That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME 20

FUSE

Illustration by
Mitz Vah



MILIM NAVA
RAGE
FELDWAY
AWAKENING
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME
20
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THE TEMMA WAR

BATTLE SUMMARY

Battle of Former Eurazania

Milim Nava	VS	Zeranus the Insect Lord
Carrera	VS	Zeth the Chief Insectoid General
Phobio Esprit Gobta Ranga	VS	Piriod the Insect Queen
Frey	VS	Torun the Insect Master
Gabil Sufia	VS	Beethop the Insect Master
Carillon	VS	Abalt the Insect Master
Middray	VS	Sarill the Insect Master
Obela	VS	Tishorn the Insect Master
Geld	VS	Mujika the Insect Master



Battle of Englesia

Masayuki (Ludora) Velgrynd
VS Feldway — Fled

Hinata Sakaguchi
VS Reiner — Dead

Testarossa
VS Vega — Fled

Venom
VS Arius — Dead



OVER

Battle of Damargania

Rimuru Tempest
Chloe Aubert
Diablo
Soei
Leon

VS

Michael — Destroyed



OVER

Battle of Lubelius

Lubelius/Tempest Unified Force

Luminus Valentine
Gunther
Louis Valentine
Shion
Ultima
Adalmann
Gadora



VS



The Bound Titans

Daggrull
Fenn
Glasord (vice-leader)
Basara (vice-leader)

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FUSE
Illustration by Mitz Vah

YEN ON
New York

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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 20
FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford
Cover art by Mitz Vah

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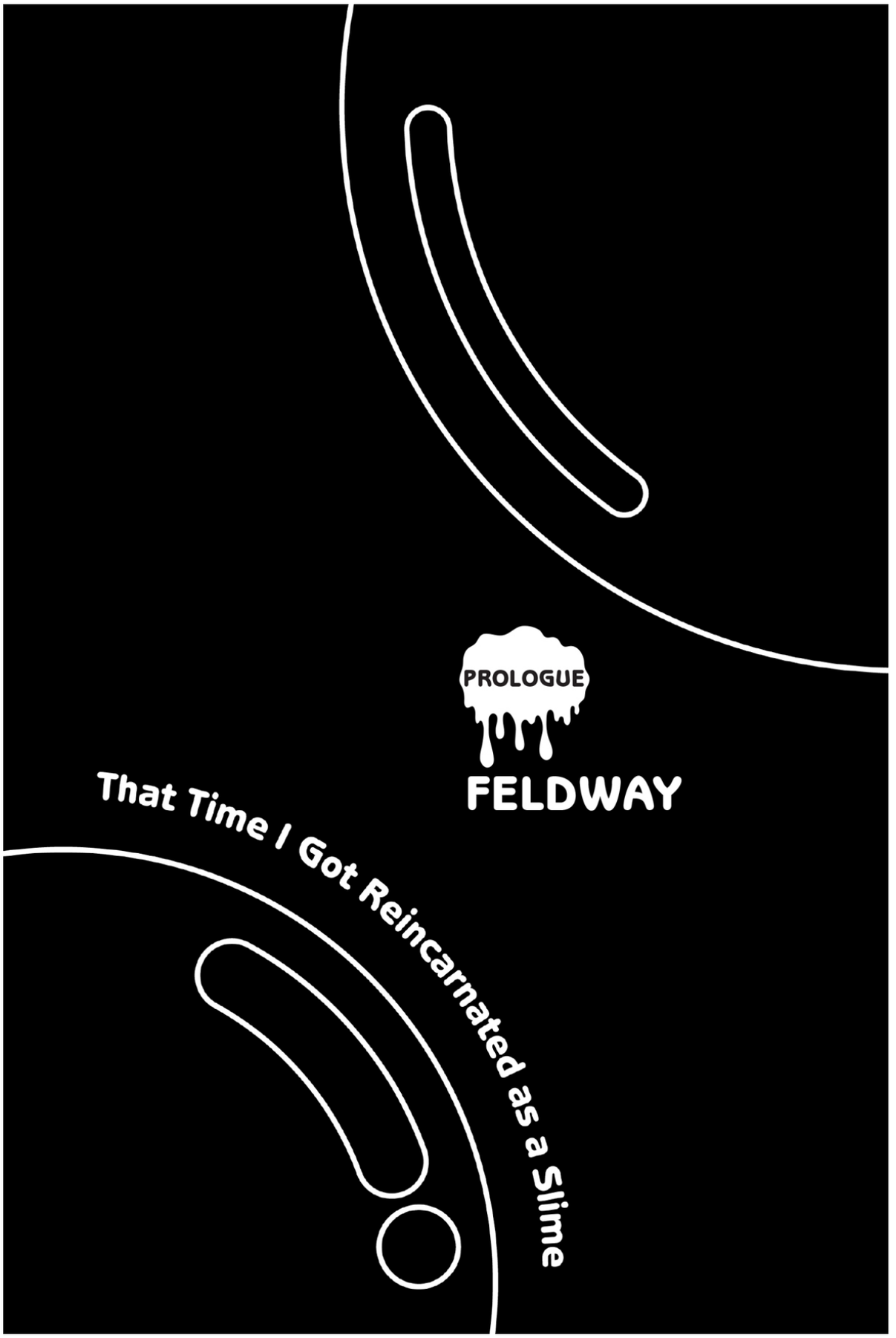
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PROLOGUE
FELDWAY
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

PROLOGUE

FELDWAY

Immediately after his loss to Ludora, Feldway ordered Mai—whom he had kept on standby, just in case—to return to the Celestial Palace, their safe base. He was already there, his face contorted in humiliation as he shouted, still wearing his bloody vestments.

"Ludora?! Don't give me that nonsense!" he snapped. "What kind of 'hero' do you claim to be if you couldn't even protect Lord Veldanava?!"

Those were Feldway's true feelings on the matter, so enraged was he. He knew Ludora was decently strong, but he had never dreamed that he could be defeated by someone like that once he had Castle Guard. Never in a million years did he expect that the supposedly invincible Castle Guard could be broken—and even if he hadn't been his usual cautious self, that would've been more than enough reason to opt for a retreat. He knew there was no shame in fleeing, but he just couldn't contain the anger welling up inside him.

As repulsive as this defeat was, it was still not a decisive one. Feldway repeated this to himself, attempting to regain his composure. He wanted to forget about his own loss, instead turning his attention to how the others were faring in battle. Then another unexpected truth shocked him all over again.

(Sir Michael, have you taken care of the demon lord Rimuru?)

That demon lord was his biggest concern now. Feldway wasted no time sending a Thought Communication over to Michael…but there was no response.

…? What's going on?

Sharing the same skill, Michael and Feldway were essentially one and the same in body and soul. No matter how far apart

they were—indeed, even if they were situated in wholly different dimensions—their two wills would never be separated. Such a separation would be possible only if one side was in a situation critical enough that there wasn't any time to respond to a call…but even then, Michael (unlike Feldway) had a mastery of Parallel Existence and therefore should have been able to revive himself from anything.

So there wasn't that much reason to panic. Or there shouldn't have been. But hearing no response whatsoever was unusual.

If time is no longer stopped and operating like usual again, the battle should have been won long ago…

There was no way the demon lord Rimuru would know about their time suspension skills. The moment they used Leon to lure him onto the scene, the mission was already accomplished. And yet…

Feldway's heart raced as an ominous premonition ran through his mind. And then the message arrived.

Ah…my wish has come true. My only regret, Feldway, is that I must leave you behind as I pass on…

Michael sent the communication to Feldway with the last ounce of strength he could muster before he ceased to exist. Feldway could feel Michael's power within his own body—but his *will* was not there. And that meant just one thing: Michael was dead.

"No… Michael's a Parallel Existence! No matter what situation he's in, I know he can be revived as long as I'm safe…"

Feldway was distraught enough that he didn't even try to pretend nothing was amiss. Michael was the first friend he ever made. People like Zarario and Fenn were one thing, but this was a friend of the heart—someone he wouldn't hesitate to bare his soul to. Cautious as he was, Feldway had always prioritized Michael's safety, layering plan after plan until he felt absolutely sure he'd be safe.

But there was no sign of Michael coming back. Lord of Justice, Feldway's ultimate skill, hadn't disappeared, and Feldway could even feel his manas restoring itself. If he spoke to Michael, he'd receive a response…but there was no sense of

self. All that remained was the power to control Michael, Lord of Justice, in its complete form. This wasn't Michael, Feldway's friend, who had hoped with his own free will that Veldanava could be revived—this was something fundamentally different. And with that, Feldway had to accept facts. His friend was gone forever.

"Why…? How did this happen?" he wondered out loud, but no one was there to answer him. The unbelievable truth of the event stunned him.

Then he thought about Michael's last words. His wish had come true? What did that mean? Feldway had no idea, but at least he knew Michael's final moments weren't spent in pain. He had found meaning to his life after all, and that at least provided a little solace.

At the same time, however, Feldway couldn't help but feel jealous.

How is this fair? Having all the satisfaction to himself, then just leaving me behind…

……

……

…

Feldway was alone.

As head of the Seven Primordial Angels, he was in a position of leadership, his shoulders sagging with the weight of responsibility. Consulting someone else never occurred to him, so all decision-making was left to his own will. With Veldanava gone, there was no longer any escape from that pressure. But Feldway continued to stand at the forefront as a leader. He had to, if only so he wouldn't make anyone else uneasy.

Since he was unilaterally making all these decisions, it was perhaps inevitable that he was largely walled off from his peers. Feldway never really cared what his companions and coworkers thought, which was a fault of his. Over the years, this had led to severe discord, and before Feldway could even realize it, the gears of the machine he oversaw began to fall out of alignment. By that point, the whole group was incohesive at best—Feldway remained unaware of this, for better or for worse…

Fenn, his erstwhile conversational partner, counted as a friend, but not one trustworthy enough to reveal any weakness to. Thus, in the end, despite all the great big worlds out there,

no one on any of them could truly understand Feldway enough to heal his mind.

Then Michael appeared. In him, Feldway found a comrade who held the same goals in his heart, as well as a friend he could truly resonate with. Michael completed him, in a way, bringing a kind of joy Feldway had never experienced before. At some point, he became as important to Feldway as Veldanava.

But reality was a cruel thing. This friend he finally acquired—one he felt completely at ease with—had vanished, leaving him behind.

What should I do…?

For the first time in his life, Feldway felt weak.

……

……

…

“Heyyy, Boss, quit actin’ so damn weepy and tell me what I should do next.”

Temporally speaking, it was over in the blink of an eye, but it was true that Feldway found himself stunned. However, Vega—not exactly known for caring about other people’s feelings—paid this no attention when he spoke to him. There was another person, Mai Furuki, but she remained silent as usual as she watched them. Only Vega was as indifferent as ever, and Feldway looked at him, offended.

“Silence,” Feldway spat. “I just lost contact with Michael. Understand that I have no interest in dealing with you right now.”

He hoped this statement would quiet Vega. But Vega was never good at reading people.

“Huh? After all that arrogant crap he spouted, Michael *lost*? Man, that’s pathetic.”

It was beyond reckless of him to say. It was also more than enough to make Feldway snap.

“I *told* you to be silent!” he shouted before launching a harsh, aggressive shot of his aura at Vega.

“Damn… That’s crazy…”

The yawning gap between Feldway’s and Vega’s strength was like the distance between Heaven and Earth—it could never be bridged. But even though he knew that, Vega refused to keep his mouth shut.

“Whoa, whoa, Boss. Are you sayin’ I’m wrong or something? It’s about survival of the fittest in this world, ain’t it? All that talk about justice and *blah, blah, blah* doesn’t mean crap if you die! Prove me wrong!”

The words themselves were intensely incendiary, but that was what Vega really felt—the credo behind every action he took. It was a sound argument, in a way, and also the supreme truth. Regardless, Feldway wasn’t about to agree with him.

“Someone like you should never *dare* to utter Sir Michael’s name!”

Feldway took a swipe at Vega, hoping to cut off his words that way. But not even that silenced him.

“Hey, what’re you talking about? Look, you didn’t give a damn when that guy Cornu died, and you sat by and looked the other way when I ate Orlia and Arius, yeah? And that’s because you thought I was doing the right thing, didn’t you? *Didn’t* you?”

He was correct. The news of Cornu’s death didn’t sadden Feldway at all. The failure of his mission had displeased him, but he was too busy thinking about a plan B to dwell on the matter much. That was how he acted toward some of his oldest colleagues, too, and Orlia and Arius were just pawns on the chessboard to him. Nothing about them mattered at all to him. If Vega ate them, well, it’d help him get stronger, at least—that was the almost machinelike response Feldway had to it. He didn’t blame Vega at all for doing that; in fact, he thought it was probably the best thing for his own power.

“Tsk! You and your big mouth…,” he muttered.

“Hee-hee! That’s just how I am.”

Having his mind so clearly read unnerved Feldway a little. So he intimidated Vega some more, hoping he wouldn’t notice.

“What would someone like *you* understand? We have a higher purpose, you know, and we’re willing to sacrifice anything to achieve it—”

“Shut up!” Vega said, defiantly interrupting Feldway. “You’re sounding like a spoiled brat!”

The pressure around them was so intense that it felt like the space itself was being compressed. It’d be impossible to resist an authority like this, usually, but Vega kept going, furious.

“Besides, everyone *knows* it’s a cruel world we live in.”

Vega had grown up in a harsh environment, so he knew just how cruel the world was. Feldway found himself falling silent,

allowing Vega to speak.

“Yuuki, my old boss, was trying to resist all that cruelty, you know. Looking back, I’m kind of amazed he got that far with what little power he had. But I still believed in that guy. I was all ready to kill him in his sleep if he showed me any weakness… but Yuuki was kinda tricky that way. You saw how he was pretending to be controlled, for example.”

“…So what? Yuuki’s gone too now, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he is. Not even he could do it. When you’re faced with such a huge gap in force, it’s hopeless, no matter how idealistic or righteous you are.”

When he heard Yuuki’s mind was being controlled, Vega was looking forward to making fun of him to his face. But somewhere in his mind, he also saw Yuuki as dangerous. He wrote that off as a habit ingrained over the course of his life, but perhaps his instincts were telling him Yuuki was of sound mind after all. It was a good thing, Vega thought, that he didn’t fully join the bandwagon with him—but when he learned Jahil had killed him, he couldn’t help but sigh. Nothing was ever permanent in this world.

“Any world where we can be happy,” he told Feldway, “is just an illusion, really. We gotta be more honest with ourselves, y’know?”

“Honest?”

“Sure. If survival of the fittest is the unbendable truth we live under, all we have to do is make sure we’re standing on top.”

Might makes right, Vega reaffirmed to himself. No matter how flowery your words, they meant nothing if you couldn’t back them up with action. On the other hand, if you *could* make what you want happen, you were free to do whatever the hell you liked. As long as you didn’t lose, you were good—and no matter how fiendish the act was, if nobody could take you down, it meant justice was on your side. No matter how much of a natural-born coward you were, if you survived to the end, you won. That was how Vega lived his life.

From that point of view, Michael—now defeated—no longer had any worth. Yet here was Feldway, someone far stronger, mourning this loser. It made little sense.

“Look, Boss, you’re a powerful guy,” Vega said. “Jahil got Yuuki, even, but he couldn’t compare with you. That girl Velzard’s a monster, too, but I still think you could beat her…to

say nothin' of that Michael guy."

"…"

"So as far as I'm concerned, you're my boss now, okay? And I'm sure no one's gonna complain about that."

As strong as Feldway was, that was a foregone conclusion. Vega didn't hesitate to make that clear.

"You're such a simple man, aren't you?" Feldway told him.

"Hey, butterin' me up ain't gonna earn you anything."

That wasn't a compliment, Feldway thought with a sigh. But he could also tell the grief of losing Michael was starting to fade a bit. Maybe this was Vega's way of consoling him—he couldn't help but think so.

"Power, huh…? As far as *that* goes, at least, we didn't lose much of it," Feldway mused.

Michael was lost, but his power had returned to Feldway. Some of it had vanished for good, but Michael had used the last bit of his strength to entrust that power to him. That, above all, proved just how much he cared about Feldway—and if so, there was no way Feldway would let it go to waste. It might not be right to steal a friend's power the way Vega had, but what Feldway just did was pretty much the same thing. He had no intention of criticizing Vega to begin with, but just then, Feldway began to feel a sort of kinship with him.

"All right. From now on, I will serve as your king in place of Sir Michael. I swear to all my subjects that I will defend the throne until Lord Veldanava is revived."

Once Feldway was resolved to that, it was time to take action. He had always lived under Michael's thumb. He had kept his true form hidden from view because of that, but now there was no more reason to hold back. It was time to unleash everything he had in his true body, kept hidden in another world, so he could fully leverage the power Michael left him.

"It has been a long time since I revealed my true form to anyone," he said.

Feldway was the first servant Veldanava created, and as such, he looked very much like his creator. While Veldanava had long, jet-black hair infused with the shining radiance of the stars—like the cosmos—Feldway's was long and silvery-white, like light shining down from above. His almond-shaped eyes shone like blue stars, lending him a look that was more divine than strictly beautiful.

In those eyes now was a determined will of steel. His old self—a bit like a doll or the creation of someone else—seemed laughable by comparison. The way he could be seen as either male or female was unchanged from before, but that was because he was simply too beautiful for words.

This beauty was framed by his tremendous physical presence. All the powers Michael had collected now belonged to Feldway. The manas Michael had authority over contained four angelic ultimate skills—the sole ones beyond his grasp were Raphael, Lord of Wisdom; Uriel, Lord of Vows; and Sariel, Lord of Hope—and all skills associated with them were fully accessible to Feldway. Not only that, the factors of two True Dragons—Velzard and Velgrynd—were infused in his body. In terms of fighting force, Feldway had never been better equipped.

"Dang… You really *are* a monster…" Vega gasped a bit as he softly spoke. He couldn't keep the truth from escaping his lips. That was how much of an aura Feldway was emitting. It was like a completely different person.

"Vega, I am now awakened…thanks to you," Feldway said. "I appreciate the favor."

"Heh! Don't worry about it." Vega laughed, a little embarrassed. But he quickly regained his composure and went back to his usual brazen look. "But don't forget, okay? I always got my sights on you. I'll do your bidding now 'cause I know I can't take you, but if you show me any weakness, I'm gonna grab ya!"

Vega may have said that only to hide his embarrassment, but he meant every word of it, too. Feldway understood that well, but he still happily nodded at it.

"Heh. I'll look forward to that."

His smile had a heart-stopping dread to it now, like nothing he had shown before.

ROUGH SKETCH




CHAPTER
1
THE FIRST
OF THE FINAL
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST OF THE FINAL

In the former Eurazania, on the planned site of the demon lord Milim's new city, two people were dancing close to the brink of death. Esprit was one of them; the other, her adversary, was Piriod the antlion.

Honestly, it's not really in my character to fight so much for real like this…, thought Esprit.

The battle had grown desperate enough that Esprit wanted to complain to someone about it. Piriod could nullify all magic, which made her about the worst opponent possible for the demon. Even Nuclear Cannon, fired at point-blank range when all else failed, was deflected like it was nothing. The Prism Barrier that surrounded Piriod let her reflect any kind of magic…and not just that. It also worked against any skill that involved emitting beams or rays, to some extent. That made Piriod a natural enemy to any demon that fought with magic.

Esprit was having trouble buying more time for this battle. Her lack of strength peeved her deeply. Then some unexpected assistance arrived.

"Lemme help you out."

It was Phobio, who had given Sufia command of his squad so he could join Esprit. Normally he should be supporting Sufia, his commanding officer, but every member of the Flying Beastly Knights was a warrior of their own. They didn't need orders to make the right moves, and every unit showed extraordinary cohesion in battle. If both their commander and vice commander were fighting on the front lines, that'd be a far greater shot of morale than if they stuck to the rear guard. Phobio was stepping up first this time, lest Sufia steal all the glory yet again.

"Uh, you can tell this one's bad news, right?" Esprit asked

him.

“Yeah, kind of,” Phobio replied. “But I’d have a better shot against her than you, wouldn’t I?”

He was right. Esprit, gifted as she was at fighting with magic, couldn’t do a thing against this foe, but Phobio was more the close-range, blood-and-guts sort. Magic might not work on Piriod, but with Phobio, at least there was still a chance he could figure something out.

“Yeah…maybe,” Esprit said. “I guess I’ll join in, too…and fight with this.”

She had planned to break it out at some point, but Esprit chose that moment to unsheathe her magic sword—her main hope for victory. With her packing a blade and Phobio in his most powerful half-beast form, it was now a pair against the bewitchingly beautiful Piriod. But even with two against one, they were at an overwhelming disadvantage.

Esprit approached and swung her sword. It was a masterful stroke—it was hard to believe she had been an amateur until not long ago. She had begun learning the sword as a pastime more than anything else, but when Esprit dove into something, she tended to go overboard with it. She’d go through her reps over and over again whenever she had a spare moment, repeating the forms and stances Agera had shown her. It had granted a certain sharpness to her skills in a remarkably short time.

But regrettably, Piriod was far beyond her.

“Tsk! A fake, eh?” Esprit remarked. “One detailed enough to be indiscernible from the real thing…”

The moment she thought her slash would hit home, Piriod’s body burst into a cloud of light particles and dissolved. Esprit thought it was an afterimage of the real thing at first, but she quickly realized she was mistaken. The next moment, that fake split up into multiple Piriods. Each was impossible to distinguish from the real one, even with Esprit’s Keen Sense.

This is impossible, she thought. She had hoped to aid Carrera in some small way, but even buying a little time for her would be asking a lot. Phobio was helping out for the time being, but any help he could give was just a drop in the bucket.

He’s better than nothing, I guess.

It wasn’t a matter of things somehow working out just because they outnumbered her. That was how beyond the norm

Piriod's strength was.

Just as they expected, Esprit and Phobio were attacked from all sides. There was no way to tell which Piriod was the real one, so all they could do was defend themselves from the onslaught.

Esprit, by nature, tended to always look out for number one—that is, herself—so she didn't try anything unnecessary. She had given up on this fight, ready to press the proverbial reset button on this video game. But death was out of the question.

I think I could revive myself if I died, but dying means I'm not following Sir Rimuru's orders. Lady Carrera would be beyond upset, too, and I don't think I could ever forgive myself, either.

So there would be no dying that day. But that didn't mean she had some surefire way of escaping the front lines. Simply put, she was a cornered rat.

Thanks to these self-contradictory thoughts, Esprit was visibly slowing down. Piriod didn't miss this, of course, her poisoned fangs taking aim at—

"Don't just *stand* there!"

Esprit was kicked away by Phobio. Immediately afterward, poison-laced scales fired by Piriod rained down on the spot where Esprit had stood. They glowed with a beautiful, almost otherworldly radiance, but the poison inside was deadly enough to kill even demons. Its toxins corroded physical bodies and destroyed the spirit inside. Even Esprit, a count-class Demon Peer, couldn't take this level of harm.

"Ow," she said. "Sheesh. Also, thanks."

"Sure," Phobio said, acknowledging Esprit's casual appreciation as he resumed the attack on Piriod. He sent countless clones of himself across the field, lunging at his opponent with seemingly extraneous claw attacks. It seemed pretty pointless if Phobio didn't know who the real Piriod was, but he wasn't about to give up on this simple, straightforward approach.

"You know," Esprit suddenly said, "you're weaker than me, right? Why don't you just give up?"

She knew this was a pointless question, so she didn't expect an answer from him. But Phobio flashed a bold smile back at her.

"Wow, *that's* rude," he replied. "But fine. As long as I'm still alive, I win. Like Geld said once, as long as you survive and win

next time, there's no problem to speak of. And if so, now's the time to gather clues for that next fight. That's what I'm workin' on. And yeah, I'm weak. I hate to admit that…but I just gotta do what I can."

Esprit was impressed with the surprisingly serious answer. She agreed with it, too.

"I'm a bit of a sore loser myself, but I gotta say, I'm impressed with you," she said. "Guess you deserve to be called the Black Leopard Fang after all."

"Thank you, Lady Esprit."

"You can be more casual with me than that, you know."

"A mistake along those lines led me to ruin once…but now's not the time to talk about that."

Phobio, unlike Esprit, was taking this battle seriously. Even if he stood no chance of winning, he kept viciously attacking Piriod, never retreating for a moment. He had become a wind of the darkest black, tearing through all Piriod's doppelgängers, but still to no real effect.

But then—perhaps finding this whole act annoying—Piriod struck back for the first time. Her scales swirled in the air, then advanced upon Phobio like a drill. Even those little scale fragments could be a deadly weapon when gathered together. If Phobio took a direct hit, he'd be nothing but ground meat, and he knew that most of all. The difference in strength was obvious—really, trying to face Piriod was nothing short of suicide. But he had made the same decision as Esprit. If he didn't put in a full effort, it'd all but guarantee Carrera's defeat.

Reckless or not, I gotta do it. If I can divert her attention even a little bit, my life is a small price to pay for that.

Phobio was proud to be one of the Three Lycanthropeers. Part of him did want to flee, but that would mean losing Carillon's trust and betraying all the troops who looked up to him. That, in his mind, could never be allowed to happen—and that was what motivated him.

His preferred fighting style involved using his high mobility to toy with his enemies before finishing them off with his sharp claw slashes. He didn't have particularly great defense, but given his specialization in speed, it wasn't that much of a problem. That speed was about the only thing keeping him alive, and even then only barely. The slightest lapse in concentration would result in his death. It was a pretty

dangerous tightrope to walk.

Esprit, looking at him, found herself reevaluating her battle ally. *Hmm…who was it? Gobwa? The girl who serves under Sir Benimaru. Isn't this Phobio guy constantly babbling at me about how much he loves her? I guess he can perform when it counts, though. Even though he's just this puny human—not like a demon, who can resurrect itself whenever it dies.*

From her point of view, even Phobio, who had become quite powerful among the higher-level magic-born, was just a puny human being. Esprit, after all, was an elite among elites, a great demon who served Carrera, one of the rulers of the demon realm. For her, death wasn't a finality—she could just come right back, like continuing after losing all your lives, so she never felt particularly endangered by anything. Depending on how bad the damage was, she might have to sleep for a few centuries, but for a demon with eternal life, that would pass in the blink of an eye.

To her, then, the sight of those trying their hardest to survive within their relatively limited time was somewhat dazzling. What about her, though? Whenever she ran into something she couldn't handle, she could just turn to her master Carrera and she'd work something out. Any minor annoyances in her life could be safely shunted to her colleague Agera. Up until then, Esprit really never had to deal with staking everything she had on something.

Wait a minute. Could I actually be less useful than Phobio here?

No!

Something deep within Esprit screamed out that it was impossible. Maybe it was that genuine part of her, one she had almost forgotten about, that absolutely hated to lose. As if to prove it, Esprit stood back up, a strong figure after almost throwing in the towel a moment ago. Not because dying would violate her orders or for some other backward-looking reason. She just wanted to win—and her will was clear in her eyes.

And what's more:

"Let's be frank—we can't beat this person, right? Instead, Phobio, why don't we just give her as hard a time as we can?"

Esprit was as much a mercenary as she was a realist. She wasn't going to entertain reckless dreams of making a comeback. Coldly and calmly, she was formulating the

conditions required for a tactical victory.

“Heh… Got any bright ideas?” Phobio asked with a laugh.

He sensed a change in Esprit’s mood. Now he could feel that their chances of winning had gone from zero to…something better.

“Well, we can’t win with a traditional approach,” she said. “But I have a little secret trick I could use. Would you like to forge a demon pact with me?”

As Esprit spoke, bits of scale were whizzing past Phobio, his entire body sporting an ever-growing number of light cuts. It was only a matter of time before the poison took hold, meaning that Phobio’s tenuous grasp on life would soon fade away.

But despite that, Phobio smiled. “Another pact, huh…? Well, no time to ponder it. Let’s do it. What kind of demon pact are we talking about?”

Phobio had gone through the bitter experience of forging a pact with Footman and his cohorts, only to be tricked in the end. But he was going through with this anyway, a sign of just how resigned he was to his fate.

“Oh,” Esprit casually replied, “just your typical one. ‘I will grant you any wish, and in return I ask for your soul,’ that kind of thing. The classic sort demons use to bring humans to their doom.”

As demons more or less lived off human souls, they were pretty good at forging contracts like that. With the magic they controlled, they really *could* fulfill most wishes. This wasn’t as true for newborn demons, however; only the oldest of the old—those around since ancient times—had that kind of power. For someone like Esprit, it was a quick little trick she could pull off without breaking a sweat.

“Gotcha. I trust you, Esprit, so count me in.”

Phobio readily agreed, not so much as wincing even as his right arm was being crushed to pieces.

Esprit smiled. “Good. If you hesitated at all, it might have been too late.”

Even before she heard Phobio’s answer, she had already begun making preparations.

“I know what you’ll wish for, but—”

“The power to get through this!”

With a broad nod, Esprit activated the demon pact to make Phobio’s wish come true. In exchange, a pathway to Phobio’s

soul opened up, allowing Esprit to enter. After just a moment of hesitation, she shed her physical body, as if shrugging off all her indecision—and then, back to her usual shape as a spiritual life-form, she entered his soul. This was Possess, a skill intrinsic to the demon races. It was used for things like taking over the body of someone they forged pacts with, and that was close to what was happening with Esprit and Phobio.

"I really didn't want to take this measure, you know. It's such a wonderful body Sir Rimuru granted me, and now I have to leave it in the middle of a battlefield like this."

"Whoa, what's going on here—?"

"Calm down. We're smack-dab in the middle of a lethal situation, but I'm using Ultraspeed Thought to extend time a million times over."

Esprit's calm voice gave Phobio the mental fortitude to understand what was going on. Indeed, the world seemed completely stopped to him, frozen in time.

"…Huh. So this is what life looks like from the top of the heap."

"Oh, I still have quite a while to go, trust me. Lady Carrera can slow it down a hundred million or so times over. She can instantly launch ritual magic that normally takes years to prepare."

"Ha-ha! I'm impressed…"

Impressed wasn't the half of it. This was on a whole other dimension—a realm Phobio couldn't begin to comprehend.

Ignoring her dumbfounded companion, Esprit began to explain matters.

"We have time now, sort of, so listen closely. I have exited my own body and returned to my spiritual life-form base in order to inhabit you. Normally, I'd completely take over my host and use their power as my own, but that's kind of a whole multistep process, and honestly, doing that won't make me much stronger at all."

Phobio's wheelhouse was physical combat, especially close-range melee combat. The training Middray pounded into him had greatly improved those skills as well. Esprit, on the other hand, had just recently taken up swordsmanship as a hobby. Piriod was a magic specialist, too, so Esprit could land a few hits on her, but Piriod had adapted to her so well that defeat was imminent. That was one reason why Esprit preferred to have Phobio retain control over his body.

But that didn't mean she'd be an idle observer.

“The reason I’m inhabiting you is so we can combine our forces.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Just keep focusing on evasive measures for me. The way it was before, you would’ve been killed within ten—no, five minutes, but now that my power’s integrated with yours…”

Esprit had used a demon pact to occupy Phobio’s body. Now she was giving all her power to him.

“…So if I use that power, I can beat her?”

Phobio’s instincts told him it couldn’t be that simple. And he was right.

“It’ll take more than just that. I think she’s got even more of a ‘vision’ in this fight than I do.”

Piriod’s compound eyes gave her visual access to all kinds of information. She could clearly see the flow of magicules around her, which allowed her to instantly react to any sort of magic cast. That much was obvious when she threw Carrera’s Abyss Annihilation back at her on the very first try. It proved to Esprit that Piriod was even more adept at handling magic than her. Esprit was probably outclassed in Hasten Thought, too.

“So what’ll I do, then?”

“Just keep struggling. Do everything you can to stay alive. And you won’t be alone, of course. I’ll help you.”

Phobio would be the one calling the shots during melee combat, but Esprit was going to engage in a little magical warfare, too. She knew it wasn’t going to work, but the idea was it’d help mitigate attacks on Phobio.

“Huh. Okay. So you’ll try to boost my chances of survival as much as possible?”

“Exactly. For us, a tactical victory means we survive until someone comes along who can beat her. If we can also keep her attention and prevent her from interfering with Lady Carrera, I’ll have nothing to complain about.”

Phobio agreed. It seemed sound to him.

“So we’re buying time, in other words.”

“It’s about the only choice we have, isn’t it? Given the clear difference in ability, I don’t see us doing much of anything else. But don’t worry. According to my calculations, we should be able to hold out for twenty minutes this way.”

“Ha-ha! Yeah, great to hear.”

Phobio chuckled at this. How was he *not* supposed to worry?

He quickly banished the thought, however. It pained Phobio to admit it, but he was a pushover. But the weak have their own way of fighting, and Phobio was ready to do his best.

The battle plunged into its second round.

✳

With Phobio and Esprit occupying the same body, their existence points added up to a sum that was more powerful than its parts. It was still under one million, which was nothing compared with Piriod's, but Phobio was moving much better than before, letting him somehow find a way to keep up with his foe.

One reason for that was because Phobio no longer had to worry about physical injury—not with Esprit taking the damage for him. Fatigue wasn't a concern anymore, either. It helped him clear his mind of worry and go into full-throttle battle mode, giving up on making this a prolonged fight entirely. This approach usually came with a pretty short time limit, but it was working only because Esprit was providing the magic force to keep it going.

Phobio's Animalize skill worked in three stages. The first was his usual magic-born form—the most well-balanced, least draining type. The second was his leopard-headed magic-born form, geared for battle and quite versatile. Finally, there was a fully animalized form capable of tricky, unpredictable moves. This form was the best in terms of pure speed, but Phobio couldn't use most of his sharply honed skills with it, so it wasn't well suited for humanoid enemies.

Right now, Phobio was in his most powerful leopard-headed form. It drained him quickly, even damaging his body when he went all-out like that. He had been carefully controlling his power, releasing it in quick little spurts. Even when he took damage, his lycanthrope body's natural regenerative ability let him manage that well enough. Maintaining that form consumed physical and magical force, which was a disadvantage in extended fighting. Now, however, he could put all those concerns aside and just keep on fighting. The hand he had lost a moment before was wholly rebuilt and ready to be used to its fullest.

That was all thanks to Esprit. Phobio's soul was fully protected with Esprit incorporating her own spiritual body into it. That was made possible by her unique skill Observer. Using it, she could keep a connection with people she knew that transcended time and space—and combined with the demon pact, she could take control of their souls in an even more complete fashion than before. It meant Esprit would take a lot of damage, but she wasn't about to complain. She tapped into everything that made her a demon, enduring the barrage in any way possible.

But if you're hurting, well, you're hurting.

"I really hate insects," Esprit grumbled. *"These attacks that hit directly on your psyche… It makes having Cancel Pain meaningless."*

It was the combination of many little factors like these that gave insectors an advantage over demons. It was always a terrible mismatch—if a demon and an insector of equal strength fought each other, the insector would always win. These unfavorable conditions were conspiring to make Esprit's damage build up in no time.

Phobio, however, was still fine. Thanks to Esprit's sacrifices, the fight remained competitive. And some good news was arriving.

"I knew it," Esprit said. *"I've just figured out why we're holding out better than I thought."*

"Oh?" Phobio replied.

"You don't have to react to this," Esprit muttered, *"but despite her gifts, it looks like Piriod was hurt pretty bad by Lady Carrera's magic. I had a hunch deflecting that huge spell had to come with risk, and I was right."*

Carrera's Abyss Annihilation had the power to destroy an entire planet, depending on how you used it. Piriod had taken that blow with her entire body, so Esprit assumed it must've had *some* effect on her. She couldn't prove that hunch by herself, but possessing Phobio and revving up her Observer skill to maximum finally convinced her it was true.

"So if I attack whatever part of her is damaged…can I win this?"

"No way. The damage is slowing her attacks, but her defense is still an iron wall. But think of it the opposite way. This is good for us, isn't it?"

Phobio fell silent for a moment. Then he heaved a heavy sigh.

“So I still have to dodge her attacks until help arrives…?”

It was a sad conclusion, one he hated to make, but it was the only one he could reach. So, resigning himself to his fate, Phobio focused on Piriod’s moves, trying to execute his role as best he could.

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Around forty minutes later:

“…We’re sure putting up a fight, aren’t we?” Phobio asked Esprit.

“I’m too tired to talk. I can’t go on. I’m sooo dead.”

Phobio was cut and wounded from head to toe, but he was alive. Esprit, protecting his soul and taking the damage, was also just barely conscious. They had assumed that twenty minutes would be the best they could do, so for her, this was a tremendously satisfying result.

But that result came only after they gave it everything they had. Piriod, meanwhile, was doing just fine. If anything, she was moving better than at the start of the fight—which meant she had healed whatever damage Carrera had given her. Strategically, this was a great victory…but tactically, it was clearly a defeat. But that was okay. Both Phobio and Esprit, after all, had done their parts.

“Tsk! Just after I get a girlfriend, too. I couldn’t regret this more if I tried.”

“Oh? Was that why you were fighting harder than I expected? Well, congrats on exceeding my expectations, then. I’ll take a message to her for you as a reward.”

If they couldn’t get back up on their feet, all that remained was to wait for death. Knowing this, they began to exchange banter with each other. Phobio would have preferred to indulge in memories of Gobwa, the first real romantic partner he ever had, but Esprit wouldn’t let him.

“What kind of monster are you?!” he asked.

“Not a monster,” she retorted. *“A demon, remember?”*

“Oh, right. I guess sarcasm doesn’t work on you, huh? Sad.”

“Well, I appreciate the compliment, at least.”

“I wasn’t complimenting you.”

“No? No, probably not.”

Through the intense battle, the two of them had grown close enough to talk this casually with each other. So they waited for the moment to come, distracting themselves as much as possible from the fear of death and the humiliation of defeat.

However…

Piriod held out her hand, her expression unchanging. Carrera had crushed the organ within her body that generated her magic, but now it was repaired, making her casting even more efficient than before. It would only take a moment to dispose of Phobio, who was lying motionless on the ground.

She joyfully awaited the screams of death Phobio would soon belt out, not knowing he and Esprit were slowing down time to prolong their bantering. There wasn’t a shred of respect for this opponent who caused her so much trouble. She was there simply to pursue the pleasure her instincts demanded.

From Piriod’s fingertips, a ray of dense, compressed magic shot out. It dug deep into the ground, not piercing Phobio. A hobgoblin had jumped out from Phobio’s shadow, grabbing his leg and throwing him out of danger with the momentum.

Then:

“Oof! Boy, I showed up with the best timing ever, didn’t I?”

The dim-witted-sounding voice echoed across the field. It belonged, of course, to Gobta. He had rushed in to help Phobio out of this critical situation, and he was ready to make his moves.

And Gobta wasn’t alone, either. As Phobio flew through the air, he was caught by Gobwa, a beautiful red-haired woman in a scarlet military uniform. She held Phobio firmly to her chest as she brought him out of Piriod’s line of fire. *Awesome!* Phobio thought, though he didn’t say it out loud.

Ranga, who was the last to appear, stood up front to protect Gobta, providing a blockade against any follow-up move Piriod might try. Without hesitation, he launched Apocalypse Howling, which slowed the insector’s movements.

With those quick, keen movements, Phobio, along with Esprit inside him, was saved from almost wholly assured doom.

Esprit, back in the body she had abandoned, sat up.

"You've amazed me again, Sir Gobta!" she said. "I always believed you'd come rescue me!"

Those gleaming eyes of hers weren't ridiculing Gobta—she really *was* a fan of him.

"Oh? You were, huh?" he asked. "Wow. I dunno what to say."

"Now come on and show her exactly why you're part of the Big Four!"

Esprit couldn't stop piling on the praise. And none of it was trolling, either. She meant every word.

"Well, uh, maybe once this fight's over, we could go on a date __"

But just when Gobta began to get carried away:

"Oh, um, I'm not looking, thanks!" Esprit said.

She didn't have any romantic sort of love for him, a fact she felt prudent to make clear. This made Gobta visibly disappointed, with shoulders sagging and everything, even as Esprit made good her retreat.

So thanks to Phobio and Esprit's hard work, the front line had yet to collapse. And after that timely substitution, the battle was in its third round.



A few moments before the great battle got underway, the battlefield had been cordoned off by a barrier. The greatest of the great would fight each other in this zone, and those of lesser ability would be pulverized into ash if they so much as approached the site.

Above the battlefield, the one-on-one fight between Milim—one of Frey's own Big Four—and Torun had grown so intense, no one could do a thing to stop them. The aerial battle between these two champions was proceeding faster than the speed of sound, leaving the Heaven Fliers and the Milim Guard with no choice but to step back so they didn't get caught up in it. The same was true for the flying insectoids serving under Torun; they had scattered as well, their formation falling into disarray.

The sky battle was thus left for these two titans to settle, but that would soon prove a terrible mistake. An overhead view of

the battle would make it plainly obvious that one side's forces were starting to dwindle in number.

"Ee-hee-hee-hee! You are weak. Only good at fleeing!" said Torun.

Frey was on the offensive at first. But after her signature claw strikes kept being evaded, she found herself defending instead. She *did* successfully attack a few times, but none of those strikes meant much to Torun; they posed no threat to him. If this was Frey's full effort, he felt assured that this foe offered no challenge at all apart from her speed. Of course, that didn't mean Torun would let his guard down around her, which was one reason why this battle was dragging on for so long…but he was starting to think it was time to end it.

That was why he made that remark, but Frey merely laughed it off.

"Oh, is that how you see it? I'll have to thank you, then."

"What?"

Torun tilted his head, unsure of what she meant. Frey clearly was the cornered one, but for some reason, she had a breezy smile on her face.

"Thank you for being such a fool, that is."

"What did you say?"

"What do you think is the most important element in battle, hmm?"

"Speed."

"You're right on that count, actually. But…"

Frey agreed with him—speed *was* the most important factor. At the same time, though, there was something even more vital to remember. Something based not on physical ability, but on intellect. In other words, the *way* someone fought. When two fighters at the same level clash with each other, the outcome is greatly affected by whether they consciously think about their battle approach. The status of this battle proved that well.

From the moment her first strike was dodged, Frey knew this would be an extended battle. She thought it key to sap her enemy's stamina without burning through her own along the way, so she took an approach that maximized efficiency. The tactic was adopted not only by her, but all the troops under her. She was working to give her side an advantage, in other words, by getting the enemy forces torn up in the shock waves from her and Torun's battle. Using the power of someone like Torun

to drive his own allies to destruction was an innovative, intelligent move from Frey. This was indeed the true nature of the sly, crafty Sky Queen.

The smile on her face finally made Torun realize what was happening.

“What…?! You aimed for this from the start…”

“Did I? Well, who can say?”

“Cocky little… But as long as you can’t even scratch me, I will win the day!”

The enraged Torun turned up the speed once more, advancing upon Frey. But that, too, was exactly what she expected from him. Torun’s ever-changing aerial attacks were so tricky, it was impossible for even a demon lord seed-class fighter to catch them—but it was a different story for Frey. After a few repetitions, she began to recognize the patterns to the point that she could read Torun’s initial speed to predict where the next attack was coming from. Some of the very strongest could move around in complete disregard of the laws of physics, so it was dangerous to assume too much, but Frey had already confirmed that Torun was bound by the laws of this key world.

That was why she felt safe to tell him:

“Assumptions can be dangerous things, you know. I’m kind of a wimp, so it takes me a while to be sure about something.”

She had just finished saying that when Torun reached the exact position she anticipated he would be in. The next thing Torun noticed was the pain from a claw piercing his chest-area exoskeleton. It had a metallic sheen he’d always been proud of, but the exoskeleton wasn’t as strong as his alionium fists. Adamantite would be enough to penetrate it…as had just been proven.

“…Huh?”

Torun was shocked. But it was already too late. He struggled as best he could to resist, but none of his skills were activating. The moment he was in Frey’s claws, the battle had already been decided.

Inside Torun’s now-shredded chest was a magicore, a vital part of all insectors. It was firmly within Frey’s talons.

“So…goodbye, then.”

The core shattered into a million brilliant pieces…and that was the moment of Torun’s death.

Lucia and Claire offered Frey their congratulations.

“Great work, Lady Frey.”

“Yes, it was so amazing. Now we can fully commit to the sweep-up.”

“Right,” Frey replied, gracefully nodding. “I’m tired, of course, but this battle is going to last a decent while longer. I don’t think I have time to rest, either.”

She looked across the battlefield. Her eyes caught a glimpse of a few of her companions, all struggling.



Frey had the upper hand throughout her fight, but that wasn’t true for everyone. Although he wasn’t as badly outgunned as Phobio and Esprit, Gabil—who had come in as a reinforcement—had to put up a desperate resistance as his enemy thrashed him around.

Gabil certainly was no pushover. The new strength he had gained had turned him into one of the toughest forces on his side. But his opponent was just too much.

Beethop, one of the Insect Masters, was too strong a foe for Gabil to handle. His EP was over 1.7 million, while Gabil’s was 1.26 million. The difference in existence points wasn’t decisive, but a higher percentage of Beethop’s EP was tied directly to his raw physical ability and combat expertise. He wasn’t bristling with special powers, but that just made him the perfect insectoid for melee combat. That, in turn, made him a poor match for the more jack-of-all-trades Gabil. If he were all by himself, he would’ve tasted defeat long ago. It was only his fighting companion who prevented that from happening.

“Are you all right, Gabil?” Sufia asked.

“Y-yes. Yes, I am still going strong! Do not worry for me, Lady Sufia!”

Gabil and Sufia, who had previously teamed up against Middray during the invasion of Eurazania, were back together in the battle against Beethop. Sufia was also a commander of the Flying Beastly Knights, but for now, that job was left to her troops. Phobio had relinquished his own command earlier, which made the takeover process a bit trickier than usual, but Sufia wasn’t really suited for command work anyway. Once

everyone was in place and she had sufficiently propped up their morale, she usually did her own thing. Besides, if she could use her skills as an individual to take down as many enemy generals as possible, that'd lead to better results for everyone.

She was fully aware of this, and in this skirmish as well, she didn't hesitate to throw herself in. But Zeranus's forces weren't going down that easily, and even though they had a two-on-one advantage, it was still an uphill battle.

"Good, good! This is how things should be fought!"

Beethop laughed, clearly excited. In a way, he was drunk on his own power. Defeating the weak with his overwhelming force was a source of constant enjoyment; for him, a battle was like a game he was always guaranteed to win. In that respect, Gabil and Sufia were the perfect opponents for him. One at a time wouldn't have been enough excitement—and this scenario, where he was at a numerical disadvantage, was another novel thrill for Beethop.

That was why he enjoyed this fight so much, even though he could have finished them off much sooner. Such impure motivations were easily telegraphed to his opponents, and they made Gabil and Sufia deplore their lack of ability as they desperately searched for a way to win.

"I have met many strong opponents in my time," said Gabil, "but you seem to be the strongest of them all."

"Oh? Do I? How nice to hear! But I won't go easy on you!"

Beethop really did sound happy about it. Gabil and Sufia, meanwhile, were loudly shouting their displeasure.

"Ha! Don't make me laugh! Like you were fighting seriously at all up to now!"

"Yeah, you said it. If you're a warrior, start acting like one! Don't just torment your foes like this!"

Beethop wasn't trying to coast at all, but he was certainly keen on prolonging the fun as much as possible. Gabil and Sufia could tell. It offended them both, but thanks to that, they were still alive, which made it even more irritating. Being saved by the arrogant pride of your enemy was nothing but humiliation.

Gabil, exasperated with the situation, took a swig of healing potion. Sufia did the same, chugging an expensive Full Potion without a second thought. But none of the many wounds that covered their bodies showed any sign of disappearing. The

reason was simple—the existence points on both of them had surpassed what these potions could handle. Sufia herself had evolved, influenced by Carillon's own awakening, and her EP was up to just under half a million. That wasn't as high as Gabil, but it was still in a class of its own, up there with high-level magic-born and members of the Crusaders. Even a medicine potent enough to replace whole limbs on a regular person couldn't do much on a body like hers.

Full Potions worked by energizing the cells of a body with magicules, compensating as needed to reconstruct any missing parts. But the cells that comprised these magic-born were already densely packed with magicules, so a potion or two wouldn't reconstruct much of anything. Both of them had already used over a hundred potions during this battle. Sprinkling it on their bodies was effective enough for slight wounds, so they were both drenched all over with the stuff.

"Good thing we improved how these things taste," Gabil remarked. "I think I'm going to take a *looong* break from potions after this."

"You said it," Sufia agreed. "I liked the strawberry flavor at first, but I feel so *bloated* now."

Sufia, more dependent on healing potions than Gabil, sounded like she'd had her fill for a long time to come. But she was lucky to still be safe and sound—thanks in part to her training with Middray. For the past few months, they had both been learning the art of close-range combat with him. If it weren't for the defensive screen provided by Battlewill, which they had gained something of a mastery of, they would've died before they could even pop the cork on a potion.

But all it took was a change in Beethop's mood for that streak of luck to end.

"Whoa, whoa, is Torun dead?" he asked.

He ignored Gabil and Sufia's chitchat as soon as he realized Frey had taken down one of his allies. When a battle was that evenly matched, a single collapse in one corner could have a domino effect. Beethop, well aware of this, decided playtime was over.

"Oh well. I wanted to take my time finishing you off, but I'll have to break out one of my secret moves instead."

It wasn't that he had been strictly playing around so far; it was just that his foes were doing better than he expected. But

the fight had remained even only because Beethop was pacing himself. He didn't want to tap into his full strength yet—a fighting style that had much in common with Carillon's—so he conserved his energy as he dealt with them. But with one of his companions down, he couldn't worry about some indistinct future. It was time to switch to annihilation mode.

"You will die," he whispered—and then he disappeared.

Using his leg strength, he closed the distance between him and Sufia at once, even more instantaneously than what Instantmove could accomplish. Then he landed a kick on Sufia. She was, of course, using Magic Sense to track Beethop instead of relying on her eyes. She used to fight strictly with her own latent skills, but she was graduating from that style and polishing her tactics.

But Beethop was just moving too fast. It was no wonder—he was attacking with all his might, without a single thought given to any damage he'd take.

"Gahh?!" Sufia gasped.

Sufia barely protected herself with both arms, but she paid a grim price for it. Her crossed arms were crushed, and then she received an intensely powerful kick to the abdomen.

"Lady Sufia…?!" Gabil shouted as Beethop stopped, still in his kicking stance. Gabil readied himself, eyes turned fully toward Sufia. She was just barely alive.

Mmh…just one blow, and look at the state she's in…, thought Gabil.

Sufia was no longer in any shape to remain on the front line. Gabil found it a stroke of luck that she was alive at all. But even that thought was naive of him. As a warrior, Gabil wasn't in the habit of unnecessarily hurting his defeated opponents. It was against his own ethic to go out of his way to kill someone even after victory was assured. He understood, of course, that this was a battlefield, and that some people think of killing as a way of achieving justice. He just didn't think anyone would bother pursuing an already-routed foe for no good reason.

In other words, Gabil assumed Beethop was like him—a skilled warrior—and wouldn't take any action that'd leave him open to attack. But reality can be cruel that way. Turning his back to Gabil, Beethop swung the leg that was still hanging in the air down upon Sufia.

"Rrgh!"

There was a dull *thud* as Sufia vomited blood. Beethop's foot had shattered her heart. And Gabil, who was using his accelerated thought process, realized exactly what was happening. At this rate, she was absolutely going to die.

No… He's prioritizing finishing her off so much that he's leaving himself open to me? …Or he must be sure he could withstand anything I could throw at him?

It was a humiliating thought, but Gabil didn't think he was mistaken. The difference in skill between Gabil and Beethop made that scenario seem extremely likely.

So he contemplated. His mind was a mess, but his thoughts, at least, were calm. Should he risk it all on this opportunity he was given and aim for victory? Or…

The choice is obvious. A choice that Sir Rimuru will undoubtedly praise me for, no less!

It took less than a moment for his mind to be made up. Whether this plan would work was a gamble—but Gabil had supreme confidence in his own powers.

"I'm not letting you die, Lady Sufia!"

With that shout, he hurled his Vortex Spear—his precious possession, one he valued as his comrade in arms—at Beethop. Then as Beethop evaded it, he rushed toward Sufia…and unleashed his power. He wasn't entirely sure whether it'd work on people besides him, but trusting in it was the only way to help Sufia.

"Destiny, return for me! Hear my wishes and work a miracle!" Gabil prayed. He believed with every fiber of his being that Sufia would come back to life, and that he had the power to help with that. And then Alter Destiny—the power of Moodmaker, his ultimate gift—began to rewrite the tragedy that was about to come.

Beethop, who had left himself wide open to Gabil in the middle of battle, turned toward him, giving him a quizzical look. He quickly reasoned that if his foe had given up his spear, he must have given up the fight as well.

"Fool," Beethop said, sneering at him. "I'll send you right along to where your friend is going."

Even to those who had lost all will to fight, Beethop showed no mercy. Mercy, he believed, led to nothing but carelessness.

Low-level insectors had no concept of mercy—or any emotions, for that matter—so the fact Beethop understood what love was showed how exceptional a member of his race he was. To those fighting him, though, that was cold comfort at best.

A gust of wind danced across the battlefield. Beethop, once again unleashing his power, executed his trademark Spindle Kick, aiming it squarely at Gabil. The alionium covering his outstretched foot shone with a dull radiance, seeming to spell doom for Gabil's continued existence. But that future never arrived. Destiny had been altered, and Sufia was fully restored.

"Look the hell out, Gabil!" she shouted.

As soon as she was resurrected, Sufia took evasive action, following her instincts to warn Gabil of the danger. Gabil promptly rolled out of the way, as if driven by her voice. Beethop's kick wound up cracking the ground under him, but both Gabil and Sufia safely avoided the danger.

"Phew…you saved me," Gabil said.

"*You* saved *me*, I'd say," replied Sufia. "I thought I was dead, but you got me out of that."

"Yes… It was a do-or-die wager, but I'm tremendously glad it worked!"

The relief at escaping that crisis made the ensuing conversation far more casual than it would have been otherwise. But Beethop was still there. The real fight was just beginning.

"Oh…? I thought I killed you," he said. "Why are you all right?"

"I *love* explaining how that works, but don't expect me to tell *you*!" Sufia scoffed.

"Pfft. Very well. I'll just finish the job next time."

Cutting off the chat, Beethop mustered his strength once more. But Gabil interrupted him.

"Don't bother trying. I happened to notice just now that you cannot use your strength continuously without end. Am I right? Otherwise, you wouldn't have any reason to waste time talking to us."

Gabil sounded confident. Beethop had speed that outclassed Apito's, and his punches and kicks had just as much weight as Geld's. He moved with almost total freedom, accelerating and stopping in quick and unpredictable ways, and not even Apito could copy his level of agility. Keeping up with it was a difficult

task, and dodging his strikes seemed all but impossible. That was what made Gabil start to wonder.

Apito herself told me that speeding up is easy enough, but stopping on a dime is much harder. Hinata used magic to twist the law of inertia in her favor, making all kinds of mind-boggling moves possible—but I don't think this foe is relying on any magic. That leaves one scenario…

Either he was using some special latent skill to rewrite physics for himself or he was relying on brute force. So Gabil kept watching him, keeping those two possibilities firmly in mind. Then he noticed it—after every attack, Beethop was using Ultraspeed Regeneration on his own body. Through this, he could push his body beyond its limits to fight. There was one good way to put a stop to this—if he kept forcing himself to attack in ways his body couldn't handle, Beethop was bound to self-destruct in time. All Gabil had to do was focus entirely on defense and wait for that moment to arrive.

Still, these were attacks from a powerful foe, one using a kind of doping to make himself even stronger. A moment of inattention would lead to death from a single blow. It was almost too dangerous a tightrope to walk. The overcharged attacks Beethop was risking his own life to unleash came at several times the speed of Apito's, and even worse, they really could kill Gabil in one shot if they hit him in the right place. A hit to any arm or leg would blow it clean off; even a glancing strike could cause major damage.

Gabil knew putting up with this barrage would make this a tough battle. So he tried to make Beethop rethink his tactics. Even without doping himself, Beethop could still outclass him. If he knew his trick was exposed, Gabil hoped, maybe he would revert to a more traditional strategy.

"…"

An awkward silence. But it was Beethop's loud laughter that broke it.

"Ga-ha-ha-ha-ha! Good, good! As weak as you are, you still never fail to amuse me!"

The mood around him changed once more.

"Yes, I admit it. That's what I was doing. And now, I promise you I will make a *full effort* to kill you!"

The bet didn't pay off.

"What?!"

Gabil didn't like where this was going. He made this big show, trying to act as cool as possible, and there was no backing out. Sufia was behind him, too, so running away was out of the question. At this point, all he could do was say his prayers and do whatever he could to survive.

If I at least had the Vortex Spear in hand…

He had just casually tossed aside the treasured spear of the lizardmen and wanted to go grab it, but he doubted Beethop would ever let him.

So Gabil steeled himself. And the moment all his senses were honed to a sharp point…

"Sir Gabil! You dropped this!"

The voice of Sukero entered the scene. He himself soon followed, Vortex Spear in hand, trying to look as heroic as possible.

"This guy's been fighting alongside us this whole time, hasn't he? Don't just let go of it like that."

"Indeed," Kakushin replied with a nod.

"Truly! With this weapon, Sir Gabil, you're the strongest in the world! So hurry up and whip that guy for us!"

Yashichi, as usual, was harming Gabil more than helping him. But even the Vortex Spear itself was trembling in Sukero's hands, as if to acknowledge its master.

"All of you…" Gabil could feel hot tears well up in his eyes.

…Hmm? Wait. Why is the spear pulsing like that, as if it's got a heartbeat?

It seemed like an important thing to address. But…

"We believe in you, Sir Gabil," said Sukero.

"Indeed!" agreed Kakushin.

"You're about to show off big-time for us, aren't you, Sir Gabil?" added Yashichi.

His three assistants were expecting a lot from him, although it felt like they were pushing him into the abyss rather than cheering for him. Yashichi in particular was less than welcome. He may have been blissfully unaware of it, but every word from him cornered Gabil more and more.

There was no longer any time to think about what was up with the spear. Gabil stood strong and puffed out his chest as usual.

But then something unusual happened: Sufia offered her encouragement as well.

“Yeah, I have to agree. These guys are right, Gabil. Even to me, you look really cool. About as cool as Sir Carillon, in fact.”

A bombshell for Gabil.

What? I’m…I’m cool?

Sufia’s voice echoed in Gabil’s head. He could no longer think about anything else. Beethop, the lethal threat right in front of him, couldn’t have been farther from his mind. What else could he do? Gabil had never received a compliment from the opposite sex before. Certainly people had given him longing looks behind his back, but Gabil tended to be oblivious about that sort of thing. He’d never notice the subtleties of a woman’s heart, and his personality was fundamentally incompatible with romance. Thus, he had been constantly extending his “no girlfriend” record for all his adult days.

And now Sufia was saying he was “cool” out of nowhere. This was the most monumental moment in Gabil’s life.

I have to say it! If I let this chance pass by, I may well never have a girl…

Gabil drummed up his courage. It’s said that the threat of looming death stimulates the urge to procreate and produce offspring in the minds of most animals, and that was exactly the state he was in.

“Ah, um… How to put it? I, er, sometimes, you know, I look at you, Lady Sufia, and I…I think you are beautiful, and, ahh…”

He could have chosen a more romantic backdrop than this battlefield for confessing his feelings to her. The timing made the audience want to wail in despair. His courage was exhausted in an instant, his voice trailing off to a near-whisper as he put the words together. The fact he couldn’t even finish the thought was typical Gabil behavior, too.

But despite how pathetic he felt about it, his confession got through to Sufia.

“Huh?!” she said. “S-seriously…? You think I’m beautiful?”

Not cute, but *beautiful*. This extreme situation was making Sufia lose her mind, too. One could see that by how her voice had ratcheted up an octave or two. In a way, they were a perfect match.

“Um, well, yes!”



Gabil was right not to deny it. If he did, destiny would likely have taken him down a different path. But by choosing the right answer, he had Lady Luck beginning to smile at him.

“Ahh, Gabil, what could I ever do with you?” Sufia mused. “But now’s a bad time. Once we beat him and this battle is over, I’ll give you a little thank-you smooch!”

Sufia was in such high spirits that she didn’t even understand what she was saying. The situation got her so carried away that she made what she’d otherwise call a completely preposterous promise.

But Gabil still had his feet on the ground. He took Sufia’s words to heart.

A…a smooch? Does she mean…a kiss? So she’s not going to beat me up over this?!

This was unprecedented. His panicked brain was running at top gear, trying to assess this monumental event. And the trio of Yashichi, Kakushin, and Sukero were there to egg him on.

“Wow, Sir Gabil! What a stud!”

“Phew! What a surprise. I knew you always come through in a pinch, but confessing your love on a battlefield? That’s just *too* bold!”

“Indeed! This is how a true man lives his life!”

“”””Three cheers for Gabil! Three cheers for Gabil! *Woooooo!!*”””

They were singing for him, and there was no stopping them. So Gabil shut off his brain and let his body dance among them. This whole process had repeated itself so often, it was all muscle memory to him.

His mind was immersed in all manner of happy fantasies.

Ee-hee-hee! At long last, I have a girlfriend. Ha-haaa! It’s hard, isn’t it, being such an attractive man?!

