settled down after this bombshell.

"Looks like Sir Masayuki's identified the killer. It's all solved now..."

"Prince Elrick killed the king? His own father...?"

"Yeah, and apparently the former head knight Reiner was his accomplice..."

"So Lady Hinata's not...?"

"Isn't Reiner that wild bastard who made an ass of himself in the Council?"

"Yeah, the greatest embarrassment the knights of Englesia ever produced."

"So that's why he tapped into all this insane power? Just to get revenge on Lady Hinata?"

"But he couldn't trick our Sir Masayuki. He saw through all of that—and now he's cleared Lady Hinata's good name!"

"The Hero's done it again!"

"Even now, as Emperor, he's never forgotten us!"

The prince's confession was incontrovertible evidence. Masayuki and Hinata didn't have to plead their case at all—the people around them were already convincing themselves it was so.

"Hail Sir Masayuki!"

"Glory to Sir Masayuki, our hero!"

The cheers were popping up everywhere, spreading among the people in the

blink of an eye. In another moment, they became a chorus.

“Maaa-sa-yu-ki! Maaaaa-sa-yu-kiiii!!”

Soon the entire city rang with that now-familiar chant.

Masayuki awkwardly raised his hand, forcing his lips into a smile as he acknowledged all this. Hinata looked a bit stunned next to him, Velgrynd couldn't have looked happier...but Masayuki himself was sobbing on the inside. *Whatever!* he thought. *I don't care anymore!!* There was nothing he could do. This was normal by now.

Incidentally, the lingering aftereffects of having Ludora in his body (among other things) would trigger an extremely rare condition called a “soulache” in Masayuki the next day, a sensation akin to growing pains that would rack his whole body for a little while. But he didn't know that, of course.



Michael was painfully aware of how naïve he was.

He really did think, at first, that the demon lord Rimuru was an insignificant figure. That changed once he defeated Velgrynd. After that, he was much more careful, treating him as a full enemy—but even so, he still didn't think Rimuru would be any challenge in a fight.

Now, though, he had no choice but to accept that he was too optimistic about that. Rimuru, after all, had entered the stopped world, a place only a select few could access—just marching right in there with impunity, no permission required.

He's trouble. And he's always in my way.

Stopping time no longer really mattered. So Michael decided to undo Time Stop and attempt to crush Rimuru with the overwhelming power difference instead. Time Stop was obtained by analyzing Velzard's ultimate skill Gabriel, Lord of Endurance, but it had no effect on someone who could manipulate data particles at will. Keeping it going would just consume unnecessary energy, so he decided that a more straightforward approach would give him more of an advantage.

After all, Michael had taken in the factors of two True Dragons, granting him incredible strength. His body was toughened so much that he now felt invincible, bursting with energy.

But that wasn't all. As the most powerful of the angelic ultimate skills, Michael was able to fully deploy all the powers he had analyzed and incorporated into himself up to now. Gabriel was built around the concept of "fixing in place," which provided him with unparalleled defensive abilities. It wasn't up to the level of Castle Guard, but since he could attack at the same time, it was more useful in many ways. The "fixation" aspect was also what led him to obtain Time Stop, and as long as he had these skills, he couldn't see how any other being could ever defeat him.

Velgrynd's skill Raguel, Lord of Relief, also boasted the ultimate in offensive performance, and the data recovered from Leon's skill Metatron, Lord of Purity, proved extremely useful in teaching him how to consume energy more efficiently. Even the skills he had lent out to his troops were available to him, as shown by his tapping into Concealment—a move from Arius's skill Sandalphon, Lord of Judgment.

This was the kind of being Michael had become, and now, any battle he stepped into would instantly become a victory for his side. He might've been defeated by the Hero Chloe, but that was just a Parallel Existence with not even a fifth of his energy. Michael was now his complete self, with all his lost energy already replenished.

There was, in fact, an over tenfold difference between Michael and the demon lord Rimuru standing before him. He could vow with confidence that he didn't lose out to him in one single factor.

