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Illustration by
Mitz Vah
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME
21

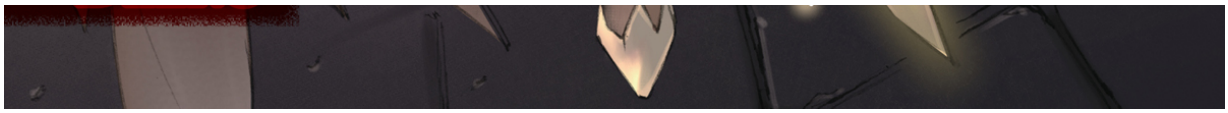
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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME 21


Luminus Valentine
"Listen to me. This is Luminus Valentine speaking—god, demon lord, and leader of Lubelius."
She revealed everything right off the bat. It was enough to make Luminus's underlings shake their heads. She was talking to a crowd of firm believers—why was she deliberately making them doubt their faith in her?


“Okay, whatever. I guess even *I* will have to get a little serious about this.”
Now Deeno’s most powerful battle form was clear for all to see. He had six pairs of glittering black-and-white wings that made him a truly radiant presence. A black minister-like spiritual robe covered his body, and two summoned swords were in his hands.
DEENO



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime 21

FUSE
Illustration by Mitz Vah

YEN ON
New York

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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 21
FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford Cover art by Mitz Vah

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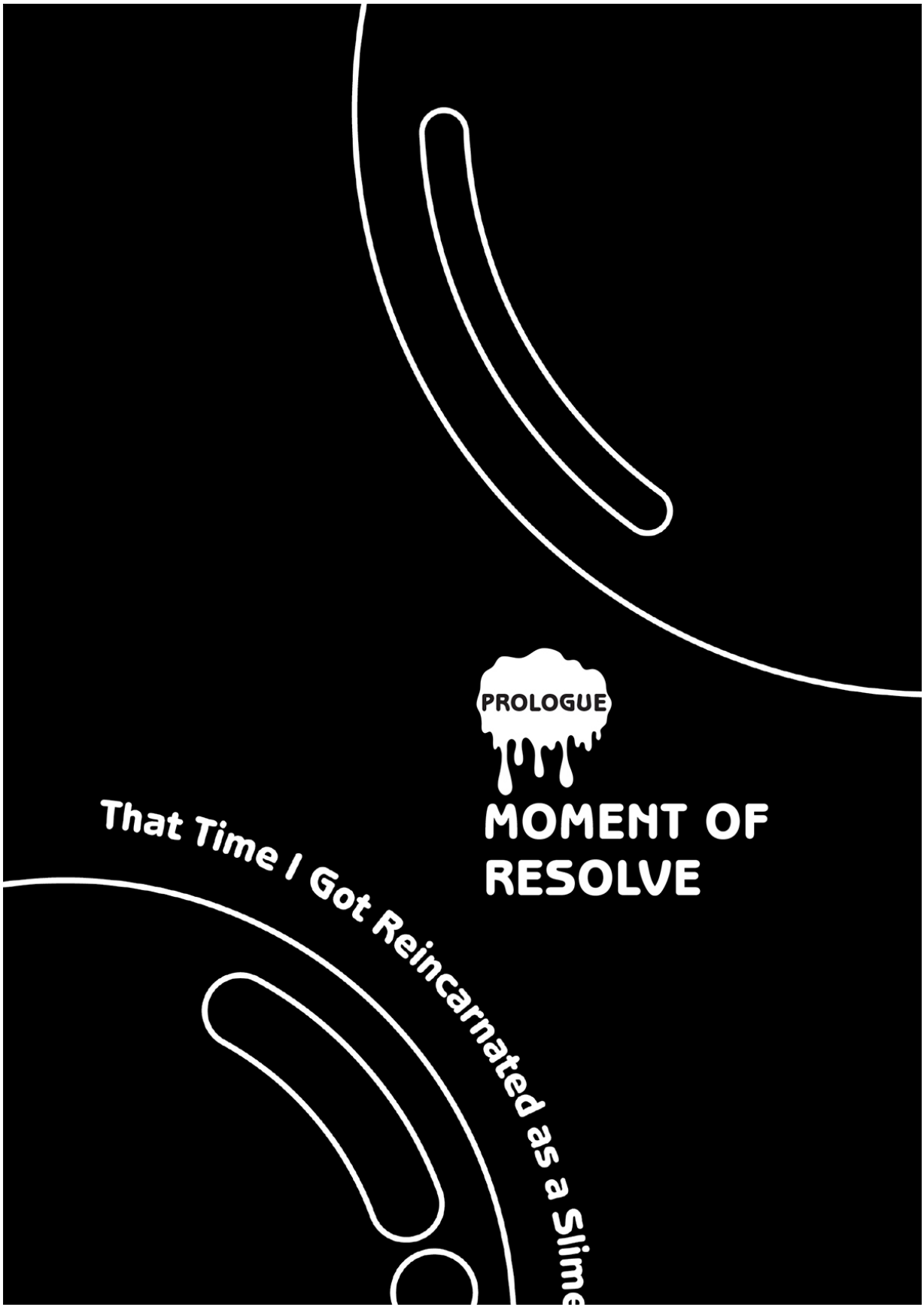
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PROLOGUE
MOMENT OF RESOLVE
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



PROLOGUE

MOMENT OF RESOLVE

The monsters quivered in fear, realizing all too vividly that their hopes were placed on Rimuru. The report was enough to shake every top leader of Tempest.

Benimaru woke up on a bed in the sick bay located within the labyrinth's medical complex. Soei had taken him here, and not much time had passed since the battle by the holy tree. He promptly shot out of bed, grabbed by an overpowering sense of loss and restlessness.

Gabil and Geld, lying next to Benimaru, were much the same way. They had woken up just then as well, as if heeding some unseen signal.

In short order, the top officials all gathered in the Control Center. Eight of the Twelve Lordly Guardians were there—Diablo, Zegion, and Kumara, who were tasked with protecting the labyrinth; Benimaru, Gabil, and Geld, who were up and in attendance despite their serious injuries; and Ranga, who was nursing his own wounds within Gobta's shadow. They were also joined by Testarossa, who had hurried over from Englesia. She always felt a strong sense of duty for the tasks assigned to her, so she promptly abandoned all her demon servants and ran over—a sign of just how serious things were. Other top members of government were present as well, of course, including Shuna, Rigurd and his other bureaucrats, and Gobta and Apito. Everyone who was available and not currently engaged in combat was here.

Ramiris, who was now commander of the Control Center, gasped at the report. The labyrinth was currently under attack from a hostile

enemy force, but what she'd just learned was incomparably more important. She could hardly believe what she heard.

Beretta and Treyni were silent but equally flabbergasted. Charys, who had seen Veldora off and held down the fort since, was unable to keep calm.

The report was from Soei, whose Replication had been the closest witness to the events. He had given them all the grim news—Rimuru had disappeared.

"So Sir Rimuru has really vanished, then?" Benimaru asked, speaking for the rest of the crowd, although he didn't doubt Soei at his word. In fact, the opposite was true. His own internal connection with Rimuru had been cut off, something he could keenly feel, and now he was asking the question out loud in the hopes that he'd be proven wrong.

"Yeah… I'm sure of it. I didn't even have time to step up and defend him…"

Soei's voice was tinged with regret, although he thought the result would have been the same no matter who was there. After all, Rimuru—who enjoyed the full trust of everyone present—had fallen for the enemy's trick and couldn't do anything to prevent it. Now was the time to think about their future moves, not wail about it and try to assign blame.

Silence reigned across the Control Center. But suddenly, with a loud *crash*, a desk was reduced to splinters.

"I was with him the whole time, and *now* look…"

Soei—usually the picture of calmness, never disturbed by anything that happened to him—had smashed up the desk, letting his rage take over. Testarossa closed her eyes, agreeing with him. Anyone would have felt the same way.

Not even I could do anything, either…, she thought.

She could do nothing. All too easily, she had allowed Rimuru to set off for the battlefield, an onus she could never deny, and that fact weighed heavily over her heart. That was why she couldn't refute Soei's words—why she couldn't offer him any consolation. All she could do was wallow in her own helplessness, a feeling shared by everyone else in the room.

But Diablo was the first to react.

"Don't be so conceited, Soei. No matter what you could have done, it would have only resulted in another life wasted."

"Ngh…," Soei grunted, Diablo's cold, judging eyes tearing through him.

Diablo was speaking the truth—no restraint, no regard for anyone else's feelings. Soei understood that, but he remained silent, unable to reply. He wasn't irresponsible enough to feel the need to defend himself in some way. He was ashamed of his ineptitude, and all he could do now was to endure the heavy strain of losing Rimuru. Diablo heaved a chiding sigh.

"You're going too far, Diablo," Testarossa said, taking a breath. "Anyone here would have been just as helpless against the rampaging Lady Milim. Isn't the same true for you?"

She eyed Diablo, uninterested in pointless excuses.

Testarossa was intelligent enough to understand what he was up to, however. He was deliberately playing the villain in order to help everyone here drum up their rage. If they wanted to face up to their despair, they had to put as much emotion as they could into it. Otherwise, if all people did was whine about their fates, despair would eventually swallow them whole.

What they needed now was the strength to go on, and fanning the flames of their anger was the quickest way to do that. Diablo knew this method well, as did Testarossa. She understood what Diablo was up to, and she could see what it'd result in. That, however, wasn't something she was willing to accept.

"Diablo… You're riling us up as much as you can in hopes that we'll banish you from here, aren't you? And then you'll go right out and try to challenge Feldway, yes?" Testarossa said, sounding sure of this.

"Tsk…"

Her question annoyed Diablo to no end. This was why he had so much trouble dealing with her. They had known each other for so long by now, it was impossible to hide anything from her. Diablo might have seemed calm and collected at first, but even he was abandoning himself to despair right now.

Why didn't you bring me with you, Sir Rimuru?

It took everything he had to keep that question from driving him insane with sadness.

Testarossa had no trouble accurately reading him. So, without mercy, she continued with her sharpened words.

"You must have looked shameful indeed in front of Sir Rimuru."

"What?"

"You couldn't move or do anything, right? Simply because time was stopped. It's shameful."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh…" Diablo felt the need to fire back. "I understand that *you* allowed a supremely weak enemy to get away from you?"

His eyes weren't laughing, though. He was looking at Testarossa with naked hostility.

The atmosphere in the Control Center was explosive. As the silence dragged on, everyone found themselves awash in sadness and despair. Geld and Gabil, sorely battered and bruised in the battle before, meekly kept their mouths shut. Kumara was visibly shaking, the color gone from her face. Benimaru was making a pair of tight fists, trying to fend off the waves of rage. Ramiris was hanging her head, about to cry. Whenever there was a problem, Rimuru would always do something about it for them. Now he was gone.

In a way, it was fortunate that Shion, the most quick-tempered of the group, wasn't there. It was undeniably possible that her words and actions could have compelled everyone to stage a desperate suicide strike against their foes—the worst approach of all.

But that, in the end, was just another possibility.

One person, at least, was not shaken. Zegion finally broke the unwavering silence, uncrossing his arms and standing up.

"Ridiculous," he stated, his voice grave. "Why are we bothering with all these silly worries? You say that Sir Rimuru has disappeared, but what does it matter?"

There was nothing that could move Zegion as he questioned

everyone's agitation. It showed that from the bottom of his heart, he didn't think there was any way Rimuru had been defeated.

"Sir Rimuru is our god," he strongly avowed. "He could return to us from the far end of the universe. If he has not yet, there must be some reason for it."

These were the words everyone in the room wanted to hear. The flame of hope kindled itself in the hearts of the group. Zegion could see the reaction.

"This is much too childish," he said. "We are not children abandoned by our parents. You must think deeper than that. Think and feel. For all of us—every one of us—are still under the protection of Sir Rimuru, are we not?"

Zegion's words, spoken so naturally, sounded like a creed, a faith that he didn't have the slightest doubt about. He was acting as immovable as possible before the group, attempting to extinguish their collective anxiety.

That's Sir Zegion for you, an impressed Testarossa thought.

She felt better, and there was even a little bit of a smile playing across her face. And she wasn't alone—now everybody had realized Zegion was right. Everyone gathered there was convinced by Zegion's declaration. It might've felt like their soul-based connection had been cut, but that didn't necessarily mean Rimuru was gone for good. They still felt enveloped in his warm embrace, even if they couldn't actually sense him. Was that just a withering afterglow or…?

Zegion firmly wanted everyone to keep their wits about them. Their connection might have been lost, but Rimuru's divine protection had gone nowhere. Some were aware of this, although they wondered if this was merely wishful thinking. Instead of clinging to pointless hopes, it was better to not hope for anything, period.

But they were wrong. Some paths open precisely because you never give up. They could worry about things later; for now, they just needed to put their heads down and do what they could. This was the promise everyone made with themselves—and their hopes became their fuel, burning brightly.

"Know that this is Sir Rimuru testing us right now. We are not so

pathetic that we must rely on him for everything in the world. But if you insist that we are incapable of anything the moment Sir Rimuru has left…" The faith in Zegion's voice was like a monolith. "If you act as a helpless baby chick unable to leave the nest by itself…then follow the rules of nature and perish."

This was a statement everyone was forced to agree with.

"He's right," Benimaru said, nodding briskly.

Looking back, it felt like he had relied on Rimuru for everything since the moment he met him. He recalled the past mistakes he had made. There was the Farmus attack, where simply being cut off from Rimuru caused him to lose his nerve and deal untold damage to his allies. He swore to himself back then that he'd be the best servant to Rimuru he could, one strong enough to guide the crowd without counting on his master to do the job. He swore that tragedy would never be repeated.

Having Zegion, the relative newcomer to this group, point this out made the memories resurface. As the man Rimuru had counted on to handle things for him, Benimaru was deeply pained; with Rimuru gone, all that responsibility was now squarely on his shoulders. Now was the time for him to stand up. No matter how anxious it made him, he couldn't let it show on his face. That was the duty, and the responsibility, of a leader.

So he flashed a bold smile. "Heh! We'd better prove that we're fine without Sir Rimuru, huh? We don't want him worrying about us when he comes back."

He was once again his normal self.

"Yeah, you said it!" Gobta agreed cheerily. "Just 'cause Sir Rimuru disappeared doesn't mean he's dead or anything! He's a really tough dude, so I'm sure he'll be back, no matter what's up with 'im!"

"Gobta! You're talking like a child again!" Rigur grinned a bit as he gave Gobta a playful rap on the head. "But you're right. We're constantly relying on Sir Rimuru. Like Sir Benimaru said, we must do our jobs well lest we look shameful to him."

The whole group was nodding along.

"Yeah, exactly! It's not right to expect him to do every little thing for us!"

Gobta's banter was turning the scowls in the room into smiles. Now nobody was moping or looking at the floor. The time for whining was done.

"He is correct! I felt a great sense of anxiety simply because of Sir Rimuru's absence. At this rate, he's liable to laugh at all of us!" Gabil sounded genuinely sorrowful.

"If Sir Soei claims so," Geld gravely mused, "there is no doubting the fact that Sir Rimuru has been banished somewhere. But the idea of him losing to anyone is simply impossible to picture. Clearly, there must be some kind of trick involved."

That, too, was a possibility no one could deny.

"Right? Right? Like, *I* believed in Rimuru the whole time, though. I wasn't worried one bit!"

Ramiris had her usual spunk back, and the labyrinth management in the room agreed with her.

"Precisely," Kumara added. "Sir Rimuru being defeated is a true impossibility!"

With these new hopes being spoken into existence, the room had regained its vitality.

Seeing this, Benimaru couldn't help but think, *I suppose I wasn't the only one reliant upon Sir Rimuru for everything.*

He wasn't trying to depend on Rimuru, but whether or not Rimuru was present made an enormous difference. His presence alone was enough to bring everyone relief.

"We could say we were relying on him," Benimaru said as he pondered over this, "but there's a thin line between relying on someone and pawning off responsibility on him."

It was a casual statement, but it had palpable weight. Something about it rang true with everyone in the room, making them tense up their faces.

"I feel like we were having him take care of everything for us. So why don't we view this as a good opportunity? Why don't we try to overcome this adversity all by ourselves?!"

Rigurd pounced at Benimaru's challenge. "Yes! Yes, you're right! Let's all do our best, so we can greet Sir Rimuru with a smile upon his return!"

Soei nodded as well. He gave Zegion a light bow. “Look at me, losing my cool like that… Sorry, Zegion. You’ve calmed me down a great deal.”

He was back to his unshakable self. A man who lurked in the shadows like he did must have regretted his earlier actions, because now he was quietly burning with resolve, not at all the same person who’d lost his temper a moment ago.

Everyone else was making similar resolutions to themselves.

Finally, Diablo broke into an easygoing smile. “Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… I see I didn’t need to light a fire under you after all.”

“You go too far with matters,” replied Zegion.

“Do I? If what I did wasn’t enough to open your eyes, none of us deserve to serve Sir Rimuru, do we?”

“No, but there is no need to be wasteful with your strength when facing the enemy.”

Diablo grinned uncomfortably.

The large screen in the room displayed the enemy’s rapid advance through the labyrinth. Just as Zegion had said, this wasn’t the time for bickering.

Still, that little act was truly what everyone needed. If they failed to turn the page and focus on what was ahead, all that awaited them in this war was defeat. Diablo could see that…but that concern was now in the past.

“You are correct, Zegion. Why make Sir Rimuru disappointed in us when we can instead show him we can fight by ourselves?” he asked.

They didn’t have any time to be depressed. The fools who had blundered into the labyrinth needed to be pulverized, and Carrera and the others encased in ice needed to be rescued as soon as possible. And now that everyone had turned the page, none of that was impossible.

“Indeed,” Testarossa said with a smile. “It’s time to restore order in this world so Sir Rimuru can come back. Sir Veldora is on his way to Ultima, so I see no need for further concern there. That leaves it to me to rescue Carrera.”

Diablo nodded. “Please do. They’ll probably blather at us about

why, but we also need to rescue Lady Milim's subordinates."

Testarossa instantly went on the move. She had her orders, and nothing was going to stop her.

Seeing her go, Benimaru looked to Diablo. "So what do *you* intend to do?"

Diablo cast a glance at the Control Center's main screen, smiling boldly as he revealed what was on his mind.

"I had intended to take care of Feldway and make this world safe for Sir Rimuru to return, but I have now changed my mind. I have to keep this stronghold protected, or else I would be defying Sir Rimuru's orders."

He sounded supremely casual about it, but this really was a shift for him. It elicited a visible reaction from Zegion.

"Hoh? Do you see these invaders as a threat, then?" Benimaru asked, speaking for everyone in the room.

The screen showed a wealth of information about their enemies, including their estimated existence points. Vega, Deeno, Pico, Garasha, and Mai Furuki—five of the Seven Heavenly Generals—were there, and their EPs were all well over a million. Some of them were even beyond ten million. Anyone could tell they were worthy of being called a threat, but in Benimaru's eyes, they were not a primary concern.

"Certainly," he told Diablo, "I am not in my best shape at the moment. But we still have Zegion. You're free to do whatever you want without worrying about us."

He didn't change Diablo's mind. "I'm staying here just in case, you see," Diablo replied. "It's not that I don't trust Zegion with this, of course."

"Don't worry about it," Zegion said, unfazed. "I have a role, and I will fulfill it."

Nothing could ever move him. He turned around and began to walk away, Apito bowing and following in his footsteps. In Zegion, they had the most powerful labyrinth guardian possible. There was nothing to be afraid of, and the confidence that brought her made Ramiris smile.

"Y-yeah, as long as we got Zegion, we're perfectly safe, huh?"

she said.

Even Beretta and Treyni, who had remained silent up to now, had to nod their approval. They hated to admit it, but everyone knew just how strong Zegion was.

"In that case," Geld added, closing his eyes, "I will dedicate myself to healing." He also had a role to fulfill, a job to do, so he fought back against his more belligerent urges.

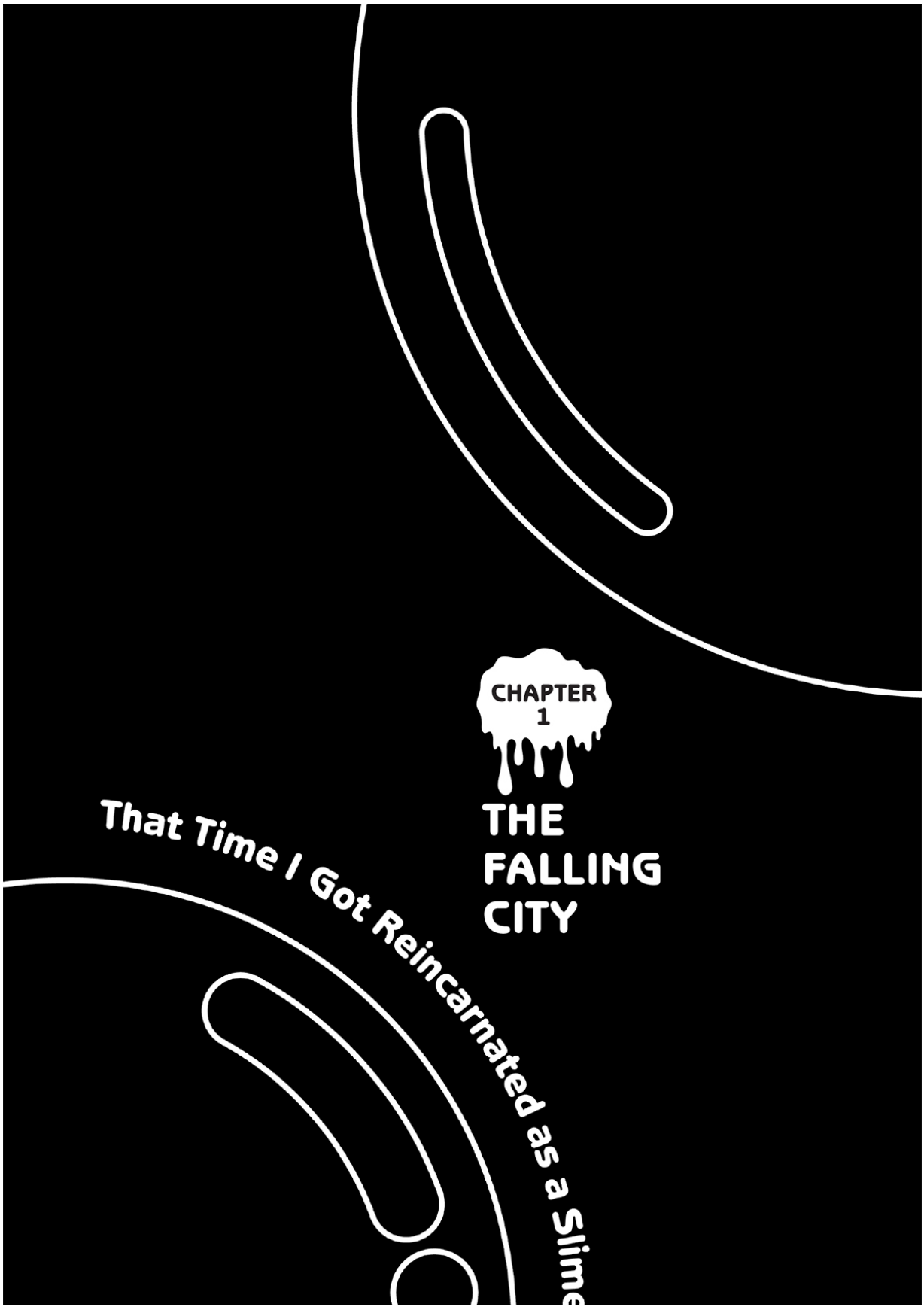
"I, too, will rest until my number comes up!" Gabil said.

He was seriously injured but in better shape than Geld. Gabil had also consumed far more of his magical force than Geld, his proverbial gas tank running on fumes by now. His gorier wounds had already been treated, but recovering his inner strength would take more time. Much like Geld, resting was the right choice for him at the moment. He was worried for the now-icebound Eurazania region, along with Carrera and everyone caught inside it—to say nothing of Sufia as well, who he was now somehow in a romantic relationship with.

At any other time, he'd ignore his injuries and fly into the fray, but he too had a responsibility. He correctly understood what he was capable of right now and what had to be done—and he knew he had to execute on that. So, bottling up all these emotions, he opted to focus full-time on healing.

The top officials of Tempest were on the move. The anxieties of a moment earlier were swept away, and strength now filled the faces of everyone there. Their wills were powerful and shining bright. Just as Zegion had said, they were not helpless children now that Rimuru was gone. They all understood what role they had to play, and they were putting everything they had into their jobs. They couldn't mar the good name of the demon lord Rimuru…and most of all, when he finally did come back, they wanted him to recognize just what kind of power they had.

It was now time for them to take flight and leave the nest of Rimuru, the one who had given them their names.


CHAPTER
1
THE
FALLING
CITY
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



CHAPTER 1

THE FALLING CITY

So, thought Luminus, *he's here?*

Veldora was quietly composed, the sight of Daggrull before him of seemingly little concern. Of course it would be. Unlike Luminus, left helpless now that time had stopped for her, Veldora was free to move around in this immobilized world all he wanted. Seeing him in action, Luminus felt immensely foolish for having despaired so much. The tension from staring death in the face mere moments ago was gone, and for some reason, she could feel palpable relief welling up from within her.

She hated to admit it, though.

Come on. Me feeling like all is well just because Veldora is here? Impossible!

Ignoring the passing thought, Luminus turned her attention to the current situation.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Behold! It is I!" Veldora bellowed.

He then proceeded to laugh at nothing in particular for a bit longer. Even amid this mortal danger, he was as casual as ever—and Luminus found it a tremendous load off her back. In a world where time had stopped, none of that laughter could. Only Daggrull, the creator of this frozen world, could hear Veldora. Yet somehow that carefree cackling was beating against her ears anyway…

"Why are you just staring slack-jawed at him?!"

That resentful voice belonged to her former enemy.

Oh. Right. She's here as well.

Luminus was thus reminded of Ultima's presence. She assumed that Veldora found a way to overcome this stopped timeline, but it looked like Ultima was involved, too.

Makes sense… Wait, why does that *make sense to me?!*

Luminus couldn't even sense the presence of this stopped world until a moment ago, and now she couldn't understand what was going on around her one bit. But if this was her reality…well, like Ultima said, this was no time to be blankly staring at things.

She was conscious and thinking but unable to move her body. It was a tremendously confusing situation, and Ultima was merciless with her.

"So how do you feel? Able to see what's going on?" Ultima asked.

"Yes," Luminus quickly replied. *"I am not capable of fully perceiving all of it yet, but I can tell that the danger is gone for now."*

Ultima grinned at her. *"Oh? It's your first experience with stopped time, but you can recognize my voice and converse with me? Not too shabby, I guess. No wonder I've officially recognized you as my playmate—um, I mean, rival."*

It wasn't like Ultima had gone through this multiple times herself, but she didn't see any need to tell her that. So, assuring herself that she had just established her dominance over Luminus, she moved on.

"So if you're talking to me, can you see things as well?"

"Of course I can. That hateful, evil dragon is having a staring contest with Daggrull."

Luminus's supernatural senses gave her a view of the situation, albeit a hazy one. Only Veldora and Daggrull were free to move. Ultima was acting like she was in full control of things, but not even she was familiar enough to this situation to gain movement.

"Hmm, I see. So you can interact with the data particles here," Ultima remarked.

Neither light nor sound could travel at all. If you wanted to perceive things around you, the only way was through the unique particles around you, ones at the very core of creation—even smaller than photons or spiritual particles. These were the "data particles" Ultima mentioned, and Luminus could understand that well enough.

"So if I can move these so-called 'data particles' the right way, I can move around in stopped time?"

"Exactly. And I think I've grasped the idea behind that, at least."

In fact, Ultima had already regained the feeling in her arms and legs. The rest came quickly after that. Another few moments, she felt, and she too could exercise her will in this stopped realm.

"Well, I certainly can't have you outdoing me."

Luminus sharpened her own senses. Grasping the matter floating both within and around her body, she homed in strictly on the data particles not attached to temporal elements, working her mind to try moving them around in the air.

Her fingertips began to twitch a little.

"Wow, not bad," said Ultima.

"Care for a race?"

Time might have stopped for them, but there was still no "time" to lose. It was anyone's guess how the fight between Veldora and Daggrull would turn out. Luminus and Ultima needed to snap out of this and start moving before the confrontation reached its end.

So, as if competing for a gold medal, Luminus and Ultima kept honing their senses.



Veldora and Daggrull were still talking, ignoring the two women struggling against time nearby.

"Veldora, was it? You certainly picked the right moment to appear. How did you do that?"

Being able to use Spatial Transport within stopped time befuddled Daggrull. If Veldora had walked in from nearby, that was one thing, but executing a pinpoint teleport job from some faraway location? It exceeded the bounds of all common sense.

"Heh. It's simple. A hero, you see, always has to make an awesome entrance."

Veldora acted like he knew everything about everything. It wasn't the answer Daggrull wanted, but it was certainly very Veldora-like, which even Daggrull had to admit.

Then the dragon presented him with one of the truly dumbest proposals ever hatched.

"So, Daggrull, let's negotiate a little."

"About what?"

"If time has stopped, then nobody can see how cool I look right now, can they?"

"Well, I'm *very* sorry about that, but…"

What the hell is he talking about? thought Daggrull as he politely listened on.

Once you managed to stop time, keeping it stopped wasn't terribly punishing to your body. It *was* slightly annoying to maintain, though, so Daggrull really wasn't obliged to put up with Veldora's nonsense. Even here, Daggrull's natural affability was clear to see.

"I mean," Veldora continued, "if we can both move anyway, there's not much point in keeping time stopped at all, is there? So how about we give ourselves a fresh start?"

"Hmm?"

"Once you restart time, I'll make my grand entrance once again. You know… I'll come in, making sure I'm directly in Luminus's line of sight, and I'll stop your fist like the hero I am."

"…"

"I need Luminus to be *moved* by my actions, you see."

"…Can I ask why?"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Come now—it's simple. I've, you know, done a few things in the past, and thanks to that, Luminus isn't exactly my biggest fan. If I can make a good impression on her here and get her to owe me a favor, she's bound to let bygones be bygones for me!"

Daggrull had to roll his eyes at this idea, one that provided zero benefit to him.

"Hmm," he began, like a father trying to humor to his five-year-old. "I *was* planning to restart time, actually, but I don't see any reason for me to play along with your little act."

He was right. Daggrull was under no obligation to be part of Veldora's ode to himself. Even taking the time to hear him out showed how much of a pushover Daggrull could be at times. But

Veldora was right about one thing—there wasn't much point in stopping time if they could both move anyway. It'd just be needlessly expending energy, gaining nothing in return from it.

That, however, only applied if this was a one-on-one fight. The moment he restarted time, Daggrull would be dealing with not just Veldora but Luminus as well. Shion, too, was down at the moment, but Luminus would doubtlessly be able to revive her.

Thus, as bothersome as it was, Daggrull had ample reason to keep time stopped…but now Luminus, and not just Ultima, was showing signs of gaining control over the data particles around them. Daggrull feared that if things kept up at this rate, he'd lose the advantage he was enjoying. At present, he was basically letting his enemies gain experience dealing with this novel environment.

So Daggrull was ready to restart time, despite the risks…but Veldora was still blabbing on about his wishes.

"Aw, do a guy a favor! Can't you manage that, at least? I'm practically bending over backward for you here!"

He was doubling and tripling down on this self-serving logic. It made Daggrull let out a long, drawn-out sigh of despair.

This stupid lizard… I swear I'll get him for this later!

Luminus, meanwhile, was blushing with rage. Had she been able to move, she would have kicked Veldora straight into next week. Veldora was being so condescending toward her, she began to think she could will herself into motion via sheer fury alone. He must have thought Luminus wasn't able to hear him in stopped time, because he wasn't being at all shy with how he felt about her.

For now, though, she swore to herself that Veldora would pay later.

Veldora was cruising at his own wavelength. Daggrull had already had enough of him. Luminus was seething with anger, and Ultima was still working on her understanding of data particles. It was a strange situation—a chaotic one, where nobody was getting what they wanted.

And even stranger things were taking place; they were all caused

by Shion. Her eyes were closed, her wounds still open and seeping blood—which was incredibly unnatural. In stopped time, you weren't supposed to bleed, no matter how bad off you were. A stopped heart couldn't pump blood through the body.

But if Shion was still bleeding…

Slowly, she got up on her feet. She opened her bloodshot eyes, standing there like a demonic ghost.

"Mmm?!"

To Daggrull's abject shock, Shion took a deep breath before him, an eerie dread behind every motion.

"Shion," he couldn't help but ask, "you've mastered this frozen world?"

"Ah… Shion, um, right now I'm—"

Realizing that someone was stealing his thunder, Veldora awkwardly spoke up. But Shion talked right over him.

"S-Sir Veldora… That man… He is *my* prey. Can…can you let me have him?"

She was using her large sword like a cane, shoulders heaving as she pleaded with Veldora.

"Ummm…"

Veldora, not having much choice, mumbled the response as he nodded. Somehow, saying no didn't seem like an option. To him, this was just a little fun; she, on the other hand, was operating at a whole other level of force and determination. All he could do now was step aside and watch things unfold…and try to act as cool as possible.

"Yes, very good, then! In that case, I will lend you some of my power. May you fare well in this battle!" he boomed, supporting Shion to keep her from collapsing.

Then he began pumping energy into her, healing her up.

Whoa! I said I'd help you, but you can't just greedily take all of it from me…, he thought.

Shion wasn't being shy with gobbling up tons of Veldora's magicules. He had to compose himself to avoid fainting.

"Th-thank you very much…"

"It's fine."

He saw her off with a breezy smile, although he was hurting on the inside.

✳

Shion stood before Daggrull, who loomed over her like a giant, ominous wall.

"Sorry I had to make you wait," she told him, gleefully holding her gigantic sword in front of her. "To make up for it, how about I give you just a little bit more fun?"

"Oh? Then let me take you up on that offer."