It was beyond too early for that talk, but since it was strictly Gabil’s own fantasy scenario, no one found out about it.

Beethop was losing his patience. He thought all this was a trap at first, but the three lizardmen who came on the scene weren’t showing any signs of joining the fight. That was helpful for him. Beethop had already been forcibly enhancing his battle skills by dangerous and possibly injurious means, so he couldn’t afford any more surprises. He could heal his injuries with

Ultraspeed Regeneration, of course, but the vast amount of energy it consumed was a problem. His main aim was to recover his strength without having to overexert himself so he could finish off everybody at once.

Now his stamina was back up to maximum. There was no longer any need for restraint, so Beethop was ready to resume his pummeling of Gabil—or, really, he wanted to kill him with a single blow.

Ignoring me, going on about all this meaningless nonsense… Well, fine. Time to teach you exactly where you stand with me!

The anger within him compelled Beethop to break out another Spindle Kick, this time on Gabil. But then something truly surprising happened.

"Do *not* get in my way, you! I am experiencing one of the most epoch-making moments of my life!!" As Gabil shouted this, he struck Beethop with his spear…and that alone sent Beethop flying helplessly into the air. It was an unbelievable turn of events, and it made the awestruck Beethop open all his compound eyes wide.

"What did you just do?!" Beethop exclaimed.

Gabil wasn't listening.

"L-Lady Sufia, by 'smooch,' what did you mean, exactly?"

Only then did Sufia realize exactly what she had said to him. It made her blush terribly, but she couldn't take that offer back now.

"Well…you know," she said, trying to make it sound as trivial and inconsequential as possible.

Gabil nodded several times at her. "I hear you loud and clear! And I swear I will fight with all my might until victory is mine!!"

He was fully roused. Any despair he might have felt a moment ago was gone. Whether he'd win or not no longer mattered—he *would* win. It was with this energized fighting spirit that he glared at Beethop.

"Don't mess with me, you worm."

Gabil's attitude made Beethop furious. How could someone this inferior have such an inflated opinion of himself? But at the same time, Beethop didn't forget the strange phenomenon that had just occurred. He thought it was just a coincidence, but now he was on the lookout for anything that might happen.

But was it really a coincidence? I attacked him many times, intending to kill. I didn't go easy on him… I could even feel my

blows hitting home. So why the hell is he still alive?

His instincts told him this wasn't just happenstance. He readied himself against his foe, who was proving more dangerous than he looked. Gabil, on the other hand, was still basking in the thought that he might've just landed a girlfriend. Their minds were in two completely different places—and as sad as it must have been for Beethop, the world can be a very absurd place sometimes.

"Here I go!" Gabil shouted, sneering at his foe.

Beethop silently acknowledged him…and then, the next moment, they crossed paths. There was no restraint—Beethop was pushing beyond his maximum force, spinning his entire body like a drill as he flew at supersonic speed. All his power was concentrated into a pair of alionium poison needles protruding from his fists. This was Spindle Needle Spear, his most powerful finishing move.

Gabil, meanwhile, was sticking to fundamentals as he held his Vortex Spear forward. Keeping himself calm, he stared at Beethop, waiting for the right moment to fire off his own special move. Two large whirlpools swelled and collided on the battlefield…and in the end, it was Beethop who fell.

"Vortex Crash!"

Gabil's special move cut right through Beethop.

"Whoaaa!"

"So cool, Sir Gabil!"

"Indeed, an impressive sight!"

The half-shocked praise from Gabil's trio of lackeys was to be expected. All the struggling up to then seemed like a mirage compared with this dominating attack. Beethop wasn't being careless or complacent, and *this* was what happened to him.

The secret lay in the Vortex Spear itself. Gabil was too preoccupied with his potential new girlfriend to notice, but amid this crisis, the spear had evolved into a God-class weapon—one that, of course, recognized Gabil as its fitting and proper master. Thanks to that, Gabil's overall existence points now exceeded Beethop's. The two were almost matched in battle skill, and after that clash, it was Gabil who emerged victorious.

""""Gaa-bil! Gaa-bil! Gaa-bil!!""""

He did a little victory dance as the trio cheered for him. Sufia watched, smiling…and then remembered the promise she made. She blushed—something Gabil didn't fail to notice. He

blushed, too. They stood there for a bit, frozen and gazing at each other.

“Y’know, I think we better leave these lovebirds alone.”

“Indeed!”

“Best of luck to you, Sir Gabil!”

The lackeys quickly took their leave. Gabil and Sufia didn’t much relish the idea of being alone, but even there, one had to admit they were a good match for each other. Between Gabil’s confession and the roller coaster of a battle they just experienced, it didn’t take long for them to finally be honest with each other.

That day on the battlefield, spring arrived in Gabil’s life.

✳

The death of Torun the Insect Master wound up triggering major changes across the battlefield, and that was true for more than just Gabil and Sufia. Carillon, Middray, and Obela were also watching the situation closely, wary of the apparent shift in the balance of power. Now was the time, they thought, to go all in.

Carillon was the first to move.

“Heh! Frey won, huh? Well, I’m not about to lose, either.” He smiled boldly as he glared at Abalt.

With all the limbs Abalt boasted, he was talented in both melee combat and magical fighting. His slender legs, flexible and covered in an exoskeleton of alionium, were sharper than a spear as they plunged into foes. He could then use his free limbs to connect magical seals, letting him invoke spells without any casting time.

This combination of magic and unique physical skills made it seem like Carillon was in trouble at first. But the reality was different. Carillon was biding his time, waiting for his opportunity. How could he conserve Burst Roar, his finisher, and defeat Abalt with as little effort as possible? That was the thought on his mind as he probed Abalt for weak points.

Right from the start of battle, Carillon realized he had an advantage. But that didn’t mean he was taking it easy. Abalt’s strength was the real thing, and if Carillon let his guard down,

he could very easily be defeated. He also had a gut feeling that trying to rush the fight would lead to needless injury and unnecessary danger. He was right to think so, too. Abalt entered a runaway fugue state whenever his strength was about to run out, tripling his attack and healing powers. If it happened to him, Carillon would suddenly have a lot of trouble to deal with—at worst, he'd lose the fight.

But once his wild intuition clued him in on this possibility, he was able to hold his own on the front line without issue. And as he did, he read and recognized all of Abalt's other habits, too. Once he grasped how much time was needed to invoke magic again after a spell, along with the time it took Abalt to retract a pointed limb after a strike, Carillon waited for his foe to unleash both at once. Then, at long last, it happened. The defeat of Torun the Insect Master at the hands of Frey caused Abalt to be impatient.

"I was waiting for that. Beast Roar!!"

The technique burrowed its way through Abalt's torso. The flash of magic particles further expanded the effect, completely swallowing Abalt up.

Middray was calmly observing the battlefield. Sarill, the Insect Master before him, barely registered in his mind. He was always in perfect control of his own body, always exerting only a certain amount of force at a time. If he wanted to, he could even adjust his body to the level of his opponent, allowing him to more purely enjoy the act of combat. In that respect (and that one alone), he shared a tendency or two with Diablo.

That was Middray's habit, and he had fallen back on that habit with Sarill.

"Hmm… You're not committing well," Middray said. "You seem to be confident in your poison skills, but that won't work on me. If your poison tail-based attack style is no longer effective, what will you do then?"

There was a taunting tone to his voice.

"You conceited little…!" Sarill snapped at Middray's mockery. But while his anger increased the force behind his attack, it meant little if he couldn't hit a target with it. His style in this fight had grown repetitive and monotonous—exactly what Middray wanted.

It would have been easy to just finish him off, but Middray refrained from that because of a new, eerie presence he sensed.

What is this strange, sticky feeling? Hmm…I can feel it probing my powers… Oh, have you lost interest, then? I suppose I should take that to mean it could kill me anytime it wants…

The presence reminded Middray of Milim, whom he worshipped as a god. But there was none of the warmth Milim usually gave him. This was far colder, devoid of any emotion, and more than a tad frightening as a result.

So Middray opted to keep Sarill alive as he tried to work out what this was.

Hmm… I must hand it to Obela. She's spotted this, too.

Obela, too, was observing the battlefield instead of wrapping up the fight against her Insect Master opponent. The difference in strength between them would have allowed Obela to defeat this insector in an instant, so Middray was sure she was thinking the same thing he was.

No one else seemed to have noticed. That was certainly true for Carrera as she took on Zeth; their battle was intense, with no room for anyone else to get involved, and she certainly didn't have the free time to focus on anything else. The same was true for Geld. The Insect Master he faced, resembling an anthropomorphized giant centipede, had the second highest EP after Piriod and seemed like a fairly even match with Geld. He couldn't afford to worry about other matters, and Middray didn't want to needlessly worry him.

The duo of Gobta and Ranga were in way over their heads with Piriod, of course, so they couldn't have noticed, either. Nonetheless, Middray was truly grateful they came on the scene at that point. The way things stood, Phobio and Esprit were doomed, and Middray feared he'd have to step in to rescue them. He appreciated not having to—this new, eerie presence was too concerning to make any sudden moves. He resolved to repay the favor by helping Gobta out with his training later, although Gobta was unlikely to see that as a "favor" at all.

All this had prolonged the stalemate for a while, but things were on the move. Frey had defeated the Insect Master Torun, Gabil had taken out Beethop, and Carillon had just wrapped up with Abalt.

Now, though, that ominous presence that filled the battlefield felt to Middray like it had grown denser and more dangerous.

He didn't know why, but something bad was happening. He was convinced of that, and he was bracing himself for it. His colleagues Carillon and Frey, having won their respective battles, seemed to have finally picked up on the presence—their instincts probably spotted it long ago, but now they were convinced something was up.

Those two still have work to do as well, don't they? They fight decently enough at this point, but they need to learn how to pay attention to their surroundings. They'll have trouble keeping up with Lady Milim otherwise.

It was a rather harsh evaluation, but that was how Middray really felt.

"Keh-heh-heh!" Sarill laughed. "You've had fun mocking me, haven't you? I hate to break out my best moves against you, but whatever."

Seeing Middray treat him like a second thought incensed Sarill. Stabbing himself with his own poison-tipped tail, he activated his fugue state on his own volition.

"Hmm…"

With Sarill's speed and strength multiplied several times over, not even Middray could afford to play around any longer. Despite the deep foreboding in his mind, he decided to finish up this fight—and when he was serious about fighting, he was a menace. Using his palpable fighting aura to bind the advancing Sarill, he immediately rendered him helpless—and after that, a sure-kill frontal strike was all it took to make Sarill's body burst into a million pieces. A true one-hit kill. Middray was a man strong enough to be Milim's training partner (or playmate), and this man of steel had just lived up to his reputation once more.

But his face was filled with gloom.

"Not good. The chill has only grown stronger." Middray looked up at the sky, which had filled with dark clouds. A little voice in the back of his head told him killing Sarill would be a mistake.



Just as Middray had guessed, Obela could feel the danger as well.

It's so strange. The pressure from our enemy hasn't changed at

all since the start of this battle…

Obela's enemy was the vicious Tishorn, capable of cutting through anything by finely vibrating the alionium exoskeleton covering her arms, but she was like a child to Obela. The only reason Obela hadn't dispatched Tishorn yet was because she had the same concern Middray did.

Many lives were being lost on the battlefield. Thanks to potions keeping damage to a minimum and a strategy where anyone hurt was immediately replaced, there were still no deaths on Obela's side. However, the insectors were waging an onslaught with no care at all about casualties, and their force had already been reduced to less than half its initial size.

Nonetheless, the enemy force Obela detected with her Super Intuition skill was still just as powerful as before, with no decline whatsoever. It was an uncomfortable feeling at first, but once Frey defeated Torun, she became sure of it. One of the enemy's greatest fighters was dead, but nothing *felt* different. It meant not even losing an Insect Master dented the insector force at all—or maybe it meant something even worse. Perhaps losing Insect Masters was even part of the enemy's strategy…

No way. That's just preposterous.

But she couldn't call it impossible. She recalled the time when her colleague Zarario complained about how stubborn those guys were:

"Just beating them isn't enough. They can be even more of a menace afterward, sometimes, so you gotta choose where you engage them carefully."

Obela was surprised to hear that from the normally taciturn Zarario. She assumed he must have been tired from work and left it at that, but looking back, what he said now seemed very important to her. She had never asked him for more detail; she didn't see the insectors as her job, so she didn't feel like engaging him that much. That was a bad habit that went beyond just Obela—Feldway and the other top mystics tended to be that way—but now she regretted it. They really needed to keep each other abreast of the bigger problems, at least.

But it was too late for that. Obela had no information to work with, so her only choice was to adapt to the situation and feel around for the optimal response. She kept a close eye on the battlefield, even as she engaged Tishorn in combat.

Then, before she could land on anything decisive, the state of

the battle began to quickly change. First Torun fell, then Beethop and Abalt were slain. But despite losing these generals, the enemy's war power didn't decline one bit. Seeing these results, there was no longer any doubt that this was part of the enemy's scheme.

This is dangerous. Maybe we should stop defeating Insect Masters.

Those foes needed to be defeated, but Obela and her allies needed to play it safe, first and foremost. If something unanticipated was going on, they had to stay calm and eliminate the source of the issue.

With her mind made up, Obela attempted to speak up about her concerns. She was just a bit too late. Right at that moment, Middray eliminated Sarill.

The remaining Insect Masters were Tishorn, facing off against Obela; Mujika, whom Geld was keeping in check; Piriod, who was still giving Gobta and Ranga a hard time; and finally Zeth, whose battle against Carrera was in another dimension from everyone else. Half the insectors had been defeated, leaving just those four.

A pall crossed Obela's face for a moment, as if she knew something bad was going to happen. It didn't escape Tishorn's attention.

"Ho-ho-ho! I see you've noticed," said Tishorn. "The lower-level Insect Masters are nothing more than the first act. With the power of those such as my master, it doesn't matter whether they're here or not."

Tishorn had the strength to back that statement up. She was a high-level Insect Master, number four on the depth chart, and her EP was over 1.8 million—not much different from Piriod, but her presence near the top of the Twelve Insect Masters over many eons demonstrated just what she was capable of.

"Cross-Dimension Slash."

The shock wave that shot out from Tishorn's arms became a cutting edge, ruthlessly slashing through everything it encountered. Its effects reached across dimensions, and while these tears in space-time were instantly repaired by the healing power of the world, nothing else that encountered this blade could withstand it.

Obela, of course, was no exception to this. She had instantly spotted it coming and wasn't incompetent enough to let it hit

her, but now it was clear Tishorn was more of a threat than she'd thought. She had acted to ensure the damage was kept to a minimum, but Obela wasn't too sure her approach was working.

"Cross-Dimension Slash."

Tishorn broke it out again. The violent shock wave surged toward Obela.

"Trying the same move?" Obela said. "You know it won't work twice."

"Ho-ho-ho…" Tishorn laughed. "What an interesting thing to say. Whether it works is for *me* to decide, not you."

Tishorn had a point. No one was foolish enough to take the enemy at their word. If Tishorn thought it wouldn't work, she wouldn't have used it again. She thought it'd have its intended effect, and so she launched the same attack twice. And Obela only advised her against it because she didn't want that to happen. The advice wasn't taken, of course, which gave Obela a new respect for her foe.

The way she so casually makes the most optimal decision each time proves she's very used to battle. It'd be easy enough to simply win, but if I want to disable her without taking her life, that'd be tough even for me.

Obela had already seen just how capable Tishorn was. There was a clear difference in strength between them, with Obela firmly at the top—however, that was based on the assumption that she hadn't been wounded in the battle against Michael. All of Obela's external wounds had healed; physically, she was in good shape. But she hadn't fully replenished her energy yet, and it'd be a mistake to say she was in top form. Otherwise, she would have neutralized Tishorn long ago. Now she couldn't—and that was why she was in this mess.

But either way, there was no time left for indecision.

"Behold, my master!"

The moment Tishorn shouted that, her fighting skills took a great leap. Just like Sarill, she could put herself into overdrive mode at will. But there was one difference from Sarill—unlike him, she had full control of her overdrive mode, letting her make more effective use of its time limit.

"Cross-Dimension Slash…Dance of Conclusions."

It was an attack like nothing before it. The shock wave sliced its way through tens of thousands of dimensions, a death-

dealing rampage that was impossible for anyone to escape—such was the awe-inspiring sight Obela saw.

In response, Obela simply stood where she was, not trying to flee at all. Or so it seemed. Now that she had given up on neutralizing Tishorn, Obela had decided to break out all her force and simply kill her instead.

"Divine nature…release," she softly stated.

It was the only warning she gave that she was about to give her full effort. The God-class gear she was clad in regained its starlike sparkle—with Obela running her magical force through it, it was back to its original level of performance.

In Obela's hands was a gigantic double-edged sword. This was the Beast Slayer—Obela's beloved longsword, evolved into its true form. The cryptids were Obela's sworn enemy, and against them, she had to abandon any noble aim to go easy. If she was *that* lenient, there'd be no end to the damage they'd cause. She always worked hard to exterminate them with optimal efficiency—and so, once Obela decided to fight, the only allowable conclusion was to destroy the enemy, no matter what happened to her surroundings.

The true nature of her twenty-million EP rating was about to be demonstrated to the world.

"Ho-ho-ho! A little too late to fight for keeps now!"

Just as Tishorn said, Obela was already trapped in the zone of extinction the Cross-Dimension Slash had just created. This kept Obela from escaping via Spatial Transport, and so there was no way to prevent the incoming blade from slicing her to pieces. Or there shouldn't have been. But in the end…

"That was nothing more than child's play," Obela said.

The dimensional slash hit home, ripping open the space around her. But once it reverted to its original form, Obela's body was restored as well, like nothing had happened to her.

"N-no…!" Tishorn gasped.

"My body is connected not only to the physical world, but to the spiritual one as well. This much of an attack won't even touch me."

Obela blithely explained this as she began to rev up her own magic force, all but declaring it was her turn. The Beast Slayer began to shine. Seeing that ominous light, Tishorn was confused by an emotion she had never felt before in her life.

My body is shaking. I…I can't be scared, can I? Could it be I'm

frightened of her?!

She saw that, but it was too late. There was nothing else Tishorn could do.

"May you be beautiful as you fade to nothing!" Obela shouted. "Planetary Bombing!!"

A ponderous barrage of slashes rained down from the heavens, dealing out death in a merciless but equal fashion. Tishorn, too, was caught up in it, and so she was vaporized, unable even to enjoy the honorable death of the truly strong.



Geld was holding his own.

He was up against the Insect Master Mujika, a warrior-type insector whose gaudy armor resembled a medieval shogun's. With the longsword he wielded using both hands, his strength was equal to Geld's, and neither side gave an inch.

The troops who served both fighters were also struggling against one another, alternately advancing and retreating. The Yellow and Orange Numbers, maintaining an ironclad defensive line, pushed back a swarm of giant centipedes led by Mujika, each a good hundred feet in length. The sheer size difference meant the Numbers needed to form teams to deal with each individual insect. Anyone hurt was healed with a recovery potion; anyone exhausted was replaced with a rearguard fighter to keep the front line strong. Their regular training was paying off.

This continued for several hours, with neither side gaining a clear advantage, but the one-on-one duel between Geld and Mujika was undoubtedly the highlight of the encounter. Mujika wielded his sword with the skill of a first-rate samurai; looking at it, it was hard to believe he was self-taught in this technique. The "other world" where the insectors came from was thought to have its own group of reincarnated otherworlders…but that didn't matter right now. The only certainty was that Mujika was a formidable opponent.

Geld stopped the blade with his large shield. That piece of gear, too, had become one with Geld as it evolved into the God-class. It was like Geld's own flesh and blood, transformed to the point that it worked somewhat like an insector's exoskeleton. As

a result, any damage exacted upon it was instantly repaired.

Even against an impact that shook the earth and scattered plasma everywhere, Geld kept his cool, using his Meat Cleaver weapon to mow Mujika down in return. But Mujika, just as great a fighter, saw the blow coming and parried it with his sword. Countless legs shot out from the gaps in his armor, unleashing a torrent of blows that pierced Geld. Despite the apparent crisis, Geld responded with a round of Lord's Ambition. His ultimate gift—Beelzebub, Lord of Gastronomy—applied a Rot effect to his own aura, resulting in the skill Chaos Eater. Chaos Eater seemed to have a will of its own, moving around erratically as it bit at Mujika's legs. But Mujika proved supreme, the evil aura around him eliminated Geld's Chaos Eater.

The back-and-forth continued in this fashion, with no end in sight. But even in this battle, the end came all too suddenly.

"Hmm," Mujika said. "Tishorn has died, too? Who could have imagined it…? I did not expect this land to put up so much of a resistance, but now the preparations for my master are complete."

"Mm?" Geld asked.

"Oh, it's nothing to do with you. It has been too long since I encountered a warrior who could keep up with me. It is a pity. I wanted to wage battle with you for longer, but my departure has drawn near."

Mujika stepped away from Geld, saying no more. Then he prepared for a retreat, taking his insects along with him.

Geld kept his guard up. But then he, too, noticed. *Something is strange with the air around here. This intense fear… Is it a sign something is about to happen?*

The air was pregnant with such an intense feeling of danger, he wondered how he hadn't noticed it before.

Geld looked up. Dark clouds were swirling, as if something was about to manifest among them.

"All troops, maintain full alert!" he commanded.

Upon his order, even those still being treated went on the move. His imposing, agitated tone—unusual for him—made them all understand the battle was far from over.

Once Phobio was safely rescued, Gobwa devoted herself to rebuilding the battle lines. Under Benimaru's guidance, she had developed into a first-rate commander. Her large-scale labyrinth training gave her experience with every kind of brutal tactic and expertise well beyond the reach of any run-of-the-mill strategist.

The three hundred members of Team Kurenai whom she led were also battle-hardened warriors, just like her. They always took the best course of action, regardless of whether Gobwa ordered it or not. As reinforcements went, they were concerningly small in number, but their presence still greatly improved the situation for their side.

Here, too, the presence of a good commander had a significant impact on a battle. With Phobio back on the front lines and in command, the Flying Beastly Knights had rallied themselves back into action.

The Milim forces were gradually regaining the upper hand.

But amid this seemingly welcome turnaround, Gobta was nearly dead. Piriod, his opponent, was an almost unbelievable danger.

Gobta had a fairly high resistance to poison, but the mist Piriod emitted was powerful enough to kill even him instantly. It wasn't like a cyanide pill that killed if ingested—a mere touch would melt skin and burn flesh. Even the slightest bit of passing contact would cause extreme pain, a fact of which Gobta had become all too aware.

Whoa! Eesh! I'm dying! If this keeps up, it's off to the afterlife for me!

It took him less than thirty seconds of fighting to reach this conclusion. So without another moment of wavering, he decided to call over Ranga and employ his most secret move.

"Transform!!"

In a flash, Gobta and Ranga became Unified, transformed into a humanoid wolf with two ominous-looking horns. This was absolutely the right decision. If Gobta had pulled the trigger even a little later, he would have died in battle regardless of what Ranga did.

"Okay, let's do this!" he said.

"You may use my power to the fullest, Gobta!"

The two were excited about this at first, but their enthusiasm quickly faded. The reason was simple: Piriod was still just as strong. This Unification didn't vastly increase their combat skills or anything—it was the combination of Ranga's latent abilities and Gobta's battle sense that made them more than the sum of their parts. For that matter, Gobta's existence points weren't that high to start with, so in terms of pure stats, it wasn't really much of a difference.

Piriod, on the other hand, oozed an aura of deadly despair just standing there. Her EP was 6.8 million, almost double what the Unified Gobta and Ranga had, and that made her the second most powerful presence in this fight after Zeth. As if that wasn't enough, she had enough spatial-control skills to even deflect Carrera's Abyss Annihilation.

Even with Gobta digging this deep into his arsenal, Piriod was still far superior to him. The only reason he hadn't been defeated immediately was because Gobta and Ranga were close-range melee fighters, while Piriod was more proficient with magic-based mid- and long-range attacks. Thanks to that, Gobta had been in a hectic situation from the very start, unable to let his guard down for a moment. He was able to stay within his preferred range for most of it, which allowed him to keep the battle reasonably close—but that was about to end, now that Piriod herself was changing.

"Gobta, have you noticed?"

"Yeah, Ranga, and it's not lookin' good. What's with her, huh? It's like she keeps getting pumped up with more power."

Piriod, the adversary they faced, was starting to concern them deeply. Compared with at the start of hostilities, there were clear signs her fighting strength was increasing, not decreasing. For one, she was growing more and more capable of handling Gobta's moves. None of his feints worked any longer, costing him the valuable time he needed to launch an attack. His offense wasn't completely shut down yet, but Piriod's sharp attacks were starting to reach her opponent.

Plus, instead of the simple strikes she had employed, Piriod was starting to put some truly murderous intent into her attacks.

"Growing in the middle of battle like this… That's kinda cheating, isn't it?" Gobta said to Ranga.

"It is a common thing. I have experienced it myself, so it

doesn't surprise me to see the enemy do the same."

"Well, no, but having it happen to me doesn't exactly seem fair..."

They dropped the banter after a while, realizing it was doing them no favors.

This situation was not lost on Gobta. There would be no more help coming because *they* were the reinforcements. Rimuru, who enjoyed Gobta's eternal respect and would normally be coming along to help at any moment, was busy on another battlefield. The enemy *this* time around was too powerful for anyone to drop their post and step in for Rimuru. Benimaru might step in, yes, but Gobta preferred he didn't, since his absence back home could put the whole nation in danger.

So...

"Guess we're just gonna have to figure something out," said Gobta.

"Yes," agreed Ranga. *"If the enemy is powerful, we simply have to be more powerful than them!"*

In the end, they settled on a "no guts, no glory" approach—not the greatest thing for a commander to rely on, but for Gobta, it offered a reason to push himself. People talk about fighting with their backs to the wall, and for Gobta—who always prudently kept an escape route in mind during every battle—having no such escape route helped him focus more on the fight.

"Okay, we're gonna try to make this short and sweet!"

With renewed enthusiasm, Gobta accelerated his attack. But every attempt seemed to come up short. He attempted a surefire dual-pronged attack, using Dance with Wolves to distract Piriod long enough for Apocalypse Howling to hit home, but even that she successfully dodged.

Are you kiddin' me?! This was my big move! I was practicin' it and everything!

Now even Gobta felt like this was a crisis. Ranga was the same way.

"Should we perhaps retreat for now, Gobta?"

"No. If we step back here, it'll be too much for Carrera to deal with."

Ranga saw Gobta was right. If no reinforcements were incoming, one option was to run away and regroup, but that

was a last resort at best. This was war, not a staged duel, and abandoning the front lines like that had too much of a negative impact on all their allies.

But if Gobta's surefire finisher didn't work, he and Ranga would just be whittled down until they were defeated. Gobta didn't want to lose any more than the next person did, so he was desperately racking his brains for some new idea. Nothing was sprouting up, though…but then…

"Let me assist you, Gobta."

Carillon, fresh from defeating the Insect Master Abalt, noticed Gobta's predicament and joined the fight. And he wasn't alone.

"I'll pitch in as well."

Frey, too, had identified the danger Piriod posed and offered her battle skills. Maybe ganging up on a single foe wasn't very fair, but again, this was war, not a duel. Victory always took precedence over honor, and Gobta was thus glad to accept this aid.

"Thanks a ton!" he gleefully shouted—and with that, the battle was back on.

Or so everyone thought.

"It's sad, so terribly sad, to think my children were so weak," Piriod muttered to herself, but her voice still reached the ears of all those present on the field.

Everyone understood this was the bell signaling the final round.

Carrera was fighting an evenly matched battle against Zeth, the chief insectoid.

Zeth was a qualified opponent, but by no means one Carrera couldn't beat. In fact, she was enjoying this battle now that she knew it was just the kind of tough challenge she liked. So she showed off a few of her recently acquired skills. Her Golden Gun and blade—the same battle style Lieutenant Kondo preferred—also suited Carrera just fine. Her moves with them

were so natural and effortless, one couldn't be blamed for assuming she had employed this weapon set for years and years.

In addition, Carrera was used to fighting insectors. Normally, this foe would be giving her trouble; instead, she wasn't losing a single step to him. Zeth, after all, was quite similar to someone Carrera already knew quite well—from his physique to the exoskeleton covering his whole body. Their fighting styles were completely different, but the quality of their strikes and the overpowering presence that made everyone else cower were dead ringers for Zegion, a person Carrera recognized as her ally and rival.

Zeth's existence points were, in fact, mind-boggling. His score was well above Carrera's and a good three times where Zegion stood. But in terms of the threat they posed, Carrera felt Zegion still had the edge. She had fought him many times, and that was why she could stay a step ahead of Zeth's thought process, even though she had never met him before.

At this point, Carrera wasn't imposing any limitations on herself, either. Diablo had come up with this goofball rule that she couldn't target any part of Zegion created with Rimuru's cells, but that didn't apply to Zeth. That was what allowed Carrera to go all out here. There was an obstacle to this at the start—an obstacle by the name of Piriod—but Esprit and her friends had done everything in their power to get rid of that for her. It was a commendable effort, especially given how mismatched they were.

And yeah, if my friends are putting in that kind of effort, I can't look like a lazy bum around them!

In a way, then, Carrera was enjoying this fight to the death with Zeth. It was helping her work out all her seething emotions.

A blade aimed at a gap in Zeth's armor made its way into his body tissue. At the same time as this dance-like blade strike, a bullet from close range smashed through Zeth's compound eye. Bit by bit, the battle was tilting in Carrera's favor.

"Ha-ha-ha! This is so fun!"

"Tsk… A demon like you, with all these little tricks…"

"You're pretty good, but not as good as Zegion."

"What?"

"Zegion's my officially sanctioned rival, but fighting him is

nothing like this. We've sometimes fought for days at a time, but I've never managed to inflict a single wound on him."

That was the truth. Even without Diablo's nonsensical rules, Zegion's strength was extraordinary. By contrast, Zeth was hardly weak, but Carrera had landed repeated attacks on him. If they kept fighting like this, Carrera was convinced she'd win.

"So what?" Zeth asked.

"What I'm saying is you're weaker than him."

"Ha. Then let me show you *everything* I can do."

Carrera's words were more than enough to hurt Zeth's pride. Converting his anger into energy, Zeth focused all his murderous rage on Carrera. That look alone could kill anyone ranked below an A; the sheer pressure was so violent it might've fatally wounded even a high-level magic-born. But Carrera brushed it off like it was nothing. Then, as if to pay him back, she drummed up her own magic force, working her aura up before sending it Zeth's way.

The twin auras collided, forming a gigantic vortex over the battlefield. Anyone who touched it was caught up in the intense waves of magic force, at the cost of their life. The Milim forces were aware of this danger, which was why none of Carrera's allies were near her. They were all fine, but since there were still swarms of insectors covering the battlefield, this whirlpool in the air did a lot to whittle down their numbers.

Zeth took a step forward. Carrera confronted him. His fist tore into Carrera's cheek, just as her sword sliced through a gap in his exoskeleton. Zeth executed a kick that'd kill a high-ranked magic-born in one blow. Carrera, unfazed, thrust her Golden Gun into his chest and fired away. The bullet, fired at point-blank range, gouged its way through Zeth's exoskeleton, creating a hole—but then Zeth's kick, which looked like it had missed, swung back down at Carrera's head.

"Hngh!"

She noticed it in the nick of time, just barely covering her head. But that wasn't enough, and she took the blow on her shoulder instead.

"Almost had you," Zeth said.

"Look at *me*, making a mistake. How embarrassing."

Carrera's left shoulder was shattered, but that intrepid smile was still on her lips. She had hoped to defeat him without taking any damage, so this was a disappointment for her, but

she still didn't think she'd lose. After several hours of fighting, Carrera recognized all of Zeth's habits. But even so, Zeth's power was the real deal—if Carrera wasn't careful, she'd be the loser. It was up to her to gradually pile on the damage and ensure her own victory.

So she stared Zeth down with her sneering, imposing look. Her military uniform was torn at the shoulder, revealing the snow-white skin below. The blood had already stopped, and she was completely healed, like she had never been hurt in the first place. The same was true of Zeth; everything Carrera did to him had healed as well. For transcendent beings like the two of them, nonlethal damage was pretty meaningless. What counted in battle was how efficiently you could exhaust your opponent; any side who let fatigue slow them down was at a major disadvantage. Carrera had started this fight with a large-scale move, which meant her stamina was lagging behind Zeth's. That was what made her consider a more measured approach.

Hee-hee-hee… I've got a grasp of this guy Zeth's skills now. He's good, but I'm still gonna win, aren't I?

The way she saw it, there was no need to overexert herself any longer. But despite how assured she was about her victory, she suddenly began to notice a change in the atmosphere.

Huh? This presence…what is it? Lady Milim was looking out for something like this, so I let her keep an eye out, but…

Carrera had been fighting so freely because she knew Milim was still on standby. That was why she was late to notice…or maybe that wasn't the only reason. Another was that Zeth was so powerful, Carrera didn't really have the free time to worry about her surroundings—a situation he had intentionally created.

"Heh-heh-heh… So you noticed?" he remarked. "Yes, you are strong. I admit that, but we will be the winners here. This is not a duel… It is war."

"What?" Carrera frowned, displeased.

Zeth didn't care. He raised his right hand and pointed in a certain direction.

"Look," he said.

Carrera instead used Magic Sense to probe the area. Then she learned what Zeth meant.

There, before Gobta's eyes, Piriod had been beautifully transformed. She had always been atypically beautiful to start with, but now anyone who saw her would agree—there was a new, mystical sort of beauty to her.

In fact, it wasn't a transformation so much as an evolution. The battle scars Piriod had accumulated over the battle tore themselves open, revealing a beautiful woman with completely untouched skin underneath.

"Hello. My name is Piriod, queen of the insects."

Even her speech had become smoother. This was clearly something supernatural, not at all the same opponent as before. And no wonder. This Piriod was the second-in-command of the insectors, the empress who was the true leader controlling the other Insect Masters. And now that her true nature was revealed, any chance Gobta had at winning was as good as lost.

"You really gotta stop screwin' with me, guys," Gobta muttered.

Ranga nodded, no doubt agreeing with him. *"This goes beyond a mere increase in strength. Us becoming stronger will no longer make any difference."*

"So what're we gonna do?" Gobta asked.

The question was greeted with silence at first. Ranga was unsure how to answer.

"We will have to run. She must seem dangerous even to you, does she not, Gobta?"

"Well..." Now it was Gobta looking for a response. *"I mean, yeah, but...if we run away by ourselves, that seems kinda mean to me..."*

Even he knew Ranga was right. Up until then, maybe they had a chance to beat Piriod if they found the right move to make. At this point, the possibility of that was close to zero—such was the overwhelming presence she now had. She called herself queen, and her power was clearly above that of any other Insect Master. Even Zeth, the chief insectoid general that Carrera was dealing with, was no match for her.

Ranga and Gobta knew what they were dealing with. Defeat would be inevitable like this. But they didn't want to be the only ones to escape. They'd never be able to face their friends like

that. They were damned if they did, damned if they didn't—but there was no time to ponder this.

"Don't give me that crap! Whether you look different or not, it's all the same thing to me!"

With that cry, Carillon was the first to make a move.

This one was Burst Roar, his best special strike. With no regard for the future, he unleashed his ever-changing particle diffusion-focusing cannon strike, his body transforming into conscious particles that swarmed Piriod. It all happened in an instant.

Piriod didn't move—and not because she couldn't.

"What…? That's crazy…," said Carillon.

She didn't need to move. Her breath had turned into a poison mist that clung to the particles Carillon controlled. It took away all his kinetic energy, effectively blocking him from action.

But Frey had predicted Carillon's initial defeat. She flew off, using his attack as a feint, and landed behind Piriod. Now it was her turn to fire off her most powerful strike.

"Time to bind you where you are," she announced, just after using Garuda Claw to grab her.

Frey's Magic Interference had become effective enough that it reached the ultimate, divine realm. It was so strong it could even seal off Adalmann's Necronomicon—and combined with the Garuda Claw she was relying on, she could shut down the abilities of any opponent, no matter who they were.

Or normally she could. But even though she should have felt endangered, Piriod just smiled.

"It's sad," she said. "My children, being defeated by opponents of *this* caliber."

"What?"

Before Frey got an answer, she took a massive blow to her abdomen, silencing her.

"Ngh! Krhh…?!"

She still had a startled expression on her face as she spat out blood. Following her instincts, she removed her hand from Piriod. That saved her life. If she trusted Garuda Claw enough to keep it going, the next strike from Piriod would have killed her.

"Hmm… You have good instincts," Piriod said. "Your claws kept me from leveraging my power a little, but I could have finished you off with two blows instead. But now I'm convinced of it. You may not have strength, but you do have extensive

combat experience. Perhaps my children deserve to have their honor restored a little."

Piriod's voice sounded like a song.

"I can't believe it…," Frey managed. "Nullifying my claws, just like that… You really are an unbelievable monster, aren't you?"

Frey was sure of it now. This site was soon to become a slaughterhouse, just as it would be for Gobta and Ranga—and for Carillon, sprawled out on the ground. He was too exhausted to even speak, much less try to defend himself. The only choice remaining was to run away.

Ugh. Not to quote Frey, but I never thought she'd be this much of a monster…, thought Carillon.

He regretted not being able to recognize as much at the start of their fight.

Not that it would've mattered even if I did…

Carillon chuckled at himself. Looking back, Piriod deflecting Carrera's Abyss Annihilation probably should've raised some warning flags for him. Assuming she was a mid-to-long-range fighter was a mistake everybody on Milim's side had made.

But did Milim not notice it, either? I sincerely doubt that. So why didn't she do anything? …Oh. Could the Insect Lord Zeranus be that much worse of an opponent?

A chill ran down Carillon's back. He recalled his own battle with Milim. Why would she, an absolute presence wherever she went, not be moved by this danger? The reason obviously had to do with the Insect Lord. And that meant they couldn't expect any help from Milim here.

That's it! …Damn it! So this whole battle…

Finishing that sentence in his mind would be nothing but an affront to his friends. Carillon, realizing this, shifted gears, trying to think about what else he might be able to do.

✳

Frey was badly hurt, although not as much as Carillon. She and Piriod exchanged glances.

Frey was prepared to die. As long as Piriod was the clear champion among them, no one would be able to stop her. It made sense, then, that Piriod would start by killing Frey, the

weakest. Frey knew she'd do the same thing in her shoes.

I'm sorry, Carillon, Frey thought. *I wanted to know so much more about you…but I guess this is it.*

With that resolve in mind, she prepared to lodge one final attack. But then a man stood in front of her. It was Middray, facing Piriod as if to protect Frey.

"Hoh… So this is how things stand?" he remarked. "The purpose of the barrier you set up in this battlefield was to gather up the energy of your dead comrades and send it to you, wasn't it?"

"Not gather, no." Piriod smiled as she turned her gaze toward Middray. "I want more power, you see, so I can give birth to even tougher children."

That was enough of an answer for Middray. Clearly, he saw Piriod had to be defeated before she could do anything else.

If we let her escape from here, she'll just create more and more monsters like those Insect Masters we just defeated, he thought. *A shame it's our side that wants to flee more than she does…*

He grinned a bit. But there was still hope left in his eyes.

"In that case," he announced as he held his chest down in a fighting stance, "try and defeat *me* first!"

Shifting his weight to his right leg, he lightly moved his left forward. At the same time, he clenched his right hand and drew it toward his waist, his left hand in front of him to check Piriod's movements. The next moment, he exploded with power from the toes of his left foot up, surging his body forward like a cannonball. Then, thrusting his fist with all his might, he formed a mass of fighting spirit in the air, also shaped like a fist.

"Dragonic Cannon!"

Uniting the planet's energy with his own fighting spirit, he focused everything he had in every part of his body straight into the fist. Then he let it all out, not sparing even a drop of strength as he combined it with the force buried in the soil. It was a divinity-tinged blow, one powerful enough to work against superior opponents. This was the secret move of Middray, a high-level chaos elemental better known as a dragon-born.

Unfortunately, it didn't work on Piriod.

"What a fascinating strike," she said. "I'm sure it'd make my children stronger if they learned it."

She smiled as she deployed a space-altering magic circle with

ease to banish the Dragonic Cannon. But this, too, was what Middray predicted. He didn't actually think this would be the end at all; that Cannon was just a decoy. The *real* attacker, of course, was Gobta.

"Hey, don't forget about me!" he yelled. "Try this on for size!"

Jumping out from behind Middray's shadow, Gobta chose just the right moment to launch his Apocalypse Howling. But that, too, didn't work. The unfazed Piriod just deployed another magic circle at the same time to cancel it out. It was a completely successful surprise attack, but none of it reached Piriod.

But even so, there was still a glimmer of hope on both Middray's and Gobta's faces. There was another person ready to give her own best shot—and who could it be but Obela?

"Don't get too proud of yourself, bug!" she cried.

While Piriod's attention was drawn toward Middray and Gobta, Obela had been preparing an attack of her own. It proved to be the second Planetary Bombing of the day. Unlike Middray, Carillon, and the others, Obela boasted an EP that was actually on par with Piriod's. Thanks to that, not even this insect queen could emerge unscathed…unless she did.

"Zarario was a wise man," Piriod said. "I had thought that you, as his colleague, would be as well."

"What?!"

"Oh, no way…"

"She's *that* good?"

Piriod was still in supreme control. But there was no time to wail in despair.

"Now for some payback," she said with a light smile.

And the meteor shower appearing above revealed her intentions. Piriod had diverted the power of the three finishers thrown her way and now was dispersing it across the battlefield. It was a truly demonic piece of work, this furious attack, and it was bound to take the lives of many friends and foes alike.

"Nngh!" Middray stared up at the sky, agitated. "Brace for impact, everyone!"

Gobta, for his part, used Thought Communication to warn his companions. Obela, meanwhile, was calmly flailing away at Piriod all by herself. If magic- and beam-type attacks didn't work on her, Obela would need to finish her off with melee

combat instead.

This, at last, made Piriod wince. In fact, there was no large difference between her and Obela's overall combat ability. Piriod's Dominate Space skill gave her an insurmountable advantage against medium- and long-range foes, but she wasn't that good up close, as shown by her inability to finish off Esprit and Phobio. Her plan was to first establish mental dominance over Obela, then overwhelm her—but seeing her attack fail didn't seem to disturb Obela at all.

Obela, too, was a fierce warrior with ages of experience fighting the cryptids. She had dealt with all kinds of troublesome opponents with all kinds of unique characteristics, and nothing could faze her in battle.

That was a miscalculation, yes, but Piriod still had the absolute advantage. Death was raining down across the battlefield, and the subsequent energy released would all belong to her.

But it's strange, isn't it? Piriod thought. *I was able to recover the energy of my children, but apart from that…*

Piriod looked around, trying to solve the riddle. Then she realized her second miscalculation. The enemy force—Milim and her army—was being protected by Geld and his troops.

"Don't give up! As long as we're here, nobody will have to die!"

Geld's strong, dependable voice stormed across the landscape.

"""Yeahhh!"""

The forces he led pushed themselves forward, hoping to meet the expectations of their leader. Even if their shields were shattered and their armor lost, they'd use their strength to its fullest to protect everyone else from the meteors raining down on them.

And that wasn't all. The demons serving Carrera were also swooping onto the scene. Recovery magic flew across the battleground, offering healing to any wounded soldier. And…

"Hey, hey, you still got a lot of work to do!"

With that light chiding from a member of the Diable Chevalier came the invocation of Resurrection, a divine miracle. The demons' firm faith in Rimuru now allowed them to even raise the dead.

Even if their bodies had been torn apart, the demons could

recover their souls and resurrect them at a later date. There was a time limit to this, but it still meant bringing the wholly dead back to life, which kept morale high across Milim's force. Everyone on hand was tackling this crisis head-on, doing everything they could to complete their mission.

Piriod, realizing this, finally began to feel distressed.

"The dead are coming back to life? I had no idea such a skill existed in this world…"

Obela shrugged at Piriod's surprise. "Yeah, I thought it was marked as taboo, but now it's spread well beyond the point of no return."

Obela herself had been stunned when she heard of this. She was first informed of it at a strategy meeting, and it made her look at the ceiling and say, "No way!" But it was too late. If the technique had spread this far, it was best to make the most effective possible use of it. Besides, if it reduced battlefield losses to nearly zero, maybe she simply ought to accept it.

Obela expected this to happen to some extent. She didn't think her own attacks would be repelled like that, but the only casualties so far in this battle were all on the bugs' side. Having all their energy revert to Piriod was a pain, but now that Piriod was effectively the only enemy left, suddenly things didn't seem that awful anymore.

“All right,” Obela said. “I hope you’re ready for this. From now on, it’s going to be a *very* one-sided hunt.”

Hunting down and killing her prey was something of a specialty for Obela. She had been commander during many group battles against foes more powerful than her, and now she was even letting a composed smile cross her face.

“May I ask for your orders, Master Strategist?” said Middray.

He, too, was relieved to see little permanent damage among his allies. He didn’t expect destruction on that scale, but thanks to the efforts of Geld and his forces, they had escaped disaster—an unexpected bit of good news. No longer worried about his future, he was happy to go back under Obela’s command.

“Yeah, bring ’em on!”

Gobta was on board, too. Against someone as powerful as Piriod, teamwork was the only path to victory. But since they hadn’t trained together before and probably couldn’t work as a team straight away, he decided to join Obela instead.

It was Obela, Middray, and Gobta-Ranga against Piriod. But then another would-be challenger chimed in.

“My mother, grant me the honor of crushing your enemies!”

Mujika, abandoned by Geld, had dug his way up from the ground to jump out. It was three against two, and even that didn’t last long.

“Hey, don’t forget about me, either.”

“And me. I don’t want people to think *that* was the end of me.”

Carillon and Frey rushed on the scene, freshly healed by Geld but still covered in scars. Their external wounds were all fixed up, but there was no getting back the energy lost so far. They were too out of gas to break out any truly devastating strikes, but they steeled themselves and joined in anyway, reasoning it was better to fight than not fight.

“I’m here, too,” Geld said, visibly excited and exhaling a mighty gust of air to accentuate his point.

That made it six on two. Gobwa and the Three Lycanthropeers were still active as well, dealing with what remained of the insect force. None of them could do anything against Piriod, though, so it was fair to assume these gathered forces were all they had.

But even this team-up elicited nothing but an eerie smile from Piriod.

“What wonderful core bodies you all have,” she said. “I’d love to use you to birth even more tenacious children than before.”

She was brimming with confidence as Obela and the others eyed her. And she had good reason to.

“Reconstruct Life.”

Piriod was able to use the energy she accumulated to strengthen the children of her own creation. That only applied to those who were still alive, of course…but Zeth and Mujika were still present and in good health. So with two super-warriors as her wingmen, the queen and wife of Zeranus the Insect Lord finally revealed her true colors.



Carrera, realizing the situation after Zeth’s prompting, gritted her teeth. She had been enjoying her little confrontation so far, but after her parade got rained on like this, she lost all interest.

Then she felt a chill. She instinctively leaped back, and a moment later, the place where she was exploded.

“Hmm. Excellent,” said Zeth. “Thanks to you, I am one step closer to becoming a new Creator. I want to test this power…and I’ll need your help.”

Also speaking more naturally than before, he opened and closed his fists as he addressed Carrera. It was the strong speaking down to the weak, an attitude that trampled all over Carrera’s pride.

“Uh-huh… Funny to hear that from you,” she said. “You want *me* to be your sparring partner for that?”

“You do not have the right to refuse.”

As soon as he said it, Zeth lightly flicked out his fist. It was a gentle jab—lodged at several dozen times the speed of sound. The shock wave was strong enough to burn the air and shatter the ground.

Clearly, he was more powerful than before. Zeth’s EP hadn’t doubled, but it had likely seen a major upgrade. More troubling was the fact that he had likely gained an array of new special skills.

What a cowardly move, Carrera grumbled.

She had constructed a path to victory for herself, and now it

was back to the drawing board. But as difficult as it had become, she didn't think it was impossible. Zeth might have more power, but it didn't seem like he had gained any new battle expertise. If Zeth had shown off a mastery on the level of Zegion, Carrera would've felt mortally endangered, but there was no feeling like that. Despite her qualms, she hadn't lost her cool yet. That being said, Zeth had just publicly dissed her, and she couldn't wait to pay him back for that.

So Carrera's smile hadn't faded from her face because she had fallen into despair at the sight of Zeth's power. No, the problem was more with his friends.

That one over there looks like bad news, Carrera thought. *She looks stronger than my prey here. Tag team or not, I wonder if Obela and Middray can beat her…*

By Carrera's estimation, it would take the combined efforts of Gobta-Ranga, Geld, Carillon, and Frey just to *maybe* defeat Mujika—that was how formidable he had become as well. Even if that did come to pass, it was still a coin flip.

…And any self-sacrifice is against the will of my master.

Carrera remained faithful to Rimuru's orders. She was engaging Zeth like this because if she took on the toughest enemy, that would prevent casualties among any of her allies. That, of course, was based on the premise that Milim would do something about Zeranus, the enemy's leader…but if Carrera took on their number-two fighter, she figured the rest would work itself out.

Now that this assumption was proven to be wrong, she didn't want to be stuck with Zeth, who had become number three in the pecking order. It was time for her to make a momentous decision.

I wanted to save this in case something came up, but I don't want to regret keeping it under wraps. Sorry, Zeth. I would've enjoyed fighting with you more, but it looks like this is going to be goodbye.

She turned toward Zeth, apologizing internally. She had wanted to defeat him with her core strength for the sake of gaining experience, but if her friends' lives were at stake, she couldn't put her own fun first. So, her mind made up, she pointed her Golden Gun at him.

"Heh. Don't you understand yet that it doesn't work on me?"

As Zeth said this, the magic bullets condensed by Carrera's

gun were only powerful enough to damage Zeth's exoskeleton—damage from which he immediately healed and regenerated, so it essentially did nothing. She continued to use her gun as a distraction, however—as well as one other, more important, reason.

"All right," she said. "Die, then."

It was also her trump card when push came to shove. Before Carrera's words reached Zeth, a bullet shot out from the Golden Gun—a Judgment Bullet, capable of felling anything that existed.

"Huh?"

Zeth froze as he looked at the hole in his chest. Then, a beat later, came the sensation of his life fading from him. The magicore that maintained his existence was destroyed, and he understood there was no escaping the death advancing upon him.

"You…you were going easy from the start…?"

"No. We were about equal in actual strength…and you're a pretty impressive sight now. If we went all out against each other, it would've been tough to beat you."

"So…why…?"

"Why else?"

Fighting a battle she couldn't predict the outcome of was fun to Carrera…but her personal concerns could no longer take first priority. The more Carrera struggled against Zeth, the greater the chance her friends would be wiped out.

But there was another, more personal reason.

"The fight *has* been interesting enough for me…but you're weaker than Zegion, so, like, I think I'm good now."

With a big, innocent smile, Carrera told Zeth the truth—a truth that plunged him into despair. It was a very demonic thing to do, but that sort of thing came naturally to her.

"I…was inferior…? I was destined to become a new Creator…"

His voice sounded full of regret as he spoke his last words.

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Even seeing the end of such a powerful enemy like this, Carrera didn't feel she had accomplished much. Without even a moment spent basking in her achievement, she was about to

head over to help Gobta and his cohorts—but then a hidden enemy made his move.

“Heh-heh-heh… I was waiting for this moment.”

“What?!”

She had detected no one else near her, but Carrera was startled by the sudden “pain” that ran through her arms—not actual pain, but data impulses reporting to her brain about the damage. An unbelievably heavy, violent shock had smashed itself against her, striking the arms she had put up to defend her vital points. It was the work of the Insect Lord Zeranus, who evaded even Carrera’s Universal Detect before making his appearance. Carrera’s instincts reacted quickly enough, but if it were anyone else, that one blow would have ended it.

“Heh… About time you showed up,” she said. “Why the hurry?”

“If you are within attack range, I will not hesitate to crush you.”

Just as he said, Zeranus was looking for any and every opportunity to hit Carrera. He far outclassed her in skill, something he was rightly proud of, but still he laid low and waited for the perfect opportunity, fearing what may happen otherwise.

It was Carrera’s Judgment Bullets that scared him. Minaza, sent out as part of the vanguard force, had once sent a report warning him about a man named Kondo. She didn’t go into great detail about all his abilities, but based on her observations, Kondo had “an unknown but extremely dangerous skill”—a description Zeranus took seriously. He later inquired with Michael and Feldway about it, and when he did, he learned that Kondo’s skill had been transferred to Carrera.

Thanks to this research, Zeranus had come at least somewhat prepared for what was to come. Michael’s Castle Guard seemed to block the attack, but Zeranus had nothing like that. He had concerns about his own personal security, so he wanted to wait for Carrera to break out that fearsome skill on someone else before he had to deal with it. Call it caution, call it cowardice—but it was one factor that made Zeranus the strongest of his kind.

Now that the moment had arrived, all his concerns were gone. They had lost Zeth, a truly valuable pawn, but it was clear he’d had good reason to be so vigilant.

Enemy or not, it was a truly wonderful weapon, Zeranus thought. *If it were used on me, I'm not sure I would have survived it.*

Despite that praise, Zeranus's concerns about Carrera were already in the past. He had covered all the bases, and with that, the demon didn't seem dangerous in the slightest.

Carrera, too, understood the danger as she looked Zeranus in the eye. *This is a dangerous foe. Great. I can't even see how far down his power goes…*

It felt like she was facing Zegion or someone worse. Zeranus had no openings to exploit. She had no clue how to begin tackling him. She hated to admit it, but she had to—she might have been the Menace Lord, but the Insect Lord had her outclassed.

But not even that was going to make Carrera give up so easily.

"Huh? Pretty petty move for a so-called king, isn't it?" she asked.

Even now, she wasn't afraid to rile him. But Zeranus had her beat there.

"Heh! Trying to act strong at *this* point? You demons are all incredibly sore losers, aren't you?"

He looked down on Carrera, calm and composed—the attitude of a winner.

"Oh, you think you've already won this? Isn't that a little *too* arrogant around the likes of me?"

She was quick to retort, but the breezy, relaxed look on her face was gone. A single kick from Zeranus had crushed both her arms. She could barely ready her Golden Gun, much less hold her sword.

Her skeleton was originally crafted by Rimuru from orichalc, which had subsequently evolved into crimson steel. It boasted God-class strength, toughness, and resistance, making it unbreakable. Maybe it would've been understandable if a God-class weapon had damaged it…but a mere kick? It was beyond unexpected. That alone showed just the kind of threat the Insect Lord posed.

The secret behind it was made clear by looking at Zeranus's body. His exoskeleton shone in a dazzling array of colors—the sheen of crimson steel.

So his whole body is crimson steel…?

It was clear from looking at the Insect Lord that he was a kind of ultimate life-form, the perfect combination of offense and defense. His entire body was both a deadly weapon and an impenetrable shield.

Slowly, Carrera observed his entire body. The fine, silvery hairs that ran from his forehead down his back gave the appearance of a long head of hair…but upon closer inspection, each hair had a tiny ridge that resembled a blade. Every single one was made of crimson steel that shone every color of the rainbow, depending on the angle you observed from.

I suppose each hair is a God-class blade. I don't know how he controls them, but they could chop me up into bits if I'm not careful…

On Zeranus's head were a pair of antennae. Two pairs of red, glowing wings sprouted from his back, and three pairs of arms were poised on both sides in a fighting stance.

Those wings are bad news, too. Is he compressing his energy into them? They seem pretty densely packed. If he released all that, it could change the whole shape of this planet.

It could very well be more destructive than the extreme magic Carrera held sway over. That was how much energy she could feel from those two pairs of wings.

And then there were those six arms. One pair was casually folded across his chest, but the other two were ready for battle. The arms on the bottom were crossed together, ready to fire magic on a moment's notice. The pair on top, on the other hand, changed color and form as they went along, becoming thin and blade-like at the end and emitting a dull sort of shine. If he had struck with those bladed arms first, he would have had a good chance of amputating both of Carrera's arms.

As Carrera continued to observe, Zeranus placed a foot on the prone Zeth. It was akin to stepping on his own son, but the truth was even worse.

"What are you—?"

Carrera's question was met with a sort of crunching, chewing sound coming from Zeranus's foot. Right before her eyes, he was consuming his son, the chief insectoid general.

"Hey, uh, he was bragging about how he was gonna be the next Creator and stuff." Carrera's eyes narrowed. "Was he actually *this* disposable to you the whole time?"

Zeranus answered that question with a loud, high-pitched

laugh. “Don’t be ridiculous. My successor must be the strongest. Even stronger than me.”

“…”

“No one weaker than I could ever become a Creator.”

Suddenly, Zeranus moved. The mouth that appeared on the sole of his foot had finished consuming Zeth, and having absorbed his knowledge and experience, he turned it into his own. He, too, now spoke more smoothly than before—and the power…

Carrera desperately tried to defend herself. But her arms didn’t work.

Uh-oh…! If I take that undefended, I won’t be able to recover from that damage!

She accelerated her thoughts a million times over only to reach that conclusion. Life—or at least the life she had led in this incarnation—could be cruel to her.

But for this instant, it was not to be. Someone caught Zeranus’s kick.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! *Now* I’m ready to pitch in. I’ve had enough of being patient!”

The girl smiled happily, her light pink hair blowing in the wind, like she was enjoying this. This was Carrera’s new friend—the demon lord Milim Nava herself, one of the strongest figures in the world.

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“Let *me* handle this guy, Carrera!”

With that, Milim and Zeranus plunged into all-out combat. Carrera no longer had any role to play.

“…So much for that,” she said. “I still have a lot to learn. Better get myself healed.”

Quickly and calmly, Carrera moved on.

As she repaired her body, her focus shifted to Obela’s team, for whom she saw the battle was growing more intense and deadlier than expected. With Zeth out of the picture, Piriod and Mujika were the only Insect Masters left…but they were both serious trouble. That held especially true for Piriod, wife of Zeranus and mother to the entire insector race; she seemed to be gaining more power by the second.

Five members of the team, led by Obela, were fighting her—Middray being the sole exception. Obela was the commander and tank of the party; once fatigue got the best of her, Geld stepped right in to replace her. The remaining three—Carillon, Frey, and Gobta-Ranga—were using hit-and-run tactics to attack Piriod.

This was a pretty dangerous approach in Carrera's eyes. Carillon and Frey were part of the Million Class, but they were almost fully spent—a single strike from Piriod could be fatal. But they were still out there attacking and trying to defend themselves. Obela and Geld were busily occupying Piriod's attention, but one misstep would lead to almost certain disaster. It meant Obela and Geld had extremely important roles. With no healer in the group, there was no way to sustain this fight without Geld and his self-regenerative skills.

Middray, meanwhile, had subbed in for Geld against Mujika, making it a one-on-one fight again. Mujika had greatly powered up, his EP stat now far higher than Middray's. However, it was a close battle, seesawing a bit but otherwise pretty even. This was thanks to Middray fighting with 100 percent of his force. All the restrictions he usually placed on himself were lifted—he knew now was no time to hold back—and he was showing off his Dragon Body form, something he only broke out when sparring with Milim. He was still human, but his arms and legs were covered in dragon scales, and he had similar protection under his clothes, except at the joints of his limbs.

This didn't mean a statistical rise in EP for Middray; it just meant he was finally tapping into all his power. When Middray threw all the rules aside and fought the way he *really* was, this was the result. Perhaps that was why this battle had become so heated, with both sides feeling each other out and even waging something of a psychological war on top of the physical one.

"Wow, Middray, good job," said Carrera. "I was curious about who'd win in a fight between you and Zegion, but now I think it's pretty much a toss-up!"

Carrera, watching, couldn't help but cheer for him. It was perhaps the greatest endorsement Middray had ever received. Mujika, after all, was a self-styled warrior, one very sure of his skills—Geld would have pummeled him long ago otherwise. He was even with Geld before he powered up, but now his EP had multiplied several times over. It was easily triple Middray's, an

overwhelming difference. But there he was, fighting on equal terms with Mujika. How impossible *was* this?

If Middray ever got serious, he probably *could* beat Zegion. But what if Zegion adjusted his intensity to match Middray's…? The way Carrera saw it, it was impossible to predict who'd win.



After a few intense opening salvos, Middray and Mujika stood at a distance from each other, observing. They were both looking for an opening, hoping to avoid any careless errors. Then Mujika spoke up.

"Impressive. May I ask your name?"

"Middray. Will you give me yours? The name of someone fierce enough to entertain *me* is well worth remembering."

Though they were enemies, they were willing to acknowledge each other's talents. Mujika felt a lot more humanlike after Reconstruct Life was invoked on him. His skills had a robotic feel before; now they were sharper, more innovative. The shift wasn't lost on Middray, who had a higher opinion of Mujika than ever—he wouldn't have exposed his full Dragon Body form otherwise.

But this was war, and these were two enemies. They might respect each other, but the ultimate aim was to kill their opponent.

So Middray shot out his left fist in a fluid motion, smiling all the while. Then, pulling back with even more speed, he used the recoil to unleash a spinning kick. It was a kind of feint, and for Middray, it didn't end there—that first fist strike allowed him to compress the air inside his fist, then shoot it out later. This air was also infused with fighting spirit, so the resulting force was greater than even your typical magic bullet.