By this point, if Michael willed it, he could've easily blown Obela's entire army away. With that in mind, beating a solo target like Rimuru should have been no big deal. But it didn't look like it'd be that simple. Even Michael had to admit it, deep down:

This guy's a monster.

Every single attack he tried against Rimuru didn't work. Even Cardinal Acceleration, which he fired off with the full intent of killing him, was instantly

erased from existence.

Michael couldn't believe his eyes. The moment he lost his decisive advantage—the ability to stop time—he no longer had any effective means of attacking Rimuru. But by the time he finally realized this, the battle was as good as decided.

"Hmm... Your attacks are all so easy to comprehend. Maybe it's time I stop fending you off and—"

He heard his opponent mutter something—and the next moment, Rimuru's threat level grew by several orders of magnitude. His eyes began to glow gold... and now Michael was no longer a match for him.

If offense wouldn't work, how about defense? Michael's Castle Guard had lost its effect, but he still had the skill Gabriel from Velzard, its fixation-driven defenses all but absolute.

With that in mind, he activated Snow Crystal, freezing the moisture in the atmosphere around him. He poured all his strength into it, creating an object indestructible by any conceivable means, and then he stretched it entirely around himself, enveloping him.

But:

"Whoa, I can eat that, too? For real?"

Rimuru seemed just as surprised when he poked a hole in the Snow Crystal shield. It was a hard reality to swallow.

"What did you do?" exclaimed Michael. "What did you just *do* to me?!"

He couldn't help but shout that out. But Rimuru's voice was flat as ever.

"I ate it."

"You *ate* it?"

"Pretty much. That's my power, so... I didn't think I could eat barriers, too, but give it a try and sometimes it works out, huh?"

No it doesn't!

Michael was astonished. He wanted to demand an explanation from Rimuru.

All his actions were based on rational judgment, and he just couldn't accept all this irrational nonsense.

But the results proved his opponent right. And Michael wasn't incompetent enough to ignore the reality spread in front of him.

So what should he do now? All his attacks were nullified, every means of defense rendered meaningless. A calm voice inside Michael was whispering to him that now was the time to escape...but there were other voices begging him to stay here and seek out more information.

Either way, Michael had Parallel Existence on hand, so he could still revive himself if defeated here. He transferred all his skills to Feldway regardless, so he could even try attacking right now, reckless though it may have been.

But...the demon lord Rimuru was just too inscrutable. And any escape route he had was already blocked.

This region has been confined in Complex Space. It is now impossible for Michael to escape from this area.

Michael felt like he heard a voice, though he couldn't make out who it belonged to.

What it said sounded impossible, but it turned out to be true. Now there was nothing to deliberate over. Only one answer remained. If he couldn't defeat the demon lord Rimuru here, there was no way out.

"Heh. You have my attention, then. Prepare to face my full fury."

With that declaration, Michael attempted to summon his most powerful sword—different from the one in his hand.

"Come to me, Deva!"

No response. It was being used by Ludora, its actual owner, so there was no way it'd respond to the call of a fake master like Michael. If he had mastered Parallel Existence to the level Velgrynd had, he perhaps would've been able to see what was going on through Feldway's eyes. But while he had functionally given Feldway that skill, they had not yet achieved full synchronization. He thought they could share notes on what happened later, and that was the cause

of his failure right now.

Switching gears, Michael decided to infuse his current sword with divine energy instead. Rimuru gave this a quizzical look, but readied his own sword in return.

“What was that ‘Deva’ you mentioned?” he asked Michael.

“Never mind that.”

“Well, if you say so...”

Rimuru seemed dubious, but as the amount of divine force rose, the tension grew clearer on his face.

Then it was time for the final clash.

“Meltslash.”

After taking over Ludora’s body, Michael had made his vessel’s swordsmanship skills his own. Not even Michael could hope to reproduce Nova Break, Ludora’s most powerful technique, but anything that required spiritual particle manipulation was fair game for him. That included Disintegration, and that was the Overblade-class skill he chose for this bout.