They nodded good-naturedly to each other and prepared for battle.

"I'll try not to disappoint you!" Shion said.

Within this stopped world, Daggrull and Shion's true battle was about to begin.

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Shion was doing some soul-searching. Rage was swelling within her; she had been toyed with by Daggrull, incapable of doing anything against him, and she was angry about it. Her elite guard, the troops that served directly under her, had fallen, and she was angry about that, too. Against this cruel reality, she felt powerless, pathetic, frustrated, and infinitely desirous of true strength. But with her cool, collected decision-making skills, she was bottling up all that.

Now her rage was serving as her engine. She wasn't letting it go out of control, like she used to. She had to think about what she could and could not do. There was no wavering. Instead of hating the enemy she faced, she observed his inner soul. Was it "good" or "evil"? She already knew that such terms had little meaning. In a battle, excessive information was nothing but a hindrance. Could he be conquered, yes or no? That alone mattered.

Tossing away this whirlpool of emotions, Shion took in what mattered. She was executing Rimuru's words, exactly as he told them. No matter how reckless, difficult, and idealistic that was, she stuck to it, no matter what.

It had allowed her to instinctively feel the essence of things with her soul. She was using these instincts in the battle with Daggrull, and she could feel his bottomless, overwhelming force on her very skin. That raging soul, that violence hidden under his calm exterior, was something she didn't notice before—or maybe it was the ultimate, final form that Shion craved for herself. Daggrull represented all that, and it made Shion shiver.

To an impartial observer, Shion's power was a far cry from Daggrull's. It wasn't a matter of being an even match or not; she clearly wasn't fit to stand in the same arena as him. But even so, the word *retreat* couldn't be found in Shion's mind. Rimuru's strategy was perfect. It had to be. And that meant there was a reason why Shion was placed here. Thus, unless there were orders to the contrary, Shion had no reason to retreat. That was how she thought about it—that was how purely she believed in Rimuru. It was, in a way, abandoning all logical thought, but to her, Rimuru's orders weren't everything—they were the only thing.

There is no way Sir Rimuru would have us all die meaningless deaths without doing anything himself. There must be some reason behind this situation…in which case, until I receive new orders, I will follow the ones I have to the letter.

The truly strong were those who never wavered. Shion was holding her own with an iron will. She didn't even fear death, and that was what moved Luminus. The noble vampire princess detested any defilement done to her body, so she had executed a flawless strategy, setting up a trap in the perfect position. That had all fallen through, so any chance of victory was now off the table. Shion understood that, and Luminus was certainly intelligent enough to see it as well.

Clearly, the right move was to hold back on their full force as much as possible and regroup with the allies defending Ramiris's labyrinth. Even Shion had reached that conclusion; if that was what

Luminus opted to do, she couldn't resent her for that. She had even considered it: *Someone as intelligent as Lady Luminus would want to retreat from here at once. I can hopefully stop him enough so she can do that.*

But now:

Seeing Lady Luminus try to help me… What a surprise. I would have been defeated long ago if I was still alone. But…hee-hee…I suppose it's very much in her character to go for that.

The demon lord Luminus wasn't like how Shion pictured her. But that pleased Shion. Having a reliable ally was among the most reassuring things in the world. Even if they were doomed to breathe their last here—or perhaps, that made it all the more true—Shion was glad to gain this new insight into the core of Luminus's mind.

Daggrull was strong. Shion could sense it, crossing swords with him. And she was also sure he was still hiding his true force. Once he got serious, she would be helplessly swallowed up by his power. Defeat was inevitable…but if this, too, was how Rimuru thought things should go, Shion knew the role she had to play. She had to grasp the essence of Daggrull for the sake of the future.

With that resolve, Shion's rash challenge continued.

Daggrull resembled her own essence in a lot of ways. He was aspirational, and Shion swung her sword as if using him as her model. She wanted to etch the memory of this battle into her heart core.

And as she repeatedly toed the line between death and resurrection with Luminus's help…

…time stopped.

From the corner of her eye, Shion could see that the world had become devoid of color.

No! Not yet! It's not over yet!!

She tried to force the scream out, but Shion's body didn't respond to her. She was stopped, unable to stand back up. She couldn't open her mouth—not even a little twitch. Only her consciousness was

there, as confused as it was.

But Shion didn't give up. The sight of the colorless world etched itself into her mind. There was something about this moment, this instant in time, that connected to the cause of this strange phenomenon…

Then I'll just do it myself!

It was a ridiculous leap of logic. Unless you were driven by the sort of grand fate a Hero had, a mere unique skill alone could do nothing to control time. But Shion didn't know anything about that kind of "truth," and she wouldn't have cared anyway. If the possibility was there, all she had to do was try it.

Shion remade her own body by activating her unique skill Master Chef. After optimization upon optimization, her flesh and blood once again accepted the demands she made of it. All that mattered were results. Shion defied logic, taking the stopped world and making it her own.

But that, too, was just part of a process. Her goal was far ahead of her, and she was still working to reach it.

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There was a sword flash.

This was a metaphor, as swords couldn't reflect light in a world without any light to reflect. But that was the only way to describe the sharpness of Shion's attack as it descended upon Daggrull.

Within this world, where all bonding force had been lost, Daggrull had used his own will to take control of his body. He hardened his frame until it was tougher than a diamond, raising both arms to block Shion's strike. It resulted in his body being driven into the ground, all the way up to his knees. The force of the strike, descending upon him, swallowed his body whole.

Daggrull's eyes opened wide.

In this frozen world, it was impossible for the air to vibrate. Since all bonds were null and void, there was no way to transmit energy in an area you couldn't impose your will on. Only through your body, which ran on your will, were you capable of working your way

through the particles surrounding you at all times.

Therefore, it was impossible to do things like plant down hard on the ground to give yourself more propulsive force. The force applied simply gouged its way through the ground, causing you to lose your footing…as Daggrull just did. The laws of physics didn't necessarily apply in this world, and even the laws of magic didn't mean very much.





Fighting under these unique conditions meant that things didn't work out as expected.

With a click of his tongue, Daggrull exercised his overflowing power to deflect Shion's blade. Now it was Shion who found her legs planted into the ground.

They exchanged blows between sword and fist several times, as both sides got used to this situation and began to move naturally within it. Daggrull had his senses back, and Shion was rapidly learning how this world worked.

The battle grew fiercer, not just in looks, but in the skills both sides were applying to it. Daggrull had no ultimate skill. He was an ultimate life-form, something close to a True Dragon. A swing of his fist had enough destructive force to cancel out the laws of physics. When he released his powers, the wave of force they unleashed interacted with the ground and the air to produce localized destruction like nothing seen before. But these special powers didn't have any meaning in a frozen world. Daggrull's force was heavily restricted here; he couldn't even summon any of his skills.

Now luck was starting to side with Shion.

✳

Shion's mind was free of all obstructive thoughts as she swung away. There were no more unnecessary movements; her speed grew faster than ever before. But she still couldn't reach Daggrull. He was deflecting every one of her blade strikes with his bare hands.

"Hoh. All that fighting and not a single nick in your blade?" Daggrull said.

It was a sincere compliment. Daggrull's solidified body contained the skill Full Destroy, after all. He meant every word of what he'd just said, and Shion noticed his sincerity.

"Of course not! My beloved sword was given to me by Sir Rimuru. I've poured my affection into it on a daily basis, and it's practically part of my body by now!"

She wasn't kidding. Shion polished her sword every day, infusing it with her aura. Calling it "part of her body" was no exaggeration, because Goriki-maru Divine had now grown into a God-class weapon. Not even being in this frozen world was enough to break it. It was able to withstand Daggrull's Full Destroy, and that was a stroke of luck for Shion. But more fortunately for her, Shion was using Daggrull as a model to aspire to.

Daggrull, in a way, was a phenomenon. He was an ultimate life-form who possessed skills such as Harden, Full Destroy, Cancel Magic, Neutralize Attributes, and Pulverizing Waves—all on the level of an ultimate skill. He was called Earthquake for a reason, and Shion would normally have no way to beat him. He was like a vengeful god who existed beyond the realms of physics and magic; trying to take him on at close range was purely suicidal.

But Shion was learning. The ability that her unique skill Master Chef provided—the one that let her reach the results she hoped for with absolute certainty—applied itself to the laws of cause and effect, continually optimizing her body as best as possible.

Now Shion was fully copying Daggrull. She coveted it all—this frozen world and Daggrull's own superpowers.

"…I can't believe it. *That* little power and you're even with me?"

The battle teetered back and forth. Much to Daggrull's admiration, Shion wasn't giving an inch. She was fighting a force that easily overwhelmed her, and she was making it into an even matchup.

That, too, was thanks to Guarantee Results, one aspect of her unique skill Master Chef, and that ability was virtually invincible in a world without time. Causes and effects exist on the other side of the flow of time, and without that flow, Shion's will always took top priority. Any attack that worked on her enemy did so with the maximal effect, and any attack she could block once never so much as put a scratch on her after that.

That was why Shion was fighting toe to toe with Daggrull despite the nearly tenfold difference in maximum magicule count. Nonetheless, she couldn't surpass him. A copy could never defeat the original, a fact that began to make itself clear during this battle

that seemed endless.

But Shion's good luck hadn't run out on her yet.

One must not forget that Veldora was still on hand.

"Hmm. Perhaps it's about time I—"

This was surely the perfect opportunity to swap with Shion. Veldora was certain no unwelcome visitors would get in his way.

But suddenly, a slender hand touched him.

"Mm?"

The moment he casually turned toward it, Veldora was racked with extreme fatigue.

"Ahh, ahh, ahh, ahhhhhhh…?!"

Before the panicked Veldora was Luminus, beaten from head to toe but still on her feet—and while Veldora grew paler and paler, Luminus began to look healthier and healthier.

"Hmph! That's what you get for arriving late," she spat as she sucked up Veldora's life force to her heart's content.

She might have been hiding her embarrassment a bit, but Veldora didn't notice, of course. He never did. That was part of why he riled Luminus so much, and it would be quite a while before that ever dawned on him—or maybe the day would never come at all…

After robbing Veldora of the will to keep going, Luminus gained full mastery of the frozen world. She had regained the power she lost fighting Daggrull, and even her clothing was regenerated and looking good as new.

"You can just watch over there."

She stood next to Shion as she fought Daggrull, seeing Veldora as nothing but a nuisance. But she wasn't alone. Ultima was ready to go, too.

"I can't have you getting ahead of me, Shion. And I can't have you forgetting about me, either! ♪"

Ultima had a rep for being a fast learner. She could deal with any situation once she gained some experience with it, and she was already capable of grasping data particles with perfection, using

them like her own flesh and blood. She could now fight just as she could in the real world or perhaps even better.

At this point, Daggrull had no reason to keep time at a standstill. "Oh, great," he griped. "Now I've lost my biggest advantage." He sighed, shrugging.

Shion and Veldora were annoying enough, but add Luminus and Ultima to the mix and stopping time no longer meant anything at all…and the lack of time flow was hobbling him in the fight against Shion anyway. Daggrull had to release time once more, and he didn't hesitate.

Meanwhile:

Don't tell me I'm not going to have a role in this…

Veldora was starting to get worried. But no one cared enough to notice.

✳

The moment time went on the move again, the noise of the in-progress battle struck everyone's ears. Ultima, who was trying to take on Daggrull, clicked her tongue ruefully and went back to sparring with Fenn.

Veldora put a hand on Shion's shoulder. "Shion," he intoned, "you have fought brilliantly. But you were only able to keep it close with Daggrull because you were inside a time-frozen world."

Now that time wasn't so frozen, the world was once again beholden to the laws of physics. The limits to Daggrull's powers were removed as well, allowing his more supernatural abilities to come to the forefront again. In no uncertain terms, Veldora was implying that Shion couldn't win.

"I appreciate the warning, Sir Veldora."

Shion thanked him, but she still didn't truly understand what he meant. Even if she did, she probably wouldn't have cared. Pointing out the danger Daggrull posed at this juncture was useless; Shion

instinctively understood it already. Even her own fear had been paralyzed as she dug in her heels.

Untold amounts of power surged across the ground as Shion lunged for Daggrull, accelerating to bullet-like speed as she swung Goriki-maru Divine down upon him.

Daggrull took the blow with his bare hands, an unbelievable sight even if one knew the fighting force within them. Power clashed against power. Daggrull and Shion both slammed their wills into each other, creating a wave of turbulence that roared across the battlefield. Sound itself was being left in the dust as the fight sped up.

The clash was being watched by Luminus, as well as Veldora after he found himself out of other options.

"What do you think you're doing?" Luminus asked Veldora, glaring at him as she aided Shion.

"…"

He opted not to reply. Having his warning be so breezily ignored by Shion had left him in a bit of a daze. He was pondering how he could participate in this fight in the coolest way possible, but no bright ideas came to mind. Veldora was starting to suspect that he had completely missed his window, with no way to make up for it.

If that was how things were, better off not trying to make waves. "Silence is golden" was Veldora's new motto as he watched how things unfolded.

To his eyes, Shion was outclassed. In fact, it was almost surprising this was a fight at all, which was why Veldora thought he'd get to hop in at some point. She was keeping things tied because of Luminus's support, along with ample use of her special abilities to make up for the massive difference in physical strength.

Even Veldora had to admit it—this was an impressive act to pull off. If Shion took damage, she could just use Infinite Regeneration to heal. Luminus was tossing healing magic her way as well, so even having all her limbs torn off wasn't much to worry about. Perhaps this sounded feasible enough in words, but it'd normally be impossible to pull off. It's not like your average guy on the street wouldn't mind having his arm or leg unattached from his body. But

Shion had an extraordinary will that way, which earned her big points with Veldora.

So thanks to a combination of factors, this remained an even fight. After going through all this, Daggrull was aware of it, too. Even with his dominant, destructive force, the fact was that he couldn't deal any decisive damage to Shion. Thanks to that, this battle showed no signs of ending anytime soon.

Daggrull glared at Shion with an embittered expression. "Boy, oh boy… Making me put this much effort into a fight… You've impressed me today, Shion."

He gave this praise in his usual collected manner. But then the look on his face changed. In an instant, everything was different about him. His gigantic force, the kind he used to lay waste to the world in the distant past, was now unleashed.

"Tidal Wave!"

This was a wave triggered on dry soil. High and low, left and right, the tsunami of violent force shuddered across the land. It was intense enough to undo all molecular bonds and pulverize any type of existence. It was a skill befitting someone nicknamed Earthquake, and now it descended upon Shion from all directions. There was nowhere to run from this fury, and it bored straight into her helpless body.

Unlike the frozen world—where only one law defined everything—the real world had an entire set of laws that defined how things affected one another. Many factors needed to be observed at the same time, and the ability to control all cause and effect was nothing but a pipe dream. It's impossible to completely predict the future, because it's impossible to have perfect control over all the world's laws. And since she couldn't fully predict what the overwhelmingly powerful Daggrull would do, the limits of Shion's skill set began to show.

Just as Veldora had warned her, Shion's chances for victory mainly hinged on staying in the frozen world.

Is this it? she wondered.

A twinge of resignation crossed Shion's mind as she withstood the searing pain across her entire body. She had been thrown against

the ground, but the earth itself was also shaking. She found it difficult to even stand up, as time and time again, she was thrown back into the air. The air was whirling, almost screaming around her, and thunder cracked everywhere. It was a scene of true despair, and not even Luminus could intervene. Veldora could have, but he wasn't the type to step in if Shion wasn't asking for his help.

So, without any aid, this agonizing despair was doomed to continue until she finally passed out. But then Shion could feel something snap inside of her, as if cut off—something that formed the base for her soul.

…Sir Rimuru?

She had only a faint grip on reality. The pain was piercing across her whole body, but she didn't even have the capacity to feel it. Just now, Rimuru had disappeared from the world. That was true despair to her, and it made her realize that everything she felt before was just her kidding herself.

No…

A great void coursed its way across her mind. The despair was swallowing up all her other emotions. To her, Rimuru was everything—the meaning of life. Without Rimuru, everything seemed faded, bereft of color.

"Worrrrrrrrrrrrrrghhhhh!!"

She screamed. Rage welled up from her empty heart. Her survival instincts activated, the fury crashing over the despair and activating her physical body as well.

And a voice was there to describe it.

Confirmed. The subject Shion's seal has been released. Her restricted skills will now begin to evolve… Success. The unique skill Master Chef has evolved into the ultimate skill Susano-oh, King of Atrocity.

This was the moment Shion awoke to the ultimate in power. A skill that would never have been obtainable if Rimuru or Ciel had still been around.

As she fought Daggrull, Shion had changed her very essence to the extreme. She did what she wanted to a brutally honest degree, never letting common sense get in the way as she firmed up her grasp on her power. Her power and her spirit as well. That was how she built the foundation for this evolution—and now Rimuru was gone. That, in the end, was the clincher.

Within Shion was the potential to kill even Rimuru himself. Ciel was wary of this fact, but now that it and Rimuru was gone, there was no one keeping watch over Shion any longer. The gloves were off, and thanks to that, Shion's skills manifested themselves in full, complete fashion.

But a skill evolution like this meant nothing to Shion. Without Rimuru, all the power in the world no longer held any purpose—

No. Absolutely not. There were no flaws to Rimuru's strategy. There could never be. This, too, must have been part of the plan.

Shion kept things simple in her mind. She never grew afraid, never let herself wonder if someone was scheming against her. No matter how little basis there was for it, she never doubted Rimuru's victory.

I always knew I could count on Sir Rimuru. He even saw that this would happen, too!

This was the conclusion Shion jumped to. It was giving Rimuru far too much credit, but to her, it was the truth. Joy and envy filled her heart, and she could feel the impossibly massive amount of force streaming out from it. It was pure violence, the power of destruction, but also the power of atrocities, with no relation to good nor evil. The evilest sort of force out there, one that held the potential to even kill Rimuru. If Ciel was here, it would likely mumble something like, *This is exactly why I sealed it off*, unbeknownst to Shion.

You have my thanks, Sir Rimuru!

With this expression of joy, the new skill was now hers.

After paying such close attention to Daggrull, Shion had been influenced to the point that her own body had been fully optimized to match. The same was also true for Susano-oh, the ultimate skill she'd just evolved. Daggrull was the personification of atrocity, and

so it was perhaps inevitable that Susano-oh would govern over the same thing.

Now even the Tidal Wave that had been sent crashing over her could easily be controlled. All the energy that raged across the battlefield was absorbed, and now Shion was calmly standing there. She eyed Daggrull, her will dauntless as ever.

"It is now *my* turn to smash you down!"

Her unquenchable thirst for victory drove her forward…and so the battle between two overlords of supreme violence reached its climax.

✳

Veldora, who predicted defeat for Shion and was just about to clench his fists and step forward, was now left to awkwardly scratch his cheek. Sadly for him, he'd missed his chance yet again.

"*What* are you doing?" Luminus demanded, her exasperated gaze drilling into him.

Veldora nervously coughed, then let out a shrill laugh. "Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Just as I expected, Shion is putting up quite a fight!"

"…"

"Ahem!"

With another cough, Veldora turned his eyes away from Shion.

The battle was still ongoing across the field, making for a tense situation in certain areas. With the most talented members of both sides participating in actual combat, the chain of command was beginning to fall apart in spots. The effects of this were clear for all to see.

The giants were growing restless, their organized resistance running into more and more difficulty. Each one was a powerhouse individually, so group-based military maneuvers weren't likely their strong suit to begin with.

Meanwhile, Luminus's side was fully prepared. Each member knew exactly what role to play, and they had trained for every

possible situation. Thanks to that, the tide of the battle was now tilting toward the Luminus forces.

There were other whirls of activity, big and small, to be seen as well. Other warriors were avoiding these spots, lest they get dragged into a battle they had no business being in.

At the center of one of these eddies were Glasord and Alberto. It was a tranquil yet intense duel, a wild shift between stillness and motion as sword clashed against sword in their own little world.

One of the larger eddies contained multiple figures. Louis Valentine, king of the vampires, and Four-Armed Basara of the Five Great Warlords were engaged in fierce combat, even though they were still only feeling each other out so far. Into this fray stepped Gunther Strauss, Luminus's personal butler. His master was dead set on keeping this area protected, and he was so moved by her zeal that he stopped thinking about anything else and stepped into battle himself. Luminus hadn't ordered him to do that, but still, things were working out exactly as Gunther wanted.

"I'm lending you a hand, Louis," he said.

"Hmm? We haven't fought together in centuries, have we? I hope you haven't let your skills go to rot, Gunther."

This casual exchange was all it took for them to form a team.

Around them, groups of notable fighters were engaged in warfare. The Seven Great Nobles who served Louis were going head-to-head against the Five Great Warlords who ruled over the giants. The giants were outnumbered, but their strength more than made up the difference. The fight seesawed back and forth, with both sides seeming reluctant to tap into their full force, and it was still too early to tell which way it would go.

The largest eddy of them all was the site of an even more vicious battle. Fenn, one of the Three Stellar Leaders, was being exposed to the full efforts of Adalmann, who had regained his younger form after joining with Venti in a possession-based merging. Adalmann was also fighting with Ultima's assistance—now that time was moving again, she saw a chance to try and sneak up on Fenn.

Looking at the numbers, not even the two of them together could hold a candle to Fenn's overwhelming presence. But thanks to the

experience they had built and the level of their skills, Ultima and Adalmann were greater than the sum of their parts, keeping the battle even without much effort.

From one end to the other, the struggle was still going strong. Veldora, seeing this, decided that now wasn't the time to intervene.

"Hmm," he muttered. "Everyone's doing a much better job than I thought."

"What?" Luminus interjected. "You're still here?"

Veldora flinched at her frigidness but still managed to laugh it off.

"*Kwaaah*-ha-ha-ha!"

Laughter was his way of preventing her from dictating the mood.

Truth be told, however, he *was* nervous. He, too, had lost his link with Rimuru, which was quite disturbing. He trusted him, of course; the connection was gone, but he could still weakly detect his presence.

Clearly, something must have happened to him, but I don't see the need for panic. In fact…

Yes, in fact, if he abandoned his current job to go look for Rimuru, things would be a lot worse later on. Veldora's instincts told him as much, so he decided to remain on hand, ready to jump in whenever called to.

But Luminus just glared at him again.

"You're in the way," she spat. "If you don't care to fight, step back and give up your space to actual grown-ups."

Veldora flinched for a moment. *Oooof… But why? Why must I be treated like a villain here…?*

One couldn't blame him for tearing up a bit at this point. Luminus, after all, kind of scared him. But if you rolled back the tape, it was his own statements that caused this, so you could say he had it coming. Veldora didn't realize it, and so he didn't see fit to regret anything he'd done.

"Luminus, there is no need to act so coldly around me! I am putting in a full effort right now as well, you know. In fact, I just saved all your hides a moment ago, not that you even noticed!"

Veldora never missed an opportunity to brag. He only said this to quell Luminus's anger a little, but she remained as cold as ever to

him. If anything, it felt like he had just stepped on an even bigger land mine.

"Oh? You claim that you *saved* me?"

Luminus's frigid, heterochromatic eyes targeted Veldora full bore.

"Y-yes, I did!"

He had broken into a cold sweat, but Veldora still held his head up high. It was a brave front, and it only made things worse for him.

"Damned lizard!" Luminus spat as she turned away from him. To Veldora, that felt even worse than being yelled at.

✳

But Veldora's vicissitudes were no business of Shion's. Her battle with Daggrull was reaching its climax, and the deciding moment was edging ever closer.

Shion and Daggrull clashed. Her attack found its target but didn't even deliver a scratch on the giant. That didn't faze her, though, as she launched into another attack.

Daggrull, never falling behind, fought back with a blow of his own. His fist, harder and thicker than a hammer of pure iron, was stopped by Shion's Goriki-maru Divine. Before he followed up on that, she swung the great sword, throwing every bit of her aura at him.

It pushed Daggrull back and into the air. The most unbelievable sight. He was more than a level larger than Shion, and the difference in magicule count was yawning. No sensible person would ever imagine something like this happening.

"Nnh!" Daggrull grunted.

"I'm not done yet…! Decapitating Demon Blade!!"

Shion kept going, pushing more of her fighting force into Goriki-maru Divine and sending Daggrull to the ground. The giant blade, now three times longer than before, landed a direct hit.

But Daggrull could never be underestimated.

"Hnnngh!!"

Running his fighting force across his body, Daggrull formed a defensive barrier around himself, fully annulling Shion's technique. Goriki-maru Divine, now back to normal, was once again blocked by Daggrull's crossed arms. Then, as if to pay back the favor, he fired off a punishing kick—but with a single click of the tongue, Shion leaped back and out of danger. The wave of fighting force still struck her, but somehow, it didn't seem to bother her one bit.

"Mmm?"

This puzzled Daggrull. It wasn't the result he expected, and he wasn't going to rest easy until he figured out the cause.

Shion, on the other hand, wasn't stopping to ponder over it. She continually went at Daggrull, never resting for a second and possibly not even realizing the extra power she now had at her fingertips. Daggrull could quickly tell as much, and that meant conversation wasn't likely to give any clues on what was up with her.

Well, so be it. I'll just crush her like I planned to.

Mentally turning the page, Daggrull launched an even more powerful counterattack. It only resulted in Shion boosting her own power in response…and so the battle grew more and more intense as it dragged on.

Shion had her evolution to thank for this change within herself, of course. The ultimate skill Susano-oh was, in essence, one that canceled out other abilities, making it something to fear for spiritual life-forms. That included Veldora, and when she replenished her energy from him just now, she actually was unconsciously tapping into her newfound skill before it was even completed. The energy she received from him was canceled out by her own magical force, making it easier to neutralize and render her own—and what's more, her attacks could steal her target's energy and bring it to her side as well.

This made it possible for her to defeat any kind of enemy…*sooner* or later. But that was the main issue. Even Shion's energy had its limits, so it wasn't like she could become infinitely strong if she kept at it. No, it was her new ultimate skill that let her surpass those limits and suddenly wage a much closer match against Daggrull. Normally, this sort of energy would be too much for her physical

body, causing it to collapse and tear apart, but now she could dare to absorb it all and try to make it her own. Even if the excessive force caused damage to her body, she could just execute that new skill of hers and forget about the consequences.

The net effects of these changes were now making Daggrull exert himself much closer to exhaustion than he really wanted to. He was still uninjured, but his stamina was slowly but surely being whittled down. That's what made Susano-oh such a threat to any spiritual life-form, and combined with Shion's natural resistance to death, it was exacting an even crueler effect on him at the moment. *Atrocity* described Shion's skill well as it so efficiently reined in the raging swells of energy, storing it in her body and pointing it straight back at Daggrull.

Thanks to that, she was now waging a pretty good fight against him, that living monolith of magical energy. But even that was about to come to an end. Daggrull was a monster, one honed by countless hours of battle. They didn't call him a demon lord for nothing, and he wasn't enough of a wimp to let this newly awakened baby chick do whatever she wanted against him.

I see, I see. It looks like she's appropriating my power for her own benefit.

It didn't take him long to see the truth. And once he did, addressing the issue was simple. All he had to do was end this fight with enough pure force that not even Shion could wrangle it all.

"You will now face my full power," he announced. "Do not resent me if it kills you."

"Bring it on!"

So Daggrull unleashed a localized skill, one that compressed a mass of energy into a shock wave lodged at a single target.

"Maelstrom Buster!!"

Daggrull's aura grew, glowing a shade of blue as the skill drew a whirling spiral around him. He let it propel him forward, advancing rapidly upon Shion. It looked like a dropkick at first glance, but the energy housed inside was Catastrophe-class. Even with Susano-oh on her side, it was impossible to neutralize the entirety of its effect. He was trying to end this fight with a power that was several dozen

times what Shion could ever possess.

Truly overwhelming power is something that no opponent can overcome with technique or experience, Daggrull thought. *Apologies, but you must learn that everything you have cultivated is powerless before me.*

Daggrull could recognize Shion's talents. He wasn't looking down on her at all, and he had a full appreciation for her experience, as well as the strength of her heart. But there was no room for such sentiments in battle; Daggrull knew well that sheer, overwhelming power was all that mattered in the results. Shion was waging a healthy fight, but that came to an end now. Now that Daggrull was serious, there was only a single inevitable conclusion awaiting her.

This, to Daggrull, was a certainty, one destined to occur just like the sun rising every day. Of course, these internal thoughts weren't reaching Shion. In fact, once the battle began, an opponent's feelings stopped mattering at all.

Even when faced with Daggrull and his Maelstrom Buster, Shion flashed a bold smile. Seeing it, Daggrull grew suspicious.

Is she giving up hope before her death? No, she seems too—

Shion was still ready to challenge him, never giving up on victory. All he could see in her was the urge to counter him—even now, when there was nothing she could do. But then a single flash of light descended upon Daggrull's head.

"Chaotic Fate!!"

That burst of light from Shion had reached Daggrull. He opened his eyes wide, surprised. An intense pain, something he hadn't felt in a long time, was making itself known from the crown of his head to his brow.

It had been thousands of years since he experienced pain like this, but that wasn't the sole surprise. He'd detected that Maelstrom Buster, filled with his respect for Shion and his will to destroy her, had found its target. That much went exactly as planned, but Shion's reaction wasn't what he predicted. She had done away with any defense at all, pouring her entire will into her attack.

No! Is she trying to die?!

Daggrull liked Shion—or at least had enough of an affection for

her that he didn't want her to die for no reason. They were enemies for now, but once this battle was over, he could picture a future where they could be friends. If that turned out not to be possible—well, he still didn't want her blood on his hands. Someone as strong as Shion could potentially survive this if she focused entirely on fleeing this strike. If she held out to the end and if she stopped getting in his way, then Daggrull was fully ready to let her go.

Instead, here was Shion, needlessly struggling and throwing away her life—

Hmm?!

Suddenly, something seemed off to Daggrull. The head pain had distracted him, but something else was amiss, too. It was unbelievable—unthinkable even—but Daggrull had fallen to his knees. He couldn't stand back up.

What happened?

He looked back at his memory. Shion didn't defend. She must have figured that she couldn't fully block his strike, so she exhausted all her power on her counterattack, slashing down with Goriki-maru Divine from above in order to target the airborne Daggrull. Normally, her blade never would've reached him, because the violent force of Maelstrom Buster would deflect it for him. The difference in power guaranteed that, but the moment they crossed paths, Shion's blade seemed to disappear into a fine haze—only to smash against Daggrull's head, seemingly ignoring the laws of physics.

Was this her way…of guaranteeing the results? Damn her… She used Control Cause and Effect on me?!

Daggrull saw it exactly right.

In the course of this battle, Shion had gained experience landing hits on Daggrull with her blade. None of them struck for serious damage, but they were still landing home—that much was beyond debate. If Shion wanted to do that one more time, that was easy enough for her by this point.

The ultimate skill Susano-oh had an unusually diverse and useful group of effects—Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Guarantee Results, Infinite Regeneration, Alter Action, Nihilistic Cancel, Destroy Illusion, Control Dimensions, Multidimensional

Barrier, and more. Among them, Nihilistic Cancel and Destroy Illusion were the most fearsome. Combining those could even make her capable of killing Rimuru, the exact thing Ciel feared.

It was thanks to the expert use of these new abilities that Shion's Chaotic Fate was all but destined to deliver a telling blow to Daggrull.

But Shion herself didn't emerge unscathed. Daggrull's finishing move had struck her dead-on as well, and even her Infinite Regeneration, which surpassed what Ultraspeed Regeneration and Divine Regeneration could do, couldn't prevent an instant death.

Or it shouldn't have. But this assumed that Shion wasn't alone.

"Rebirth!!"

Luminus's enchanting voice echoed across the field. Before Daggrull's ultimate violence could shatter Shion's soul, a deus ex machina stepped in to rescue her. She was destined to die, but thanks to Luminus's ultimate skill Asmodeus, Lord of Lust, she had been pulled back up from the cliff's edge.

Now she was standing proud in front of the felled Daggrull. The winner of the battle was clear.

"Hee-hee-hee! Thank you, Lady Luminus," said Shion.

"Of all the foolish things… What were you going to do if I *didn't* step in?"

Shion would die—that was what would happen. But Shion expected that Luminus would make the exact move she had, and this strategy won the day.

"Well, I believed that you would do something to help me, Lady Luminus!"

Luminus gave this a sigh and an eye roll. Then she shook her head, dropping the subject, and flashed a faint smile.

"Enough with the 'lady' nonsense. Just Luminus will suffice."

"…?!"

"Do you have a complaint about that?"

"No… No, Luminus. As of today, we shall be friends and equals!"

Shion expressed her appreciation with as sincere a smile as she could.

"Hmph! Feel free to take that any way you see fit, then!"

Luminus, meanwhile, was awkwardly blushing. Then she "saw fit" to turn her back to Shion.

✳

Veldora, who had been watching the battle, also caught the conversation between Luminus and Shion. He could tell Luminus was just trying to hide her own embarrassment, but even he judged it smarter to not bring it up. For now, he just wanted to join the conversation and stop being shunned any longer.

"Kwaaaaah-ha-ha-ha! Well done. Truly an excellent job, Shion!"

He laughed heartily, convinced that his reaction fit the vibe. But he was wrong.

"*You're* still here, lizard?"

Veldora was once again subjected to Luminus's cold stare. The warm gaze she gave to Shion was now a frigid glare that could freeze even a roaring bonfire in place. It was almost enough to make Veldora's heart core shatter—but he kept it cool, holding back the impulse to run away.

"But of course. I was worried for you all, so I was keeping watch! I mean it!" he said. "And, Shion, you've done well to surpass my expectations like that! Such an excellent, moving performance!"

Veldora offered this praise as he frantically searched for a way to warm up the frozen air between him and Luminus. Even she saw fit to lay off a little. She wasn't actually that angry at him—in fact, she appreciated him helping them out—but she hesitated voicing too much appreciation for his acts. She thought it'd just make him too full of himself, and the idea of giving him her honest feelings rubbed her the wrong way. So she decided to drop the act for now.

Besides, I'm sure it's too early to let our guards down, Luminus mused.