Mujika had his sword ready once he saw the fist coming, allowing him to deflect the projectile of compressed air. But immediately after that, Middray's kick cleanly entered the gap from lifting his sword high.

"Nggh!"

The force penetrated Mujika's armor, running through his entire body and affecting all his physical functions. That kick, too, was filled with Middray's fighting spirit. He was a master of

Battlewill.

Just as the Dragon Fist school had sprouted up in the other world Velgrynd had visited, there was a similarly unique school introduced here in the key world. Its core movements resembled premodern *koryu* judo, but its focus was on working one's fighting spirit into martial art attacks. It was a wild, uninhibited style, as befitted its founder Milim, and while it didn't have a name yet, it could be called Ryuma-ken, or "Dragon-Demon Fist." There was none of the *hun-po* inheritance ritual seen in Dragon Fist; it was up to each practitioner to acquire the school's accumulated knowledge and experience themselves.

In a key world, an individual's lifespan might vary wildly and be greatly extended based on the lifestyle they pursued. Simply training and managing one's physical condition through Battlewill could multiply one's lifespan several times over…and someone like Middray, with a pedigree that hearkened back to his ancestors, could make it past a thousand years. Middray himself, in fact, was over two thousand years old, and he had spent all that time training—the main secret behind his strength.

The force behind Middray's kick made Mujika take a step back. He looked down at the spot where he was hit…and his eyes opened wide. His shell armor, which couldn't be scratched by any normal attack, sported a healthy dent and had a few pieces missing. Low-level insector soldiers had no sense of fear; they launched repeated suicide attacks against any foe they were ordered to strike. However, the rarity of higher-ranked insectors allowed them to instinctively grasp the difference in power between them and their opponents. An Insect Master could make these predictions with great accuracy as well. However, this ability could only gauge an adversary's core ability; it couldn't surmise what their foes' skills were capable of. It also required the insector to actually fight the person they wanted to evaluate, of course.

Thanks to the blow he'd just received, Mujika was on high alert. Piriod had helped him grow stronger, but he could calmly conclude he might lose if this fight went on too long. The only course of action, then, was to show his respect for his opponent and demonstrate only his best techniques, powered by all his strength at once.

“Have a taste of this—Consuming Fang.”

Mujika’s weapon, strictly speaking, was not a sword but a pure blade forged from alionium. As he evolved, it, too, grew sharper and sharper. He also put his magical force into this God-class blade, making it powerful enough to cut through all matter.

This was what Middray faced—but he didn’t move. Instead, with a mighty “hnnngh!” he raised his left arm and caught Mujika’s blade.

Yes, *caught it*.

A dull, unpleasant *thud* echoed, almost deafening in volume. It was the melody played by the collision of two equally tough and powerful forces.

“No…!” Mujika gasped.

“Why the surprise? With the right attitude, it’s easy to make a weapon out of your own body.”

It wasn’t that easy. Mujika was right to be surprised. But Middray was constantly training against Milim, the most unfair of opponents. What was normal to Middray was extremely abnormal to others, although he never caught on to this. To him, anyone was capable of it if they tried hard enough.

Of course, this wasn’t done by sheer willpower alone. The dragon scales covering him were one reason, but it also stemmed from a certain skill. Middray was controlling his own fighting spirit, using it to literally harden his body. He could anticipate when an attack was coming, focusing his attention on the body part being targeted. Then he’d gather all his fighting force around that part, despite the blow to the rest of his defense. That gave his left arm enough defensive strength to withstand the power of God-class weapons, but using sheer willpower to achieve that was beyond reckless.

Only Middray could pull off something like that. His true nature was close to a dragon god, a title Gabil would likely obtain someday. The strength of his body, imbued with divinity throughout, gave him the kind of willpower that would compete with God-class strikes.

Those skills, of course, weren’t limited to defense.

“Now it’s my turn.”

With a grin, Middray lowered himself, his left hand still on the blade. It was like a *shiko-dachi* stance from karate—legs out wide and bent like a sumo wrestler. The vast amount of energy

generated in his left arm flowed to his right fist. As it did, he took in the energy coursing through the terrain beneath him through his feet, tapping into the force of the planet itself and making it his own in his body.

This was Planet Unity, a Ryuma-ken move. It exacted an unimaginably harsh toll on the body, but Middray's willpower was able to wrangle and tame it. Anything else that happened in the future didn't matter to him. Winning was all that mattered.

"Nngh?!"

Mujika sensed the danger. But it was already too late.

"Dragonic Blast!!" Middray shouted.

This was the moment Middray had waited for—his most powerful secret move, easily surpassing even Dragonic Cannon. At first glance, it looked like a simple thrust of his arm, just like the one that had shredded the Insect Master Sarill's body. Its power, however, was beyond any law of nature or any definition of common sense in this world. Mujika certainly couldn't comprehend it. Only after a large hole was opened in his shell armor did he understand just how unusual a fighter Middray was.

Simply being on my guard wasn't enough…? Mujika wondered. *Perhaps old age has slowed me…*

It was, indeed, too late for Mujika. These were his final thoughts—but strangely, he was comfortable with this defeat. He had lived and died satisfied with himself—not as an Insect Master, but as a warrior.



Nice one, Middray, thought Carrera, eyes wide.

She liked him already, but this demonstration of strength was even more praiseworthy in her mind. Simply getting to watch this advanced exchange between two awakened masters felt like a tremendously useful experience for her.

For now, though, Piriod—the sole remaining problem—was a more important matter. With Mujika defeated, Carrera's allies could pool all their resources together against this threat. Carrera thought it'd be nice if she could join the effort, but her battered and bruised body wasn't quite listening to her yet.

That was just how devastating Zeranus's strike had been.

Carrera was frustrated with her own pitiful state, but she still calmly analyzed the situation.

These insects really are such a pain…

That was her conclusion, and she meant every word of it. Piriod had just experienced yet another power boost. Defeating Mujika was good and all, but it had just added to Piriod's strength.

The reason? She had absorbed Mujika's force. Zeth's power had been directly taken by Zeranus, so none of that went back to Piriod, but when someone like Mujika died on the battlefield, Piriod received every bit of that power—strength she could use to perform Reconstruct Life on herself. That was what made Piriod, supreme ruler of this fight, such a tricky foe.

Her entire body was covered with samurai-like armor, with an eerie-looking sword in one hand. Mujika's traits and experiences had become her own, which meant Piriod had a certain mastery of melee combat as well.

Her weaknesses are disappearing, one after the other, thought Carrera. *If she can take strength from everyone in the area like this, I'm really glad we followed that "no casualties" order to the letter.*

The power of anyone who died on this battlefield, friend or foe, went straight to Piriod. The only way to break that cycle was to destroy the barrier covering the field. But that was impossible because both Zeranus, leader of the insectors, and the demon lord Milim were devoting energy to keeping it up. If it weren't for that, this whole planet would've been blown apart long ago. Zeranus's goal was to rule this planet, not destroy it—the only real point both sides agreed on. This naturally led to barrier-based protection around the fight, but thanks to that, Piriod was gradually becoming invincible. It was a headache of a situation, but it was too late to do much about it.

But I guess she won't get any stronger now…right? We can't panic here. We just have to find some way to handle this.

Apart from the king and his queen, there were no insector survivors left. Unless some of Carrera's allies were killed, there would be no further powering up for the day. Obela and Middray, too, had realized this, and that dictated their strategy. They were stretching this out over the long run, avoiding reckless or sacrificial attacks in favor of a slow, steady

approach. It wasn't glamorous, but it'd work if practiced long enough. This was actually their strategy from the start, so nobody felt panicked or mentally burdened by it. Even if Piriod found a way to get stronger, the plan didn't change—they'd keep up their strategy, centered around Obela and Geld, and just wait until Piriod finally tired herself out.

I gotta hand it to them. But…

Even though the powerful Middray had joined the battle, the tide of this war wasn't turning their way. In fact, it was going in the opposite direction. Carrera grew increasingly concerned; if things continued as they were, her side would lose.

The battle between Milim and Zeranus was being fought in such a different dimension that she couldn't consciously keep up with it. What she needed to think about was how to defeat Piriod before any of her friends got killed. They didn't have any surefire winning moves. The battle was still evenly matched, which was miraculous, but this balancing act was unlikely to last long. A single mistake, like a single hole opening up in a dam, could instantly cause the whole thing to fall apart.

I need to do something before that…

Carrera frowned in anger once more. She glared at her right arm. It showed no sign of responding to her. If she couldn't move, there was no reason for her to be there. That was a big problem, one that made Carrera ask why she was even on the battlefield. She had sought strength for so long because of occasions like these.

Her Golden Gun began to faintly glow.

Then I will lend you my strength.

Carrera heard a voice in her ear, one she never expected.

No way.

She was startled for the first time in ages. Then, at the next moment…



The battle was like a mythical legend revived.

The fists of Milim and Zeranus, tearing through the air, made the atmosphere shake and the earth tremble. It was so intense, it felt like the planet itself would soon shatter. There was only one reason why that didn't happen: Zeranus and Milim were protecting this battlefield with their respective defense barriers.

This was also why Milim didn't join the fight from the beginning. After assessing the effects of Carrera's Abyss Annihilation, she calculated the damage this war would exact on the planet. Based on that, she took measures to protect this entire planet with her barrier.

Milim might have been a tyrant, but even she had her thoughtful side. Everything she said and did was based on what *she* wanted to do, but behind the scenes, she could also accurately predict and understand the consequences of those actions. It was a kind of dual personality, but Milim Nava did her best to make both of them coexist.

So while Milim had left chief ass-kicking duties to Carrera, she soon realized she wasn't the only one looking out for this planet. Zeranus, the insector leader, was doing the same thing.

Hmm… He must be having the same thought I did. That's kinda troublesome…

Milim never saw this coming. Zeranus was trying to take over this world, of course, so if you thought about it for a moment, it made sense. But in Milim's mind, this wasn't something she could readily agree with.

If this was a plain old barrier, it wouldn't be a problem, but *his* barrier had a few effects added that helped the enemy. Milim wanted to bust it up, but that might affect her own barrier and cause untold damage to this planet.

Nnngh… Look at him, using my barrier like that! He's got a lot of nerve!

It was annoying, but Milim had to admit: Zeranus's barrier was keeping her from making any untoward moves. It proved the enemy leader had a good head on his shoulders, and Milim knew she couldn't afford to lose her temper. She preferred to solve most of her problems with violence, but when faced with an enemy that might very well rival her, she had no choice but to proceed with caution.

So after waiting for the right moment, it was finally her turn.

Zeranus was on the move. Milim quickly followed suit, but then a problem came along. The ever-careful Zeranus had

tinkered with his barrier, preventing her from breaching it. It'd take less than ten seconds to dismantle, but accepting that delay could be a fatal blunder. It was really just a tiny thing, but clearly Milim had been outfoxed. She had to praise her enemy for it, but she also calmly vowed to get her revenge.

She was only dealing with this problem because she had arrived just in time to help with Carrera's crisis. Carrera was unlikely to die, but if she did, no one could tell what that might do to Milim's anger level. The world could breathe a sigh of relief about that.

Regardless, Milim had avoided the worst-case scenario, and all that remained was to defeat Zeranus. She couldn't wait to get started.

Zeranus was strong.

He blocked Milim's fist without a second thought, sharply hitting back with his own. Milim took this attack in stride as well, responding with kicks, elbows, and headbutts in a fluid motion. Zeranus kept up with each attack, never falling behind for a moment.

A fierce battle ensued, both fighters using nothing but their own bodies as weapons.

"Not bad," said Milim. "I'm not going easy at all, but you can play with me at *this* level, huh?"

"Heh. Don't make me laugh. I worried about what you, the Creator's daughter, were capable of, but this seems like nothing serious."

Zeranus responded to Milim's chitchat with sheer arrogance, but he wasn't letting his guard down. He was acting above Milim, but inside he was exercising every caution possible. Pride and self-conceit were not in his dictionary. He was supremely powerful but never overconfident. No matter who his opponent was, Zeranus never let his guard down and never gave less than a full effort.

Thanks to that, Zeranus was wary of more than just Milim. He always strove to do his best, never underestimating either the strong or the weak. So he put a little trick into his barrier to delay Milim's entry into the fray—and during that little instant, he planned to take out Carrera and make her power his own.

That wound up not happening for two reasons: Milim's brain

ran faster than Zeranus expected, and Carrera was more stubborn than he ever imagined.

Failing to finish off Carrera was another blow for him. If she recovered enough to join forces with Milim, that would be trouble. The battle could drag on without end, to the point that she might get to use another once-per-day Judgment Bullet. Calmly looking over the situation, Zeranus found little reason to be optimistic.

So in the midst of his conversation with Milim, he tried a rather high-end tactic.

If this makes her let her guard down, then great…but we'll just have to see what the Creator's daughter can do.

Zeranus pondered the thought as he watched for Milim's response. Milim, meanwhile, laughed as haughtily as she could.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, look at *you*, huh? You better keep on entertaining me, then!"

And then Milim took this seriously for the first time. Beautiful crimson horns sprouted from her forehead, parting her red hair. Dragon wings spread out from her back, a suit of jet-black armor covering her whole body. In her hand was the Temma Sword that Guy gave her. It was rare for Milim to ever use a weapon—it was a sign of her admiration for Zeranus, no matter what she said to him.

Zeranus realized this performance wasn't working on her. If so, there was no reason to keep it going.

"If you're *that* strong," a curious Milim said, "then how come you're being so cautious? Are you a big coward or what?"

"Heh." Zeranus wasn't about to hide his feelings. "What do you mean, coward? Better to be a victorious coward than a rash, fearless loser."

He retained his regal bearing, assuring Milim he had nothing to be ashamed of. It was what Zeranus truly believed—and took pride in.

"Victorious? What are you tryin' to do anyway?"

"Heh! Isn't it obvious? My mission is to surpass the Creator."

That, too, was the unvarnished truth.

Ever since Veldanava first named him, Zeranus had been wondering why he existed. Unlike Feldway, he wasn't blinded by respect for his Creator—instead, he constantly searched for a mission to devote his life to. Then, after a lengthy trial-and-error process, he found that mission: surpass his parents.

Zeranus already had an immortal body. Every cell of it was controlled directly by his mind, which could instantly repair and replace at will—even faster than any chemical process. Illness and injury did not affect him, and his being transcended any numerical lifespan.

But despite that, if his energy was fully depleted, he would die. His body was immortal, but his spirit had its limits. In other words, he wasn't so immortal after all. He knew he had to surpass Veldanava, but in his current form, he could not fully resist death. That made him a coward all the way—someone willing to take any measure to bring himself higher.

And so he gathered followers, never attempting to complete the puzzle himself. He created Piriod to be his spouse, even knowing the risk involved. With her, he created the children who would do his bidding. These children, like their father Zeranus, sought strength. Zeth in particular was quite similar to him, and just as timid. He was also sneaky and cunning—enough to try to eliminate his newborn "brother" before he proved a threat; enough to hatch a plan to consume the individual birthed to become the next queen and make her power his own.

That plan had failed, it seemed, but all that was none of Zeranus's business. He let his children do what they wanted. If Zeth became the next Creator, nothing would make Zeranus happier. He was the father and Zeth was his son. Whoever won would be the righteous among them, charged with building the next epoch.

But Zeranus had no intention of handing the throne over to Zeth. Once he was done raising him, he intended to seize his power. As time passed, though, he instead won Zeth's trust through love and affection, gaining a full view of his powers at all times to better ensure his victory.

In this case, he had used Zeth as a kind of test against the dangerous Carrera. Now that he had taken Zeth's power, Zeranus had reached a conclusion with him that he was perfectly fine with. And as long as someone as strong as him could be so cunning, so endlessly cautious in his behavior, he was as good as undefeatable. That was why he gave Milim the truth, with no shame or hesitation whatsoever.

When she heard him, Milim saw Zeranus was more of a danger than she'd assumed. Figuring he'd be impossible to

corral later at this rate, she decided she'd go all out to defeat him now.

"I'd love to play with you more," Milim said, her face serious, "but unfortunately, you're too dangerous for that. Sorry, but from now on, I'm gonna apply my full effort to this."

Without waiting for a reply, she released her power. Zeranus could no longer take it easy. He had no choice but to reply in kind.

"Ha. You will make a fine diversion before I reach for the top. Show me the power of the Creator's daughter!"

No longer concerned about the potential effect on the planet, he released his accumulated, disastrous force. The air trembled as great wells of power grew out of both sides. If there was no appreciable gap in their technical skills, a simple battle would turn into a slog that dragged on forever. Both of them knew that, and so Milim opted to finish this up fast with a special magic of hers.

Zeranus, preparing for that, got his fighting spirit ready. The resulting clash between Milim's aura and Zeranus's spirit caused small, compressed explosions in the air. The shock waves alone could have razed your typical monster on the spot; even a high-level magic-born wouldn't have weathered the effects too well. There was no way a third party could enter this battle, now surrounded by massive, random explosions. Everyone had evacuated already, watching the proceedings from afar outside the barrier. If they had been even a little late, a hellish scene would have unfolded. But despite the force field of energy that was already being generated, the real show had yet to begin.

"I got the perfect thing for you! Drago-Nova!!"

Stellar particles shimmered between Milim's hands, whirling around as they bore a destructive force not of this world. She bundled them together and shot them toward Zeranus.

Even if Zeranus had the power to twist space to his needs like Piriod, it'd be impossible to avoid such an attack. Milim, thinking that far ahead, threw all her tyrannical force on him at once.

It was sheer reckless violence, perhaps befitting the girl they called the Destroyer, and it was the right move to make. In a battle between two supernatural beings, the longer a fight dragged on, the more intense the resulting damage. Since the

two of them had joined forces to create a barrier around themselves, Milim decided to take advantage and bring the fight to Zeranus.

Zeranus, on the other hand, used the same tactic as Milim—an instant-kill move meant to annihilate his enemy.

“Devour it all…Devastator Virus!!”

Dark micro-particles rose from his body, blocking the shine of Drago-Nova as if they had their own free will. They were actually some of the dark cells that made up Zeranus’s own body.

As Zeranus was capable of freely controlling any substance he took in from his home world, he could also make his own cells microscopic enough to invade the bodies of his enemies. These tiny cells, each infused with his will, could break through magical barriers to devour their target from the inside out. There was no way for any ordinary person to resist them.

So Milim’s shimmering light and Zeranus’s dark particles crossed paths. The light drove out the darkness, but the darkness swallowed up the light. It all happened in an instant, but one so tense that it seemed infinite. It also wasn’t what either side wanted to see. Milim sought an overwhelming victory, while Zeranus wanted to consume Milim.

Finally, though, the result became clear. When the light and darkness ran their courses, Milim was standing. The dark micro-particles clung to her body, but her aura was enough to destroy all of them. It was a fatiguing experience for Milim, but she was unharmed.

As for Zeranus…

“So this…is pain? I never thought…there was something I couldn’t consume…”

Shockingly, he was safe.

Milim’s Drago-Nova was mainly composed of special matter known as stellar particles. This matter, controllable only by Milim, packed more destructive power than even spiritual particles. Unless someone could fully analyze its properties, there was no chance of manipulating it at all. It was little wonder Zeranus failed to consume them—but he *was* able to cancel them out. He sustained some damage, but it was easily healable and didn’t impact his ability to keep fighting one bit.

So Milim was mentally winded, and Zeranus was just a little worse for wear physically. Those were the sole results of this clash of finishers.

Zeranus got back up, his compound eyes studying Milim. Then he had a thought.

Can I really win like this?

Milim, daughter of the Creator, was truly powerful. It was said that she’d inherited the lion’s share of the Creator’s power, but some aspects still seemed to be hidden, unfathomable. In fact, Zeranus was sure of it.

He had seen the Barren Lands, the ruins where Milim had once waged a life-or-death struggle with the demon lord Guy. Just like now, Zeranus had taken a cautious approach, gathering every piece of information he could. That land, also known as the Deadly Desert, was created over two thousand years ago, and even now it was polluted with excessive amounts of magicules.

The power of Milim’s Drago-Nova was stupendous, but not even *that* could cause so much environmental contamination. He had to assume it was something else—but what? That was unclear, and it unnerved him. Victory at all costs, including death, wasn’t what Zeranus wanted. He had to win, but it had to be safely, with no room for error. His belief in this approach was absolute, and based on it, he felt that further battle was too dangerous. He didn’t want anything unexpected to happen, but Milim was just too full of unknowns…

It was at that point that retreat began to seem like an attractive option to Zeranus. Then, right after that, something happened that forced him to make up his mind.

Carrera, hearing the voice of someone who wasn't supposed to be there, realized she couldn't spend another moment as a spectator. She couldn't believe it, but she also wasn't foolish enough to think this was some kind of dream.

"Hey there," she said. "Didn't die after all, huh?"

"Heh. Thanks to how weak *you* are, I had to be summoned from the afterlife."

The man smiling wryly at her was Lieutenant Kondo—someone Carrera was sure she had killed herself.

Unbeknownst to Carrera, Masayuki had just invoked his ultimate skill, Lord of Heroes. This Kondo *did* exist, but was not exactly a living person. He was an "einherjar," akin to a digital life-form. Kondo's presence would normally be impossible, but thanks to Masayuki's skill, he had rushed over to Carrera in her time of greatest need.

"Now, don't tell me the demon powerful enough to kill me is going to meet her end *here*?"

"Don't believe it for a minute. I was just about to punch this guy out, too, until you so rudely interrupted me."

Kondo didn't bother asking Carrera how. He just smiled, nodded, and said, "Good, then. I'll help you if you'll let me."

It was a very casual offer, and Carrera accepted it as a matter of course.

"Well, you know, given the state I'm in…sure."

Her pride as a demon wasn't a concern. In fact, she sounded happy about this. A new and powerful partnership had just been formed.

Despite the desperate situation, the two were casually working out their plans.

"So what's your strategy?" Carrera asked. "You gonna beat her for me or what?"

Now that they were a team, Carrera was already making some pretty harsh demands. It made Kondo roll his eyes at her, sighing.

"Well, not even I could beat someone like that."

He always was a realist. And although he was only several

minutes old in this manifestation, he still calmly, accurately grasped the situation. The subsequent decision he made was just as rational.

“But fortunately for us, her eyes are on everyone else,” he said.

“Oh?”

“If we can’t win the normal way, we’ll just have to use a hidden trick.”

Kondo put his hand on top of Carrera’s.

His intention was to pour his power into the Golden Gun in Carrera’s hand.

“Holding my hand out of nowhere… You’re gonna make me blush.”

“Quiet. Now’s not the time for jokes like that.”

Carrera was actually pretty serious. Getting the cold shoulder like that made her pretty angry. But Kondo was right. If she wanted to keep her friends out of harm’s way, they needed to defeat the enemy, and they needed to do it right now.

She focused her attention on what Kondo was trying to do. Then it dawned on her.

“Oh. Your Judgment Bullet?”

“Yes. I’ve put all my power into it. You just focus on using this.”

He didn’t ask whether she was well versed in the weapon by now. Carrera noticed that, too. It made her feel a little better.

“Right,” she said, a big smile on her face as she accepted the job. “I’m on it.”



Piriod was dominating the battlefield. There were twists and turns along the way, but things were generally going how she wanted them to.

There were far fewer deaths than expected, though, which was problematic—and none at all even from the enemy side. Some were injured seriously enough to require evacuation, but they all must’ve been given magic- or potion-based first aid, because not a single one lost their life for her. She had gone to the trouble of creating this special force field to capture the power seeping out of the dead that’d no doubt be strewn across

this field, but it didn't produce nearly the results she hoped for.

Still, though, eating my children allowed me to join all our power together. There's that upside, at least.

Her power had skyrocketed to unimaginable levels since the start of battle. It was in more than just comparative energy, too—she had taken on all her children's skills and their mastery of them. Adding these newly acquired melee combat skills to the Dominate Space she already specialized in, she'd no longer lag behind these annoying worms clinging to her.

Those worms—Obela, Middray, Carillon, Frey, Geld, and Gobta-Ranga—were demonstrating some excellent coordination, keeping the damage to a minimum for them all. They couldn't do a thing to mortally wound Piriod, but they were proving to be surprisingly difficult to kill. It was frustrating.



I don't like this anymore. After all this power I've gained, I still can't beat these guys…

With enough time, she would surely win. She understood that, but she still couldn't contain her irritation.

What peeved her most of all was the magic-born Geld. He was no powerhouse compared with Piriod, but he was vexingly tenacious. He should have been near death long ago, after all the killer attacks and direct hits he had taken the full brunt of, but he just kept getting back up over and over again. His eyes, too—*so* irksome. He must have known the difference in strength between them, but he just kept glaring at Piriod, like he was never going to give up. Almost like he was assured of victory, somehow.

You all really need to stop messing with me, you know. If anyone should be glaring like that, it's me!

Obela she could understand. They had sent out scout insectors to investigate the cryptids, so they had naturally received reports about the opposing force Obela led. After witnessing her strength in this battle, Piriod knew Obela was a dangerous figure. She had fired off two major strikes to try and exhaust Obela—Piriod definitely had no intention of belittling her. But she hadn't counted on the presence of a pest like Geld.

He's only as good as Mujika before Reconstruct Life worked its magic on him, but his sheer durability is incredible. How long is he willing to hold out against me? This is why specialized types like him are such a pain…

Piriod tried to quiet her irritation and keep her composure. Then, as if to vent her anger, she waved a feeler to launch a Cross-Dimension Slash. Most of them, however, were canceled out by Geld's Chaos Eater; the slashes that remained were also neatly avoided, serving to anger Piriod even more.

This wasn't a lack of strength on her part; it was just the result of Geld and everyone else risking their lives and putting in the best effort they could. Gobta had conquered his fear, dedicating himself to distracting Piriod. Ranga was joining the effort, fully trusting in his partner. Middray was enjoying the fight, but he also knew death would end the fun quickly. Overcoming his own fears, he was striving purely to finish off this foe. And Carillon and Frey, fully displaying their awakened strength, were raining attacks on her from land and air.

All that training in Ramiris's labyrinth was really paying off.

Without that experience, they would have mismanaged their strengths and been forced to retreat long ago.

Obela, meanwhile, was demonstrating an accurate read of the war situation as she gave her commands. Geld's continued safety was thanks in large part to her spreading tank duties around the party.

Speaking of Geld, he was about to pass out. Just as Piriod thought, it was a miracle he was still alive. Pure willpower kept him upright. His full-body armor was cracked to pieces, rendered really nothing but a pile of wreckage. His body had long passed its limit, becoming so battered not even Ultraspeed Regeneration could keep up with the damage.

He was only able to fight because of a certain secret behind his powers. Beelzebub, the ultimate gift given to him, included skills like Stand-in, which let him take damage for other people, and Grant Protection, which boosted his allies' defense. However, combining these two powers granted a completely different effect—basically, he could flip Stand-in around and let other people take the damage he received. This allowed him to constantly adjust and fine-tune the damage to his body, spreading it around to the members of his forces.

Even that, however, had its limits. His troops said they could take on more, but Geld knew they were lying to him. Everyone was at the end of their rope, just like he was. But Geld still held his ground, eyes forward, never looking away from Piriod. Rimuru once told him the first person who looks away in a fight loses—merely a casual remark he made over drinks at some party—but Geld took that to be literal gospel. Whether or not it was actually true, he was willing to use his own strength to *turn* it into the truth. That was the kind of person Geld was.

But even for him, the end had to come. After another barrage, he finally fell to his knees.

"Mngh… I can't stand up," he groaned.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee! Finally down, are you? Well, I commend your effort. I'll make sure to kill you last."

Piriod laughed in his face. Her offer to kill Geld last wasn't out of pity—she just wanted to take her time tormenting him later. It was just an experiment, in her mind, to see how many more of her attacks he could withstand. Besides, focusing purely on Geld would be ill-advised. None of her other foes were nearly as durable, and if they weren't, it was better to pick

them all off before they became worse threats.

Now that her main obstacle was gone, her victory was assured. If any uncertainty remained, it revolved around Piriod's master Zeranus. He had entered into battle with the demon lord Milim, and there was no way yet to know how that would turn out. That battle was part of the plan, but Milim's total power was unknown. Piriod didn't doubt for a moment Zeranus would win, but they couldn't afford any unpleasant surprises. She wanted to go over and help him as soon as possible, just to be sure.

But now that this stubborn fool is down for the count, the rest of these wimps should be much easier.

Convinced of her victory, Piriod prepared to launch a finisher move against Obela and the rest—but then she stopped. A cold chill had just run down her spine. Someone—or something—had entered the space controlled by her.

How…?! Only a small handful of people could ever come in here…

Even among all the great powers she had been told about before, entering this controlled space from the outside was supposed to be nigh-impossible. Even if they broke the space open like Milim did, she should have noticed someone meddling with the barrier long before they breached it. But here was this person just waltzing in, like that barrier was thin air. There was no way anyone could do something like that. If there was, it couldn't be any ordinary type of life-form.

Piriod nimbly determined the intruder's position and turned her eyes in their direction. Then she saw a golden glow—the gleam from the barrel of a gun, the muzzle of which was pointed straight at her. Holding it was Jaune, the Original Yellow, someone Piriod had dismissed as permanently sidelined. Another figure—the intruder Piriod detected—was standing close to Jaune, almost supporting her, his eyes fixed sharply on Piriod's head.

They were clearly trying to do something so threatening, it even made Piriod shudder.

"Stop—!!"

Before she could say any more, the bullet shattered her head, unerringly reaping the life from her very existence. And so, without even a moment to leave a few regretful words, she was gone.

✳

Zeranus sensed Piriod's disappearance. Her presence was gone—in other words, she was dead. It was an alarming situation.

"Time to move on," he muttered, finally committing to his retreat.

"Hmm?" a dubious Milim asked.

"I said that any further fighting is pointless."

Piriod's passing was an unexpected development for Zeranus. It threw a wrench into the entire plan of operation, and he could no longer worry about winning the battle presented to him. If he kept fighting Milim, the result remained a coin flip. He only kept tangling with her because Piriod was supposed to kill off the horde of enemy leaders, seize their powers, and then support him. If she collected the power of all the warriors together and invoked Reconstruct Life on herself, the results wouldn't outclass Zeranus, but she'd almost certainly be reborn as an intensely powered-up version of herself.

All that was off the table. He was devoting himself to a fight he wasn't sure he could win. And Zeranus wasn't so assured of himself that he was willing to introduce such an element of uncertainty into his plans.

And he had an even bigger worry to contend with, too. This space was covered by a combined barrier meant to reduce the damage to this planet. But thanks to the death of Piriod—one of the figures supporting that barrier—it was palpably weaker than before. Milim had been hiding her full force, and Zeranus, too, still wasn't fighting all out. But then he decided continuing the battle any longer could lead to unforeseen problems.

"You're running?" Milim remarked.

"Ha."

Zeranus snickered at Milim's provocation. Milim was no fool; she knew she wouldn't be able to exercise her full force if the barrier disappeared. That was why she wanted to wrap this up quickly—and since that failed, she didn't have much reason to keep Zeranus anyway.

Milim truly was hiding her power. She hadn't used a certain skill imbued within her yet, but if she did, she didn't see defeating Zeranus as that difficult. But the fallout from that would be a headache. Once Milim's skill was invoked, it was

difficult to stop. It'd put her past her limits, causing her to lose all reason and go into an out-of-control rampage. Frey once described it to Clayman as a Stampede, and she wasn't lying—it really *would* happen that way. Milim had described it to Frey casually, like she was talking about a passing case of the sniffles, but there was no denying the truth behind it.

Everyone's exhausted right now. Some of them'll be in real danger if their treatment's delayed any longer. Instead of forcing myself to beat this guy, it'd be smarter to step back and regroup.

That was the conclusion Milim came to. She opted to let Zeranus off the hook.

✳

Carrera saw Piriod was gone. It made her smile.

"Hee-hee-hee! Look. We won."

She turned around to speak to Kondo. He wasn't there. He had never been formally summoned by Masayuki's skill—instead, he forcibly manifested himself, using the Golden Gun he gave Carrera as a medium. One could feasibly describe him as a mirage, an illusion, created by the fervent hopes inside Carrera's mind.

"Heh," she said. "Oh, I know. I'm so clearly worthless in your eyes, so you got worried for me and rushed on over, right?"

She kept smiling as she spoke to the empty space. It was sad, but Carrera could endure it. Now she was determined to become even stronger, so she wouldn't have to go through this charade next time.

Gobta let out a victorious war cry, Ranga howled in triumph to accompany him. They actually resembled each other a lot in a charming way. Geld, completely out of energy, collapsed, with Obela helping him up and congratulating him on his effort. Carillon and Frey nodded at each other, lending a hand to Obela as they shared a laugh with Geld.

Gabil and his team hurried to the scene, placing Geld on a stretcher and sprinkling copious amounts of potion on him. They were making quite a scene, but he didn't seem to be in critical danger, at least.

As Geld and the others were being carried back to Tempest, Middray muttered to himself, the emotion clear in his voice,

“We won.”

“We sure did, Middray,” Carrera agreed. “Well done.”

“Heh. It feels a tad awkward, being praised by a Primal who’s lived longer than me.”

“Well, is that bad? If I see talent in someone, I want to pay them my respects.”

“I’m honored.”

The conversation stopped there. Middray and Carrera basked in the afterglow for a while.

Given all the wounded, it was difficult to call it a complete victory, but no one on their side was dead. That alone was enough for Carrera. As far as this battle was concerned, she had given strict orders to the demons under her command to retrieve the souls of anyone who died. The lack of casualties this time allowed her to cope with the damage, but if they had been hit by something like Obela’s powerful wide-area attack, the number of wounded and dead would’ve been too great to reverse. The fact they were all able to celebrate their safety like this was a great victory.

“I’m going to get stronger,” Carrera vowed.

“Hmm. The demons *I* heard about were these heartless monsters who couldn’t understand the human heart…but actually talking to one like this, it’s surprising how much we resonate with each other.”

“You bring that up *now*?”

Carrera laughed at Middray’s frank analysis. Middray smiled back at her.

“If you’re aiming for more strength, I certainly can’t let you outdo me. If getting just a little serious in battle is enough to rattle me like this, I still have a while to go with my kung fu.”

“Ha-ha-ha! You’re already pretty much a master, aren’t you? And you’re still trying to improve?”

“Why not? I’ll need to push my mind and body to their upper limits so I can break out my full power for longer periods of time. And along those lines, Carrera, I think you’d make a great partner.”

“Sounds good to me. I was just thinking I needed to further train this body my master gave me. I’ll take you up on that offer.”

Carrera and Middray exchanged a firm handshake. They both wanted to reach the next level, so there was no reason to

turn down the offer.

Then, as usual, Milim butted in.

“Hey! No fair! Lemme get in on this!!”

There was no denying that smiling face—not that she would’ve accepted no for an answer.

“Whoa, Milim,” said Carrera. “Surely *you* don’t need to get any stronger, do you?”

“Yes, Lady Milim, you are already the strongest. Why would you need any more training like that?” Middray asked.

Carrera was mind-blowingly strong, but there was always someone better out there. Everyone knew Milim was an anomaly among anomalies, something Carrera had come to understand all too well now that they were acquainted. Carrera was still sensible enough to treat Milim’s nonsense like the joke it was, but not Middray. Unlike Carrera, he really *was* concerned that the one he worshipped was about to aim for a higher plane of existence.

But none of that came across to Milim.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! Don’t be silly! If you guys are having fun, I’m not about to let you shut me out of it!”

So it was settled.

Gobta could sense the danger already—or the writing on the wall, that is. He had secretly overheard their conversation as Milim descended from high above, and the subject disturbed him. He could already predict he’d be dragged into this group before long, so he found it high time to make a strategic retreat. It was a truly virtuoso assessment of his situation.

“I’m gonna go report on our victory, guys!” he shouted as he climbed on top of Ranga—they had de-Unified a while back—and rode like the wind from the battlefield. His keen eye on his surroundings, and his knack for picking up on useful information had saved him once again. Ranga trusted him on that, too; Gobta’s insight into danger ahead had saved his life many times, so he followed his lead without question. He, too, was safe.

As for the others…

“Huh? Whoa, whoa…”

“Wait, Milim, are you trying to pull me into this, too?”

Middray and Carrera, the first to be corralled, weren’t alone. Carillon and Frey were being forced to participate, despite their resistance.

So although the war in this region had caused a great deal of damage, it seemed to have come to an end without any fatalities.

Or so it seemed.

“Freeze everything in place, my blizzard, and put it to sleep.”

The world was instantly covered in white; it was as if this moment was waiting to happen until everyone had their guard down. A blizzard of despair swirled in from the outer edges of the field toward the center, encircling everyone inside before they could escape.

“No way; are you—?”

Milim was the first to notice. It was already too late to do anything. All of them were caught completely off guard. Not many people could trick a demon lord as crafty as Milim. But if it was *her*—Velzard the Ice Dragon, eldest sister of the True Dragons—it was far from impossible.

“Long time no see, Milim,” Velzard said.

“What’re you doing, Velzard?”

“Hee-hee! Just here to see my darling niece. I needed your help with something, you see.”

“Quit fooling around. If you wanted a favor from me, you could at least act the part. Stop this blizzard at once. *Then* we can talk!”

Milim held back her anger as she tried to intimidate Velzard. Her friends were going to be in danger before long—in fact, those on the outer rim of the battlefield were already ice statues. They weren’t dead, but all their vital signs had been frozen in place. You could say they were cryogenically frozen, ready to be revived at any time, but a mere whim from Velzard would instantly smash them to pieces.

Clearly, she had aimed for the moment Milim would be off her guard, right after the battle with Zeranus. But Frey felt even more concerned. If Milim flew into a rage and went out of control, the whole place would be reduced to ashes. The scale of the damage would be unimaginable, and she couldn’t guess how many people would survive it.

I need to make a decision…

Frey felt it would be dangerous for Milim to let Velzard do

whatever she wanted. The longer Frey delayed her decision, the worse things would get. So without Milim's approval, Frey sent an order to her Heaven Fliers:

"Strike Velzard down!"

With that signal, the Heaven Fliers moved at once. No one was unaware of the terror Velzard wielded. This was a suicide attack, and everyone involved was prepared for that. Milim, their beloved master, was too kind to them—almost fatally so. With every person put to sleep in the ice, Milim's patience would be tested more and more. If it broke her limit, there was no turning back. Milim was already enduring a lot out of consideration for Frey and the rest. If things got any worse, she'd have no choice but to do Velzard's bidding for the sake of her hostages.

As far back as Frey could remember, the only time Milim had gotten fully serious with a fight was against Guy, destroying a whole country before Frey was even born. If she got that serious again—looking to kill, with no regard for her allies—she'd never have a hard time against any opponent. But Milim never went that far again.

In a way, all the people around Milim hobbled her. She was so kind all the time like that—even now—that Frey wanted to ensure none of her friends dragged her down.

"Oof, too late, huh? Guys, you can run if you want to, but if you're staying, you better be ready," Carillon warned the people around him.

"One crisis after another, isn't it? And now it'll be against my master's aunt. I hate to fight a war I can't win, but if it's for Lady Milim's sake, I can't afford to whine about it," Middray added with a laugh.

No one in the Flying Beastly Knights was leaving, either. Even the warrior priests led by Hermes had abandoned their medic roles and switched to battle mode.

Everyone serving under Milim was rushing toward Velzard.

"H-hey! Stop, all of you! You need to retreat from here at once!"

Milim's shouting was drowned out by the flurry of magic and spirit attacks on Velzard.

"Lady Milim is certainly well-loved," Obela muttered to herself. "I wish I could have served her sooner."

The battle against Piriod had drained Obela. Though she was

all but completely out of energy, Obela stood back up, firmly glaring at Velzard.

Here was this absolute force in the world; it didn't take much thinking for everyone to know they had no chance of winning. Frey knew that, too. If survival was all that mattered to her, she would've ordered her forces to scatter and exit the area. So why didn't she? Chances were…

Hee-hee! Sly as always, I see. I never hated her to start with, but I sure respect her decisiveness, thought Obela.

Frey's aim was to make Milim shed her self-doubt. If her friends were killed by Velzard, Milim would have no reason left to hesitate. Instantly, Frey decided that if Milim survived, that was all that mattered in the long run. Carillon and Middray followed suit as well, and all their troops also decided without hesitation to share in their fate.

Every one of them loved Milim. Obela felt the same, so she could understand. She had a healthy respect for those who made the same decision as the troops she lost—and she, too, was prepared for the eventuality that this was where she'd make her last stand.

Carrera, too, was still there, thinking about what she needed to do. Trying to engage the completely flawless Velzard in a drawn-out battle wasn't going to happen. Velzard wasn't nearly as kind as Velgrynd. She'd offer Carrera no way to win; indeed, it was a matter of luck whether Carrera would even be able to escape alive.

Not that escape was ever an option to her.

Well, whatever, she thought. *I might wind up disobeying my master's orders depending on how this turns out, but I should really join in this. I sure can't complain about having Lady Velzard as an opponent. Might as well try as hard as I can!*

The decision was made quickly. It wasn't great luck for the demons serving under Carrera, but in any case, there wasn't any escape from there for anyone. Victory over Velzard was the only way out…but everyone knew that wouldn't happen. All Carrera and her demons could do was guide the souls who'd be streaming out of there shortly, diverting them away from their true death.

"Brace yourself, guys. Make sure we don't miss any."

Carrera's words were met with a collective nod from her staff. By this point, healing meant nothing. All the other demons

gave up on the bodies they were incarnated into as well, going back to their roots as spiritual life-forms. That would reduce their influence on the material world, but if leading the dead was their next great task, it was better carried out in this form.

So in a very short time, everyone was ready. But in the next instant…

“How foolish.”

These frigid words echoed through the minds of everybody on hand. It was a quiet voice, liable to be drowned out by the blizzard, but the waves of thought that carried it were worryingly loud.

As if to respond to this voice, the blizzard turned into a maelstrom, bringing white-out conditions to the whole battlefield. It was a beyond unfair form of violence, a supernatural disaster on a level beyond anyone’s control—any attempt to resist would have been met with shrill laughter.

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“Now, go to sleep.”

The white ice and snow raged wildly.

All the ground-level soldiers were the first to be frozen solid. They were followed by the squad captains, then the top officers. Soon, only a few were left conscious—those who had reached the Million Class, with an EP of one million or higher. Even for them, though, it was only a matter of time.

Witnessing this hopeless turn of events, Frey prepared for her own death. So did Carillon and Middray. They remained upright only because Milim was protecting them all—otherwise the energy released by Velzard would have done its worst on Frey and her friends long ago.

Carrera, a short distance away from Milim, was no longer able to shed her own physical body. The lord of all demons was unable to move an inch, and none of her servants fared any better. It went without saying that Frey’s Heaven Fliers, Carillon’s Flying Beastly Knights, and Middray’s warrior priests

were all little more than ice sculptures by that point.



Velzard had not even attacked any of them, and this was the result. The blizzard itself was nothing more than her releasing her aura. For those who understood this, the experience was like feeling a helpless despair from which there was no escape.

Milim, protecting the survivors, was unable to move. If she abandoned Frey and the others, their fates would be sealed.

Ahh, Milim, always so kind, thought Frey*. You're such a sweet girl after all. I love you.*

Frey believed that with every fiber of her being.

Feeling a gaze upon her, she turned her attention to Carillon. He was defiantly smiling. Middray sighed deeply and nodded with him. Obela was engaged in silent prayer, as if apologizing to those she held dear. These were all people resolved to their fates.

(I guess we're ready for this?)

(Yeah. We'll all do it at once. As flashy as we can.)

(Indeed. If we're going to go, I want to go while giving Lady Milim one last show of my courage.)

(Hee-hee-hee! Now, at least, I think I understand how those who served me feel. No, they didn't die in vain at all. Now let's see if I can have something to brag about when I see them again.)

Milim's Big Four were united in mind at that moment. Then…

"Wait, you guys…?!"

Milim, picking up on this, tried to stop them—but they were already on the move. The four of them moved with expert coordination, as if they'd been fighting together for a millennium. They closed in on Velzard, landing a series of blows, not a single missed strike among them. Sadly, none of it worked on her.

"I'm glad," Velzard said. "I really am. You were as strong as I thought you'd be…and so I managed to handle you without any mistakes."

Velzard laughed as she calmly stood there. In front of her were four brand-new ice sculptures.

Then it was Milim's face that froze. Every emotion had been drained from her expression—except one. Her look was sheer rage. Robbed of her companions, she was furious.

"This won't stand. You took my friends away, didn't you? I'll

never let you live this down!!”

Milim’s cry pierced the battlefield. As it did, her ultimate skill —Satanael, Lord of Wrath—was activated at full power. It took in all the surrounding magicules, pouring in all its own magic force to generate further power. Using Milim’s intense rage and magicule count as its fuel, this ultimate force turned into a magicule-generating machine, producing more and more by the moment.

This was Satanael’s true nature; it was a magicule reactor that was too powerful to ever fully use. The magicules fed into it were processed and outputted as even more power—a multiplicative process. As long as it was active, the magicule count within Milim would continually balloon higher and higher. No matter how much she consumed, the count would never go down. True ultimate power.

She was called the Dragon Princess, the child of Veldanava, and that was no joke. The demon lord Milim was a single person who wielded unlimited force.

And she was roaring again. The heavens shook; the ground broke under her. The God-class armor around her body transformed into an ominous-looking robe, as if reacting to the fury. It wasn’t built to protect her from external enemies, but to prevent her from being destroyed by the power within her. The overflowing torrent of power merged with the armor, transforming it so it covered Milim’s entire body—and with that, the conversion was complete.

A pair of jet-black wings was on her back, the single red horn on her forehead shining with even more dazzling radiance than before. Strange patterns, etched atop tough dragon scales of dull, shifting colors, covered her skin outside of her face. This was Milim’s default state—the form of the true Dragon Princess. Her body might have been human, but the power housed inside exceeded any True Dragon, making her a pure embodiment of absolute destruction.

“My, my, I think it’s the second time I’ve seen this,” Velzard remarked. “Since you’re here and all, why don’t I play with you a little?”

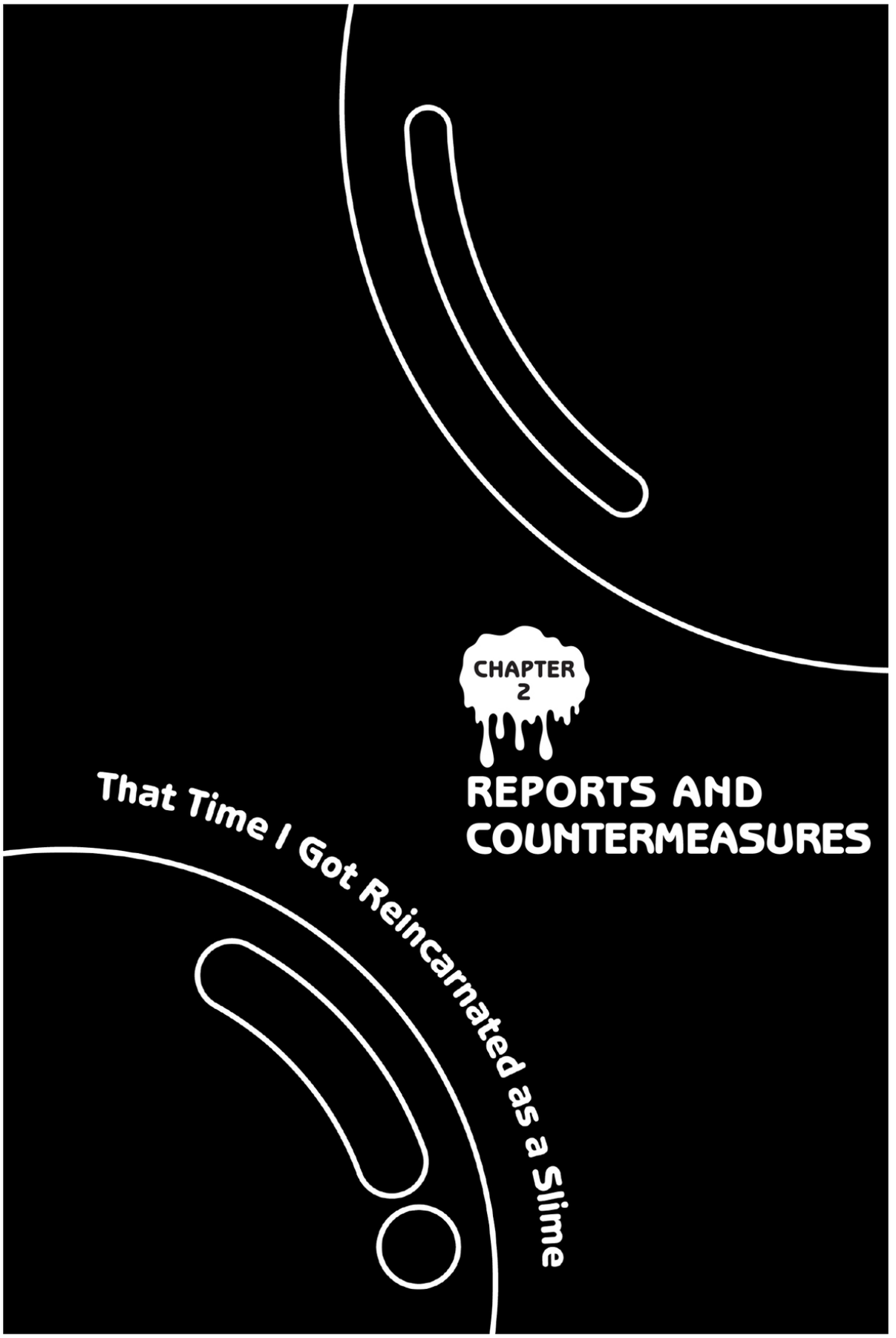
“Die.”

No one was left to stop Milim. The planet trembled at the

wrath of this ancient demon lord. And a moment later, it was exposed once more to the ultimate dragonoid's rage.

ROUGH SKETCH




CHAPTER
2
REPORTS AND
COUNTERMEASURES
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 2

REPORTS AND COUNTERMEASURES

“Velzard’s made her move?” Feldway asked.

Vega, who had been staring at the screen with a pallid expression, nodded. “Ugh. The demon lord Milim, that bastard Zeranus…they’re both more fearsome than I ever imagined. Look at all that power. It’d take someone like Velzard to actually laugh at them. I couldn’t hold a candle to her…”

Witnessing the fight between Milim and Zeranus made even Vega feel humble by comparison. No matter how confident he usually was, he could at least understand the power differences involved.

“Quit whining. I have my own feelings, you know, about our longtime enemies the insectors finally tasting defeat.”

That was Zarario, who had just been called in.

Milim’s forces were victorious against a vicious enemy that had been a thorn in their side for far too long. Even better, despite the extensive damage, there were no deaths among Milim’s followers. Maybe it was just a matter of failing to find the right strategy or the right conditions, but it was Zarario’s fault for not being up to the challenge. Milim was superior to him, and that was that—it was not an excuse, but the truth. It was little wonder Zarario was less than amused about all that.

“So what are you gonna do about this, Feldway?” he asked.

By “this,” he meant Velzard. She seemed to have some kind of scheme underway, but Feldway didn’t dwell on that further. To Zarario, it seemed like a very fast-changing situation, one pretty derailed from their original plan, and he believed it was time for a course correction or two.

Someone else present was just as outraged.

“That’s the thing! If *you* hadn’t interfered with me, I would’ve defeated our divine enemy!” Jahil shouted. “You better explain

what's going on with that—right now!"

Upon returning to the Celestial Palace, Feldway ordered Mai to provide a visual of the ground situation. He then ordered Zarario to bring back Jahil, who was over with Luminus's force providing a diversion. Jahil's behavior, however, went well beyond diversionary tactics. Zarario was right to stop him, but it didn't exactly please Jahil much. Jahil didn't bother hiding that, snipping at Feldway and asking for answers.

"Heh. Quit being in such a hurry," chided Feldway. "It's not like you could've taken down the demon lord Luminus anyway."

"What?" snapped Jahil. "Are you mocking me?"

"No, I'm not. I just want to proceed with caution. Look, now that Daggrull is in our ranks, the balance of power's shifted vastly in our favor. We've also got Fenn of the Three Stellar Leaders, remember. With all that, Luminus couldn't be in a more precarious position."

This was Feldway's attempt at appeasing Jahil. It didn't work.

"Yes, I'll admit to Fenn's strength. But Luminus killed my father, the great demigod, who I must avenge with my own two hands!"

Jahil's mood was the result of a grudge making his anger boil over. Taking over Footman might've had an effect—that was unclear—but either way, his heart was seething with a rage like a hurricane. That was why he was so violently dismissive of Luminus. Being denied the chance to take a swipe at her set him off so much, even *he* thought it a bit odd.

But the next moment:

"Won't you listen to me?" Feldway said quietly.

It didn't sound all that intimidating; in fact, he was speaking with a perfectly normal tone. But with the aura that reigned supreme in the room, everybody—even Deeno—was on the edge of their seats.

"N-no, um… I'm sorry."

Regaining his composure, Jahil immediately apologized. A wise decision on his part.

"Feldway," Zarario said, "bear in mind that your aura is like poison to those not accustomed to it. You are in your true form now, nothing at all like you used to be."

He, too, was smart to step up and defend Jahil—and with that, the situation was resolved.

So they were back where they started.

Feldway had narrowed his objectives down to three strategic goals:

Steal the ultimate skill Sariel, Lord of Hope, from the Hero Chronoa.

Eliminate the Hero Masayuki, a potential danger to their plans, and strip him of the ultimate skill Uriel, Lord of Vows.

Last and most important: capture the draconic factors of Veldora.

Now he thought it was time to reconsider these goals.

The first question to tackle was the gathering of these skills. After inheriting Michael's powers, Feldway was able to detect and perceive angelic-type ultimate skills…but the collection of those angelic skills was Michael's personal mission, not Feldway's. As Michael himself was a conscious will housed inside a skill, he felt he could reach an all-powerful state by consolidating all the other skills into a single whole. This, the theory went, would allow him to become an omniscient, omnipotent Creator.

Although this logic seemed to make sense on the surface, Feldway was skeptical. For one, Veldanava was neither omniscient nor omnipotent. He himself said he had renounced those abilities, and there was no room to doubt those words.

How wonderful it would be, Feldway thought, *if that weren't true!* If it were, he wouldn't have lost his power and gotten killed by mere humans. Of course, it was Veldanava himself who gave humans their desires. The subsequent cause-and-effect relationships led to his doom, in a way—a self-inflicted wound.

Thanks to that, Feldway had no doubt Veldanava was a less-than-all-powerful being. As a result, he didn't see much point in collecting the angelic skills he was still missing. Besides, even if he could find them all, it'd mean nothing if he didn't have the right receptacles for them.

Feldway and Michael had planned to manifest Veldanava by using the best possible body in the lineage of the "first Hero" as a vessel. That plan was a total failure—Michael was defeated, and that body was gone. Those facts were set in stone, and that

suggested to Feldway that targeting Masayuki was no longer such a high priority.

Emperor Masayuki, eh? I hate having to lose to him, but victory or defeat is all about the luck of the moment anyway. It's not worth losing sight of the bigger picture.

That was Feldway's decision. If Zarario and the others targeted Masayuki—who bore the power of Ludora, the true Hero, in his hands—they'd quickly find themselves in over their heads. Velgrynd was still around, too. Any half-hearted effort would be met with swift vengeance. The only choice was for Feldway or Velzard to aim for Masayuki, or to ask Zeranus for the favor—but as Feldway saw it, they didn't have that much to gain from a victory anyway.

Now Feldway was quickly narrowing down his goals. If he was going to leave Masayuki alone, that suggested there was little point to defeating Chronoa, his fellow Hero. They *might* kill her before everything was through, but they didn't need to go out of their way to do it now. There was no need to assign valuable forces to the job when they could just wait for her to come at them instead.

Now I wonder if all hope has been lost after all…

Feldway's thoughts began to come together as he tried to shake off those fears.

"So? What's our plan?" Jahil impatiently piped up at just the right moment.

"All we will go after are Veldora's factors. But we need to act so nobody knows who we're really aiming for."

With that declaration, Feldway proposed a new strategy…and then, once everyone left, he began muttering to himself: "Now then, will Velzard achieve *her* goals for me?"

That True Dragon held the key to victory in this battle. Feldway thought so, at least.

"Her love is the real thing, I know. And if it is, the final outcome is beyond doubt…"

He smiled coldly at the thought of her beauty, thoroughly convinced of this eventuality.



At the capital of the Holy Empire of Lubelius, where Shion and

Adalmann had been sent, I was sitting on a sofa, relaxing. Next to me, Shion was defiantly demanding another cup of tea. Luminus's servants answered the request, and Shion accepted their service like she deserved every bit of it, eating a bowl of *chazuke* right there on the table. Nothing made her nervous, did it?

…And hang on a minute. Wasn't I supposed to be superior to her on the org chart? This difference in treatment's a little weird, isn't it? Why was I, the king, sitting there twiddling my thumbs while my (alleged) secretary Shion acted like she owned the place?

Ahh, I guess thinking about it would make me a petty loser, wouldn't it? Oh well.

"These snacks are delicious, Sir Rimuru," Shion said, offering the plate to me. "I've tested them for poison for you, so please dig in!"

I popped one of the snacks into my mouth without thinking. The idea of someone as terrible in the kitchen as Shion tasting anything for poison was kind of a joke, but whatever. Poison didn't work on me in the first place, so I didn't really need that testing anyway.

And yeah, these *were* good. Shion had a disastrous hand in the kitchen, but her palate wasn't so bad. But that just made this even more ridiculous. It suggested she didn't even bother tasting *anything* she cooked before foisting it on us. Her newfound skills had improved the taste of her food to perfection, but the look and the texture of her stuff were still garbage.

"What do you think? Do you like it?"

"Yeah, I do. It's light, not too sweet, and I like how it comes apart in my mouth."

It kind of reminded me of a financier, those little rectangular almond cakes you see in French bakeries. It had a slight fragrance to it that served as a nice accent, and overall, it was seriously tasty.

Shion, hearing my praise, beamed at me. "Wonderful! I had a lot of confidence about this recipe, Sir Rimuru, but I'm glad you liked it!"

"Uh?"

I froze and looked at Shion. There she was, smiling as usual. I looked back at the baked treat in my hand, then at Shion again.

“Are you saying…?”

“Yes! I made those.”

“Dude, you’re *kidding*!”

It was a truly unbelievable statement, but I guess it was fact. It’d been a very long time since I last saw Shion look that smug, but I couldn’t blame her for acting so proud. Shion—*that* Shion—had finally figured out how to make food *look* and *feel* delicious, not just *taste* that way.

Plus…

“Did you use your inner skills to shape the taste and texture, or what?”

“No, I made it with my own hands!”

Clearly, she was showing tremendous progress. I guess a change in environment really *can* lead to great strides. Her cooking had never improved, no matter how many times Shuna and Benimaru tried to steer her in the right direction…but after her little study abroad trip, something had awakened inside her.

What triggered this, though?

As soon as the question occurred to me, I heard a voice answering it:

“It’s been a lot of hard work.”

Luminus blurted that out as she stepped into the reception room.

“Sorry to keep you,” she added.

I rose to greet her, but she just plopped down on her own seat, not bothering with formality.

“What is the *matter* with her anyway?” she continued unprompted. “She comes in here brimming with confidence about all the great dishes she can make…and then she comes up with all these *unconventional*-looking things that barely seem like food!”

She was using strong words to describe it. Her use of the term *unconventional* even gave me pause.

“And that’s not all!” Luminus went on. “The texture of her work couldn’t possibly be worse, but it all tastes so good, I don’t even know *what* to think. Some are even trying to reproduce her dishes for fun. I’ve had to personally step in. Just *think* about the negative impact this might have on our food culture here!”

She must’ve been bottling up her anger for a while. I couldn’t say much back to her apart from the occasional grunt.

“W-well,” I stammered, “I’m glad you managed to correct Shion, though. All of us had long since given up on it, so great job!”

I tried to downplay my role in this. Luminus just stared back at me. Even Shion was giving me a look, cheeks puffed out in protest. I pretended not to notice as I awaited Luminus’s answer.

“I can only imagine how much you and your associates have coddled Shion, but that is none of my business,” she said. “I intended to leave her be at first, but once she began to cause real damage, I could no longer remain silent. So I told her.”

“Oh?”

“Coddling” wasn’t the way I would put it, but I suppose I couldn’t blame people on the outside for seeing it that way. Shuna was one thing, but neither me nor Benimaru could cook at all, so we were in no position to take a really strong stance against Shion. It’s pretty rude, after all, to go up to someone and whine to their face about stuff you can’t even do.

So I was hoping Shuna and Chef Gobichi would give her a talking-to sooner or later. But Shuna was way too kind and gave up much too soon on Shion. Gobichi, meanwhile, wasn’t nearly pushy enough for Shion’s mind to be moved. So there we were, after all this time.

Her food *tasted* better anyway, and it wasn’t exacting a death toll anymore. That was how I thought about it, but maybe that was just me trying to escape reality. I had a long life ahead of me as a slime, so I really should’ve tried my own hand at cooking, if only to develop more of a kitchen kinship with Shion. Maybe then we could’ve found ways for her to improve, and this whole problem would’ve been solved sooner.