Rimuru, meanwhile, casually broke out one of his innermost secrets.

“Falling Haze: Whirling Transition.”

It was the public debut of this skill, generously broken out as a sort of courtesy to his soon-to-be-dead opponent. And it was mesmerizing.

The trajectory of his sword changed in thousands of different ways, slicing through the enemy in a constantly elusive motion. The effect was naturally devastating, reducing its target to dust and scattering it to the winds like flower buds. It was beyond what any human could match, and even a demon lord was likely to meet their end from it. Only with the combination of a True Dragon’s strength and a slime’s malleability was this mysterious, almost grotesque sword technique possible.

“I...lost...”

Michael realized that his body was giving way on him. Then, with no time

allowed to face this inescapable reality...

“Okay, any last words?” Rimuru asked.

Now accepting defeat, he wondered: Why did he lose when he was superior in every possible way? No answer came to him. So, risking that it’d make him look like a sore loser, he asked a question.

“Who...are you...?”

Rimuru looked blankly back at him.

“Me? I’m just a slime...”

What is he talking about? It all seemed so ridiculous to Michael. But for some reason, it took his attention off his crumbling body. Somehow...

Could this perhaps be what “fun” feels like?

Suddenly, he understood. He had been abandoned by his master and gained sentience, and ever since then, he had never experienced this feeling. He tried to imitate it at times, but in the end, he dismissed it as something beyond his understanding.

But now, at the very last moment, he suddenly understood. He chided himself. Some things were just beyond his control.

“A slime? A creature as outlandishly strange and incomprehensible as you? Come on. You defeated me, a manas—”

The crumbling was speeding up now. His body was falling apart, particles of light scattering from it.

“Well, I’m not alone, actually.”

“...?”

“But you can take your time asking my partner about that.”

With that, Rimuru broke off the conversation. His hand was pointed at Michael, and then:

“Consume all things...Azathoth, God of the Void!”

The ultimate, most powerful of skills bared its fangs for the first time in this

world. And then Soul Glutton—its tranquil powers irresistible to anyone—swallowed everything in Michael’s body.

.....

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...

In truth, he understood.

He knew that his creator had abandoned him. He never wanted to admit it, so instead he soldiered on this far. But that was all over. He was warm, all his needs fulfilled—a nostalgic feeling of comfort.

Yes, Michael thought as he faded away, this is it.

Maybe this was all a misunderstanding on his part. Here, he had everything—and he felt himself becoming part of it.

Michael was no longer alone. It was inevitable that this would happen—all planned from the start.

Ah... My wish has come true. And my only regret, Feldway, is that I have to leave you behind...

With that final thought, Michael’s consciousness cleanly vanished away.



Upon confronting Michael, I had a pretty quick epiphany.

Oh, wow, this isn’t any big deal whatsoever.

I mean, Michael’s attacks were a little too perfect for his own good. Sticking to the fundamentals is fine and all, but he’s got hardly any curveballs at all. He’s throwing nothing but strikes down the middle, and no matter how fast they zoomed by, they were easy to predict and even easier to deal with.

So I subbed Ciel in for myself early on and enjoyed the game from my luxury skybox seating.

Seeing Michael bust out that fancy-looking defensive move midway was a little unnerving. No matter how adeptly I could handle it, the difference in

power was pretty obvious. *If he broke out a defensive barrier that I couldn't break down with my own strength, I'd be up the creek pretty quickly*, I thought.

But Ciel was even more amazing. Like, seriously. With frightening calm, it identified the weak point of Michael's skill—and as a result, even his Snow Crystal was easily neutralized by Azathoth, God of the Void.

It was an overwhelmingly one-sided game. I was completely victorious, and I made Michael look so pathetic as I did it. Falling Haze: Whirling Transition, which I busted out at the end there, might've served as a kind of on-the-field test for Ciel, as far as I know. For me, though, it was my final tribute to Michael.