Daggrull, the enemy leader, was defeated, but the larger battle was still ongoing. They couldn't afford to let up quite so soon. Luminus was right.

Daggrull's defeat had a major impact on morale, especially among the giants in the battlefield. Things were much tenser between them now; they were looking for a good excuse to run away, and that was lethal in a fight like this. Even Glasord was nervous enough that his sword strikes lost their edge, giving Alberto room to start dominating him. Fenn tried to lend him a hand, as much as it annoyed him, but Ultima wasn't about to allow it. She wasn't the sort to let up on a weakened foe, and she wasted no time going on the offensive. Adalmann followed suit as well, as if to make up for before. Thanks to some brilliant teamwork, he and Ultima soon had Fenn cornered.

Victory seemed within grasp now…but instead, a loud laugh roared across the area. It was a powerful laugh, enough to send chills down the spine of anyone who heard it, and it belonged to the freshly defeated Daggrull.

"Heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I can't believe it. How could I ever be downed by someone like this? Shion, it seems I have gravely misjudged you. Allow me to apologize."

He casually stood back up. Shion knew she had struck home, too. She hadn't landed any major wound, but she had successfully taken a large chunk of Daggrull's energy away. But now he didn't look the slightest bit bothered.

"I don't need one. I'm just ashamed that I thought I defeated you."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! No need to be modest. No one has made me shed blood since Veldanava way back when. You should be proud, Shion!"

Just as he said, a fresh trail of blood was still streaming down from the top of Daggrull's head—and thanks to Shion's malicious skill, it showed no signs of healing anytime soon. But his aura was growing ever more powerful. That ominous aura filled the entire battlefield around him, putting Shion and Luminus on edge.

Still, at least one person was emboldened by this turn of events. It was, of course, Veldora.

"Heh-heh-heh… All I can say, Daggrull, is well done. That's what I want to see from my rival! Shion, you have a rest right where you are."

He then stepped up to Daggrull.

The two faced each other.

"I am your opponent, aren't I?" Veldora said to Daggrull.

"No doubt about that. If you were going to be here, we should have just settled this by ourselves."

Daggrull's main target was Luminus, but if Veldora wanted to get involved as well, he didn't mind changing around his hit list a little. That's how much of a priority he was. In Daggrull's mind, there was no longer any time left to play around with minnows.

"Now," Veldora said loudly, "let us both return to our true forms. We must exercise our full powers to settle this, so there may be no regrets later!"

Daggrull nodded. "Heh-heh-heh… Very well, then! It's time to teach you just where dragons stand compared to giants!"

They both joyfully glared at each other.

"I will show you today that *I* am on top."

"Do not go easy on me, Veldora. I want to see a concerted effort from you!"

The shouting came from the two of them at the same time—and as they talked, they transformed into their true, serious forms. Veldora was in dragon mode, and Daggrull summoned his brothers to his side.

"Glasord, Fenn, come to me. Now is the time to demonstrate our powers!"

The call was quickly heeded. Glasord bowed to Alberto, promising to continue the fight later, and then arrived at Daggrull's side. Meanwhile, Fenn kicked the clingy Adalmann away, swinging a fist at Ultima to shut down her surprise attack.

"Keh! You people never give up, do you? I'll deal with you later."

Soon, the three brothers were together again.

"It is time to break the seal of Ashura!"

At Daggrull's order, the ancient seal was lifted. He, Glasord, and Fenn began to emit a blinding glow, marking the return of the god of destruction from the age of mythology—a six-armed, three-headed creature that towered above everything else.

Daggrull and his brothers were ready now.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Is this your true nature, then, Daggrull?"

“Exactly. Prepare yourself, Veldora, for I am not in a mood to be gentle!”

The heavens cried out, and the earth shook. A mythological battle was about to begin, one waged between two supernatural presences with the power to destroy the world.

✳

One look at this gigantic god made Shion and the rest understand that they could do nothing against him. The aura released by Daggrull, combined with his two brothers, was simply dominating. He was truly worthy of being called a god now.

The air vibrated, creating rumbling thunder, as if heaven itself was voicing its fears of Daggrull’s violent rage. The audience here was too awed by the eerie atmosphere to say anything at all; even Luminus could do little more than state the truth.

“What a monster… I could never handle him,” she managed.

The feeling was doubtlessly mutual for anyone else who saw that figure standing there. Trying to overcome him through sheer guts or the like wouldn’t work. If challenging him simply meant a pathetic, shameful death, it was smarter to run and count on whatever chance for survival you had. If Shion and Luminus were able to keep a straight face at all right now, it was because Veldora was facing up to this god giant for them.

But even so, they were resigned to their fates. If Veldora lost, that was it for them as well. In a very real sense, it was all up to him, and that realization considerably lightened the load on their minds. Their fears faded away a bit, and now they were fully spectators in this fight.





“Shion,” said Veldora, “once the battle starts, you must defend yourselves with all your might. With your skill, you should be able to unify everyone’s powers the way you need to.”

The shout became a Thought Communication, one that reached the entire battlefield.

“Adalmann, and Alberto, and the vampires dotted around here… You must work together with Shion. If even one of you lets up right now, the chain reaction will blow away all of you at once! Kwaaaaah-ha-ha-ha!!”

Daggrull didn’t try to stop him. Just like Veldora, he too was giving orders to the people under him, putting their safety first and foremost.

“Basara, do you see the situation? Take steps now to ensure your safety.”

Basara was still waging a heated battle against Louis and Gunther. He was fired up and fighting at his best, but if his king ordered him to stop, he had no choice.

“I’ll wait a little longer to finish this. Of course, if Sir Daggrull defeats Veldora, the aftereffects will doom all of you just as much.”

With that, Basara called the other members of the Five Great Warlords and set off to shore up their forces. Louis and Gunther had no objection.

“That was some fearsome strength,” Louis remarked.

“Mmm, Four-Armed Basara certainly lives up to his reputation,” Gunther agreed. “He wasn’t even seriously trying yet.”

“I know. I wasn’t, either, but it’s impossible to say who might’ve been hiding more secrets from each other…”

Louis didn’t see any special meaning behind gaining a localized victory. Everything would be settled by the fight between the two leaders of each side, so he was conserving his forces so he could best serve Luminus when the moment arrived.

But that was no longer necessary. He never expected that their hated enemy Veldora would step up to represent them, but if that’s how it was, there was no room left for him in the equation. Veldora going around like he was the boss of them irked Louis more than a little, but if Luminus was accepting this, he and Gunther weren’t

about to oppose her.

So Veldora took over command like it had always belonged to him, sending down orders and treating them like final decisions. The last people he spoke to were Daggrull's sons, who had lost consciousness.

(Daggra, Liura, Chonkra—now is no time to rest!)

"""…?!"""

The booming Thought Communication sent them all flying to their feet.

(I want you to witness what is about to happen), Veldora somberly continued, once he was sure they were awake. (You are about to watch me defeat your father!)

This unusually heroic turn of his silenced the three brothers. They knew something substantial was about to happen, though, so they hurriedly nodded back at him. The upcoming battle would be of mythological proportions, and it was up to them to witness it all and pass it on to future generations.

The rest of the people on hand, especially Luminus, were just as impressed by Veldora's somber words. Not that Luminus fully believed them—and she was right not to.

Heh-heh-heh… I must be looking so cool right now! Everyone is so shocked at how heroic I am! This is exactly the sort of spotlight I've been looking for this whole time!!

If Veldora said any of that out loud, it would've ruined the atmosphere in an instant. And the fact that no one realized what he was thinking was, in a way, fortunate for them.

✳

The myths of the past were being played out anew—Daggrull, the personification of violence, and Veldora, the personification of storms.

Thunder was what the two of them shared in their skills. Daggrull

could use his own massive force to freely control the difference in electric potential between the earth and the air. This gave him a great number of attacks derived from lightning, the strongest of all nature-based attacks, but the same was true of Veldora. The Storm Dragon could circulate the energy inside himself to create natural lightning from thin air.

Naturally, both of them boasted strong resistance to lightning. Tossing bolts of it at each other wasn't going to accomplish much—but regardless of that, Veldora and Daggrull were converting their auras into lightning and smashing it against each other. These powerful attacks could turn an army of ten thousand into ash in an instant, but instead, they dissipated into the air, not even reaching each other's skin.

The barriers that covered both of their bodies ensured this would happen, but thanks to this energy of differing natures interacting with each other, pillars of lightning were being summoned across a wide swath of the battlefield. In just a few minutes, it was hellish mayhem from one end to the other. There were no casualties since both sides had built up their defenses beforehand, but keeping themselves safe from this onslaught necessitated a punishing amount of work.

Both forces could tell that they wouldn't last long like this. Witnessing a myth in the making suddenly seemed a lot less important; if this kept up, they'd all be dragged into this hellscape and destroyed.

"Foul dragon," Luminus snapped as she realized that. "This is exactly why I hate people who can't rein it in!"

Complaining to him at this point wasn't very helpful, but as much trouble as Veldora had been for her over the years, she was done mincing words. And while she might have just been letting off steam, at least one person agreed with her.

"Oh, I know it. If *my* boss starts seriously going on the rampage, it's a huge pain in the ass for all his men."

It was Basara. He had approached Luminus in hopes of using her forces as a shield, as he had his concerns about the strength of the defense barriers created by his side alone. The barriers from the two

sides contacted each other as he did, allowing him to listen in on Luminus's whining. He didn't mean to voice his agreement out loud, and he certainly didn't intend for Luminus to hear it. But she had a sharp ear that way.

She promptly turned toward him. *Hmm. If we stay separate, the lack of power could lead to cracks in our barriers. Then I could count the survivors on my fingers.*

Even the giants would be wiped out, to say nothing of the troops on her side. Luminus's goal wasn't to render the giants extinct. She and Daggrull weren't friends at all, thanks to grudges from long ago, but she'd have trouble sleeping at night if all of them had to die thanks to that. If possible, she wanted to save the lives of those she could, and there was just one way all of them might survive this.

She pondered for a moment. Then, her mind made up, she spoke to Basara.

(Your name is Basara, yes? If you are good enough of a fighter to prevail against Louis and Gunther, I have a proposal for you.)

This became a Thought Communication that made its way across the entire field. Everyone on both sides was now listening in on it. Basara tensed up, afraid he'd give her the wrong answer.

(All right, vampire queen. I'll listen.)

(I want all of you to work with us.)

(…Huh?)

(If you want to survive, we must assume a unified defensive formation. We'll all gather together, and then Shion will boost us.)

This was the answer Luminus arrived at. Asking your enemies, up to now, for their hand in this was a tall order, but if they couldn't work this out, they would all die.

Basara knew that as well. *She called it a proposal, but frankly, it's sending out a lifeline to us…*

With Shion on her side, Luminus might just be able to guarantee the safety of everyone here. Basara's support would make that even more of a possibility…and that, in his mind, was enough reason to make him want to help out his nemesis.

…Like, if she wanted to, she could use this whole situation to easily destroy us all. Instead, look at how kind she's being. What can

I do?

(I'll happily accept the offer. You guys have any complaints?)

The giants all roared their approval, and with that, Luminus's proposal was accepted. Now everyone could—and would—survive this.

✳

Daggrull held free control over wave energy. He could shake the earth to summon tremors or vibrate the air to rain down punishing electricity. He could work the wind currents to generate waves of vacuum force as easily as snapping his fingers. But none of it worked on Veldora. It couldn't have. He, after all, was the personification of storms—something Daggrull knew full well, so he wasn't in a panic about it. They had been fighting for years upon years; they knew each other's nature like the backs of their hands by now.

Things would be very different from here on in, though. After combining his brothers' powers with his own, he had become Ashura, the god of destruction—a fact he assumed gave him an advantage over Veldora.

"You know, looking back, this is the first time I've tested this power out on you, isn't it?"

"Hmm… I will remind you that I am not who I was in the past."

"Ha. Well, you now have an excuse for when you lose to me!"

This was the first time Daggrull had unleashed his full powers since losing to Veldanava. It just wasn't necessary otherwise, even with Fenn away from the scene—that was how powerful Daggrull was by default. But now that he had become Ashura, even that previous self looked insignificant by comparison.

He could tell that his blood was surging with excitement. It was finally time to settle the score for good with this rival. If Veldora was roughly equal with him before, he wouldn't even be able to keep it close against Ashura. He was sure of it. Things like magic didn't

work on Ashura. With three heads and six legs, he had no blind spots. And his body, hardened beyond the level of a diamond thanks to his solidification skills, could deflect any attack. Even Glasord with his God-class weapon couldn't land a scratch on Ashura.

That was how invincible Daggrull had become. And it made him arrogant.

"Try to at least entertain me a little, Veldora!" he crowed.

Veldora smiled back. "Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ridiculous! Save your whining for after I beat you!"

Nothing had changed with Daggrull's demeanor. There was no fear, no needless excitement; he wasn't overestimating his own powers. All he was, was ready for battle—the very model of a warrior.

Veldora, too, understood that losing here would likely crush any chance for Luminus, Shion, and everyone else to survive. He wasn't about to let that happen—and now that he had that burden to bear, he was ready to fight for real, albeit with at least a few jokes in between.

So the battle began, looking every bit like an epic *kaiju* clash. Beams of Thunderstorm Roar shot out of Veldora's mouth; he could charge up the compressed magicules in his body and spit them out like a cannon blast, accelerating them to sub–light speed. The resulting charged particle beam boasted a force as untold as it was unavoidable, discharging electricity across the landscape as it landed directly on Daggrull…but the moment it did, Daggrull grabbed it whole with one outstretched arm and snuffed it out.

"You bore me, Veldora. Little tricks like that won't work."

This wasn't just trash talk. Daggrull sincerely believed every word he said. Even Veldora's most dazzling attacks were no threat at all when Daggrull was in Ashura form.

But Veldora was no pushover. Ignoring Daggrull's warning, he moved on to his second attack as planned. Thunderstorm Roar was merely a ruse, a distraction he created for Daggrull while a few of his Separate Bodies, created by the Parallel Existence ability of his

ultimate skill Nyarlathotep, Lord of Chaos, maneuvered behind his foe. He couldn't control as many Separate Bodies at once as his older sister Velgrynd could, but he could still break out a lot of them. Each one had the same fighting ability as the original, and he was using them as sacrificial pawns—a testament to just how vicious this skill was.

One of the Separate Bodies sank its claws into Daggrull.

"Here's my *real* attack! Face the wrath of Dragon Claw!"

The name wasn't the most creative, but its force was all but guaranteed. These claws, unleashed by Veldora at extreme speed, were smaller than expected for a dragon his size…but they had slicing power that could cut through any matter in the world. These ominous claws, six of them on his left arm, glowed a disturbing shade of purple as they lunged at Daggrull. It was his solidified body against Veldora's unstoppable talons, and when they contacted each other, the resulting screech was loud enough to make the entire world shudder.

There was an impact…and then two arms went missing. The arm that blocked Veldora's claws had disappeared, and the left fist that carried them was also gone from Veldora's own body. They had done each other in…but this was just one arm on one of Veldora's Separate Bodies. It wasn't serious damage, but Daggrull wasn't about to give up yet. He could regenerate his lost arm in the blink of an eye.

"Tsk! I finally maim your incredibly unfairly solid body, but you just fix it up that fast…?"

"Don't give me that. *You're* the one not playing fair, Veldora. I'm truly shocked you could hurt me at all, the way I am now…"

They both complained about how unfair their opponent was being. Veldora was peeved by this surefire killer move not scoring any serious damage; Daggrull was irritated over how easily damaged his allegedly invincible body was. Given how long they had been rivals, this was a kind of ritual by now. This was just a first round, a way to feel each other out, and soon both of their attacks grew fiercely more intense.

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Veldora finally started to think that maybe this wasn't such a fun little battle after all.

He had quickly taken back the Separate Body that wound up being a dud for him, so he didn't lose much in the way of energy. He was still doing great, and if he kept fighting at this pace, he'd recover his magicules more than quickly enough. But the same was likely true of his foe. Half-hearted attacks wouldn't work on either of them. He knew that and also felt it for himself…but he couldn't go breaking out his big guns willy-nilly.

Neither side was about to flinch, so what Veldora needed more than anything else was a hole to exploit. Like *kuzushi* in judo, he could gain the advantage by compromising his foe's footing and throwing off their balance. Breaking out your full force in the opening rounds was the height of folly. The Storm Dragon and the god of destruction both enjoyed equally eye-watering levels of power; whoever forgot about that and panicked first was likely to lose.

But Veldora wasn't about to listen to common sense. Instead, he launched a barrage at Daggrull.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Time to keep it going! Wing Blade!"

He produced a small herd of Replications. Unlike Separate Bodies, these couldn't act freely under a united will, but he had given them orders beforehand to give him just as much force as the main body.

These Replications now swarmed upon Daggrull at ultra-high speed. The beating of their wings generated vibrations that transformed into high-frequency blades. Each body had two sets of wings—one large, one smaller—and the resulting particle-level bonds created a cutting zone that fatally tore through anything in their path.

But Daggrull remained calm.

"Tsk… I never *could* read you."

He quickly took suitable action. If he was dealing with blades, a

sword was the best tool. Glasord's head was now facing front and center, as Ashura held his great sword with two hands.

"Mnngh!"

With a flash of effort, Glasord fended off the Replications like a grown man swatting at flies. Even the barrage of slashing attacks was nothing more than a distracting little annoyance to Daggrull. The great sword in his hands was now a good ten yards long, more than suitable for a god giant to wield, and its tip easily traveled faster than the speed of sound. With the master-level skills of Glasord, he had created a zone of invisible yet absolute defense for himself. Any Replication of Veldora's that entered this zone was destroyed, and so all the Veldoras were fended off without scoring any useful damage.

Daggrull didn't let up on his attack, either. Now Fenn's face was front and center.

"Hell Binding!"

In his hands were the bonds of Gleipnir, capable of immobilizing even a living god. He wanted to try capturing Veldora with them.

"Gahhh?!"

The chain Fenn threw wrapped itself around Veldora in dragon mode. Several Replications disappeared, leaving only the bound and helpless Veldora to himself.

"A pity, Veldora. You might've tried to deceive me, but you wasted too much time on it. With my True Eye, it's a simple task to see which one is the real you."

Daggrull's True Eye had no problem discovering the real Veldora, the one that held more magicule energy than any of the Replications. No matter how many dummy Veldoras were generated, that True Eye ensured the effort was meaningless…or so he thought.

Instead, the bound and apparently helpless Veldora disappeared into a dark mist. Then came a jocular voice, a poor fit for a climactic battle.

"Aw, too bad! That one was a fake, too!"

Veldora was intent on riling Daggrull up as much as possible. It irritated his foe to the point that he could no longer hide his chagrin. His True Eye had been deceived all too easily.

"Hoh? You tricked my eyes, then…?"

"Yeah! Pretty neat, huh?"

"What kind of trick did you use for that?"

"Heh-heh-heh! Let me tell you, Daggrull, *this* proves just how in over your head you are with me!"

With a smirk so broad that it ought to have been accompanied by a wailing pair of timpani drums, Veldora daringly asserted his dominance. There still wasn't that much difference in their overall abilities, but Veldora couldn't help but ride this wave a little.

"You can break out every bit of your power if you want, but you still can't beat me. And there is a very good reason for that!"

Veldora tried his best to act mysterious about it. There wasn't any solid basis for this statement, but it was nonetheless good enough to trick Daggrull. The giant might have been feared as a personification of pure destruction, but at his core, he was basically a nice guy. Definitely the most benevolent out of the Octagram members, at least.

"A good reason…?"

"Yes, exactly. I, too, have been doing a lot of growing. I can't have you thinking I'm the same as I used to be!"

If this was enough to make Daggrull put his guard down, nothing could have gladdened him more. But he didn't, and that was partly thanks to Veldora being an ass and holding out like this.

Still, while he might have dodged Daggrull's question, he was certain he could beat Daggrull. The reason was simple—he had grown and obtained a lot of new skills along the way. Exactly *how* he had grown and *what* he had obtained wasn't really in his capacity to fully explain—but to Daggrull, it must have been a terribly confusing avowal.

So how did Veldora fool the True Eye? Technically speaking, he couldn't fool it at all. He only did it thanks to Control Probability, one ability of his ultimate skill Nyarlathotep. Altering the probability of his own existence allowed him to instantly swap his real self into one of his Replications. It was a kind of magic trick, in other words—but through the judicious use of Parallel Existence, Control Probability, and Control Dimensions, he could trick the analysis and assessment

abilities of any skill out there. It was a hidden trick of Veldora's, one that'd prove valuable in almost any situation.

Just as he wasn't hesitating to brag about it, Veldora really did have a strength he lacked before. It wasn't just obvious things like his magicule count; he had been putting in a daily effort as well. He might've had a rep for screwing around all day, but he really *had* been training himself. Thus, even if he couldn't give a comprehensive lecture of the principles that drove his skills, he had gained an instinct-driven mastery of them. He really *couldn't* explain them to you; if he did, he would've used that knowledge to brag even more about his greatness. Not being able to turned out to be a stroke of good luck for Veldora.

Daggrull, to his credit, wasn't expecting a straight answer from Veldora, so he continued on, not letting the mystery bother him.

"I wish I could call it nonsense, but you really *do* seem to have grown. You're certainly not like you were before, at least."

The Veldora of the past simply threw himself around, using his power to batter everything in his path. Now he was using his head in battle, deftly employing his skills to gain an advantage against Daggrull. He had to hand it to the guy, but he wasn't about to admit defeat, either.

So he kept talking, trying to build a more advantageous situation for himself. This, too, was standard battle tactics. Even someone with as much brute strength as him didn't overlook the finer points of a fight like this—in fact, he appreciated the finer tricks for the payoffs they could potentially give him.

From the start, he had one goal in mind. Instead of gradually building up like Veldora, he wanted to finish this with a single all-powerful strike.

"Your might is the real thing, yes…so let me end the fight with my most powerful of skills!"

Quietly, Daggrull grasped the air around him, expanding the range of his wave-energy intervention. Using his True Eye to gauge the space, he made sure none of Veldora's Replications were lurking within, then sliced it away from this dimension, creating an isolated space of his own. Inside of it were Veldora, Daggrull, and nothing

else.

"Mmh?!"

Veldora realized the anomaly that occurred around him. But he was already too late.

"I've got you now, Veldora. This is where our rivalry ends! Quasar Break!!"

The finisher-level move filled the entire cutoff space, not leaving an inch unturned. It began to shake violently, as supercharged waves of space-time energy shot out from Daggrull. As they filled the area, they created a force field of irreversible destruction. The boundaries prevented it from fanning out, so instead it compressed itself, testing the physical limits of the space.

The result was a destructive, absorbing light beam, one that cost Daggrull 60 percent of his energy to create. It transformed his body into a sort of black hole, destroying and swallowing up the space around him as he saw fit. The friction in the air this generated created a blinding light that bubbled out from the isolated dimension. It was a sight as fantastical as it was terrifying. Anyone exposed to this overwhelmingly high-density energy interference wouldn't be able to survive. They'd just be deconstructed and fed into the insatiable body of Daggrull.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You were too proud, Veldora! I don't need to identify your main body at all! I can just erase all your bodies at the same time!"

Daggrull couldn't help but laugh. This move was the perfect offense and defense in one, refilling his energy the moment he used it. Most of that absorbed energy, however, was taken up by ensuring Daggrull's survival after tapping into such a magicule-expensive skill. He'd have been blown away as well otherwise.

Quasar Break, through its multiple stages of expansion and compression, creates energy on a level hard to imagine. Failing to control it correctly could result in the whole thing blowing up in Daggrull's face. It was obviously a onetime skill, not something he could fire off in rapid succession…but once he launched it, victory was guaranteed. Veldora put up a great strategy, but even he was powerless against this almighty violence. Daggrull was positive that

he had obliterated Veldora, and now he was free to see the results unfold.

The fallout from Quasar Break quickly destroyed the isolated dimension. He nimbly absorbed it, returning himself to his original dimension. All that remained were the faint afterimages of the energy field that had so twisted and warped that enclosed space. They dissipated over time, fading into the air until all was back to normal—the evidence of the untold destruction that just took place, something nearly impossible for anyone to explain in mere words.

Those who saw it in action immediately knew just how dangerous a move like this was. There was no way anyone in this world could survive such a skill. Veldora must have been broken down within the isolated space, caught in its collapse and disintegrated. Perhaps, as a True Dragon, he would revive at some point, but that would be another Veldora, well into the future. *This* Veldora would never exist again, and by that standard, Daggrull had won the battle.

That is how it should have been recorded…but that jolly voice echoed once more:

"Ooooooof. Wow, that was really dangerous!"

Daggrull's eyes burst open. He was sure he was just hearing things. "Y-you're kidding me! You took that and lived to tell the tale?!"

He couldn't help but shout. It was just too unthinkable a situation. He hadn't used Quasar Break against even Veldanava. It was still too far out of his control back then; only now had he gained mastery of it and turned it into his ace in the hole. It was his strongest of moves, one he unleashed with the full intent of destroying Veldora. His current alarm was thus fully understandable.

Anyone hit with it would be destroyed. There was no escaping it—not in that isolated space. Veldora somehow surviving that was simply impossible. But here he was, alive and well.

"…What did you *do*?" Daggrull asked him.

"Kh… K-*kwah*-ha-ha-ha-ha! Th-this much is like a passing breeze to me!"

He couldn't have been faking it more.

Upon closer inspection, Veldora was definitely not all right. His

twin pairs of wings were torn and battered, and there was a black mist steaming out from the assorted wounds across his body. Those were the magicules he was losing, thanks to lacking the energy needed to maintain his existence. It was a dire situation for a spiritual life-form to be in, a real nightmare for races like demons.

In fact, he was one step away from death back there. He had used Nyarlathotep's Control Probability skill to deftly lower his survival probability to a bare minimum, just barely escaping the destructive energy that threatened to take him. He dodged those waves, in effect, by letting them run right through his body. It may have worked, but it exacted a heavy toll. All his Replications were gone, and the main body was in less than stellar shape. Bringing a True Dragon like Veldora to this point said everything that needed to be said about Quasar Break's awesome fury. The Veldora of the past would definitely have been destroyed by it.

"Care for another shot of it, then?" said Daggrull.

"Whaaat?!"

Veldora knew it was an idle threat, but it still made him visibly twitch.

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So Daggrull's ultimate finisher was foiled. He had little energy left, and Veldora was beaten up badly. Any ill-advised move right now could finish the fight, so neither side was eager to act. They had a stare-down as they pondered what to do next.

The next one's gonna suck, isn't it?

Veldora had reason to think so. He hadn't fully recovered from that last attack, so the next one was bound to do him in. However, part of him also figured there wouldn't *be* a next one. He was almost down for the count, but so was Daggrull probably. He didn't look hurt on the outside, but he must have expended a huge amount of energy just now.

The question was just how close to total exhaustion each side

was. If you could truthfully compare the two of them, who was better off right now?

Veldora tried to size himself up. He was losing magicules through the wounds on his body, but that was deliberate. All that training in the labyrinth had taught him more than a few crafty moves by now. Quasar Break dealt him more damage than expected, but it still wasn't lethal. Instead, he was just acting like he had one foot in the grave, trying to dupe Daggrull into thinking he was much worse off than he actually was. Shion and Luminus had used him to refill their energy earlier, but that, too, was part of his pre-calculations. Put all that together, and he estimated that his remaining energy was a little under 50 percent.

I sure burned through a lot…but it's going the way I planned it!

Daggrull and Veldora were evenly matched. Daggrull's estimated existence points were over one hundred and ten million, while Veldora's were just under ninety million. That seemed like a pretty cut-and-dried difference, but with Nyarlathotep on his side, Veldora appeared to be pushing his opponent pretty hard. He was pushing, but he still lacked a decisive move against him. No matter what he tried, it'd be tough to make it hit home against Daggrull's near-infinite resistance.

How should you use what little energy you have left, and how can you make your finisher hit your opponent? That would decide how this whole thing worked out, and thus Veldora saw an urgent need to drain Daggrull as much as possible.

All of this so far had been part of his plan. Even that mindless barrage of attacks earlier was designed to make Daggrull more assured of his advantage. He'd make Daggrull fearful of his skills and convince him that he wanted to make this into a battle of endurance and clever strategy. That way, he predicted, Daggrull was bound to break out a be-all, end-all move to wipe him out in one hit—and that bet paid off. Daggrull busted it out, and it drained him.

In Veldora's mind, Daggrull was just as energy poor as he was right now, if not worse. And he was correct. Daggrull had expended just under 70 percent of his energy, putting his total count at a smidge under Veldora's. Not only did the bet work—it had turned the

tables on the fight. Daggrull's natural energy advantage was now a thing of the past.

…It's all fine and good now that it worked, but it sure wasn't the safe approach, no…

The memory of Quasar Break's fury made Veldora shudder. The chances of him surviving something like that were extremely low, and he swore to himself that he'd never take a bet that dangerous again. Of course, even if the bet didn't pay off, he could always have Rimuru resurrect him. That slime didn't seem to be in this dimension at the moment, but he hadn't been destroyed or anything like that. Veldora just *knew*. If Rimuru really was gone, Veldora would've been deeply affected as well.

And if I can be revived anyway, there's nothing to fear, no matter how insane the bet is! Kwaaah-ha-ha-ha!!

This was the reason Veldora felt safe in telling Daggrull that he could never beat him. Victory was guaranteed, so even the most dangerous approach wasn't anything to sweat over. That was the thought he had, and now that it was proven to work, Veldora couldn't be more in his element right now.

So he laughed loud and hard to himself, ensuring that this more malicious side of him didn't bubble up to the surface.

The Veldora that Daggrull knew was this mischievous little prankster who constantly searched for new toys, then promptly got bored with them. He wasn't at all the type to keep working on a difficult problem until he solved it. A few serious threats and Daggrull was sure he'd give up and capitulate at once. Veldora, after all, owed absolutely nothing to Luminus and her nation. He had no reason at all to seriously trade blows with Daggrull.

He also assumed that Veldora would admit defeat the moment he encased him in that isolation space. If he tried to escape it, in fact, he didn't intend to chase after him. He didn't *hate* him at all anyway. They quarreled a lot in the past, but it was really more horseplay than anything else. Killing Veldora was the last thing on his mind, so he actually would've been much happier if he fled for him.

But Veldora stood strong, and if he was in that much of a hurry to be annihilated, Daggrull wasn't afraid to break out his surefire killer skill. But Veldora took it without blinking, and it was impossible for Daggrull to understand why.

So he spoke up.

"…Why? Why did you have to expose yourself to all this danger?"

"Hmm?"

"Taking a direct hit from Quasar Break put you at serious risk of being destroyed. Back in the day, you absolutely would've opted to run away from that!"

"Hmm…" Veldora nodded. "I wouldn't call it running away so much as changing course. The word *flee* isn't even *in* my dictionary, after all!"

He was spinning the facts like a seasoned politician, but no one thought fit to point out his lies. If someone like Velgrynd were around, she probably would've smiled and subjected him to a three-hour "reeducation" lecture.

"But, well, one reason is that I wanted to test out my powers, I suppose."

"Oh…?"

Veldora was indeed stronger now, a fact Daggrull had to acknowledge.

"Plus, if I fled, Luminus and Shion and everyone who serves them would have been doomed…and I'm just not willing to allow that."

"Why not? What possible motivation would drive you to risk your life for Luminus? To say nothing of a bunch of *humans*?!"

Daggrull was questioning Veldora's very resolve—and depending on the answer, Daggrull would have to firm up his own resolve as well. But instead, Veldora succeeded only in exasperating him even more.

"Well, if I didn't, Rimuru would never let me hear the end of it. Do you have any idea, Daggrull, how *scary* Rimuru is when you piss him off? It's *terrifying*! *Kwaaaaah*-ha-ha-ha!!"

Now it was clear to Daggrull. Veldora was *never* going to retreat.

"Mmm, yes, I see. So you've grown able to accept responsibility now?"

The dragon really *had* matured. Daggrull had to accept that as the truth—and now he really *was* resolved to defeat him.

"All right, then. In recognition of your growth, I will continue to engage you…no matter how long the battle drags on!"

If Veldora wasn't going to flee, he'd just have to be defeated. Whichever side made the other run out of energy first was the winner. Finishing this with a single telling blow was one option, but Daggrull had just busted out his most powerful of finishers and had it backfire on him. The right tactic was clearly to take his time, be careful, and slowly whittle down his opponent.

Daggrull began pouring energy into his aura. As he did, his massive frame, easily over sixty feet tall, began to visibly shrink.

"Hmm?!"

Now he was back to his normal size, around eight feet in length. But flashes of lightning were bursting out of his body, making it clear just how densely packed the energy was inside.

"Hohhh? You're a whole other person now," Veldora remarked.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! That I am. It is an even higher-level transformation than my most gigantic form; I call it Super Divination. It has always been difficult for me to control myself in this state, but you have now given me some vital pointers."

"Um…?"

Veldora froze, unsure what he meant. Daggrull wasn't about to be shy about it.

"How to train yourself to hold your aura back, I mean. You mentioned something about gaining further power after learning how to control your rage, yes?"

This sounded more familiar to Veldora. He *had* bragged about the knowledge he had gained from the "sacred tomes" of manga he had been reading, a bunch of trivia he'd eagerly shared with Daggrull—and indeed, maybe that little nugget was part of it, too. He couldn't remember the exact details, but more to the point, Daggrull was demonstrating some clearly stabilized power. Veldora was just having a friendly chat with him about that stuff, and he had worked it until it served him well in actual combat. His sense for battle was beyond reproach.

Although back to normal size, Daggrull was still in Ashura mode with his two brothers. Between that and the electricity arcing out from him, he seemed like even more of a threat than in his giant form. Veldora was ready to finish the battle, but now that he had a look at Daggrull's determination, he decided to accept his offer.

"Well, Daggrull, I must hand it to you. If you're now able to control that power thanks to my advice, I suppose I really must take you on."

The two of them returned to their "human" forms as they squared up, compressing their energy even further. Veldora shrank down to about eight feet himself, kindly adjusting his height to match his opponent. Size was power, maybe, but that common sense didn't apply to spiritual life-forms. To them, the *density* of your energy gave you power. A fist packed with energy compressed to the limit could turn almost anything in the world into a fine powder—even if that target was a body with similarly compressed energy.