This was really my and Benimaru’s fault for turning away from what we didn’t like doing. I was reflecting on that as Luminus finally continued:

“I told her that before she served anything to our guests, she needed to taste it first. Who knows, after all, whether someone laced it with poison!”

Oh… I see. Hence Shion bringing that topic up earlier. It wasn’t that Shion’s palate was a train wreck. She was just more the “never tasted her own stuff” type of bad cook. Once she got in the habit, the problems with her cuisine would become much more obvious to her.

“I gotta hand it to ya, Luminus. You’re a brilliant woman.”

I thanked her from the bottom of my heart. Luminus replied with a “hmph!” as she turned away from me, her cheeks a little red with embarrassment.

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These improvements to Shion’s kitchen efforts made for some unexpectedly good news, but they had nothing to do with why I was there.

Ramiris reported to me that Milim and Zeranus the Insect Lord were deadlocked in combat. At the same time, Lubelius—the heart of the territory Luminus ruled over—was reportedly being attacked from the sky by angelic forces.

Since Gobta and his team had been sent over to Milim as reinforcements, it seemed safe to assume things would be okay there for the time being. Milim was around, too, so unless something really crazy happened, things should work out. On the other hand, we had sent people like Shion and Adalmann to support Luminus, and I can’t say I had zero concerns about the strength of our army.

The Crusaders, the main fighting force in Lubelius, had been deployed to the Kingdom of Englesia, with their leader Hinata guiding them. Lubelius also had the Bloody Knights, a group composed of vampires numbering just under four hundred. They were quality fighters; each of them was over-A in rank. A handful of the overcomers among them could be equivalent to the low end of demon lord seeds.

Even so, though, when I heard Jahil was on the scene, I saw fit to take further action. So I left the cleanup effort in Englesia to Hinata and Masayuki, and zoomed over in a great hurry. Despite my concern, though, there was no sign of battle at all, and instead of a war room update, I was sampling Shion’s baking as I waited for Luminus to show up. I only had to wait around ten minutes at most, though; I was so surprised about Shion’s progress that we wound up talking for even longer about her.

Now that everyone was relaxed, it was time to attend to business.

“So how did your battle with the angels go?” I asked

Luminus.

“They have withdrawn, and the damage is not very great. I don’t think attacking here was part of their plan in the first place.”

Luminus gave me a detailed account. What she told me was that the attack was really nothing more than Jahil getting out of control, or maybe just harassing her.

“He and I have some history, you know,” she said. “We’ve never exactly gotten along well.”

She didn’t elaborate when I asked, but when I told her Sylvia had given me part of the story, she went ahead and told the rest, a slightly disgusted look on her face.

First off, there was someone in Luminus’s life who was kind of like her father. He was the demigod Twilight Valentine—the “King of the Twilight,” the kind of figure who showed up in myths and such. This demigod apparently created a lot of different intelligent life-forms, and the founding figures of several of these species came to be known as the Disciples of the Demigod. The first of these Disciples was Jahil and the second was Luminus, just like Sylvia told me.

Each of these Disciples established their own country. In Sylvia’s case, she merely served a support role to the high elves, but in the end, her daughter Ellie—the Emperor Elmesia—united the elves and established the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion.

Luminus and Sylvia, by the way, were still close. This wasn’t through Ellie at all; Luminus just happened to know a lot about her.

“As a rule,” Luminus said, “I thought it best not to personally meddle with Thalion. I did help out in the beginning, however.”

Thalion was founded over two thousand years ago, so I didn’t know if Luminus was telling me the truth. But as long-lived as their species was, Luminus and Sylvia were kind of like walking dictionaries on their races, and I saw no reason why they’d lie to me.

Convinced this was true, I continued listening to the story.

Out of the original Disciples of the Demigod, only Luminus and Sylvia were still alive—or at least the others had fallen out of contact. King Gazel’s ancestor, the founder of the high dwarves, had reportedly died, and the leaders of the enki and siren races—the fire- and water-based species, respectively—

had also likely lived out their lifespans. The high elves, being closest to the elementals, were always going to outlive them.

Speaking of long-lived races, there were also the High Humans. This species was created solely by reversing the elemental attributes of the demigod himself.

“I’m not fond to admit it, but I am a sort of copy of the demigod,” said Luminus. “This makes me technically not a vampire at all, but a highblood. I was created from the blood of the demigod, you see, and Jahil from a culture of the demigod’s body. I don’t think he inherited the power to absorb force from others the way I can, but he was fairly close to immortal, too.”

The demigod didn’t need to eat; instead, he survived by seizing the life force of other people. With no particular weaknesses to speak of, he was the living embodiment of immortality. Thus the demigod created two species by duplicating his own traits—the High Humans who lived by day, and the vampires who ruled the night. (“Living by day” here is a metaphor.)

Think of it this way: Plants gain energy through photosynthesis. Animals consume them in order to sustain life. Predators prey upon those animals to accumulate more energy, and microorganisms feast upon their corpses to nourish the earth. In this scenario, it was the High Humans who stood at the top of the food chain. They were a full part of this chain, and thus they had finite lifespans—and Jahil was no exception.

The average lifespan of a normal urban dweller in this world was around seventy years old, and that was without any magic-based extensions. Medicine wasn’t too well developed at all, but despite that, humans actually lived for a decently long time around here. Those in rural areas or adjacent to monster-laden forests had a shorter average life expectancy, and I should also add this average didn’t count deaths caused by natural and man-made disasters.

High Humans, meanwhile, could live between several centuries and a whole millennium, about the same as elves. Their physical strength seemed to be on another level from modern humans, too, and they had high magicule resistance, so they could take them in and harness them for spells. But despite these skills, they were *not immortal*—there was no escaping their ultimate fate.

So in response, Jahil devised a method to indefinitely extend

his own life. It was called the Secret Art of Spiritualization. His reasoning, I suppose, was that if you could not maintain the three elements making up a physical body—the material body, the spiritual body, and the astral body—at the same time, maybe it could be enough only to pass on the minimum amount needed to maintain your sense of self.

In other words, Jahil succeeded in transforming his material body into a spiritual body. That way, he'd only need to keep his mental and astral bodies protected. That meant Jahil was voluntarily reborn as a spiritual life-form.

The Mysterious Art of Reincarnation that Gadora developed was a way to reincarnate one's soul while it was still protected by its astral body. If it sounds risky, that's because it was. The physical body that resulted, though, belonged completely to that soul, and all its experiences and knowledge were passed along as well.

Meanwhile, the Secret Art of Possession that Razen invented simply transplanted the spiritual and astral body into someone else's physical body, without passing on any of the skills attached. It was much safer, but since things like magic force are dependent on the physical body, you might wind up becoming weaker in your new incarnation.

By contrast, Jahil's Secret Art of Spiritualization was a perfect, surefire method of reincarnation. Since Jahil himself was now a spiritual life-form, he was able to safely and surely inherit all the knowledge, experience, and skills he had gained in life.

"It required preparing a body to serve as his new vessel," Luminus bitterly said, "but he could procure one from any number of his blood relatives. That was the way Jahil solved the problem of his finite lifespan."

Okay, then. If he was a spiritual life-form, his near-immortality made sense. That also explained why he was able to take over Footman's body so easily.

"Of course, his arrogance caused him to make one serious mistake."

As Luminus put it, while Jahil was absorbed in his spiritualization research, his staff, whom he left in charge of government politics, began competing with each other for supremacy. Over time, it divided up the country…and once he mistakenly summoned Guy, the most uncontrollable of demons,

his downfall was complete.

“He resented me, after all, for destroying the demigod. He was always hostile toward me. I had assumed he had died on me long ago—oh, what a happy thought that was! But I didn’t think he’d be stubbornly surviving until now, much less resurrecting himself with all his force.”

Yes, it was true. Luminus had killed the demigod, her own father—which was why Jahil had it out for her. And it sounded like this was the last guy we wanted breathing down our necks.

“Yeah… Even my Benimaru had trouble with him,” I said. “He must be a real force to be reckoned with.”

“Huh? Benimaru lost?”

Shion chose that moment to butt in. And yes, Benimaru had lost—that was the story we went with. I think I explained all that to my cabinet officials. Maybe it slipped Shion’s memory. Not terribly surprising.

“No he didn’t,” I told her, trying to defend Benimaru’s good name.

My philosophy was that you won any fight you walked away from, and by *that* definition, he won for sure…but the truth was he basically ran out the clock. If the fight had continued as it did, Benimaru’s defeat would have been inevitable. So yeah, Jahil was a threat.

“Ah, I see. And if you defeated an opponent like him, Lady Luminus, that means you must be stronger than Benimaru!”

Right? Yeah, I was wondering about that, too. Because if you stacked Luminus up against Benimaru, I doubt you’d see that huge of a difference in strength. That’s why I thought Luminus and her force were in big trouble—and why I rushed over like this. That and I also wanted to know how Luminus had fought Jahil off.

“Oh, that?” Luminus casually said. “Well, I’ve experienced a certain evil dragon destroying my city in the past…”

Ulp. I thought I’d heard about this somewhere before…or received a lot of complaints about it, at least…

“…so when I’ve built subsequent cities, I’ve tried to make security my first priority.”

“Um, right. Yes. A very good idea, yes…”

I sounded all uptight. But it was best to play the yes-man for now.

Luminus responded with a cold look in my direction, then

continued, looking a bit gratified.

"So I set up several layers' worth of barriers to ward off dragons…and they worked very well, as it turned out."

She had told me about this, as I just remembered. I *did* notice a multilayered defensive barrier over the holy city before. We were allowed to pass through, but no suspicious strangers ever received entry.

"I didn't think it'd be *that* strong," I said. "Jahil had enough power to dominate Benimaru, and he seemed to have control over an ultimate skill, too. I don't think he could outclass Veldora, but I didn't expect some garden-variety barrier would ever work on him."

I meant that, too. But Luminus just sniffed at me.

"Don't be so sure, you! You outsiders wouldn't realize it, but this is a holy land, one where those who worship me gather. If a barrier runs on the unlimited faith that springs from all their hearts, of *course* it could repel someone like Jahil."

Her words were full of confidence—and they were backed by results, I guess. But was it really *that* easy?

Theoretically, yes, if one were to apply the "secret skills of faith and favor" correctly. Therefore…

And Luminus had honed and polished that theory until she made it work? Wow. I'm kind of amazed. I couldn't even guess how hard that'd be.

It is not a feat achievable by a single person. It requires a deep understanding of one's believers, along with a mutual appreciation. This cannot happen overnight, Master, but would you like me to research it as well?

Ooooh, I dunno… I'd rather keep things to myself, so… Nah, we can put that on hold for now.

Ciel seemed to agree with me, too. Besides, while it seemed useful, we already had enough projects we hadn't gotten around to tackling yet. Plus we were in the middle of a war; I didn't have the luxury of getting close with my citizens at the moment. So I decided to put that on the back burner for the moment. I would wanna tackle it someday, though.

✳

So I knew how Luminus had escaped her latest crisis, but that didn't solve the full problem. In fact, I hadn't gotten to my main question yet.

"...So yeah, Daggrull's turned on us. He's on the march even as we speak, so I think we'll make contact within a week at the latest."

I needed to drop the truth on her: Fenn, Daggrull's brother, had done something or other to him, and it made him do a total one-eighty in personality. I didn't see any of this; I only learned about it from Ultima's report...but I had witnessed Daggrull from a distance, and he certainly *seemed* to have a new, evil sort of aura around him. The army of giants following him all looked just as ominous, so when it came time for a fight, I expected it to be pretty intense. *That'd* be the real battle—Jahil was just an appetizer.

These giants were marching on foot, but looking at the way they advanced through the Deadly Desert without suffering from it one bit, I didn't think it'd take them long to reach here. If I could be brutally honest for a second, having Daggrull defect on us was a serious blow. The possibility was on my mind, but now that it was reality, it was beyond a headache to deal with.

"Yes, well, Daggrull and I were never on good terms to start with," Luminus said. "We had some conflicts of interest, but more than that, Daggrull was rather fond of the demigod, so..."

"Wait. So the demigod's behind Daggrull's beef with you, too? Not just Jahil?"

"Mmm, well, it's all in the past now," said Luminus, sounding less than bothered. Apparently this all happened back when Daggrull was still called an evil god. Maybe it was no skin off Luminus's nose, but if they had *that* kind of past, I really felt like Daggrull was trying to settle a score with her...

"So yes, I wouldn't be surprised if we ended up in a head-on war with him."

Great. And Daggrull was pretty strong, too, right? Even I would have trouble with him, probably...

Pfft. Impossible.

…But then again, Ciel seems to disagree with that. Well, fine. I'm not going to debate the issue. I don't want to underestimate the enemy only to look like a fool after he kicks my ass. We need to assume, for planning purposes, he's enough of a threat that I'd have trouble with him.

Roger that.

Glad we're on the same page. Now let's figure out what we should do.

From a geopolitical point of view, the Holy Empire of Lubelius was the keystone of our western defenses. If it fell, our enemy would gain a foothold in the Western Nations, and the situation would shift quickly after that.

The angel army was capable of flight, so it wasn't like we could intercept them at some point. The giants, on the other hand, were on foot, although they were going much faster than a human's walking speed—about nineteen miles an hour. I sensed some legion magic at work, because this was unthinkable for a normal army. Still beat any kind of aerial attack, though.

Daggrull's base, the Holy Void of Damargania, was about 1,250 miles as the crow flies to Lune, the holy city we were in. Even assuming they didn't detour around the Barren Lands and Deadly Desert, we were talking a trek of some 1,900 miles by foot. Simple math told me they'd require over four full days of walking, and I was sure they'd need breaks at some point, so that figure should likely be tripled…but judging by the glimpse I had of their march, this could very well have been a constant thing, with no rest involved.

Either way, we had our Argos system keeping watch over them. If anything new happens, I should know right away—

The Argos surveillance magic is easily fooled. If the enemy is cautious, I cannot discount the possibility they are taking countermeasures against it.

They are, huh?

Argos allowed me to see what was going on somewhere in real time, but there was no real way to confirm the video feed I

was getting hadn't been tampered with. I, too, was taking measures based on the assumption we were being watched ourselves. If the enemy had some similar kind of magic, it was fair to assume they'd take some equivalent measures, too. Of course, maybe I was just worrying too much…but either way, we clearly couldn't let our guards down.

But we had other things to be concerned about. Luminus told me they'd managed to fend off Jahil, but I wasn't sure I should take that at face value. Making Daggrull turn traitor was part of the enemy's operation, after all. If they wanted to defeat Luminus, too, I thought they'd use him to stage a pincer attack on Lubelius. But they didn't do that, probably because Jahil was beyond anyone's control. Maybe Jahil had his own agenda, given the bad blood between him and Luminus, but from what I'd heard, this was probably just Jahil going rogue—in other words, a breakdown in the chain of command.

Luminus was certainly powerful, but if she was caught between an army of giants from the west and a flying angel force from above, I could see her being pretty helpless to stop that. If the enemy didn't attack with that strategy, it showed inconsistency within their ranks.

Anyway, since I had clearly arrived on time, I wanted to make sure we were in perfect position to intercept our foes before Daggrull arrived. So how much wiggle room did we have?

"Assuming they maintained their current marching speed, I believe it will take at least four days for Daggrull's army to arrive," I told Luminus. "Hinata and her Crusaders will be back soon, I guess, and if we're lucky, they may just be in time for this."

"Hmm. I'd like to call them back right now, in case things get bad…"

"Yeah, I came here alone after leaving them to help clean up Englesia's capital. They need to guard all the VIPs there at the moment, too, so I don't think they can leave until they hand all that over to other people."

I wasn't so sure about calling back Hinata and the rest of the paladins. Masayuki was still in Englesia, so it was still not entirely secure over there. Feldway had reportedly been repelled, but maybe all that was the prelude for a more concentrated attack to come.

Of course, Masayuki had Velgrynd with him, and Testarossa was still there, too. Those ex-imperial officers seemed surprisingly dependable, actually. Besides, things had to be better there than over here, so I was pretty sure they could deal with whatever came their way.

"Hmm, yes," Luminus mused. "Hinata was sent to represent the Western Holy Church, so I suppose we can't ask too much of her."

So Luminus reluctantly agreed. If we selfishly called Hinata back, it might be perceived as the Holy Church abandoning the Western Nations. All the trust we had built up could be lost in one fell swoop. If things *really* got awful, we might not have much of a choice—but then, I was there to keep that from happening.

"Well, I have my man Gadora here with me, and I think he's discussing your defenses with Adalmann right now. He's not on the same level as Hinata, but he's reliable in a pinch, so you shouldn't have anything to worry about."

Luminus greeted my assurance with an indignant glare. "You are being *far* too thoughtless! You can be that carefree about this only because you don't understand just how terrifying Daggrull is."

No, lady, I thought he was bad news, too. But Ciel suggested it'd be an easy win for me, so I couldn't help but be a bit relaxed about him. I didn't think I'd be called "thoughtless" for it, but if I talked back to her, I'd just be kicking the hornet's nest. So, maturely swallowing my complaints, I moved on to the next topic before she berated me any further.

"Anyway, why don't we check on our war strength?" I suggested.

I didn't expect her to be honest with me about every bit of it—we were talking about the military of another nation, after all. But if I didn't ask, we couldn't really come up with a proper strategy. So I broke out my most important question.

"First off, I'll just go ahead and ask—how many overcomers do you have?"

I knew I was being rude, but this question really did matter a lot. We couldn't rely on the captains of the Crusaders for this job, so I wanted a grasp of just how much useful personnel we had on hand. In the battle ahead, we were better off not counting anyone below the rank of A. There was no point

bringing along the kind of people who'd get immediately wiped out by a single shot of wide-range magic, a fact Carrera demonstrated all too well for us.

In terms of what the Holy Empire of Lubelius had publicly announced, their main force was the Temple Knights, composed of knights faithful to the Luminist religion. They numbered ten thousand, and since they were charged with protecting their nation's holiest of lands, they were stronger than the guys they sent out to other nations. The knights who belonged to it each merited at least a B-plus in rank.

But—and not to be rude—it was really six of one, half a dozen of the other to me. They were strong as far as humans were concerned, but facing Daggrull, one kick would send them into outer space. It'd depend on how we used them, of course, but I couldn't really see soldiers like these as mere numbers. I wasn't playing a video game, so I really wanted to stick to my no-deaths policy.

That meant fighting only with my main force, with everyone else strictly handling a support role. For these guys, that meant maintaining the barrier and making sure the holy lands remained well guarded.

Luminus seemed to understand this line of thinking.

"I can name seven who would be the most useful for this. The demon lord's army has established a system of rule where my stand-in Roy—er, Louis—is king, and the Seven Great Nobles rule under him."

Hoh. More impressive than I thought. And surprisingly enough, one of these nobles was an overcomer conducting research as part of Vester's team.

Interestingly, this group of seven did not include Luminus's butler Gunther. "He is also one of the Disciples of the Demigod," Luminus explained. "We are something like sister and brother, you could say."

"I am truly honored to hear you say that, my lady," Gunther said. "I would never be able to hold a candle to you."

Luminus introduced me to Gunther, who was just setting up another round of tea. We had met before, and I thought he had a fair bit of muscle, but now I fully understood why.

She went on to tell me Louis was also a work of the demigod. I wasn't sure if *work* was the best word for it, but anyway, he escaped soon after he was made, turning wild and rampaging

across the countryside. Until Luminus defeated him and brought him under her control, he apparently caused quite a bit of damage. It was all a long time ago, so I wasn't about to judge him…but if anything, that was one of the more heartwarming demigod-related tales I'd heard. Luminus had sure been through a lot. She told me the Seven Great Nobles were all derived from Louis, making them all more than qualified to serve in the army of a demon lord.

At any rate, I now knew what Luminus was working with. It was my turn, so I informed her about a report I had only just received.

"According to info from Ultima, Daggrull's force is called the Bound Titans, a group of thirty thousand warrior giants. Each ranks a B on average, but the best are all over-A—we're talking nearly a thousand of those elites."

"Quite a piece of work," noted Luminus.

She wasn't talking about the size difference between thirty thousand Bound Titans and ten thousand Temple Knights, but rather the number of over-A warriors. We didn't know why Daggrull was dragging lower-ranked giants with him, but the quality was more noteworthy than the quantity. We'd been vastly outnumbered before and turned the tables on that, so we knew this was the valid approach.

So let's compare the quality.

Luminus's force originally consisted of under four hundred Bloody Knights plus about three hundred Crusaders, meaning she commanded almost seven hundred over-As. Given the nearly one thousand Daggrull had, these numbers weren't all that astonishing…but since the Crusaders weren't there, it was clear Luminus was at a major disadvantage.

If she was defeated and her holy land fell, there was no doubt the Western Nations would collapse. Not only would the object of their faith be gone, but their literal guardian would disappear as well, and I was sure they'd be fully overrun in under a month. If Daggrull was just looking to conquer land, he might temper the destruction along the way…but the people living there would suffer either way, and we had no idea how they'd be treated.

Having someone butt in like this—just when we were getting recognized and about to join hand-in-hand to create an affluent, civilized society—was beyond ridiculous. Anyone who messed

with my gloriously self-indulgent lifestyle had to pay the price—and so I had to keep Luminus's forces from losing by any means possible.

So the big question was: Did we have enough firepower? Daggrull's strength was still unknown. Apparently, he was iron-fisted enough to have had a go at Veldora in the past, so we underestimated him at our peril. According to Ciel, I'd definitely come out on top against Daggrull…but as long as the next moves remained unknown, there was no telling whether I'd actually need to enter the fight myself.

We had to be ready for any kind of situation. If it came down to a duel between him and Luminus, I couldn't tell you who'd win. Luminus possessed a sin-based ultimate skill, so there was no way she'd go down that easy…but it was better to avoid any fight between two leaders if we could help it. Maybe it didn't really matter if I was there, but I still felt safer knowing the strength of all our second-tier guys.

✳

Luminus and Daggrull together arguably controlled the largest faction among all demon lords, but their overall strength was thought to be around even. That was likely why Daggrull hadn't made any untoward moves, but with war on the horizon, the strength of each side's second-tier generals and officers could decide the winner.

On Luminus's side we had Gunther, Louis, and those Seven Great Nobles. Daggrull, too, had a packed roster. His brothers, for one—Fenn and Glasord. They lagged a step behind the Million Class, but I was told they had other warriors comparable to a demon lord seed. These were the so-called Five Great Warlords, the best of the Bound Titans' best fighters.

Their chief member was already known to me.

"Seeing Fenn back is truly bad news," I said. "It means Daggrull is back to his evil-god ways, and I'm sure old Four-Armed Basara is back, too."

Yes, this "Four-Armed Basara" was second-in-command of the Bound Titans. He was supposed to be just as strong as Glasord, the other vice-leader, which undoubtedly made him part of the Million Class.

Really, there were just too many menaces hidden away in both these guys' camps. They were each housing dudes so ferocious, they made Carillon and Frey look like neighborhood kids. I was really starting to wonder about the balance of power between demon lords.

"Well," Luminus said when I whined to her about it, "why wouldn't it be this way? We've both been demon lords for a long, long while, taking in the strong and expanding our power the whole time. If anything, I respect Carillon and Frey for the job they've done, despite being so new to this."

She clearly looked down on them. But "a long, long time" must have been the truth. Luminus and Daggrull had been alive for more than just a millennium or two. Way more than that. Maybe even ten, for all I knew. Apparently one or two hundred years weren't usually enough for a demon lord seed to reach Million Class status, a statistic I wasn't really sure how to respond to.

"Yes, along *those* lines, you are *beyond* exceptional!" Luminus said. "How many Million Class members do you even *have* under your command? I would *love* to ask how you managed to grab so many of them in the blink of an eye!"

"Ah…?!"

I couldn't help but gasp. I didn't really know how this happened, either, and it wasn't like asking me would help find an answer. I began to sense continuing this topic wouldn't help me very much, so I attempted to steer away from it by asking another question I had on my mind.

"Speaking of that, you sure seem to know a lot about Daggrull's force. Did you personally know Fenn or something?"

Luminus gave me another "are you kidding me?" look. "Hmm? Of course I do. He had already been sealed away before I was born, but there was still evidence of the damage he exacted all over the place. The demigod used to love telling me stories about his heyday. It was thanks to Fenn, after all, that the siblings Kisara and Basara were born."

As she explained to me, Kisara and Basara were the first of the giant species, crafted by the demigod using the "true giant" Daggrull as a reference. They were twins, which led to quarrels over who was older—and when *they* fought, it always took on epic proportions. Luminus claimed all the disasters of the past could be traced back to the demigod, and I think she was right.

Things only settled down once Kisara and Basara lost to Daggrull in a fight; he then made them his personal underlings.

"It takes a thief to catch one, you could say, but the end result was an expansion of Daggrull's power, which I didn't much appreciate," she said,

That was apparently when the real power struggle between Daggrull and Luminus began. Things only changed for the better once Daggrull and Kisara got married. It's often said having a family helps wild men settle down, and that was exactly what happened.

This period of peace lasted for a while, but it was really only a preparation period for the next war…and so on. According to Luminus, they cycled between war and peace every hundred years or so.

I wasn't too interested in this history, though, so I had her give me the digest version.

Kisara had become Daggrull's queen, but she wound up dying in childbirth. The death was a struggle for her brother, Basara, to deal with—I'm sure the more you fight, the more you love, or something.

His behavior grew erratic enough that he was put under house arrest by Daggrull. Basara was forced to fall into a deep sleep, but as Luminus put it, he had almost certainly been woken up for this new conquest.

This came up in Ultima's report, too: *"They used to have this wild child named Four-Arms a long time ago, so I asked what was up with him these days. Apparently he's been kept confined this whole time. The guy I talked to said they'd let him out when the times called for it."*

So we could definitely expect him on the enemy's side that day, yeah. If someone like Ultima called him a wild child, I was sure he was gonna be a handful.

Anyway, the group led by Basara was called the Five Great Warlords, with their roster chosen through an annual skills competition. It was an established custom in Damargania, one way they encouraged national unity and pride. However, the giants had an average lifespan of around five hundred years, so only the senior giants—those who had lasted at least a millennium—got to participate. (You'd occasionally see a

younger giant pick up some genes from their older ancestors and get in early, though.)

These Five Great Warlords were the best among their race, but none of them were as threatening as Basara, their leader. The rank-and-file warlords were probably below the Three Lycanthropeers, or the Twin Wings who served Frey, and that meant Luminus's Seven Great Nobles outclassed them, too.

Let's take a moment to summarize the forces on both sides again. First, Luminus. Gunther and Louis were Million Class members, probably just breaking into seven-figure EP. The Seven Great Nobles were equivalent to demon lord seeds, boasting EP between two hundred and six hundred thousand—a lot of variation between them, I guess.

As far as the general public knew, they also had something called the Seven Days Clergy, although they had been wiped out after an unfortunate incident. They didn't have any time to restock this group with other champion-class humans, but in the future, there were plans to reform the group with paladin captains and the like.

That about rounded it out.

On Daggrull's side, you had his siblings Glasord and Fenn, first off. Glasord's EP was said to be just under two million, and Fenn's was above Daggrull's as well—the strength among them was mind-boggling. Basara, who I mentioned earlier, was a level behind Glasord at just over one million, about on an equal footing with Gunther. The rest of the Five Great Warlords had scores of between 150,000 and 300,000, which made them less of a threat than any Lycanthropeer, but the problem was the *other* high-level fighters in their army. There were nearly a hundred of these, the weakest of whom had EP over 100,000, and the strongest nearly 150,000.

That wasn't surprising, since the yearly competition guaranteed a healthy supply. But that they had nearly a hundred people that strong was a threat that frankly couldn't be ignored. I believed quality beat quantity, but if even your rank and filers were above a certain line, that was a problem. It would've been great if we could've beaten these guys in a single blow like Velgrynd, but I doubted Daggrull was about to let that happen…

"It's been a while since I last saw the enemy's sheer numbers as a threat," I ventured.

“Yes, well, we’ve been at each other’s throats for quite a while, but if it came to all-out war, I *did* think he’d have the upper hand to start,” Luminus said. “I’ve been working on my preparations, but a certain slime I know whittled down my forces, so…”

“H-hey! That’s in the past now, isn’t it?!”

This bickering was fun and all, but it didn’t really solve the problem.

At this rate, our only option would be to send more reinforcements from Tempest—but then Shion entered the conversation, smiling from ear to ear.

“Hee-hee-hee! There is nothing to fear from Daggrull, Sir Rimuru!” She stood up, then called out to the other side of the door. “Come on in, everyone!”

Into the room shuffled a group of men, all looking pretty nervous.

Hang on. Don’t I know these guys…?

“Good to see you again! I’m Daggra!”

“I’m Liura!”

“And I’m Chonkra!”

They were Daggrull’s sons. I’d left them in Shion’s care, and then I’d completely forgotten about them. Okay, I *did* file them in the back of my mind, yes, but once things went sour real fast between me and Daggrull, I hadn’t thought about what I was gonna do with them…

“Yeah, great to see you all,” I said. “Glad you seem to be doing fine, but, um, you *do* know what’s going on right now, don’t you?”

If they said they wanted to return to Daggrull, I supposed we should let them go, not keep them prisoner. Like, each of them was stronger than your average demon lord seed, so giving them to the enemy was a real drag…but if we made them POWs, we’d have to devote personnel to guarding them, which could cause all kinds of chaos. Killing a non-resisting opponent was out of the question, too…aaaaaand I was out of ideas. Maybe we could isolate them in Ramiris’s labyrinth somewhere, but that’d put more burden on Ramiris and her team, so it was safer to avoid that.

I mulled my options as I waited for a response from the three of them. When it came, it surprised me.

“Oh, of course. Sounds like Dad’s switched sides, huh? It’s *so*

embarrassing," griped Daggra.

"We heard about Uncle Fenn in our bedtime stories, but I never thought he'd come back in *this* day and age," said Liura.

"Fweh-heh! What a diabolical guy!" added Chonkra. "Dad said he was about equal to him in strength."

They sounded a bit more open to our side. So I decided to ask, "Uh, we're about to go to war with your father, but are you okay with that?"

"Well, it does make me anxious, but me, I'm a lot more interested in testing out how much stronger we've gotten."

"My big brother's right! Lady Shion's been training us on a daily basis. Physical training, mental training, a healthy, tasty diet…and we've been honing our skills with a lot of training partners, too. If anyone tries to destroy this environment we've been given, well, we've obtained this power in order to beat them!"

"Fweh-heh! We're all excited to show off the results of our training, yeah. Me, I can't wait to use this power to go beat up my uncle…and everyone else, too!"

They were all pleading their case. I guess they meant it—they really *were* eager to take on Daggrull and his force. I looked at Shion; she was just sitting there, nodding in satisfaction like I should've expected this all along.

"Uhmm…," I mumbled.

So now what? Was it really okay to bring these guys out to battle?

I do not believe it is a problem.

Ciel wasted no time answering my conundrum.

But isn't there a chance these guys will betray us? I really do think they're telling the truth, but if they're faking it, it'd expose my friends to danger. I'm sure the rest of my gang would wince if I told them they'd be fighting alongside the enemy leader's sons, too.

But Ciel was unwavering.

The chances of that happening are believed to be very low. This is because—

No need to go into detail.

The door opened once more, and Shion's troops poured into the room. One stern-faced young man was the first to address me.

"Sir Rimuru, we all trust in Daggra and the gang!"

Oh, isn't that Gobzo…?

He looked so young and virile, I didn't recognize him. His face was the same, but there was some real *spirit* in it now.

Apparently Daggra and his brothers had Gobzo's trust, and he wasn't the only one. Everyone in Team Reborn sang their praises, one after the other, proving just how much they trusted them. I guess they thought I was about to lock them up somewhere and throw away the key, or worse. How mean. I'm a rational thinker. Just because I think someone might become my enemy doesn't mean I'll take their life on the spot, does it?

"Sir Rimuru! As you can hopefully tell, our unity is solid as a rock. We didn't train ourselves to be soft, and we promise you we won't be moved by anything!"

Shion looked me straight in the eye as she spoke. I guess as the caretaker of Daggrull's sons she felt a bit like their guardian.

All this was enough to convince me…but then, to my surprise, Luminus spoke up.

"To tell you the truth, Rimuru, I too am of a mind to dispose of his sons…"

Drop the "too," please.

"…but I think it safe to trust in them."

I never expected her to defend them. Didn't she and Daggrull fight like cats and dogs? I decided to ask why she came to that conclusion, and Luminus frowned at me.

"Well…it has to do with the improvements in Shion's cooking. The three of them were the main contributors to that, you see."

"Meaning…?"

"Who do you think was tasting her food? *I* certainly didn't like her work, but quite a lot of us here are young and curious. One of the Seven Great Nobles foolishly tried his luck with her dinner course once. He was bedridden for a month."

Well, he wasn't gonna die anyway, right? Being undead and all? Maybe I shouldn't be so sure.

What an idiot that guy was, though…but I hesitated to say that out loud. It took pioneers like him, after all, to bring about

great new inventions and discoveries. The same was true for any era. Like, I really respected the first guy who thought it'd be a great idea to eat lobsters or curdled milk, you know? I know being forced to eat disgusting food was a punishment given out in the past, but surely the poor victims undoubtedly made huge contributions to gourmet cuisine later on. Really, that noble had a rare type of courage, you could say.

So I briefly nodded, urging Luminus to continue.

"Since then, nobody was interested in trying her cuisine…but then this trio volunteered. Everyone was so impressed by their gallant spirit, myself included. Yes, even my own servants sang the praises of Daggra and his cohorts!"

Wow, really? Behind Shion's much-improved cooking lurked a tale of unbearable hardship, I feared. After all, this was stuff that drove Adalmann to comment, "I never thought I'd be so thankful I'm no longer able to eat," which I thought was kind of the slam of the century. I really had to be grateful for those kid giants, I guess. We owed them big-time.

"Well," said Daggra, "if that lady's offering up her homemade cooking, we deserve to be the ones who taste test it, don't we?"

"Yeah, big bro, you're right!" agreed Liura.

"It's a great reward!" said Chonkra.

Uh-huh. Then again, maybe these guys were just messed up in the head.

Still, all's well that ends well, and if Daggra and his brothers were already part of the team like this, well, let's have them kick some ass in battle for us.

"All right," I said. "Either me or Luminus will take on Daggrull, so I'll let Shion and her force handle Fenn."

"Hmph! Allow *me* to handle Daggrull. It will be a challenge, I will admit, but I'm sure I could drag out the fight for as long as necessary."

Luminus didn't seem to think she could beat Daggrull. In her mind, she'd hold him down, and in the meantime we'd beat all the other main dudes, then band together to whip their leader. If I took on Fenn, that'd help pad our roster much better than any other approach.

"All right, then…"

But just was I was about to say, "I think I see a way to win this," I was interrupted by word of a sudden upheaval.

✳

The news came in the form of an urgent Thought Communication from Ramiris.

(Hey, Rimuru, we got big trouble!)

(You always say you got big trouble. I have a lot to deal with over here, too, y'know.)

I was trying to make light of it, but I guess she really *did* have big trouble this time.

(I'm not jokin' with you, okay? Listen, I've lost contact with Milim! I've ordered an investigation into what's going on, but I got a real bad feeling about this!)

As she explained it to me, Gobta and his force had returned to Tempest a few minutes before, reporting they had successfully defeated Zeranus. Just after that, though, their video feed monitoring the war situation stopped working. Fortunately, the transport gate to the battlefield was still operational, so Gobta came running back through it to check things out while Ramiris contacted me.

(Sounds bad.)

(Yeah, that's what I'm telling you, Rimuru!!)

Eesh. No rest for the wicked, huh? I doubted anything had happened to Milim, but I could guess what was causing that video interference.

That would be Velzard.

And if Ciel shared my opinion, I could pretty much accept it as fact.

(Tell Gobta and the others not to overexert themselves. I'll be back real soon.)

With that, I ended the conversation and turned toward Luminus.

"Sorry, I think I've got an emergency brewing," I said.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"It's looking pretty likely that Milim and Velzard got into a fight. I'll need to contact Guy as well, so I'm gonna return home for the time being."

Luminus nodded back at me, composed. "Very well," she

calmly said, allaying my fears. “We will prepare for Daggrull as well, so don’t worry about that.”

“Yes! We alone could defeat the giants, even!” Shion boasted.

I couldn’t take her at her word there, but I felt safe leaving Lubelius to her while I worked out our strategy a little more.

“Anyway, I’ll be back soon,” I said.

“Certainly! We’ll hold down the fort here!”

Oh. I just remembered. It’s only a possibility, but I’d better share it with everyone.

“Luminus, not to sound too pessimistic, but don’t be too confident you’ll have four whole days to work with.”

Four days was the minimum time Daggrull’s army would need to reach this city. But that assumed they stuck to their current marching speed. They might’ve had someone on hand who could teleport the entire army over like I could, so we’d need to watch out for that.

“Hmm, yes. I, too, am considering this possibility. *You* could certainly cut down on that time, for example. It’d be a very negligent commander, indeed, who assumed that what we can do, the enemy cannot.”

Good. She seemed to have understood me. I had nothing else to say. If the need arose, I could run back to help, so it was better to deal with the more pressing matters first.

“All right. Be careful,” I told Luminus.

“You too.”

She and I exchanged nods.

“Good luck, Sir Rimuru!”

And with that last bit of encouragement from Shion and her troops, I returned to Tempest.

✳

As soon as I was back, I went straight to the Control Center. The sight presented to me was…astonishing. Astonishingly bad, that is. *Real* bad.

On the big screen was Milim, beside herself with rage. She had transformed into something I’d never seen before and was rampaging across the landscape. Her opponent was Velzard, a bewitching beauty with an alluring smile, but even with Milim turned into a real, bona fide Destroyer, she wasn’t backing

down one bit. They looked pretty evenly matched, and…well…it was like a return to the days of the gods, and the sorts of battles they must have waged.

"What's the deal with this?" I whispered. Ramiris wasted no time answering me.

"Gobta's recording it!"

That wasn't what I meant…

"Oh! Right, that! Well, as you see, it kinda really sucks at the moment!"

Great. Glad to see Ramiris is completely useless. I sighed as Benimaru got up off his gaudy, luxurious commander's seat and greeted me.

"Everyone was celebrating the defeat of Zeranus, but then we suddenly lost contact with the battlefield," he said. "Gobta had just returned at that point, so we sent him out on reconnaissance, and he confirmed Lady Velzard and Lady Milim were locked in combat."

At least Benimaru knew how to act.

As I looked at the landscape on the screen, my biggest concern was that we couldn't tell if there were any survivors. Gobta's partner Ranga was using Control Wind to try to capture some smell particles and get a better picture for us, but he found nothing. All scents had disappeared. We could see people frozen in ice here and there, and it was clear the entire battlefield had to be in the same state.

"We were hoping to examine the ice statues more closely, but even with Ranga's protection, it was difficult—impossible, really—for Gobta to approach," Benimaru told me.

"Wow. It's that rough out there?"

"Yes, sir. The feed you're watching is being shot from the closest approachable distance possible. Gobta is whining about it, but I'm telling him to bear down and do his best for us."

If it was Benimaru, he'd probably be as tough as a polar bear out there, but joking wasn't a good idea right now.

Carrera and her demons were still there, but I couldn't connect to them via Thought Communication. We were supposed to be connected by a soul corridor, but still, nothing. The status of everyone on the field was unknown. It was, in fact, the worst possible scenario.

I didn't want to think Carrera's team was dead. Besides, that probably included Carillon, Frey, and everyone else, too.

Multiple Million Class members, all wiped out in the blink of an eye—it was unthinkable. If they encountered some kind of emergency, their first objective was to buy time—that was the rule we had. And now look.

It wasn't clear from the video, but Milim definitely appeared to be out of control. She was unleashing power well beyond normal as she waged this massive fight against Velzard. What caused this? I thought it over…and then I pictured something I wished I didn't. I couldn't obsess over it, though. Brooding wouldn't solve anything, and if Ramiris was already this frazzled, we'd all be screwed if I joined her.

Clearly, something bad was going down over there. But it was time to switch gears. What could *I* do about this? There was no point in panicking. In times like these, you needed to focus on what you could do in the moment. Keep calm, clear your mind, think of how to respond, and act.

"Summon the remaining Dungeon Marvels," I said. "Have Gobta's team come back for us; staying there any longer would be dangerous."

"But…"

"This battle between Milim and Velzard isn't going to wrap up that soon. If Milim's gone out of control, it'd take either me or Velzard to take her on, right?"

Not that I really wanted to. Like, if Milim had gone nuts, who really *could* stop her? When she and Guy clashed long ago, it was Ramiris who intervened to stop them, one way or the other…but I really couldn't expect an MVP performance like that from her right now. Then again, maybe there was a nonzero possibility…

"Hey, Ramiris… Quick question—do you think you could bring Milim back to her senses while I hold back Velzard?"

"Hey! Are you asking me to go out there and die, or what?!"

Thought so. I didn't expect that to be a solution anyway, and now I was sure of it. Ramiris was being too much of a baby to handle the situation.

"Yeah, I didn't think that would be possible. But I also didn't think they'd take this strategy where they'd deliberately set off Milim like this…"

I sighed. Benimaru was briskly assembling all my officers, and I needed to come up with our next move before then.

Honestly, I never saw it coming. Having a traitor in our ranks

was bad enough, and then we had an even worse disaster. I mean, I knew full well this was a pretty effective strategy against us, but—really—who would have expected them to actually *do* it?

…If Milim truly lost her mind, it may well destroy the world. This is a taboo move for both us and the enemy, and if someone was resolved enough to calmly go through with this, we will need to prepare for an even bigger crisis to come.

…Such as?

The most likely candidate is the release of the World-Destroyer Dragon Ivalage, but we had best be wary of other potential dangerous moves.

So no rules applied any longer? This really *was* awful. Trying to figure out how to rein in Milim was difficult enough, but Velzard was gonna get in my way the whole time? I thought I could tap Veldora for help, but the moment Velzard appeared on screen, he reportedly started acting all weird and ran out of the room, mumbling something about an errand he forgot to do. I swear. You can *never* rely on him when it counts.

Not that I was any better, though. If I could escape, I would've been doing so at full speed. But that would have meant, with no exaggeration, the end of the human race. Which I didn't want. I mean, if I was the only one left alive, what was the point of that? I'd much rather fight with everything I had than accept that fate.

No more whining. I flipped the switch in my mind and began to think seriously about what we'd do.

✳

Before the rest of my cabinet showed up, I had one more errand I wanted to tackle. There was a certain powerful assistant I had to summon.

(…So, yeah, can you come over ASAP?)

(Roger that, Sir Rimuru! Sir Guy didn't seem too enthusiastic

about it, but please allow me, Raine, to exercise my consummate negotiation skills on him!)

Yes, I had tried to call for Guy.

If I can be honest for a moment, there was no way for me alone to take on both Velzard and Milim at the same time, no matter how hard I tried. You couldn't win a war by having enough heart or guts, or "wanting it more" or whatever. I had no intention of getting in a fight I couldn't win—and if I had no choice but to dive in, I wanted to make every effort to improve my chances, even if it was just a little.

So I sent a Thought Communication over to Guy, and he refused. Maybe he detected Velzard and Milim were fighting and noped right out of that? Nah, I doubt it. Guy, unlike Veldora, was aware of his responsibilities. Chances were he thought there was some even worse threat waiting for us. That was the same conclusion Ciel came to, which was enough to trigger depression in me.

We were dealing with a mountain of problems. Even if I roped Guy in, I could have him handle Velzard, but I'd inevitably have to deal with Milim myself. I could see myself hurtling toward that conclusion, but the fact I had no plan beyond that point was a major anxiety.

If this was nothing but a duel, I could manage. But as it stood, it'd be tough to take on Milim without gravely affecting the area around us, much less the planet itself. I'd probably have my hands full not dying. I'd be able to resurrect myself as long as Veldora was around, but if I was knocked out of the fight, it'd be that much more of a burden on Guy and we'd be blown out after all. No matter how strong Guy was, I really thought taking on *those* two was a doomed proposal from the start. And even worse, unless we handled them *just right*, we could wind up destroying the planet in the process.

Bad news, no matter how you sliced it. And now all this talk of Feldway and Ivalage… I defeated Michael, and then these new challenges cropped up one after the other. Whenever I tried thinking of measures to take, my mind just catastrophized every kind of scenario imaginable.

As I agonized, Raine finally gave me an answer.

(Okay, Sir Rimuru, it's a go! Sir Guy was more than willing to accept my proposal—)

(Rimuru, why the hell are you using my Raine as your errand

girl?)

Oof!

That was Guy, of course, interrupting my Thought Communication with Raine. I guess he didn't understand why Raine and I were getting along so well, but there was a reason for that, of course. As of late, I had come to recognize Raine's talent as an artist, and I was commissioning her for various personal things. She proved to be quite open to my requests and established herself as my personal painter, more or less. To be more exact, I was her patron, helping her flesh out her talents.

How did we build this kind of relationship? Well, after that meeting at Leon's castle, I had a look at the paintings I'd confiscated from Diablo…and actually, I found Raine's work very much to my liking. They were wonderful, in fact, almost like photographs. She didn't use a model, either—she could depict all this expression just by spreading the wings of her imagination. There were even nudes, too! (Purely artistic, of course.) The pursuit of beauty has no limits, after all, just as there are no bounds to my desires. There weren't any ulterior motives or anything. It was just that, as someone who pursued "beauty" in my own way, I had an intellectual curiosity that drove me to approach her.

"Raine," I'd said, "can you paint nudes without a model?" And Raine, upon hearing my innocent question, had replied: "It'll cost you." Not a yes or a no, but an "it'll cost you." So I quietly offered her a bag of gold coins. Without raising an eyebrow, she quickly slipped it into her pocket. Then, with an attitude as calm and detached as ever, she'd said, "It's nonsense to give a demon gold coins…but I do respect you, Sir Rimuru."

At the time, I thought this would be the start of an advanced battle of the minds. So I obliquely replied, "Well, what do you want?"

There was nothing advanced about it at all, and you weren't oblique about it, either. You were as direct as it gets.

Well, ignoring this heckling from the stand for a moment, here's how Raine reacted. She'd looked straight at me with those pure eyes of hers and said, "I have an interest in those things you call 'store points.'"

After that…well, let's just say winning her over was pretty easy.

So after a personal meeting where we discussed a bunch of things, I agreed to become Raine's patron and support her artistic endeavors. If Ciel had been kind enough to preserve those images in my brain back then, I wouldn't have been so enthusiastic…but since Ciel proved uncooperative with me at the most critical of moments, I instead found a new path involving Raine's paintings.

…Tch.

Hmm? I thought I heard someone click their tongue at me… but I'm sure I'm just hearing things. Audio hallucinations stemming from fatigue or something. I mean, I didn't do anything untoward, so…

I do not understand why so many of your requests have nudity as a motif.

Oh, come on, Ciel! I thought there was nothing in this world you didn't understand! I'm sure it's just in your imagination! And that's the end of this topic!!

So Raine and I were closer than before, and as an outside collaborator, I could have her do my bidding. It was perhaps natural that Guy—unaware of this—was suspicious, but I had no obligation to explain everything to him all the time. So I stood my ground with him.

(Now's not the time for this! It's an emergency, so get your ass over here right now!)

And then I closed the Thought Communication.

The painting I asked Raine for, using Hinata as a model, was not yet complete, and there was no way in hell I was gonna let the world be blown up before I could see it. Once more, I vowed to do everything in my power to overcome this crisis.

✳

Everybody was gathered within five minutes of me giving the order to Benimaru. He was there, looking every part the commanding officer, and Diablo was as composed as ever, showing no sign of his earlier fatigue. Gobta, freshly recalled from his scouting mission because of the danger, was shivering in his seat. He was welcome to sit this one out, but I guess he had more of a sense of responsibility than I gave him credit for.

Ranga, by the way, had retreated into my shadow. Pretty shrewd of him, maybe, but I find that kind of cute. After everything we'd been through, I wanted to be sure he got ample rest. Geld, after all, was undergoing emergency treatment for his injuries. He was out of the woods, but he was worn out in a way simple potions couldn't keep up with, so he had been taken to our rarely used rehab facility.

Gabil, who was accompanying Geld, was also hospitalized at Shuna's discretion. He, too, was a lot more exhausted than he looked—perfectly fine on the outside, about to die on the inside. That was the unexpected pitfall of relying on potions too much; people could seem totally healthy just because they didn't look hurt at all. For monsters, though, magicule count was equivalent to their life force. Deplete it and it could easily cost you your life. I ran into that situation several times naming people, so it was no joke to me, either. Gabil was all gung-ho about attending this meeting, but I forced him to keep resting.

There was one other seriously injured member among us. That was Leon. Diablo had taken him to our medical facility, and he was expected to survive, they told me. Shuna said he should wake up soon, and given that he was a former Hero and current demon lord, it sounded like he was recovering tremendously quickly. I would've liked him to attend the meeting if he were up in time for it, but I couldn't force him. There was no time to wait for his recovery, though, so he'd be absent for this one, sadly.

Beyond that, we had Kumara, Zegion, and Apito from the labyrinth. Adalmann and his team were defending Lubelius with Shion, and old man Gadora had joined them. The Dragon Lords wouldn't join us for stuff like this, so that covered the whole labyrinth contingent.

Hakuro, by the way, was still at training, performing guard duty for Chloe and the rest of the kids. Saare and Grigori were there with him; the former was a step ahead of the others, it

seemed, but Grigori was competing pretty well with the children. I didn't wanna call Hakuro in; it wouldn't do to make the kids all worried. Chloe had apparently faked an illness in order to come to my rescue, but this time she really *did* need to rest up. That was another reason why I didn't want Kenya and the other guys to start worrying about stuff.

Either way, they were in a safe floor of the labyrinth, away from any enemies that might venture in…but I didn't want to take any chances, either. So once we were done with this meeting, Kumara would be going right back there to join the kids.

I had another reason for this, too. Momiji and Alvis were taking refuge in the labyrinth, with Kaede accompanying them. The latter had experience with pregnancy and childbirth, so I couldn't ask for anyone more qualified. I went with this approach to ensure Benimaru could focus on his commander duties. Kaede also emphatically asked for our help, so we were going to have Hakuro focus on guarding them for the sake of Benimaru's family and their safety.

That was everybody at the meeting, but the small number of people on hand made me a bit uneasy. We had officials and commanders scattered all over the place, but we didn't even know if Carrera was safe…so maybe it was only natural that I felt more in "crisis mode" than ever before. Still, it was up to me to bottle up those fears and act dignified, just like Benimaru would.

We decided to begin our meeting in a conference hall adjacent to the Control Center, so we could be contacted immediately if something came up. Really, this wasn't the time for a leisurely debate anyway, so I figured this would be more of a lecture than a conference. It wasn't quite what I wanted, but there was a fierce battle going on as we spoke, the ground shaking at regular intervals. The Kingdom of Englesia might have been experiencing those tremors, too. If it kept up, the damage would be not only continent-wide, but planet-wide, too. It had to be stopped, so I hoped people wouldn't mind if I acted a bit like a despot.

The conclusion I had come to was that Guy and I would go out there and do something—a haphazard, irresponsible, reckless "plan" that could barely be described as such. But even my reliable partner Ciel couldn't come up with anything more

brilliant, so I had no choice but to plunge in with this.

"Thanks for coming, everyone," I began, getting right down to business. "With regards to Milim, I'm gonna go to her."

A wave of tension spread across the room. I could see why. A military leader going out himself to fight was usually beyond a bad idea. Maybe we did that a little more often on this planet than the one I came from, but it was rare to skip any and all discussion beforehand, so I was sure some people would have their thoughts about that.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… In that case, Sir Rimuru, I will join you."

Diablo was quick with that response. However:

"No, I know you're strong and all, but no way you can go easy when you're fighting Milim, okay?" I replied. "I think an enemy more up your alley is likely to show up, so exercise your talents on that guy for me instead, okay?"

My decision was final, and I didn't care what anyone said. If it was us against Milim and Velzard, bringing along a large army would do nothing but increase the body count.

…Against a foe of that level, there is no one else who could be counted as war power for us.

Ciel was in agreement. Benimaru, Zegion, Diablo—Ciel was assuring me they'd all be useless. If they dared to try their luck, there was a very good chance they'd die. It'd be one thing if the mission was to kill Milim, not stop her, but that was not what we were dealing with. It was all up to me to work this out.

I turned toward Guy, who was kind enough to attend.

"Apologies, but Guy, I want you to come along with me."

"…Huh?"

He glared at me, but I wasn't about to back down. I'd much rather try my luck at persuading Guy than attempt to stop an argument between two of the strongest in the world.

"Well, you're the leader of the Octagram, aren't you?" I asked. "I'm the newbie in that group, and right now, I really want a veteran to help out with this…"

My hope was to agitate Guy enough that I could get him involved in this plan. That would improve our chances to some extent, so hopefully he'd forgive me. But Guy interrupted me, a

dour look on his face:

“First you call me over here, and now you want me to help you? You got a lot of guts, you know that?”

“Whoa, whoa, I just want a little help because I’m too timid to go it alone, all right? I’m not messing around, I promise you. I’m serious.”

I bowed my head, hoping he’d understand I meant that. Seeing that, Guy’s attitude changed a little.

“Don’t you get it?” he asked me, his tone more serious. “I know you’re worried about Milim and all, but…”

Hmm. So Guy had come to the same conclusion as Ciel, I suppose. Instead of mediating between Milim and Velzard, his concern was more about what came after that. It depressed me more and more as I thought about it, but I still firmly believed we should tackle what we could first.

“You mean the possibility Ivalage could go free? I’m worried about that, yeah, but if the world is destroyed before that even happens, it’s all over anyway.”

I tried to show my resolve to him, not letting his intimidation get to me.

“…You picked up on that?”

Guy didn’t sound like he enjoyed that fact too much as he silently took a seat. I guess he was waiting for my reaction—which was good for me.

“I don’t actually know what Velzard’s goal here is,” I said. “I can’t imagine she really wanted to rile Milim or make her go berserk like this.”

Making her go into a rage was a means to some other goal. What did Velzard want her to do, though? If we knew that, maybe there was something we could do about it…but we didn’t have time to sit and stew over this. We’d have to save all that for later if we wanted to save Carrera and everyone else.

“Chances are,” Guy said as I thought this over, “Velzard wants to see how serious I am.”

“Huh?”

“Her goal hasn’t changed all this time. She wants to fight me for real and prove she’s better than me.”

“Um…?”

I looked at Guy, wondering where this was coming from all of a sudden. He looked dead serious. I guess he actually meant it.

“That’s why I didn’t want to take her on,” Guy reluctantly added.

Wow. Now this was starting to sound like a lovers’ quarrel—one that could destroy the world. It made me sick, but I couldn’t just ignore the topic.

“Well, whether that’s true or not, they’re going to shatter the planet if they keep fighting. We gotta stop them or else, right?”

“They’re *trying* to lure us over, though, aren’t they? If we don’t engage her, Feldway’s plan is gonna fizzle out. Isn’t that the best move to make?”

As Guy explained, this planet was created through the power of Veldanava and therefore wasn’t going to be catastrophically torn apart or anything. But Milim’s power was still rising, and if left unchecked, she’d encase the whole planet in a thick layer of contaminating magicules.

…Well, if there’s still gonna be a planet at the end of the day, then great. And I guess it made sense. After all, even Carrera’s magic wasn’t the sort you should really use on the surface of a planet. We only got away with it because we were on a world that could withstand such lethal force. Otherwise, at best, some attack from her would’ve bent the axis of the planet by then.

I was starting to see Guy’s argument. If we joined the fight at this point, it could be just what Feldway wanted—and at worst, we’d wind up having Ivalage plopped down upon us. Guy’s reasoning certainly wasn’t mistaken if we wanted to avoid that risk.

But…

I was just about to nod in agreement, but that option was long off the table.

“Well, sorry, but Carrera and a load of her allies are frozen in ice, and I’m not gonna just leave them there,” I said.

No, it wasn’t just Carrera. There was Frey, Carillon, and everyone else who was fighting down there. We’d never have a peaceful, happy world unless we rescued them. I was firm on that point; there’d be no convincing me otherwise.

“Tsk… Fine, fine. If that’s how you’re gonna be, I’ll go along with it.”

Guy got up, frustrated, like it was all out of his hands.

✳

“I think you understand this, but if we go seriously all-out over there, that’ll spread the magicule contamination across a wider space. So watch yourselves, okay?” said Guy.

I could say the same thing, y’know.

“*You’ve* already done that once, haven’t you? Be more careful,” I cautioned.

“Yeah! I can’t help you guys out this time, so nothing rough, okay? I tell you, if it’s just you guys, I’m so worried…”

Ramiris kept lecturing me, much to my chagrin—but then, I couldn’t really defend myself. We were so blatantly going in without a net it was almost funny, but I didn’t have any choice. I needed to stay strong, and besides, I’d been through experiences like this many times before.

“Right, so it’ll just be me and Guy trying to stop Milim,” I said. “Everyone else needs to be defending our home base and answering requests for help from other nations.”

I wasn’t leaving this open to debate, which I was sure dissatisfied a few of them, but after conferring with Ciel, it was the best solution I could come up with.

“I really would like to go with you, Sir Rimuru—”

“No.”

I shot Diablo’s proposal down before he could finish it. Yeah, I thought he could take our position in this fight well enough. I refused him anyway because I wanted him to stay back in case of any unforeseen events.

“I think Feldway’s aiming to do more than just resurrect Ivalage,” I said. “Chances are Daggrull’s upcoming attack on Luminus is a diversion, an attempt to divide up our war power. If I get stuck somewhere, then you, Benimaru, and Zegion are about all I can rely on to step in, so…”

I could trust Diablo, which was why I wanted him to stay. Feldway wasn’t our only foe, after all; Zeranus the Insect Lord was still kicking. Plus, as long as our labyrinth was intact, we’d never be “defeated”—not in the normal way, at least. All three of them needed to stay inside it for me, or else I’d feel even more anxious.

Benimaru was our chief commander, a vital role. Zegion I trusted to serve as guardian of the labyrinth. Between the former’s command, the latter’s strength, and the environment of the labyrinth, I knew we could hold out against even Zeranus. Add to that Diablo’s uncanny ability to handle

whatever he encountered, and even if an all-out attack was launched on the labyrinth, I thought—or I wanted to believe—we'd be able to cope.

So after a little coercion, I finally convinced all three of them. Them and Veldora.

"Me?" he said.

"That's right, Mr. Secret Weapon. You'll be our final, *final* last resort."

He'd looked a little peeved about not being called yet, but he gave me a satisfied nod. Like I've said many times, as long as Veldora was safe, I could come back to life anytime I wanted. I didn't want to actually test that out, but it was a kind of insurance, and it made all the difference in my mind.

Since I had snuffed out all further objections, I decided we should head out at once. The more time we spent, the slower our decisions would be, so I decided to let Veldora be our contingency for every other possible scenario.

"I'm counting on you, all right, Veldora?" I said. "I mean it!"

"Indeed, you are in good hands," he replied.

Seeing him nod at me was just the shot of confidence I needed.

"Rimuru," Ramiris said, flying up to me, "please help out Milim!"

"You got it!"

With a smile, I promised the anxious Ramiris I'd bring Milim back to her senses. No half measures would work on the strongest of demon lords, I knew, so I'd just have to hope my voice would reach her. If I could contain her anger well enough, at least, I was sure her good sense would come back naturally.

Still, I knew we'd need luck on our side. First, I was running on the assumption Guy could restrain Velzard for me. On top of *that*, we had to prepare for a long slog of a battle, fighting while ensuring we minimized the impact on this planet.

It was a new and unprecedented level of recklessness, even by my standards. Confronting Milim in this berserk state was akin to suicide in the first place… I told Diablo he had no chance, but I didn't really like *my* chances, either. But I had no choice.

"Benimaru, the Control Center is yours," I said.

"Take care, my lord!" he replied.

I was glad he was there, at least. We needed to be ready for

urgent requests from other countries, especially now that Lubelius was in a state of war. I had no idea how this would turn out. Things were changing from minute to minute, and we needed to respond with the times, deploying our remaining forces as best we could. The only person I could ask to handle such tricky logistical work was Benimaru. I nodded back at him.

Now, then…

Hold on, Milim! Don't kick so much ass that you cause any more damage!

It was time to open Milim's eyes back up before it was too late. Guy and I left with everyone's anxious gazes—and an almost too heavy amount of expectation—behind us.



After Rimuru and Guy left, the atmosphere in the meeting room turned languid.

"I'm not sure I have ever felt so helpless before," muttered Diablo—an eloquent expression of what was on everyone's minds.

"You said it," Benimaru truthfully replied. "I was told I had a major role to play in analyzing the situation and leading the command, but I'd give up all that in a heartbeat if I could join Sir Rimuru."

He didn't passionately object to this because he thought Rimuru had made the right call, but deep down, Rimuru was a lot more precious to him than any of his allies.

Things were just different this time. Rimuru wasn't at all his usual easygoing self. In fact, he seemed quite nervous. He was trying to hide it to keep everyone from worrying, but Benimaru had known him for too long. He could tell at a glance—they just didn't have the upper hand this time.

"I guess we were all kind of taking advantage of Sir Rimuru still, weren't we?" said Benimaru. "I never meant to, but…"

"Yes," agreed Diablo. "If this is Sir Rimuru's desire, I will obey it…but I'm not sure even *he* thinks he can give anything but a hundred-percent effort in battle here. It's quite upsetting."