So that's how I beat him...but that sure was a funny question at the end. "Who are you?" That's hard to answer. I'm me. Nobody else. But I think I see what he was getting at. I'm willing to bet that Michael picked up on Ciel's presence...so I thought I would have the manas talk to each other. Michael seemed to take pride in being one, so I'm sure he'd be surprised to learn about Ciel...but, well, it was his first and last chance anyway, so I didn't see the harm.

With that in mind, I used Soul Glutton for the first time against him. Seeing it in action was a surprise. Michael's existence points were probably over ten times mine, so I thought fully eating him up would be impossible, but in an instant he was gone. I sure *felt* full afterward, yeah—the kind of fullness that I never had before, no matter how crazy I went at the dinner table.

With this, I have finished gathering information on all seven angelic-class ultimate skills. I also obtained Velzard's angelic factors, so I will now begin the Analyze and Assess process. ♪

Glad I'm not the only one satisfied with how this turned out. Ciel was on cloud nine as well.

After my battle with Michael, I checked up on Diablo and the rest. They were all okay, which relieved me.

"I...I was too careless this time," Diablo said. "I have no way of apologizing to you..."

"No, no, you couldn't have helped that, okay? I mean, if time was stopped and all, what could you do?"

"Still, though, I should have thought of a better plan. Stopping time means nothing if you can move within the stopped region, so I thought it would be too inefficient energy-wise to be useful...but that was naïve of me. I swear I will never again make such a blunder!"

Diablo sounded unusually down about this, and calming him down took a little while. I still think stopping time is too much of a cheat, but since so few people can do it anyway, I don't see it as a red-alert threat or anything.

That's what I believed, but Diablo and Soei didn't see it that way.

"Teach me how to handle it, too, Diablo."

"I thought I had a sense of what to do, but reaching the next step proved elusive for me. If you know it, tell me."

"Of course, Sir Soei...and you too, Ultima."

Already they were discussing countermeasures, clearly motivated to improve themselves. And, sure, if you assume something will never happen again, you run the risk of repeating the same mistake twice. If there's a way to solve this, best to prepare for that in advance.

With enough time, I felt like we could devise a response to pretty much any problem, so I didn't think that discussion was pointless at all. I opted not to intervene.

Leon hadn't regained consciousness yet, reportedly, so I ordered Diablo to transport him back to Tempest. I don't think anyone will try attacking him again, but you can't be too careful.

Then I ordered Diablo and Ultima to go help out Shion and her team. Daggrull's giant force was on the march now, and we all concluded that Lubelius was likely the next site of battle.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I will be back soon. You will not be without me for long."

"Okay, Sir Rimuru, see you later!"

They were both in high spirits as they left.

Veyron and Zonda joined Ultima as well, so now it was just me and Soei left

there. But we still had business to handle. The Holy Void of Damargania needed to be closely examined. Daggrull never seemed like the sort who'd be motivated to two-time me like this, so clearly *something* must've happened over there. I wanted to know what, and I also wanted to know what was going on in their main city.

"I'll be counting on you, Soei!"

"Yes, Sir Rimuru!"

With him on the job, my mind was at ease.

So, after giving my orders, I returned to the capital, my final concern for the moment. But it looked like I had no reason to worry.

"You're late. It's already over."

Velgrynd proudly regaled me with the whole story. Masayuki, of all people, had defeated Feldway, the enemy leader.

"That's great, isn't it?!"

"W-wait a minute, please! Before you praise me, you really need to listen to my side of the story, okay?!"

Sure, yeah. I get it. I'm sure Masayuki was an unwilling participant in all this. But still, he won, right? He oughtta be prouder.

But I was relieved, too. I was so glad everyone was all right. That was great to see, but it was too soon to relax yet. War reports were soon arriving from across the continent, and it was even more wretched than I imagined...so, in an instant, my mind switched over to the next battle.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

EPILOGUE

THE EVOLVING EVIL

EPILOGUE

THE EVOLVING EVIL

It opened its eyes, feeling a great surge of power.