In another moment, the stare-down ended. They both went on the move, kicking off a martial arts battle that defied imagination.

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A few moments earlier, it was all-out *kaiju* warfare. Now it was a more refined test of technique. Before long, however, it descended into an ugly brawl.

Daggrull buried his fist in Veldora's stomach…just as Veldora's elbow smashed into Daggrull's face. One side would stage a blow, and the other would reciprocate. There weren't any rules to this contest, but they had now settled into this kind of back-and-forth exchange, like a pro wrestling match.

The fight grew fiercer than ever, neither side giving an inch. A kick for a kick, a punch for a punch. Any attack thrown was greeted with a similar one in return. Neither fighter was digging their heels in; the battle was taking them all over the place. They'd go high up, then back down to the ground. They rolled over to the desert,

blowing away everything around them—and then it was right back to the skies, even outside the planet's atmosphere at one point.

To both of these fighters—little more than accumulated masses of pure energy—the location of the battlefield didn't matter. They didn't need any ground, no platform they could push off to gain momentum. Their own bodies were like cannonballs, smashing into their opponent with hyper-compressed force. Then, when one side was hit with that kind of force, they could vent the energy out from their bodies to keep it from being lethal.

What mattered here was exhausting your opponent while using as little of your own energy as possible. They were exchanging blows that could easily destroy a high-level magic-born in one hit, sending anything around them flying in the cross fire, not that they cared at all. The spectators were all holed up under their barriers, incapable of moving an inch. The fighters were no longer giant size, but the shock waves of energy alone were hard to comprehend, much less resist.

"Truly a fearsome sight…," mused Luminus.

The battle between Veldora and Daggrull was laying waste to the area around them. Luminus resented it, but she didn't see much alternative. It was a simple case of *Well, what can you do?* This was Daggrull, the god of destruction himself; it'd be asking way too much not to expect some collateral damage.

Pillars of pure lightning dotted the landscape, burning anything they touched to a crisp. Layer upon layer of the protective barrier covering the holy city had already been rendered useless. The great wall that had protected that city over so many years was blown apart after the first collision between Daggrull and Veldora. It was almost breathtaking, how it couldn't hold out for even a single instant.

If that wall was down, the Monster Exclusion Barrier couldn't last much longer, either. It, too, had lost all functionality. The barrier had been built to withstand monsters up to a certain level, so there was no way it'd remain intact against things like a True Dragon or a god of destruction. All that remained was the defensive barrier everyone had gathered together to build, with Shion leading them, and they

were risking their lives to keep it going.

But even with all that effort, it was almost strange how they were still alive. At this rate, the barrier would fall, they'd all instantly die, and the damage would extend to the central core of the city. Anyone could see that it was only a matter of time; it hadn't happened yet only because Veldora was doing whatever he could to avoid that.

"Dammit, Veldora," said Luminus, realizing this fact. "He really *has* grown a little, hasn't he? He's protecting us, in his own way."

"It's true," agreed Shion. "I'd expect nothing less from Sir Veldora!"

Her eyes were gleaming as she gave him this honest praise.

"Yeah, it's pretty impressive. He's leading Daggrull around to ensure nothing directly hits us."

Ultima's analysis was correct. Even Gadora had to offer his approval.

"It's true, yes."

She didn't want to admit it, but Luminus could no longer deny how great Veldora was. She even marveled at how he had the capacity to think about things like that during this awe-inspiring battle. Adalmann and Alberto were both speechless, watching with bated breath as Veldora fought.

Luminus, too, was watching events unfold above her head. It was a constant barrage of imponderably powerful skills beyond anything she could have imagined. Attempting to join this fray would be suicide, even for someone like her. She might've wanted to complain to them about it, but she had no way of getting that complaint across to them. All she could do was pin her hopes on Veldora—or really, on the heavens themselves.

Of course, she didn't really have any complaints to lodge in the first place. In fact, she was just as enraptured by this fight as everyone else. It was a rough, unrefined contest, but it was also beautiful. They competed in both power and technique, as if trying to spur the other to yet greater heights. It was proven by how Veldora had considerably sharpened his technique since just after the battle broke out.

Now it was getting even more frenetic. Shion, next to Luminus,

was just as awed by the whole thing, and Luminus could see why. Having a mythological-class fight like this was a precious asset, something that maybe happened once in a millennium. Merely watching the truly strong fight could provide you with vital experience; seeing two utter superpowers like this go at it was something you almost never got to witness.

Basara, who had joined the abject crowd at some point, couldn't help but appreciate it.

"Y'know," he said, "since when did Veldora become such a good close-quarters fighter? I mean, my boss has three heads and six arms. That's so much more to work with."

And yet the fight was even—unnaturally so.

Basara, having just awoken from his banishment, wouldn't have known, but Luminus and Shion knew the reason.

"Well," said Luminus, "he's been going around the labyrinth laying waste to everything he sees is why. 'Training,' he calls it."

"Not quite, Luminus. Sir Veldora is the one leading and guiding all the labyrinth's guardians. He has made a concerted daily effort to maintain his reputation as the final line against any intruders!"

Shion couldn't have sounded prouder as she refuted the sharp-tongued Luminus.

"Labyrinth…?" said Basara.

"Ah yes, you wouldn't know about it. Inside the labyrinth created by Ramiris, there's a training ground where you can die and be revived an infinite number of times," Luminus explained.

Basara groaned in wonder. "Huhhh? Oh, come on! That's just cheating!"

No one could refute that. Everyone, no matter which side they were on, found it pretty unfair. It was Veldora who leveraged that aspect of the labyrinth to the maximum possible level, too. He'd cause outrageous amounts of damage if he marauded like mad on the surface, but that was no worry in the labyrinth halls. Some of the levels had been taking damage as of late, but the training ground was still intact, so he had mostly been practicing in there with Zegion.

That's what had made Veldora into a first-class martial artist. He

had always been strong, but now he had true technique, making him an unstoppable menace. If Daggrull hadn't turned into Ashura, he absolutely would have been above him—and through his experience in this battle, Veldora was learning how to fight off a foe with lots of different moves to throw at him. It was making him literally untouchable.

It was little wonder that everyone was awed by the sight. The battle was truly monumental in scale, and it didn't seem like it would ever end.

But…the final decision was near. From before the start of this martial arts contest, Veldora was hatching his plan. Victory, for him, had been promised all along.

He had continually looked for his big chance. He had trained with Zegion and Ultima and all the other stout residents of the labyrinth. That, plus his experience fighting Velgrynd and Rimuru, had made him stronger than ever before. To him, close-quarters battle was now his preferred method of fighting. He had even learned how to fight less than fair when needed, with Rimuru being the perfect teacher for him. Like Sun Tzu said, every battle is won or lost before it is fought. Rimuru quoted that a lot whenever he lectured his team about the importance of preparedness. If you squared all of that away beforehand, you wouldn't need to panic about any eventuality. The hardest part of a war was always how to end it, so you needed to make sure any potential hazards were out of the way.

Veldora made an on-the-spot decision to join this battle, so "prepared" was not exactly how best to describe him, although he did have a few secret moves up his sleeve. They could potentially be resisted by a foe whose energy outclassed his, but if that was no longer the case, they were basically guaranteed to work.

So he steadily chipped away at Daggrull's stamina. Then he waited, gauging his own status and comparing it with his enemy's. He only kept going with Daggrull after he was sure the time had come out of common courtesy to his old friend.

"I thought I had mastered this, but I see I have far to go…"

Daggrull, who was planning to dominate Veldora, was shocked down to the core. He had transformed into Ashura; he broke out his

greatest skill of all, and he still couldn't win. There was no longer any point pretending he was above his foe at all.

Still, despite that, he felt he retained a slight advantage in martial combat. That, however, was also just him kidding himself. Here, at this point, Daggrull finally had to admit to that.

"I think it's about time to pull out, Daggrull. If you give up and go back home, I will do nothing further to you."

"Enough, Veldora. You know I can't do that. I have to defeat Luminus. It is the least I can offer to my late friend."

Veldora nodded. He, too, understood what paying your respects to the dead meant. But despite that, he couldn't help but think that the living were more important. Rimuru described it as a case-by-case thing. It didn't matter who was right or not; it depended a lot more on people's feelings, and apparently, it wasn't the kind of thing a third party could casually decide on.

So Veldora hesitated to judge Daggrull for it, but he wasn't about to allow him to do whatever he wanted, either. Daggrull might have his own motivations, but Veldora had good reason to not let him go. This world was all about survival of the fittest. The strongest got to set the rules, and he had already resolved that beating Daggrull here was the best way to stop him.

"Well," Veldora began, "it's too bad, Daggrull. Allow me to end this with my final and most greatest of finishers!"

Daggrull grew tense at the announcement. But it was too late for him. Veldora's skill was honed for this moment, and now he was champing at the bit to use it.

The next instant, a rainbow of darkness blanketed their surroundings, swallowing up an area that completely covered both the Holy Empire of Lubelius and the Deadly Desert.

"Fertile Paradox!!"

The declaration was made. And amid that rainbow of darkness, a cruel miracle manifested itself.

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The rainbow was swallowing everything up, expanding so quickly that it would soon envelop the entire area…

What is that?!

It was already too late by the time Luminus sensed the danger. She was unable to resist this rainbow of darkness as it penetrated their barrier.

"…What is going on?" she asked amid the confusion. Then, once the darkness reached her, she understood.

"…This is paradoxical power!"

It was a power similar to prayer. A healing force, helping people heal and grow, the opposite of destruction. There was no way to resist it—it would never allow anything like that. Luminus was no exception, and in another moment, the darkness was all over her.

This… How could he…? Dammit! That lizard! How is anyone supposed to do anything about this—?

Then, as frustrated as she was, Luminus became engulfed in the rainbow of darkness. As did Shion. And Ultima, and Gadora, and Adalmann, and Alberto, and all Daggrull's sons, and Basara too. Them and everyone else from hero to buck private. All were driven to a deep sleep the moment the darkness reached them. There were no exceptions—and thus, as all life began to slumber, green buds began to sprout on the soil.

Veldora stood within the dark rainbow. Before him was Daggrull, the god of destruction—or what was left of him.

Ashura had been deactivated by Veldora's skill, so Glasord and Fenn were there as well. Glasord looked like he had just completed a great task, but Fenn seemed nonplussed, pouting and turning his back to the others.

Daggrull, on the other hand, remained serene. "Did you…change the world? Using *us* as the seedlings?" he asked Veldora.

"Hmmph. 'Change' would be exaggerating it. But I *did* mess with

it a little, yes."

Daggrull looked like he couldn't believe any of this, and Veldora was eager to answer him. The giant didn't appreciate his attitude very much, but he was too incapacitated to do anything about it.

The "seedling" statement was more than an analogy. Daggrull's arms and legs were now buried inside the trunk of a large tree, as were Fenn's and Glasord's. It looked as if their upper bodies were growing from the tree, but their limbs were now fully absorbed into it. They had no way of freely moving around any longer, and it was impossible to get themselves out of this.

"What did you do?" Daggrull demanded.

"I suppose it'd be most accurate to say that I returned you to what you were."

"What?"

"I took this world, teeming with out-of-control magicules, and brought it back to its original verdant state."

"Wait… Did you change the state of the magicules themselves?"

Magicules could be in one of several states. The hostile ones were used for attacks, but they could also be calmer and more stabilized. The Deadly Desert was in a state of constant ruin because these more aggressive magicules were running freely over its confines. If they could be stabilized, the whole region could turn into a lush wood, just like the Forest of Jura.

Daggrull, however, couldn't do that. Neither could any of the other demon lords. Not even Luminus, usually an expert in paradoxical forces like these, was capable of quelling Milim's rampage. If she could, maybe she and Daggrull could have come to an agreement long ago. The conventional wisdom dictated that changes in the state of magicules could not realistically be fixed by anyone; you simply had to wait for time to take care of it.

But here was Veldora.

"Fertile Paradox isn't an attack, technically speaking. I have simply applied my blessing to this land. It has reconciled the chaotic magicules, using those who trod upon nature as fuel to encourage the growth of new life. This was once the site of a magic-driven disaster, but now it'll go back to normal and become a fertile land

anew!”

“…Mmh.”

Daggrull groaned. There was no fabrication in what Veldora said. He stared blankly at him. Was that even possible? Yes, it must be. Daggrull gloomily thought that was what Veldora could do.

“And by the way, this is all running with your bodies as its core. It’s using all the abundant energy inside of you, so you’re as good as sealed away in there now! And since no one but me can undo this skill, I’d say your marauding days are over. There’s no escaping Fertile Paradox,” Veldora stated, laughing.

He was confident of this, and not even the all-powerful Daggrull could shake him of that conviction. This skill, after all, was a blessing at its core—derived from nature-based healing. It simply restored life-forms to their natural state, never forcing anything on its targets. There was no way to resist.

Daggrull and his kin were evil gods—marauding gods of destruction. Now Veldora had restored a part of this planet that had been missing—the gods of nature who protected it. It was now impossible to escape by their own will.

“Now I know. You are fearsomely cunning, indeed…”

“*Kwaaaah*-ha-ha-ha! I will accept that as a compliment!”

Daggrull didn’t mean it as one, but Veldora just laughed it off. Even Daggrull couldn’t do much more than bitterly smile.

“But there’s no need for you to worry. I’ll release you once the overall war is over. You’ll have recovered your holy force by then, and things ought to be completely back to normal around here. You and Luminus won’t have any reason left to fight, will you?”

Rimuru would be tracked down, too. It wasn’t likely to take any more than a few decades at worst. Daggrull would cease to be a viable threat then, so Veldora didn’t see any reason to keep him confined beyond that time frame.

This, too, surprised Daggrull.

“You’re going to *release* me? …No. More than that—you realized the state that my domain was in?”

He was shocked that Veldora’s thoughts ran that deeply. Anyone who knew the old Veldora would be just as astounded. Daggrull and

Luminus could probably spend the entire night talking about it.

"Mmm. I sense a little hostility around me…but fine," said Veldora. "Your nation was going to run out of water in a few more centuries regardless. As stout as the giants are, not even they would've been able to stay here. Right?"

It was too accurate an assessment; Daggrull had to agree with him. Veldora *was* much more thoughtful than before.

"So you *did* notice. You saw the true reason why I sent the Bound Titans on the march for Luminus's domain…"

Losing to Fenn had reminded Daggrull of his past, more violent self, but his core essence hadn't changed at all. It may have looked like he turned traitor against Rimuru's force, but he had what he felt was ample justification for that. He was the king of his people, and he coldly reasoned what had to be done to weather this storm. Veldora knew all that, and it made Daggrull feel supremely awkward now.

"Nah," Veldora blithely replied. "I didn't know about any of that. It's none of my business anyway. The fact that your force was composed strictly of the undead with no young soldiers or women—that wasn't any concern of mine, either."

"Heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Playing dumb, huh? That's just like you, Veldora."

Now Daggrull was heartily laughing. Once again, just as before, he was Veldora's friend.

Daggrull, defeated once by Veldanava in the past, had been assigned the role of guarding Skyspire Tower, the gateway to the Celestial Palace. The giants he led stayed faithful to that order…but then Milim went berserk on them, and there was nothing they could do to punish her for it.

He didn't have it in him to hate anyone, so Daggrull quietly followed his divine orders, all but agreeing to die with his land. But when Fenn beat him, the experience jogged his memories of the past. It rejuvenated his mettle, and he decided to place one final bet on his fortunes. Luminus was the perfect scapegoat for him; if he

could take her on and seize her domain, there was hope that the giants would survive after all. Even if they were defeated, if their numbers were suitably culled, the survivors would have a little extra time to hold out.

Either way, taking action presented new possibilities. So even if it branded him a traitor, he decided to play along with Fenn.

"If only I would fall, then so be it," said Daggrull. "But as a king, I couldn't bear to doom the younger residents of my domain to the same fate. It was hard luck for Luminus, but I saw it as a golden opportunity…"

Daggrull was in full confession mode. Veldora only shrugged.

"Hmm. No one will chide you for that. Survival of the fittest—that's what makes the world go round."

That, too, was the supreme truth. People might want to complain about it, but nobody was there to hear them. They were unlikely to survive this great war. Without Veldora intervening, there was no way for Luminus's forces to avoid defeat. Whoever won was on the side of justice. Daggrull was just unlucky this time.

"But, Veldora… Why? Why did you revive this land? In order to save us? Out of sympathy?"

As Daggrull could see, the bare desert, once infused with magicules gone mad, was rapidly turning into a land of green. It was expanding before their eyes, and even now it was starting to do its work on the giants' domain.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don't read me wrong now! All I wanted was to prove I'm stronger than you. That and I wanted to show off a little so Luminus would stop hating me so much—and this seemed like the perfect way!"

With the magicules now in harmony, crops could grow far better than before. This phenomenon was powerful enough to reform the desert itself. It was bound to work out.

But there was no way *that* could be the only reason.

"Stop playing with me," said Daggrull.

"I am not playing one bit! I never thought its effects would extend into the Deadly Desert, is all. A miscalculation!"

That was the story Veldora stuck with. It made Daggrull smile.

“Heh-heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Playing dumb to the end, eh? All right. Don’t expect me to repay you, Veldora!”

“Of course not. We are friends, and friends should never owe each other favors! We will fight again someday, trust me. And I’ll *win*, of course!”

“Oh, sure, go on like that. I’m not enough of a wimp to lose to a kid like you twice!”

Veldora and Daggrull shared a laugh with each other. There were no hard feelings any longer. The refreshed looks on their faces told the whole story.

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Daggrull was no longer a threat to anyone present, but then an unexpected intruder showed up, pushing through the dark rainbow like it was nothing and appearing inside this unique space. It was Velgrynd, a blue-haired, heart-stopping beauty and an ominous figure in Veldora’s mind.

“Looks like you’ve settled things here,” she told Veldora. “In that case, we need to talk about the *next* thorny problem.”

“G-gehhh! My sister?!”

“You don’t have to act so shocked to see me every single time. Anyway, it’s about Milim… She attacked Skyspire Tower.”

“Huh?” said Daggrull.

“What did you say, my sister…?”

The bare facts, laid out by Velgrynd, came as a shock to everyone else. It was a particularly painful blow to Daggrull. Next to Skyspire Tower was an underground city that the rest of the giants had evacuated into. Most of them were children, the future standard-bearers for their people. There was no way they could defend themselves against something as awful as an attack on the tower.

“Don’t lie to me, Velgrynd!”

But Fenn was the most agitated. Feldway hadn’t breathed a word of this when he described his plan to him.

"It's the truth," a peeved-looking Velgrynd spat.

"Why?" countered Fenn. "I *thought* we weren't going to touch that place! So—"

There was no talk about not touching that place. Feldway just never said that he *would*. He kept silent about it, not seeing any need to make this new recruit suspect him.

"Well, don't ask me," said Velgrynd. "*You'd* know more about what's going on in Feldway's mind than I ever would."

"God*damn* you…!!"

"Oh, will you just quit already, you idiot? You knew Feldway wanted to destroy the divine tree, right? You should have anticipated that Skyspire Tower would get in the way of that effort. Why didn't you?"

Fenn didn't have much of a way to counter that. Only a small handful of people were forward-thinking enough to consider the idea, but saying that wouldn't help his case much. Velgrynd, for one, certainly came to that conclusion. It was why she protected the people of the Holy Void of Damargania, even helping Soei evacuate its people to safety. That was the only reason there were no casualties yet.

"Skyspire's outer walls were an even match against Milim's Drago-Nova, so I used my Star Barrier to reinforce them a bit. They held out," Velgrynd explained.

The news came as a great relief to Daggrull and his men.

"So…you saved them?" Daggrull asked.

"I suppose so. I owed Rimuru a favor, and I'd like to think I just paid it back with interest. But more to the point, I'm pretty sure the gate has been destroyed…and thanks to that, we'll have a disaster on our hands soon."

"Mmm… You mean Ivalage the World-Destroyer Dragon?"

"Oh… So we really *were* just a distraction all along?"

Without Daggrull and his forces guarding Skyspire Tower, it would have happened all too easily. Fenn might have seen Feldway as his compatriot, but even he had to admit to the truth. Now he couldn't blame Velgrynd for calling him a fool.

"So why did you come here to tell us?" he asked.

Velgrynd flashed him a cold look. “I don’t have any business with *you*. I wanted to discuss this crisis with Luminus. Her and my stupid brother over there.”

“M-me…?”

Veldora sounded terribly aggrieved by this, but he was ignored.

“So once this darkness goes away, you’re going over to the divine tree.”

“Wait, what?!” Veldora balked.

“Yes, the divine tree. Feldway probably wants Milim to destroy it.”

Feldway had failed at it once, but he hadn’t given up yet. Now that he had regained full control over Milim, he had no reason to sit idle. And that was the “thorny problem” Velgrynd had in mind—Milim and her group were on their way to their next destination.

“He really does want to destroy this planet, doesn’t he?”

“I’m sure he does. I’ll stop him, of course, but…”

She knew just how tough it’d be, but she still boldly smiled. If she timidly wailed over it right now, it wouldn’t improve matters at all. She was just going to struggle until the end, and that was that. It was a move she’d learned fighting Rimuru and his allies.

“What are *you* gonna do, Luminus?” asked Veldora.

“I will accept any refugees. The Holy Void of Damargania will be the front line of this conflict. They’ll all be wiped out if we don’t evacuate them.”

It was an extremely valid opinion. Everyone was convinced of it at once, and Daggrull and the giants thanked her from the bottom of their hearts.

The rainbow of darkness dissipated. They were back in their original wasteland, spread out next to what once was the Deadly Desert. Now it had transformed into a vast land of green, with plants growing at a dizzying pace and creating fertile lands wherever they were. The effects of Fertile Paradox spread far and wide, turning this land into a vast forest even Jura would be jealous of in the blink of an eye.

On the other hand, the holy city was facing serious problems.

These same plants, perhaps feeding on the magicules in the area, were now burying the buildings in greenery as well. The land was filled with things like wood fences and stone foundations that used magicule-infused materials, and of course they were going to be affected by Veldora's skill.

"Um, maybe I got a little too carried away, kind of?" Veldora wondered aloud.

It was a little too late for such regrets. The transformation had gone beyond even what Veldora expected. Now there was no way for him to avoid Luminus's rage—and in fact, Luminus (who had just woken up) had the most darling smile on her face. She stomped her way toward the increasingly nervous-looking Veldora.

"So, Veldora, would you mind explaining all this to me?" she asked.

There was a clear, visibly throbbing blue vein on her forehead, underneath her silver hair. Her lips were smiling, but her eyes certainly weren't. Veldora was quickly gripped by the feeling that he was in serious danger.

Y-you're kidding me! This was the perfect plan! It was supposed to restore my good name for all time! he thought.

He had saved Luminus from danger and turned both her and Daggrull's domain into a bountiful paradise—truly the perfect strategy. Unfortunately, that plan now seemed to be going in a truly ominous direction. Even worse, Velgrynd was right behind him. This was exactly what being between a rock and a hard place meant.

At this rate, all Veldora could do was remain defiant.

"N-no, Luminus! Umm… I have a perfectly reasonable explanation for everything! I'd love to lay it all out for you, but I'm busy, so we'll need to talk later! Now farewell!!"

And so he soared into the air, flying away at a speed faster than any he had accomplished fighting Daggrull.

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“Ugh! That bastard ran off on us again!”

Luminus sounded miffed, but she had no intention of chasing Veldora. Velgrynd had been there since the moment Luminus woke up, so the demon lord knew something terrible must have happened. Her rest was nowhere near as long as she needed, but she had to have missed a lot. She looked at Daggrull and his brothers, who now seemed to be growing out from a large tree of some sort.

“So what is going on?” she asked Velgrynd.

“The world’s in danger.”

“Can we do anything about that?”

Velgrynd shrugged. “We’re gonna have to.”

She now regretted not doing more to keep Rimuru from being banished…but regardless, it was too dangerous to intervene back there without a plan. Even if she did, it would have just immediately vaporized her Separate Body. Staying hidden and protecting Daggrull’s people was the best choice to make back there.

And besides, thought Velgrynd, *I knew Rimuru could work it out. Even against Chrono-Saltation.*

That was her honest assessment. If Velgrynd herself could make it back out, she felt that Rimuru could as well. She didn’t have any concrete basis for that, but she was willing to believe in it. Thus, instead of worrying about Rimuru, she decided that doing what she could right now was a far better idea.

She explained to Luminus what was going on. Being an intelligent ruler, Luminus immediately appreciated the danger.

“I see, I see,” she mused. “In that case, I will accept any refugees, by all means.”

“Thank you,” Daggrull said, heaving a relieved sigh. He wasn’t able to move, but he could still converse with everyone—and this was how he and Luminus finally brokered peace with each other.

That being said, while they had successfully defended this domain, the city borders were in a sorry state. Even within the city, trees and plants were growing wild, cutting off entire streets and causing mayhem all over the place. Fixing all this would take a herculean effort, but Luminus had no intention of suing Daggrull’s

side for damages.

No, this was the sort of victory where the winners should just celebrate the fact they're still around. It may not have seemed like much, but it was important. Stay alive, and you could always work something out later.

Luminus was frankly outraged by the damage, but the danger facing the whole world right now took priority. She felt repairing the city could wait until all these other difficulties were behind them. For now, it was time to turn the page—and she presumed that Rimuru would be all too eager to help out with the rebuilding.

Velgrynd had told Luminus the whole story behind Rimuru's disappearance, but she honestly wasn't too worried about it. She knew what kind of person Rimuru was, because she had been carefully observing him this whole time. A slime like him wasn't about to go down *that* easily. So instead of devoting excessive concern to him, she decided to think about the future.

"The next question is how we'll guide the refugees here…," said Luminus.

"I think you can leave that to me," Velgrynd replied.

Velgrynd instantly created a Spatial Connection linking this land with theirs. The Separate Body she had standing by on the opposite side began guiding the giants through it. The migration was underway.

"You see?" She gently smiled. "Nothing to panic about."

Her smile was laden with merciful love, but she wasn't feeling all that unhurried right now. Already, she could sense an ominous presence oozing from Skyspire Tower.

Not good. I can even detect Ivalage over there. We'll need to build a full defensive line or else the whole world could be destroyed in an instant…

Fortunately, they seemed to have ample time before Ivalage showed up. However, the cryptids were likely to be the vanguard force, and these wouldn't be the small fry that that traveled through that time rift in the past. The aura of destruction she sensed was intensifying by the moment; each one of them was at least a Disaster-level threat, nothing a normal human being could handle.

All the world's champions would have to come together or else it'd be far too difficult to overcome this danger—a fact Velgrynd prudently decided not to tell the refugees.

These refugees were led through by Louis, making full use of his status as a religious leader to urge calm among the crowds. The local citizens weren't much better off than the refugees right now. Many of them were now homeless, and they had all fled into the cathedral for shelter. Only so many people could fit in one place, so they were splitting them all up, guiding them to underground shelters, the inns and churches that dotted their holy mountains, and so on.

Meanwhile, the leaders were all holding a strategy meeting, with Daggrull and his brothers in the tree also participating. Velgrynd was leading this conference, and Luminus, Gunther, Ultima, Shion, and Daggrull's sons were in attendance, along with Adalmann, Gadora, Alberto, and Four-Armed Basara.

"We'll need to stop the cryptids before they take off and fly across the land," said Daggrull to the agreement of everyone on hand.

"Your inability to guard that gate is putting us at a *serious* disadvantage!"

Luminus's remark indicated that she still wasn't in a particularly good mood.

"I'm sorry." Daggrull bowed his head. He couldn't do much else.

"It's exactly why *I* had so much trouble, too," retorted Ultima.

Daggrull wasn't sure how to respond to that. He knew that his actions had made things a lot worse for them all. From an impartial perspective, that epic battle just now was a complete waste of time and resources, triggered by Daggrull getting duped by his brother. All he could do now was submit to their complaints.

The True Dragon, on the other hand, couldn't care less.

"Can we drop the little details for now, Luminus?" Velgrynd asked.

These were far from little details, but from Velgrynd's perspective, the destruction of a city was no great shakes.

They resemble each other in that way as well, noted Luminus. *Like brother, like sister, I suppose.* If she brought it up, though, it'd

just agitate Velgrynd and make Veldora scowl at her.

Either way, they needed to figure out their future direction.

"As I think you're aware, once Ivalage shows up, it'll be on us to engage it. If we have to protect the entire rest of the planet as we do, it'll be hard for us to exercise our full effort on that dragon."

Velgrynd was stating the cold, inconvenient facts. Those who didn't know the threat the World-Destroyer Dragon posed probably didn't know what this meant—but not Luminus.

"So Veldora is going to the divine tree?" she asked.

Feldway's mission wasn't likely to end with the destruction of that tree. The summoning of Ivalage was part of his plans as well; he wanted to destroy this whole world and reset it back to square one.

"So all that was a lie from the start…," said Fenn.

Between destroying the gate and trying to destroy the divine tree, there was just one thing Feldway could be aiming for. He had no intention of respecting anyone else's territory from the get-go—or really, he had no reason to. If this planet was wiped out, all territorial disputes would cease to matter.

Reminded of this anew, Fenn hung his head low.

"Again, will you stop bringing up inconsequential pieces of trivia, please?"

Velgrynd interrupted him once more. It was almost surprising how little she cared about the giant leaders' problems. It made Luminus smile a bit.

"Regardless of what happens with Ivalage, we will need to do something about those cryptids," Luminus remarked. "But taking along a massive force would simply result in countless unnecessary deaths."

Basara nodded, eager to join in this effort. "I agree with you, yeah. If we're gonna do it, then it'll have to be with only our best."

No one disagreed with that, but realistically speaking, it presented a major problem, one Adalmann was the first to point out.

"But don't you think we're lacking in war power?"

There were only eleven people here healthy enough to act. Even if you added Louis and some of the more famed generals to the mix, you were talking four out of Basara's Five Great Warlords and the full

roster of the Seven Great Nobles. Velgrynd also needed to be taken out of the force, since she had other roles preoccupying her. They couldn't even afford to put their full manpower into this.

Picking who'd participate in this effort would be a problem. Fortunately, all the fatigue from the previous battle was taken care of. Veldora's Fertile Paradox had fully healed everyone here—an impossible miracle, but everything about this was already so far-fetched, they all accepted it as normal by comparison.

So the eleven members here were ready for battle. Anyone who fled would have nothing but death awaiting them; they were better off struggling to the bitter end. That was the resolve being shown here. Everyone was ready to risk their lives.

Velgrynd nodded at them. "I explained the situation to Masayuki over in Englesia, and he said that Hinata Sakaguchi will join us as well."

Masayuki himself had volunteered to fight. Velgrynd tried to stop him, calling it too dangerous. It'd be one thing if he manifested Ludora again, but if it was just young Masayuki himself, it'd be a one-way trip to the grave. She tried to convince him as much, but apparently it didn't work. Masayuki's mere presence brought fortune to his companions. Even if he lacked the power to fight, he could prove more useful than anyone else on the team.

If Lubelius were to fall, Englesia would be next, and then the flames of destruction would reach the Western Nations. Someone as good-natured as Masayuki couldn't just sit there and wait for that future to happen. So now the Hero was joining the fray.

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Their core members were now decided, but the problems hadn't been solved yet. In fact, they were still piling up. The meeting continued with some new members. Hinata and Masayuki had now joined in, while Daggrull and his family were out. They had moved to an open meeting hall, a more suitable place for healthy debate.

The conclusion they had come to was that even a defensive force consisting of their handpicked elites simply wouldn't provide enough firepower. They had too small of a team to handle the enemy force Velgrynd anticipated. Their team needed to be ranked A or higher and geared for mobility—in other words, they had to be able to defend themselves with no outside help.

"The cryptids are highly capable of regenerating their bodies, so exhausting them is a difficult task, but their offense isn't that strong in general. Once you learn the right tricks, I think you'll find it possible to deal with them."

That was Velgrynd's assessment, but as a supreme being, she wasn't the right person to pass judgment about this. Whittling down the enemy's stamina would be a near-impossible task, and any attack that hit an ally dead-on would kill them. Even a scratch could mean a serious injury. Each one of the enemies was a Charybdis-level threat by themselves, and they had real cunning, too. They could even gang up during warfare if required to.

If the estimates were correct, they'd have over a thousand of these monsters surging toward them. No matter how optimistic you were, this was clearly a world-level threat. They couldn't do what Obela and the rest of Milim's Big Four could—namely, set a trap, surround them, and start pummeling. If any of their allies should fall, there'd be no time to rescue them.

Based on all that, they were more or less forced to bring only the strongest among them to battle.

"I contacted Caligulio," Velgrynd said. "Minitz should be coming, too. I took my Separate Bodies in the Empire back, which will weaken its defenses a fair amount, but it beats losing the whole world."

Masayuki, who joined this meeting with Hinata, nodded. "That's great to hear. I hate how I'm just being protected all the time, but I don't think any enemy attacks will reach me anyway, so it'll probably work out fine."

Lately, Masayuki had grown pretty accepting of his lot in life. He had given up on mastering his control over Lord of Heroes, the ultimate skill he was supposedly in possession of, and now he was

taking a "whatever happens, happens" approach to living. He had noticed some time ago that leaving everything to luck usually led to better results in the end. Usually, he tried to make it *look* like he was putting forth a concerted effort, at least, but now was no time act cool.

His volunteering for this war, too, wasn't the work of heroic altruism.

If I do nothing, that's it for the world, isn't it? It's not gonna be much fun if I'm the only survivor. No, I gotta bet on the off chance that everyone can survive this…

It was, perhaps, a half-hearted sort of motivation, but it had brought him here anyway. It was true, though—his mere presence did a lot to make people feel a little bolder. Maybe he wasn't brimming with enthusiasm, but his actual actions proved he was every bit the Hero he pretended to be.

Hinata was present as well, leaving the Western Nations behind and gallantly appearing in the face of danger. She had resisted taking action upon being told of Daggrull's advance, but things were different now. After all, Rimuru was missing.