"Not just that," Benimaru added. "Between Feldway, Jahil, and the demon lord Daggrull, we have so many foes we need to

watch for, and I can't say we have enough manpower to tackle them all. I'm sure that's why he wanted you to help us out instead, Diablo."

He was pretty much right on the nose. That was only natural, considering how long he and Rimuru had worked together. That was why Benimaru was so down on himself.

"Well, no use pitying ourselves," concluded Zegion. "We have to put our heads down and carry out our assigned tasks."

He, too, understood just how important the labyrinth was. He warned those under him not to let unnecessary anxiety interfere with their given duties. The labyrinth team would head back to their own territory to fully prepare for whatever enemy might come at whatever time.

Benimaru chuckled at Zegion. "Heh… You're right. Everyone, brace yourselves and get ready for your mission!"

With that final word of encouragement, everyone went back to work, hoping to fulfill the responsibilities Rimuru had granted to them.

Ramiris and her team were hurriedly flitting about. They had a lot to do, and keeping busy was one way to stave off the anxiety.

In time, the Control Center returned to its usual sort of atmosphere…but the fragile sense of normalcy quickly faded away with the return of Soei.

"You're back, Soei?" Benimaru asked.

"Yeah. Where is Sir Rimuru?"

"Out for now. A serious situation has come up, and he's going to deal with it."

"Ugh. So we have to rely on him yet again…?"

Benimaru couldn't agree more with that sentiment. "So," he asked, "what's going on? You seem in a hurry."

Soei composed himself and began his report.

"I was investigating the movements of Daggrull's force under orders from Sir Rimuru, but…"

He started laying out the fruits of his labor.

In the Holy Void of Damargania, there existed an underground city, buried beneath the desert, that served as an emergency shelter. When the once-prosperous capital was destroyed, the giants abandoned the surface and developed a

large underground cavern centered around a lake, creating a living space that could support tens of thousands of people. The women and children among the giants were still there, apparently living life as normal.

Witnessing this, Soei concluded those living underground had not been affected by the changes undergone by Daggrull. Relieved, he began to look into why Daggrull betrayed his allies in the first place.

His first stop was the royal palace. There were only a few soldiers guarding it, but the government administration was still at work inside. None of them had heard about Daggrull's behavior; in fact, they welcomed Soei as an envoy from an allied nation. After listening to their stories, Soei was able to pinpoint the potential cause of this crisis. He had no concrete evidence to back it up, but since there was no other intelligence to refute it, Soei saw fit to return home and report to his superiors.

"…Aha. So Daggrull had two brothers, one of whom was banished, and he was once feared as an evil destroying god marauding the land?" said Benimaru.

"Exactly," replied Soei. "He had a change of heart after Lord Veldanava defeated him, and after he met the current queen Kisara, he became the calmer figure we knew up to now, apparently."

"I see the old myths shouldn't be dismissed as mere myths. This one, at least, is based on a kernel of truth."

"Yeah, I think so, too. And if so…"

"…It's the return of that evil god we should be worried about."

Benimaru and Soei nodded their agreement to each other. Everyone else listening watched them, stern looks on their faces.

"Hmm… That might be the case, yeah. Daggrull is kind of the incarnation of a natural force, and he fought Veldanava a super long time ago, too."

The unexpected contribution from Ramiris lent even more credence to this reasoning.

"By the way, how strong was this evil god?" Benimaru asked her.

"Oh, *real* strong. Not as much as I am, but stronger than my master back then, at least."

“Mmm?” said Veldora.

“Ah, but you’re *way* stronger now, Master!”

Veldora never liked chatter about anyone outmuscling him, so Ramiris quickly corrected herself. Whether she actually believed that or not was unclear, but either way, Daggrull in his evil god days clearly rivaled a True Dragon, at least in strength.

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Bad news always seems to be followed by more bad news. The second wave of it was from Mjöllmile, who came charging into the Control Center.

“I have something important to tell you all! Big Mama—um, that is, Emperor Elmesia—just sent an urgent message informing us Thalion is now in a state of war!”

“What?!”

Benimaru demanded more details.

Mjöllmile replied that he’d received a call on his cell phone. There were several means of communication available between Thalion and the Western Nations, but Elmesia must have decided this direct line was her best bet this time. Mjöllmile, sensing the urgency after the emperor called him personally, rushed over as he talked to her.

He was still catching his breath, but had enough to give the basic summary. Thalion was under attack by Zarario and Jahil, who had led their main military forces to stage an assault.

“So it’s a full-on attack, not a diversion?” Benimaru asked Mjöllmile.

“Indeed it is!”

“I know Thalion has Lady Sylvia, but it could be hard going for them…”

Benimaru groaned. Sylvia could fight, yes, well enough that her against Benimaru would be a pretty exciting duel to watch. But Jahil had given him the fight of his life. There was a certain chemistry involved with any battle matchup, but if both Jahil and the powerful Zarario were there, Sylvia wouldn’t be able to do much alone.

“Argos monitoring magic successfully switched over. Playing feed from the area!”

The quick-witted Alpha projected the scene from Thalion

onto the main screen. It depicted a tree dating from ancient times, large enough to house a full-size city. This was the holy tree of Thalion, the pride of the nation.

Here and there, on its trunk and branches, flashes of light were twinkling. They were tiny in the video, like sparklers, but considering the size of the tree, they were undoubtedly large-scale explosions.

“Jahil’s fire? He’s not playing around.”

“What’ll we do, Benimaru?”

Benimaru, hearing Soei’s question, scowled in anguish. Unless they sent someone over there, Thalion was likely to fall—but they had no one to send. Deploying an inferior force would do little to help; they had to send one that could ensure victory. Over in the labyrinth, people carried out suicide missions without having to fear death. Even if victory wasn’t guaranteed, it was easy enough to stall for time in there.

Outside the labyrinth, however…

“Guess I’ll have to go.”

Benimaru, Diablo, and Zegion—even these three were no guarantee against Jahil’s force. If they sent anyone else, it’d be like sending them to the gallows.

“Shall I go as well, then?”

Diablo made the offer, but Benimaru stopped him. He had a bad feeling about that, although he couldn’t articulate why.

“No,” he said. “I’ve fought Jahil once, and I was no match for him then, but I think I have a winning plan now.”

Benimaru had been training hard in the labyrinth, reassessing his abilities. There was no visible change yet, no increase in his magicule count, but his abilities had most certainly improved. That was no guarantee he could win against Jahil—but he still exuded all the confidence he could, if only to assuage everyone’s fears.

“Hmm…”

Diablo, taking Benimaru’s intentions into consideration, fell silent. Benimaru nodded his thanks to him.

“Besides,” he continued, “if this turns out to be a diversion, it’d be dangerous to divert any more resources away from the labyrinth, our main keep. My gut tells me it’s better for you to stay here.”

“Very well. If that is what you say, Sir Benimaru, I will heed your orders.”

Rimuru had left Benimaru in charge. He was above Diablo in the chain of command, something Diablo understood well enough, so he wasn't going to defy him. Still, he wanted to speak his mind to him.

"…You do realize that Zarario is a major threat, yes?" Diablo asked.

Benimaru was wary of Jahil, but in Diablo's mind, Zarario was even worse.

"That man is a true warrior," Diablo insisted. "His magicule count is not the highest, but his latent skill is quite impressive."

However, this observation wasn't enough to sway Benimaru. It did cause him to waver a bit, but he banished his indecision, not showing any of it to Diablo.

"I'm heading out," Benimaru said. "That's my final decision."

"Heh. Are you trying to imitate Rimuru? Who'll serve as commander?"

"I can handle that duty in Thalion, too," Benimaru avowed. He knew this was pretty reckless, but he still wanted to push through with it.

"Benimaru," Veldora said, "have you forgotten about me? Someone like myself could defeat little ants like Jahil or Zarario with a single flick of my wrist, you know."

Veldora's supreme confidence once again shook Benimaru's resolve. Now that Rimuru had defeated Michael, there was less reason for Feldway to target Veldora. Benimaru's instincts as a commander told him he should make better use of their best weapon of all instead of keeping it under wraps deep in the labyrinth. But at the same time, his instincts—his wild intuition, one might call it—said it was a bad idea. So without showing any emotion, he turned the offer down.

"Certainly, Sir Veldora, Jahil would be no match for you. But…"

"Mmm? Is there some concern you have in mind?"

Benimaru snorted a bit. He was full of concerns. And he had a good reason not to send Veldora, their greatest weapon, to Jahil.

"My worry is about the evil god we discussed earlier. I've heard before, Sir Veldora, that the demon lord Daggrull was once an eager fighting partner of yours. On top of that, we have his younger brother, the giant called Fenn, who has been sealed away since ancient times. Those two were almost even with

each other, right?”

Diablo nodded under Benimaru’s gaze. “I did not see them fight, but from a distance, I received the impression Fenn was the superior fighter.”

“Ah. Well, he showed up in Ultima’s report, too, so there’s no doubting the threat he poses. Even with the demon lord Luminus on hand, I’m not sure Shion, Adalmann, and all their forces together could beat them.”

Both Daggrull and Fenn were comparable to True Dragons—that was a fair assumption. And they couldn’t ignore Glasord, either. He reportedly fought evenly with the demon lord Leon, so beating him would likely be a challenge as well. That, and there were even more unknown talents among the giants’ army. If Daggrull were to go into full “evil god” mode in these circumstances…

These were all just possibilities, but Benimaru couldn’t shake off his unease.

“However,” countered Veldora, “we still have time before they reach Lubelius, don’t we? If I went to Thalion and wrapped up matters over there fast…”

“That’s just wishful thinking. If Sir Rimuru has a secret way to instantly teleport his troops around, we should assume the enemy has something similar as well.”

Rimuru advised them that simply buying time would help them enough. Benimaru agreed with that, and he was still reminding himself not to let his guard down.

Besides…he could sense some kind of presence clinging to the back of his neck. A premonition of danger provided by his internal instincts. He couldn’t say why, but he could just sense something was happening in Lubelius.

“As I said, Sir Veldora, we need you to be ready if things go really bad.”

Rimuru liked to keep calling Veldora his secret weapon, and Benimaru agreed with that assessment. If you had a surefire winner in your hand, it generally worked out better if you left it unused until the very end. If you found yourself in a position to play it, that pretty much meant the worst had happened. And if some other unexpected event came along on top of that…it’d mean the end for their side.

“All right,” Veldora said. “I will be here, so feel free to fight to your heart’s content!”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh… Imagine, Sir Benimaru himself joining the fray. Allow me to handle matters back here…but we also look forward to your continued command.”

Diablo was now on Benimaru’s side on this question…and so it was decided.

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He would take several other people with him. They knew Jahil and Zarario were there, but that might not be all the firepower the enemy had. At times like these, the defending side is always at a disadvantage, so they had to be prepared for whatever kind of attack the enemy could throw at them.

“I’ll join you.”

Soei was the first to volunteer. Benimaru, not against this, readily agreed to the offer. He’d be good for goading and distracting the enemy with the arsenal of skills he had—and his adeptness with them all let him perform well above what his stats suggested.

But who else would come along? That was the conundrum. Team Kurenai was too exhausted for the job. Gobta and Ranga were the same way. The latter was in a deep sleep within Rimuru’s shadow to recover his lost strength, but Gobta was, well, relatively healthy?

“Yeah, but I dunno about just bringing Gobta alone…,” Benimaru mused.

“I don’t wanna die yet, sir!”

With Gobta himself providing this valuable piece of feedback, the room agreed to count him out for now.

The labyrinth forces could also travel to Thalion, but Benimaru discounted the idea. He thought it was smarter to keep them in the labyrinth instead of dragging them to some new, unfamiliar land.

But this meant it’d be just two of them over there.

“Well, so be it,” Benimaru said. “Soei and I work well together anyway. We shouldn’t die, at the very least.”

“Right,” agreed Soei. “We’ll have Lady Sylvia and Emperor Elmesia on hand, too. If we can work well as a team, we might be able to find a path.”

Elmesia was visible on the main screen depicting the scene

from Thalion.

“Wow,” gasped Mjöllmile. “Big Mama’s sure fighting up a storm…or, really, I’m astounded she’s this much of a fighter at all!”

It was a surprise for everyone, not just Mjöllmile. Sylvia and Elmesia, almost impossible to tell apart in looks, were also remarkably similar in battle ability. The only major difference was that Sylvia used lightning in her fighting style, while Elmesia preferred wind. This was an unexpected asset on their side—and a happy surprise for Benimaru, for a change.

Now their chances of winning were better, if just slightly, and Benimaru and Soei felt a little bit more optimistic about it.

But then Beta—monitoring video feeds from assorted locations—shouted out in a stiff voice, “Urgent report! Lady Milim and Lady Velzard have begun to move. If they continue in their current direction, they will smash right into the sacred tree that protects Thalion!”

Everyone’s eyes focused on the large screen. The red dot on it represented Milim; the blue one, Velzard. They were both moving at a frightening speed, as if intertwined with each other. Beta was right—at this rate, they were on a crash course for Thalion.

“Why are they doing that? Did Rimuru do something?”

No one had an answer for Veldora.

“If someplace gets caught in that,” a pallid-looking Benimaru said, “it’s gonna be burned to ash.”

“Perhaps this is what Feldway was trying to accomplish.”

Velzard’s blizzard had iced over the battlefield in the former Eurazania. Thanks to that, for better or for worse, the damage itself had been kept to a minimum. That meant nothing unless Velzard lifted the freezing ice, but there was still hope that not everything was lost. But that might not be true. Any direct hit from a crazed Milim would immediately vaporize an entire city…and Thalion wasn’t the only place in danger.

“Does he want the world to perish at the hands of Lady Milim?” Benimaru asked.

“I cannot say for sure,” Diablo calmly replied, “but given how crazy he is, that’s certainly a possibility.”

If Feldway’s true aim was simply to spread death and destruction all over the place, perhaps this was his way of priming the pump for Ivalage’s summoning. It was a possibility,

one Diablo had just pointed out, and it seemed plausible to Benimaru, too. If *Diablo* thought he was crazy, he must have been way off his rocker indeed. Who could even tell what someone like that might be thinking?

Either way, Thalion was in danger of being wiped off the map. And after that, where would the next target be? The Western Nations? El Dorado? Or maybe they'd just pass through all the cities before finishing up at the labyrinth? They didn't have enough information to go on. Just thinking like this wouldn't provide any answers.

"There's no time to dwell on this," Benimaru said, standing up.

Rimuru was on the scene. If Diablo's hunch was correct, he was desperately trying to stop this onrush. Instead of agonizing over it, Benimaru reasoned, he should step up and do something. He wasn't averse to the "no guts, no glory" credo. His confidence could occasionally get the best of him that way, leading him to think anything was possible if he tried. But that was only true for himself—dragging other people into that was against his principles.

"Sorry, Soei," he said.

"Don't worry about it."

Those were the only words that needed to be exchanged. With that, they were both resolved and ready to go out into a potentially deadly situation…

"I'll come, too."

…but then the demon lord Leon, who had slipped out of his hospital bed and joined them in the Control Center at some point, announced his presence. And what's more:

"And me. I have such a grudge against Jahil, I can't even begin to explain it to you."

Kagali was there, too, her face so determined that it was clear she'd never take no for an answer.

Teare was behind her as well. "I gotta kick that guy's ass and free Footman from him! I'll do whatever it takes for that!"

She shed tears as she declared her will. And Benimaru had no reason to stop her.

"No need to hold back," he said. "I will gladly accept your offer."

They had their team. And now the missing pieces were in place.

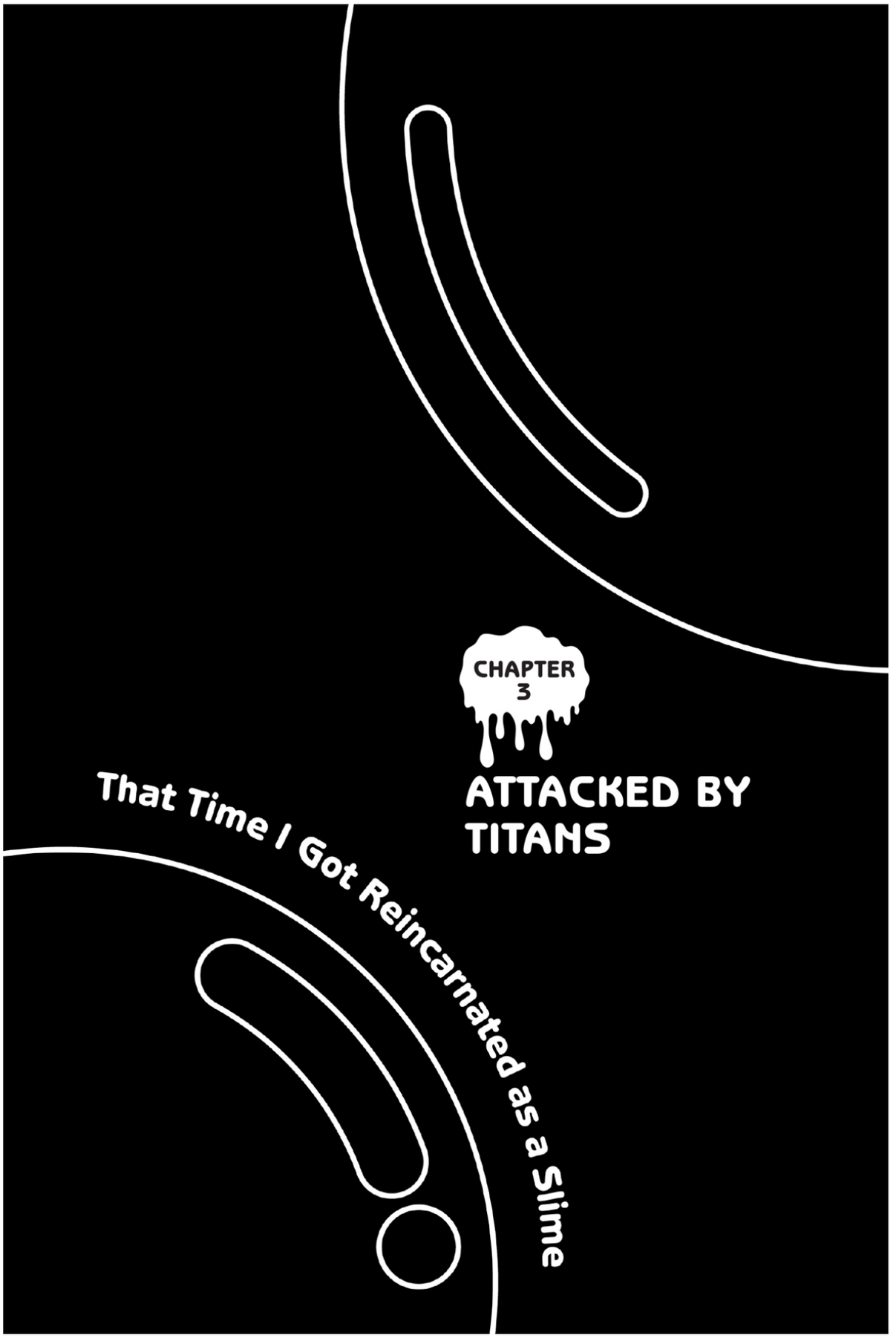
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Even after Benimaru left with his teammates, the Control Center remained a hive of bustling activity. Data was being gathered from across the world to send to Benimaru. Everyone busily working there had the same wish: *I don't want anything more to happen*.

It was the hope of the entire Control Center that everyone would at least come back safe. But even this modest hope was about to be dashed.

"Urgent message from Sir Adalmann!" cried Beta. "He's engaged the enemy giants at the Long Wall in the desert!"

It was the moment when Benimaru's premonition came true in the worst possible way. The greatest battle yet had begun.


CHAPTER
3
ATTACKED BY
TITANS
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 3

ATTACKED BY TITANS

Along the border between the Barren Lands and the Western Nations was a structure called the Long Wall.

The stories said it was built by the god Luminus to guard civilization—nowadays, the small nations on the other side—from the hot sands known as the Deadly Desert. It had been considered a sacred wall because it was protected by a special barrier of its own: the Monster Exclusion Barrier. It was common knowledge that it protected human-inhabited lands from outside intruders.

This barrier was activated to protect the Long Wall, blocking any monsters looking to invade from the Deadly Desert. The mechanism behind it was simple: It dispersed any large gathering of magicules in the area, preventing the spontaneous formation of giant monsters. At the same time, it actively repelled magicules, which meant the more powerful the monster, the more it was pushed away from the wall.

It wasn't perfect, of course, and sometimes monsters made their way in through holes. However, since many desert dwellers hunted these monsters for a living, there hadn't been any major problems so far.

The Long Wall was also considered the front line in the ongoing battle against monsters, making it a regular patrol site for the Crusaders. The paladins running these tours of duty would look for and repair wall breaches, as well as defeat monsters on the wrong side of the wall to keep the locals safe.

This long history behind the Long Wall had helped entrench the people's faith in the god Luminus. The legend of this wall and the safety it offered had become an unshakable part of the culture.

But that day, after two thousand years, the Long Wall would

reveal its true face.

A skeleton clad in sacred robes was atop the Long Wall. It was Adalmann.

Just a few moments before, a spatial distortion had been detected in the area. From it immediately sprang an army of giants, freshly teleported in.

“The enemy transported itself here. Ohhh, just as my master said!”

Adalmann almost sounded happy about it. Rimuru’s prediction coming true was a moment more of excitement for him than fear. But he wasn’t carried away enough to forget his task, either. Now that he had just sent a Thought Communication back home, he switched his attention to the battle in earnest.

Meanwhile, the giants who came in through the transport were totally convinced their sneak attack was a success. Thanks to Mai’s skill, they had just replaced several days of marching with a few quick steps through a portal. The enemy must have been in a state of complete panic.

Daggrull and his men had demonstrated their intention to march in order to catch Luminus off guard. They must’ve been basing their strategy on what they saw, so their ability to engage the giants couldn’t have been at its best.

But that wasn’t the case. It wasn’t anything worth panicking about—at least, not yet—and besides, they had built a defense network that could handle a monster strike, morning, noon, and night. They knew full well the real threats of the Bound Titans would take a while longer to arrive.

The threat with these invaders wasn’t numbers, but sheer overwhelming force. Each giant was built like a rock, and there were several different types of them—giant ogres, cyclops, multi-armed hecatoncheires. All had converged to stage this assault.

Seeing this army of Daggrull’s, Adalmann laughed. “Heavens, what a spectacle *this* is! It may be a little too much for my poor little skeletons to handle.”

“A little, you say…?”

A beautiful purple-haired woman next to him provided this retort. It was Shion, looking fine as always in her suit.

“To be honest, it may not be…all *that* easy, but I’m sure it’ll work out.”

Adalmann, being an unexpectedly competitive sort, didn’t like whining about his plight before a battle began. His army was all undead, after all, so he could always revive them.

“Oh? Do you have a plan?”

Shion was wondering why Adalmann was so confident.

“Well, nothing as elaborate as a plan, but Alberto’s command is certainly an impressive thing. And look at that! Feast your eyes on our army ranks!”

He pointed to the orderly lines of soldiers—the Immortal Legion—he ruled over.

“Have you noticed? The equipment granted to us by our god has reached even our swarms of bone soldiers!”

Shion realized what this was. Adalmann just wanted to show off to her.

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…

Adalmann had command over a legion of undead monsters he had summoned. These immortal creatures, marching in a single lengthy line in perfect rhythm, were one of the more spectacular sights inside the Long Wall at that moment.

It consisted of two thousand death knights. This was an unkillable order of undead knights, mounted on death horses and led by Death Lord officers. Each death knight was clad in full-body “magic mail,” top-quality armor crafted in the dwarven workshops. They weren’t forged by Garm himself, but the apprentices responsible used generous amounts of highly purified magisteel in each set, making them truly high-end products. They all did their jobs exceedingly well, and the magic mail resonated with the demonic force of the death knights themselves, merging with each body.

With this dramatic increase in their defense and offense, these death knights were much more dangerous than the A-minus they were originally assigned would suggest. They were all now about as close to an A as one could get, strong enough to live up to their reputations as their force’s main attackers.

They weren’t alone, either. In addition to that main force, there were a few other hidden gems on the team.

Deployed atop the Long Wall were sets of lower-ranked

monsters, the sort that lacked any really direct offensive punch. There were fifty thousand of them in all—ten thousand zombie soldiers, twenty thousand bone soldiers, ten thousand bone archers, and ten thousand bone knights. A lot of large numbers, but each troop was a pushover, ranking a D at best.

None of them would be useful as soldiers, but their secret lay in their equipment. Adalmann had reason to be proud of it—it was a vast investment, with the Tempest workshops working overtime to craft this new set of weapons. They all sported matching armor, and although the colors varied by rank, this armor was as high-quality as anything else bearing the Tempest seal. Each set offered a decent amount of protection, as well as fire and cold resistance as an added bonus.

Another thing that stood out was the portable, recoil-free missile launchers the bone archers carried. These weapons, capable of firing projectiles at five times the speed of sound, were packed with both explosives and compressed magical force. The ammunition was carried by the bone soldiers, two of them assigned to support a single bone archer. The result: ten thousand mobile artillery batteries. Each trio didn't have a ton of bullets, though—just the one loaded from the start, plus two more carried by each soldier, for a total of fifty thousand shots across the whole force.

Furthermore, the zombie shoulders were carrying assault rifles. These worked with gunpowder, no magic involved, but their destructive force was underestimated at one's peril. The rifles wouldn't affect enemies that were resistant to physical attacks, but against the low-level giants, they'd probably perform quite well.

Firearms like these had been fully researched and implemented in battle, but they were illegal to manufacture by decree from Rimuru. For this war, however, permission was granted for their experimental deployment, on the condition that each gun needed both an engraved production number and a magic tracker installed. This was one of those cases where Rimuru was so busy with work one day that he just stamped his seal of approval on whatever documents crossed his desk without really looking at them. (Only Ciel knew that, however.) Rimuru had no idea he had approved this, and

maybe Adalmann was better off not knowing that.

These weren't the only secret weapons, either. Last but not least were the bone knights' equipment. Remarkably, they were all equipped with the same type of imperial magic saber and even had spellguns dangling from their belts—thorough if nothing else. These arms were seized from the Empire and redistributed, greatly boosting the bone knights' offense, although it left them much more undefended. It was a pretty rash move to make, but the way Adalmann saw it, if these undead rank and filers didn't fear death at all, their weak fighting strength could be somewhat covered for if he incorporated some suicide tactics into their orders.

That was the whole Immortal Legion—an army of immortals who didn't have to eat or sleep, assigned to provide the first line of defense against attacks.

The thing about this army, though, was that all their stats had gone up after accepting Adalmann's rule. Their attributes had also been changed by Holy-Evil Inversion, a part of the ultimate gift Grimoire, so they were unaffected by the Monster Exclusion Barrier placed over the Long Wall. Even by day, they could conduct their maneuvers with no difficulty at all. These troops couldn't be revived if defeated, unlike in the labyrinth…but holy magic no longer worked on them, so they couldn't be "purified" by moves like Turn Undead.

How terrifying would an undead foe that had become a holy entity be? Just ask the enemies forced to deal with them. Normal attacks didn't kill them, so the only way to stop them at all was to hack them apart.

So the Immortal Legion was deployed to engage the enemy, taking advantage of the Long Wall's structure as it did.

The wall was built so an observer up at the top, sixteen feet above, had a full view ahead of them, which was useful for sniper warfare. It was originally constructed under the command of Luminus, after all, as a defense line against Daggrull's attempts at territorial expansion. They weren't expecting the Immortal Legion to carry *these* sorts of weapons, though. The original plan called for vampires to lob magic at any invaders to fend them off, but if they had something better now, there was no reason not to use it. Better not to sweat the details, as Rimuru would say.

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Shion’s eyes narrowed as she looked down at the proud soldiers serving Adalmann. Her initial, honest assessment: No matter how many skeletons you lined up, what was the use? But when she saw the equipment they had, she changed her mind. Or more to the point…

“Adalmann… If I might ask, how did you procure all that equipment?”

A soldier’s gear was provided by their superiors. That was the common understanding among all the officers. If you applied for something and got permission, it’d be sent right over to you. Such gear deployments, however, ran on a waiting list, one not even the top brass could skip ahead on.

First dibs on the gear produced in Tempest’s forges were given to the Second Army Corps, headed by Geld. No one complained about that, as that corps was directly involved with homeland defense. Everyone in that force had at least some equipment. There was so much around that maintenance was a hassle, but being made of magisteel, most scratches repaired themselves. Even now, in fact, most of the forges’ output went right to the Second Corps.

After the Second Corps, the forges’ second job was to build commercial gear for adventurers. This was one way Tempest earned its foreign currency, so even if Team Reborn leader Shion wanted to nab some of that gear for her own squad, she was barred from it.

Thanks to all this, if a Tempest officer like her wanted to get some free gear for their troops, they’d have to wait far too long for it.

Team Reborn, for example, was full of beefy guys who trained constantly every day. That was commendable, of course, but could also be counterproductive. Some might take it for granted, since they were professional soldiers, but they often broke their equipment or tore their uniforms, so they had to visit repair shops on a pretty frequent basis. All the work was provided for free, of course, something Shion received a lot of complaints about.

There was no way she could beg for new equipment while her army was antagonizing the top brass, so Team Reborn’s official gear set hadn’t changed at all from its first version. Even

that first-gen stuff was only given to officers and the original members; new recruits couldn't even touch any of it. They'd instead get equipment made by apprentices for practice and stuff like that. Work was being done on improving these items, but there was no uniformity to any of it, forcing soldiers to demonstrate their Team Reborn affiliation by wearing purple armbands or bandannas.

For Shion, who had no choice but to plead to Rimuru for some new gear, seeing the relative newcomer Adalmann secure all this fancy junk raised all sorts of questions. When she asked about it, the skeleton smiled.

"Oh, it's very simple. I took several wagonloads of the cheap equipment worn by adventurers, melted it down, then used the monetary proceeds to purchase iron ore directly… That sort of thing. I have contacts in the merchant class, so I called in some favors, too."

"Wait. I didn't think you saw any labyrinth challengers make it down to your floor yet."

Shion was right to suspect Adalmann. He was the overseer of Floors 61 through 70, which counted as hidden levels.

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, I have my best handmade monsters visit the other levels. It helps train them, too, you know. Two birds with one stone!"

So Adalmann was sending his monsters around to work a side gig of sorts for him. The classic "it's not a crime if nobody saw it" kind of thing. Shion was impressed he had kept it going for this long.

"Oh, and you know, the imperial soldiers who invaded the labyrinth… I was quite impressed with all the rather nice equipment they had! But hunting down iron golems was the big moneymaker, of course…"

Adalmann's cheerful voice explained everything to Shion. Now she was sure of it. He wasn't just playing around with adventurers in the labyrinth. He was gathering raw materials, too.

Floors 51 to 60 had a lot of rocky terrain; you'd occasionally see golems down there. The iron golems among them were rich in high-quality ore, and if you defeated them, stored them somewhere in the labyrinth, and waited long enough, you'd "grow" a cache of high-quality magisteel. Iron golems were tough enough to make for good training, and you could also

harvest material from them. It really *was* two birds with one stone, and Shion couldn't help but grit her teeth after seeing how well-funded it had made Adalmann.

Or, really…

Wait. Is he making more money than I am?!

The thought struck Shion like a thunderbolt. For all she knew, Adalmann wasn't the only floor boss padding his wallet this way. As for Shion? Well, she never had much attachment to money in the first place.

The ogre homeland she lived in had some otherworlder blood, so they had knowledge of their practices. She understood the concept of money and all…but really, she was indifferent to it. Only recently did she begin paying attention to stuff like that. It felt patently absurd to see her worry about Adalmann raking more of it in than her, given she didn't even own a wallet.

Recently, though, Shion's force had seen a wealth of new recruits. She recognized she could no longer run it like some money-rejecting commune. They couldn't dance around it any longer—Team Reborn's officers seemed to be struggling more than she was, and clearly she couldn't keep ignoring her financial situation any longer.

Incidentally, people like Benimaru and Soei were earning a surprisingly large amount of money, using their abundant funds to purchase all kinds of new equipment for those serving them. They also offered generous job benefits to their troops, making their forces a popular place of employment. Gabil, unexpectedly enough, was also doing pretty well for himself. Anything he and Vester discovered in the lab was patented in both of their names, earning them a regular income. They paid their employees regular salaries, too, and none of them ever had any trouble covering equipment costs.

So yes, Shion was the poorest among them.

The shocking revelation was just starting to sink in when Ultima, ordered by Rimuru to provide support, called out to her.

"Don't worry about it, Shion. Who cares about earning money when you can just take it from the enemy?"

The classic demon's solution. And this was the chief prosecutor of Tempest, charged with taking on crime and evil deeds. The media would have a field day.

"Oh, I see! That does make sense!"

"Right! I'm really smart, so I know!"

And as they carried on, Adalmann next to them couldn't help but think:

I'm really not sure this a suitable topic to bring up in a war zone…

Yes, he was taking equipment away from adventurers in the labyrinth. But he only seized that gear after ensuring the party was all safe. Besides, Adalmann was a person with uncommonly decent common sense, a throwback to when he was still a living human. As he shopped around for this equipment, he gave assorted bribes to the relevant craftsmen, ensuring he got preferential treatment. Shion would probably shout, "do it for free!" at them, but Adalmann would never dream of that. That was why he was able to acquire all this decent-enough gear for all the undead around there.

Maybe I should have kept quiet about this with Lady Shion, he thought—a very wise conclusion. Loose lips sink ships and all. Master Gadora, his good friend who had also come to help him, nodded in agreement.

Certainly even Adalmann thought it was a bit of an issue for his troops to have better gear than the most senior of Shion's elite guard. Common sense dictated the strong should be favored over the weak…but he didn't want to get targeted, and he really should have kept all this from Shion.

"Now, Lady Shion," he said, in a hurry to change the subject, "we will be taking the lead on this as planned."

Shion nodded. Her attention was on the enemy ahead.

"Sounds great! I will allow that, so go teach them a lesson!"

Permission was given—a tremendous relief to Adalmann.

The battle began. And just like that, Daggrull's army—ready to mow down everything in their way as they stormed the holy city—found themselves suddenly blocked.



"Hmm…cheeky little bastards," Daggrull muttered to himself in frustration as he watched his vanguard force get blown away by missiles.

He'd never expected this, not at all. He'd been looking forward to a completely unprepared enemy, but he was just

kidding himself.

“What now, brother?”

Glasord, his ever-reliable younger brother, wanted to know. Only then did Daggrull realize he had been talking out loud.

“Heh-heh-heh… It’s been a long time since I had a *real* battle. Let them have their fun for a little while. They need to get their battle instincts back.”

Losing their momentum from the start was irritating, but it wouldn’t mean that much in the end. The enemy was putting up much more of a fight than he thought, but even this was trivial to Daggrull.

The Bound Titans numbered thirty thousand in all. Some were weaker, inexperienced troops, of course—but even if they got sifted out, all their elite soldiers would still be enough. In fact, if they all just fled the battle once things got busy, it’d do a lot for their survival rate.

“Roger,” said Glasord. “Any new soldiers, or those without Ultraspeed Regeneration, can head back at this point.”

Glasord, understanding Daggrull’s intentions, lightly nodded and began to give out instructions. He was in his element, the prospect of a large-scale war not seeming to bother him at all. A calm general made all his staff calm, too, and since the chain of command was in good shape, they quickly regained their composure.

Soon, the giants were using their incredible strength to throw projectiles at their foes. This wasn’t part of the original plan, but the giants were gleefully crushing huge rocks into smaller ones and heaving them around as they pleased. This turned out to be a tremendously destructive attack, perhaps even equivalent to the bone archers’ missile launchers. It was a quick lesson in just how impossibly well suited for combat the giants were.

These rocks rained down on the Long Wall. Every hit caused considerable damage, and any monsters in the way were reduced to dust. However, the Long Wall itself stood—as it should have, because beneath the peeling outer wall was the dull glow of magisteel.

“Damn you, Luminus. Of all the nasty surprises…,” muttered Glasord.

“The barrier prevents us from teleporting into or beyond the Long Wall,” said Daggrull. “We’ll be at a stalemate here if it’s not

broken.”

Glasord sounded less than thrilled. Daggrull just snorted as he read the situation. His first move was a poor one, and looking back, he should have seen it coming. After all, that scheming demon lord Rimuru was on their side.

He had expected Michael to crush Rimuru, but to his great surprise, he heard Rimuru had his number instead. There was no longer any looking down on him as the new guy in demon lord-dom. Daggrull had always recognized his talents, but he now realized he should see Rimuru as his equal…or maybe even stronger than him.

Rimuru was a born genius at spotting the enemy’s strategy, then taking advantage of it. Daggrull fully understood Rimuru hated to see his friends suffer any casualties. So—and this was so classically Rimuru of him—he deployed immortal monsters for his first wave. These were wimpy guys, save for how the sun strangely didn’t seem to bother them, but their offensive force could no longer be ignored.

Daggrull wasn’t familiar with these weapons, but clearly, they were too powerful for a low-ranked giant to withstand. A few of them attempted a suicide charge in response, but they were knocked down by the lines of zombie soldiers ready to strike them. They didn’t seem to be casting magic; instead, they were hurling small, gravel-like pellets at high speed.

Both of these attacks were effective against the giants. Their species had high resistance to magic, but that was meaningless in the face of what looked like purely physical strikes. Against them, low-level giants with no regenerative skills were just lining up to be killed. Fortunately, the defenses of this enemy were the same as the ordinary undead.

The battle was mostly fought at long range, but considerable damage was done to both sides. This strategy probably only worked because of the Long Wall Luminus had built, but having to struggle against a force that’d normally never slow him down annoyed Daggrull to no end.

“Can you believe it?” he asked. “I didn’t think I was underestimating Rimuru, but just look at this. My wonderful foot soldiers, being defeated by the lowest of low-ranked undead!”

He still had his old memories, and his core personality hadn’t changed, either. He had no deep-seated hatred for Rimuru, and

if he could help it, he didn't want to fight a war against his old friends. But his memory of the era as one of the old gods—an age when all he wanted was to rampage until he ruled the planet—made him fiercer inside. He wanted to rebel against the divine Veldanava and show just what he was made of. That, he believed, was what Veldanava hoped for, too. The hope that the child may someday outshine their parent. He couldn't disappoint that divine parent with the way he fought today.

There were some who were fated to be "god-killers," and Daggrull was one of them. So he couldn't stop now. Even if it meant betraying his friends—even if he wasn't sure whether it was the right thing to do.

Then he recalled something.

"Ever since she killed my friend Twilight, Luminus and I have constantly been at each other's throats. This, too, is another reason why I must fight."

Yes—Luminus, the demon lord Daggrull recognized as his rival, had killed her own father. He hated her for killing his friend…but he was also jealous. Respectful. All those feelings were intertwined inside him, making for an extremely complicated mix of feelings.

Then he remembered. His sons—Daggra, Liura, and Chonkra. He had already detected their presence in this battle. They were enemies this time, but he wondered what kind of fight they'd show him. He had spoiled them in their younger years, making them strong in muscle but not in actual ability. They could take down an average demon lord, but against a "real" one, it was no contest.

Daggrull loved his sons, but he didn't expect much from them. Or…really, he never trained them because he didn't want to burden them with the karma of having to kill their own dad. Defying the Creator was absolutely impossible…but his sons would be freed from that curse.

Yes… I will go down my own road. You must take the one that each of you believe in!

Of course, to enjoy that freedom, one must have the strength to protect it.

"What will we do about your kids, my brother?"

Fenn seemed amused by this as he asked.

"Isn't it obvious? If anyone stands in our way, we'll mercilessly beat them down! If they can feed off that pain, then

good. If not…”

…let them rot in the sand. That was the absolute rule of this world—survival of the fittest.

Hopefully they’ve gotten at least a little stronger. At least so they’re not quaking in their boots in front of me.

Daggrull didn’t hesitate. All that mattered was his mission. He was always a warrior that way—a pure, simple warrior.

Then, in just a little time, the full fury of the giants would sweep across the battleground.



Shion, watching Adalmann and his forces begin the fight, was ready to go.

“Did you hear that, guys? I’m not here to give a long speech. Do you know what you have to do?”

“”””Yeahhhhhhh! Commandeer equipment from our foes!””””

Shion’s soldiers were always reliable that way. They read their leader’s thoughts accurately, and they couldn’t wait to get moving. Shion gave them all a satisfied nod.

Team Reborn, along with Shion’s elite guard/fan club, had grown to an astonishing size. Shion had only begun to think about the cost of equipping and supplying them, but that was an issue members like Gobzo had been having headaches over for a long time.

The only offered solution was to give up, essentially. All of Shion’s troops were capable fighters, so it was decided they could obtain their own weapons and armor. So it was perfectly acceptable for them not to have matching gear…but their procurement process was taking an absurd new turn. Gobzo was afraid someone might yell at them afterward, but things like that were normal around there, so he accepted it without much protest.

Normally, plundering the enemy’s goods was a forbidden act. Looting from citizens, too, was unacceptable. But all that was a matter of perspective. Maybe you couldn’t take stuff from soldiers, but what if you were just disarming the enemy to neutralize them? Given how Adalmann was clearly distributing weapons seized from the Empire to his undead, the handling of

enemy weapons was often left to the whim of the commander.

Heh-heh-heh! Even Adalmann's procured equipment for his force. There's no way I can't do that!

With that, Shion had a slightly higher opinion of herself. She thought about asking Rimuru to do it for her, but changed her mind—it sounded like begging to her. One could say this was Shion maturing, but given her chosen solution of robbing the enemy blind, maybe she still had a lot of maturing left to do.

It was certainly a morale boost, though, and Shion herself was newly motivated. The army of giants before them was wearing equally large armor—a treasure trove of materials ready for the taking. It was enough to bring a smile to anyone's face.

Taking a closer look at Shion's force…

Team Reborn, which consisted of under a hundred members, were treated as officers. Now that Rimuru had named them all, promoting them to death-onis, even the weakest among them were ranked over-A. They could be called hornless demons, and they ran the gamut—some recruited platoons from Shion's elite guard, while others preferred the lone wolf lifestyle. There was even this young girl with an entourage of men around her at all times. You saw pretty much everything with them.

Then there was Shion's elite guard/fan club. This was led by Daggra, Liura, and Chonkra, with Gobzo as "honorary president." This usually meant "honorary gofer to Shion," though, so it wasn't a very lofty role.

This elite guard (also known as the Terror Knights) was a ragtag band of many different species, and around three thousand of them were geared for military service. They had been trained hard through previous fighting, and like the death knights, they had grown to be the elites of their ranks. In this battle, too, they were going to be the main force on the ground, in the truest sense of the word.

There was just one problem.

"Are you sure you wanna do this? If you wanna go back to your dad, now's the time," said Gobzo.

Yes, the relationship between Daggrull and his sons. There had to be family affection between them—Gobzo feared they wouldn't take this seriously, lest one of them died. Nobody from

Shion on down thought the sons would suddenly turn traitor; they just wondered if old sentiments might keep them from trying hard at all.

"Gobzo's right," Shion said. "You're free to come back after the fight is over, okay? And there's no need to push too hard either way."

But Daggra, Liura, and Chonkra laughed off the idea.

"No need to worry! Whether it's my dad or my uncle, we're gonna beat them silly!"

"Yeah! Gotta show 'em what we're made of!"

"Fwehhhh-heh-heh! I can feel my stomach rising!"

Stomach rising? thought Shion. *Doesn't he mean heartbeat? What's wrong with him?*

Then again, Chonkra always did talk funny that way. And he *was* pretty overweight. Maybe his stomach *did* expand when he was ready to fight, although she didn't see how that'd help him.

She had gotten sick of pointing out his eccentricities, though, so she gracefully ignored this. If the kids said they would be okay, they'd be okay—probably.

The problem was their dad and uncle. Rimuru told Shion Daggrull's change of heart seemed to be related to his brothers. There were two of them, with one being a potential major headache.

"I heard Daggrull had a younger brother. Tell me what you know about that."

Shion asked the question point-blank, regretting not bringing it up sooner.

"Right!" Daggra sharply replied. "He's got two younger brothers, actually. Uncle Glasord, his second-in-command, we know really well. He's taken care of us a lot and stuff. That Fenn guy, though, I've never met."

"From what I heard, he was confined somewhere because he did a lot of really bad stuff," Liura added. "They say he beat Dad, too, which I found kinda hard to believe. If you believe the rumors, though, then maybe."

This info wasn't all that useful, but Shion still sagely nodded. "I see, I see. Yes, Daggrull was certainly strong. I was hoping to ask him for a match, but if this Fenn's just as strong, he could be a threat."

Judging by her intrepid smile, she didn't think any of them were a threat at all.

Chonkra, who apparently looked up to her a lot, followed her lead. “Yeah, well, if you leave it to us, my dad *and* my uncle are gonna be a cinch!”

Shion was beginning to feel a tad uneasy. It was weird how what sounded so eloquent from her lips seemed so childish from his.

“But you know,” warned Ultima, “you better stay on your guard. Daggrull really *was* a force to be reckoned with. If I didn’t give my all, it’d be tough for me, too.”

Shion, to her credit, agreed. She wanted to challenge him, but she didn’t think she could win. She had gone toe-to-toe with Daggrull before, after all, and she just wanted to test her skills against a trained military type like him.

“It’s still hard to believe he, of all people, would betray us,” said Shion.

“Hmm, I dunno if it’s ‘betray’ so much as he had something else he wanted to do, y’know? We’ll find out if we beat him, so no point thinking about it now.”

Ultima sounded pretty matter-of-fact about it. Daggrull was a local god, a natural sort of creation, a super-being that had lived far longer than the human race. Creatures that long-lived tended to be aware of each other, which naturally led to relationships of all sorts. He might be acquainted with Feldway, for all Ultima knew—and if so, the word “betray” didn’t quite fit.

Either way, merely thinking about it wouldn’t produce an answer. Now that they were enemies, he didn’t need to go easy at all. Whoever won got to be right.

“Not too long ago,” Shion added, “I would have challenged Daggrull to a one-on-one duel.”

She really *would* do that, not even thinking about whether she’d win. Everyone around her was aware of that.

Now, too, Shion thought this would all be a lot easier if she just beat Daggrull herself. She’d come to realize going wild like that wasn’t recommended, especially now that she was a military commander…but still…

“But now, I’m starting to come up with actual strategies and things,” she continued. “I feel like I’ve gained a lot.”

Shion was pleased with how much her mind had expanded. But no one agreed with her. No one, that is, until Chonkra opened his stupid mouth again.

“Huh? You haven’t gained anything, Lady Shion! You don’t look fat at all!”

Oh man, thought everyone at the same time, *he’s so dead.*

Chonkra, the youngest of the brothers, had the weirdest body. No matter how much he ate, all the nutrition seemed to skip his brain and go straight into widening him even more. He was easily the least intelligent of the three brothers and the most unserious. His room-reading skills were even worse than Gobzo’s, as he blundered into all these social faux pas without even thinking.

The comment, of course, infuriated Shion. She certainly wasn’t fat—and she didn’t really worry about her weight anyway—but she couldn’t help getting irate.

“Ohhh?” Shion smiled and clenched her fists. Then she plunged one of those fists into Chonkra’s stomach.

It was a corkscrew punch, as they called it.

“You need to learn how to act *normal* already, you fool,” she began, lecturing Chonkra as he rolled around on the ground.

“Wh-what a reward this is…”

A warm smile came across his face as he lost consciousness. His brothers looked chagrined it wasn’t them—they weren’t too bright, either, although they beat Chonkra by a long shot. Shion, charged with training them, was starting to grow vaguely afraid of how amazingly awful they all were.

They *were* amazing guys, yes; she was going less and less easy on them in training as time went on. Chonkra, for example, had just took a nearly full-on punch unguarded, and all it did was make him faint for a bit; his body was still in fine shape. In endurance, at the very least, he stood head and shoulders above his brothers.



This world could be home to some truly terrifying characters…in many ways. But if those guys were your friends, then you couldn't ask for more. Shion believed in all three with all her heart, and as she eyed them, she let her thoughts wander a bit.

The enemy could not be allowed to break the Long Wall, no matter what. Beyond it lay the undefended holy hand, and beyond that was human civilization. The region wasn't very easy to defend, and if they lost the wall, it'd mean Rimuru's ideal scenario was even less likely to happen. Shion wouldn't tolerate that, a fact she etched into her mind once more.

How powerful would Daggrull really be?

They say he's on par with Sir Veldora. He'd certainly be a worthy opponent for me! Even if I lose, we still have Ultima and Lady Luminus. In the end, you know we'll—

There was Daggrull and his two brothers, plus unnamed powerhouses they didn't know about yet. Even in the face of this largely unknown enemy, Shion's will to fight never faltered. If the worst happened—if she lost her entire army, if Shion herself fell—she was still determined to destroy Daggrull there, by the wall.

"Listen to me!" she said. "Adalmann's force might have fired the first salvos, but the *real* warriors always show up for the final act! So give all these fools a taste of your power!"

Morale was high among her troops as she loudly declared this. The crowd roared in response, like a bunch of fans attending a pop concert. For Shion and her followers, there was nothing to be tense about.

Shion gave them a fearless smile, encouraging and empowering her friends. Ultima, listening to the whole exchange, snickered. Shion's eyes were already those of a predator staring down their prey.

She must know Daggrull's better than her…but talk about mental toughness. I could learn from her, thought Ultima, in a secret show of respect.

To Shion, even an army of giants was nothing more than a learning and growing experience. That die-hard optimism was something even Ultima, a spiritual life-form, sought for herself. It was an ideal she could learn a great deal from, and it was little wonder Diablo approved of her. In fact, Ultima was willing to do anything she could to support her.

Now, she thought, was the right moment.

“The operation is going well as planned,” Ultima said. “I think you should probably get ready, Shion.”

As she pointed out, Adalmann himself was about to make a move to break the stalemate. The war had just begun, and it was only going to explode from there.

✳

Adalmann climbed on top of Venti, in her true form as a Gehenna Dragon, and took to the skies.

Venti soared high, as if she had been waiting for this moment. She was in her original evil dragon form, happily throwing her ominous mystical energy around. This could kill a human with weak resistance to it, but it actually gave Adalmann more power. He felt quite comfortable amid this force as he peered down at the battlefield.

“Looking good so far,” he muttered.

The low-level undead were helpless after firing all their missiles. They were just waiting to be overrun at this point, but given their humble position in life (or death), they deserved praise for putting up such a good fight.

Adalmann nodded to himself.

“Well, the attack I’m about to break out is rather…inhumane. Should I give them a warning?” he wondered aloud.

He didn’t see the need to. These invaders were fundamentally incompatible with him. And a voice beside him agreed.

“Well, this isn’t a duel, so verbal statements wouldn’t mean much. Better to win by underhanded means than lose after abandoning our superior position.”

Master Gadora had been following along via his flight magic. His comment made Adalmann laugh. They always *were* good friends.

“Very true,” Adalmann said. “In that case, I’ll just unleash my biggest, flashiest magic and give them the fright of their lives.”

“Then it’s a race, isn’t it? I want to settle for good which one of us is better!”

Gadora was all for it…and so they began to cast spells, each hoping to fire one off first.

Both he and Adalmann could invoke magic without any casting time needed, but when it came to extreme magic, going through the casting process helped keep them within the right mental framework. Adalmann in particular had a firm image of magic as power provided on loan from his god. He spun the magic words like a prayer in praise of his ultimate gift Grimoire and the fortune of receiving it.

His choice of spells was a forbidden summon, the kind that couldn't be cast in the labyrinth. Its effective range was so large, it was difficult to predict what sort of damage it'd do. He went with this one because he knew damaging this battlefield wasn't a concern. This was all secret magic, not known to the public… and even if it was, no human magician could ever cast it.

According to the ancient literature, it was a greatly powerful magic, so tricky to cast that several great magicians once teamed up to cast it and still failed. The difficulty of controlling it was the main culprit, but trying to integrate the magic force of each caster into a single package didn't go well, either. It'd be first time Adalmann cast it, too, and he was a bit nervous about it potentially not working. Of course, he only chose it because it seemed like the most spectacular option, so if it failed, it wasn't any long-term concern. Gadora would rib him about it, but he could then just invoke something else.

So, his mind made up, Adalmann got comfortable and set up the spell's impact range. This was going to consume a lot of magic force, but that was no issue for him and his demon lord-class magicule count. All the preparations were completed without a hitch.

Ahh, I see… No wonder this doesn't require any casting time.

A feeling of comfortable wellness filled Adalmann's mind as he fully grasped his powers.

"Right, then!" he said. "Take a look at this, Gadora. One of the greatest magics of ancient times—Tempest Meteor!"

Once a magic spell is successfully cast, its words are engraved in the mind of the caster, allowing them to instantly activate it again. Checking that this was the case, Adalmann unleashed his spell.

At that moment, the giant magic circle that appeared suddenly in the sky shone a dazzling cascade of color as light poured down upon the ground. It was as beautiful as a shower of shooting stars—but this was a fearsome light, one that

brought forth death and destruction. It bore the name of the nation Adalmann and his friends loved, which was one reason why he chose it, but the sheer destructive power also lived up to the Tempest brand. The spell the magicians of old had tried to complete was in full effect.

The light pouring down was actually meteors—over a thousand of them, each several feet long, filling the air with carnage. No matter how proud the giants were of their Ultraspeed Regeneration, it meant little if the damage came too fast to keep up with.

There was nowhere to run—the spell range was just too wide. Try to catch a meteor, and it'd just tear a limb off. Heads were crushed everywhere. The giants wanted to overrun the Long Wall with sheer muscle, but they were being helplessly pulverized by an even more massive force.

This magic had an even greater effect than Adalmann intended. In a short period of time, he had knocked a good 30 percent of Daggrull's army out of the battle.

"Did you see that, Gadora?" he asked. "I've won this match, haven't I?"

Every meteor collection caused a huge explosion. The ground seemed to boil under them as Adalmann declared victory. The force was well beyond what he anticipated, but he still boasted about it, like he expected it all along. His face was all bone anyway, so it wasn't like anyone could tell he was lying—and nothing made Adalmann happier than showing off to his former rival.

But Gadora wasn't so amused. The spell Adalmann had just cast was summon magic based on imaginary material, one of the most secret tenets of dark magic. It created meteors from this material, summoning them from thin air—truly the ultimate in magic attacks. This imaginary material became real once it appeared in this world, and thus subject to the laws of physics. Its effects were only temporary, but it still lasted long enough to wipe the enemy out.

How does he know this type of magic?! This isn't holy magic or necromancy. If anything, it's a summoning, tilted toward dark magic… That's my *specialty!*

Gadora was in no mood to praise Adalmann. If he lost this competition after trying to cast something outside his expertise, he could still make excuses about it. But this? This was a direct

challenge to him. He had to admit to the power of this Tempest Meteor, yes, and he secretly admired his best friend for how great he was. But as a master of magic, he just couldn't admit he was defeated.

Gadora had only just joined Diablo's staff, after all, and he wanted to make a name for himself fast. And that wasn't all. The very survival of humanity depended on this battle, but looking at it another way, this war was a struggle for supremacy. If so, Gadora thought it prudent to try to gain some name recognition. If he did that, at least Diablo wouldn't abandon him.

"Come on," Gadora angrily replied. "If you want to see the essence of true magic, let me show it to you!"

He had just completed the spell he was constructing. It was time to show off his own ultimate magic, one he grew capable of after being reborn as a metal demon.

Making full use of his ultimate gift Grimoire, he unraveled the knowledge at the core of magic. Adalmann didn't know this spell; a member of the dark magic family, Diablo, and Ultima had taught Gadora. He had gradually been learning it in his free time, and the culmination of all that effort was here.

"May those who suffer from eternal hunger come to me…and use your fangs to devour all!!"

The culmination of all this was the viciously dark magic Nihilistic Parade.

It was a well-known fact that the most powerful holy magic was Disintegration, the ultimate antipersonnel spell. Only a few people could use it, a fact also widely known, and its power was well documented. No one, it was said, could possibly survive a hit. But there were some drawbacks to it, most vitally its narrow range. Against a human being, it was the strongest out there, but it couldn't be used against a military force—that was just not how it worked.

But there also existed a dark magic version of Disintegration, its counterpart of sorts—a fact known only to a very limited number of people. This was Nihilistic Vanish, a spell of the type Ultima and her demon cohort specialized in. A truly terrifying magic, it consumed its targets using the emptiness welling up from the underworld—and what was more, this magic worked in a wider range than Disintegration. In this case, Gadora had worked the spell so its area of influence expanded across the

entire battlefield. Pouring all his magical power into Nihilistic Vanish, he managed to turn it into Nihilistic Parade, a new and wide-area annihilation magic.

Just as the caster intended, an extremely large magic circle appeared on the ground and in the sky. Then, as if connecting heaven and earth, bolts of dark electricity raced between them, releasing countless black spots in the air—the fangs of darkness, the devourer of all matter.

Gadora was releasing dark magic that manipulated emptiness itself, a forbidden skill if there ever was one. These voids, released into the world like this, did not disappear until the EP of their effects was reduced to zero. They filled the space between the magic circles, erasing all that existed inside. Any mistake in controlling this spell would result in this ultimate magic destroying the world.

As soon as the spell activated, Gadora burst into laughter. “Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! How do you like it? Isn’t it *tremendous*?!”

He looked so innocently happy about it. But Adalmann was having none of it.

“You damned fool!” he snapped. “What are you thinking?! What’ll we do if this dangerous magic becomes too much for you and goes out of control?!”

He understood the danger of Nihilistic Parade through his ultimate gift Grimoire. The realization made him shout at Gadora, his face pallid—or more so than usual for the skull he had for a head.

“Well,” Gadora calmly replied, “I want to show off, ya know?”

“No, I don’t know,” a floored Adalmann said.

There was no dignity to be found—Gadora was showing his true feelings, like a young child. Adalmann didn’t know what to do with him. Certainly, Gadora wouldn’t have any excuse if this spell failed on him and potentially caused the world to collapse.

So he defiantly said, “Well, it’s all right, isn’t it? It worked! And as long as you and I are here, we’ll be fine!”

No sign of remorse at all. Even in his old age, Gadora was every bit a mad genius. Being reminded of this made Adalmann let out a big sigh and stop complaining. It was useless to say anything to him—and Gadora was right anyway. The spell succeeded, and there was no problem to speak of.

After these two massive spells, the enemy was close to being completely destroyed. They had already been reduced to less

than half their initial number. In a normal war, they would've given up and retreated long ago. Gadora's Nihilistic Parade made visibility poor in the area, but at this rate, they'd be routing these giants.

Adalmann and his assistants looked below with bated breath, hoping this would end the war right there. The result…



Daggrull recognized the danger of the magic at first glance.

He had planned to overrun the battlefield as soon as the fight began, but those puny little undead soldiers had stalled him. Just when he thought he had evened things out, he lost over half of his army from a one-two punch of extremely powerful spells.

This situation was a miscalculation on Daggrull's part, but it was not actually a great loss for him. It was a well-kept secret, unknown to the world, but magic was not about to defeat the giants. Anyone who got killed by this level of attack was not only unlucky—he simply lacked what it took.

The falling meteorites, he shrugged off with a smile. In fact, he praised them as a brilliant piece of magic, even seeing them as a kind of "you must be this tall to ride" sign that sorted those who were qualified to participate in the battle from those who weren't. If this had been something like dropping down a huge rock from another dimension, the resulting shot of potential energy added to the mass would've made it too destructive to ignore. However, since Tempest Meteor attacked with meteorites conjured by magic, the giants could use their skills to shrug them off without issue.

A real warrior would never have trouble with magic developed to target a group of people. In fact, none of Daggrull's closest associates were stopped, nor were the most powerful warriors in his band. That was as it should be. But the magic invoked by Gadora was just too much. Nihilistic Parade penetrated right through Cancel Magic, the skill possessed by all the best giants, to do its damage.

Cancel Magic was an absolute sort of defense, automatically neutralizing all kinds of magic attacks. Thanks to it, no magic could defeat the giants. Even something as powerful as Tempest

Meteor could be safely ignored. If something like *that* killed any of them, their own inexperience was at fault. But…

"Goddamn it, Ultima. Throwing your forbidden spells out like candy…," Daggrull grumbled to himself, Ultima's innocent smile dancing in his mind.

Magic invoking the voids of hell should have been known only to demonic royalty. Who would spread those spells around? Out of the seven people who came to mind, Ultima felt like the prime suspect. Or maybe Raine. Mizeri was too sober-minded to do anything like that, and Guy, Diablo, and Testarossa were too sensible, so they could be ruled out. Carrera? Maybe, but Daggrull reasoned her lack of teaching ability would rule her out.

So the main suspects were Ultima and Raine. And between those two, Ultima was on much better terms with Adalmann and his undead friend. Thus, Daggrull assumed Ultima was the culprit—and he was correct, although that wouldn't have made him any happier about it. It wasn't the time to point fingers anyway.

Fortunately, Daggrull could deal with this magic. With a bitter expression on his face, he raised his hands to the sky… and then he released his power.

Nihilistic magic did its work by using its negative EP to annihilate matter and existence. If so, then saturating the area with positive energy would cancel the damage, reducing it to zero. As a giant, Daggrull was an enormous mass of magicules. Even Nihilistic Parade, which contained Gadora's full power, would be no match for him.