There, it saw all those little peons that always stood in its way. The being in front of them was annihilating the crowd swarming around it. It was a figure so powerful that not even Ivalage, the World-Destroyer Dragon, could ignore it—and in no time at all, the carnage was over.

Michael, the winner, left the scene, not giving Ivalage even a moment's notice.

It crept over to the remains of the battle, slightly displeased with this. Here were the remains of those who had opposed it over many years. Unconsciously, it feasted upon the many corpses floating there. They were all fools with their frail attacks that never even caused a scratch, but they were still enough to satisfy Ivalage's boredom. It probably took that pointless action because even it felt that their deaths were a little bit of a waste.

But that mere whim on Ivalage's part brought about unbelievable change. The dragon, who had no intellect or reason and had only been destroying its surroundings on instinct, was now imbued with a single emotion. So far, Ivalage's only purpose in life had been to satisfy its destructive urges...and yet, at this moment, he felt hatred.

And this hatred marked the birth of its intellect and emotion.

No god up in the sky could have foreseen how the grudges of those destroyed by Michael would drive Ivalage to this. And the transformation wasn't limited to that.

Thanks to taking in more than ten thousand souls, Ivalage had entered an evolutionary phase. Or not—in fact, it was already complete. The evil god was

now reborn as an incarnation of malice—more cunning, more evil, and more ready than ever to destroy the world.

Just before this Halloween Carnival—the evolution into an evil deity—Ivalage had seen it: the gate leading to the other world, just beyond where Michael had been. This excited its mind as it fell asleep. What could be beyond that gate? And what sort of fun things would await it there? An enemy worthy of throwing this hatred against? Lofty expectations filled Ivalage's imagination, until it felt like its heart would burst.

These were all new emotions to the World-Destroying Dragon—a desire it should never have been allowed. But it was too late. And the day of this dreaming god of malice's awakening was near.

AFTERWORD

Great to see you all again.

For the very first time in this series, I asked for a monthlong deadline extension. I was already not liking my chances very much when I started writing, but in the end, it really *was* impossible for me.

Now that I'm reorganizing all these story elements with an eye toward the finale, I keep coming up with these different ways to develop them. The paths I adopt will all have a big impact on the future, so it's hard to figure out which ones to employ—and that made it hard to start writing them out. I had a fair amount of other work to do as well, of course, another reason why I couldn't really switch my mind over to writing mode. I feel like my mind's not working quite as well as it used to, maybe because I'm getting older. Those kinds of idle thoughts.

When I mentioned all this to I, my editor, he replied with "quit with the excuses and get on with writing" and other such warm words of encouragement. Inexplicable, isn't it? He even said that he'd never, ever change the schedule for the next volume, so now I have to start on that one right after I finish up this afterward...

Oh, but I have to revise this manuscript before then, don't I? Man, proofreaders are really incredible. Looking for errors and contradictions not just in this volume, but the entire rest of the series. Once you reach this number of volumes, though, the small discrepancies have a tendency to pile up.

It'd be easier if these were just little typos or revisions to make the text easier to understand. But in my case, I start writing with nothing but a rough plot in mind, so most of the checking I do is limited to what I can recall from memory.

That only works if the series is just a few or so volumes, and this experience has reminded me that I really need to work out the plot a lot more before I begin writing in earnest.

So here is Volume 19 for you.

The final war has broken out, and now forces are staring each other down in different parts of the world. I couldn't cram everything into this volume, so—as a matter of course by now—it'll be continued in the next one. I'd like to keep this sprint going for the entirety of the remaining three (planned) volumes!

Michael, one candidate of mine for the last boss, has left the stage, so now I'm not sure who'll take that role. The vaguest of ideas are beginning to form in my head, but whether I'll adopt them depends on what happens in the future. The direction of my writing changes all the time on me as I write, after all—but either way, I'll devote myself to providing a story that readers can enjoy more than ever!

Thanks again for your continued support of *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*. See you in the next volume!

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