There's no way I'll ever believe he was defeated…

He was always so chill and easy-breezy, no matter what happened. Like Masayuki, his mere presence had a reassuring effect on people around him. But from now on, the lazy hope that he'd figure something out could no longer be relied upon. It was up to Hinata herself to get moving.

"I have taken along my greatest elites," she began, her expression harsh, "leaving only a minimal defense force behind in each of the Western Nations. If we can't rely on Rimuru, we'll just have to muddle through this ourselves. If we can't keep this place safe for when he comes back, you know he's gonna mouth off about it."

She was more frigid than ever, practically freezing the air around her. Losing Rimuru put her on edge. It was enough to remind those who knew her long enough of the days of old, when she acted like a goddess of ice to everyone around her.

Well, who can blame her? thought Luminus.

Luminus knew better than to point it out. She'd realized a number of times since Rimuru's disappearance just how excessively they were relying on him for everything. But there was no point wailing about it.

It was decided at this point that the main gist of this meeting should be narrowed down to one topic: Should they inform the world at large about this mortal danger? They already feared they were lacking in strength, so inviting qualified warriors from across all nations seemed like a must.

"I understand that self-defense must remain a priority for any nation," Luminus stated, "but it will mean precious little if this ends up destroying the world. Frankly, I do not care terribly much about what fate befalls the human race. I value those I have sworn to protect, but anyone who refuses to pay their respects to me—well, I will not be too bothered if we lose some number of them. They'll be multiplying all over again before very long, after all."

They likely would be, yes. But this was a much different sort of danger. This calamity, presumably traveling in through Skyspire Tower, was the natural-born enemy of every life-form on this planet. Let it go unchecked, and there was no guarantee anyone would survive to tell the tale. That, Luminus said, was why they had to protect this land, the one they were on right now. What happened to other human societies had to play second fiddle—they must focus on the front lines, the root of all this evil, and throw all their war power at it. However, there was no room in this "war power" for the weak. Anyone included in that descriptor would be left to figure out how to survive for themselves.

Clearly, Luminus was putting her own motivations ahead of what was best for mankind at large. But no one was interested in a debate with her. Clinging to lofty fairy-tale ideals wasn't going to get them anywhere, a fact everyone on hand understood. There would be winners and losers in this conflict, but it was up to them to figure out who'd get first priority and who'd be left in the lurch.

"So what exactly do you intend to do?" Hinata asked Luminus.

"I suppose we'll have to be honest and tell the world's nations."

Luminus believed that a danger as unprecedented as this

necessitated such an advance notice. There wasn't universal agreement on this—"Wouldn't it just spread fear," one person pointed out, "and make it impossible to maintain order?"—but Luminus wasn't swayed by her detractors.

"I don't see why that matters," she said. "Those who choose not to believe in us are free to take whatever action they see fit instead."

It was a near-irrational line of argument, but it was the only correct one to make. They simply couldn't protect everyone, so there was no point getting upset over it. Luminus would have preferred if the rest of the world could just sit tight and wait for her. This was what the assembled guardians truly felt. And yes, the fear and anxiety that'd follow the news could lead to rioting. They were fully aware of that, but to be brutally honest, they couldn't devote what precious few resources they had to dealing with that.

"That being said," continued Luminus, "we will only be taking champions above a certain level of ability, so the rest of them can help unite the people behind us."

"I doubt it'll be easy, but that's what we'll have to ask of them."

With Hinata's voiced agreement, Luminus's suggestion was adopted.

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They decided Luminus would hold a speech addressed to the entire world, but there was hardly any time to organize that. Normally, a move like this—termed a "revelation" when it came from the divine Luminus—was carried out solemnly, with advance notice provided to all relevant nations and ample preparations made. This time, however, they'd just go and *do* it, without any grandiose setup like that.

So, with absolutely no warning, the image of Luminus was suddenly floating in the skies of the principal nations of the world. It was a simultaneous world broadcast, and it shocked everyone who looked up at it—but Luminus didn't appear at all concerned about

that as she began to speak.

"Listen to me. This is Luminus Valentine speaking—god, demon lord, and leader of Lubelius."

This introduction of hers was impactful, to say the least.

She revealed everything right off the bat. It was enough to make Luminus's underlings shake their heads. She was talking to a crowd of firm believers—why was she deliberately making them doubt their faith in her?

"I will keep this brief, as there is no time for formality. The entire world is under threat from an unprecedented danger. By name as the god of my nation, I solemnly swear to devote everything I have to protecting my people. Furthermore, by my pride as a member of the Octagram, I swear to you that I will neither retreat nor give any ground as I fight this menace, just as all the other demon lords will."

She wasn't sugarcoating it one bit. There was violence behind every word, making her onlookers wonder if she was deliberately trying to spark a riot. But instead, the people remained calm at large, precisely because they were about to descend into the worst kind of chaos. The mesmerizing beauty floating in the air didn't seem to be lying to them at all. Her appearance truly was godlike, and that alone was enough to charm people over to her side. No one doubted a word of what she said.

"Of course, running is pointless against this. We are talking about a threat that could destroy the entire world in time, so fighting is our only option. I will stake my pride as a demon lord on standing my ground, never turning my back to the enemy. And I am not alone…"

The image switched over to display a number of people in succession. First, it was the demon lord Luminus. Then Ultima, the Primal Demon. Then Hinata, the Saint. Then Masayuki, the Hero, and finally Velgrynd, the True Dragon.

"These are my companions who will dare to face this mortal danger with me."

Seeing this, the populace at large shared the same thought:

This is totally in the bag, isn't it?

The residents of Englesia, in particular, swooned at the gallant sight of Masayuki, his preeminent attractiveness clear for all to see.

Some viewers even considered traveling to the site of battle so they could see him in action.

To those aware of how dangerous the True Dragons were, Velgrynd's name held great sway as well. She was an unshakable presence, the fearsome empress not even Veldora dared to cross.

Then there was Ultima, whose sheer cuteness was earning her a rapidly growing fan base worldwide. They were all fools tricked by how she looked, but that was partly Ultima's fault for striking all those cute poses for the camera.

Add to that crew both Hinata and the god of Luminism herself, and the natural reaction for most was along the lines of "How would we possibly lose this?"

"However," continued Luminus, not aware of this, *"we still need more numbers. Therefore, I send out an invitation to all brave, gallant champions out there. Come to us, for you will find no future for yourselves if you flee! If you fail to take action and instead survive on the backs of all the champions who may die for you, then you will never be able to live proudly for the rest of your lives! Yes, now is the time to prove your courage…"*

Now Luminus's speech was starting to have an unexpected effect. Some onlookers were enraptured by her bewitching beauty. Some had just become lifelong fans of Ultima. Some were left quivering at the fetching sight of Hinata. Some cheered loudly at the smug grin of Masayuki…and some revered the otherworldly visage of Velgrynd.

Broadcasting this video to the world was, in a way, a brilliant move to make. There was concern at first that it'd throw the people into despair, but the sheer divinity of this performance was giving them hope instead. It felt like the end times, but here they were, gathered together like they were recreating the divine myths of old. Seeing this unfold created a swirling maelstrom of excitement.

This was, well, a tad befuddling to those who knew the full nature of what was to come. But to the general public, seeing all these big names join hands against a common enemy was the most energizing experience they'd had in ages.

The speech was now nearing its climax.

"Leaders of the world, listen closely to me! You may enjoy your

lofty positions, but you serve your people, not the other way around. You are nobility, kings even, because you live proudly and hold your head high. Fleeing will not be allowed. No, you must unite your people and rule over them correctly, so we may all face this mortal danger together! And to the unenlightened masses, I advise you that remaining unenlightened is perfectly all right. Your job is simply to live. Cling to life with all your might, and do not get in our way! Finally…to the strong and the powerful, I offer you a truly attractive place to die. I invite you to dedicate your lives to us, so we may all grasp victory in the end!"

It was the most important speech of Luminus's life, one that would be recorded and discussed for generations.

"And when all is said and done, let us all shout together: Victory to us! Victory to our planet!"

All evil must be eliminated so victory may be gained. All human intelligence, power, and courage must be gathered together so they can be harnessed for this utmost of priorities. That was the message she had, and the people of the world answered it. Seeing the determination of Luminus and her champions, everyone was instantly resolved to this noble effort.

"""Yeaaaaaaahhhhhhhh! Victory to us! Victory to our planet!"""

The cheers and roars could be heard across the world. It was sheer passion at work. One should never underestimate Luminus's charisma like that. She wasn't tapping into any particular skill, but all at once, the human race was united, as if caught up in her spell.

This speech would come to be known by later generations as the "Final Declaration," and before anyone's passions had settled down, all the nations of the world began to hold emergency meetings, debating with what little time they had left. One by one, they agreed to send as many resources as they could to the front as reinforcements, leaving only the bare minimum behind.

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As those inspired by Luminus's speech began to gather for the cause, Daggrull was holding a speech of his own, addressing the surviving members of the Bound Titans. His sons were in attendance as well, all three of them lined up in front.

"Hear my words! I am incapacitated for now, and so I name Daggra as your interim commander. Liura, Chonkra, I order you to aid Daggra in his duties and strive to bring glory and prosperity to all giants!"

"Yes, Father!"

"Sure thing, Dad!"

Daggrull gave them both a firm nod.

"Now, my giant warriors! Please forgive me for my foolish deeds. From now on, I bid you to treat Daggra as you would myself and to follow all his orders to the letter!"

A flurry of cheers erupted, the entire audience voicing their "yeahhhhh!!"s at this request. He might only be interim leader until Daggrull could move again, but Daggra, his eldest son, was hardly an unpopular figure, either.

"Don't worry, man," said Four-Armed Basara as he slapped Daggra on the back. "You got me right here, and I'll protect you all, no matter what."

As Daggra's uncle, he was ready to provide whatever support he needed, which tremendously relieved Daggrull. At long last, he could smile again.

"Luminus and I have yet to settle our disagreements, but this time, she has done me a favor I could hardly repay her for. I will lock up all our previous grudges inside of me and prepare for the future to come," said Daggrull.

Thanks to Veldora, their land was going to be revived. The age would come when territorial expansion was no longer a top priority, and so they no longer had a reason to battle Luminus.

Luckily, only a small number of them died in battle this time. The

ones who were near-mortally injured on both sides were immediately healed by Fertile Paradox and back at their posts. This miracle, too, played no small role in the lack of enmity between the two sides.

For now, they had to look toward the future, a vision Daggrull shared with his sons.

"Daggra, you will become our king someday. Instead of following my opinion, you must start to decide on matters and figure out what is right and wrong for yourself. In your hands is held the fate of the entire giant race. You'd do well to remember that—and both of *you*, too."

Fleeing was not an option—a fact Daggrull wanted Daggra, Liura, and Chonkra to be sure about. It unnerved his three sons a little.

"Y-yes, Father!" replied Daggra. "That goes without saying! I will wager my very life on carrying out my role as the king's proxy!"

"A-and I'll help him!" added Liura. "I promise I'll live up to your expectations, Father!"

"Yeah, for sure, Dad!" said Chonkra.

Daggrull would not accept hesitation on this topic, and there was no way his sons would dare to defy him. All three of them made their promises, awed by their father's oppression.

And then:

"We swear to pray for Sir Daggrull's return and follow Sir Daggra's orders for the sake of our country!!"

The elite members of the Bound Titans—fully aware of Daggrull's defeat, Veldora's rescue, and Luminus's kindness—all avowed their agreement with Daggrull's decision. Their king gave them a satisfied nod.

"I regret the fact that I cannot watch this war for myself, but there is little time left to work with. We will now go to sleep, firmly believing that we have a future waiting for us. The rest is in your hands, Daggra. For now, farewell…"

With those final words, Daggrull and his brothers were absorbed into the great tree. They would go to sleep so that they could revive both this land and their own physical bodies. Daggrull's rebellion was settled, and the Bound Titans were going to participate in the final battle.

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Mighty forces were now gathering across the continent. Those who wouldn't make it to the defense lines in time weren't counted on from the start—if they made it there, that proved they were already one-man armies.

One major surprise to see here was the five hundred Pegasus Knights, led by the champion Gazel Dwargo himself. "If *that's* how she's going to phrase it," he said with a chuckle, "I can hardly stay preoccupied with only my kingdom's matters." But despite his complaints, his eyes held a sincere drive. As his former training partner, he saw himself as responsible for guarding the fort while Rimuru was gone, a duty that motivated him to no end.

Hinata, meanwhile, was leading a team of three hundred Crusaders.

"You must stake your very lives on keeping the lines defended. If you die, Luminus will revive you anyway," she told them.

The order was beyond reckless, venturing into impossible territory, but it was gleefully accepted by her troops. They were all paladins with an over-A rating, and they had no fear of death whatsoever—a trait that was as eerie as it was reassuring to those around them.

Louis, leader of the vampires, captained a Bloody Knights group that numbered a bit under four hundred. Their holy robes certainly drew attention, so they served as the most conspicuous members of this army.

From the Empire, meanwhile, came a troop from the reformed Imperial Guardians, with Caligulio as commander and Minitz as his

aide-de-camp. They were to serve as an iron wall protecting Masayuki.

The main force, however, would be the thousand elite warriors selected from among the Bound Titans. Daggra, as interim king, was their commander, but Basara was also by his side, ensuring that everything went smoothly. They would be reinforced by a group of five hundred champions assembled from around the world. The new monarch Yohm was sighted among their ranks, as well as Queen Mjur Farminus (the former Mjurran), Gruecith, and even Razen.

Two of the Three Battlesages, Saare and Grigori, would temporarily go back into action for this effort, fighting alongside thirty members of the Master Rooks. Saare was afraid to so much as make eye contact with Hinata, but at least he didn't flee, indicating that he grew at least a bit of a backbone in the meantime.

This ragtag group of champions weren't much of an ordered fighting squadron, so they'd form smaller mobile units, the ranks of each team filled by those who were friendly with or otherwise knew one another. A hierarchy quickly made itself known among these teams, which made sense given how the more famous champions were generally the most powerful ones as well.

So, despite how hurried the effort was, they now had a defensive force comprised of the greatest elites the world had to offer.

Their total numbers were just under three thousand, all of them ranking on the upper end of an A—the most powerful fighting force one could think of. Luminus, observing the force as they fully surrounded Skyspire Tower, couldn't help but feel deeply moved.

"An impressive sight…but who knows how many of them will survive?" she wondered aloud.

Which of these champions lived and which died were none of Luminus's business…but she still thought about them, because within each of them was the shining glow of a soul that was true.

Standing next to Luminus was Shion, fully recovered and bursting with energy. When she woke up after Veldora's Fertile Paradox, she was still in an incomplete state; her magicule count had skyrocketed

so high that not even that crazy skill completely healed her.

"It's not a problem, though! I'm not going to let this body die on me," said Shion.

Luminus wondered what possible basis she might have had for saying that. This was Shion, so there was likely no basis at all—it was just pure hope talking. It *had* to turn out that way or else, a blunt way to express how she felt inside. Luminus liked that aspect of her. Pessimism wasn't going to help anyone. In Luminus's eyes, it was better to die with hope for the future than with despair in your heart.

But Shion and Adalmann's conversation concerned her a little.

"That's right. We'll use the Immortal Legion as a ruse to—"

"Ahhh, that's not going to be possible."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, I seem to have taken possession of a physical body…"

Luminus glared at Adalmann. He was right. She knew that he had merged with Venti during the fight against Fenn, and she assumed he was still in that mode…but apparently not. The miniature dragon on Adalmann's shoulder was Venti in her own transformed state, and that meant one thing—Adalmann had finally graduated from skeleton-dom, at least in his default state.

And not just him, either. Apparently, this applied to all members of the Immortal Legion. It had something to do with Veldora's Fertile Paradox; the skill saw being undead as a status ailment of sorts, so it removed that attribute from all of them.

"Is that, like, even possible?" a disinterested Ultima asked—and if even a Primal Demon was caught off guard by this turn of events, it *had* to be something really weird.

No longer being undead was great news for all of them… probably. But if they no longer cleared an A in rank, they wouldn't be useful in this battle. They'd now have to work in the rear guard, guiding the citizens and giants to their shelters and maintaining supply lines and such.

Only a short time remained before battle kicked off, and preparations were now rapidly underway.

INTERLUDE

KING OF THE INSECTS

Zeranus was nursing his wounds. Not the ones he incurred in the fight against Milim—the side effects from being forcibly subjected to Reconstruct Life.

Piriod's death was wholly unexpected, throwing his plans slightly out of whack, but it wound up not being a major issue. As far as Zeranus was concerned, even that tragedy merited nothing but a slight rearrangement of his original schedule.

All insectors were designed to belong to Zeranus. They had been birthed that way, from Piriod on down, and when she died, her power merely went back to Zeranus. It was supposed to revert to Piriod, so she'd eventually become a super being, but instead all that power went straight to Zeranus.

To someone like him, who didn't mind consuming even himself with Devastator Virus, it was no great change at all. He was just raising his own kin, like a farmer tending to his fields, and then he'd live off them. The better he was at raising them, the more powerful he became. Knowledge, power, experience—all of it became Zeranus's possession. That was the true nature of Sefirot, Lord of Life, his ultimate skill.

It was true that he anticipated Zeth would become more powerful than his parents over time, but now Zeranus was certain that was impossible. If it ever happened, he was prepared to turn Sefirot over to him, except it was doomed never to occur. Zeth was dead, too—more grist for the mill.

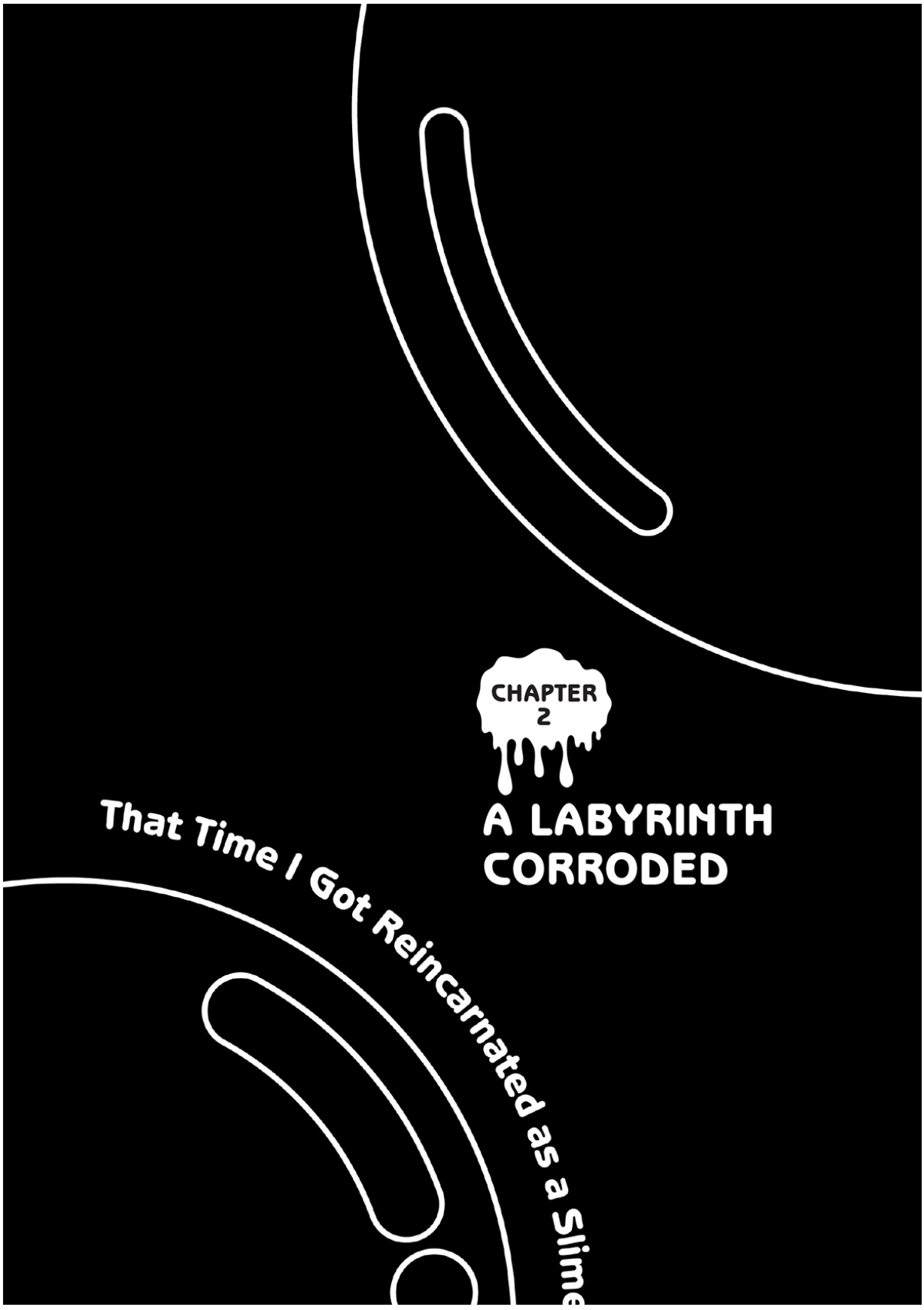
The moment arrived too early…but it looked like he had matured enough.

Zeranus was satisfied. The power surged within him. For the first

time in ages, he felt terrific, as if all his old abilities were back. He was several dozen times stronger than he'd been at birth. Even compared to when he fought Milim, he was overwhelmingly more powerful now. His existence points were well over a hundred million, making him a supernatural presence that surpassed even a True Dragon.

Yet it wasn't enough. Some of Zeranus's kin were still alive, exulting in the glories of their lives. He needed to consume them and aim for even greater heights.

He stood up. "Time to go, then," he said to the empty space he was in, and began to walk forward.


CHAPTER
2
A LABYRINTH
CORRODED
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



CHAPTER 2

A LABYRINTH CORRODED

Deeno was depressed.

Right now, he was advancing his way through Ramiris's labyrinth, on orders from Feldway himself. Deeno had only begun this mission, but already he was starting to wish he was anywhere else but here. His mind was screaming at him to take Pico and Garasha and just bug out of here…but it could never happen. Feldway's rule over him was absolute; Deeno was allowed a mere limited degree of freedom.

That bastard, he thought. *This is such a drag*. All he could do was curse himself for not being powerful enough to resist.

But someone else was also bothering Deeno. It was Vega, cheerfully and triumphantly leading the way for them.

"Whoa! I keep *telling* you to watch out for traps, man!"

Vega had just stepped on yet another switch, causing another giant boulder to tumble toward them. He should have seen this coming the moment the hallway started tilting uphill on them, but no, Vega really *was* stupid enough to fall for it.

Deeno's irritation was threatening to boil over. Why did it have to turn out like this for him? He thought back to how he got into this situation.

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Mai's skill brought them right to Tempest in an instant. There were five of them—her, Vega, Deeno, Pico, and Garasha—and they exchanged looks in front of the labyrinth. It was time for one final talk before they dove in.

"Now listen," Vega said, "from now on, you're following *my*

orders, all right?"

Deeno was already revolted by this, but it was Vega who was tasked with handling this mission. He could already picture the kind of trouble they'd no doubt have to deal with, but following Vega's lead was the only option allowed to him.

"And what kind of strategy d'you have in mind?" he asked.

"Simple," replied Vega, beyond confident in himself. "We'll storm in right down the middle and beat the crap out of everyone in there. That'll earn *you* some experience as well, and once I eat all their strongest guys, I'll be that much stronger."

How stupid can you get? thought Deeno.

He beyond hated Vega by now. Vega wanted to give him all the dirty work while he just cruised in there and gained yet more power for himself. It was a ridiculous plan, and Deeno wasn't afraid to say so.

"Whoa, whoa, are you crazy? This labyrinth is practically impregnable. I know I sound like I'm making excuses after we messed it up, but seriously, there's nothing but trouble in this joint! And that's not even the worst part! If any of them die in the labyrinth, they can get resurrected all they damn well want as long as Ramiris is there! You could kill them a billion times, and they still won't die! There's just no way we can conquer this place!"

Deeno was talking like this wasn't the mission he was asked to carry out. Even when he was on Tempest's side, he was a little bit frightened by this place—now that he'd switched allegiances, he deeply understood how fearsome it really was.

All he wanted to do was go in, act like he was accomplishing something, and bail out as soon as he could. And Pico and Garasha were ready to follow him.

"Hey," Pico said, "there're guys *we* can fight against in there, too, right? And they can't die, so they'll always go at us all the way. They don't even care about getting hurt. Like, it's not a fair match at all."

"Exactly," agreed Garasha. "The guy I fought was ridiculously tough and tenacious and…you know, just had the most persistent fighting spirit I ever saw. Having a born fighter like that pursue you, totally unafraid of death… *Forget* about it."

Garasha must not have wanted to be there, either. She wasn't being shy about her feelings on it at all, and neither she nor Pico were putting in much of an effort, either. Maybe they could win inside the labyrinth a little more readily if they tried their hardest, but if their enemies could revive themselves all they wanted, their side was bound to falter sooner or later. They all *knew* that, and it wasn't very motivating.

"Right? So let's just call this off before we waste any more time on it."

Deeno saw this as an honest word of advice for his boss. Tackling this labyrinth a second time also seemed like too much *work* to him, but he didn't mention that.

But Vega was apparently even more of an idiot than Deeno believed.

"Hey, no problem, man. They only resurrect if they're defeated, right?"

"Huh?"

"So I'll just eat them. Eat their bodies, and they can't resurrect after that."

Is that, like, how it works? Deeno wondered.

He wasn't sure. He thought, however, that Ramiris's skill worked by applying itself to people's souls. As long as she could tap into the information stored inside these souls, she'd be able to reconstruct entire bodies without issue.

"No, but the thing about Ramiris is that her skill—"

"So what?" Vega smiled at Deeno. "Either way, I can gain power from the guys I eat, right? So if they get resurrected, I can beat 'em even more easily next time."

Vega's steadfast belief in his own convoluted logic began to irritate Deeno.

"No, the guardians of this labyrinth are *better* than that. You can't beat them *that* easily!"

He really wished Vega wouldn't talk like he had already conquered this thing.

This is why I hate working with the utterly clueless…

"It'll be *fine*, man!" Vega insisted. "If you guys are gonna be *that*

timid about this, I'll just use Create Dracobeast to generate some more minions. As long as I have the right food for 'em, I can create up to four at once!"

Vega's confidence knew no bounds. Deeno wanted to stamp his feet in protest.

Why does he refuse to listen to anyone…?

He had an urge to shout that to the heavens, but unfortunately, Vega held all the power in this group. The fault here lay with Feldway and the thrall he put over them. Deeno could curse his own fate, but he had no choice but to do Vega's bidding.

"…Well, I warned you, okay?" Deeno told Vega.

"Heh! You sure do worry too much. But fine. If it gets *that* bad, I can just use my ultimate skill Azhdahak, Lord of Dark Dragons, to eat up the labyrinth itself!"

"Don't be crazy," Deeno spat.

"Are you stupid?" Pico asked.

"Save that crap for the toilet," Garasha quipped.

"…Seriously?" said Mai.

Vega's idea just now was so ridiculous, even the taciturn Mai had to join in.

"Quit treating me like an idiot. As strong as I am now, consuming a whole labyrinth like this is no problem whatsoever."

Vega sneered at their retorts. They only inspired him further, and by the next moment, he had opened the labyrinth door, cutting off the debate. Any more talking was clearly useless, so Deeno finally gave up.

"Okay, okay," he said. "You just want me to listen to you, so I will…"

"*That's* the spirit!"

No matter how hopeless this expedition was, it was already set in stone. Vega had made up his mind, and the others had no way to defy him.

"…Worst-case scenario, we can use my World Map to escape…I hope," said Mai.

"I think that'll work, yeah."

Deeno tried to help Mai motivate herself a little. Entering and

leaving Ramiris's labyrinth was actually pretty headache-free—it accepted all who entered, and it wasn't too picky about keeping people inside. Deeno knew it had some neat features like isolation chambers and the ability to shore up its defenses simply by adding more floors, but he hadn't heard anything about preventing people from leaving. Escape, at least, wasn't a major worry for him.

"Good to hear. You guys are wimps, so try not to slow me down too much!"

With that, Vega ventured inside. Deeno followed right behind, Pico and Garasha taking a moment to steel their resolve before sheepishly joining him. Mai silently stepped in as well…and so they were invading the labyrinth with a group of just five people, the worst possible scenario Deeno could think of.

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And now Vega's reckless march continued.

"Hey, weren't you gonna create some minion beasts for us?"

Deeno, always looking for the easy way out, really wanted to see some dracobeasts with them soon.

"Will you shut *up*?" Vega angrily replied. "Wait a bit! I don't have any food for them!"

The monsters that should have been prowling the labyrinth halls were nowhere to be seen. There were some around, sure, but far fewer than usual, and they were all unintelligent little afterthoughts. Instead, the number of traps had skyrocketed compared to before.

Guess they saw right through our plan…, mused Deeno.

He was convinced of it. Their strategy meeting at the entrance was doomed to be overheard by the enemy—it was almost like Vega wanted it that way—so he felt relieved to see things turn out like this. All these traps, however, were really a drag. He'd really hoped things would have gone easier than this for him.

"Don't let your guards down, okay? Anything can happen in here," he cautioned.

"Yeah, I know," said Vega. "I told you I was gonna corrode this labyrinth, didn't I? I'm counting on you guys to buy me some time

for that.”

The moment they entered, Vega had begun his corrosion. It wasn’t providing results yet, and that was to be expected. Ramiris’s labyrinth wasn’t a living creature, so the ultimate skill Azhdahak’s Dominate Organic ability wouldn’t work on it. But Vega wasn’t giving up. He didn’t really have a deep understanding of his skills, but he *could* feel them maybe working a little bit.

So he was laying out microscopic magi-bacteria on the walls of the labyrinth. This would normally be a pointless endeavor, and since it consumed his energy, he didn’t have any to generate dracobeasts with. Even worse, despite all that effort, Vega was still tripping every trap they came across.

Garasha was losing her patience. “Can you stop taking the lead position, at least?”

“Yeah, stop setting off every single thing.”

Pico, too, was taking this chance to vent at Vega. It wasn’t exactly the most cohesive of teams, but onward they went, deeper into the maze.



There was a group monitoring these labyrinth raiders. Benimaru and his team were on the job, trusting in Rimuru’s return and dedicated to protecting his home turf.

Inside the Control Center at the bottom floor was a large monitor hanging from the wall front and center. Vega’s party was shown on it, revealing everything they were up to. Benimaru was sitting on the commander’s chair, a spot Veldora normally occupied, as he stared at the screen. Next to him was another special seat, this one set up in midair for Ramiris. It was miniature but gaudy and gorgeous, and it even came with a matching desk.

The rest of the Control Center had been remodeled along the same lines as this chair. This included a lot of needless decoration, such as the rows of blinking lights put there strictly for a “starship

bridge" atmosphere. Still, most of the room's tech was real, with screens and gauges all over the place allowing the staff to monitor everything going on in the labyrinth.

Manning each of these stations were Treyni's brethren.

"Playing conversation!"

"Switch over to that one. Activate the trap!"

"Data collection fully working! Enemy EP calculation complete!"

Everyone was dutifully handling their jobs.

Vega's party was working its way past one trap after the other. It seemed like a pointless obstacle course at first, but it was actually a vital part of the labyrinth team's strategy. Benimaru, listening in on Vega, decided to prevent him from gaining any "prey" to consume. He was using traps to lure them down a path where they'd run into as few monsters as possible.

Now they had made it past Floor 50. Bovix and Equix, the usual bosses of this section, had been evacuated to safety; it was unclear if they'd be revivable after Vega ate them, and the Control Center staff didn't want to take needless risks. People *could* be fully revived from their souls alone, just as Deeno feared, but there were still too many unknowns to contend with. What if Vega ate someone alive, for example? The labyrinth's reputation for absolute safety was at stake, so Benimaru and his peers played their hand as conservatively as possible.

Still, this was certainly a novel way to tackle the labyrinth. Deeno, who figured out Vega's plan first, was doing a fine job.

They were past another boss floor, and what awaited them next was the cutting edge in scientific weaponry, all activated and ready. With the boss guardians missing from many floors, Ramiris had done some crash remodeling to much of the labyrinth—those traps were designed to buy her more time for this effort as well.

This was where things would start to get serious.

"Well, here we go," Benimaru murmured.

"Yeah, so far so good, huh?" Ramiris nodded, crossing her arms and putting a hand to her chin to look smart. She was giving the room an imposing smile, as if setting the atmosphere around here was job one for her at the moment.

“Stop playing around and get to work!” Shuna barked. She folded up her fan and bopped Benimaru on the head with it.

“Ow! It hurts when you have it folded up, you know! Can’t you be any kinder to your beloved brother?!”

The way he saw it, Shuna couldn’t tell the difference between a playful love tap and a head-crushing blow. But Shuna didn’t care.

“I have no kindness for you! I understand that you’re trying to ease your anxiety while Sir Rimuru is gone, but you need to stop with the games and be serious about this!”

Shuna was laying down the law, and she had a stout ally in Beretta.

“Why are you wasting time, Lady Ramiris?” he asked sharply. “Lady Shuna is right—this is an emergency. If you don’t shape up, I’m going to report this to Sir Rimuru when he returns.”

Ramiris began to panic. “Whoa! Wait, what’re you talking about? I’m being totally serious right now…!”

She was frantically making excuses; the “gruff commander” act from before was completely gone.

“You too, Benimaru,” added Soei. “This is not playtime, as I’m sure you’re aware. It’s a battle we cannot afford to lose.”

Benimaru meekly nodded back at Soei. “I know, but a commander needs to be relaxed.”

Ramiris eagerly joined Benimaru’s excuse-making. “Y-yeah, he’s right! We’re trying to look as relaxed as possible to keep everyone from worrying!”