So Daggrull's army marched on, accepting the deaths of their comrades as if nothing was amiss. They walked across the battlefield with nothing at all to fear, their eyes shining with their immense trust and loyalty to their leader.

"I—I can't believe it…"

"Gotta hand it to Daggrull, huh? He neutralized that magic so easily…"

Gadora and Adalmann were awestruck. As soon as Nihilistic

Parade petered out, the giants resumed their march, seemingly unconcerned about the deaths of their comrades. The line had once been broken by two all-powerful spells, but before Gadora knew it, they were back on their feet. Those who escaped instant death were back to full health as if nothing had befallen them, thanks to their superb resilience. Gadora thought they had been considerably thinned out, but that turned out not to be the case. It was such an eerie sight that it aroused fear among those confronting them.

Seeing Daggrull's army on the move, Adalmann and Gadora grew weary of the situation.

"Don't they have any fear at all?" Adalmann wondered.

"No," said Gadora. "Normally they'd take countermeasures, or at least pull back for a bit…"

They were facing an enemy that lacked this sort of common sense. It made for an uphill battle.

You don't see that common sense among Sir Rimuru's people, either, thought Gadora, although he wasn't stupid enough to say it out loud.

"I was wondering…," he began. "Even if it was inevitable that the demon lord Daggrull would kill off those voids, how did he ever endure Tempest Meteor? To me, it looked like the meteors were vanishing in a most unnatural way…like the magic was being wiped away."

Adalmann was also concerned about that. There were some casualties among the lower-ranked giants, but the elite senior warriors were all unharmed. He figured they'd be injured at least a little, whether they healed up or not, but there wasn't a scratch among them. It was unnatural.

They looked at each other again, trying to work through their thoughts. It didn't take long for them to realize thinking about this wouldn't give them an answer anytime soon.

"So now what do we do?" Gadora asked Adalmann.

"Well, I've used up too much magic power. I'm going to pull out for the time being. Good thing my Immortal Legion doesn't fear death, at least."

"That's true. The giants barely fear it, either, which is a nightmare, but your force is rather similar to theirs that way…"

The two of them sighed. This unbelievable reality, right after they thought they had a big win, was a major shock.

Adalmann patted Venti on the head and ordered her to

return. As originally intended, he had succeeded in dealing them a blow with his punishing magic. There was no need to linger; instead, they should quickly return and report on the threat of Daggrull's army. Their steadfastness and resilience was truly something to be feared.

So this initial skirmish was over. Next was the meat of the battle—the clash between both their main forces. But in light of the threat they had just witnessed, it had to be said that the Immortal Legion did not have the advantage. Their foes were similarly fearless and had a similar knack for surviving anything. They feared the giants would overrun the Immortal Legion with their overwhelming destructive force. Already, they could see a future where they'd be crushed and battered before they could strike a decisive blow against the giants.

So be it. Their troops would have to gang up on each giant, overwhelm them, and just try to cull their numbers as much as possible.

"Well," said Adalmann, "I think we should head back and report to Lady Shion."

"I suppose so," Gadora agreed. "We will need to discuss the future."

They returned to Shion, thinking about what the future would bring.

Upon receiving the report, the thought on Shion's mind was: *Now what?*

She was standing on the Long Wall, looking down on the battlefield. Witnessing Adalmann and Gadora's mega-magic, she thought maybe it'd be enough to win the battle, but reality was harsher than that. She didn't need Adalmann to remind her—she already knew this enemy would be a big headache.

Two hours had passed since the battle had begun. The struggle had shifted to the next stage: the clash between the two main forces.

The Bound Titans' numbers seemed much smaller than their original thirty thousand, but their actual attrition rate was less than 10 percent. With their elite at the top, they had gone into an assault, clashing with the main force of the Immortal Legion. The undead were using a crane-wing formation, with two

thousand bone knights in the center and ten thousand bone soldiers on both wings, each carrying their secret weapons. They were trying to surround the Bound Titans as they charged forward, but they lacked the numbers to fully encircle them.

This would normally be considered a tactical error, but Adalmann was unfazed.

“Is everything all right?” Shion asked Adalmann.

“Not a problem. If they don’t know the terror an undead legion can deliver, we will teach them.”

Adalmann, commanding next to Shion, had no intention of winning this battle from the beginning. The objective was to reduce the enemy’s strength. The real main forces were Shion’s Team Reborn and the Bloody Knights of Luminus; Adalmann and his team were de facto pawns by comparison. They wanted to defeat as many A-ranked warriors in Daggrull’s camp as possible—or at the very least figure out the enemy’s weak points. That was how this operation was planned, and Adalmann had agreed to it, of course. They had worked all this out before the war began. The consensus among Rimuru’s officers was that they wanted to avoid as many casualties on their side as was feasibly possible. That was also an effective strategy for analyzing the giants’ strength. An army of immortal undead didn’t count as “dead” if they fell, really—Adalmann’s troops never truly perished.

The key to this strategy was to make optimal use of the immortals and their characteristics. It was, in so many words, a suicide mission—lure the giants in, then go all out to reduce their numbers.

But there were limits. At first glance, the battle appeared to be in a stalemate, but the trend was tilting in favor of the giants’ forces. The bone soldiers would launch their suicide strike, blowing open the magical power that filled the battlefield. The death knights would then finish off the wounded and fallen giants, but unless they inflicted a definitive, fatal wound, the giants would revive themselves.

The giants’ massive stature proved an obstacle to this. Their huge bodies ranged from ten to sixteen feet in height, and their armor-like muscles were so thick that it was difficult to fatally injure any of them. If the death knights took too long, they’d be crushed in short order.

This strategy went well at first, but as time went by, the

giants began to adapt. Those with long weapons began to check the bone soldiers, making any approach impossible without ample care taken. If they tried to force it, they'd be crushed, and once that happened, the offensively inferior bone soldiers gradually became useless.

The death knights were outnumbered and forced to fight an uphill battle, their numbers gradually dwindling.

At this point, the Bloody Knights led by Louis began to tense up, wondering if it was finally time for them to go out. Shion, too, tried to deploy the Terror Knights that she had been saving. The two thousand death knights were mostly intact. If she added the three thousand Terror Knights to that, she was sure they'd be able to compete with the giants' top fighters.

The enemy had a thousand over-A warriors, compared to the Bloody Knights' four hundred. If they wanted to close the gap, Team Reborn alone was not enough. If ten of them could gang up on one giant, Shion thought, maybe it'd work out? She was the "all or nothing" type in battle, but she didn't want her own troops to suffer any casualties. But here, as a commander, she bit her lip and prepared to give the order.

She was stopped.

"Well, looks like I'll have to break out my biggest secret of all."

Adalmann, who had recovered his magical powers, climbed onto Venti's back again.

"You still have something?" Shion asked curiously, to which Adalmann replied with a clattering laugh.

"No," he said. "I've run out of tricks. After this, what happens happens."

With those words, Adalmann returned to the battlefield. Then he invoked a new and improved necromancy spell, developed in preparation for this moment—Create Immortal Legion. It was a favorite spell of his, enough that he'd named his own force after it.

This magic took effect across a wide area, and that effect was nothing short of astonishing. It transformed anyone, friend and foe alike, who had died within its sphere of influence into undead soldiers loyal to his commands. It was the epitome of the forbidden art of necromancy, the culmination of

Adalmann's research—and moreover, it had already been improved to take those who had already died and have them serve as the core of a new, rebuilt undead force.

The shattered remains of the bone soldiers gathered around the death knights serving as the nucleus. Even the dead giants began to be gathered up, along with bone soldiers who were still "alive" and fighting. The result: two thousand brand-new "death giants."

The magisteel armor worn by the death knights covered their huge bodies, reaching thirteen feet in height. The armor transformed according to the will of the wearer, which was to be expected, since it was reacting to the hateful malice of the dead. Adalmann had anticipated this war situation from the very beginning, and so he had devised a way to create immortal, allied giants for himself.

"Are you kidding me? You had this prepared the whole time? And you didn't even tell me?"

Shion couldn't hide her surprise. The death giants were all over-A in rank.

"I can't believe it," said Louis, watching the war beside Shion. "I've never been so glad you're on my side."

So the balance of power was reversed once again. The giants, who once overwhelmed by force, lost their advantage following the emergence of a greater force. These death giants were immortal; even if crushed or destroyed, they would instantly be revived under Adalmann's authority.

But the giants were not defeated. The reports that there were close to a thousand top-level fighters were mistaken; in fact, there were more than two thousand elite fighters among their ranks, and any over-A fighter like that could use Ultraspeed Regeneration to instantly heal any wound they received. They were invincible as long as any individual strike didn't kill them, making them evenly matched with the death giants.

The numbers on both sides continued to stay stubbornly constant. The battle was deadlocked once again.

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Adalmann's moves gave Shion and her team some more breathing room again. It was a welcome surprise; they hadn't

been told about this trick up his sleeve. Adalmann didn't want to pump up their expectations, because Create Immortal Legion was making its first public appearance with hardly any pretesting. The results were clear, though, and no one was more relieved about it than Adalmann himself.

"That's my best friend for you, isn't it?"

Gadora was beyond pleased. Louis couldn't help but nod in agreement.

"It sure is. The Seven Days had no idea what they were dealing with. How could they have let such a great talent go elsewhere?"

He sounded genuinely regretful about it.

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Louis recalled the old days.

At that time, Adalmann and Alberto were already famed figures—the former a high priest and master of sacred magic, the latter the strongest paladin of all time. They were both qualified to be Heroes, but neither of them had a hero's egg inside. Even so, they had reached the level of Enlightened as a matter of course, and if nothing else, they were on the verge of becoming Saints.

But both of them were too smart for their own good. That was why the Seven Days Clergy were jealous of them—which ultimately led to their demise.

Fearing they'd become a threat if they continued to grow as they were, the Clergy took measures while keeping Luminus in the dark. The plan, as Louis recalled, was termed a "purification of a large-scale undead disaster." What the Clergy actually did was pit a dragon zombie against them in the hope both sides would be killed. They gladly accepted the request and headed for the Forest of Jura.

They never returned to the Holy City and were thus thought to be dead. Even the demon lord Luminus, master of Louis, didn't expect they had fallen into the hands of the demon lord Kazalim after their death—and then, through a strange twist of fate, found work under the demon lord Rimuru.

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Luminus was frustrated, and Louis was much the same. These champions really should have been kept on their side at any cost.

Now Alberto, one of these champions, was drawing his sword on the battlefield.

“Hoh… That’s Adalmann’s right-hand man. Even from a distance, you can see how skilled he is.”

Daggra, Liura, and Chonkra, who were standing behind Shion, nodded in agreement.

“Alberto’s so cool!”

“He sometimes spars with us, but he’s really strong, isn’t he?”

“Oh hey, he’s going up against Uncle Glasord! I wouldn’t be surprised if either of them won!”

The three brothers were initially supporting Alberto, but they changed their tune when they saw their opponent.

“He looks real powerful. Even the giants have a swordsman among them?” Shion muttered.

“Yeah, that’s our father’s brother,” Daggra explained, followed by his own two brothers.

“The second-in-command of the Bound Titans.”

“Our mentor! And our uncle, too!”

He was Glasord, a top-notch swordsman and one of the strongest in the Bound Titans. He couldn’t beat Daggrull in terms of magicules, but his swordsmanship was said to be superior. For a giant, as the stories went, he was mild-mannered and intelligent. Along those lines, Daggrull was also calm and collected as of late, but his past reputation made many fear him still.

Now Glasord was engaged in a one-on-one battle with Alberto. Moving his huge six-and-a-half-foot frame gracefully, Glasord swung his two-handed greatsword here and there. He was clearly a unique presence on the battlefield, boasting a strength that set him apart from the rest. But Alberto was still able to hold his own, not letting the height difference keep him from matching Glasord’s skill. Even those who knew Alberto as an excellent swordfighter would have found this scene hard to believe.

Despite his massive stature, Glasord was able to execute sophisticated techniques in the most agile ways. It was unlikely that anyone other than Alberto could compete with him, but looking at it the other way around, perhaps Alberto was the

extraordinary one for being able to compete with such a person. Like a willow swaying in the wind, he could parry a heavy attack that would normally crush him with a single blow, and even counterattack afterward.

This was possible only because he had been given a set of God-class equipment. If he had been equipped with anything else, he would have been destroyed the moment he received an attack. Plus, one lesser-known characteristic of Glasord was that he could perform his Destroy Weapon skill on his opponent. This name was quite literal—it meant anyone who crossed swords with Glasord was destined to have their weapons and armor destroyed, leaving them naked and defeated.

It was fortuitous that Alberto, who didn't know this, was equipped with a God-class sword. It was a miraculous coincidence, because not even Daggra and his two brothers could have known about this.

Thanks to such good fortune, Alberto and his allies just barely kept the front line from collapsing. It was a bit ironic that no one picked up on this. The threat was there, but the danger remained unnoticed as the battle between the two warring factions heated up.

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Despite the titans of the battlefield making their moves, Shion and her companions were in spectator mode.

"Dad hasn't moved at all, though."

"Well, our uncle is out now. It won't be much longer."

"And then we'll dive in to fight him!"

The three brothers were beyond excited. It disgusted Shion a bit.

"Think again," she said. "I'll be dealing with him, of course. You three can just lead the Terror Knights and keep out of the way."

The three of them agreed without comment. It wasn't that they thought they could win against their dad—they were just having fun getting carried away. But they still had a warning for her.

"All right, but you shouldn't underestimate my father, okay?"

"My brother's right. No matter how strong you are, Dad's a

real monster."

"Fwehhh-heh-heh! I've sure never been able to beat him."

Victory and defeat weren't even the focus. Simply being exposed to Daggrull's aura made it difficult to stand up. It was brutally obvious the three brothers wouldn't provide a challenge to him. Nonetheless, from Shion's point of view, this trio was capable in their own right; they gained more strength every time they staged a battle, and that growth was something she looked forward to seeing.

Right now, she could sense they were being serious about him.

"Don't worry," she said. "I won't try anything rash."

It was a very Shion-like thing to say, although she didn't realize it. The battlefield wasn't moving much, but it'd soon be time for her to get to work. Shion felt it vividly, and she was ready for battle.

Maybe I should try to wrap it all up at once?

Waiting wasn't in her nature. Breaking the stalemate and grabbing victory all at once seemed like a good strategy. If she could only focus on the enemy's leader, victory would be assured after that—such were Shion's thoughts.

Suddenly, the battlefield changed abruptly and severely. An empty no-man's-land had opened up. Several death giants had been blown away from it.

"What's that?!"

Shion's eyes widened.

With every silver glint, another over-A death giant was knocked out with ease. Standing there was a slender man with an exceptionally large physique, layers of chains covering his whole body. Even with the chains, there was no concealing his strange, intense presence, one that surpassed even Daggrull's.

Shion's entire body was covered in goosebumps. Her survival instincts were telling her with all their might that the man was dangerous.

"Oh, is that…the one who was sealed off?"

"Is that Uncle Fenn? The Mad Fist? Feared as a god of battle or of raging violence?"

"Fwehhh-heh-heh-heh! I'm getting *really* hungry!"

This irrelevant remark was met with a corkscrew punch in Chonkra's stomach.

"Feeling fuller now?" Shion said, finding herself relaxing.

Thanks to Chonkra's flippant remark, things were a lot less tense. Shion observed Fenn, thinking even an idiot can be lovable sometimes.

That man in chains was attracting her attention again, his ten-foot-tall figure looking massive.

"Are those Gleipnir chaos bonds?" Gadora remarked. "Very impressive."

"Ah, Gadora? What are those?" Shion asked.

"Well, they're part of a myth from before the history of mankind, written in ancient texts."

Gadora, a lifelong fan of trivia like this, showed off some of his knowledge.

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The Gleipnir chaos bonds were chains that had been sealing off rampaging evil gods since the age of myth. If the story was true, the chains must have evolved via the magicules they had absorbed from those gods.

Since that time, the chains had served as the sacred weapon of the Dragon Emperor, sealing both the holy and the demonic away. It'd be no wonder if the chains boasted performance that surpassed God-class.

But it was not the chains that should be truly feared. It was the evil god enclosed in them one needed to be wary of.

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"It is said that in mythical times, three evil gods were sealed away by the Dragon Emperor," Gadora continued. "Two of the three reformed their ways, but one of them remained violent and was thus sealed in divine chains. In other words, that's Fenn rampaging over there, and the chains that bind him are the famous Gleipnir chaos bonds."

Gadora sounded excited about it. And as if to prove he was right, the chains were wriggling and pulsing of their own accord. Despite being bound by that, Fenn was still smiling, as if to say he couldn't be enjoying this more. Even if Fenn did nothing, the chains moved on their own to defeat his enemies; not even the over-A warriors could stop his progress.

Shion was astonished. She'd heard Fenn's EP was

comparable to Daggrull's, but he seemed to be easily surpassing him.

"It's almost hilarious," said Shion. "There's always someone better than you out there, but just look at the level he's achieved…"

Shion's friends boasted tons of magicules and had grown beyond imagination since the good old days, but Fenn was in a realm not even they could reach. He was on a level similar to the best Shion knew—the True Dragons like Veldora and Velgrynd.

"That's one fearsome monster," Shion concluded. "You guys couldn't handle him."

And Daggrull was still waiting in the wings. That thought depressed her further.

"What are we gonna do?" Ultima innocently asked. "Because I don't think we can beat him. Are we gonna retreat?"

Shion didn't like the idea. No matter how up-and-down this battle was, the balance could easily be overturned by an off-the-charts monster like this. Running was an option, like Ultima said. Rimuru didn't want any casualties, and if they wanted to be faithful to that order, retreat needed to be considered. Adalmann and the others were holding out for now, so if it was strictly Shion and her Tempest reinforcements, it was likely possible to make good their escape.

But as easy as it'd be to retreat, the consequences after that were obvious. Those left behind, the innocent people of this land, would wind up losing everything at the hands of this tyrannical enemy. They were in human lands, and getting them needlessly mired in this would make Rimuru's ideals an impossibility.

So what should they do? Even if they fought this monster, they'd inevitably be wiped out…

Wait. No. Shion was there to prevent that from happening. The answer was found. It wasn't that big of an issue. Shion's will to fight welled up within her as she made up her mind. She'd experienced this many times before, so she was used to it. She had been in lots of critical situations, and she made it through each one—a thought that drove her forward.

And not just her.

"Which one do you want, Ultima?" she asked.

Ultima innocently smiled. "You won't run away after all? I

like that about you, Shion. If you got your eye on that old guy, I'll take the other one raging around over there."

They were discussing who to fight as if talking about their favorite dessert. It was with that light note that they picked their roles. Ultima would be Fenn's opponent, while Shion would go to Daggrull—leader against leader.

The Luminus forces began to move.

"Well, great," said Louis. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it? The demon lord Rimuru's officers don't seem to know the meaning of fear."

Louis, sounding exasperated, also got moving. He saw a new giant rampaging. This was Basara, leader of the Five Great Warlords and an uncle from the perspective of Daggrull's kids. Several other powerful giants dotted around the battlefield also caught his attention. Louis flew toward them, the Bloody Knights and Lubelius's Seven Great Nobles rushing after him.

Thus the battlefield became more chaotic.

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A sandstorm swept across the land. Fenn moved, the chains dancing around him, and whenever he did, death giants were broken into pieces.

Fenn's gaze caught Adalmann, who was commanding atop the back of Venti, the Gehenna Dragon. In any battle, targeting the general is a standard tactic. Adalmann's skills were upgrading the undead to immortal beings. Fenn was right to do the same.

He ran through the air at tremendous speed, raising a cloud of dust behind him. It was more flying than running, and he came to Adalmann with such force he ignored the presence of anyone who blocked his path.

"…Mmm?!"

Adalmann, noticing Fenn's approach, tried to do something to deal with him. He didn't think being in the air kept him safe from attack or anything, but Fenn was just too fast. His chaos bonds seemed to be infinitely long, because he was ignoring the laws of physics and using them to bind Venti. These chains were God-class, and there was no way for Venti to escape. She was

slammed against the ground, unable to move.

Adalmann nimbly escaped, but Fenn wasn't about to miss him.

"You're in my way, you know. Die!"

He struck at his foe as he shouted. Adalmann had expected that. From the beginning, he had protected himself with multiple barriers so he'd be safe from a surprise attack. However, with just one blow, Adalmann was sent rolling to the ground. It was a boundlessly heavy blow, bearing so much absolute violence that it took away not only Adalmann's will to keep resisting, but also his will to keep existing.

A terrible silence fell over the battlefield. In an instant, Fenn was in control.

Ultima was also in motion.

Before the battle began, she had a secret meeting alone with Luminus. The demon lord, who knew the threat Daggrull posed, had anticipated the current situation well in advance. Violence has a way of overturning everything. Luminus knew this well, and so she had devised every possible strategy for victory. She wanted to defeat Daggrull for good, even if it meant tapping into the most secret and gruesome tricks in her arsenal.

So Ultima set out for Fenn, walking gracefully through this battlefield like she was on a stroll. She stood strong, in position to protect Adalmann. Looking at Fenn, she laughed, as if to say "you take from me, I'll take from you."

"Not too bad at all," she said. "I rated Adalmann pretty highly, you know."

Adalmann, like Ultima, was one of the Twelve Lordly Guardians. He had a talent for supporting the rear, yes, but they called him the Gehenna Lord for a reason.

Fenn, meanwhile, was too strong. Ultima, perhaps annoyed by this, was unhesitant in her assessment of him.

"Oh, really? He was weak," she scoffed.

Fenn had knocked Adalmann to the ground with a blow from his fist full of fighting spirit. But he didn't take pride in it. To him, this was just the normal result.

Ultima could see why he thought so. She could understand Fenn's feelings because she was the same way. To the powerful, the weak are nothing more than toys. Ultima had reigned as

head of the demons, so she knew she had no right to lecture Fenn about it. The difference in strength was just too great. From Fenn's point of view, they barely even registered. This time, Ultima happened to stand on the side of the weak—that was all it was.

But she didn't intend to give up easily. Ultima loved games, and whether she lost them or not, she'd try to win until the very end.

Just keep trying and you'll win someday. And if so, there's only one thing to do.

She was taking an exceedingly easygoing approach to this.

"I suppose I might as well give my name. I'm Ultima, the Pain Lord. What's yours, you little rampager?"

"What an impertinent brat you are. I'm Fenn—not that you'll survive long enough to memorize it!"

As soon as they exchanged names, the battle began.

Shion, still atop the Long Wall, was waiting to see what Daggrull would do.

No matter how she handled this, it was obvious that once Shion was defeated, her side would totally collapse. It seemed like Luminus had some kind of plan, so she wanted to hold out for that, too. But that alone was not enough. Expecting miracles was a good way to lose a winnable battle. But Shion was going in ready to win, even if she had to force it.

"So that's Fenn, eh? Our younger uncle?" said Daggra. "Not even I expected him to be such a monster."

"You're sure right, my brother," agreed Liura. "A lot crazier than I expected."

"Uncle Glasord's one thing, but Uncle Fenn's on a whole other level!"

"Yeah, no wonder they chained him up…"

Daggra and Liura were discussing their impressions of their uncle by Shion's side. This was the first time either of them had seen him. They had boasted about defeating their father, but they seemed much less enthusiastic about the idea now. Shion couldn't blame them. Really, if they thought they could win, they were just fools incapable of realizing their limits.

"Fweh-heh-heh! I bet I can win against that skinny guy weight-wise!"

Yes, fools like Chonkra were the ones who could only say stuff like that. *He really needs to be punished*, Shion thought—but just then, things began to change.

"Hmm… Looking down at me? Not a care in the world?"

The voice came from behind Shion. They were above the Long Wall, on the front lines but also at their main base of defense. The Monster Exclusion Barrier was in operation, and several Multilayer Barriers were around Shion. How could anyone ignore all that and stand there? And more to the point, Shion herself didn't notice until the voice spoke up. She was keeping her eyes open. Even if someone used a skill like Spatial Transport, she should still be able to detect *something*. Besides, Shion had Dominate Space, which took every measure to protect her surroundings.

And yet the demon lord Daggrull was right there.

"Why are you here, Sir Daggrull?" Shion asked the giant standing behind her atop the Long Wall.

Daggrull kindly answered her. He could be surprisingly gentlemanly these days, not at all like before.

"Hmm… Well, I just slowly walked over here, but did you not see me? Because if not, you're not even qualified to stand in front of me. I'd be wasting my time if I seriously tried to fight you."

"What?"

Shion didn't feel like she was being mocked. Quite the opposite. Daggrull was offering his true feelings in the kindest possible voice. From his point of view, Shion must have been like a little girl.

Now she could understand. Shion had met Daggrull many times, but at that moment he was so intimidating, it was like a different person. There was no doubt Daggrull saw himself as an almighty victor.

Shion, however, silenced that aura with her own intimidation.

"I'll be the judge of that," she said. "I am Shion, War Lord and the demon lord Sir Rimuru's most trusted secretary. I shall be your opponent!"

Shion gave her name, along with a couple of irrelevant facts. Then she turned to Daggrull with her beloved Goriki-maru Divine blade in hand.

Will he use some kind of skill, or maybe a trick…? I may not

match him in strength, but there has to be a reason behind all his moves!

If he was using something like Spatial Interference to move, there'd always be traces left behind. Even if he was simply moving really fast, it would be impossible for not even a shimmer of a breeze to be detected.

Shion told herself not to be fooled by Daggrull's bluff. But maybe…

Heh! What's the point of even thinking about it? If he gets me, I'll die as gracefully as I lived!

Shion was defiant. If things turned out as bad as she imagined, admitting to it would be tantamount to defeat. There'd be no more resisting him at that point, and no reason to think about it at all.

With Lady Luminus waiting behind me, it is my duty to analyze Daggrull's strength, even if only a little!

That steadfast drive was one of the good things about Shion. Shouting heroically, she set her consciousness to battle mode. Her body, optimized by her unique skill Master Chef, helped boost her strength beyond her existence points. With Infinite Regeneration, surpassing even the giants' healing skills, Shion's physical body had been reconfigured to excel at close combat. She was physically immortal, never dying unless her heart core was broken.

Even then, Shion's body was living up to her expectations, easily taking in power that exceeded its limits. The all-powerful blow this force would unleash would undoubtedly push all the way up to the ultimate realm. She was going to expose her full strength from the very first move and hoped to bury Daggrull.

"Uh-oh! Everyone, evacuate immediately! This whole area will be obliterated!"

Gadora, who was looking to provide support, immediately gave the call. Shion's elite guard quickly retreated in response… and immediately after that, Shion slashed at Daggrull. Her attention was focused solely on him and nothing else around her.

Daggrull, however, remained where he stood, eyeing Shion with pity.

"So that *is* all you've got?" he muttered. And the results were in. The moment Shion's sword made contact with his forehead, it was held in place by an invisible force.

“Wha…?!” gasped Shion.

A wall of compressed fighting force was in place between Shion and Daggrull. A wall that just blocked Shion’s sword. It was so dense, it easily drained her will to keep going. Thanks to it, Shion’s slash could not even touch Daggrull. He truly was a monster.

At that point, it was obvious Shion was no match for him. Defeat was certain for her.

“Just as I thought,” Daggrull said. “It seems you were never qualified to stand in front of me in the first place.”

Shion’s eyes widened in surprise. She stopped moving. Daggrull didn’t miss that, but he remained immobile. He didn’t need to catch her with her guard down to beat her.

So he broke the news to her softly.

“My only target is Luminus. Stay out of my way. That is my advice to you.”

Shion wasn’t about to accept that at face value. More determined to fight than ever, she began to challenge Daggrull.

✳

Fighting was underway in several places. Daggrull’s side had the upper hand, and Ultima’s battle was proving even more desperate than Shion’s.

“This is *so* weird,” Ultima grumbled. “How can you just stand there like it’s nothing when my Nuclear Cannon keeps hitting you?!”

Ultima resented Fenn and was openly angry. She hated to admit it, but he was strong. Even as she used her ultimate skill Samael, Lord of Deathly Poison, to enhance her power, adding a deathly poison effect to her Nuclear Cannon, Fenn wasn’t hurt by it in the slightest.

He laughed, openly deriding her. “Like I care. It must be tough to be a weakling, huh? Can’t even fight unless you work hard to learn some tricks.”

“You sure piss me off for such a little kid,” Ultima retorted.

She was analyzing her foe the whole time, though. From the start, she didn’t think she could defeat Fenn…but that was fine, because not losing was her only requirement.

But there was something wrong.

That magic had just proved it—something was frustrating her, something more than just the difference in ability. It felt like she was overlooking something. Then she suddenly remembered a report earlier that had bothered her. Gadora described it like the magic had been drained out, didn't he? The meteorite attack wasn't as successful as expected, and they thought it was because of the giants' superior healing skills, but…

Come to think of it, that didn't do as much damage as we thought, did it? Ultima wondered. *I mean, the only ones who looked injured at all were the lower-ranked warriors…*

That alone wasn't all that unnatural. If they were weak, of course they'd die or get hurt. But it was just strange that none of the higher-level fighters had so much as a scratch.

It's like the magic's not working…

Then a thought suddenly occurred to her.

No way…

Ultima's instincts sounded the alarm. If this was true…she needed to inform Luminus at once. She began to get antsy.

Just around then, Shion was repeatedly attacking Daggrull, even though she knew it wasn't working.

This could no longer be called a battle; she looked more like a child having a tantrum, and Daggrull was barely paying attention to it. Still, Shion didn't give up, because she believed Luminus had a plan. The two of them got along surprisingly well now; in a sense, it was thanks to Luminus that Shion had become half-decent at cooking. Shion trusted her unconditionally.

"You don't know when to give up, do you?" Daggrull asked. "You can repeat that all you want. It won't even scratch my skin."

"Shut up! Now that I'm done with my opening stretches, it's time to give this a real effort!"

Shion, determined not to be outdone in spirit, tried to slash at Daggrull again. But…

"I *told* you not to kid yourself!"

Daggrull's shout stopped her. The sound of his voice alone made Shion unable to move, as if she was bound in chains. He walked up to the immobile Shion, and then he simply swung his

clenched fist down.

That made the corner of the Long Wall where Shion was collapse. Even two thousand years of history were powerless against this fury—as was Shion after taking a direct hit. There was nothing sad about this. It was just survival of the fittest, the natural order of the world. Someone was not conforming to the will of the absolutely powerful, and now she had been eliminated by violence.

Thus, Daggrull's victory was about to be decided…but Shion had a smile on her face. Her eyes had caught the light of the magic circle shining under his feet.

The next moment:

"Who's kidding now?!"

The dignified voice was released with such force, it seemed to blow away the dust that had been dancing around. A radiantly beautiful girl in a jet-black dress appeared, accompanied by a fragrance as sweet as a rose. The silver-haired girl who landed in front of Shion was none other than the demon lord Luminus, the ruler of this land. She stared at the demon lord Daggrull, her silver and gold eyes full of intelligence and logic.

Then without a moment's pause, she completed the trap they had laid.

"You will now be destroyed," Luminus said. "Sanctuary Disintegration!"

It was the crystallized totality of the prayers of the whole city, an iron will driving them. That was the poetic way of putting it, but in reality, it was the demon lord Luminus using the secret skills of faith and favor to break through her computing limits and gather up the holy force of her believers. The greater the number of followers, the greater the power that could be gathered. It took some time, but it was well worth it.

Taking the strongest magic against an individual target and making it a ranged attack was a feat worthy of praise. With the all-powerful Disintegration spell unleashed in this way, even a giant like Charybdis could be obliterated in an instant.

Daggrull, caught off guard, had nowhere to run. Getting hit by Sanctuary Disintegration was his only option.

"Heh! You disappoint me, Daggrull," Luminus spat. "People like you always leave an opening when you're gloating about your victory, huh?"

Daggrull was proving more impervious than predicted. Luminus was worried Shion might be killed at this point. Daggrull might wield vast amounts of power, but a direct hit with Disintegration would still kill him for sure. But it didn't matter because his defensive barrier of fighting spirit couldn't be broken.

So Luminus went with a greatly expanded Disintegration that could include the whole barrier inside it. She wasn't much for hiding out and watching how things developed, but if she wanted to win, she had to do it. And then, after what felt like an eon of observation, Luminus struck at just the right moment.

And her patience was rewarded. The results couldn't have been better.

"Don't hate me for this," she said.

She offered her tribute to Daggrull, assured of her victory.

If they were to fight head-to-head, the odds of Luminus winning were very low. She knew that, so she went with this plan, not considering it a cowardly move. Come up with a way to win in advance, then execute—that was how she lived. It was the strongest of blows to the off-guard Daggrull, and she wasn't hesitant to show it off despite its strength. It was the perfect strategy, and if it didn't work, there was no other way.



And so…

“Hmm, yes… Was I being careless?” mused Daggrull. “But still, not a problem. I’m not hurt at all.”

She froze at those words.

Luminus’s lucid mind correctly perceived this impossible reality. Daggrull was unharmed—the facts were clear.

“Is that all, Luminus? Then it’s my turn.”

If she couldn’t defeat Daggrull with that attack, there was no victory for Luminus and her allies.

“Careful, now,” Daggrull said. “You might die instantly if you let your guard down.”

And with that, desperation began to set in.

✳

The battle between Alberto and Glasord was intensifying. The area around them was a wide-open circle, with nobody wanting to get dragged into the fight. But that didn’t matter to them. They were enjoying this battle, acknowledging each other as worthy foes.

“Kah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I am impressed by your skill, yes. It is an honor for any military man to cross swords with someone of your caliber!” cried Glasord.

“It is not my skill,” said Alberto. “It is this gear, given to me by our god Sir Rimuru, that lends me strength. The old me would have already been defeated, unable to withstand the pressure of your blade.”

“Ha! No need to be modest! Even among the giants, there are few who can match me. The fact you’re holding your own is proof you are a first-rate swordsman.”

Alberto calmly parried Glasord’s compliments. Glasord, perhaps appreciating this, gave him some gentle admonishment.

Alberto’s true strength lay in how he brought out the performance of God-class weapons. The fact he didn’t brag about it proved he wasn’t satisfied yet with his own skill…and not letting his enemies’ words disturb him was another

strength of his.

Hmm… I must hand it to him.

Glasord was also impressed. In a battle where split seconds counted, losing one's peace of mind meant instant defeat. Checking your foes with your lips was often just as effective a strategy as using a sword.

"Still," he continued, moving on to his next tactic, "why do you follow someone like that?"

"…What are you driving at?"

"If you developed *that* much strength, what need is there to follow some weak undead king? His necromancy is worthy of adulation, but true fighting spirit is something that resides in the body."

Glasord sounded agitated as he swung his two-handed sword. He didn't mean anything he said; he was just trying to provoke Alberto into a rage. Emotional agitation could lead to mistakes, which then led to instant death. This, too, was one of Glasord's great tactics, and a true warrior like him resorting to tricks like that didn't exactly please Alberto. But his expression did not change at all.

"You seem to be mistaken. Yes, I am Adalmann's bodyguard and the one in charge of the vanguard force. But aren't you forgetting something? Sir Adalmann is one of the Twelve Lordly Guardians, as recognized by our god himself."

"Hmm?"

"Don't you understand? In other words, he is more powerful than I am."

Alberto was just matter-of-factly telling the truth. Glasord, so firmly denied, raised one eyebrow and muttered, "Oh?" Then he held his longsword above his head, saying no more. He recognized Alberto wasn't an opponent he could fool with his trickery. It made him sad.

"Things never work out the way you want them to, do they?" he remarked. "Here I am, facing this wonderful opponent…but this is war, not a game. I have my own duties to perform, so it's about time to get serious."

Glasord wasn't trying to insult Alberto by cutting corners with him. He was enjoying the fight to the very last minute, using all the deception he could against him, but he was also all in on this, putting his life on the line. Now that all his techniques had failed, he had to put aside his own desires and

defeat his opponent head-on.

He preferred simple and clear thought, and he thus quickly made up his mind. He was a warrior by nature, and his skills were all master-level. He had honed them without relying on his strength—and not because he wasn't strong at first. That was just how he wanted to do it.

He had sealed his power within his beloved greatsword. Now that power was released. The change was instantaneous. His sword became a part of him—and Alberto had no way of knowing, but Glasord's existence points had just gone up from less than two million to ten.

Even Alberto was blindsided by this change. *Ugh. I should have gone for the win sooner, even if I had to push it…*

The bitter thought came to mind as soon as he caught sight of Glasord's swordsmanship. He knew his plan of action would be a mistake, though. If he went through with it, he would've been defeated before he saw Glasord make an effort.

There was only one correct answer: Alberto had to keep going head-on with him. He had to stick with it.

"Yes, you are a worthy opponent for me!" cheered Glasord.

"That's exactly what I'd say," replied Alberto.

The fierce sword fight started new. Alberto was at an overwhelming disadvantage. Like a willow swaying in the storm, Alberto could do nothing but deflect Glasord's fury away from him. But there wasn't a trace of defeat in Alberto's eyes. The battle intensified, and before long, the two of them weren't even paying attention to their surroundings, focusing solely on their swords.

✳

Adalmann, knocked to the ground, seemed to have fainted.

It was a momentary blunder, one that came and went in an instant, but on the battlefield, even that could be fatal. Thankful for the good fortune not to be hurt, he began to gauge the situation ahead of anything else. He didn't need to go back to his memory to understand what had happened. Fenn's blow had hit him; that much was clear.

The sheer force would drive anyone to despair. Adalmann was only safe because Venti the Gehenna Dragon protected him.

They took the impact together, and the only reason they weren't attacked further was because Ultima came in to help out.

Nevertheless, Fenn was a fearsome fighter. Adalmann's Multilayer Barrier was fully broken through; only one of its defensive measures was effective at all. If not for that one, though, a single blow would have mortally wounded Adalmann.

"Mortally wounded" is a strange way to describe a body that's already dead. Still, magical barriers are something I'm a master of, but it wasn't that he destroyed it so much as…

So much as, well, sliced through it without even noticing its presence.

The final surviving barrier wasn't magical, by the way, but rather a protective coating made of fighting spirit which Adalmann applied to keep his old skills useful more than anything. Without it, Adalmann couldn't deny the possibility that he could've ascended to Heaven right there and then.

Fenn might've just overpowered that barrier with pure force, but it seemed more natural to think he'd penetrated it somehow. This hinted at the secret behind Fenn's power.

Oh… I didn't think it was possible, but it'd explain a thing or two. It seems clear to me that the higher-level giants have Cancel Magic.

That was the answer Adalmann came up with. It was the same as Ultima's view, and it was correct.

Adalmann was sure it was the truth. It'd explain how little impact his ultra-powerful magic had, and the way his magical defenses seemed to completely fail him. If he was wrong, that was fine. All it meant was he couldn't use magic on giants, so Adalmann left it at that. His magical power was already exhausted anyway. It'd be hard to cast any more spells, so he didn't really care if the enemy had Cancel Magic or not.

So despite the mortal blow he should have received, he stood up like nothing was amiss. His bones were cracked up and down his body, and his holy robe was covered in mud, but he remained unconcerned as he turned his attention to Fenn, who was fighting Ultima.

Looks like she realized long ago that magic was unavailable. With that big a difference in power, I'm amazed she can fight evenly with him.

They were not that evenly matched; Ultima was just stalling. Even a single direct hit would have knocked her out for good,

but that didn't stop her from audaciously attacking over and over. That was exactly why she could fight so hard against a foe with an EP more than twenty times her own.

But the limit seemed to be approaching. Adalmann had to stop goofing off. He remained unhurried, though, because he knew he'd be of no use to Ultima like this. At that point, he was little more than a pile of bones, dying from lack of magic. And if so…

"Venti, are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes. I was caught off guard…"

Venti slipped into human form to answer Adalmann's question. Her damage was so bad, it was clear to her she needed healing at once, even if it meant revealing another one of her secrets. Once a day, Venti could perform a "super heal" by changing her body shape from dragon to human, or vice versa. This freed her from even fatal wounds, and transforming into a human right now let her fully erase the damage she had taken for her master.

Adalmann, aware of this power, looked unsurprised. "Thank you for saving my life," he told Venti.

"I am glad you're all right."

"But now we have a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"It looks like magic doesn't work on him. If we don't do something, Lady Ultima will be in danger."

"I see."

Fenn's energy level was so extraordinary that any head-on attack was beyond reckless. Venti, who had been thinking of using magic to support Adalmann, was quite shocked by this. Adalmann, however, was unperturbed. He studied Fenn like a scientist conducting an experiment; it was hard to believe he used to be a priest.

"That giant is simply too strong. Even if magic worked, defeating him would've been tricky."

That much, as Adalmann claimed, was certainly true. His battle speed, destructive power, and defensive strength were all top-notch. In terms of energy alone, he was comparable to a True Dragon. Any half-hearted attack would be promptly crushed.

Naturally, the same was true of Adalmann's magic. And in that case, Adalmann saw fit to make a change of policy.

“Goodness,” he said. “After far too long, it looks time for my well-honed body to take center stage.”

“What?”

Venti, who loved her master Adalmann with all her heart, could not let that go unaddressed. She gave him a suspicious look, as if saying, “Did you hit your head? There are cracks in it. Are you even conscious? Or have you lost your mind? Maybe you’re just mumbling in your sleep…”

This doubt was understandable. “Well-honed body” or not, Adalmann was nothing but bones. What kind of nonsense was a skeleton like him spouting?

“Did I not tell you?” Adalmann asked, nonchalantly answering the question. “I did once hold the position of high priest, but my real job was something else.”

“Um, it was…?”

“I was a monk of the Holy Fist, the highest rank of martial arts-practicing priests.”

“Uh…okay…?”

Adalmann didn’t have to engage in close combat too often because he had Alberto, his superb bodyguard, handling the front line for him. Somewhere along the line, he had become a rearguard specialist handling healing duties. That was simply more efficient overall, but it didn’t mean Adalmann had abandoned his skills. He was still an active kenpo practitioner. The fact he’d survived that last blow with that defensive layer of fighting spirit was proof of this.

“I never had a chance to show you myself,” he said. “When I fought you, I didn’t think it’d be effective against your nonhuman form.”

“Oh, no…?”

Venti was at a loss for a response. She had known Adalmann for hundreds of years, and this was the first she was hearing about it. If he had something like *that*, surely there would’ve been more occasions to use it? She might have adored Adalmann, but not even she was willing to let this slide.

“I’m glad to see you’re so accepting of this,” he told her.

“Ah, um, actually, I… Um, wait just a minute!”

“Is there a problem?”

“Well, there’s just a lot going on, you know?”

“Oh? How, exactly?”

Being asked this embarrassed Venti. But she strung the

words together anyway. She had to know the answer.

"I'm sure I'm mistaken, but you're not actually going to challenge that giant with your bare hands, are you?"

Venti hoped for a denial. She had known Adalmann for a long time, but she had never seen him do anything remotely close to working out. Not that it'd make sense for a skeleton to pump iron anyway, but… And besides, what was this "monk of the Holy Fist" stuff? She'd never heard of that. And all this new, uncertain information was enough to make him think Fenn was beatable?

In short, Venti was not keen on the idea. Adalmann, on the other hand, was bullish.

"What a foolish question," he said. "I fight with my fists, and it therefore follows I'd fight barehanded, doesn't it? Do you have any more questions?"

That's not what I meant, Venti wanted to retort. "No, nothing…" was what came out instead. Adalmann's momentum simply overwhelmed her.

No wonder he was deceived by his allies in the past. Sir Adalmann seems so intelligent all the time, but sometimes he has moments like this…

Resolving to stop thinking about it, she turned her attention to the rampaging Fenn. Her beloved master was the only one she could trust. She was beginning to doubt whether she really respected that master any longer, but still Venti entrusted everything to Adalmann.

"Good," Adalmann said. "I will now tell you the plan, then. Magic doesn't seem to work here, so I'm going to strike at him with physical force. It's the only way."

Venti wanted to go straight home after hearing that. But she persevered, listening to this harebrained plan.

"Of course, your breath won't work, either. Cancel Magic works by interfering with the spirit particles that make up magicules."

This was surprisingly intelligent-sounding, no offense to Adalmann. He really could be dependable at times like these. But then came what he said next.

"In other words, we have no means of attack. So I have a suggestion: Let's combine together!"

"…Um, okay?"

Adalmann's proposal was beyond Venti's imagination.

Frankly, it made no sense. But sadly, Adalmann took Venti's response as an agreement.

"Hee-hee-hee! Ah, I knew you would say that!"

"Ah, um, no…"

Venti's denial was too late. In fact, without pausing for another moment, Adalmann launched his skill.

"I've been developing a secret technique for just this kind of crisis. Now it's time to show it off!"

Then Venti's strength drained from her body.

The secret move Adalmann invoked was a kind of assimilation by possession. Venti had endless questions about how long he had been developing it and so on, but both parties felt the move succeeded without a problem.

Adalmann, an undead skeleton, was as close as you could get to a spiritual life-form without actually being one. He was, in a way, "possessing" his own corpse in skeleton form. This let him physically interact with the world, but he wasn't limited to the skeleton at all. In this case, he went over to Venti's body, possessing it.

This alone, however, was nothing particularly unusual. The question was how the two consciousnesses mixed together, if at all. Unlike a possession, where you seized someone else's body, Adalmann needed to preserve the consciousness of the original body owner. It was a tricky problem, but one he'd solved, which was why he was loudly boasting about it being a "secret move."

"Don't worry," he said. "Your consciousness is still intact after the possession, right?"

"Y-yes…"

"Good," he whispered. "I do have my concerns about the separation process later, but…"

Venti didn't let that go unheard. She was one with Adalmann, after all, so she heard every word of it clearly.

"Wh-whoa! Are you sure we're okay?"

"Well," Adalmann said, trying to calm her, "even in the worst-case scenario, we could ask our god Sir Rimuru to prepare a new body!"

It was pretty brazen of him, but Venti had a feeling the request would be approved. Rimuru loved conducting experiments like that; he'd likely be overjoyed to see this skill in effect. But it left open the question of who'd move into the new body—but before she went down that rabbit hole, Venti devoted

herself to understanding her current situation. Being possessed by Adalmann had greatly altered Venti's body. The magicules of the Gehenna Dragon and the strong body to support all that were now in possession of Adalmann's steely spirit.

"Hmm… I've missed looking like this."

Standing there was a dark-haired young man wearing a jet-black priest's robe. It was the very figure of Adalmann's younger days. There were a few differences, such as the color of his hair, but otherwise it was a perfect reproduction.

Whoa, Venti thought. *How surprisingly good-looking! Adalmann is worthy of my respect and love after all!*

Venti had a habit of putting her interests above everyone else's like that.

"All right. I'll leave the rest to you, Sir Adalmann. Good luck to you!"

So she decided to completely trust Adalmann, forgetting about all the uneasiness she had before…and so was born the true Gehenna Lord, possessing both a strong body and enormous magical power.

Heh-heh… I haven't been this excited in ages. In this state, I might make a good match for Sir Zegion. By my estimation, I should be about equal with Ultima…

Adalmann thought so anyway.

He remembered all his acquaintances, people who couldn't engage him in the martial arts since he was a skeleton. Now, whether he beat them or not, he could at least fight them.

Yes… Now the door is open to me.

Aside from Benimaru, Diablo, and Zegion, Adalmann was confident he wouldn't lose to any of the other Lordly Guardians.

With a fearless smile, Adalmann leaped up. His body felt light, as if he were flying. Even in his skeleton days, he had never felt so free from the forces of gravity. Still, the giant called Fenn was a formidable foe. It'd be suicidal to underestimate him after Ultima couldn't even lay a finger on him. If Adalmann were to go it alone, victory would be impossible. But if he worked with Ultima, then maybe…

Fortunately, although Fenn's power was the real thing, his fighting skills weren't as great as Glasord's, who was busy fighting Alberto. He couldn't handle the energy of a True Dragon, which was why he hadn't finished off Ultima.

Adalmann was confident he had a chance.

“I’m not in the mood for just a tactical victory. Instead of simply buying time, let’s make this an overwhelming win for us!”

“You can do it, Sir Adalmann!”

Venti, too, was in high spirits, although the basis for this was admittedly pretty thin. Master and servant resembled each other to a scary extent.

“Yes! I *can* do it! I—*we* are one of Sir Rimuru’s strongest fighters—a member of the Twelve Lordly Guardians, in fact!”

That fact fueled Adalmann and Venti’s confidence. Soon they were running and laughing happily together during this crisis.

✳

Ugh, I knew it!

Ultima wanted to curse the world. She was convinced magic didn’t work on Fenn, and the fact embittered her. And even worse, the plan she devised with Luminus called for erasing Daggrull from existence with Disintegration, the most powerful magic. She wanted to tell Luminus it wouldn’t work, but Fenn was not so naive as to allow her—and so, after she saw the pillar of light in the distance that signified a Disintegration casting, Ultima realized the plan had failed.

“Some insectoid magic beasts can nullify magic, but that’s not what you are…,” she said to Fenn.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You noticed that, huh? Our Cancel Magic is an absolute defense against all magic. It blocks the movement of spirit particles itself, so no matter what kind of magic it is, it won’t work!”

“Thanks for telling me,” cracked the annoyed Ultima.

Magic was the most powerful weapon for demons, making the giants their natural enemy. Only the higher-level types had access to that skill, but it made giants a terrible match for her in battle.

…Damn it! Guy definitely knew about this. I really wish he told me…

She could whine all she wanted, but Guy wasn’t there. Ultima understood from the bottom of her heart exactly how important it was for everyone in a group to be on the same page—just as Rimuru always said. It was too late, though. They

couldn't just give up, so they had to find some way to overcome this catastrophe…and Ultima thought she saw a clue to that in Gadora's Nihilistic Parade.

If the old man's on the field here, it must've been because it's real dangerous magic. And why is that?

The answer was obvious: because it worked.

It had to do with the nature of magic. A spell rewrote laws by influencing magicules, and since magicules contained spirit particles, it was inevitable that Cancel Magic would be an absolute defense against them. However, unique among the dark magic family, nihilistic magic summoned the emptiness of hell, making any energy it came into contact with vanish. Thanks to that, they thought, it could even cancel out Cancel Magic.

Ultima was certain about it, so she didn't hesitate to limit her attacks strictly to nihilistic ones.

"Time to die!" she yelled. "Dark Magic—Nihilistic Vanish!"

The emptiness flowed over Fenn.

"Tsk… What a pain in the ass. You demons are *so* good at harassing people!"

Fenn's fighting spirit drowned out the emptiness, leaving him with zero damage. Nihilistic Vanish was the most powerful dark magic spell, the counterpart of Disintegration, but to Fenn it was like a pesky mosquito.

But even so, it wasn't a meaningless move. Just as enough dust piled together can create a mountain and a stream of water can pierce through a rock over many years, Fenn would eventually fall if she kept up this attack. There was plenty of time.

Ultima, seeing a path to victory, grew more focused. She needed to repeat the same attack thousands and thousands of times, with such precision that not even a single mistake could be tolerated. If Fenn's attack hit her even once, Ultima's defeat would be set in stone. That was how big the gap in power was… but speed was the most important element in battle, and they weren't that far from each other on that.

Thanks to that, Ultima could hold her own against Fenn. That and one other reason—the difference in combat experience. Ultima had trained in combat against the overwhelmingly strong Zegion. That was being put to good use—she was accustomed to fighting foes stronger than her.

The difference in EP between Ultima and Zegion wasn't *that* great—his wasn't double hers anyway. One would think Fenn, who had almost twenty times her EP, would be far more dangerous, but that wasn't the case. To use an analogy, Zegion's attack was like a spear. If it pierced you, you died, and that was it. Fenn's attacks, on the other hand, were akin to a giant hammer. Even a single scratch was enough to inflict serious damage, and its sheer power was staggering.

The sole difference was between a single sharp point and a large, flat surface. If an attack had enough energy to kill a target, its threat level was the same regardless. Fenn's attack was more powerful, but it was no different from Zegion's, being a one-shot kill either way.

Thinking about it that way made it easier to relax a little. Ultima had been worried about Luminus and the others, but she'd already moved on. There was nothing she could do to help, so she had long since banished them from her mind.

Ultima was back to humming to herself as she toyed with Fenn. That was when Adalmann returned.

"Sorry to make you wait, Lady Ultima," he said.

"Um…who are you?" she asked. "Not the bony guy?"

"Ha-ha-ha! It is I, Adalmann!"

"Oh. Well, whatever. You know what you have to do, right?"

"Of course I do!"

Using Hasten Thought, they divided up their roles in an instant. Adalmann would be the frontline force against Fenn, while Ultima would back him up as needed and repeatedly cast Nihilistic Vanish to whittle down Fenn's strength. At this point, it was more like assembly-line work than anything else.

"A big, musclebound rampaging lummox isn't any match for us, right?"

Ultima laughed wickedly as she declared victory, more than a little bit too early.

✳

The earth trembled.

The absolute fury of the demon lord Daggrull dominated the battlefield.

This isn't going to work, the demon lord Luminus Valentine

thought, and she meant it. Her plan was to dispose of Daggrull on the first shot, even if it meant breaking out her most powerful secret techniques. If that didn't work, defeat was inevitable. Disintegration could turn any opponent into dust; it could kill Daggrull just as well. Even a True Dragon would have no choice but to be reborn later.

And yet the results were a disaster. Daggrull's cheat-level Cancel Magic had completely destroyed any chance of victory. Luminus had half-expected this to happen, and now it had come true.

The fight between Alberto and Glasord continued.

At first glance, it appeared to be evenly matched, with neither side giving an inch. However, if you observed the fight through the ultimate skill Asmodeus, Lord of Lust, things looked very different. Glasord's light was shining brightly, while Alberto's was so thin and frail that it could flicker its last at any moment. They had both shaved only a tiny percentage of life force off each other, but the overall numbers were what made the difference.

Before Alberto could whittle Glasord down, the winner was as good as decided. But Alberto wasn't the one to blame. On the contrary, he was able to compete with a true master using his impeccable swordsmanship, a feat that should be praised.

Glasord, too, was a master swordsman. Taking into account the energy handicap, it could even be said that Alberto was superior in skill to Glasord. That, however, was not enough to change the situation. At this rate, Alberto's defeat was only a matter of time.

Meanwhile, Ultima's party was putting up a good fight against Fenn. The battle was raging, but it was already looking a bit like a throwaway match. Adalmann was doing beyond well. *That's what working for Rimuru can do for you*, she thought.

For example, Adalmann had become one with Venti the Gehenna Dragon. Ultima didn't know how it happened, but thanks to that, he had gained a strong body and a significant magicule boost. But even so, there was still a clear difference between him and Fenn the Mad Fist, who was as powerful as a True Dragon.

For Ultima in particular, this was an opponent who had been tormenting Luminus for many years, which gave her a lot to think about. She wanted to admire him, but at the same time, she bitterly cursed him as a major annoyance. Luminus, too, had mixed feelings. To someone like her, able to quantify other people's life force, the gap between the two seemed to be widening to the point of hopelessness. But she still didn't give up, even seeming to enjoy the battle. They could only keep it going thanks to an intense sort of mental concentration, akin to stepping on thin ice.

Luminus could see Adalmann, who had abandoned defending his whole body at once and instead focused his energy only on contact areas to deal with Fenn's attacks.

Ultima did the same. She could more easily manipulate her energy than Adalmann—she was a natural at it—but a single blow would still end her anyway. To make up for the difference in energy, she was focusing all her body's power on a single point. It was such an amazing feat, one could even call it divine…but it was doomed not to last long, and even a momentary lapse could be fatal.

Still, their objective was to wear down the enemy and prolong the battle as much as possible. It was a miracle that this was even a competitive match. And Fenn wasn't even using his Gleipnir chaos bonds. Once those entered the picture, the battle situation would change drastically, and not in a good way.

Finally, there was Shion. She had been beaten down in front of Luminus, but she stood up again, challenging Daggrull once more. Clearly she was determined not to retreat, no matter how many times she was beaten.

But it was beyond foolhardy. The difference in fighting ability between Daggrull and Shion was so extreme that Luminus, who could read it in number form, saw Shion's strategy as suicide. The only reason she was alive was because she was under the protection of Luminus; otherwise, she would have been instantly killed long ago.

No matter how immortal Shion's body was, if she wasn't given even a moment of free time to regenerate, she would lose her body. She could fully regenerate from her soul alone, but if one lost not only their material body but their spiritual body as

well, the exposed astral body (or heart core) would be crushed, causing death.

Luminus was preventing that from happening. *Don't be so reckless*, she thought as she looked on, wiping the cold sweat from her brow.

Daggrull's sons were in a panic, scurrying to stop Shion.

"Hey, lady, you can't do this!"

"Lady Shion! I don't think that—"

"B-bad news! I think you better run away…"

But Shion wasn't intimidated.

"Shut up!" she spat. "There is no defeat in Sir Rimuru's book…and so I, too, will never be defeated!"

That sounded like completely unreasonable logic to Luminus, but it was typical Shion talk. Something about her words seemed to energize Daggrull's sons, too.

"Yeahhhhhhh! C'mon, Dad! Take us on!"

"We've got to do it. I'm ready to go!"

"I'm gonna do it! And I'm gonna get so much praise later!"

Their minds made up, they went straight toward Daggrull.

"Hoh? You're facing me now? You *have* grown a lot."

Daggrull looked pleased, but it didn't look like he had any intention of going easy on them. The next moment, all three of them were knocked down. They were so badly injured by that single blow that they seemed unable to stand up. They were still alive, though, so Daggrull had probably gone easy on them.

This is impossible. There's no way I can win!

Luminus, who had half-given up, heard Shion roar in her ears.

"Hee-hee-hee! You did well, you guys! Great drive. Just rest there and leave the rest to me!"

Shion herself had been seriously injured by Daggrull. The healing was already complete, but the sheer difference in skill was insurmountable. But Shion still stood up, never faltering.

The sight of her reminded Luminus of a long-ago memory. She couldn't help but see Shion as similar to the Hero who saved her in the past.

"Let me help you!"

Gadora swooped in to back Shion up. But it was pointless. The attacks from Shion's side couldn't reach Daggrull. They couldn't even touch him.

They were at a crossroads. Should they continue to fight and face certain defeat, or should they run from the match and try to regain their footing?

A wise man wouldn't hesitate. And…yes, the Luminus of the past would have withdrawn without hesitation. A war offering no chance to win is pointless. You can always rebuild a country, and they had no attachment to this region. With her eternal lifespan, Luminus had no need to go around fighting life-and-death battles.

But…

Am I sure about this? Is it right for me to abandon Shion?

Luminus wasn't sure. Daggrull was after her, primarily. If she retreated at this point, that would up the chances that Shion and the others would survive. She thought that, but she also knew that was just an excuse. She couldn't lie to herself.

Shion would never give up, just as Ultima and Adalmann continued to challenge Fenn. But there was no way to win, and Shion was certain to die at this rate. But what if Luminus helped her out? Her power—the ultimate skill Asmodeus, Lord of Lust—ruled over life and death. Even if she died instantly, as long as Luminus was there, she could be revived.

If Luminus withdrew, Shion would surely die. She didn't want that.

So I'd abandon my friends and just run away? I refuse to accept such an ungainly way of life! I am the proud Queen of Nightmares!

Luminus, too, was dedicated to this.

"Gunther!" she yelled.

"Here."

Gunther Strauss, her butler-like assistant, appeared from the shadows. Luminus didn't even turn around to look at him.

"As a proud member of the Octagram, I intend to share Shion's fate," she said.

"You have the option of running away. There would be no shame in that."

Luminus laughed him off. "It would be most unbecoming of me to run away in disgrace, don't you think?"

She gave her servant a glamorous smile—bewitching, even, not the sort of smile a girl as beautiful as her would normally give you. It made Gunther recall her smiling just like this long ago, when she defeated that demigod. She always had an

attachment to life, because she'd promised her friends she'd be there for them. She was, in essence, a proud queen. And no, running away would never suit Luminus Valentine, Queen of Nightmares. She was a noble vampire princess, and to Gunther and the rest, she was the greatest treasure of all.

"…Yes, my lady."

Gunther bowed reverently. Luminus placidly nodded back at him.

"If I should perish, you may lead the people as the next king. Now go."

Luminus's voice was filled with determination and resolve. Gunther remained calm and unmoved. As a steward who obeyed the god of this nation, Gunther was unquestionably the apostle of Luminus.

"What kind of vassal would I be if I abandoned my queen? Not a single person under you would be foolish enough to do that."

"You mean it?"

"The evacuations have already begun, but as for myself, I will follow you wherever you go."

"Mmm…"

Luminus was puzzled by this unexpected reaction. For the first time today, Gunther, her ever-faithful confidant, disobeyed her.

"…When we fall, we fall together."

Gunther waited for Luminus's reply, a look of unwavering determination in his eyes.

She was bewildered at first, but soon her spirits rose.

"Hmph. Do as you please," she joyfully commanded him. "You're just as stupid as certain other people I could name."

✳

"Good luck to you."

Gunther bowed and left. Reasoning he was no match for Daggrull, he went to help Louis instead.

Luminus, impressed that he was as capable as ever, stood by Shion. She still wondered if she had done the right thing, but she had no regrets.

"It seems that your strategy has ended in failure," Luminus

said. “You’re still not giving up?”

“Of course not,” Shion retorted.