Benimaru, meanwhile, was thinking about how hard it was to imitate Rimuru's style. No matter what kind of danger was up ahead, Rimuru would keep it casual at all times, helping everyone stay calm and gather themselves. When Benimaru tried the same thing, *this* was how people reacted. He tried to act unaffected, joining Ramiris in her games…but all that did was rile the more serious-minded in the room.

Ramiris fired back at Beretta, grousing about how Rimuru never yelled at her for playing "just a little," but it was time to move on from this topic anyway. Rimuru was a talent like no one else here, so trying to copy him in the first place was asking for trouble. Benimaru would just have to find his own way to calm everyone down.

He and Ramiris exchanged glances, communicating their thoughts to each other. Then their attention turned back to their work as they gave out orders to deal with Vega's party. Things actually were proceeding as predicted so far.

"So what are the EP figures for the enemy?" Benimaru asked.

"The black-haired girl here is at 1.66 million points," an operator replied. "The bow she carries is a God-class weapon with a million points of its own for a total of 2.66 million EP."

The twenty-four members of Dryas Doll Dryad were carrying out their duties without Beretta having to micromanage them. They nimbly operated their control consoles, putting figures up on the main screen.

On that screen right now was a young woman with her black hair in a ponytail. Her narrow eyes and taut, pink lips gave her a grimly serious look. This was Mai Furuki, and her weapon was the crescent bow Orlia created. It had disappeared upon Orlia's death but manifested all over again after Vega took over the Multi-Weapon skill, and she had been borrowing it ever since.

"She had teleportation skills, didn't she? Normally, I'd want to take her out of the picture first…," said Benimaru.

"I don't think that's possible. It's likely she can escape my labyrinth whenever she wants."

In other words, Ramiris was saying, isolating her inside of here wouldn't work. That, too, was just as Deeno thought. He might be

lazy and selfish, but he could actually be pretty insightful.

"She *is* a threat, but killing her should be a last resort."

"Why is that?" Ramiris asked Benimaru, curious.

"Because I'm sure Sir Rimuru wouldn't want it."

Everyone had to agree with that. Mai was clearly from the same place Rimuru was—and still a child, no less. If she was here voluntarily, there'd be room for debate on this, but there was no doubting the fact that Feldway was controlling her. Killing her would have to wait until it was absolutely necessary. Ramiris didn't like killing very much anyway, so she readily agreed with Benimaru's assessment…but she didn't like just going along with him all the time, either, so she put on a gruff face.

"You're keeping things pretty loose, aren't you?" she said.

Everyone in the room knew exactly what she was thinking.

"Of course," Benimaru replied with a chuckle. "If the commander stops being loose, the battle's doomed."

That casual reply made everyone else loosen up, too. Calmness reigned once again in the Control Center.

Next on the monitor was Pico.

"Regarding this young girl…," an operator began.

She wasn't young in terms of age, but that's how she was described.

"Ah yes, I fought her. I believe she called herself Pico," said Kumara, in one of the lower seats. Her eyes gleamed; maybe she wanted a rematch.

"We recorded her conversation," reported an operator. "The subject's name is indeed Pico."

She outlined Pico's vital statistics. Her existence rating was pegged at 1.89 million, and she bore a God-class trident, bringing the total to 2.89.

"Another tough customer."

"Sir Benimaru, I humbly beg you to let me pair with her in battle."

"I'll think about it, Kumara."

It felt a bit too early to make that call.

Next up was Garasha.

"This was my opponent," observed Geld. "She was quite the seasoned warrior, although she wasn't seriously trying at all."

He seemed to be itching for round two as well, but Benimaru really wanted him to focus on healing. His wounds were gone, but Geld wouldn't be relieved of his fatigue that easily. The damage he'd taken from that skill had been passed around among his companions, but apparently, it all came back to him after the fight ended. He had to be shouldering a lot, and him on the battlefield right now would be suicide.

Still, Benimaru understood Geld's feelings. He, too, was eager to fight on the front lines, despite not being fully recovered from the previous battle. Rimuru's absence made him nervous, and fighting was a great way to work off those nerves. Now, however, they had to be careful with every move they made. It was too early for Geld to wade into battle, and that was Benimaru's final decision.

He turned his attention to Garasha's numbers.

"The subject Garasha's EP is 2.44 million, and she's in possession of a God-class longsword and circle shield," an operator stated.

That put her grand total at 4.44 million existence points—and that made Garasha a classic example of why, when it comes to EP, bigger isn't necessarily better. If you wanted to inflate your number, you could always start wearing a lot of fancy gear—but that didn't connect to actual strength at all. There wasn't much God-class gear out there in the first place, and that gear didn't even mean anything unless you mastered its control.

Garasha was likely capable of bringing the most out of her gear, though, so she was still a serious foe to watch.

"How to handle this, I wonder…," mused Benimaru as he looked at the next set of data.

Now Deeno was on the screen, looking wholly checked out. That was a familiar enough sight, but it made Ramiris seethe at her desk.

"You better be ready for me, Deeno! I'm gonna make you pay big-time for what you did to me!"

He couldn't hear her, but Ramiris didn't particularly care.

"This subject is Deeno, the 'Sleeping Ruler' and member of the Octagram," the operator began, although everyone knew that already. Deeno's EP was pegged at 2.26 million, and the large God-class sword on his back was 2.2 million—pretty serious stuff. That gave him a total of 4.46 million EP, but—

"But he *sooo* doesn't want to be here, does he?"

Ramiris sounded sure of it.

"What makes you say that?" Benimaru asked, although he figured she was probably correct.

"My sixth sense. My *feminine* sixth sense."

Everyone in the room gave her a "yeah, right" look.

The final party member to tackle was Vega, who was also the biggest threat. Everyone peered at the data on-screen.

"His EP is 17.37 million? What a monster."

Benimaru summed up what everyone was feeling. Only Diablo still had a smile on his face.

"Would you like me to step up and take care of him, perhaps?" he asked, his smile widening.

Benimaru hesitated for a moment.

"No, don't," he said before Diablo could protest. "His skills are still largely an unknown to us. He got away from Testarossa once, after all. We need to exercise caution."

Benimaru sincerely believed they'd get Vega this time, but he wanted to wait until the moment was ripe. They needed to at least peel Vega away from Mai, or he'd be able to escape at the drop of a hat. A clear plan of action was necessary to deal with this threat. Diablo was convinced enough of this, too, so he politely withdrew his offer.

"Now," said Ramiris, "if you ask me, it looks like Vega's up to some *real* mean business at the moment."

Benimaru nodded. "Corrupting the labyrinth, yes? As in his conversation with Deeno?"

"…Is that possible?" Treyni asked.

"Huh? Of course not," Ramiris indifferently replied. No one else thought so, either…

"But," she continued, "I think we might be better off not lettin' our guards down with that. I had kind of a bad feeling, so I looked closer into it, but I think he's seriously tryin' to eat up this whole thing."

As she put it, Vega's magi-bacteria was threatening to fully cover the entire labyrinth. This structure was an imaginary creation, composed of neither organic nor inorganic matter, and since magi-bacteria only worked on organic objects, it was impossible for that stuff to affect it at all. However, Vega was still keeping up the effort.

"So, y'know, when he changes floors, he loses control over the bacteria he had before that point, I guess. Which I think he knows, but…"

He had to be on the same plane as his magi-bacteria or else he'd lose control over them…but he was still spreading them around on every new floor he reached. Was there any point to this? In fact, there was.

"I mean, yeah, those little things *are* eating the weaker monsters on the floors, and it's boosting his power just a little bit each time it happens. Kinda gross, really."

"Great." Benimaru groaned.

Another annoying foe to deal with. Getting Bovix and Equix out of there had been the right move. They were both seated, exchanging glances and breathing a sigh of relief.

"So," Diablo began, "do we have a sample of this bacteria or whatnot he's released?"

Ramiris nodded. "Of course we do!" she crowed, ordering Beretta to bring a beaker-like object up for observation. Diablo took out a pinch of the matter inside and tried to destroy it.

"Certainly doesn't *seem* too tough," he noted.

Benimaru did the same, using his fire to burn a small amount. As expected, it was easily killed—a reassuring sight.

"Once it's free of Vega's rule, it doesn't have that much life force left, does it?" said Benimaru.

"Indeed," replied Diablo. "We had best thoroughly cleanse the

labyrinth of them when we can, though, just in case."

Vega's growth was simply astonishing. There was no telling whether his effects would rub off on this stuff and trigger a sudden mutation or something, so safety had to come first. And in fact, the EP of Vega (and Vega alone) was fluctuating a bit and in an ominous way. They had to stop him then and there, or he'd become an even more serious threat later.

Now that everyone was on the same page about this, the way forward was clear. Once Mai and Vega were separated, Benimaru and the others needed to address their anxieties for the future by eliminating Vega.



Since Gadora was absent at the moment, the guardian of Floor 60 was the Demon Colossus. It was designed for overwhelming violence and ordered to eliminate any intruders it saw. After some key adjustments by old Gadora, it now had a variety of weapons at its disposal, each more heinous than the last; no normal band of adventurers could hope to deal with it.

But when faced with Deeno's party, that power did little more than slow their advance for a bit.

"Ugh," moaned Deeno. "All this trouble it put us through. I can't believe how tough-skinned the thing was."

"Also, why did it disappear into that cloud of light particles?"

"I hate to even think it…but you think maybe the golems in here get resurrected, too?"

Pico and Garasha weren't too happy to be here, either—a common opinion as of late. But Mai, looking supremely serious compared to them, didn't see it that way.

"Come on, that's silly," she said. "We're talking *golems* here."

It seemed like a fair point to everyone. But one could never be assured of anything in the labyrinth, and Deeno knew that more than anyone else. He wasn't too proud to let everyone know, either.

"Yeah, sure, think that if you want. Like I said, anything's possible in here."

He thought he could lord it over them by saying that, but only Mai's cold stare acknowledged his words at all.

"Of course," noted Garasha, "even if he *could* revive, he's not *that* much of a threat."

"It *would* be an annoyance, I'll admit," said Mai.

Deeno understood that he was sounding a little ridiculous—but the labyrinth itself was the most ridiculous thing of all, a fact he wanted to shout to the heavens. The idea of man-made golems getting resurrected in here struck him as terribly unfair…but when he recalled Ramiris's evil grin, he was too afraid to discount the possibility entirely.

She might just be able to do it…

Then he suddenly remembered: Wasn't she conducting research along those lines? He didn't hear anything about a breakthrough yet, but the research facility was pretty much a den of monsters at this point, and the memory of what he saw down there made it impossible to banish his worries.

The thing that made him fret so much was how the lab was populated by a bunch of folks with more than a few screws loose. The slime, first and foremost, but also Gadora, the vampires, Kaijin, his beloved boss Vester, and so forth. They were constantly making giant leaps forward in their research, so Deeno wouldn't have been surprised if they'd implemented self-resurrecting golems by now.

Ramiris, too, was just as scary as all those guys. She wasn't physically strong enough to threaten anyone, but her brain was her most lethal weapon. People were often tricked by how she acted and sounded, but she was actually pretty intelligent. That was how this labyrinth was so quickly converted into an impregnable military fortress.

"Like, seriously, can't we go home yet?" Deeno grumbled.

He couldn't be blamed for whining like that.

Then, as if fated all along, his fears came true.

"Okay, here we go! Today I'm offering y'all a full-course meal of our very best golems! Have fun with them!"

The ebullient voice of Ramiris echoed across the halls—and then the nightmare began. Laser beams dancing all around; lava that flowed like someone overturned a blast furnace; missiles that constantly pursued them; hypersonic waves that destroyed any will to go on. That and the thermite plasma—a rain of it, forming flames that never fizzled out…

Ramiris is enjoying every damn minute of this!

Deeno was crying bitter tears of rage now. He had good reason to. They were the test subjects for a litany of brand-new weapons, and he just wanted it all to stop. None of it was lethal on contact or even all that worrisomely damaging, but it was a huge blow to his psyche, and if Ramiris kept it up long enough, it *would* exhaust him in time.

He didn't have anything as useful as a barrier that resisted everything, and Rimuru probably knew that when he devised this gauntlet, so of course it was going to impact him hard. Even worse, Ramiris was capable of implementing all the insane ideas Rimuru had come up with. Like, why would they set up a *blast furnace* in this labyrinth? It was an impossible sight normally, but once Ramiris was on the job, she just made it happen.

And right now, before their eyes:

"See? It *did* resurrect!"

"Oh, come *on*! What's *with* this place?!"

Pico and Garasha both shouted in unison, likely having anticipated this outcome.

"Like," Deeno said a moment later, "if they can revive man-made objects, I mean… Can't Ramiris just give us a freakin' break already?"

"…I'm sorry," the serious-minded Mai softly stated. "I never expected this…"

Ramiris had warned him about this cavalcade of golems, and she meant it, as Deeno now saw. The golem that had vanished into a swarm of particles was now back and in like-new shape. And there were *more* of them. Ramiris was busting out everything in stock,

including the newest types and test models.

"You're just harassing me now, aren't you, Ramiris?!" Deeno hollered as he tried his best to handle this barrage.

Inside Ramiris's domain, all her subordinates enjoyed immortality…but if that applied to inorganic golems, too, the threat was incalculable. It only dawned on Deeno now that he was opposing her, but Ramiris's intrinsic skill Mazecraft was the epitome of unfairness. He couldn't believe how much he looked down on her all this time.

✳

"F-finally, it's calmed down a little…," Deeno said, breathing a sigh of relief.

Garasha nodded. "Yeah. It's gotta if they run out of material…"

They had been forced to fight for three hours straight, but at long last, there was no sign of any golems coming back to life on them. It looked like the missiles and gunfire, at least, couldn't be magically restarted by Ramiris's skill. If they could, Ramiris could easily create a perpetual motion machine next, so that made sense.

Deeno had factored that into the strategy he came up with for his party, and it had paid off for him at long last.

"I'm *so* tired. Like, Mai, if you didn't bash the engine out of that thing for us, we would've been fighting forever, huh?"

"I owe you one for pointing it out to me, Deeno."

He had suggested that Mai separate the golems' engines from their main bodies and teleport them outside of the labyrinth. The spirit cores that golems ran on could produce energy forever as long as they had magicules to feed on. If things hadn't worked out for them, then Pico was right—they'd be fighting until the end of time. Having a talented Dominate Space user like Mai on hand was what allowed this approach to strut its stuff.

Having to fight together in such close quarters for so long also helped break the ice between Mai and the rest of the party. The

battle was an exhausting slog from start to finish, but it wasn't all bad, either.

Still, though…

Deeno flashed a dirty look at Vega, who was meditating in a Zen position. They'd held their ground here, never fleeing, solely because *this* man had ordered them to.

"Listen, you four!" Vega boomed. "I am going to seize all the labyrinth's capabilities right here and now. It looks like I lose all connections to previous floors when we go to a new one, so I'm gonna try my luck with this while you're beating the boss here."

It didn't sound at all like it'd work, but Vega wasn't going to take no for an answer before he could even try it. So they all reluctantly agreed—or were forced to agree anyway. All this torment was primarily Vega's fault, and Deeno wasn't even trying to hide his annoyance.

"Hey, so is it working?" Deeno asked.

"Mmm? Oh…" Vega opened his eyes a smidge. "Not too badly," he said, stretching as he stood up. "I figured out one thing, at least—my skill doesn't work on inorganic objects after all."

Him shamelessly bringing this up did little to cheer Deeno.

"What? So all that effort on our part just went to waste?"

He didn't really make an effort, but yes, he had been put to work for three whole hours. That, to Deeno, was hard labor, and he thought he had the right to complain about it. But Vega paid his irritated companion no mind.

"I lose control over my magi-bacteria when we change floors, which proves that the labyrinth is set up so every floor is in its own separate dimension. So if I enter a floor and cover it with my skill, everything inside of it becomes my meal. Right? Good idea, huh?"

Vega liked to think—and talk—to himself a lot more than listen to anyone. His optimism was laudable, but he didn't care one bit about the rest of his party. Deeno wanted to scream at him but resisted the urge, because Vega wasn't talking complete nonsense.

"Okay. So let me just confirm this—if your bacteria or whatever fully cover an area, is it possible for us to teleport over there?" Deeno asked.

"Huh? No. Of course not."

Vega sounded pretty confident.

"I think that's asking too much," added Mai. "I mean, it's already hard enough to figure out the exact coordinates of a living creature."

Calculating those sorts of locations with any precision was difficult inside a constantly changing space like this. Jumping from inside the labyrinth over to the outside was simple enough, but as Mai put it, the opposite wasn't true.

Deeno, hearing this, grinned. "Well, this means that we're unlikely to get snuck up on, right? You're eating the monsters we kill, and we're wiping up everything else—that's pretty huge. We can keep enemies from running away, too, and I bet we could think of some other uses."

As said before, Deeno was no fool. He had keen insight into anything that would make life easier for him. Gaining more food to eat would give Vega more energy to work with, which meant he'd start creating those dracobeasts for him—and that should make things a lot more chill for the rest of the party. He knew that Rimuru and his friends could teleport anywhere they wanted to inside Ramiris's labyrinth, and if they could prevent that, maybe Vega was on to something really big.

However, trying out his idea on this golem floor wouldn't help at all. They'd need to see how well it worked on the next one down.

It sounded valid to Deeno—and Vega, hearing this, was elated.

"Wow, great, great! You understand me after all, don't you, Deeno? But yes, as long as I'm around, it'll be easy to conquer the rest of this place!"

He was getting pretty carried away.

"Great, thanks. Stop slapping me on the shoulder like that. Now, can you summon some dracobeasts for us?"

"Sure thing, man. I'm gonna focus on taking over this labyrinth down on the next floor, too, so sweep things up for me, okay?"

Deeno nodded. He just wanted to avoid work, so he was ready to accept Vega's suggestion. If he was all for it, then Pico and Garasha were, too, and Mai was going to follow along no matter what. What started as a hasty, unplanned assault on the labyrinth was starting

to take on a much more palpable form.

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By the time they climbed down to it, Floor 61 seemed terribly anticlimactic.

"The enemies are all gone, huh? Right after that all-out attack?" said Vega.

"Isn't it supposed to be nothing but undead from Floor 61 down?" Deeno asked.

"You're right," said a surprised Mai. "There aren't even any weaker monsters around. The higher floors were a lot more painful than this."

"Tsk… What, they scared of me now? What's the point of tryin' to take over this floor, then?"

"Well," Deeno said to Vega, "I'm gonna guess that whoever was here left to take on Daggrull."

He was right to assume that, but Mai gave him a surprised look. "What? No way. How many monsters got taken out of here?"

A Spatial Motion expert like her was curious about what kind of operation it was.

"Oh, I don't know. Ten thousand or so?"

Mai gasped. "Is that even possible?"

"I think Adalmann could do it, at least. It'd be an alternate take on summoning the dead for him."

Deeno didn't really care about how difficult a task that was, despite Mai's shocked reaction.

"But they're using the monsters that run wild in here for their army, too? That's kind of against the rules, isn't it?" Pico asked.

"It's beyond that," Garasha told her. "I never would've come up with that idea in a million years."

"Yeah, well, don't ask me to explain it. Go bother Rimuru instead! I'm just as weirded out by this as you."

Deeno was done fighting. The lack of enemies meant he had no

work to do, giving him the time to shoot the breeze with his companions.

So they kept on walking until they found a floor with monsters lurking inside. It didn't happen until Floor 71.

"Ahhh, yeah, Zegion's still in here," Deeno whispered with a hint of concern.

With all the wriggling insects around them, there was no way that their lord Zegion wouldn't be joining them. It made Deeno tear up a little. Now he and his party were assuredly about to get their asses kicked.

"Okay. Just like the plan, all right? Get going," a cheerful Vega said.

"I'll put in *an* effort, I guess," Deeno lazily replied. He figured that if they weren't going to win, what was the harm in letting Vega do what he wanted?

So Vega sat down, attempting to corrode the labyrinth once again. He shrank his own cells, turning them into magi-bacteria, and then thinly spread them around until they covered every surface. Deeno really wished he'd broken out some of those dracobeasts first, but apparently, he couldn't control them and the magi-bacteria at the same time. Not even Vega was omnipotent, so summoning those beasts would tap his coffers pretty quickly.

"Well, so be it. Let's just hunt down these bugs and feed them to Vega," Deeno told the rest of the crew.

"Right."

"Sounds good."

"…"

So began the insect hunt, with Deeno's party protecting the "home base" where Vega sat. Vega, meanwhile, was evolving his ultimate skill Azhdahak in an unthinkable new direction—and he didn't even realize it.

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In a small room within Floor 71, Vega was seated and meditating. He was used to this now, having done the same thing several times before on other floors, but this time he had a new, clearer goal.

Eager to get to work, he began to release his skill. He tried to corrode the labyrinth, like he did every time, but nothing happened. Of course it didn't. Azhdahak, Lord of Dark Dragons, held sway over organic matter, so it couldn't do a thing against the imaginary matter this labyrinth was made of. Trying to take over the labyrinth like this was never going to work.

But Vega was actually making a very wrong assumption. In fact, despite possessing it, he completely misunderstood Azhdahak from the ground up. His skill was still only in the developing stages—and since he thought it only worked on organic matter, he was looking to *consume* energy with it, not seize it for his own. Organic matter was easier for Vega's body to take in, and it also formed the cores that dracobeasts ran on.

The real essence of Azhdahak, however, lay in absorbing the power from whatever it consumed. If that was impossible against a given target, it could still seize that energy through an ability known as Absorb Skill. If he wanted to take on the entire labyrinth, it was Absorb Skill he should've been tapping into, not Dominate Organic.

Vega hadn't picked up on that yet. Instead, he was letting himself get carried away, skipping whole steps of the procedure as he unleashed the full brunt of his skill.

Normally, he applied the brakes to this sort of thing since it burned through energy at a breakneck speed, but he wanted to show off his capabilities to Deeno and the rest of the party. He could tell they were openly looking down on him, which was another motivation of his. So, giving way to his instincts, he tried chewing on the labyrinth one more time, swallowing it whole…

Hoh? Haven't gotten a reaction like this before…

There was a new question in his mind. The feeling wasn't so inorganic any longer. He had the vague impression that he was finally getting somewhere.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, this can work, can't it?!

This was a rush like nothing before it. The ultimate skill

Azhdahak, if he ran its feelers into and along the ground, could take in organic matter and create infinite copies of its master. What would happen, though, if this feature of it was thrown against the labyrinth?

The results were shocking. It failed to take in the imaginary matter this place was made of, but it promptly began sucking away the energy of the labyrinth itself. Working its way into the natural environment around Vega, it gave him the opportunity to create infinite copies of himself, making him part of the natural landscape. That was the true essence of Azhdahak, and this was the correct way to harness it. Vega had unconsciously learned it, and now he was making it his own.

Once an environment was sucked dry of its energy, it was destroyed and doomed to perish. Vega had no way of knowing that, and even if he did, it wouldn't have bothered him.

The problem was what waited on the other side of this. If Vega somehow found a way to fully assimilate himself into Ramiris's labyrinth, he'd be able to take over full ownership of it, just like that. Ramiris's Mazecraft skill would become Vega's, and *that* was far too powerful a skill to put in the hands of somebody like him. It'd do more than just destroy him—it would create a truly terrifying situation.

Vega, unaware of any of that, pressed forward.

This feels so incredible! I'm taking in energy directly from the labyrinth itself! Maybe I can't take it over, but at the very least, I'm guaranteed not to be the loser today!

With the infinite stores of energy this unlocked for him, Vega was as good as invincible. If he had taken in the skill driving the labyrinth as well, it would've been perfect—otherwise, he could just drain all its energy and reduce it to a spent pulp. Then the enemy would lose their *own* immortality! They'd try to flee in a panic, no doubt, but there was nowhere safe on the surface for them. Vega didn't even have to worry about them, then—Feldway would take care of the rest for him.

Of course, if I could just take over this labyrinth, I wouldn't have to let anyone escape from here, then, huh?!

By this point, Vega was assured of his victory. This labyrinth truly *was* impregnable—the greatest threat he knew—and out of nowhere, he had just found a way to reign supreme over it. Even better, it was clearly all thanks to Vega's own hard work. It was like stealing the enemy's immortality from them and making it his own. It'd be impossible to ask Vega *not* to be excited over this.

Deeno and his cohorts seemed terribly afraid of this labyrinth, and that wasn't ridiculous of them, either. It's just that Vega was *that* much better than them, and the thought made him pine for victory all the more. The more dangerous this labyrinth was, the greater the rewards to reap once he bested it for good. It'd be Vega's power conquering this dungeon that everyone feared and revered; who wouldn't be overjoyed to pull off a feat like that?

Well, I'm all in on this now. Time to show off what I can do and finish off this invasion with a dominating victory!

If Vega could shut down this labyrinth's abilities, all that remained was for him to trample all over it. That wasn't happening, but if Vega himself was de facto invincible, he was guaranteed to not *lose*, at least.

So he began corroding the labyrinth at an even quicker pace, already dreaming of the upcoming moment of total victory.

……

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…

The other four party members were tackling the labyrinth, using Vega's location as their starting point. Frankly, none of them believed Vega's strategy would ever work—in fact, all they really wanted was to pick up their stuff and get the hell out of there.

How can he be so stupid?! I never counted on him for anything from the start, thought Deeno. *But…well, if he's setting things up so I don't have to work anymore, I guess I could humor him for a little while longer…*

Deeno had been begging the whole time, but Vega still hadn't broken out any of those dracobeasts. Deeno understood why, but that didn't mean he was okay with it. Zegion was around here, someone Deeno did *not* want to fight, and besides, he wasn't

particularly interested in conquering this labyrinth in the first place. He couldn't escape thanks to Feldway's rule over him, and Feldway couldn't make him enthusiastic about this.

Also, Deeno had a promise with Rimuru, one that kept him from going too far out of line. He was trying to keep talking as much as possible, discussing their plans out loud, so the Control Center could learn about them all. Hopefully, that was enough to earn Rimuru's forgiveness, but that depended on Rimuru, not him.

Ugggggggggh… Dammit! This is all such a pain in the ass!!

That succinctly summed up his current situation.

Regardless of whether Vega conquered this labyrinth or not, Deeno didn't really care how things turned out. Pico and Garasha were the same way. He wasn't as sure about Mai, but it didn't seem like she had sworn her loyalty to Feldway or anything. That's just what his instincts told him, but he found they were usually right about stuff like this.

Either way, it was already impossible to escape this. He had resigned himself to supporting Feldway, although he hoped to reserve the right to whine and moan about it.

"I mean," said Pico, "he's just, like, the *worst* damn person! Who does he think he even is?"

"Right?" replied Garasha. "He orders us around like some big shot. Who could ever like someone like that? Why are you letting him *do* that, Deeno?"

"What do you want from me? Feldway's taken over my mind."

"You can't undo that at all?"

"Don't you think I would've *done* it by now if I could?"

"True…," said Pico.

"I guess he's kinda ruling over us, too, isn't he?" said Garasha. "Vega drives me crazy, but really, I've got it in even worse for Feldway."

Pico and Garasha both possessed angelic ultimate skills, so there was no escaping the absolute rule over them. If they knew how to wriggle out of it, things would've changed pretty quickly, but for now, there was nothing they could do.

And along those lines…

"But you know, Mai…*your* skill isn't angelic at all. Why do you need to do Feldway's bidding all the time?" Deeno asked.

Mai's skill, indeed, wasn't angelic.

"Huh?"

Mai's eyes opened wide. She must not have expected to be the subject of conversation out of nowhere. She looked a little flustered, not at all the no-nonsense feel she usually exuded.

"Um… That's not true, though. I was given Alternative by Sir Michael, so…," she countered.

"Yeah, but you can bear down a little and overcome that, can't you?"

"Well, if I'm given an order, it's kinda like, ooh, I better carry it out, so—"

"That's just what *you* think!"

Deeno hardly liked putting in an effort on anything himself, but he was really good at having people do stuff for him. If someone else was raring to take action, after all, that always made things a lot easier for him. This time, he was targeting Mai.

"Yeah, Mai! Don't you realize it? You can save us!" said Pico.

"He's right! Let's all go somewhere really far away, where those pricks can't order us around any longer! Like, another dimension even!" Garasha added.

Mai, not used to being browbeaten like this, had trouble accepting this flattery. Frankly, she wasn't too confident in the skill she was given—in fact, she found it a disappointment. She wanted to see the brother she loved, but this skill wouldn't let her do the necessary dimension crossing at all. In her mind, escape was impossible even before she tried to fight for it.

"Look, have a little more confidence in yourself, huh? Because no offense, but Instant Motion is powerful beyond, like, all common sense," Deeno told her. "I'm not sure even *I* could beat that."

"Yeah! In fact, you could probably even blow Feldway far away with it!"

"Right? Somewhere too far for his thrall to work on us. Help us out, Mai!"

Pico and Garasha were both firmly on board, peppering Mai with

all sorts of unreasonable requests. Somehow, though, Mai enjoyed it. It was a feeling she never would've had if she was truly under anyone's rule.

"Heh-heh… You know I can't do that."

She might have acted modest, but somewhere in Mai's heart, she was starting to see a rosier future ahead.

Mai began to open up to the rest of the party as they continued with the insect hunt.

A cheerful voice suddenly boomed:

"Ohhhhhhh-ho-ho-ho! There you are, Deeno. I'm gonna make darn sure you regret ever two-timing me!"

Ramiris's shrill laugh was unmistakable. At long last, she was looming (?) before him, all sorts of evil intentions on her mind.

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Once the echoes of Ramiris's laughter faded away, the structure of the floor began to change. Before them now was Beretta, along with Zegion, Apito, Kumara, and Ranga—five fighters setting off to engage Deeno's party.

"Ugh. You *are* here…," Deeno grumbled.

The sight of Zegion made Deeno look up at the ceiling for answers. By now, all he wanted to do was lose and get out of there.

But Ramiris wouldn't allow that—or really, if Deeno left now, that'd be a problem for her. Her strategy was in motion, and she needed Vega to be far enough away from the rest of the party for it to work.

To be more exact, Ramiris's sights were set squarely upon Mai—Deeno, Pico, and Garasha were just along for the ride. The idea was to isolate Vega and do him in while Mai was kept in place and unable to help him. If that didn't work, they at least wanted to coop Mai up in the labyrinth so nobody could escape too easily.

As Deeno warily eyed his surroundings, Ramiris suddenly

appeared—in hologram form, a very elaborate sort of recreation. Deeno blinked.

Ramiris always puts so much effort into the weirdest things…

He sighed in acquiescence.

"Look, Ramiris—enough of this!" he shouted. "Like, you were torturing us with those golems a little bit ago! Where does some allegedly *good* demon lord get off doing *that*?!"

Deeno wasn't being shy with his grievances. He was even bringing up the concept of a "good demon lord," something that hadn't existed until he invented it. He had been constantly working since he entered the labyrinth, and his stress was near the breaking point. Now he was raging and all but baiting her to fire back if she didn't like it.

But Ramiris wasn't moved. Instead, she flew around in hologram form, hovering in front of Deeno's eyes.

"Pardon me? I'm not at all sure I know what you mean, sadly. That was just my way of wishing you a friendly hello! No, I'm not really *getting back at you… Not yet, that is!"*

Deeno rolled his eyes. There was no turning back now—he had to plead his case.

"Look, can you stop with that act already, Ramiris? We've known each other too long for this!"

All his remaining pride was shunted aside as he begged Ramiris, trying to look as pitiful as possible. But Ramiris wasn't fooled.

"Hmmm," she said, mostly ignoring the pleas, before dropping a bombshell. *"Well, since there are five of you there, we decided to recruit five of our own to pit against you…but we wound up with one extra, you know? So I decided to have both Beretta and Zegion entertain you, Deeno."*

It was the most saccharine of tones to take. Deeno couldn't believe what he heard. When Ramiris's words finally reached his brain, he chewed over them, figuring out what they meant, and then:

"Whoa! Don't give me that crap, you freak! There's no *way* I can win!!"

Deeno's pitiful scream echoed across the labyrinth.

After a few deep breaths, Deeno began to negotiate.

"Like, if you're pitting two people against me, can't I call one more person to my side, too?"

"Nuh-uh! Sorry!"

"What? No! No 'nuh-uh'! Think a little more—"

"Okay, so which of you is gonna fight the others?"

Somehow, the matchups were already set in stone. Pico was staging a rematch with Kumara, and Garasha was going to fight Ranga. That left Apito to pair up with Mai.

Deeno was having the distinct feeling that he was being ignored. Things didn't appear to be going well for him, so he made one final attempt.

"Wait! How about this? Let's make this based on points. We'll fight each other in order, and whoever has the most points at the end wins! How 'bout that?"

He was getting pretty desperate. To him, if he was picked to go first, maybe that'd let him avoid a fight with Beretta and Zegion, if it all worked out in his favor. If not, well, at least he'd probably not have to fight them together. He also needed to buy time for Vega's labyrinth corrosion efforts. He was obliged to stick to this at all costs, and if it worked out, that'd be two birds with one stone.

I got such a sharp mind when it counts, don't I?

He couldn't help but pat himself on the back a little. This proposal was a big bet. If they started fighting right now, it was almost guaranteed to end with his side losing. He knew that, and he was desperate to find a way out.

Against those two at once, I'd be lucky to last a few minutes, he thought.

He could figure something out against Beretta alone, but the moment Zegion stepped in, he was done for. He could've asked Mai to get them out of here, but that was basically leaving Vega to die, and Feldway was unlikely to allow that. Deeno would be purged, no doubt.

If he was doomed either way, Deeno wanted to take the path that'd let him survive for as long as possible. He prayed as he waited for Ramiris's answer, hoping this offer would be accepted, no matter

how much wishful thinking it was.

No way she's gonna agree to this…

But just when Deeno gave up all hope:

"Hmm… Okay! That works in our favor, too—mmph, mm, mph!"

"Whoa! Lady Ramiris?!"

Static appeared over Ramiris's hologram for a moment, but she immediately went back to normal.

"Ah, never mind that just now! That was nothing in particular!"

So the offer was accepted. Things went a little strange at the end, but best not to pry into that too much.

Maybe Ramiris's side wants to stall for time as well, thought Deeno. *That totally works for me.*

He didn't know why they'd want to stall, but it sure beat being immediately killed. So, ignoring Ramiris's and Benimaru's muffled exchange, he whispered a few words of thanks for this unexpected good luck.

"Right, so Kumara's going out first! Have at it!"

Ramiris's motivations weren't questioned any further—and so this pro wrestling–style tournament kicked off.

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Ramiris's side was just as happy about this turn of events.

"Come on, Lady Ramiris. He *must* be suspicious of us now," said Benimaru.

"It's fine, it's fine! Deeno's in no shape to suspect us of anything!"

Ramiris seemed excessively cheerful about this, but Benimaru had the same opinion. When faced with the absolute menace of Zegion, he just didn't have the mental capacity to think about anything else. And they were right. Ramiris and Deeno had been acquainted for a while, so they knew what the other was thinking most of the time. After all, the more you argued with someone, the closer you eventually became.

So it was time for the first bout, Kumara against Pico.

The labyrinth had changed shape on them again, transforming into an arena. Pico was front and center, walking toward the middle of the circular ring. Kumara, on the other side, was just as ready.

"Today, we shall end this," Kumara told Pico.

"That's what I could say to you. Don't expect me to go easy on a kid."

It looked kind of like the opposite, given Pico's appearance, but she was right. The difference in age between the two of them was like night and day. And while age wasn't always linked to experience, Pico clearly had an edge there as well. Ramiris's side was keenly aware of that, so they ensured it wouldn't be a problem no matter which fighter won.

As if to prove it, Beretta was in the center of the ring.

"Um, I'll lay out a few rules before we begin," he said. "First, I want both of you to wear these."

He provided each fighter with a Ramiris-crafted Resurrection Bracelet.

"Hey, I was hopin' to score one of those!"

Deeno butted in to obtain a bracelet of his own, even though nobody called for him.

"…You will receive one later," Beretta told him.

"Oh, don't be that way," he said as he put one on.

Sweet! Now I can escape whenever I want!

It was a cunning little trick, one that worked much to his benefit. But he wasn't getting everything he wanted here.

"Deeno, I'll warn you in advance: That bracelet's set up to resurrect you at the place you last died, okay? Do you understand what that means?"

Ramiris was kind enough to spell it out for him.

Wait…so I can't escape? Well, damn…

Deeno hung his head. But Ramiris wasn't done yet.

"But I have to say, Deeno, I didn't think you'd be jonesin' that bad for one of those bracelets. Then how about I give you, oh, say, five of them, huh?"

"What?"

Deeno didn't understand what she'd told him at first…but it didn't take long to figure it out. This could only mean one thing—he'd be killed *five times*.

"Whoa, wait, you…you can't just *do* that to me!"

"Hohhhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Prepare to savor a heaping helping of my unbridled wrath!"

With Deeno's protests summarily overruled, he was shooed out of the arena.

The battle was underway. Pico had her spear equipped; Kumara was barehanded. She wasn't particularly proficient in any weapon, except perhaps for her fan. It was an exquisite piece of work, one crafted by Kurobe as a fun side project, and its capabilities were Legend-class…but it was still a mismatch. It just wasn't the kind of thing you wielded against a God-class weapon, even if it was a mass-produced one.

But Kumara was in her element.

"Come for me, White Monkey!"

Upon that order, one of her tails transformed into a simian magic-born. It looked much more human than before, and a wooden pole was in its hand. The pole's name was Shinkoubou, or Divine Steel Pole, and it was modeled after the weapon carried by Sun Wukong, the hero of *Journey to the West*. Rimuru had asked Kurobe to make it just for kicks.

It might've looked like a stick, but its feature set was no laughing matter. Rimuru saw it as a neat little toy, and yet Kurobe didn't clown around with its production. The materials, for one, were out of this world. He had used some extra crimson steel he had on hand to make it, which shows just how dedicated he was to this pole, and that naturally gave it God-class stats. Truly, it was another masterpiece from the master weaponsmith.

Although the pole didn't grow to dizzying heights at will like Sun Wukong's, it *could* extend and shrink a little if the owner willed it. It was chiefly designed for toughness, but it also had that little bonus applied to it.

Shinkoubou was a true *weapon* that no mass-produced God-class gear could hold a candle to, and it was in the hands of White Monkey now.

"Screeeeee!"

"Ngh?!"

The monkey lunged at Pico, demonstrating first-class moves. It had been receiving instruction from Hakuro whenever there was free time to be had in the labyrinth. That had given it expertise in polearm combat, along with a mastery of Battlewill—and since Kumara could freely divide her powers between her tails, she had made sure to provide White Monkey with everything she had. That meant this creature was in the Million Class, with an EP surpassing one million, making it a threat beyond all comprehension.

Kumara, its master, was no slouch, either. Holding up against Hakuro's grueling training, she had become a splendid master of her own. In terms of pure battle technique, she was even better than White Monkey. Now that she had taken on divinity and evolved into a divine fox, there was no way she was weak at all. She summoned White Monkey now because she believed that was the most assured way to victory. After her battles against Carillon and Frey, Kumara had grown and matured, gaining the sort of keen battle sense she needed.

So Kumara and White Monkey worked as a team to pursue Pico. The monkey took point, not having any need to fear death, while Kumara stood back and fired off a barrage of tail-based attacks. She had fully blocked Orlia's trident in their battle, and while Pico was a better fighter, Kumara had little to worry about as long as she focused on defense. If Pico were to target her, White Monkey would attack instead, and vice versa—a very efficient strategy, but a frustrating one if you were on the other side of it.

"What *is* this thing?! Wasn't this a one-on-one match?"

Pico was shouting her grievances, but there were no rules about team sizes. She was just being a sore loser.

"Well, try *this* on, then!"

She activated her skill. Black Thunder descended upon Kumara at divine speed—but she didn't move. Instead, she deployed her eight

tails like lightning rods, swatting the attack away without taking any damage.

It made Pico's eyes shoot open. *This…this isn't at all who I fought last time! It's unnatural, how much power she's gained!*

Internally, she was truly astonished. She didn't underestimate her foe at all, but now she realized she had to reevaluate. In a battle between fighters of this level, three factors mattered the most—ability, compatibility, and luck. Being of equal ability was a given; compatibility gave you certain advantages and disadvantages; and in the end, it was luck that gave you the final push.

Kumara had acquired enough ability for the job—enough to defeat Pico anyway. It obliged Pico to take this battle much more seriously than before.

But is there any real point to winning? she wondered. *I mean, Deeno's top mission right now was just to survive this, so…*

She just couldn't be inspired to take this very seriously. If she did, she very likely would have beaten Kumara. Jibril, Lord of Rigor, was her ultimate skill, and the Divine Judgment ability included within it was truly fearsome. Just one shot of it would've knocked White Monkey out of the picture.

Divine Judgment applied damage to foes based on how much damage that foe had dealt to other opponents up to that point. It was an event-changer type and an unfairly strong one. To defy it, Pico would need some kind of high-level alteration-type skill, one that worked on laws, phenomena, or destinies. Kumara's ultimate skill Bahamut, Lord of Fantastic Beasts, was geared toward establishing rule over natural influences. Any illusion wouldn't work against its divine qualities, but Pico's Divine Judgment was likely to do the trick against it. White Monkey might've stepped in to take the blow, but it'd still be a tough battle for Kumara.

But Pico resisted pulling the trigger. She had other priorities.

We need to buy more time. Why don't I play a little? ♪

In her eyes, she was better off enjoying this the traditional way. So she did—and then the moment came.

"Fallen Spear!!"

That killer shot struck down White Monkey…but it stopped there.

"Nine-tail Gouge Thrust."

Pico basked in victory, leaving herself open for just a moment. Kumara wasn't about to miss that chance. In that single instant, she fired off a lethal set of tail attacks. They turned Pico's body into a swarm of light particles…and then she was resurrected on the spot.

"And it's all over! My li'l Kumara is the winner!"

Ramiris's voice echoed across the arena and over the peeved-looking Pico. Calling such a divine-looking lady "li'l Kumara" didn't sound all that correct to anyone there, but as far as Ramiris was concerned, she was just a little fox kit until a very short time ago, and she wasn't going to change what she called her *that* quickly. But as inappropriate as it sounded, the announcement still heralded Kumara's victory. Kumara had clearly earned the win, although it wasn't what Deeno wanted to see.

"Whoa, whoa, why'd you go easy during that last bit? You could've won if you were serious about it, no?" Deeno asked Pico, descending on her as she walked back to the sidelines. Pico looked sick of the whole affair.

"Well, I just proved that the bracelets are real," she said, shrewdly putting her spare bracelet on. "Isn't that good enough?"

"Y-yeah, I guess so, but…"

He opted to stop hounding her. Her intentions seemed clearer now—and actually, she picked a great time to pull out. She still had energy to spare, and as mentioned, she still had her most powerful skill safe in her pocket. If she cared enough to win, she could have—but what she might've earned from it is an open question. Going all out on Kumara opened up the worrisome possibility of a grueling, dragged-out match or at least one she'd emerge from exhausted. And was pride, or glory, the only thing waiting at the end? That meant nothing unless she made it out of there alive, and really, revealing her best moves would be a huge loss for her.

After all, Deeno's party wasn't looking for glory. They were attempting to stall for time so Vega could corrode and take over the labyrinth, although they didn't know if he could actually do it.

"…But yeah, winning wouldn't mean much in that fight."

"Oh, you understood that?"

They couldn’t forget that they were in enemy territory. Death was reversible here; Ramiris was trying to evoke a sort of party atmosphere, but the less able someone was to heal up in time, the more dangerous it became to go all out.

“Well, yeah,” said Garasha. “We don’t have any way to heal, and we sure can’t expect any reinforcements. This isn’t about *just* winning.”

There was no guarantee Ramiris’s side would keep their promises. Even if Deeno’s party won every bout, there were still a bunch of rested warriors on the other side.

“What a pain. How about we just go easy and lose each match?”

It was the laziest possible plan, and Deeno made that suggestion without a hint of shame. Mai, who had fallen silent again, loudly sighed. Pico and Garasha looked at each other, then shook their heads, dejected.

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Pico was out of the fight with most of her power intact. They hadn’t discussed it in advance, but Deeno saw that as the best approach. Vega’s skulduggery wasn’t guaranteed to work, so they were really obliged to keep something in the tank for later.

“Okay, Pico, get whatever rest you can right now.”

Deeno was already gracefully lying down as he spoke. The sight made Pico raise an eyebrow.

Why the hell is he relaxing more than any of us?! she thought.

It irritated her, but that’s just how Deeno was.

“I’ll do that,” she said, opting not to dwell on it any further as she lay down on her side next to him.

Now it was Mai entering the arena, holding her crescent bow in her hand and looking like she didn’t really want to be there.

“Okay, next up is…”

Apito stepped out on cue.

“Right, Apito! And against her…”

"My name is Mai Furuki. I'm not human any longer because of… reasons, but I originally came from another world."

"Right, right. The same place as Rimuru, it sounds like. I'll see about going a little easy on— Mmph, mmhph!"

The sound cut off for a moment. After what everyone surmised was some hurried scolding, it came back.

"Okay! So it's Apito versus Mai!"

Apito appeared within the arena as if she used Instant Motion, but it just looked that way. She really *was* that fast. It didn't fool Mai, who was using Magic Sense to scope out the entire arena, but it certainly gave a taste of her full abilities.

Can't let my guard down…

Mai braced herself. Apito just smiled.

"Fighters, give this everything you have!"

And so the second battle was underway.

Apito's forte was superspeed movement, but it couldn't even compare to Mai's. With her ultimate skill World Map, she could perfectly anticipate Apito's actions and position herself behind her like it was a children's game. Speed is the most important aspect to any battle, and Mai's was at the top of the heap, making her the natural-born enemy of an agility type like Apito.

"…Not bad."

Deeno was impressed. He was observing Mai's fight in a completely relaxed manner, like he was watching her from his living room TV. He had fought Apito before, and that made Mai's moves seem all the more insane to him.

"Y'know," he remarked, "when it came to speed alone, Apito was pretty much equal to me…"

"Impressive," said Pico. "I think even *I'd* struggle against that kind of speed. But Mai's got her totally covered, doesn't she?"

"That bow's bad news, too," Garasha added. "It fires arrows that split in the air, covering every possible escape route. I have to applaud Apito for keeping it close at all."

All three of them gave Mai the edge, and they also praised Apito

for deftly handling this torment at the hands of Mai. They only did that, though, because they were pretty sure Mai would win. They had already concluded that victory here was pointless, but that didn't mean they were obligated to lose. A victory for Mai would help them save face, so Deeno and his companions were sincerely cheering for her.

But that smile on Apito… It unnerved them. She was supposed to be at an overwhelming disadvantage, but all they saw in those eyes was an unwavering determination to win.

"Tee-hee-hee. Powerful, indeed. Instant Motion is a gruesome threat, no doubt."

In the realm of space-oriented skills, Dominate Space was by far the best. Not only did it let you Spatial Transport yourself to any location in memory, you could also instantly teleport anywhere within range of your eyesight with it.

It may not have sounded much different from Instant Motion in that way, but Dominate Space had one fatal flaw—it required the caster to link up the spaces from the starting point to the destination, so the moment it was invoked, an outside observer could read where you were going. In other words, if you were fighting a low-level opponent with a pedestrian view of the space around them, Instant Motion was all-powerful, but if two foes with Dominate Space fought each other, it became pretty much useless in battle.

But Instant Motion was different. It let you instantly travel to another point in space, giving your surroundings no warning and leaving no trace behind. Few skills could possibly be more useful in a battle scenario. Mai couldn't be tailed even going at light speed, so there wasn't much you could do against her. The only viable option was to try setting a trap—but Mai knew that, of course. She kept a careful eye out for that sort of thing, so entrapping her was far from an easy task.

Despite all that, Apito seemed to be enjoying herself out there—because she was learning. She, too, was in the midst of an evolution. Her existence points were rising, and even during this battle, she was constantly gaining strength.

Wait. That's weird, isn't it…?
Deeno finally picked up on it, far too late.





The evolution began to accelerate once Apito's EP passed one million. She began to strike a vast, intense presence, like a butterfly emerging from the cocoon.

"No way. Getting stronger *during* battle?"

It happened more often than you'd think, but that didn't make Mai any more agreeable to it. They were okay with losing but only if they could trust their opponents to let them—and as serious-minded as Mai was, she just couldn't manage that.

No, she was trying to win, no matter the consequences—and so she unfurled her killer skill, one with enough mass to weigh upon the air itself. She had picked this bow mainly because she once belonged to the archery club at school, but now she could use it to shoot arrows infused with her own aura at will. She never had to worry about running out of arrows, either. With her stratified force of will, she could freely adjust the number on hand and their force, as they set off from the crescent bow like shooting stars.

Instant Motion let her zoom across the arena, darting from one place to the next. That, combined with her shooting star arrows, was how she fought in battle—and now, sensing the danger Apito brought to the table, Mai aimed to finish this quickly.

Her arrows, fired from all directions, seemed impossible to escape from, no matter what you tried. Not unless you were just as much of an expert with Instant Motion as Mai was…

"Stardust Rain!!"

The force of Mai's will became a shrieking shock wave. Apito had nowhere to run. It seemed to be all over, but at that moment, Apito's evolution was completed.

Before everyone's eyes appeared the queen of the insects. Anyone who had seen Piriod before would marvel at the similarities. It was akin to the difference between a hornet and an antlion, but the otherworldly beauty she exuded from all angles was unmistakable.

With the evolution behind her, Apito raised a hand into the air before the arrows could reach her.

"Insect Space."

A thin barrier, running the gamut of colors as it shimmered in the

air, surrounded her. It was a Distortion Field, the kind that could block any sort of attack. Zegion was gifted at this sort of defensive move, but after evolving and earning her own Instant Motion ability, Apito had come to learn it as well.

"…?! My best offense…"

A queen never runs. She never backs down. All she does is advance forward—and as if to prove it, Apito took a step toward Mai.

Mai stepped back, seemingly scared. Now that her very best offense had failed her, the fight was as good as decided. She understood that well enough, and now she saw no reason to continue with hostilities.

"Why…? Out of nowhere like that…?"

But before the whispered question could be picked up by anyone, Apito's hand came down.

"Empress Stinger."

As quickly as the twinkling of a star, the stinger shot forth faster than Mai's shooting star arrows, gouging straight through her heart. Before she could even ask why she had gotten so much stronger, Mai died and was resurrected.

That question occupied the mind of not just Mai but Deeno and the rest of the onlookers. Nobody had an answer for it. Nobody could possibly know what just happened. Deeno could do nothing other than sigh and roll his eyes, all but saying, "This is why I didn't want to be here," out loud.

Ramiris and the others, watching all this on the Control Center's big screen, were just as thrown by Apito's evolution.

"…Her existence points have stabilized at 1,737,775."

A low murmur crossed the room at the operator's assessment.

"How…?" Ramiris whispered. No one else could hide their surprise—this was a wholly unanticipated event.

How could an evolution like this take place? The answer could be found in the way Piriod met her end. With the death of the empress—commander of the insectoid generals and holder of the number two position among the insectors—the post had been passed down

to Apito, the only surviving female. She had been raised to be the next queen, and now she was capable of wielding that power the correct way. Thanks to that, Apito had become a god-wasp, taking on a divine air she didn't have before. That, too, was inherited straight from Piriod, and Apito still wasn't quite powerful enough to make full use of it, but "divinity" was what she had achieved.

So Apito had finally acquired the strength needed to serve as a pair with Zegion, one of the ultimate forms of existence. To those unaware of the story behind this, it must have felt like an utterly unfair turn of events—but with this timely evolution, Mai was overwhelmingly defeated.

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With two victories in a row under her belt, Ramiris was all smiles. She had already decided Deeno would go last, so the third battle pitted Garasha against Ranga—but Geld chose this moment to state his mind, a sheepish look on his face.

"I know I'm being selfish when I say this…but my fight against that man was interrupted last time. Would you let me tackle the next round?"

Geld almost never made personal requests, but now he had chosen this moment to lodge one. It wasn't something Benimaru and his cohorts wanted to turn down, which made this even thornier to deal with. Geld, after all, was still sorely battered and bruised. Regardless of his chances in this fight, he was in no shape to step into that arena.

"But, Geld…"

"I know. The potions have healed my wounds, but my will has been exhausted. But that man is *waiting* for me."

The force behind those words made everyone hold their breath. It certainly didn't *sound* like his will was gone. Ramiris was all but forced to bend in the face of it.

"Well… I think we can afford a loss at this point, y'know?" she

said.

"Yeah," agreed Benimaru. "And we certainly have all the data we need on Deeno's party."

Benimaru didn't see the harm, either. It certainly wouldn't damage their plans, at least, which were all going just fine. They had two wins, and they had seen two opponents go through the death-and-rebirth cycle.

Ramiris's team, of course, had a good reason to be fighting it out like this…

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The first purpose of this plan was to separate Vega and Mai. That had already been achieved; Vega was doing his own thing away from Deeno's party.

Based on the conversation they listened to, they knew Vega was attempting to take over the labyrinth by "corroding" it. Ramiris found the idea disgusting, but it was also a stroke of luck for them. If they knew what he was up to, they could just cut off the area he was in from the rest of the labyrinth. She was planning to do that anyway, so work on this began promptly.

The motto of Ramiris's labyrinth was "no one refused at the door; no one chased on the way out." Basically, people were free to leave if they had a sudden urge to escape. It wasn't originally designed to entrap their enemies at all…but that didn't mean they couldn't do it. Even if the enemy had Control Space, they could just deploy multiple layers of floors around their foe, preventing an easy escape.

In the case of Dominate Space, though, that was no longer true. If an enemy had that, along with a concrete set of spatial coordinates located outside the labyrinth, they'd be able to escape without breaking a sweat. Attempting to trap someone like Mai, who could work with locations spanning between whole planets, was a fool's errand.

Along those lines, Vega didn't seem to have Dominate Space abilities. In fact, he didn't even seem to understand Control Space—it hadn't dawned on him yet that Ramiris was cutting him off from

the labyrinth. It made Ramiris smile and sit back on her chair. This was looking a lot easier than it had a moment ago.

So they were rapidly cooping up Vega, and once they did, it was time for the next step. They wanted to figure out how Deeno and his party were being mind-controlled, and if they could, they wanted to try undoing it. They had done a good job collecting all the external data they could, but they couldn't tell what was going on in their minds yet. Defeating them inside the labyrinth, though, would allow them to observe their deaths and resurrections and analyze the effect it had on their abilities.

Beyond that, once Vega was fully quarantined, they planned to take him out of the picture. They couldn't let Deeno's party get in the way of this, so that was why they were keeping them in the arena for now. This approach let them stall for time while collecting all the data they wanted on their foes—truly the best of both worlds for Ramiris's side.

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They already had all the info they needed for Pico and Mai. Garasha was up next, but it's not like she absolutely *had* to be defeated. It wouldn't be a problem, then, to indulge Geld here…

…but suddenly Ranga, Garasha's chosen opponent, sent over a Thought Communication.

(In that case, Geld, allow me to lend you my powers!)

He was offering to help Geld satisfy his stated desire.

(Hmm?)

(I will compensate you for any vitality you lack at the moment. Please, Geld—transfer your injuries over to me!)

Before waiting for a reply, he invoked Shadow Motion to pop up in front of Geld.

(Mmm, but…)

Geld wanted to turn him down. The damage he sustained was far from trivial. But Ranga just smiled and promised it wouldn't be a problem. The way he saw it, if Garasha and Geld had a grudge with each other, it wouldn't feel right to steal this chance from him.

(I appreciate this.)

(Yes.)

Geld wasn't fully sure he could use his skill set this way, but there was no harm in trying. Firming his resolve, he transferred his damage over to Ranga, much in the same way the Stand-in ability of the ultimate skill Beelzebub, Lord of Gastronomy, could spread damage out among many of his companions—

"Yiiiipe?!"

Ranga leaped into the air, then curled up into a ball, body twitching and eyes lolling upward. Everyone from Ramiris on down was startled, Gobta hurriedly coming down to look after him.

"Well," remarked Benimaru, "what did you expect?"

The most surprised of all, however, was the now completely healed Geld. The move worked without a hitch thanks to Ranga's cooperation, but he never thought that he could use his skills to just toss his damage over to someone else so casually. This wasn't like divvying it up among his companions, who were like family to him—all the burden had been lifted at once. It felt freeing, even. Ranga had the extra capacity to deal with it, but if Geld had handed it over to someone on his own level or below, things wouldn't have worked out so well.

Geld had to applaud Ranga. He must have known the danger, but he'd still made the offer.

"Sorry," Geld said to Ranga. "I owe you one."

"D-do not worry about me. The rest is up to you now… Hrrrk…"

"Rangaaaaaaaaa!!" Gobta cried.

If Ranga and Gobta were well enough to put on that little drama routine, there was probably nothing to worry about.

Without further delay, Geld invoked Spatial Transport, reappearing in the middle of the arena.

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"Um, okay, we're gonna make a substitution here. Replacing Ranga

in the lineup, batting third, here's Geld! Let's give him a big hand!!"

Ramiris was enjoying every moment of her announcer duties.

"Batting? This is *such* a game to them," Deeno groused. Mai had to agree with him.

"Well, what's the big deal?" Garasha smiled and put her Resurrection Bracelet on. "If I'll be resurrected anyway, I kinda *want* to play a little, y'know?"

She walked to the middle of the arena, going face-to-face with Geld. She was glad to have another chance with him, despite the circumstances.

So the third battle began, pitting Geld against Garasha. They were both seasoned fighters and defensive specialists, deftly wielding their shields to deflect the attacks coming their way. It wasn't particularly flashy, but the steady stream of techniques and sharpened moves made for an entertaining match for seasoned fight fans.

Geld was equipped with his Meat Cleaver and Scale Shield, which were virtually parts of his own body by now. Garasha, on the other hand, brought in a longsword and circle shield granted to her by Vega. The difference in EP was over two million, but the battle was still an even match. Geld hadn't lagged a single step behind Mujika in their battle, and now he was attacking Garasha like a fiend, too. His defensive skills usually stole the spotlight, but his offense was nothing to sniff at, either.

Against someone as seasoned as Garasha, however, it was hard to land much of anything. Little jabs would be easily deflected, but charging up for heavier blows was too simple to read. Even now, Geld couldn't find a way to land a strike.

"Nice try," said Garasha.

"Mmm… That didn't work, either?"

Garasha had expertly read another feint from Geld, deftly avoiding his enemy's downward swing. But despite her immediate counterattack, Geld had no problem escaping the threat. Both sides were flailing away, neither giving an inch.

"Parrying one attack of mine after the other! I can see you're not clowning around!"

"I received the title Barrier Lord from Sir Rimuru for a reason. I cannot afford to be taken down that easily."

"Oh, can't you?!"

"But look at you. It feels like all flash at first, but your style is as steady as it is stable. Quite admirable."

"Heh! I don't appreciate being complimented by the enemy, but if it's *you*, I can't help but blush a little."

Amid these several rounds of short back-and-forth clashes, they began to grow a new appreciation for each other, sensing that they were building a new sort of bond. Both Geld and Garasha were exercising their technical skills to their limits, relying solely on the moves they had spent so much time polishing.

I was hoping to buy us some more time…but I'm not sure I can afford to go easy in this fight.

Garasha had nothing but praise for Geld in his mind. Just as she thought, this fight was settling into a stalemate. It almost looked like a practice session between two battle-hardened trainees, a basic sort of match that was partly for real, partly just pretend…

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Beelzebub, Geld's ultimate skill, was frankly not built to deal with individual targets. The skill was geared squarely toward combat between battle squadrons, granting extended power, an iron shield, and collective sharing of damage to boost his team's ability to stay in the fight. Nothing about it really helped power up Geld himself, so the skill didn't seem terribly useful in this duel.

Garasha, on the other hand, didn't seem to be using any skill at all…at first glance. She had been awakened to the ultimate skill Haniel, Lord of Glory, but if she wasn't going to tap into it, she was just losing out. That's what you'd normally think, but the truth lay elsewhere.

Haniel, it turned out, was a passive skill. Its main effects were Detect Attack, Detect Hostility, harmonizing energy, adjusting her offensive/defensive balance, and self-healing. Without being particularly conscious of it, Garasha was continually busting all this

out at once—detecting enemy traps, following their moves, turning disadvantageous attributes into useful ones for her, converting attack force into defensive power and vice versa, and automatically healing any kind of injury.

So long as this was running, Garasha couldn't lose. As a fully balanced fighter, the skill was raising her game to sheer perfection. She had even more balance to her style than Pico, and that was all thanks to Haniel. Garasha had defensive skills on Par with or better than Geld's, along with far more powerful offensive force. With this much of an advantage, she should have been calling the shots here from start to finish.

But it wasn't working out that way. And that proved just how talented a fighter Geld was.

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Garasha waged a ferocious attack. She reached out with a kick, putting her foe off-balance as she swung her sword at him. But Geld didn't fall. Invoking Armorize Body, he took Garasha's kick from the front. That threw her off-balance instead, but she jumped back with her momentum from the kick, as if she meant it all along. She had a good sense for battle that way.

Still, Geld deserved the most praise. With his expert-level skill, he was blocking everything Garasha threw at him—and that wasn't all. Garasha outclassed him in offense and defense, but now she was starting to be pushed back by him.

"Hmph! What's this?" she said.

"Hnnngh!"

The pressure from Geld's blade just pushed her another step backward. Garasha outclassed him in EP and had a skill that should have dominated him; it was strange to see her struggle against Geld. But that was the reality…and now Geld's attacks were starting to chalk up some damage. Garasha's attacks still weren't landing on Geld, either.

Why was this happening? The answer lay in how Geld fought.

Once he saw that direct attacks wouldn't work, Geld opted to

change direction. One-shot finishers—anything involving slashing his foe or landing a telling blow—were now off the table. Instead, he added more weight to each of his smaller attacks. Whenever Garasha's shield hit against his Meat Cleaver, he invoked Rot to pile on some extra fatigue.

In other words, Geld saw that Garasha was using her shield to block his strikes, so he started attacking it directly, hoping to break it. He didn't have any weapon-breaking skills, but there was still a purpose to this. If Garasha kept taking those blows, it'd damage her arm soon enough. She was trying to parry the strikes to avoid that, but Geld wasn't about to let her.

And now the results were starting to appear on Garasha.



To those who knew how to appreciate it, this battle was nothing short of brilliant. But to the less well-versed in how fighting worked, it was apparently the most boring thing ever.

"I'm kinda sick of this," was the extremely childish way Ramiris put it, loudly enough that Benimaru in the Control Center could hear it. He chuckled a bit.

Geld and Garasha's fight didn't have any flashy finishers or awe-inspiring magic. It looked like a pretty pedestrian affair, in fact. No one was getting hurt; it was just an exchange of blows that seemed to drag on without end.

To Ramiris, it was stultifying. She couldn't comprehend the advanced skills both fighters brought to the table, nor the exquisite strategy both of these well-honed experts were deploying against their enemy. So she was bored.

"Hey," she finally said, "how 'bout we call this a tie and move on to the next match?"

Even worse, she apparently had forgotten why they were trying to stall for time with these one-on-one contests.

"Because, you know, I think it's about time for Deeno to pay the

piper, kinda."

She must have really been looking forward to that next fight. Just *itching* for it, in fact, compared to this snoozefest.

Beretta, sadly, was not there to lecture her. Treyni, who did nothing but indulge Ramiris, was simply saying, "Oh yes, it's so true!" and other barefaced brownnosing. No solution to this crisis was in sight…and so Benimaru finally spoke up.

"If I may, Lady Ramiris, have you forgotten that we need to stall for time here?"

"Oh!" she yelped.

"Right, exactly," said Benimaru.

"Tee-hee!"

Ramiris *was* a demon lord, more or less, on the same level as Rimuru. She deserved to be respected in public like this, at the very least. But now Ramiris was forgetting about all this and acting like a child. She needed to get back on track, and Benimaru couldn't be blamed for stepping up to do the awkward deed.

"Don't try to hide it now," he cautioned her.

"*Ahem?* Vice Commander?! You need to respect your superior officer a little more!"

"Yeah, yeah."

"You don't sound very sincere about it…"

"Is there a problem?"

Benimaru was growing too impatient to pay attention to etiquette around Ramiris.

"N-no, perfectly fine with me! You have a good point, besides. So don't listen to me, then! Let them keep going!"

"Right, right."

Benimaru turned his attention back to the screen, assured that Ramiris was back on the same page with him. Geld's performance in battle was exemplary. The idea of stopping it before its conclusion was ridiculous, as far as he was concerned. You didn't get to see an A-tier match like this every day. There was so much an observer could learn from such a closely fought bout. A lot of people in the Control Center seemed to agree, but still, opinion across the room was rather polarized. If you were bored by it, you were bored to

tears—but if you had an eye for it, you wouldn't find better entertainment. Benimaru was certainly hooked, as were Gobta and Gabil. The passion must've been infectious, because at some point, even Ramiris was staring at the large screen.

Geld and Garasha were waging a high-energy clash of swords, the momentum building by the second. Now things didn't seem so pedestrian after all. The exchange of overwhelming force, applied at white-hot speeds, was enough to crack the ground and send torrents of dust into the air.

The battle continued like a beautiful dance, mesmerizing everyone in attendance. Garasha, so much better on paper, was finding her advantage whittled away by Geld's constant effort…

"Oh, it's gonna end soon," Gobta said.

Benimaru agreed. Just when the intensity of the battle reached its peak…the balance was lost. Everyone could tell that the conclusion was just a moment away.

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Garasha, her sword thrown aside, was agitated.

"You… What the hell did you do?!"

She realized something was wrong once the left arm that held the shield began going out on her. She had auto-healing, so it wasn't a lethal loss, although it was nothing to jump for joy about, either.

But it was increasingly too late anyway. Geld continued with another set of blows that finally tore the shield off Garasha's arm entirely.

She had lived for a very long time and built several lifetimes' worth of battle experience; she didn't lose out to Geld in terms of technique, either. But she did lack one thing—battle experience against foes on the same level as her. It was a problem species with long lifespans often faced; once you reached a certain level of strength, there was no one left to fight against. Not everyone could be a master of everything, the way Guy was. If you were immature

but could still overwhelm everyone you met through sheer muscle alone, you couldn't grow from that.

And getting to fight a better opponent became more and more impossible over time, too. There are lots of guys out there you just can't beat, and you can't really go picking fights against potentially dangerous opponents all the time in the first place. After a while of this, you're never put in a spot where you have to push yourself to the limit in battle. If you feel like you *are* in such a spot, you're more inclined to just run for it.

Geld, on the other hand, never stepped back. If fighting was the only way forward, he'd never run, no matter the foe. He never slacked off on his training—he was so serious about it, in fact, that he'd stage battle training as a warm-up for his work on construction sites. On his off days, he'd receive education from Agera and Hakuro as well.

No, he might not stand out much among the Twelve Lordly Guardians, but he never missed a training session—and it brought his battle technique up to the very highest of standards. He had a ways to go on offense, but no one could outclass him on defense. His ability to deal damage while defending—or to pile up damage over time without revealing his attack strategy, like he did with Garasha just now—showed how well-versed he was in all the skills he needed.

That was what it took in this battle. And with Garasha shieldless, it was time for a major strike.

"…Chaos Rush."

Geld's Meat Cleaver took on an ominous aura as he swung it down upon Garasha.

"Nngh?!"

Garasha leaped back in a panic.

The strike seemed exaggerated, full of holes to exploit—enough so that it looked like Garasha could finish him off, shield or not. She never let her guard down. She could tell this was a killer blow, but she could also tell that it was a trap, a way to lure his enemy in. If she tried poking at the holes he revealed, she'd likely be cut down by his blade in the next instant.

But she was wrong. Geld was aiming at the shield he had knocked out of Garasha's hand. He invoked Predation, swallowing it up. The ultimate skill Beelzebub could convert anything it swallowed into energy, and since Garasha's circle shield was made by Vega, it wasn't nearly as resistant to this as other more naturally born God-class gear. Absorbing it was a quick process that Geld easily completed via Predation.