Luminus shook her head in disgust, but the next moment, she grinned.

“Are you sure you don’t want to run away, Shion?”

Now Shion was disgusted.

“Absolutely not!”

The last one standing was the winner. Even if you didn’t win, you just had to survive, and all would be well.

“Our mission’s simple enough here, isn’t it?” Shion boldly stated.

It made Gadora’s head hurt, but he didn’t want to argue with her. Luminus was just as astonished.

“In that case, leave the healing to me,” Luminus said. “Even if you die instantly, I’ll bring you back to life on the spot.”

With that as a cue, they launched what could be called a reckless suicide attack.

Shion and Gadora repeatedly attacked in waves, while Luminus poised herself to provide support in the rear. Even though they were both killed instantly by Daggrull’s attack, Luminus actually managed to revive them. The power of Asmodeus is a thing to be feared, but the way she wielded it was also worthy of praise.

And then there was Gadora. Thanks to being reincarnated as a metal demon, he was able to put up a good fight against even Daggrull, who was impervious to magic. Daggrull’s Cancel Magic worked on everything, but it wasn’t without its weaknesses. By the looks of things, it could cancel all magic that affected Daggrull’s body, but it couldn’t do that for magic that affected other people.

Body-strengthening magic was a good example. Cancel Magic allowed Daggrull to ignore things like defensive barriers and body-hardening magic, but if you powered up your speed in advance, it couldn’t cancel that out. In the case of Adalmann’s Tempest Meteor, the summoned meteorites were erased by Cancel Magic because they were made of an imaginary substance, but if they had been real, they would have caused a considerable amount of damage.

What if you took a rock of a certain mass from a different dimension, brought it into the sky with flight magic, then dropped it? In that case, Cancel Magic couldn’t counteract the

potential energy imparted to the rock. In other words, Gadora believed, this skill couldn't cancel out indirect magic.

And he was right. Gadora had applied enhancement magic to his own body to fight more intelligently, and it worked. When Shion was down, Gadora would step forward; when he got knocked out, Shion promptly took his place. It was an improvised combo, but they were working together like a skilled party.

The power of Luminus was undoubtedly the most important factor, but this battle strategy wouldn't have been possible without both of them.

The only concern, then, was that Daggrull didn't even seem fatigued yet…

Shion rose up before Luminus's eyes. No matter how much she was hurt, she stood up again and again, never fearing death. She was focusing on doing what she could to the point of brutal devotion. It only worked thanks to her trust in Luminus. She truly believed Luminus could revive her from instant death. It was a simple, almost childish belief, but Shion could earnestly believe in it—one of her greatest traits.

But this wasn't the case with Gadora. As soon as he recovered from near-death, all of his injuries were healed, not even leaving a scar. At first glance, since he was unharmed, it felt like nothing had affected him…but the exhaustion was building in his mind. Unlike Shion, he was an intelligent person, and try as he could, he couldn't help but think about how hopeless this battle was. You could really only fight this kind of thing if you completely turned off your mind. The moment you grew conscious of your anxiety and self-doubt, it would lead to mistakes.

And they were fighting Daggrull, a demon lord with a magicule count comparable to Fenn's and a little inferior to Glasord's. His skills, though, made him the best of the three brothers, and by far the most dangerous.

Is this fine as it is? Or is there something more I can do?

Gadora wasn't sure—and that proved fatal.

He was just a little late in taking action. Normally, a minor delay like that couldn't even be called a mistake, but Daggrull wasn't slow enough to miss the opportunity—or, really, he had been letting those mistakes go so far, but he didn't want to go along with this any longer.

“Honestly,” Daggrull grumbled. “I thought you’d be more entertaining, but this has been so disappointing.”

With a big sigh, Daggrull casually threw a punch at Gadora.

Naturally, Luminus healed him immediately, but then Daggrull butted in with a move that caught her unawares, preventing the healing spell.

✳

Daggrull stood between Luminus and Gadora. Luminus wanted to heal Gadora, but Daggrull was in her way.

“You…”

“Oh, am I blocking you? I could have done this at the start, but I thought I’d see some more variety, so I let him have his way. I don’t expect you to be grateful, but you have no right to hold a grudge against me, either.”

Daggrull wasn’t lying. From the very beginning, he been playing along with his adversaries, trying to enjoy the fight as much as possible. Once he made his move, though, he was convinced he couldn’t lose. Daggrull’s power was that great. And yet he gave Luminus and the others a chance, because he remembered the words of his best friend, the demigod Twilight Valentine.

“That girl, you know… She’s my masterpiece. She’s so full of potential…not at all like my other work.”

The demigod always boasted to Daggrull like that. And while all the Disciples of the Demigod were talented, only Luminus was treated differently from the others…even though Daggrull didn’t see that much difference in her.

In the end, the demigod left this world without ever telling him why. Even his soul was annihilated at the hands of Luminus, the daughter he loved the most. The Sanctuary Disintegration earlier was the very magic that buried the demigod…and even *that* couldn’t work on Daggrull.

There were no more secret tricks up their sleeves. Daggrull was playing along, waiting to see what his opponents could do, but it all seemed meaningless. Luminus, devoted to her support role, showed no sign of joining the attack. He showed them a few opportunities, but they still kept repeating the same attack pattern.

They can play those childish games all day if they want to. It's impossible to defeat me…

Daggrull felt he had been looked down on. So he decided there was no further point in going along with them. But that didn't mean he stopped being vigilant. Just then, he made the rational decision to separate the front line from the rear.

"You're talking like you were holding back," Shion said.

"It's true."

Daggrull brushed off the indignant Shion.

"What are you—?"

"Hmm… You don't seem to understand."

Daggrull disappeared. The next moment, Shion was silenced by a fist slamming into her abdomen. It felt like her internal organs had exploded. This wasn't just a cute little jab that'd disappear from their minds immediately. The blow kept raging inside Shion, as if it was running through all her organs.

Recovery magic will be meaningless against this…

That was Shion's thought. And with that destructive energy still housed in her body, all the healing in the world no longer mattered.

Luminus also recognized this at a glance. *Not good*, she thought, biting her lip.

"Well? You must have felt very secure in the knowledge that you had someone to protect you, right?" Daggrull asked Shion.

"Ughh… Th-this is nothing…"

"Still undaunted? I applaud your will, but guts alone won't help with that!"

The unamused Daggrull kicked Shion in the face. He had nothing against her; in fact, he rather liked her. With this, he just wanted to knock her out for good so she wouldn't disturb him any longer. But he underestimated Shion's stubbornness.

"D-don't be ridiculous! This much w-won't defeat me…"

Shion stood up, spitting blood and gruffly smiling.

"…I see my eyes must be going on me. I apologize for misjudging you."

He had intended to just knock her out, not kill her, but Shion wasn't about to be stopped by that. Daggrull, realizing this, finally stopped going easy on her.

"You would have been a little better if you'd never awakened," Daggrull told her.

"What are you talking about?"

“It doesn’t matter. You’re about to die anyway.”

Daggrull clenched his fists. He didn’t appear interested in any more chitchat.

Luminus, seeing this, shouted out:

“N-no, don’t!”

She sensed the change in Daggrull. She knew Shion was in danger. But Daggrull just snickered at her.

“This woman will die, and it’s all thanks to *your* worthlessness.”

“Wha—?” Shion tried to argue, but was silenced again by Daggrull’s blow. She wasn’t dead, but she was finally unconscious at long last. She was lucky to survive, but Daggrull hadn’t held back at all with that blow. There was no way she could continue fighting.

Daggrull was relieved that Shion fainted. He didn’t intend to make her suffer, and if possible, he wanted to avoid killing her.

Now Luminus and Daggrull were the only two people left. Luminus finally steeled her resolve.

“Very well, Daggrull. It’s a duel between you and me. I will deal with you myself!”

Luminus prepared for Daggrull. The words honestly felt a little funny to her. She wanted to express her pride as a demon lord, but Daggrull probably saw her as nothing more than a piece of trash.

“Hmm,” Daggrull said. “All right, Luminus, show me what Twilight has entrusted to you. If you can’t do that, then die!”

The next moment, Daggrull’s entire body surged with ferocious fighting spirit. Seeing this made Luminus realize just how much he had been holding back. Daggrull wasn’t even conscious that he was, but if he had fought like this from the beginning, the match would’ve been settled long ago.

He really is a monster, isn’t he? There’s no effective way to deal with him. The only possibility is to wait for Rimuru to come to the rescue…

Her best laid plans had failed. There was no chance of winning a head-to-head battle with Daggrull like this—and yet Luminus was standing right there. For a moment, she wondered if she should have run away after all. But Luminus laughed off the idea. What kind of demon lord would abandon her friends?

Strange, though. I haven’t known Shion as long as Chloe,

either…

But she was still standing, because she didn't want to disappoint Shion and her party. And then it occurred to her.

Rimuru's got it tough, doesn't he? Always working beyond his limits, trying to live up to the expectations of his friends…

For the first time in her life, Luminus understood Rimuru's feelings. Rimuru was the only one who could beat Daggrull now, with the exception of Guy.

Him, or…

The image of a free-spirited black dragon passed through Luminus's mind.

I must be imagining things. I could never expect anything from him!

Despite this thought, a smile appeared on Luminus's lips.

Daggrull turned curious at the sight of this. "Don't tell me you've got some *other* secret trick to break out at this point?"

"If I did, I would have used it long ago!"

Luminus proudly puffed out her chest. If the end was coming, she wanted to stand strong and protect her pride as a demon lord.

…And maybe I believe in it, too? The idea that someone will come to help, just like long ago…?

In the past, a Hero saved her from a crisis. It was a miraculous event, one that didn't just happen when you wanted it to. Luminus knew that was a little too convenient. But Shion, Ultima, and everyone else never losing hope inspired something in her. Maybe it was rubbing off. It must be, she thought.

It's really tough for Rimuru, isn't it? Even people like me who have no relationship with him can't help but feel their hopes rising.

The idea made her laugh, really. It was strange.

"…? Come up with any bright ideas?" Daggrull asked.

"No. I know this isn't in character for me, but I'm going to struggle against you till the bitter end!"

"Hoh."

"Now let's go!"

Luminus, newly inspired, broke out her magic power to the fullest. At the same time, her Nightrose sword was imbued with the power of Asmodeus, Lord of Lust. This was her preferred surefire battle style—using the power of death to steal her foe's

life force, then the power of life to convert it into energy for her. Fighting like this canceled out any slight strength differences, and the longer the battle went on, the more of an advantage she enjoyed. When it came to draining the energy of foes who far outclassed her, she was an expert.

Daggrull, too, was glad to see Luminus in this state. He had a healthy respect for his foes. They were wonderful people, no matter how he looked at them. They were so reliable as allies, and now that they were enemies, they made Daggrull's heart soar like nothing else.

Truly a shame to kill them.

But he had to avenge the man who had been his best friend. Only then could Daggrull fulfill his destiny as a god-killer. This was the secret agreement he'd made with Feldway through Fenn. Daggrull would cooperate with Feldway's ambition to revive Veldanava; after that, the real battle would begin.

And this secret agreement with Feldway wasn't the only one, either. If they defeated Luminus, all the western lands would be incorporated into the domain of the giants. If they then invaded and overran the Forest of Jura, that land would also belong to Daggrull.

It was his chance to both go on a rampage to fulfill his destiny *and* satisfy his territorial ambitions. *I can't stop here*, he thought—and by that point, his instincts were already starting to run wild.

So Daggrull decided there was no need to continue this charade any longer.

"In the first place—"

Daggrull began to speak. But at that moment, everything stopped. All hostilities no longer meant anything.

"…You can't do very much now, can you?"

Only his muttering echoed across the world before fading.

"…?!"

In the world where only her conscious remained, Luminus was puzzled.

"Oh, you're conscious? No wonder he boasted about you being his greatest masterpiece."

Daggrull's voice had a tone of admiration, but Luminus was struck by a fear that chilled her soul. As wise as she was, she

might have overlooked this entirely without being aware of it—but since she was concentrating on the battle, she understood what was going on.

As much as she didn't want to.

Time is standing still…?

It was pure despair.

From the very beginning, there was no way we could beat Daggrull…

She fully understood this…but Luminus's thirst to live still wasn't lost. She was gathering information, figuring out how to survive…and it only led to further despair.

Luminus continued to claw her way back, even though it felt like she was being swallowed by a deep, bottomless darkness. In this suspended world, even despair went on forever.

She closed her eyes, confronting her regrets. *At the very least, I wanted to take on that hateful, irreverent, evil dragon with my own two hands…*

And just as Luminus was thinking that, she heard what sounded like a high-pitched laugh. It rang out just as Daggrull's fist was about to reach her.

Her thoughts paused there.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! It is I!"

The moment she perceived what this voice meant, Luminus fully grasped what was going on. A mighty fist loomed in front of her…and a brown palm was there to catch it. The evil dragon, who had been nowhere near the battlefield until that moment, stopped Daggrull's fist before it could hit her.

Time moves with the arrival of hope, so there may be no eternal nights…

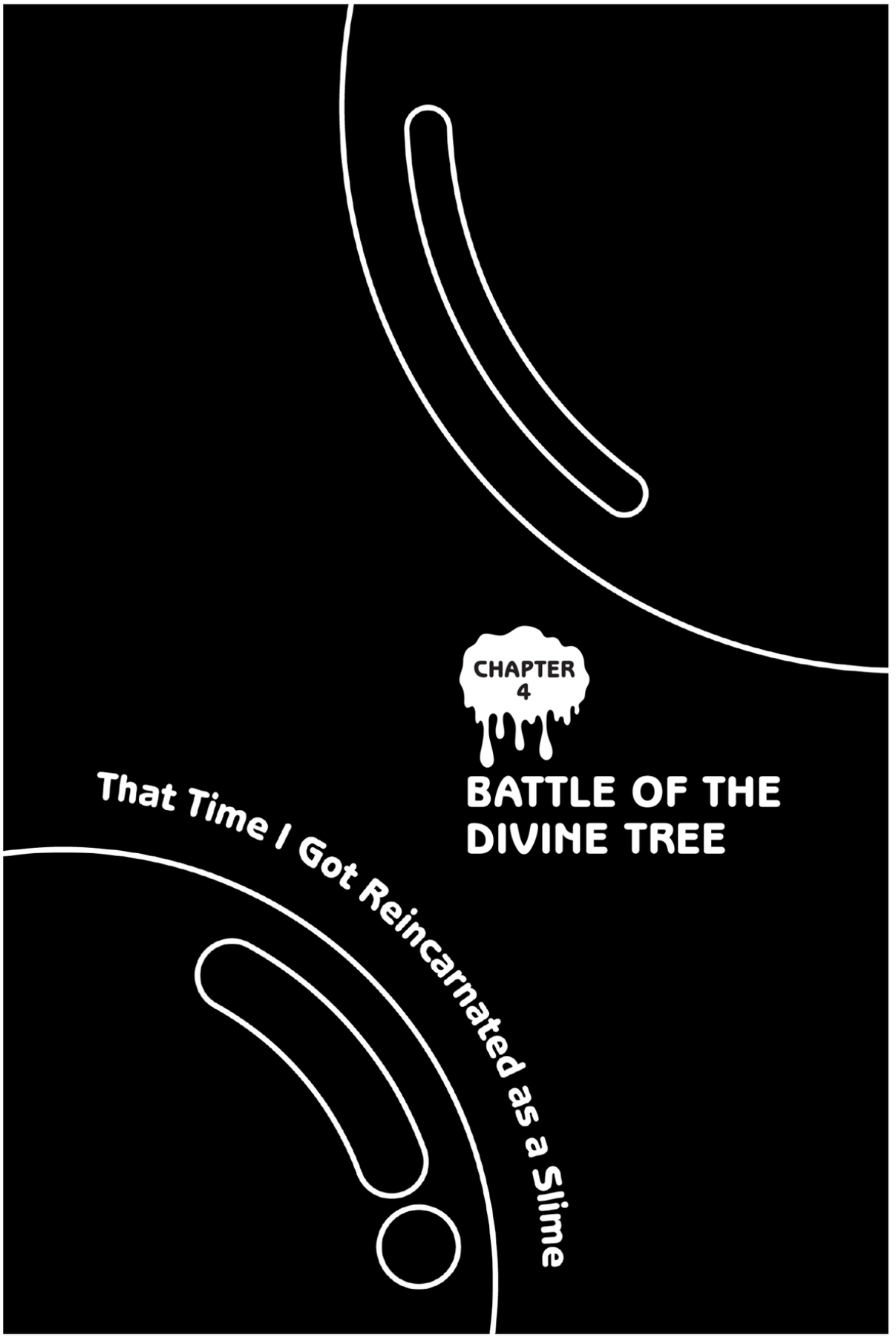
At that very moment, the evil dragon that jumped through time and space—the invincible Veldora that Luminus hated but so longed for—blocked the attack by Daggrull, who had been hiding an impossibly huge amount of power from them.

The time for despair had come to an end.



ROUGH SKETCHES




CHAPTER
4
BATTLE OF THE
DIVINE TREE
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 4

BATTLE OF THE DIVINE TREE

Turning back the clock from Veldora's arrival…

I set up a Spatial Transport over to the former Eurazania to stop Milim's rampage. The area where Velzard's ice and snow were blowing was too hard to see in for me to head there directly. Anticipating this, I set myself down some distance away. From there, I made a beeline for the site, following the signs. Milim and Velzard were supposed to be clashing with each other, so I approached with caution.

But it wasn't quite what I was imagining. In fact, it was worse.

"Tch! You came sooner than I thought. But it's too late. Milim! Use your power to shatter the sacred tree in our way!"

Milim and Velzard weren't the only ones there; Feldway had joined them. But in fact, he felt so different I wasn't sure it really was Feldway. He just had this overwhelming presence—way past what Michael had. I wasn't sure if I could win in a serious fight any longer. For some reason, he was giving orders to Milim like he was her boss.

Milim, I saw, had undergone some pretty loony changes. It was too indistinct in the video feed, but up close, she was beyond ominous. On her back was a pair of jet-black wings. A single red horn had sprouted from her forehead, shining a rainbow of colors in the light. The rest of her skin, except for her face, was covered with hard, shining dragon scales that sported mysterious patterns and dull, shifting colors.

I wondered if this was the "berserk" form of Milim—and at the same time, I sensed a power from her that almost made me tremble. Milim, the demon lord who had become an incarnation of absolute destruction, was truly worthy of being called the Destroyer.

But why was she being ordered around? What in the world was going on?

This is due to Regalia Dominion, part of the ultimate skill Michael, Lord of Justice. It seems Feldway has succeeded in controlling Milim.

Huh? Wait a minute. So we got Milim running amok and being this total menace, and Feldway's using her as a pawn?! That's, like, beyond awful.

Fortunately, it doesn't feel like he is in complete control. Even with Feldway devoting his full Computational Domain skill to controlling Milim, it seems he can only issue simple commands.

No, uh, that's still bad enough! The only real luck I had so far was that he didn't order her to kill me.

Feldway sure didn't look happy to see us, but he had no intention of fighting. He didn't care about us at all, in fact. He just gave the order to Milim and left.

His rule over Milim was likely too unstable for him to focus on anything else. Or perhaps he wanted to prioritize the destruction of the sacred tree.

Was it impossible for Feldway's enthralling power to revoke an order once it had been given, then? It sounded quite feasible. Just thinking about Milim seriously trying to kill me gave me the shivers. I should be glad it didn't come to that, but I never thought it would come to *this*, either.

It was completely unexpected. Being in this runaway state, she must have lost her ability to resist him…

I knew Feldway also had this kind of controlling skill, but I didn't even consider the possibility he'd use it on Milim. I couldn't blame Ciel alone for overlooking that. I mean, I was sure Milim had all kinds of resistances against this hypnosis. She told me all the time that stuff didn't work on her. If she

hadn’t been in this berserk state, I doubt Feldway ever would’ve succeeded.

And that was exactly what he was aiming for, wasn’t he?

If they made Milim go berserk, the world would be in danger of ending. But they then removed that concern via Regalia Dominion. It was quite a risky gamble.

Ciel’s being so vague about this, I suppose the strategy had little chance of success. Frankly, it would have been crazy to go through with it.

But if that was the case, there was no point in worrying about the “why” of it. What about the “sacred tree” Feldway set as Milim’s goal?

This is a divine tree that protects the capital of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion. It is a tree so large it can hold a giant city. It also seems to play the role of stabilizing the magicules in this world, preventing natural disasters.

Ciel answered me clearly and concisely. It was as knowledgeable and dependable as ever, but what it had just told me couldn’t be overlooked.

I’d never been to Thalion, but its capital was in a tree? Neat… but that wasn’t the point. I only had a vague image of it, but if the capital was built atop a tree, it’d be a disaster if the tree was destroyed, right? We had no choice but to stop it. And if we couldn’t…well, we’d have to buy enough time to evacuate the residents or else a catastrophe was sure to ensue.

“Whoa, whoa, this is sure a pain in the ass, huh?”

Guy was talking like this was someone else’s problem. I really wished he could contribute a little more. We weren’t talking about writing an essay for class or whatever.

“…What, you got a problem with me?” he snapped.

“No, sir. I’m sorry, sir.”

I wanted to complain that I didn’t need him reading my aura like that, but better to avoid ruffling any more feathers. I kept my mouth shut because I needed him to do his best for me there. But Guy didn’t sound too grateful about that.

“That bastard Feldway,” he grumbled. “He’s just as

treacherous as ever.”

“Oh?”

“I mean…well, letting you talk me into joining you turned out to be the correct answer, y’know?”

That made sense to me. If Guy had been too busy looking out for an attack from Ivalage to come, all might’ve been lost right there and then. Guy was going to handle Velzard while I tackled Milim, but if it were just me, well…

Ahh, but who cares about hypotheticals? No time to loiter around any longer. Milim had started to move.

Guy naturally stepped in front of Velzard. As he did, I tried to inform Ellie before pursuing Milim, but for some reason, I couldn’t get through on my cell phone. I guessed she was busy… which wasn’t a good sign. So with no other choice, I followed Milim while contacting Benimaru.

While connecting my Thought Communication to Benimaru, I desperately tried to catch up and attack Milim to get her attention. But she just shrugged me off. I wasn’t trying to go all out on her, but I thought that was still a pretty powerful attack.

Ahh, no time to whine. Milim had just let out a roar, setting off this weird kind of power. I’m guessing the vibrations of her scream broke all the molecular bonds in the target’s body or something. I managed to escape it, but the shock wave alone made a river below us dry out.

I thought it was too risky to mess with Milim. But if things continued as they were, the collapse of Thalion was imminent. As I wondered what the hell I was going to do about this, I felt my Thought Communication link up with Benimaru.

The probability of success is low, but I have come up with a plan.

There was no more time to hesitate. I was flying a few dozen times the speed of sound, and we were very close to reaching Thalion. No matter how low the chance of success was, I had no choice but to bet everything on Ciel. It was the same thing I always did, really, but so be it.

Despite my qualms, I informed Benimaru of the situation and ordered him to carry out the plan Ciel had described to me.

The Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion was facing an unprecedented crisis. In the midst of this, the Celestial Emperor Elmesia spoke to her mother Sylvia in her usual easygoing, informal tone of voice.

“So is Rimuru coming, you think?”

“Forget it. The demon lord Milim’s gone out of control, and he’s busy trying to stop her.”

“Oh, no way!”

This was even worse than she’d assumed. Elmesia couldn’t hide her surprise.

“Also, the cause of it was apparently Velzard the Ice Dragon. Even the demon lord Guy’s been convinced to take action.”

She made it sound easy, but it’d take someone like Rimuru to get Guy to do anything. Elmesia, fully aware of that, just wrote it off as typical Rimuru behavior.

Still, this was a conundrum. The capital of Thalion, the city embraced by the sacred tree, had turned into a hellish landscape, thanks to the onslaught of Jahil. He was joined by another man who called himself Zarario of the Three Stellar Leaders, and that guy was wreaking havoc on the scene, too.

“We cranked up the sacred tree’s defense mechanism to its limit, but even then, it’s not going to matter much at this point…”

Elmesia’s head was spinning. The Magus was fully mobilizing to deal with the situation, but its members were being shot down one after another. Elmesia was impressed that they hadn’t been wholly pulverized yet.

The Magus, one of Thalion’s proudest corps, was a group of high-ranking military officers also known as the Pure-Blood Knights. They had the authority to act in place of the Heavenly Emperor and serve as mediators for any relevant disputes. Reportedly the greatest military force in Thalion, it was composed only of those whose blood hearkened back to the ancients…or so the story went.

In reality, its knights were picked based on their compatibility with a weapon known as the magic mount. This item, also called a magus, was a closely guarded state secret. It had the same name as the corps itself as part of an effort to prevent information leaks.

A magus was about sixteen feet tall, with its exterior made of magisteel, and it was driven by dragon muscle fibers. It was an

intelligent weapon with its own will that searched for a partner to utilize it. Its true nature was shown only in operation, and just like an elementalist's most secret moves involved merging with an elemental, a magical mount was also designed to release its power only when piloted by its user.

Usually, it was stored in a space within a magical jewel placed in a necklace or bracelet. Kabal and Gido both had one, by the way. When they confronted the berserk Ifrit after meeting Rimuru for the first time, they were *this* close to activating their maguses…but launching them in a foreign country would lead to charges of leaking confidential information and get Archduke Erald in serious trouble to boot. Besides, they didn't even know if a magus was enough to beat Ifrit.

In the end, they stuck to melee combat, reasoning that the main job was to protect Elen long enough to get her to safety. Both Kabal and Gido had A-rank strength, and riding in on a magus wouldn't have doubled their fighting power or anything. They were already strong enough, which was one reason Erald had chosen them as Elen's guards.

That was how magic mounts worked—every partnership was different. Some, like Kabal and Gido, didn't see that much of an upgrade from them, while others were total wimps who transformed into overpowered war machines on their maguses. These devices provided over-A combat strength, and Thalion usually sent squads of three hundred to deal with enemies.

"I didn't know we had that many maguses," said Sylvia.

"Yes," Elmesia replied, "we've been beavering away at them."

The thirteen noble families of Thalion usually quarreled with each other day and night. During this crisis, though, they seemed to have come to an agreement of sorts, devoting everything they could to this battle regardless of the expense. If they chose this moment to rebel, Elmesia would seriously consider abandoning them, since she no longer saw any point in keeping them alive. The fact that this didn't happen was something of a silver lining.

Regardless, the conversation between Elmesia and Sylvia continued.

"You know," Elmesia began, "they were developing golems over in Rimuru's city, too. I think we're going to lose our advantage in a flash."

“If that happens, we were going to propose a joint development, weren’t we?”

“Pretty much. Rimuru’s got a lot of common sense. I think he agrees with me that we don’t want any superweapons getting leaked out. We could place numerical limits on what we provide.”

Elmesia was usually so secretive, but this was a surprisingly unguarded measure from her. It surprised the top officials who had been listening in, but this was just Elmesia and Sylvia’s way of escaping reality. And now, another Magus ace had been shot down. The EP of these knights were estimated to be over half a million each, but even an ace-class knight like that couldn’t stall for time against Jahil.

And he wasn’t even the only notable leader among the enemy. Zarario went without saying. Dhalis and Neece, who were under his command, had also achieved remarkable results. They had taken on physical forms as walking dead, destroying the Magus with tremendous force.

“All that damage,” complained Elmesia. “A great loss, isn’t it?” But she didn’t really mean it. The survival of the nation was more important than things money could replace. They had to hold out until reinforcements arrived, and that’d be difficult if things continued as they were. Such calculations put her in the mood to complain even more.

“I guess we’ll just have to make do,” Sylvia resignedly said.

Sylvia and Elmesia, mother and daughter, were the most powerful fighters in all of Thalion. They were standing by right then because they had been called back by the elders and other important government figures.

“Your Majesty, you must not! And Lady Sylvia, please have a little more prudence.”

“Indeed. If we had a chance of winning, that would be one thing, but this is just too much. I’m afraid I cannot allow it.”

Even the grand elders came out to block them. They were, of course, concerned for their well-being. Few of them knew Sylvia acted as a stand-in for Elmesia at times; even the thirteen noble families didn’t know it. Seeing them both at the same time created great confusion. Even so, their strength by themselves couldn’t hold a candle to a Magus knight on a magic mount, so order was restored among the royalty for the time being.

Everyone in the Magus corps was deployed, doing their best to buy time so Sylvia, Elmesia, and the other VIPs could escape. If the two of them returned to the battlefield, all the warriors' efforts would have been in vain.

But…

"To tell you the truth, I don't like the idea of us running away alone too much," Sylvia said.

"I agree with you, Mom. I'm afraid Rimuru will make fun of me for it later. Maybe I should contribute a little…"

The two of them had already made up their minds.

"Your Majesty!!"

One of the elders was desperately shouting. It was the minister who had sent Laplace—or Thalion—off to the battlefield all those years ago. He had regretted that decision ever since, vowing never to repeat the same mistake, and now he was doing his best to protect his beloved Elmesia and her family.

But Elmesia was in full politician mode.

"Who am I?" she asked.

As an elder, he had to answer.

"You are Her Majesty the Emperor."

"Can anyone stand in my way?"

It's not fair, you know, exercising your power at a time like this!

The elder was internally weeping. But he also understood this was how Elmesia lived, and there was nothing he could do to stop her, now that it had come to this.

"That would never be possible, my liege."

So he could do nothing but bow his head. This chief elder had given his approval, and there was nothing the others could do. The heads of the thirteen noble families also had to fulfill their duties as leaders. As the grandest of the emperor's subjects, they were entrusted with leading the people according to her orders.

"Y-Your Majesty…," Erald managed.

"Ah, Erald," said Sylvia. "I'm sure Rimuru's got Elen protected, so why don't you protect everyone else for us?"

"L-let me join you, Your Majesty!"

"Hmm… Nah, you'd just get in the way. I know you're one of the Magus captains, but you'd just be giving up your life for nothing."

It was Sylvia, not Elmesia, turning him down. Erald thought this was their first meeting, but to Sylvia, he was her beloved husband's younger brother. They had met many times while she was pretending to be Elmesia. That was why she rejected him so coldly—and Ellis Grimwald, Elmesia's grandmother and Erald's mother, nodded in agreement. In her capacity as leader of the thirteen noble families, she was now commanding Archduke Erald.

"Hold back, Erald. And all the other leaders gathered here, please listen." Ellis's voice was full of dignity, despite her usually gentle demeanor. "Do not be selfish. You must heed the will of Her Majesty."

She wasn't taking no for an answer. And no matter what the other kings in attendance thought, they could do nothing but nod back to her.

"B-but Mother—"

Erald, still trying to argue, was silenced by Ellis's glare. It was the first time Erald had ever seen real anger on his mother's face.

"If Lady Ellis hadn't stopped you," one of the kings admonished, "you would have been captured, you know."

Then an old noble, one who had long since given up the throne to his sons, slapped Erald on the shoulder. "Don't give up, okay? Sylvia's been retired since that bastard Thalion disappeared. I get it if you don't know how scary she is, but trust me, she's even more of a handful than Her Majesty."

"Oh yes! All of us together couldn't match her. You'd best take her advice and flee to safety."

It was an unwritten rule around there to never say Thalion was dead, a habit adopted because no one wanted to incur Sylvia's wrath. Everyone lamented their own helplessness. They were relying on her yet again—and would that make them the only survivors? But if this was the wish of the emperor, it was the duty of her subjects to obey.

The young kings, looking at their elders, realized it was futile to try rebelling against it. At the same time, they were surprised to learn Thalion really was united together. Their parents and grandparents normally never got along, but there they were, amicably talking to each other. It was the first time they had ever seen such a thing, but it all seemed so natural they didn't feel it was insincere at all.

Everyone there agreed: This was the charisma of Sylvia and Elmesia at work.

Sylvia was a vajra-wielding master who made full use of her ultimate skill Indra, Lord of Thunder. Her daughter, Elmesia El-Ru Thalion, had another face apart from her position as emperor of the Sorcerous Dynasty. She had awakened the ultimate skill Vayu, King of Heavenly Wind, the apex of weather-based magic, a feat no doubt inspired by Sylvia's own skills. In battle, she too was a genius, freely wielding her God-class chakram to slice and dice her enemies. Her abilities were not as strong as Sylvia's, but they weren't far behind.

Once again, the two of them had returned to the battlefield, everyone's hopes pushing them forward. It opened up a potential way out. It's said God helps those who help themselves, but thanks to their courageous actions, the hopes of Thalion would continue unbroken into the future.

✳

Benimaru, Soei, Leon, Kagali, and Teare arrived in Thalion some time after Sylvia and Elmesia returned to the battlefield. The video feed in the Control Center showed them after their second sortie, and they were already looking exhausted.

The injured seemed to be receiving medical treatment atop the leaves of the giant sacred tree. Sylvia and Elmesia were protecting them while dealing with Jahil and Zarario. The defense mechanism of the tree was functioning normally, and that was the only reason all of them were surviving.

"Rimuru's done it again," said an emotional Elmesia as she greeted Benimaru and the others. "I thought it'd be too late, but he really did send out reinforcements…"

"Sir Rimuru always keeps his promises," Benimaru replied with a smile as he looked at Zarario and Jahil.

Leon flew in front of Zarario to replace Elmesia. The Flame Pillar sword radiated in Leon's hand, boasting of its presence. Soei, too, had crept up behind Zarario undetected. Everyone was in the air, floating around the sacred tree as they fought, and Soei had joined them like nothing was amiss about that.

It was two against one, although Leon and Soei were at a disadvantage in strength. But Soei, who never cared about

fighting fair, readily took his foes by surprise without any hesitation.

Jahil, on the other hand…

"I'll never forgive you."

Kagali spoke those words as she floated next to Sylvia. At the level they were at, they could create a foothold for themselves in the air just as well as on the ground. *Oh*, thought Sylvia, *she's not subbing in for me?* But she still had some fight left in her, so she was thankful for the assistance, at least.

"Cheeky little…"

Jahil gritted his teeth as Teare glared at him, as if challenging him to battle. It was about to be a three-on-one match; Benimaru grasped the battle situation from above.

Except for Jahil and Zarario, the leaders, the Magus outclassed their enemies. With one stroke, they turned things around and began to push back the army of mystics.

If we can just defeat Jahil and the others, we'll win this.

It wouldn't be easy, but Benimaru flashed a fearless smile as he watched on.

Leon, facing Zarario, had a blank face as usual, but on the inside he was livid.

He often found himself being misunderstood. He wasn't a good talker, and any good deed he did often wound up causing more resentment against him. The few people who really understood Leon were Sylvia, his mentor, and Elmesia, whom he considered a close ally (though the feeling wasn't mutual).

Making those two suffer this much was a crime that ranked second in Leon's list of things that set him off. (It went without saying, of course, that first place went to anyone who tried messing with Chloe.) But there were other reasons for his anger this time. He couldn't forgive himself for letting these guys do what they wanted with him, and for the trouble he subsequently caused Sylvia. He wanted to take out Michael, the cause of all this, by his own hand—but Rimuru seemed to have gotten to Michael first. Now Leon owed him a debt he could never repay, which just made him feel worse.

If he didn't make up for it, it'd be even harder to show his face around. The only person he wanted to owe anything to was Sylvia—but now he could see this was more than her problem

alone. Velzard's purpose was unknown, but apparently she was on her way here, fighting Milim the whole time. If this place got caught in the fallout from that fight, it could easily be wiped off the map.

And Leon didn't think that would even be the end of it. If one traveled north from Thalion, there were no obstacles to the Western Nations, a hotbed of human civilization. To the west was the Deadly Desert, and beyond that was the Holy Void of Damargania. Turn a little to the southwest, and you'd reach El Dorado, Leon's domain.

Nobody knew what Velzard was after, but there was no doubt in Leon's mind she'd target one of those places next. If it were only here, certain countermeasures could be taken, no matter her intentions. But with Milim also losing her mind, even trying to interfere with them was an impossible task.

And were these just Velzard's intentions or Feldway's own plan, too…?

Whatever it is, we just have to stop it.

That was Leon's creed. He preferred quick decisions like that, as well as punishment for anyone he suspected. In this case, whether Velzard and Milim could be stopped at all was largely up to Rimuru, but there was no doubt Thalion was an important defense line. That much was proven by the enemy choosing to attack it—an enemy who had to be eliminated before Milim and Velzard could reach it. Only then could they devote all their force to dealing with Milim's rage.

It'd be suicide to fight them directly, but it should at least be possible to reduce the damage by making them change direction. Leon couldn't point them toward El Dorado by mistake, and threatening any human-run lands was out of the question.

The Barren Lands would be the best destination for them…

It wouldn't be great for Daggrull, but Leon thought it'd be the best thing to do. But to do that, he couldn't let himself get tied up with all of this.

"Heh!" he said. "Taking advantage of Milim's rage… Feldway comes up with the cleverest ideas."

Leon thrust the tip of his sword at Zarario as he addressed him. He fought like a fencer, making him good at thrusts and other flashy techniques. Some people believed fencing was for dueling and not suitable for actual combat, but that wasn't true.

The thrust, after all, was the most powerful of all sword techniques. Missing with it left you off-balance and defenseless, making frequent use a great risk, but Leon's swordsmanship was good enough to overcome this weakness. Much like Sylvia and her spear skills, Leon's mix of technique and incredibly fast physical moves kept him from being exposed to attacks.

In addition, Leon's skills were built around speed—and the Flame Pillar, his weapon, was God-class. When he got serious, he didn't rely on his Gold Circle shield. Defense didn't matter to him with the speed and sword skills he had. He was the fastest out there, concentrating almost totally on his first-class swordsmanship—and that earned him the nickname the Lightflash Hero, once upon a time. Furthermore, Leon's ultimate skill Metatron, Lord of Purity, let him manipulate spiritual particles at will. Through that, he could invoke the all-powerful Disintegration in rapid-fire succession, unstoppable by anyone.

This was why they called Leon the strongest out there. In existence points, he wasn't far behind Zarario, but in combat ability…

Leon's lean, flourish-free fighting style was more than enough to compete with Zarario. A true warrior knows a fellow true warrior, and Zarario couldn't kid himself about his opponent's skill. And so…

"They said they're after Veldora's draconic factors, but I don't even know what they're really thinking," said Zarario. "Velzard is acting on her own, too. I wish someone would tell me what's going on with her."

He gave Leon his honest, true thoughts. And in fact, Zarario had not been given any explanation at all. All he was doing was conducting a war to bring down Thalion, as ordered by Feldway. Jahil was thrown in there, too, although he was aiming for Luminus the whole time.

If they're going that far, there must be some meaning behind trying to conquer this place…

Nothing can be less inspiring than being forced to work without understanding the purpose of it. Zarario thought it an extremely unpleasant way to treat a general, let alone a soldier at the far end of the line, the proverbial cog in the machine. He was unable to resist Michael's rule over him, which was the only reason he put up with this. But Zarario was always looking

for an opportunity, and he had a chance to disarm this thrall over him the moment Michael disappeared. Since then, he had been gradually analyzing this control over him, and now he was at the point where it'd be possible to shed it for good.

But since he didn't see the need to spell all that out for Leon, Zarario changed the subject.

"So, Leon…are you going to duel with me? Or am I supposed to deal with that little sneak behind you at the same time?"

Zarario glanced at Benimaru as well, realizing he wasn't about to make a move. Benimaru wasn't looking down on Zarario as a fighter; he just wanted to make sure his assets were in the right places on the battlefield. That was largely the same as underestimating Zarario, but his foe wasn't inspired enough to do anything about that. He couldn't disobey an order, so he was just going through the motions.

Soei knew his presence would be noticed. Unlike Jahil, Zarario seemed to be on his guard. As Benimaru saw it, Jahil was the bigger threat in EP alone, but Zarario was far more troublesome. Soei agreed, and that was why he was supporting Leon instead of trying to take Zarario by surprise.

"If you spotted me, then great," Soei said. "We're cutting it pretty close here, too, so know we will take any measure needed to win."

Soei declared with pride that he was going to cheat. Leon had no objection. Losing would mess everything up, so it was natural to try to win by any means necessary.

Thus the battle with Zarario began, with Leon taking the lead and Soei assisting.

✳

Three people were fighting against Jahil, each with a very different method of attack. Sylvia was going at lightning speed, stabbing with her vajra. Kagali was using long-range bolts as well, her Ruin Scepter working her power into a sharpened magical mass. Finally, Teare was up front, keeping their foe in check—the most dangerous role, but she wasn't afraid of it. Anger dominated her body; she was trying to take Footman's place in this fight.

"I hate you!" she yelled. "You're so dead!"

“Shut up!” snapped Jahil. “All you cretins can do is form herds! Enough with you!”

“*You’re* the one who should shut up!” Teare retorted, throwing the scythe in her hand like a boomerang. It was given to her by an ogre named Kurobe before her departure, and it had so menacing an aura, it likely was at the highest level of Legend-class gear—even God-class, in fact. Teare instinctively knew it was far superior to her own broken blade.

It was called the Tear Scythe, and as Kurobe put it, it reaped tears, not lives—making Teare think it was the perfect weapon for her. Right now, she needed to put an end to all her sadness.

The Tear Scythe aimed itself at Jahil, as if it had a will of its own. Suddenly Teare expanded her physical force, confronting Jahil. Diving at his chest, she delivered a powerful punch, then quickly disengaged and caught the scythe as it came spinning back her way. Then, as if nothing had just happened, she took a fighting pose, keeping Kagali protected. It was an amazing feat, made possible by the unique skill Manipulator and the control it gave her over her body.

Meanwhile, her other unique skill Born Optimist only activated under the vague condition of “when ordered.” Teare was too weak willed and flighty for it to work otherwise. But when she received data particles from the heart core of Clayman, she changed. She got stronger. And she decided she had to protect Kagali instead of Laplace, who was gone, and Footman, who had been taken over.

……

……

…

At that moment, someone said to Teare:

If you agree to it, power will be given to you.

It was a voice left by someone not present. As she slept, her mind had been analyzed and had this implanted inside, on the reasoning that it’d be necessary someday. Its aim was to react to Teare’s desire for power and provide what she wanted. This came at a price, of course, but it was paid in advance. Teare’s power had long since been analyzed and determined to be harmless. Integrating it with Clayman’s similarly

nonthreatening force wouldn't hurt anyone, so it was put in her in the hope that it'd power her up at least a little.

Hey, if someone's giving out something, I'll take it! I gotta get so much stronger!

Teare didn't hesitate to agree to it. The change was completed quietly and swiftly within her mind. Her unique skill Born Optimist was combined with the unique skill Manipulator, reproduced from Clayman's data particles, and this in turn created the ultimate gift Orpheus.

All this, done by the hand of a certain someone.

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So Teare was reborn of her own volition.

Okay! Yeah, I know, Clayman! We both have to protect Lady Kagali!

She made that promise, and then her power surged, like her late friend was lending her his strength. Her EP of 240,000, which felt like too much for her body to hold, now seemed so small. Being able to double your force from one moment to the next, after all, made a superior opponent like Jahil seem a lot less intimidating.

And Jahil was less than thrilled by it.

"Don't you dare mock me, you puppet!"

Enraged, he shot out a large fireball. Sylvia, with her godlike speed, could have avoided it, but Kagali and Teare had no way to do so. That one shot was going to extinguish their very souls—or it should have. But the duo flickered out of sight, and then they reappeared a short distance away.

Even Jahil was startled. "What? You didn't have that kind of power... What have you been doing?!"

He launched another fireball, this time much more careful about what he was doing. Zarario could have easily seen through the trick—it was childishly simple. Benimaru was just protecting them with his Shimmering Haze. Jahil had been humbled against Benimaru many times, and after that second try, he figured out what was happening.

"Stupid little tricks...!"

Enraged anew, he let his temper get the best of him and shot

a series of fireballs at his foes. Benimaru used his same trick on those, too. He wasn't directly fighting Jahil, but he had deciphered all his thought and behavioral patterns and given Kagali the best advice he could about them.

And so…

"Ah, you're open!"

Sylvia's spear pierced Jahil. It wouldn't be enough to kill him, but it did relieve her frustration a little.

Kagali, too, was ready. Melchizedek, Lord of Dominion, the ultimate gift granted to her by Michael, had been lost after Yuuki took it. She gained her freedom in return, and in Melchizedek's place, she had been powering up Schemer, the unique skill that had taken root in her soul. It was very close to the level of an ultimate skill.

But no matter how talented Kagali was, there was a limit to how far the non-divine could go. Being able to tinker with one's own skills was highly unusual for anyone but Ciel. Kagali knew that because she had experienced it in a dream.

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The voice was clear.

If you agree to it, power will be given to you.

The offer made little sense, but it had still been made to her sleeping self. Needless to say, it was Ciel talking.

Within the labyrinth, Ciel could do pretty much anything. This wasn't a dream, exactly, so much as a conversation in Kagali's subconscious.

Ciel proposed a contract to her. In exchange for optimizing Kagali's skills, it would prevent her from turning that power against Rimuru. Even if she betrayed him, though, the power would still be in Ciel's hands…so to Ciel, it was a two-birds-with-one-stone proposal. It'd get to pursue its hobby of skill tinkering, and it'd help keep Kagali in check, too. In a way, it was the sort of offer only Ciel could propose.

Kagali, who had been craving power, agreed. Thinking it was a dream, she never suspected she was being deceived. It wasn't the sort of blunder the cautious Kagali usually made, but it

wouldn’t affect her as long as she didn’t try taking on Rimuru. That, to her, was no problem—she had lots of reasons to avoid antagonizing him.

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Then when she woke up, she realized the power existed within her. Now that she fully understood it, she fully owned it as well.

“Give me back my Footman!” she shouted, activating her skill—the ultimate gift Agastya. The skill could predict Jahil’s movements, as if it could see the future, and she used it to execute this combo attack flawlessly, fully bridging the difference in power. And a true “combo” it was—Benimaru’s judgment, Kagali’s predictive skill, Sylvia’s actions, and Teare’s resolve. Not even Jahil’s evil power could so easily diminish that kind of teamwork.

Besides, Benimaru had fought Jahil before. The power difference unnerved him the first time, but now he had a grasp of his strength. There was nothing left to fear. Rimuru’s policy was to not fight a battle that couldn’t be won, and Benimaru had inherited that drive. In other words, if Benimaru bothered to come, they had every chance to win. All the forces they wanted were in place, and the moment of victory was just around the corner.

“Don’t give me that!” shouted Jahil, unaware of this. “Have you forgotten how terrifying I can be?”

He aimed a volley of fireballs at Kagali, then hid himself amid the explosions. Then, using the blasts to propel himself forward, he approached Kagali. He wanted to kill her first—it was an ironclad rule that you started by targeting the weakest, so Jahil wasn’t mistaken to do this. But as easy as it was to read his mind, it was even easier to lie in wait for him.

Everyone had their own thoughts about this. *No way*, Sylvia told herself. *I’ve never had an easier fight than this.*

I knew this coming in, thought Kagali, *but Rimuru wasn’t the only threat after all. He puts my mind at ease as an ally, but if I was fighting him, I’d be horrified.*

I feel totally secure here, thought Teare, despite having the most dangerous role in this fight. That was how outstanding Benimaru’s command was. He did occasionally grumble to

Rimuru about it, but as a person in a high position, he always had a real sense of responsibility. Diablo was the same way—both of them worked harder and achieved more when Rimuru wasn't watching them.

Now Benimaru was honing his focus. He was connected to everyone below him via Thought Communication. Regulate Thought, one of the features of his ultimate skill Amaterasu, allowed him to make everyone act like they were all of one will. Thanks to that, they were able to fight evenly with Jahil, despite being far inferior to him. If Benimaru were alone, it would've been impossible to secure this win. He and Jahil fought the same way, which would have made him too indecisive. Any plan he'd attempted would have been foiled.

Here in Thalion, like everywhere else, the objective of the game was not to lose. But this fight was different. They had a decisive leader in Sylvia, a safety device in Kagali, and some perfect follow-up work from Teare. The way Benimaru saw it, they couldn't possibly lose.

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Zarario gave Jahil a sideways glance, only to be a little surprised. He should have been superior to him in strength alone, but Jahil was being overwhelmed by a party of lower-ranked opponents.

Jahil's no fool. He's arrogant, but he's not dumb enough to be defeated out of sheer carelessness. So that man up there is superior to him?

He glanced at Benimaru, immediately understanding. He wasn't directly involved in the battle, but he didn't hesitate to provide support at key points. Benimaru's power was in the same vein as Jahil's, and he was neutralizing his flame attacks with relative ease. The flame attribute was immensely powerful when focused on a specific target, but if deflected, it became less and less thermally efficient. The same was true with Jahil, who used his skill-enhanced dominance to gather magicules and launch flames burning at ultra-high temperatures. If that intense wave of heat was turned in a different direction, that'd naturally affect its focal temperature.

Doing that couldn't have been easy, but Benimaru had the

most nonchalant face as he kept it up. Zarario was honestly impressed. Enemy or not, that deserved praise.

Still, Jahil's energy level was so much greater than Benimaru's that not even he could take a direct hit. No matter how much better Benimaru's magicule-wrangling skills were, being hit with pure, uncontrollable energy would still be the end for him.

Hmm. He's doing well to prevent that from happening. But I wonder if Jahil will grow tired of this.

Zarario thought so. Jahil was a great magician known as the sorcerous dynast. If he understood the situation correctly, he'd see Benimaru had to be addressed or he'd just grow weaker.

It's brilliant, though.

Zarario couldn't be blamed for thinking so. Benimaru was skilled at inducing the fireballs away from them. The explosions and impacts from them were awe-inspiring. At first glance, they probably looked overwhelming, which was why Jahil was slow to realize what was going on. The coordination between Kagali and her party was immaculate. Every member was carefully handling their role, and Benimaru seemed to be directing them all. He was a warrior in his own right, but if anything, he showed greater talent as a commander. Secretly, Zarario realized how much of a threat Benimaru was.

"Taking me on, yet looking in the other direction? How offensive."

Leon made the casual observation after their swords crossed at blinding speed. He did not seem particularly angry; he was just saying what he thought.

Zarario chuckled. "No, not that. We're equal in skill, so whoever loses their train of thought first loses."

He breezily parried Leon's blade as he spoke. But he wasn't lying. The higher the level of both swordsmen in a fight, the harder it became for one to truly outclass the other.

The trajectory of a sword can be predicted from things like the opponent's line of sight, their body position, and what they're focusing on. In a situation like this one, victory and defeat depended on how well a person succeeded in their feints.

To Zarario, keeping an opponent pinned down via conversation was preferable to forcing some action and getting hurt. His enemy wasn't only Leon—Soei, that troublesome

ambusher, was there, too. He had a knack for attacking Zarario right when it'd annoy him the most. Lower-ranked or not, Zarario couldn't let his guard down around him.

One's existence point score—a calculation based on the elements of your body structure, the amount of energy, your resistances, and many other factors—was still, after all, only a rough estimate. If two mismatched fighters were brought together, the match could turn out to be a toss-up—just like how Jahil, a powerhouse, just couldn't keep up with a speed specialist.

Zarario was well aware of this. He had a rough idea of his opponents' strength. He didn't have exact EP counts, but years of experience as a warrior taught him that if he judged everything on EP alone, he'd be caught flat-footed.

Seeing that, he knew laughing off his opponent was out of the question. He never let his guard down, even when dealing with Leon and Soei at the same time.

Leon, too, quickly read Zarario.

He's a tricky opponent, Leon thought, ignoring his own foibles. *It's hard to deal with someone who never leaves himself open like that.*

If the enemy was careless, he could use his special attack, but that was unlikely to happen with Zarario. No matter how good at stick-and-move tactics Leon was, any special move he broke out would leave him open. If he tried to avoid that, then it'd probably mean a marathon battle, no matter what he wished for.

Being inferior in every way was proving to be a disadvantage. Leon, competitive based only on his skills, could see defeat in his future if he kept up this approach. In other words, Zarario had the right idea.

After reading each other this much, the two of them reacted in starkly different ways. Zarario was calm and collected, while Leon was gradually losing his composure.

But Leon wasn't alone.

"Calm down. Don't be deceived by the enemy's words."

Soei, creeping out of the shadows, whispered in Leon's ear. Then he launched a seemingly reckless suicide attack on Zarario, only to be cut down with a single swipe. It was Soei's Replication, of course, but this mix of real and fake attacks was actually working out pretty well for the two of them. Leon was

the main attacker, but Soei took over whenever fatigue got the best of him. This cycle let them continue the fight with as little wear and tear as possible. For Zarario, too, it wasn't what he wanted to see.

But as the stalemate continued, suddenly a change occurred. Benimaru was on the move.

"Emperor Elmesia, if I could have a word…"

He was talking to Elmesia, who was taking a break to address her fatigue. Zarario found himself listening in, impressed that Benimaru had the time for this during combat.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Those knights over there…the Magus, right? Would you mind if I temporarily took command of them?"

What a crazy thing to ask…

Zarario found himself drawn further into this chat, much to Leon's annoyance. He felt like he was being ignored, but then, Leon was just as interested in what Benimaru had to say.

"What? That's, um, asking a lot…"

"I know it is. But I've received a report that Milim will be arriving soon. If we don't do something, it'll cause immeasurable damage. I've been ordered to do something to stop this."

"Is that from Rimuru?"

"Yeah."

Elmesia gave him an "ugh, if I *have* to" look. "Normally I'd never allow this, you know. No matter how friendly our countries are. But if Rimuru says so, then *fiiine*…"

Then she called her knight captains over, grumbling about how the apple never fell far from the tree with Rimuru and his officers.

Zarario found it just as absurd.

"Isn't that insane?" he said to Leon.

"Well, it's Rimuru we're talking about."

"Is he always that weird?"

"Well, frankly, he's impossible to read."

For some reason, Zarario felt sympathy for Leon, enemy or not. *But still*, he thought, *what's this Benimaru guy trying to do while fighting Jahil the whole time?*

Watching with interest, he noticed the knight captains seemed to be complaining about it, too. It was a perfectly natural reaction, but Elmesia raised her voice to silence them.

A critical moment seemed to be near, and Benimaru was taking further action. A video image was projected into the air—a view of a faraway place, presumably powered by his skill.

"What's that?" Zarario asked.

"Some kind of mirage or an applied version of one," said Soei. "I guess Benimaru's been making some upgrades to the Argos surveillance magic developed by Sir Rimuru."

Soei was kind enough to explain this to Zarario—all the while the battle was ongoing. Swords were still clashing against each other, but it had turned into a kind of rote exercise, giving the participants time to converse.

Zarario's swordsmanship was akin to a blunt weapon, cutting down his enemies with a single stroke. The insectors, Zarario's nemeses, were usually covered in exoskeletons that caused damage to his blade after repeated slashes. To prevent this, he instead refined his skills, finding gaps in his opponent and capitalizing on them.

Time ran differently between Zarario's home world and this key world, so by local standards, he had been constantly fighting for tens of billions of years. His swordsmanship was at a standstill, however, because it was far too geared toward the characteristics of his main enemy, the insectors. Still, quite a few of them were unusually good fighters, so Zarario's strength had reached an unimaginable level nonetheless.

Leon's party could take him on only because Zarario wasn't particularly interested in fighting. The moment they confronted him, Leon and Soei realized just what Zarario's true strength was—but nobody was in a hurry, chatting with each other and providing commentary on events around them. It took a lot of guts to keep that going.

This projected image showed what was happening with Rimuru. He was facing off against Milim, while Guy was sparring with Velzard. Velgrynd was there, too, for some reason, working with Rimuru to prevent any damage to the surrounding area.

"Look at Velgrynd, cooperating with him," remarked Leon. "Rimuru is certainly a talented conman."

"Call him naturally charismatic," said Soei.

Leon and Soei were still chatting away, but Zarario had bigger fish to fry. He couldn't understand why Milim and Velzard were heading this way. He wasn't even sure if this was

part of the plan. Was Feldway up to something or was this just a coincidence? It might be that Velzard was acting on her own, but if so, what would she want to accomplish?

But if this *was* a ploy by Feldway…

If Feldway gave Velzard some story that incited her, that would explain this. But what's his ultimate goal?

Zarario thought it over. Velzard and Milim were in a fight, which was really more about keeping Milim in check than anything. If Velzard decided to pursue some other goal instead, she'd leave at once. Then Milim would cause widespread carnage, and it was highly likely that Guy would move to stop her.

That was likely what Velzard wanted to see. If Guy took on Milim, he'd need to devote his whole attention to the fight—and then she would take advantage to make Guy her personal slave, with him doing whatever she wanted him to. That much was easy enough to read, so Guy probably wasn't going to just walk up to her. He'd naturally bring along some assistance—and if that assistance was the demon lord Rimuru, well, it all made sense.

But what about after that?

It's obvious Velzard's target is Guy. But why bother moving anywhere else right now? Maybe Feldway's involved with this after all…

Zarario worked it out up to that point. But the rest puzzled him. Why would they go to the trouble of coming to Thalion, which was already under attack? To support Zarario and his allies?

No, I doubt it. What are you thinking, Feldway?

Zarario couldn't find an answer. His frustration with Feldway grew. Really, if he'd just explained his plan to everyone at the start, everything would be fine. Instead, they were all stuck there, forced to decipher Feldway's intentions. If they couldn't figure out why he was leading Milim there, they might get caught in the crossfire, with no idea whether to help her out or flee.

Zarario thought some more. If Sylvia and Elmesia were Thalion's only defense, his army could easily take this city down by themselves. With the reinforcements the demon lord Rimuru sent out, it was a stalemate, more or less. Was Milim sent over because he'd anticipated this would happen? It seemed like a

weak reason. If that were the case, he would've sent Milim here first, and then Zarario's army could've launched a fuller-scale invasion. Having Milim show up when things were already this chaotic made no tactical sense.

Or maybe, with everyone occupied like this, nobody could stop Milim from—

Zarario looked behind him. There was the sacred tree, standing in this land since time immemorial. Rooted deep in the earth, it protected the planet from all kinds of natural disasters—and it was still standing strong, even after taking all of Jahil's flames. It is the same tree that kept the past Milim/Guy battle from being any more damaging.

To the north, there was Velzard. The human realms there were ruled by the demon lord Luminus and protected by Guy and Ramiris. The Nasca region, once guarded by Ludora, was also safe, thanks to Velgrynd's help. But the Holy Land of Damargania, at the center of all the damage, still bore the scars of the devastation. Skyspire Tower had kept it from completely falling, but all its former glory had been lost.

But if you looked at it another way, that was the *only* damage that resulted last time. This world was protected by gods who put up many obstacles to destroying it. Guy, the great Arbitrator, was the best example—feared by mankind as the strongest and most terrifying of demon lords, but still constantly protecting this world, as per his pact with Veldanava.

Several beings helped him with this role. There were the demon lords selected by Guy, including Ramiris, the other Arbitrator. There were the Heroes, their nemeses and counterparts—and now there was Masayuki, the reincarnation of the most powerful Hero there ever was. Velgrynd was with him, too.

Apart from these, there were relics like Skyspire Tower, influenced directly by the hand of these gods, which also offered the people their protection. The sacred tree was another such relic.

Feldway wanted to revive Veldanava, but he failed after losing Michael. If so, what he'll want next is…

Zarario felt a chill run down his spine. Maybe he *would* want to destroy this world.

There were only two holy relics left in this world: the sacred tree and Skyspire Tower. There was also the labyrinth created

by Ramiris, but that should be considered its own separate category.

What's more, only a few "gods" were still around to get in the way. Guy, Rimuru, Chronoa, Masayuki, Velgrynd, and Veldora, to be exact…but most of them were nonfactors. Guy was being blocked by Velzard. Rimuru had his hands full dealing with Milim's madness. Chronoa and Masayuki were free, but had probably exhausted their power and wouldn't be around for a while. Velgrynd was devoting too much of her force to protecting the planet to be able to fight. And Veldora was hiding out in the labyrinth. He must have been holing up in there after sensing Feldway was after him…which meant he wasn't likely to leave there anytime soon.

In other words, if Zarario had Feldway's goal right, the situation was steadily improving for him.

Not good…

To be honest, Zarario had no inner urge to destroy. If Feldway was going to die, Zarario really wished he'd die alone. No matter how much of a friend he was, he didn't want to help him destroy the world. In fact, given their friendship, Zarario felt he needed to stop him from doing anything that foolish.

I don't know if I'm right or not, but I better assume so now… and act on that.

If he was wrong, then it was Feldway's own damn fault for not making himself clear. With that conclusion in mind, he tried to switch his thoughts to what his future course of action should be.

Then, looking around, he noticed Benimaru was standing tall, leading the Magus somewhere or another. It impressed him.

He's carrying out his strategy against Jahil while simultaneously preparing for the disaster to come? Amazing.

He made Jahil look small in comparison—and for Zarario, who disliked Jahil, that made Benimaru look all the better. *It's settled*, he thought as he spoke up to Leon and the others:

"I think you know this, but my freedom's been taken from me. I've taken back enough control to be able to say what I think, but Michael is still ruling over me."

"…What are you getting at?"

"I think you'd understand, wouldn't you, if you've been through the same thing?"

“Hmph. You want me to help free you?”

“I’m glad you’re quick to understand,” Zarario casually stated—and then he made a proposal.

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Benimaru had taken control of the Magus.

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Elmesia had granted her permission, but the knights were having none of it. How could they? Why was someone from some other country going to command them?

Benimaru could understand their reluctance, but now was not the time for it. Elmesia granted him command because she knew that as well, and even Archduke Erald showed his willingness to comply, despite his qualms.

The knights in the group were all titled superelites, but they had to obey or there’d be trouble. Any half-hearted attempt at defending themselves, and they’d be exposed to Milim’s fury and destroyed in an instant.

Milim’s just as much of a juggernaut as I thought. She’s already changed the topography of the Khusha Mountains, and we’ll suffer the same kind of carnage here if something isn’t done. I have to do whatever I can to prevent that.

Benimaru was determined. Rimuru’s orders were simple: Predict their trajectory and figure out a way to alter it. If their course continued as it was, they’d smash right into the sacred tree that protected the capital of Thalion. Rimuru didn’t sound too confident about that idea, but Benimaru knew he was never wrong about this sort of thing.

In the worst-case scenario, Benimaru was told to evacuate everyone from the city…but first, he wanted to give this the best try he could. The key to this was Magus. As Rimuru said, if they could attack Milim with the combined power of all their knights, they might be able to distract her, even if only for a moment. They weren’t even at the stage where they could discuss how to beat her, so there was no need to worry about her getting injured.

Like that’d be a worry for anyone…

Benimaru chuckled. Then, bracing himself, he raised his voice at the knights Erald was still trying to persuade:

“Listen to me! If things continue as they are, this land will face an unprecedented crisis. A crisis I have been ordered by my lord, Sir Rimuru, to prevent! You may not have a duty to go along with me, but you must obey me for now, or else your homeland will be cleanly wiped off the surface of this planet!”

Benimaru didn’t mean it as a threat. He was simply telling the truth. If they failed to follow Rimuru’s instructions, Thalion would almost certainly be destroyed. Of course, even if the Magus didn’t follow his orders, Benimaru himself had no intention of giving up. He would do his utmost to help guide the life-saving evacuation, and then he was going to join Rimuru. Jahil was no longer anything more than an inert obstacle in his mind. Kagali, Teare, and Sylvia alone would be enough to defeat him. That was thanks to Benimaru’s support, but to him, that was roughly the same difficulty level as taking out the trash.

Regardless, Benimaru wanted to be prepared for the looming threat. All he could do, though, was wait for a response. His strategy would depend on whether the Magus went with him or not, but in order to get everyone on the same page as quickly as possible, he used his skills to project an image in the air.

As Soei explained to Zarario, Benimaru replayed the video coming from many miles away with Amaterasu, Lord of Shimmering Flame, his own skill. Based on the science behind mirages, it proved extremely useful for outdoor operations. Using it to show what Milim was up to would make for a more persuasive argument.

That was Benimaru’s thought, but the results turned out more terrifying than expected. A mere roar from Milim was enough to destroy the natural landscape. Rivers dried up; mountains crumbled. Rimuru was trying desperately to calm her down, but to no avail. He and Velgrynd worked together to serve as punching bags for Milim, preventing any more damage than necessary—but they couldn’t do anything else.

…Or, really, the damage is kept to that level only because Sir Rimuru is distracting Lady Milim…?

Rimuru was taking up all of Milim’s attention, and Velgrynd was blocking out the aftershocks. No wonder Rimuru was so engrossed in this. Benimaru wondered if Rimuru could more actively guide Milim away from danger, but that was

impossible. Milim's attacks were like a torrential downpour; Rimuru might have been able to weather it, but he couldn't change the way the rain was going.

Or is there some other reason for this? Is he just trying not to make us worry?

In any case, Benimaru had a mission to carry out.

If I can divert her attention just for a moment, I might be able to change her course. I'll give it a shot.

Benimaru took a deep breath. If he failed, it'd be a disaster—the end of the world, even. He didn't like his chances, but it was the only way to win. So he decided to trust Rimuru, as he always did.

Benimaru was fine with that, but the Magus force wasn't. It'd be impossible not to be deeply disturbed by the situation. All eyes were on Benimaru, standing tall and proud—and after the Magus quieted down, Elmesia opened her mouth.

"Like I said, I entrust Sir Benimaru with the command of the Magus. Does anyone object to this?"

The question, asked with as much authority as Elmesia could muster, was met with silence.

Like anyone could say no to her. I don't think anyone's stupid enough to voice any complaints after being shown that.

If Elmesia had forcibly given her orders, they all would still have risked their lives following Benimaru…but some of them wouldn't have known what they were fighting for, while others might have still had their own personal grievances about it. Benimaru didn't actually think that far ahead, but as it turned out, he had made the best move possible to solve this issue.

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With no time to lose, Benimaru issued one order after another. These were knights from foreign lands, but he was loud and energetic as he stirred them up. The Magus seemed to find this encouraging, and in an instant Benimaru's reputation was growing rapidly, if unintentionally.

The preparations proceeded steadily.

As we approached Thalion, I could see a gigantic tree. It was still some distance away, but it was clearly visible. That alone made me understand just how big this sacred tree was…but no matter how massive it was, it'd be no match for Milim's fury. Her overwhelming force instantly convinced me of this.

I had seen my fill on the way. The only reason this planet was still safe was because of Velgrynd offering to help. She was worried the planet would be in a state of chaos if things continued as they were, so she came all the way over for me. I supposed Velgrynd wouldn't like it much if this world fell apart, either, so I didn't really need to thank her *that* much—but then, if it did, she could just do one of her Trans-Dimensional Leaps, right? Not that I was gonna turn down her help, but…

She told me she'd left a Separate Body by Masayuki's side, so the Velgrynd I saw contained just 70 percent of her power. Even so, it was helping me enough, and I was relying hard on it.

I suppose that's why I dared to ask Velgrynd:

"Hey, not to get too greedy, but is there any way you might be able to keep that sacred tree from getting damaged?"

The results were about what I figured.

"You're as silly as ever, aren't you? Milim isn't even trying, but I'm working my hardest keeping a Star Barrier going, you realize. And even then, she's *still* causing tons of damage. She can work directly with stellar particles, you know. And there's no such thing in this world as a barrier that can absorb a Drago-Nova head-on."

She gave me a cold look, like this was the most stressful day of her life.

Her side-eye glare made my heart accelerate, and I regretted asking the question.

"But I thought Drago-Nova got deflected by that, too…"

"Yes, because Milim wasn't really trying. I know for a fact stellar particles can't be deflected, so don't get your hopes up."

Oh, uh, okay. I guess Milim was always in full control of her powers, whether she was "going easy" or not. It made sense that she wouldn't go 100 percent all the time—she couldn't go destroying the planet while she annihilated an enemy army, after all.

Right then, though, she really *was* out of control. Asking her for mercy would be a big mistake. Somehow or other, we had to remove the orders placed in Milim's mind before she broke out

Drago-Nova. So what would we do?

Ciel's plan was to gather all possible forces and launch attacks in waves to attract Milim's attention. In the meantime, I'd find a way to neutralize Feldway's authority over her and cancel out his orders.

In fact, Milim was being controlled by Feldway's power, but it wasn't perfect. Ciel was pretty confident I could take this thrall off her…or, really, *Ciel* would. But for this to work, we apparently needed to distract Milim in some way first, which I couldn't accomplish on my own. I was thinking Velgrynd could tackle Milim and I could remove the orders when I saw an opening…but apparently the shock waves from that could cause a huge catastrophe on the ground. I should have known. Velgrynd wouldn't have come of her own volition if this weren't a serious crisis.



No, as much as possible, I wanted to be the target so we could keep collateral damage to a minimum. But it wasn't working out that way, and there was no way to tell how much damage all this would cause. This whole operation was beyond reckless, really.

All that, *and* the odds of success were so incredibly low…

Good news. I have discovered an element that may increase the probability of success.

Oh? Well, I hate bad news, but good news is always welcome. Let's hear it.

I have confirmed the presence of the demon lord Leon and the enemy general Zarario in the vicinity of our destination. This is very convenient for us, so I'd like to ask them to provide some help. Can you give me your permission?

Sure, of course, but will they really help out? I know Leon would, but Zarario's kind of on Feldway's side…

Not a problem. I'm sure he'd be glad to cooperate with us.

I wasn't sure where that confidence was coming from, but in times like these, I could always trust it. Without another thought, I gave my permission. And it wasn't long before I found out what resulted.



Zarario's proposal was to have Leon and Soei attack him with all their might, putting him on the spot. He wanted to find out how the Ultimate Dominion Feldway put on him worked while exercising his own powers with all his might. Leon had been under the control of that as well, but now seemed to be released from it. Zarario wasn't too sure how it'd work with him, but through this experiment, he hoped he'd have a chance to escape from this situation.

Leon was up for it. And for him, the “override circuit” installed in his angelic skill by the demon lord Rimuru had been sealed off. This wouldn’t help too much with freeing Zarario, but it was worth seeing whether stressing his will as much as possible could do the trick.

So they went right down to business…but then they heard a strange voice.

I have heard your story. If it is your wish, I will remake your angelic skills to ensure no external force can affect them.

This proposal, coming without warning from an unknown person… It was absurd, actually. There was no way you could say “yes” to something so iffy.

Leon and Zarario exchanged looks. Both of them knew this wasn’t something either of them had conjured up. They weren’t sure what to do…but Leon, at least, was convinced this was Rimuru at work. It seemed silly to think there was any other way.

If it was him, there’s nothing strange about this at all. Perhaps I should leave it in his hands?

Leon’s mind was made up. If Rimuru could mess around with the “override circuits” in other people’s skills, anything was possible. This voice almost sounded like him bragging about his insane powers—he wasn’t even trying to hide them now. Leon, along with the other demon lords, unanimously agreed Rimuru was a wacko. Rimuru would call that a gross misunderstanding, but he deserved it, really. The moment he let Ciel do whatever it wanted, he became a willing accomplice.

Zarario, on the other hand, was bewildered. On the surface, he retained the calm demeanor of a battle-hardened warrior, but inside, he was anything but calm.

How did you do that? How can you speak directly to my mind?

It was the first time he’d experienced anything like this. Leon seemed unfazed, but even *that* was enough to unnerve the overly serious Zarario. If Leon had done this, Zarario would have perceived it as him jamming his thoughts into his mind… but Rimuru wasn’t even there. Common sense dictated this was impossible.

And that wasn’t all. Zarario, of course, had put up a

psychological barrier to prevent any kind of mental attack on him. He was a spiritual life-form to begin with, so his heart core was extremely well defended. And besides, how could someone tamper with someone else's ultimate skill, one so intertwined with the owner's hopes? It was beyond nonsensical.

I don't understand any of this. Is it even possible?

He doubted it. But the voice didn't sound like it was trying to deceive him.

Zarario was prepared to put himself in danger to gain his freedom. But this voice was making these incomprehensible proposals, as if nothing could be simpler. It was all so sudden, he almost wanted to laugh.

"What's the price? If I accept your proposal, what good would it do you?"

Zarario's questions were understandable. And he immediately had a reply.

I would like to ask you for a little help. It's a simple job, really. Just follow my instructions and attack with all your might.

This felt beyond fishy. The voice that sounded like Zarario had nothing to lose, which triggered alarm bells. But somehow, the proposal was like a breath of fresh air in his mind. It was strange.

"All right. I'll accept your proposal."

With that, the contract was concluded.

Confirming the target's acceptance. I will now perform Ability Adjust.

The change was as dramatic as it was instantaneous. From this point on, the mysterious voice—Ciel—held sole authority over their minds.

Leon's ultimate skill Metatron was transformed into the upgraded ultimate skill Surya, Lord of Brilliance. Meanwhile, Ciel transformed Zarario's Israfil into the new ultimate skill Metis, Lord of Retribution.

Ciel informed me that all the necessary pawns were in place. I guess Leon and Zarario agreed to help us out. I couldn't believe it. I mean, Leon, sure, but Zarario was our enemy, right? How had it ever come to *that*?

It was very simple. Michael, Lord of Justice, the skill I ran Analyze and Assess on, contained something called Ultimate Dominion that allowed for absolute external control over angelic skills, so I merely made use of that.

Oh, right, there was that work-around, wasn't there? Sucked when the enemy was doing it to us, but look at how much it was helping us now! I mean, it was so awesomely powerful, the lack of subsequent fireworks was almost a disappointment.

So Ciel had opened a channel to Leon and Zarario through their skills and persuaded them to help us. It also tinkered with their skills a bit, it admitted. The sheer devotion Ciel had to its hobby might be downright praiseworthy.

Hee-hee! Thank you very much. ♪

No, I haven't praised you yet. In fact, I'm more shocked than amazed.

But Ciel sounded happy, so I kept my mouth shut.

Anyway, thanks to this fortunate happenstance, I had more people on my side. Leon and Zarario would maintain the status quo, pretending to fight as they waited for further instructions from Ciel.

For my part, I contacted every party involved as we prepared for the big moment. I'd keep close contact with Benimaru, making sure there wasn't even the slightest margin of error. It sounded like Benimaru was also assisting against Jahil, but he said not to worry about that. Sylvia was there, as well as Kagali and Teare, all working together to corner Jahil, and I guess they were beating him, if only because Benimaru (who came from a similar sword style) was telling them how to exploit his weaknesses. I was glad to see that chemistry in action, especially since I didn't think Benimaru alone could've won.

I felt fine trusting him at his word, so I turned my mind elsewhere. I explained matters to Soei, telling him to assist Leon

and Zarario as needed when the time came. I then sent a Thought Communication to Ellie, updating her on the situation and telling her to inform the Magus about my plans. I thought Benimaru alone as commander wouldn't be a problem, but this would give me even more peace of mind.

By the way, this was the first time I saw the Magus in person, and it was pretty mind-blowing. They reminded me of big, armored robots like you see in anime. They were "putting it on," kind of, instead of operating it, so the pilot could sense everything their mech did, but each magus was a good sixteen or so feet high. I *really* wanted to do some research on these once things were at peace again. It was something to look forward to, I thought, and another reason why this mission had to work. If we failed, Thalion would be reduced to ashes.

Focusing once more, I continued my observation of Milim. She was still blowing off a tremendously powerful aura, showing no sign of fatigue whatsoever. I still had no idea how far her powers could take her, but what truly frightened me was how that aura seemed to be strengthening over time. Even then, Milim's was actually *growing*—or to be precise, the power she had suppressed was finally being released.

There was no real point converting this to EP, but hers would definitely surpass Michael's. I had beaten that guy, but still, I shuddered to think about fighting her head-on. But I'd have to. The decisive battle was drawing near, and I needed to think about every possible situation to come so I wouldn't be stuck later on.



Zarario couldn't hide his consternation. He had no sense of what had happened to him, even though he had just experienced it.

He thought he heard a voice talking about "performing the ability adjust" or something, and immediately afterward, he could hear the chains binding his heart core shatter inside him. It was only a mental image, but Zarario was sure he'd felt it.

After he inherited Michael, Lord of Justice, Feldway immediately had full control over Zarario—and in an instant, all that was gone. He no longer had Israfil, Lord of Trials, the

ultimate skill he had managed to obtain, but it was better to toss that aside than to be under someone else's rule forever. That was what he thought at first…but then he realized that skill was still there, and it had become even more useful to him.

This ultimate skill was something of a low-level version of Uriel, Lord of Vows. It had some missing parts by comparison, although it compensated for them in other ways—but regardless, the skill worked in much the same manner. Its specialty was managing spaces, making Zarario capable of exerting control over any kind of matter, flow, or wavelength within its effective area. The only exceptions were special cases like data or stellar particles.

In other words, not even Disintegration—the skill Leon was so good at—would work on him now. Leon could *make* it work if he had the same kind of energy stores as Zarario, but the real-life difference was too great. If Zarario tried hard enough, he could even reflect Leon's Disintegration back at him.

That being said, Leon wasn't using any of his special skills in this fight. He hesitated to tap into them, thanks to some doubts he had. That was fortunate for him—and for Zarario, too, although it made for a less climactic show.

Thanks to Ciel, Zarario's skill had been reborn. The ultimate skill Metis, Lord of Retribution—the ability to manipulate any and all materials and wavelengths in a given space—was a truly insane power, even transcending Uriel. It didn't work on data or stellar particles, but it was still one of the most powerful combat-oriented skills in existence.

Zarario could intuitively sense all this.

I can't believe it. Why? I accepted the proposal, yes, but I didn't say I would be that voice's ally…or no, actually, before that…

He understood he was panicking a little. Who could blame him? Ultimate skills are normally incredibly difficult to acquire. Zarario had lived for tens of billions of years, and only recently did he finally nab one for himself. He knew they existed, of course, but thought he didn't need any. Maybe that was why he never got one, but either way…

I know for a fact they're hard to acquire, and now I just get one out of nowhere? Is that even possible?! And who could even do that?

Zarario shuddered. The ultimate skill system was invented by Veldanava the Creator as tools to manage the world with.

Other administrative skills could replace them, but a specialized, useful power like Zarario's brand-new Metis was truly a divine force. He could even raise the dead with it if he used it right.

But is it really possible to just modify ultimate skills like that? These forces that could destroy the very laws of the world?

The thought made him shiver. Even contemplating these heady topics was such a strange sensation.

"Who in the world could have done this…?" Zarario muttered despite himself.

"It was Rimuru," Leon replied.

"Rimuru? You're saying the demon lord Rimuru did that?"

"Yes. You don't have to think too hard about it. Just accept it as the way things are."

That's insane, thought Zarario. But looking at Leon, staring into the distance, he could tell Rimuru had put this demon lord through a lot.

"You're being disrespectful to Sir Rimuru," a miffed-looking Soei chided.

"Wait a minute," replied Zarario. "Don't you see how crazy your master is?!"

"That's right," Leon said, nodding.

The unexpected affirmation made everyone fall into an awkward silence. Zarario attempted to change the topic.

"And you got one, too? Are you sure of that?"

"Don't be silly. I can *feel* it."

Leon was now in possession of Surya, Lord of Brilliance. It slotted perfectly into his body, like he'd had it the whole time, and Leon could interact with spirit particles without any issue.

In terms of pure technique, Leon's ultimate skill was above Zarario's. The former was an experienced warrior, but his enemies were the uniform, never-changing insectors, so honing his skills was never a concept for him. The same was true of Obela; she had been fighting the same enemies for so long her skills had been optimized to work best on those foes she knew so well. Since her beloved sword had gone God-class, she was able to slice right through the exoskeletons of the insectors. Any further refinement of her skills was unnecessary.

Along those lines, Leon was a former Hero who had fought against all kinds of enemies, albeit over a different time frame from his companions. When it came to overall experience, it

wouldn't be strange at all if he actually beat Zarario. That was why, despite Zarario holding back a bit, he could beat him without relying on ultimate skills, even with the wide gap in strength.

"Are you all right, though? Because I haven't seen you use a skill yet."

Leon just smirked at the question. "It's fine. Now we can fight each other without any second thoughts…but what do you think?"

Zarario couldn't help but laugh. Leon was all but saying "how about I test it on you first?"

"We'll have plenty of time for that later," he replied, parrying the question as he turned his attention to the now-visible Milim.



Looking at my friends waiting in the distance, I confirmed they were all set to go. Benimaru was *so* good at setting things up that way. Now we could launch our wave attacks at Milim with minimum of waste.

I saw Soei, too, standing still in midair—or hovering, I guess. He always looked so weirdly seductive when standing in place. That wasn't going to help him in battle, but I guess he wasn't trying to do that, which made it hard to stop.

Anyway, he was flanked by Leon and Zarario. They appeared in good spirits, so I guess Ciel was right—they really *were* helping out. Though I suppose this wasn't Zarario turning traitor so much as Feldway just being too much of a prick to work for? Which I certainly didn't mind if he was on our side now. We'd just have to see how things shook out afterward…but I'd let Soei worry about that.

(Okay, Benimaru, final check. Everything looking good?)

(Absolutely perfect. Sir Leon and Sir Zarario are now under my command. There is no need for any anxiety.)

I was glad he sounded so confident. This fight, after all, was going to last a single instant. We were approaching at a few dozen times the speed of sound, so if we messed up the first move, it was game over. Milim could undoubtedly break out Drago-Nova faster than the blink of an eye. All she had to do was hit the brakes, come to a stop, get in position, and fire.

It must have seemed like a long time to everyone watching, but the whole thing would be over and done with in around three seconds. It'd be impossible to hit Milim in mid-flight, so we could only aim for that one moment when she stopped. At that instant, we'd launch a slate of repeated attacks to lure Milim over—then, while she was distracted, I'd activate Azathoth, God of the Void, and undo the Regalia Dominion Feldway placed on her.

Leon and Zarario would be supporting me with a barrage of all-out attacks, which I think improved our chances. Once the Magus unleashed their waves of magic, Benimaru, Soei, Leon, and Zarario would each launch their most powerful offensive spells. That'd be enough to make even Milim stop for a bit and defend herself.

That was the outline of the plan. And the moment was nearly there. Milim was stopped, about to aim an attack on the sacred tree.

The Magus began their assault. A massive beam cannon radiated out from them in a single, unwavering movement, like a beautifully staged performance. I would've been longingly watching them it if weren't for my job.

Upon closer observation, I could see the beam was a high-output heat ray akin to Nuclear Cannon. So they had mech weapons that fired nuclear magic *that* rapidly? Ellie'd been sitting on some neat stuff over there, huh? We were gonna have a lot to talk about.

As expected, though, it didn't work on Milim. Benimaru's precise command focused the rays from the Magus on a single point in the air. The focal temperature must have been millions of degrees, which sounded rough, but Milim just didn't care. In fact, she was totally ignoring it, not even trying to defend herself.

That looked like a pretty flashy strike, too. Was there much point to it, in the end?

It distracted Milim enough to buy us a small sliver of time.

Oh. All right. It was *almost* pointless, but it did its job after all, huh?

…Whoa, hey, Milim's sticking her arms out ahead of her. I'm not really sure she was distracted at all. At this rate, I doubted anything we could throw at Milim would work on her. All I could really count on was the magic from Benimaru and the gang.

The first to go up was Soei.

"Thousand Shadow Death."

His shadow stretched out, forming a thousand arms that bound Milim down…but despite all the energy he was pouring into his ultimate gift Tsukuyomi, it didn't stop her for a moment. Insta-Kill and its ilk sure weren't gonna work on her, no.

We had expected this from the start, but it fizzled, with Milim's attention not diverted in the least—but that wasn't about to faze Soei. In fact, he was going right up to her, attempting to pin her in place.

Don't worry. That is a Separate Body of Soei's.

Oh, that sort of thing? That's coming in pretty handy, I see.

Soei couldn't stop Milim from moving, but he *did* obstruct her for a little bit. Then a blast of ultimate destructive light danced around them, completely covering Soei.

"Be rendered into dust. Hundred Breaker!"

This was Leon's special finisher. Each point of light coming from his hands, large enough to envelop a grown person, was a single bolt of Disintegration he could freely move in the air. I couldn't think of a stronger move, really, and it quickly turned Soei's Separate Body into a fine powder.

But Milim didn't move. From the moment she got in position to fire Drago-Nova, an invisible barrier manifested around her. It shone with the gleam of stellar particles, perfectly blocking any spiritual particle-based attack. I'm sure it outclassed Absolute Defense, part of Uriel's tool set. Leon's finishers were so powerful even I'd have a hard time with them, but this one faded away without much apparent effect.

But the attack wasn't over yet. Even before we knew the results of Leon's strike, Zarario was making his move.

"Insanity Hush."

Zarario, the very picture of fortitude against all odds, had

accepted Benimaru's orders without any back talk…and if he agreed to this, he wasn't about to make a mistake. Enemy or not, he seemed to think it was a soldier's duty to obey his commander—making him a pretty trustworthy guy, actually, even though he wasn't on our side.

Zarario was performing this technique just when Soei launched his attack. I had no way of knowing this, but apparently he had never shown it in public before, not even against Leon and Soei. His sword, tough enough to slice an alionium exoskeleton in two, could instantly kill with a single swipe—and he was pointing all his murderous intent at Milim. No wonder he had an EP of over twenty million. The pressure from this sword was denser than Soei and Leon's attacks combined—an almost too simple strike, delivered at distressingly high speed.

But although it made Milim's barrier shine with dazzling light, that was all it did. Truly unbelievable. Every one of them had power nobody could afford to underestimate…and it meant nothing to Milim.

The simultaneous attack from all three of them seemed to have failed, but there was still one second of time left before Milim activated Drago-Nova. To Benimaru, that was more than enough. A bold smile was on his face, as if to demonstrate just how belligerent he could be.

"Now for the real show!"

He didn't say it out loud, but Soei, Leon, and Zarario all went on the move in response. It was just as we'd planned from the beginning.

The Guren sword in Benimaru's hand glowed a stunning shade of red—a fearsome crimson light that could burn away all matter—and that light intermingled with Benimaru's own dark aura.

"Prominence Acceleration…!!"

It glowed like a black sun—this jet-black darkness with red flames dancing around it. This black and crimson sunlight, backed by vicious, stormy violence, took the shape of an Eastern-style dragon. It swirled in the air, swooping down to engulf Milim like it had a will of its own.

Even Milim had no choice but to react. Why? Because Benimaru's Prominence Acceleration boasted an instantaneous energy that ranked up to the tens of millions.

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Power was calculated based on the relationship between the output and total amount of energy. An attack could contain a large amount of energy, but if the output was low, the results would be pretty weak. By the same token, large output and low energy wouldn't give you much power, either.

In Benimaru's case, output was never a problem. His total amount of energy wasn't paltry at all, but it still wasn't enough to take on Milim. So how could Benimaru unleash such an overpowered move?

…I lent him the power of my master.

Huh? I didn't feel anything like that at all. Are you acting on your own again, Ciel? I mean, if it helps everyone out, then great, but I wish you could've explained that to me first…

It was still in the experimental stages, so I thought I would report back after it was successful.

Hmm…a perfectionist as always, huh? I know it was just a quick little experiment for Ciel, but it meant a whole lot more to me. But I could whine about that later. For now, I wanted an explanation of what happened.

As Ciel stated, my ultimate skill Azathoth, God of the Void, contained something called Void Collapse that was a kind of inexhaustible energy flow. It was hard to work with, though, so Ciel was working on ways to take advantage of it. As part of this, it had approached some of my cabinet and conducted some negotiation. I asked it why it couldn't just conduct the experiment itself, and it said:

I would never put my master in danger.

Okay.

I thought it'd be safer if we did this kind of thing in the labyrinth, but Ciel wouldn't tolerate that, either. It was being

way too overprotective, but I guess I should appreciate how much it cared for my safety? Ah well.

Anyway, Ciel had devised and built a system to secretly supply the energy from Void Collapse, piping it over to those connected to me via a soul corridor. It was truly Ciel in its element, I suppose. It was an application of "supply and demand," as it was explained to me, but I'm sure it was the kind of thing only Ciel, who had already done stuff like combine Azathoth and Shub-Niggurath, could do.

This whole setup wasn't complete yet, apparently, but that "Void Supply" was the secret behind that instantaneous surge in Benimaru's power.

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Prominence Acceleration surrounded Milim, chomping at her. She stopped, looking clearly annoyed as she swatted at it.

"Demonwire Bind."

Soei's mystical threat caught her.

"Hundred Prison," said Leon.

A Disintegration-powered cage instantly completed itself. The invisible barrier around Milim twinkled like the brightest of stars, but she still hadn't activated Drago-Nova. We just bought ourselves enough time.

Zarario, by the way, didn't have any kind of "capturing" techniques like this, so he was just releasing his aura to exert more pressure on her. It was effective enough, I suppose, but I kinda wished he had something for a situation like this—not that I was gonna tell him.

Everything was looking pretty ideal. I was ready to go, and I wanted to be sure this went right so everyone else's hard work didn't go to waste.

It's up to you, Dr. Ciel!

Leave it to me.

It didn't really feel right to me to rely wholly on my skill when it mattered the most, but since Ciel and I were pretty much one and the same, this was me trying my very hardest. With this perfect argument running through my mind, I

prepared myself and waited for the results.

…Reset.

It worked with almost no fanfare. Ciel understood the power behind Michael, Lord of Justice, how it was able to duplicate and cancel out all other effects. With that, Feldway's Regalia Dominion lost all effectiveness on Milim.

✳

The whole operation was a brilliant success. And while I wanted to congratulate everyone on a job well done, Milim was still out of control.

We had undone the order in her mind to destroy Thalion's sacred tree, but we still had some tricky work to do. If we kept duking it out there, the shock waves alone would cause massive damage to Thalion. We needed a new location, fast.

The Republic of Ur-Gracia was nearby, and Leon's domain was across the sea as well. The Western Nations spread out in the opposite direction, so for a route that'd keep damage to a minimum, our best bet was to guide Milim over the sea and toward the Barren Lands. It'd affect things in Daggrull's domain, but it was a tad too late to worry about that.

I didn't want to kill any of the locals, though, so we'd need to evacuate everyone beforehand. This was where Soei came in.

(Soei, I'm gonna try to guide Milim to the Barren Lands, but I wanna make sure none of Daggrull's subjects are hurt. Can you do that?)

I gave him the basic outline. He responded with just the answer I hoped for.

(I am on the job. I left a Separate Body behind for just such a purpose, so I can begin moving immediately.)

A consummate professional, that man. Seriously. He never made a single error. When I planned things, I never thought about what *might* happen in the future, but with him, I could count on that. Once again, he showed me just how capable a guy he was, so I left all that work to him.

That was all a big relief, but then something terrible

happened. Time stopped on me.

Who the hell didn't get the message? I don't need this right now!!

I couldn't help but shout that in my mind. Like, if Milim stopped, too, then great, but she was still moving around, of course. Plus, with time stopped, all the world's defenses were at zero, which suddenly made her extremely dangerous. She was tough enough as it stood, but at that point, even touching her was out of the question.

Fighting would be a terrible idea, so I had to get her over to the Deadly Desert. We did a great job distracting her before she started firing off attacks like crazy, but as it stood, Soei couldn't evacuate the locals in the desert before I took her over there. Hardly anywhere in this world was totally uninhabited—and either way, it wouldn't be very nice of me to go destroying whole ecosystems.

"Over here, Milim!" I shouted to get her attention, and then I started moving. This was an extremely unpleasant turn of events, but I was in a midair dogfight with Milim in this suspended world. If I hadn't figured out how to deal with stopped time, it would've been all over at this point. I was glad about that, but still, it was tough to fight Milim like this. I could feel my strength being drained, but Milim's was seemingly infinite; it was still rising. A first-grade math education was all you needed to know who would run out first.

As it stood, I was doomed. The world was about to collapse, and I didn't really want that to happen, but I didn't even know who stopped time in the first place.

I knew I could cross Chloe off the list. It could be Guy or Velzard, but they could move in this space, too, so I didn't see much of a motive for them. Who could have pulled this crap on me? Feldway? It'd be a good way of harassing me, yeah, but would he really do *that* at this point?

Now really wasn't the time to be looking for a culprit, but if I wanted to do something about this, I preferred to know who I was dealing with.

Then…

(Rimuru, can you hear me?)

Veldora talked to me through a Thought Communication…or, to be exact, he was sharing his thought data through our soul corridor. Being in a suspended state like this made nearly all

magicule-consuming skills useless, so it was difficult to communicate at all unless you had work-arounds like this one.

But Veldora hasn't been affected by this, huh? I guess I should have expected that.

(Yeah, I'm listenin'.)

(Stop sounding so casual about this, you! Shion and Luminus are in grave danger over here! Adalmann's team was having a tough time as it stood, but nobody here can counter Daggrull's Time Stop, you see.)

(Hmm? So Daggrull did that?)

(That he did! Daggrull, of all people! He must've wanted to end this in a hurry!)

Well, there's the culprit, then. And if he was locked in warfare with Shion and the gang, they must've used Spatial Transport to travel, just as I feared. They must've really pushed Daggrull to the edge for him to use something like this.

Stopping time mainly helped weed out the weaklings; if someone couldn't cope with it, that was their problem. I got trapped in this once, too, but I had no idea Daggrull had access to it.

So now what…?

There were two problems here. One, if I didn't help Shion, Luminus, and the rest, they might all be wiped out. Two—the trickier one—how was I gonna get there? Spatial Transport involved sending data particles over to perceive the other side, so you couldn't use it while time was suspended. You could probably transport yourself to another point within visible range, but it'd be faster to just move like normal. No matter how far (or close) your destination was, you needed to use data particles to read the situation in your destination first, and if that was the case, I might as well just walk instead.

Given this situation, Daggrull would probably wipe out his opponents before I could reach Lubelius to rescue them. Whether I went there or asked Veldora to help out, the results would be the same. And if I was dealing with Milim, Veldora was about all I could turn to…

(Veldora, whether you make it in time or not, can you go and try to bail them out right now?)

(That's what I was waiting to hear!)

I really wanted Veldora to remain our final line of defense in the labyrinth, but I couldn't be picky. We just had to work out a

transport. Could he maybe tough it out for me?

(Sir Rimuru, I have connected my thoughts to Ultima. I will send her coordinates over to Sir Veldora immediately.)

Whoa! Diablo, of all people, had just interrupted us.

No matter the distance, Spatial Transport is possible even in suspended space if you have the right coordinate data. Since Ultima is in the area, I shared in her senses and had her acquire the needed data.

Um, okay? So, like, that was possible because of our soul corridor connections?

Yes, exactly.

It sounded pretty confident, but really, traveling that far in stopped time? Seems like a cheat code to me. It's totally impossible otherwise, right? People being connected by soul corridors in this space was such an exception to the rule, I didn't even know what to say. Anything was possible, wasn't it?

Not too proud to leverage that, though.

(Whenever you're ready, Ultima!)

(Right! I'm on it, Sir Rimuru! Will these work, Sir Veldora?)

(Yes, well done! Kwah-ha-ha-ha, now it's finally my turn!!)

Veldora's laugh was like a breath of fresh air to me. And if Diablo and Ultima could function in suspended time, too, well, I couldn't feel more reassured.

And then, just when I felt Veldora make the transport…the world started moving again.

I suppose Veldora did his job, just like I knew he would. Breathing a sigh of relief, I got back to my own task—guiding and distracting the crazed Milim as we flew toward the Barren Lands.

Dealing with Kagali's party was starting to seriously rile Jahil. He had thought they were wimps, but he still hadn't been able

to land any decisive damage on them, a fact that made him wince with anger.

But his thoughts were calm. He was well aware of what was happening around him.

This is insane… I can't believe the Dragon Princess had that much power the whole time… No, but more than that—

Zarario's betrayal was a real problem. Jahil didn't know how it happened, but Zarario was helping keep Milim captive—a distressing twist. Jahil didn't care about loyalty to Feldway or anything like that. For him, the problem was that he had no other allies left in this region to count on. If it was just Kagali's party, he could probably trounce them in time, but if Zarario was his enemy, too, escape could prove pretty difficult.

(This isn't what I was promised, Feldway!!)

He shot off an enraged Thought Communication to blow off some steam. After a short silence, Feldway muttered back at him.

(You're saying Zarario betrayed us…?)

(Stop acting like a doddering old man! I'm in danger, too, if this keeps up! I'm going to retreat, but do you mind that?)

He was polite enough to ask, but Jahil was already preparing his escape. It was humiliating, considering how inferior his opponents were, but taking that extra caution was how Jahil had survived. Otherwise Milim would have obliterated him long ago.

So Jahil held his Demigod's Bloodspear tight…then unleashed a power he never had before. The Bloodspear had a lot of power; he had forced it to accept him as its master, but its rejection instinct made it dangerous to use too much. It was an ultimate weapon, though, one he could trust in a pinch—and when combined with Jahil's own skills, it could conjure up Evil Bloodwaves that could vaporize even the largest of nations.

This worked the same in principle as a thermobaric weapon. By scattering magicules across a wide area, then setting them aflame, he could generate an explosion. And he hadn't been fighting at random, either. While keeping Teare and Sylvia at bay, he was also secretly spreading magicules around. They now filled the battlefield, ready to transform into murderous hellfire at Jahil's will.

These guys would likely withstand my Evil Bloodwave, though.

This was a wide-range skill meant for use against whole

armies, so it wouldn't be a decisive blow against a strong enough opponent. Anyone below a high-level magic-born, though, could never survive.

The magicules Jahil dispersed covered Thalion's Magus corps. They'd engulf and burn Zarario's forces to the ground, too, but that was none of Jahil's business. It'd be the perfect distraction to save his own life with, so he wouldn't hesitate to use it.

"Prepare to see just how great I am, you maggots!"

Then in a single burst of combustion, Jahil detonated his Evil Bloodwave.

The sacred tree was covered in flames, its outermost layer exploding from the super-high heat. The Magus deployed in all directions to protect the tree were similarly engulfed. Sylvia and Teare, standing in front of Jahil, and Kagali, a little behind them, were too caught up in the flames to react.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Take that and die, you bastards! May you wail in despair in the afterlife, forever trying to stop me!"

Jahil laughed hysterically as he sneaked away, hiding in the flames.

.....

.....

...

The blazing fire was threatening to consume the very atmosphere itself. But the moment Jahil left the picture…

"Boy. Good thing he wasn't paying attention."

With those words from Benimaru, all the flames were extinguished at once. It looked like it was going to be a catastrophe, but the next thing everyone knew, there was only minor damage. Sylvia, Teare, and Kagali didn't even suffer any burns. The Magus, who had been in the greatest danger, were all safe. Some of the magic mounts were stuck where they were, damaged by the sudden wave of intense heat, but all their pilots were protected, so there were no serious injuries.

The sacred tree, the one thing everyone thought would be a maelstrom of flames, remained fresh-looking down to the last twig, although there were scorch marks here and there. The tree wasn't as damaged as it looked, and in a few days, it would likely be good as new.

"I tell you, it sure was hard manipulating the air so Jahil wouldn't notice!" said Elmesia.

“You’ve done well, Emperor Elmesia,” Benimaru said. “You made the perfect decision, just as I expected.”

Benimaru flashed a hearty smile, consoling the grumbling Elmesia.

As may be inferred from this exchange, the minimal damage from Evil Bloodwave was thanks to Benimaru’s behind-the-scenes work. The job he was doing made him a literal jack of all trades—and master of them all, too. While proceeding with his operation to stop Milim, he was assisting Kagali’s party with Jahil—and also working with Elmesia to foil Jahil’s plot, preventing damage before it occurred.

The magicules Jahil’s skill spread around were actually a special flammable type of matter called bloodmist. Vampires occasionally used this for their spells, but wrangling this matter was one other skill of the Demigod’s Bloodspear. Bloodmist had a slightly different aroma from natural magicules, which Benimaru recognized through some precise Control Magic work, making him realize Jahil was up to something.

But Benimaru wasn’t the only person to spot this. Sylvia immediately sensed the danger, but she had no idea how to deal with it. If she made any untoward moves, she feared Jahil would speed up his spell, causing even more damage. So she asked Benimaru what to do—and since he had noticed it, too, he already had a full grasp of the situation. That alone was impressive, but it didn’t bring them any closer to a solution.

No, the answer came down from the heavens.

You must use Elmesia’s ultimate skill Vayu, King of Heavenly Wind, to gather the bloodmist alone, then the ultimate skill Amaterasu, Lord of Shimmering Flame, to burn only the demonic blood.

Upon hearing this revelation, Benimaru immediately sprang into action, asking no further questions. Some things in the world were better off not being examined too closely. He’d heard that voice back when Rimuru connected that Void Collapse circuit to him, too, but Benimaru freely accepted what it told him, pretending nothing was amiss.

Everything in accordance with Sir Rimuru’s will, you could say. If this heavenly voice is working in his favor, I’ll just go along

with it.

So with that resolve, Benimaru stayed busy both in public and behind the curtain. With the help of Elmesia and the others, he made it through another crisis.

So Jahil's plan was foiled, thanks to the efforts of Benimaru, Sylvia, and Elmesia. Jahil himself had made good his escape, but given their lack of backup, Benimaru thought it best not to take any more chances. This was really the best outcome possible.

Then as soon as everything settled down, Benimaru collapsed. Seeing Jahil was gone made every bone in his body give way at once. Soei, perhaps anticipating this, quickly steadied him.

"Can't blame him after all he's done for us."

Elmesia's eyes were as gentle and respectful as her words as she watched the fainted Benimaru. To her, Benimaru was a national hero who'd saved Thalion from its greatest crisis. She knew how hard he worked for it, and it was only natural for her to react that way.

Still, she had a lot of work left to do, mainly dealing with Zarario and his legion, who were all alive and well. The task concerned her. With Jahil gone, there was a lull in the battle, with both sides waiting to see what the other would do. Should she get this battle roaring again? That was the question on her mind.

Since Benimaru stepped up to stop Jahil's attack, none of Zarario's forces were damaged. It wasn't quite an even match anymore—they actually had a slight advantage over Thalion's army. Their baseline forces weren't much of a threat, but those two generals were a menace. There was so much to worry about, and what was worse, she wasn't sure if the enemy would even agree to a ceasefire.

Elmesia pondered at super-speed, simulating all the possibilities that came to mind. But her worries would soon be over, long before she could work out any answers.



Dhalis and Neece were in charge of Zarario's army. Their former advisers had been defeated in the previous mad dash

for a walking-dead body, their egos fully extinguished. The thronus class of angels could be so weak-willed that way. After all that fighting, too…but no, it was actually the opposite. They had performed the same work for untold amounts of time, and it wore out their souls, causing their senses of self to fade. Zarario's presence as a seasoned warrior was perhaps another reason for that.

Obela's forces were quite different. With her, camaraderie mattered, and every member of her army adored her. Many of them had died in battle, with Ohma her only assistant remaining, but each one was a valiant warrior willing to risk their life for Obela.

Zarario, on the other hand, operated his force like a fine-tuned machine, not a single cog out of place. There was no need for self-awareness in this force; all they had to do was follow their orders, and everything would work out fine. Thanks to that, Zarario had few true friends—and now only two, Dhalis and Neece, were alive.

Zarario approached them.

"For reasons I cannot surmise, Benimaru protected us as well," noted Dhalis. "We've temporarily paused fighting subsequently, but should we continue with it?"

"Are you sure about all this, Sir Zarario?" Neece asked. "I'm afraid Sir Feldway might see this as treason."

Dhalis was sticking to business here. Neece, out of consideration for Zarario, was implicitly asking about his future plans. It wasn't at all the direction Zarario thought the question would take…but that was why he found these guys so amusing.

They're really starting to act like individuals now. Surprising.

Zarario hadn't paid attention to it before, but even his assistants were expressing their own opinions now. It gladdened him.

"Heh… You guys are way too serious."

""…?!""

Dhalis and Neece were astonished to see him smiling. It was as momentous an event as the world itself ending. In all their memories, there wasn't a single instance of Zarario smiling.

"S-Sir Zarario?"

"Is this some kind of a trick as well? Or are you testing us?"

Zarario raised a hand. "Calm down. I've decided further fighting is pointless."

“What?!”

He had just formally declared the end of hostilities. It surprised Dhalis, but he meekly obeyed the order and transmitted it to the rest of the army.

“And also, Neece…I did not betray Feldway. Quite the opposite. He took away my free will. He trampled all over the trust we built as friends!”

There was a quiet anger in his voice. It was his way of saying farewell for good.

“So will we…not see Sir Feldway again?”

Zarario nodded back at the fearful Neece. “That’s right. I have decided to part company with him.”

The statement made Dhalis and Neece gasp.

“Fortunately for you,” he continued, “neither of you acquired an ultimate skill. You weren’t given an ultimate gift, and you still have your own freedom. You may continue to follow me, or you may join Feldway. I will give you a moment to make your choice.”

This sudden ultimatum confused Dhalis and Neece.

“Y-you don’t need us any longer?”

“Did…did we do something wrong?”

“No,” he said, assuaging their panic. “I, too, have just been freed from his domination. It’s taught me the importance of freedom all over again. You should take a break, too, and look at the beauty of this world.”

The two angel assistants looked around. The sky was completely clear and beautiful, like no war had been fought there at all. The sacred tree, saved from the threat of Milim, loomed high above them, although the burnt bark stood out here and there. Each branch was long and wide enough to support the heavens themselves, their green, lush foliage spread wide. A pleasant breeze blew across the leaf they were standing on—a breath of fresh air, blowing away the old ways of thinking.

“After ages of hostility, we now have a truce with the insectors as well. I was doing Feldway’s bidding as a favor to a friend, but I can no longer tolerate the way he conducts his life. It’s time for me to find a new way to live.”

Clearly, Zarario didn’t want to serve Feldway if he was going to be that unfaithful to him. He might have been a warrior, but he wasn’t constantly looking for new challenges on the

battlefield. He fought because he had to, not because he found it his calling. He had been forced to fight all his life, but now Zarario wondered if it was time to turn his attention to other things. His assistants agreed with him.

“Well…actually, ever since I’ve occupied a walking dead, I’ve been thinking a lot about what matters, too. It feels like someone else’s will resides within this body. If I was able to, I think it’d be great if I could find a hobby besides fighting.”

Dhalis sounded hesitant, but he managed to get it all out.

“That’s fine,” Zarario replied, nodding.

“I don’t have any particular thoughts,” said Neece. “I will continue to follow you, Sir Zarario, for as long as I can.”

Her will was certainly firm. All she wanted was to be of use to Zarario.

“That, too, is fine.”

He accepted the offer. He had decided to live his life freely but not irresponsibly. He would never abandon those who loved or followed him.

“In that case,” said Dhalis, “I will join you, too.”

“Oh? Are you sure? I won’t stop you from finding your own pastimes to pursue.”

“Hee-hee-hee… I’m sure that’d be fun, but I’m not in a hurry. I’ll wait until everyone’s settled down first.”

That sounds good, too, Zarario thought. They had a lot of life left to live. There was no harm in taking their time to rethink their future paths. But for that to work, they needed the world to be at peace first.

“I suppose our next goal is decided, then.”

The world was so beautiful…and yet Feldway hadn’t even tried to look at it. Now he was actively trying to throw it out of order. As a friend, Zarario thought, he couldn’t afford to overlook this outrage.

“Listen to me, all of you! Our enemy is Feldway! Let us put an end to his delusional ambitions and make the world a stable place!”

“““Yes, my lord!!”””

Zarario’s army was still a well-oiled machine. Here, too, the decision was unanimous.

At Zarario’s command, the entire army disarmed at once.

“I see no point in further combat,” he said. “What about you?”

He had gone up to Elmesia alone. She agreed with him.

“I’m in the same boat. I don’t think this battle was much to your liking, either. Let’s call it a draw and put away our weapons.”

The statement was tantamount to saying she wouldn’t demand reparations or apologies from the other side. She could have asked for them, being the politician she was, but instead she proposed a draw in order to force this war to a quick end.

The noble families near her were in support of this—not that they had a choice. If the fighting continued, the very future of Thalion was at stake. The Magus had sustained severe damage, but at least their magic mounts were repairable. If the battle continued, though, the casualties would undoubtedly start to grow. You couldn’t use money to compensate for the loss of a life, and the nation as a whole would grow weaker. Feldway’s chaos was likely to continue going forward, and they couldn’t afford to waste resources on things like this.

Fortunately, the leaders on both sides were smart enough to see this. None voiced objections about the emperor’s decision, and thanks to these high-end talks, Elmesia and Zarario signed an agreement to end the war.

A joint statement was released soon after, and so—for the time being—Zarario would station his army in Thalion to prepare for the unprecedented crisis that likely lay ahead.



Feldway, looking down from the heavens, had a full grasp of the entire battlefield.

“Imagine, Zarario turning away from me…”

It was a shock to him. Zarario was one of his few confidants and old friends. Losing him was something Feldway never imagined would happen.

His grip on sanity was failing him. First he lost Michael, then he was betrayed by Zarario. And only after he lost them did he understand how vital they were.

Are you going to abandon me, too? Then there’s no more need for hesitation. I must risk my own life to prove the existence of my

god!

Feldway's mind was twisted and broken—irrevocably, without anyone ever knowing.

"What're you gonna do, Feldway?" Vega asked.

At least *he* had it easy. No responsibilities at all; just pursuing his own purposes and pleasures, day in and day out. Feldway gave him a wry smile.

"Heh… It's all going to plan."

"Yeah? But wasn't Milim supposed to take down that big tree?"

"Ah, that didn't actually matter much. We can knock it over later."

Zarario's departure wasn't at all part of the plan, but it was true this didn't unravel Feldway's plans at all. He was as confident as ever, and the fated time was near. Any slight hesitation that remained in his heart was banished whenever he recalled how Zarario had forsaken him. He was driven by just one purpose. There was no stopping now.

"Vega, I want you to team up with Deeno and go conquer the labyrinth."

"Oh? Sweet, I'm finally seeing some action!"

He laughed happily.

Mai, standing to the side, came to attention when Feldway looked at her. Vega had never been given a key, so she couldn't leave the Celestial Palace. Mai, on the other hand, had a duplicate, which let her send Vega and the other residents anywhere she pleased via Instant Motion.

Feldway, among others, had a key linking him from his home world to the Palace, but only Velzard possessed the key to Skyspire Tower, their link to the surface—the "true key," as it was called. Feldway's key was registered with this key world, however, so he could move around as he pleased. Mai's duplicate key, meanwhile, was built into her ultimate gift, giving her full freedom of travel as well.

Deeno and the others had been given similar keys, but he wasn't all that happy about it.

"Huh? Me too?"

Deeno still sounded like he didn't want to lift a finger to help. But his reaction was ignored. Veldora, the greatest asset the labyrinth had, was gone, opening up a perfect opportunity. No matter how much Deeno whined, there was no reversing this

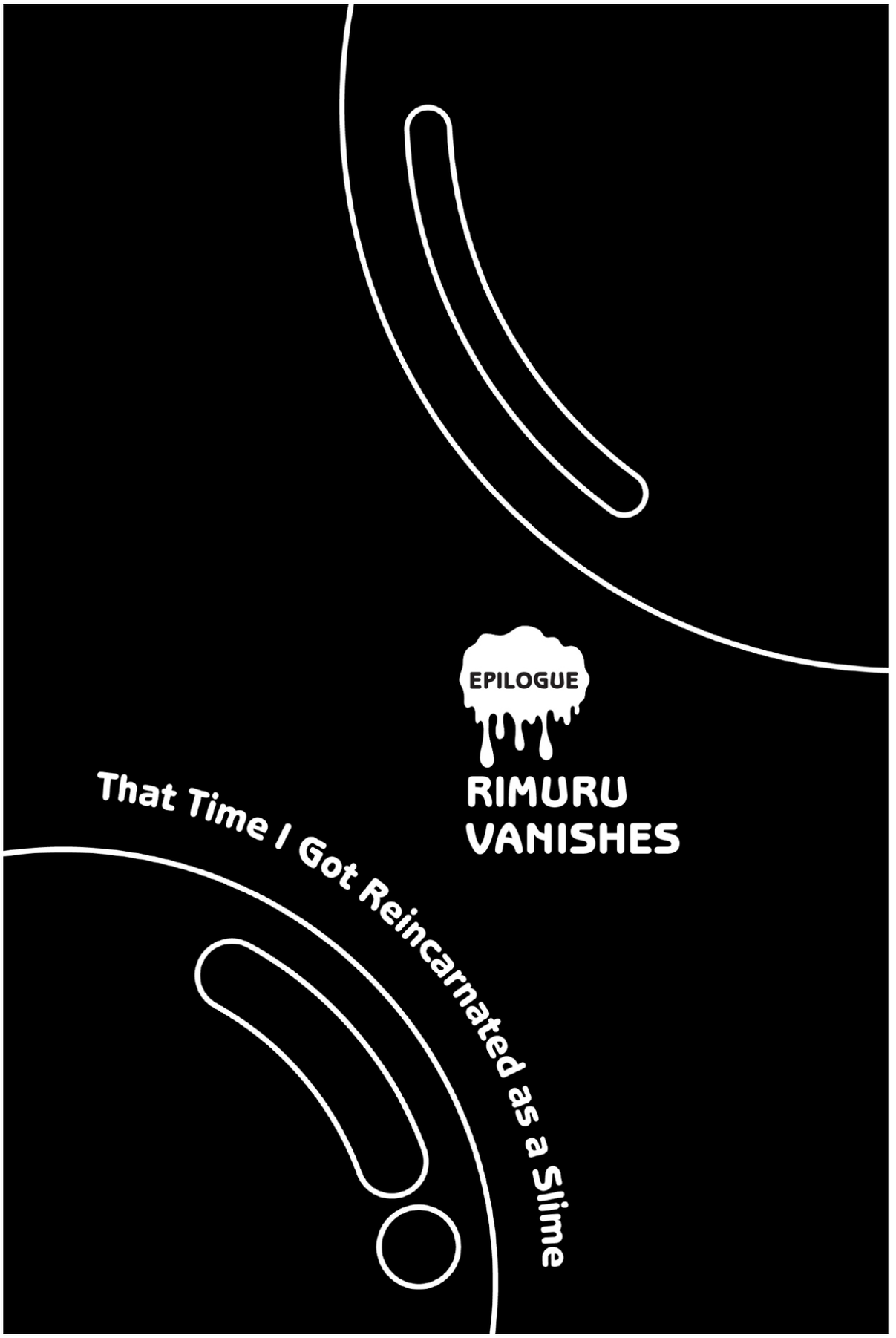
decision.

"You can expect good news from me," Vega said as he left. Mai led the way, followed by a despondent Deeno—along with Pico and Garasha, rolling their eyes as they dragged him away.

Silence fell across the Celestial Palace. Feldway, alone in there, was contentedly laughing to himself—a laugh tinged with a hint of madness.

Then, looking down at the planet's surface, Feldway began working on his final touches.




EPILOGUE
RIMURU VANISHES
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

EPILOGUE

RIMURU VANISHES

As I was guiding Milim toward the Barren Lands, I suddenly had a bad premonition. Something had just occurred to me, and it wasn't too rosy. This stuff I was doing… What if this was exactly what Feldway wanted me to do?

It was something I likely picked up on only because I'd been following Ciel's suggestions a whole lot lately. Maybe I was overthinking this…but the fact I had only one suitable destination to aim for led to some uncomfortable questions in my mind.

If this was him leading me around, he undoubtedly wanted to see me at Skyspire Tower. After all, that was a divine relic from a god so strong it completely blocked Michael's attack. The surrounding Deadly Desert would also prevent further damage from Milim, a shared goal of ours.

I felt bad for Daggrull, but hey—we were enemies. I wasn't gonna lose sleep over it. I mean, I didn't feel *great* about it, but if he was hostile to me, so be it. Call it an act of God, sort of.

So Skyspire Tower was about the only place I could take Milim to. He didn't predict that, too, did he? Nah, I gotta stop worrying about—

…No way.

I really doubted Feldway could outsmart Ciel's predictions. We couldn't have ended that battle without Zarario's support, and there was no way he could've predicted *that*. If he knew Zarario would abandon him, he could have tried any number of other tactics…

…Hmm. There was really no point dwelling on this, but I still

kind of had a bad feeling. And as if on cue, Ramiris contacted me. I hated how these feelings always panned out.

(Hey! Rimuru! Big trouble over here!)

Yeah, yeah, same here, I was about to say, but Ramiris kept going before I could.

(Deeno and his crew are attacking us! We're intercepting them, but I'm kinda worried now that my master isn't here!)

Ughhh, this sucks…

If I hadn't asked for Veldora's help, I still would've been suspended in time. Daggrull had True Dragon-class power; he could have kept it stopped for a long time to come. If I had allowed the crazed Milim to do whatever she wanted in that state, the sacred tree would be a bunch of burnt-up lumber, and who knew what other trouble she could've caused.

So I didn't think I made the wrong call, but…

(Well, all I can say for now is hang in there.)

(Um, y'know, that's really not the kinda answer I was lookin' for.)

(Oh, I know, I know. But, like, I gotta devote everything I got to handling Milim, so…)

(I can't make contact with Benimaru at all, either! If you don't come back real soon, it's kind of gonna be a big problem for me!)

I could tell Ramiris was nervous. She couldn't contact Benimaru because he'd overexerted himself, no doubt. I confirmed his safety earlier, and I figured he'd be back on his feet before long.

(All right. Just try to hold out for the time being!)

(I know, but like, seriously, come back soon…)

After some more grumbling, she finally ended the call. She could have given me at least a little praise—but now was no time for jokes.

I had no idea how the fight between Guy and Velzard was going; there was no way anyone could intervene with them. We had invaders in the labyrinth, and the battle was still intensifying. Milim remained beyond control, and I had no idea yet how to stop her.

If someone could take on Milim for just a few moments, we'd be able to stop her via Regalia Dominion…

I was *really* averse to that, but in the worst-case scenario, I'd have no choice.

More to the point, though, there was no "someone" here. Simply lifting Feldway's order was a task tough enough to totally drain Benimaru. Asking him to do it all over again would at least have to wait until he recovered.

And you know, it really felt like our enemy was seeing all our moves and intelligently responding to each one, didn't it? An attacker was always going to have the advantage, but I didn't think it'd be this one-sided all the time.

I'd have loved an opportunity to counterattack, but—as free as I'm sure I sound, thinking about extraneous stuff like this—I really couldn't take my eyes off Milim's onslaught. If I was leading Milim, that meant she was targeting me. There was no way I could do anything about Feldway, and I had my hands full cutting off Milim's attacks as we headed toward Skyspire Tower.

Finally, I saw it in the distance.

The tower should be able to withstand her attacks. Once I was inside, I was sure things would be a little better.

But sadly, that bad premonition I had was about to come true.

"I've been waiting, demon lord Rimuru."

A voice from above reached my ears as I wrestled with Milim. It was the malevolent voice of Feldway as he descended before me.

"Damn it… I *knew* you'd aim for this!" I yelled.

I cursed my fate, but it was already too late. I was wondering what I should do when Ciel chimed in, its voice agitated.

Retreat from the area immediately!

Its unusual behavior indicated just how much of an emergency this was. By "retreat," Ciel was basically telling me to get the hell out of Dodge.

I'd have loved to, really, but I couldn't. I was still fighting Milim. This was exactly what Feldway wanted. What a disaster!

And I wasn't panicking, either, because I knew exactly what was going to happen.

Feldway's next move:

"Now, Milim! Obey me once more—Regalia Dominion!"

Gah, I knew it. He didn't hesitate for a moment to employ the one last resort that bothered me the most.

The power drained from Milim, showing me she was once again under Feldway's thrall. I was glad she stopped fighting—surely all her rage was gonna be pointed at me. Check and mate, I guess. If I had to deal with Milim *and* Feldway at once, I would have no chance of winning.

"Come the hell on! You coward!" I shouted.

Call it being a sore loser or sour grapes, or whatever you like. I felt I had a right to complain. But Feldway just looked down on me, laughing.

"What a sorry sight you are, demon lord Rimuru. You're in my way, so now it's time to make you disappear."

Actually, maybe he wasn't laughing at me. Maybe it was his way of recognizing my strength. Feldway, after all, was edging away from a confrontation with me. I assumed he was going to team up with Milim to beat my ass, but surprisingly, it didn't happen.

"Prepare to be blasted to the far edges of time and space… Chrono-Saltation!!"

I had seen something like this before. It was the same attack that wiped Velgrynd off the face of this planet a short time ago —

And then, the moment I had that thought, everything went dark. Thanks to Feldway's Dimensional Transfer, I was blasted to an unknown location—the past, the future, the present? I had no idea. I was lost.

AFTERWORD

I'm finally done with Volume 20. My aim was not to count on a deadline extension this time, but frankly, I had so many problems that it just wasn't gonna happen. Slow going, indeed.

To be exact, I fell into a slump. Mentally, I wasn't motivated to write at all…or, really, I could come up with scenes and everything, but once I began the writing process, I couldn't focus one bit. That kind of thing. I *did* have a lot of tasks outside of book writing, it's true, so my tank was running on empty to start with…but even so, this was the first time I had ever felt so uninspired to write.

With no other choice, I took the last-resort option of changing my writing environment. I was worried about how it'd turn out, but what it ultimately involved was going to Tokyo, staying at a hotel, and livin' the dream, I guess, while I concentrated on my writing life.

This was my own expense, of course. We were talking about how the publisher would spring for it, but I didn't want to feel pressured to write even more that way—I thought it'd be a drag. Not being able to write made me uneasy, and I certainly didn't want to feel even more behind the eight ball, so I turned down the offer and paid for it myself.

Thanks to that, the three-month period of writer's block came to a surprisingly quick end, and I hit my writing quota every day without a hitch.

I guess your local environment really is important. You need to have a regular schedule and a working rhythm to your writing. I understood this, but it's hard, you know…so yeah, I'd like to thank the hotel staff for their hospitality. It was such a great time, I didn't want to go home. My editor I said, "Who says you *have* to go home?" to me with a straight face, but I'm not so sure that was a joke. In fact, I think my editor was pretty serious about it, so, uh, let's make sure I'm never put in *that*

situation…

During my stay in Tokyo, I had the opportunity to meet with some other writers, including a few who said they were facing the same slump I was in. This was back when COVID-19 made it hard to even go out for a walk, which I think affected a lot of people's mental health. I know a lot of folks began working at home as a result, but people like me who don't have the greatest self-control may likely be experiencing the same kind of issue, to some extent. If that describes you, a change of scenery is really important!

I hope you can take the time to relax and try not to overexert yourself…and hopefully *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime* can help give you more peace of mind. I'm gonna continue doing my best, too, as we ramp up for the end of the story.

See you in the next volume!

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