Now the power was his. His Scale Shield began to glow. It was a part of his body and powering it up also improved his own capabilities.

"Ah… No way," said Garasha. "It works on inorganic objects, too?"

"Well, a God-class piece of equipment *should* naturally have a will inside of it. This was once an imitation crafted by someone, it seems…but that does not matter to me."

Geld didn't seem to be gloating over his victory, but what he said held great meaning. He was capable of using Predation on anything, whether organic or not…and if the target had its own will, it'd be eaten up, too, if its resistance failed.

A cold stream of sweat ran down Garasha's forehead. Now she knew just how unbalanced this fight was. Her self-defense had just plummeted, and the gap in existence points between her and her opponent was closing up. What if he consumed her sword, too?

There was a moment of quiet. Then Garasha broke it.

"Heh… Looks like I lost this one."

She flashed Geld a refreshed smile.

"Mmm," he said.

Geld stayed on his guard, unsure what to make of this. It didn't seem like a bluff to him, but he didn't fully trust Garasha yet. But she just chuckled a bit.

"Okay, okay. I wanted to experience what it's like to be resurrected in here anyway. Don't be shy about the final blow."

If she was going that far, Geld had no choice but to believe her.

"So you'll admit that I won? In that case, no further combat is necessary."

Geld put his weapon away. There was no more need for it. He didn't like beating a dead horse.

"Heh. You really *are* a warrior. I'm completely defeated."

The wry grin on her face told the whole story. She was submitting to him.

"All right! Geld is the winner!"

With Ramiris's announcement, Geld and Garasha stepped out of the arena. Now, finally, the long-awaited (by Ramiris anyway) appearance of Deeno was near.

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Ramiris's voice boomed across the arena once more.

"All right, Deeno, come on out! I didn't forget about what you did to us. Now it's our turn to whip the snot out of ya!"

Ramiris was burning for revenge. The five Resurrection Bracelets she gave him told the whole story. She wanted to commit a quintuple homicide on the same man, all in one day, and she wasn't shy about revealing it to everyone. Her actual aims today must've slipped from her mind again.

But Deeno didn't seem too affected.

"Heh-heh-heh… You know, Ramiris, I got a little trick up my sleeve."

"Huhhh?"

"I forfeit! I'm not gonna fight the next—"

"Oh, as if I'm gonna let you do that."

Ramiris dealt with this sly little ploy as mercilessly as possible. There was no way she'd agree to let Deeno off the hook. It was outlandish for him to even think bringing it up was a good idea.

Dammit! Just shooting down my brilliant idea like that… But wait! My plans haven't failed yet!

That pep talk wasn't going to do anything to improve his situation. It was him against Beretta and Zegion, a fight he frankly had no chance of winning, and now he was taking the kitchen-sink approach to dodging it.

"Listen, I lose, all right? I'm officially declaring right now that I've

been defeated!”

This was his next tactic, one he thought up after seeing Garasha’s defeat. Why go through this painful battle if he could just admit defeat instead?

“This is bad, Deeno,” whispered Garasha, who was back by his side. “Geld’s gotten so weirdly powerful now. He’s like a different person from the last time I fought him.”

“Huh? Wait, so you tried your best and *still* lost?”

“Weren’t you paying attention? Yes! He stripped me of my shield, and I lost. Did you think that was a performance?”

“I was making a full effort, too,” echoed Pico. Mai gave a slight nod as well. This really *was* a three-match losing streak.

“Guys,” Deeno said, still looking triumphant, “you have enough power left to escape from here, right?”

“Of course I do.”

“Well, sure. Fighting until I couldn’t move would be suicide.”

Garasha and Pico nodded to each other. Losing while still keeping a *little* of your power left was actually pretty tricky to do.

“Listen,” advised Mai, “I don’t think you can just *say* you lost. You’re hated the most around here, aren’t you? Why don’t you just try apologizing to her?”

It was a surprisingly sane argument to make.

“Y-yeah, um, ah…”

Deeno didn’t know what to say. But apparently, it was too late for that anyway.

“Huhhh? Come on, quit with those silly ideas of yours! I don’t even care who wins and who loses right now. I just want to see you cry!”

With that self-serving screed from Ramiris, Deeno was doomed to fight. Maybe she would’ve reconsidered if he thought to apologize a little sooner, but that was strictly theoretical by this point, and Deeno had missed his chance to try it out.

He looked at Beretta and Zegion with his zombielike eyes.

I don’t have a chance in hell of winning…, Deeno thought, sinking into despair. But then a doubt formed in his mind.

Oh? Zegion… Did he always have that low of a magicule count?

It was an anomaly Deeno picked up on thanks to fighting him once before. The intimidation that oozed from every pore of Zegion's body seemed a little lighter than usual.

But Deeno didn't have time to dwell on questions like these. The fated moment he had been trying to delay for so long was about to arrive.

"Now, Beretta, you're free to lose if need be, but make sure you do it after you teach Deeno a lesson for me!"

"Heh-heh-heh… Very funny. If I keep losing all the time, it'll become a bad habit, after all. No, I am going to *win* today."

Beretta's vow depressed Deeno even more. *Dammit… What the hell, Vega? Hurry up! Don't blame me if we run out of time!*

Although if they *did* run out of time, Deeno would be the one who paid for it…

With a heavy sigh, he reluctantly took up a battle stance.

Beretta had grown stronger as well. Like Garasha said, he was striking a much more sinister presence since their last meeting. Deeno estimated that he was still stronger than Beretta, but that assumed Beretta hadn't gained any tricky skills in the meantime. Either way, though, with Zegion waiting in the wings, beating Beretta alone wouldn't count for much.

It's all over, thought Deeno as he headed for the arena. He stood before Beretta, relieved that Zegion wasn't joining him yet. They stared at each other for a few moments.

"All right… Begin!"

The gleeful voice of Ramiris was their signal to start the battle.

Unlike Pico and Garasha, Deeno wasn't that much of a fan of fighting. In fact, he hated it. It was too much work.

With little other choice, he resolved to just go through the motions a little. He wasn't allowed to forfeit, but he was planning to lose while making it look like he was trying. Part of him also wanted to at least defeat Beretta so he could retain a little of his pride…but life could be cruel sometimes.

The punch Beretta unleashed seemed like something he could

dodge with a light sway, but the arm was homing in on him, ignoring all the usual laws of anatomy. It writhed like a snake, stretching out and scrunching down unpredictably before coming apart into several pieces. It wasn't a punch so much as a summoned beast with its own self-will.

Not a care in the world about how it looks, huh? He's completely different from before, yeah. Garasha was right…

Deeno believed it. He heard that Beretta was a golem created by having a demon possess a magisteel body crafted by Rimuru. Now that the possession was fully complete, Beretta's skin was supple and didn't look like it was made of steel at all.

A single exchange of blows taught Deeno just how dangerous Beretta was. Beretta didn't look different, apart from his more ominous presence, but once the fight kicked off, it was like night and day. Any dreams of beating him were now flushed away. It would've been a simple task once upon a time, but now? Not a chance. Even if Deeno put in a concerted effort, he saw an uphill battle ahead.

He's grown way too much in such a short time…

Kumara and Geld's growth was pretty crazy, too, but Apito and Beretta's went beyond even that. Apito got some kind of boost while fighting Mai, too. Fighting Rimuru's staff without being thoroughly prepared was clearly a bad idea—that much was common sense.

Deeno wasn't trying to look down on his opponents, either.

Yeah, in fact, I respect them. Seriously, just stop picking on me any longer!

So he decided to run away.

Beretta's fist plunged into the ground. That fist might've looked soft and supple, but it was an extremely heavy chunk of crimson steel. He carried no weapon, but he didn't need one. His fists were more solid than your typical sledgehammer, and he was clearly more dangerous than one, too. It didn't seem like Beretta possessed any weird skills or whatever, but his martial arts alone made him more than enough of a menace.

For Deeno, who was wary only of Zegion before now, Beretta's growth was an unfortunate miscalculation. But he wasn't even his only enemy. Zegion, the absolute king of strength, was waiting

behind him. He just wanted to give up already—just go down on his knees and wail about why he had to endure this.

All he could do was buy time, running away and hopefully not getting too hurt along the way. That was the best answer Deeno could find after giving up the fight against Beretta. But now the ground under him was turning murky and swamp-like.

By the time he thought *Oh crap!* it was already too late. His legs were sinking into the earth, up to his knees. And that wasn't all—the ground had turned into some kind of liquid metal, pulling Deeno ever lower. He couldn't count on brute strength to get him out of this. This metallic mud was like a set of leg-irons, binding Deeno down in place. The more he struggled, the lower he sank, all the way down to his waist. Even worse, the solid surface around him was hardened to a steellike finish, making it even harder to climb out. Beretta's Mineral Domination and Control Earth Attribute abilities were being woven together to create this liquefaction/solidification combo.

Deeno immediately gave up. This was impossible.

Beretta was the guardian of Ramiris. He led the Ten Dungeon Marvels for a period, and at his roots was a Greater Demon from the Noir clan. He was never going to be a pushover, but not even Deeno thought he'd get his ass kicked *this* soon.

"You didn't have this kind of power when I was in the labyrinth!"

Deeno had given up on escaping, so now he was defiant, with nothing left to lose. Beretta didn't use any skills like these the last time they fought. He must have earned them in the short time between then and now. It seemed ridiculous, but he had to accept this reality.

"I didn't?" Beretta coldly said, snapping Deeno out of his happy-go-lucky thought process. "Well, I do now."

Yeah, I know, Deeno almost told him, but he couldn't voice the thought. The moment Beretta spoke, he invoked a skill and ran Deeno through, top to bottom, with a metallic spear. His consciousness flickered out, and Beretta's victory was set in stone.

✳

Once he was awake again, Deeno could hear Ramiris's joyful voice.

"All right! Beretta wins the battle. Let's make some noise for him, people!"

He must have passed out for just a moment.

Well, it'd be nice if this was the end, but…

Ramiris's Resurrection Bracelets were the real deal after all, but Deeno wasn't too elated about it. He had four left, which meant Ramiris wouldn't let up until he died four more times.

"Right, who wants to fight him next?"

He could hear more talking. Just as he wondered what it was about, Apito advanced into the arena.

"Allow me, Lady Ramiris," she said. "I would like to test out the power I have gained."

"Oh, you got it, girl! Apito's our next challenger!"

Now Deeno understood.

That sort of thing, huh…?

The truth became clear: He was an experimental test subject.

"Don't give me this crap, Ramiris! All you're doing is bullying me!"

"Huh? Like I need to hear that from you! You attempted to put your filthy hands on poor, weak, li'l old me!"

"I know, but that was—"

He had a lot he wanted to say, but it was nothing but excuses. Deeno knew that well enough, so he bit his tongue.

"Okay! You may begin!"

Assuming he had nothing to say back to her, Ramiris wasted no time starting the match. It was time for Deeno's second battle.

Apito's speed flummoxed Deeno. The sword he carried on his back couldn't even hit home against the afterimages she left behind.

Her fists came just as fast, and all that speed was focused right on that sharp stinger of hers, too. He thought he dodged it in time, but with a *stab*, it was in his arm.

It was a pretty light impact, actually. Too light. It was just a virtual stinger she released, not a real strike.

"What do you think of my Phantasm Needle?" Apito asked with a smile. The impact was light, but now it was turning into pain—pain that reached Deeno's soul.

"Ah, ahhhhhhh…!!"

As a spiritual life-form, Deeno naturally possessed Cancel Pain. He hadn't experienced true pain at all in an extremely long time. He thought he could just die again and get it over with fast, but that wasn't in the cards for him. The screams of his soul as it endured the pain said as much.

He fell to the ground, rolling around and crying. Apito didn't pursue him, opting instead to enjoy the view. Tormenting him like the merciless queen she was. *This* is what Ramiris, master of the labyrinth, was looking for.

In fact, Phantasm Needle did little to no physical damage. A spiritual life-form as high-level as Deeno would likely be impervious to something like Apito's Lethal Attack skill. Realizing that, she set up multiple Lethal Attacks at once, timing them so they sent an intense warning signal to his instincts. Each one of them was weaker than usual, but they now lasted longer—and Deeno either resisted each new round of it or he didn't.

In this situation, Deeno's survival instincts saw Phantasm Needle as a mortal danger and began trying to resist it with more intensity than ever. His spiritual system overreacted to Phantasm Needle, much as how the human immune system may start attacking its own body, and it was now being more forceful with him than necessary. That was the source of the unbearable pain Deeno felt. It wasn't Apito's attack—it was his own defensive reaction sending signals of pain out.

"Hee-hee-hee! Looks very effective to me."

Apito seemed satisfied with the amount of pain it produced. If Deeno had read her intentions and allowed Phantasm Needle to go through him, it probably would've resulted in little to nothing happening to him. Now that its effect had been established in his mind, however, there was never any resisting it again.

This was the true value of Anaphylactic Shock, the new battle art Apito had devised. And now that its effect was etched in stone, Deeno's fate was already in her hands.

"Th-that's *so* dirty! Is this fun for you, tormenting me like this? Pulling all these coward moves… Don't you think Rimuru would hate to see it?!"

"Silence! There is no 'dirty' or 'clean' in battle. If you win, then great; if you lose, then die! That is the iron rule, as taught to me by Sir Rimuru."

Apito was sternly rebuking the wailing Deeno. It was "might makes right" brought to its logical extreme, and he couldn't argue against it any further.

Kumara briskly nodded. "Yes, exactly. 'Grown-ups are dirty creatures that will do anything to win!' It was written in my textbook."

Beretta seemed a little put off by what the two of them said, but he refrained from commenting further.

I feel like they're twisting Sir Rimuru's words more by the day, he thought. *Then again, if they'd be interpreted the right way, maybe they're not that far off the mark…?*

Beretta wasn't so sure any longer. But unlike someone as sensible as him, Apito was still putting the pedal to the metal. They weren't around to comment, but if Arnaud and the rest of Apito's training partners had a chance to say something, it'd be along the lines of "you should be glad they're kind enough to just say it in words to you." That was the kind of credo they lived by.

Having Hinata as her master probably explained a lot about Apito. Hinata never gave mercy to her foes, and a lot of that rubbed off on Apito. She put a cap on it usually, because Zegion lectured her about going overboard—but he was being awfully quiet right now, so nobody was going to stop her.

With a sadistic smile, Apito pointed a beautiful hand at Deeno.

"W-wait a minute! Hey! Chill. Why don't we talk this out? Then it'll make more sense, okay? We can learn to understand each

other!!”

Deeno grew frantic as he attempted to soothe Apito. He was wasting his time.

“Yes, perhaps that is true. But…”

She flashed a merciless smile at the proposal. But much to Deeno’s chagrin, she still had more to say.

“B-but?” he asked, hoping for the best as he banished his anxieties.

“But my job is to inflict pain upon you.”

The smile was still on her face as she stabbed him. His scream echoed across the arena.

“Owwwwwwwwwww!! W-wait a minute! I mean it! Wait!”

“No thank you! ♪”

“This hurts! This *really* hurts!”

Deeno rolled around, eyes bursting with tears as he attempted to get away from Apito. He was begging for mercy, but Apito wasn’t stopping. She would go on to sting him with Phantasm Needle three or so more times, Ramiris joyfully beaming with each strike.

“Hohhhhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! What a pathetic sight you are, Deeno! How does it feel? If you give me a tearful apology, maybe I’ll consider forgiving you…or not?”

Deeno blew up at this. In a way.

“I *am* crying, man! I’m sobbing over here! And I’ve also been apologizing this whole time, Ramiriiiiiiiis!!”

He was doing his best to plead his case with her. He was also having a pretty powerful cry as he did, like a bawling child.

Ramiris, however, was being a little too irresponsible. She wasn’t paying attention to what he said, ordering the attacks to continue.

“You won’t get off that easily, Deeno. You don’t know how to apologize at all, do you? Besides, if you two-timed someone as purehearted as me, it’d affect my rep if I let you off the hook that easily! You’re going to need to show a little more regret. I want some proof you won’t betray me again. So… Go ahead, Beretta and Apito! Go get ‘im!”

Deeno’s pleas were met by Beretta rejoining the fight—the worst possible outcome. He was buried in the ground again, unable to

move while Apito pummeled him. His sad screams traveled across the arena, proving to the intruders just how fearsome Ramiris really was.

Finally, at long last, the feckless Deeno's punishment was coming to an end. At the same time, he'd have to make a momentous decision soon.

✳

Ramiris's not-so-innocent laughter echoed across the Control Center. Seeing Deeno cry like a baby must've satisfied her well enough.

Treyni was watching on excitedly as well, but Benimaru was thoroughly taken aback. Yes, Deeno betrayed them first, so he had it coming. But ganging up on a single target like that went against Benimaru's values. It'd be one thing if this was a war, but it wasn't. This was clearly a punishment.

"Commander, isn't this going too far?" Benimaru asked Ramiris.

"Oh, it's fine, it's fine! I gave him some Resurrection Bracelets to keep him from dying, even!"

"No, that's not the problem…"

On the screen, he could see that Kumara had taken Apito's place. Beretta had stepped back as well, turning it into a one-on-one match again—a pseudo-battle that Benimaru could at least stomach a *little* longer. Ramiris was still satisfied with this, staring up at the screen. The sight made Benimaru realize that maybe Ramiris was doing this not only so she could torture Deeno all day.

"Y'know, Deeno's an awful lot tougher than I thought," she said.

"I mean, you see how he is now, but if he ever got serious about fighting, he might even beat us."

Benimaru meant it, too.

"True," said Ramiris. "I think he's picked up on the fake Zegion, too."

Ramiris knew from the start that Deeno wouldn't bother trying to

fight. He was shouting and crying up on that screen, but really, that was just him playing along with her. He wasn't saying it with words exactly, but this was Deeno's way of expressing his thanks to her. She understood as much—but that was that and this was this. She wasn't willing to budge on her lust for revenge against him.

"Well, I think that ought to be enough, though. Let's forgive him," Benimaru suggested.

"Yes, let's do that," Ramiris said.

Benimaru relaxed a little.

"We beat the rest of his pals once already, and we got to kill Deeno twice," Ramiris added. "Don't you think it's time they realized how they're all being ruled over?"

Their conversation was perfectly casual, but *that* was what Ramiris was really trying to do. She *did* want to punish Deeno, of course, and she also wanted to release her old friend from this unfair shackle placed on him.

"So that *was* the case all along!"

"Oh, Lady Ramiris, I *knew* you'd be merciful!"

Treyni and Traya were heaping praise on her again. If Beretta were there, he'd doubtlessly think about how bad an idea that was.

"You know," Ramiris began, a smug smile on her face, "the thing about Deeno is that he's kind of lacking this one thing in his head. He goes on about how sly he is, how nobody can ever trick him, but…y'know, it's just stupid, isn't it?"

Deeno might have shouted, "Objection!" if he was around to hear that, but he wasn't. No one could stop Ramiris now, and everyone in the room was accepting her words as the truth.

Rumors are dangerous things, thought Benimaru.

Then again, her words rang a bell somehow. Rimuru said something similar all the time—the more someone bragged about never letting anyone trick them, the deeper into the trap they eventually fell. Apparently, this was because they were too embarrassed to admit they'd been tricked, but it just caused more damage in the end. According to Rimuru, being able to admit you made a mistake meant a lot in how you handled it.

Indeed, if Deeno admitted to his faults sooner, he likely wouldn't

have been poked and jabbed at quite this much. Feldway ruled over him, so he probably didn't have that much freedom to do anything else…but as Benimaru saw it, there always could have been another way. Regardless, when asked point-blank whether he thought Deeno was an idiot or not, Benimaru had a response at the ready.

"Um… Yes, I suppose so," he said, hesitating at Ramiris's question. Deeno wasn't just some stranger to them. Benimaru saw a little bit of Deeno in himself, in fact, something that he regretted.

"So, Lady Ramiris," he said, changing the subject, "how much progress have we made?"

"Umm, well, I've finished quarantining the floor. I figure Vega's managed to corrode about 90 percent of the area he's restricted to."

"Good. And is Zegion on the move?"

"Yep! He can barely wait any longer!"

They nodded at each other.

As she mentioned earlier, the Zegion staring down Deeno was just an illusion—which was why he didn't quite feel like Zegion to Deeno's eyes. Deeno realized what was going on, but despite that, he still went through with Ramiris's punishment…and so she had forgiven him long ago.

That just left Vega to deal with…but that, too, was already taken care of. Quietly but most assuredly taken care of, with the defensive measures already in the final stages.

✳

With Ramiris seemingly satisfied, the atmosphere in the Control Center was a lot calmer. Now everyone realized that Ramiris had some kind of plan in mind, Shuna included. She didn't blindly follow Ramiris the way the treants did, but she knew there must have been *some* reason why she was putting Deeno through all this pain.

That much had been revealed by what she just whispered, a reason that convinced everyone in the room.

Normally, there wouldn't be any reason at all to beat Deeno up

this much. Ramiris was maybe getting a little *too* sadistic with what she said and did, but she's normally a very tolerant person—or, to put it another way, one who didn't keep tabs on very much. She wasn't the sort who'd hold a grudge against Deeno for *that* long.

But if she dragged him through not one, not two, but three fights to the death, there had to be some purpose to that. And now, seeing Ramiris carry on like always, Shuna had it figured out.

Oh… She just wants to get Sir Deeno back, right?

That explained Ramiris's attitude, as well as the repeated punishment. They had always gotten along, Ramiris and Deeno, all joking with each other. Feldway had made them into enemies, but neither of them desired that.

Ramiris just wanted to get Deeno back is all. That was why she was obsessing over him in this dungeon so much—she was searching for some trigger that'd release the skill-based thrall upon him. Shuna thought that must have been why the sight of him acting all "whatever" riled her up so much.

And if that's how it was, Shuna wanted to help them a little. Her mind was made up. Deeno got along with Rimuru, too, not just Ramiris, and Rimuru wouldn't want to lose a friend for no good reason.

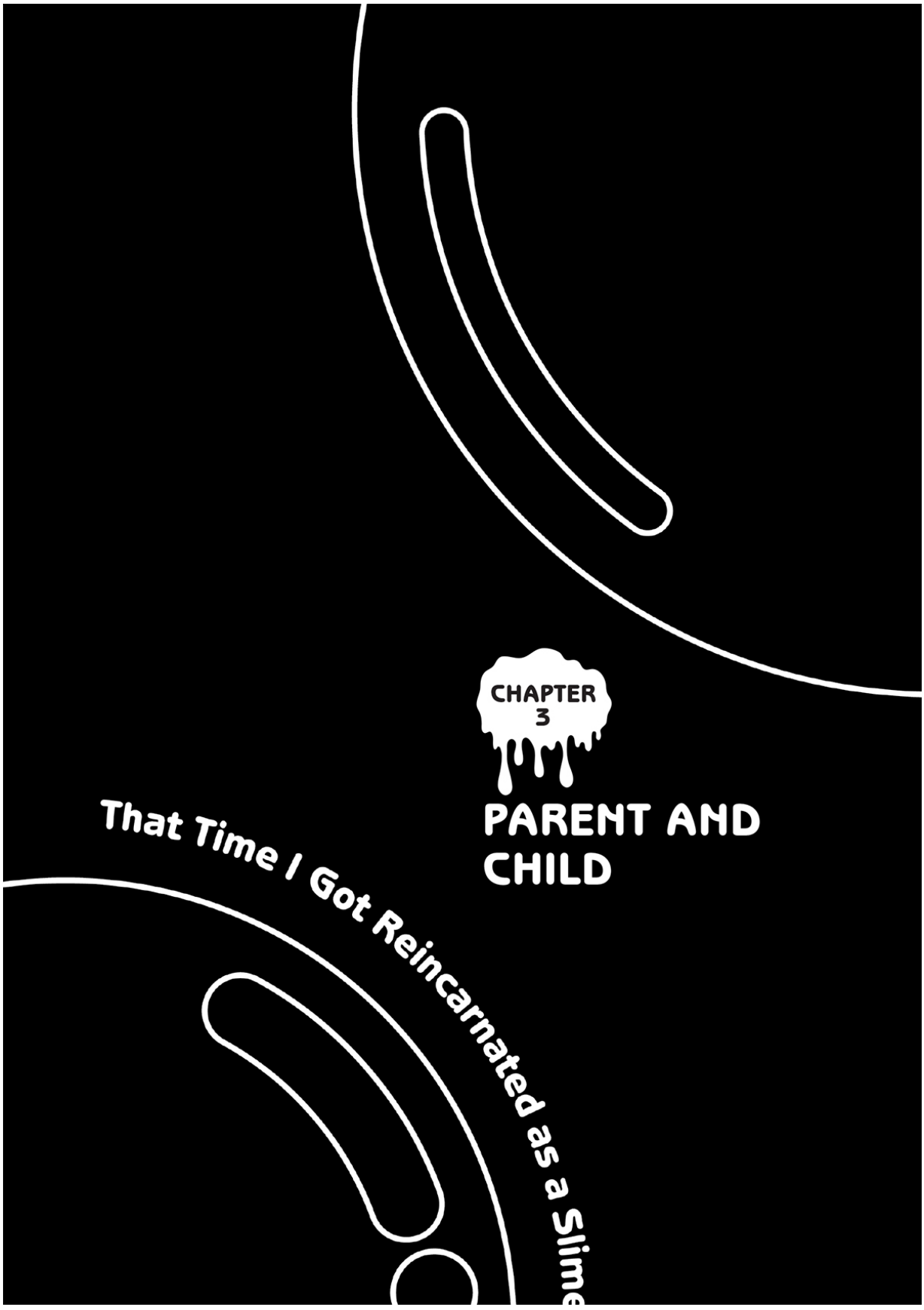
Shuna looked up at the screen, resolve in her eyes. At just that moment, her unique skills Parser and Creator began to change.

Understood. In response to the subject Shuna's request, the unique skills Parser and Creator will be united to acquire a skill to lead large numbers of people… Successful. It has been reborn as the ultimate skill Guiding Deities.

It was like a miracle.

This…this must be the will of Sir Rimuru at work.

Shuna smiled. Her eyes, capable of seeing it all, were focused on Deeno and the others. They were calm, merciful eyes, ready to forgive whoever they saw.


CHAPTER
3
PARENT AND
CHILD
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



CHAPTER 3

PARENT AND CHILD

Vega was firing on all cylinders, laughing loudly as he corroded his way through the labyrinth. He never noticed that Ramiris had locked him up in that isolated floor he was on.

His instincts told him that this floor would belong to him before too long. The assimilation rate was already past 90 percent.

"Damn, what an easy win this'll be," he muttered.

His companions kept lecturing him about how fearsome this labyrinth was, but it was really no great shakes in the end. With his ultimate skill Azhdahak, Lord of Dark Dragons, not even Ramiris's labyrinth could put up much of a resistance. He was marauding all over it, and they couldn't do a thing.

"Heh-heh-heh… They never thought for a moment that the labyrinth itself is being attacked. Guess I outsmarted them this time, huh?"

He couldn't help but wallow in self-praise. If the enemies in the labyrinth enjoyed immortality, there's no reason he couldn't copy that. If he was on a floor he had taken over, he'd be able to gain the exact same thing. He couldn't influence the entire labyrinth yet, but if he kept the corrosion going, Vega would have it all soon enough.

It was always at times like these when the tables got turned. The enemy begins resting on their laurels, figuring they have an insurmountable advantage, and now they're about to lose the hideout they pinned all those hopes on. Oh, the looks on their faces when he finally seized it from them! Just imagining them made Vega's heart sing. He could picture all those fools, running around and raving to themselves. The faceless crowd robbed of their power —and then he'd sweep them all away.

I gotta hand it to myself. It was the perfect strategy…

Vega smiled. He was about to teach a lesson to everyone who had ever looked down on him. Even Feldway would look at him in a new way. He'd make Vega head of the Three Stellar Leaders, no doubt. Feldway didn't like Fenn, or Zarario, or Jahil, or any of those guys—only Vega deserved to be the greatest of men, capable of standing side by side with Feldway. And he was just a few steps away from that reality.

"Heh-heh! Let's do it! I'm gonna gobble up this labyrinth and prove I'm the strongest out there!"

He couldn't help but say it out loud. And he didn't expect a reply but:

"Don't kid yourself. Know that the likes of you could never take down this labyrinth."

A cold voice echoed in from some unknown location. Or maybe not so unknown. Something in Vega's view, something that shouldn't have been there, caught his attention. It was a lone butterfly, a creature of light and beautiful rainbow-colored wings, fluttering around in the air.

"Huhhh?"

As he suspiciously eyed it, the butterfly's outlines began to shimmer. The next thing he knew, it had taken human form—the form of a warrior, one covered in a jet-black adamantite exoskeleton. The weaponized frames covering his limbs and the single horn on his forehead bore the telltale multihued shine of crimson steel.

As for the name of this warrior…

"…?! Who're you?"

"My name is Zegion," the newcomer solemnly responded. "The faithful servant of the great demon lord Rimuru and the recipient of the title Mist Lord."

This wasn't the illusion Deeno had seen. The real Zegion was here. He was a profound phantasm, the strongest guardian of the labyrinth, and now he was looking right at Vega.

✳

Normally, the danger Zegion posed would be obvious at a glance. But Vega was still riding high. He had just discovered a new use for his skill, and his mistaken belief that he was making the labyrinth his own had made him feel truly invincible. What's more, he held complete rule over the area he was currently in, so he was able to at least vaguely grasp Zegion's power. The difference was almost four to one. Vega's existence points had ballooned to nearly four times that of Zegion, and that told Vega he could easily win.

"Zegion? Never heard of you," he spat. But there was no way he hadn't. Deeno had talked his head off about the guy, explaining every little detail behind him. Vega had mostly tuned it out, as it didn't interest him. He didn't see him as a threat, so he barely paid any attention.

"Since when did you invade this space I rule over?" Vega demanded.

If Vega paused to think a moment, the fact that Zegion had penetrated this zone without him noticing should have put him more on guard. But he wasn't the sort to care about that. The way he failed to catch his presence at all until now was a bit of a surprise, but he didn't see it as a major problem. What *really* mattered was his ability to fight. Sneaking around and hiding in the shadows won't let you beat your enemy, after all—a fact Vega learned after a lifetime of running and hiding.

"Simple," Zegion replied, not letting the question bother him. "I was here from the beginning. That's all."

"…Huh. Guess that was a blind spot of mine."

It made sense to Vega. It explained why he didn't sense anyone breaking in. He certainly didn't notice anything untoward treading on the roots he had spread across the labyrinth grounds. If he knew the reason for it, there was no longer any need to fear it.

"Well, I can't say you're too smart." He gave Zegion a scornful smile. "If you kept yourself hidden, I would've never spotted you."

This wimp must've not made it out of this space in time, only to realize he was locked in for good. So he panicked, he jumped out, and here we are, thought Vega.

It made sense to Vega, who was barely paying attention to half of what Zegion said anyway. The Mist Lord epithet went over his head as well; nothing about what Zegion told him meant very much.

"Yep, your luck's sure run out, huh? You should feel honored, though. It was gonna happen sooner or later anyway, but now you get to die and become sustenance for me."

Without further warning, Vega created four dracobeasts and ordered them to eliminate this pesky bug for him.

Each of them was stronger than back during the battle with Hinata's group. Their EP each broke four million, and they had been steadily building up experience in battle. Vega lacked the resources to create an entire herd at once, which was regrettable, but once the labyrinth was consumed, he'd have an infinite stock to tap into.

The way Vega saw things, Zegion and the dracobeasts were about equal. One of those creatures alone might have trouble against him, but four would have no problem. But the next moment, the four dracobeasts all lunged for their prey at once—then, with a line of blinding light, they were all chopped into fine pieces, dissipating into the air. It happened so quickly, Vega couldn't even see what it was.

"Huh? You beat my dracobeasts *that* easily? What the hell kind of trick did you use, you bastard?"

Vega didn't lift a finger to attack this magic-born calling himself Zegion. He was too busy taking over the labyrinth to bother—essentially, he wasn't afraid of Zegion at all. He was still looking down on him, his thoughts along the lines of *if he wanted to mess around, he could've done so a lot sooner for me*.

The truth unfolding before Vega didn't matter to him. All that did was what *he* thought and how *he* felt, and it was that error in judgment that made him fail to notice the true threat.

That, however, was not Zegion's problem. The only reason he hadn't attacked Vega yet was because he was waiting for Ramiris to fully seal off this section of the labyrinth. Otherwise, he wouldn't

have let this disrespect go unaddressed. This wasn't Floor 80, so normally he wouldn't be managing this area in the first place, but during this emergency, the rest of the floor guardians had been summoned to the surface to join the war. He was holding down the fort for them, and that was a serious responsibility. This labyrinth was something they had to protect, and anyone looking to trash the place wasn't about to escape punishment. A piece of garbage like Vega doing whatever he wanted in here was usually unthinkable.

It was one of those extremely rare occasions where Zegion had actually lost his temper. But Vega didn't notice. Instead, he added more fuel to the fire.

"Heh-heh-heh! Well, don't get cocky with me just because you beat some of my minions. This whole labyrinth is mine now."

"…"

"And yeah, I know you. The demon lord Rimuru's got a few famous underlings servin' him, doesn't he? And what was it? The Mist Lord, you called yourself? Maybe you wanna tell me you're one of them, but hell if I care about that."

Zegion clenched a fist.

"Now, what I *do* need to watch out for is that girl I fought earlier. Even that, though…like, I kinda let her go. She's totally going down the hatch next time—"

Vega was nonchalantly saying things that would do a lot more than rile Testarossa if she heard them. And he wasn't done.

"…And who else was there? Benimaru, too, right? And I think a few others, too, but whatever. It doesn't really matter anyway—they're all like little kids to me!"

He was certainly proud of himself.

And with that, Vega was practically signing his own death warrant. He was completely convinced of his overwhelming superiority, never doubting it for a moment—but it wouldn't be too much longer before he'd realize just how mistaken he was.

"Ridiculous," Zegion scoffed. "You have the enemy right in front of you. You could at least look at them and judge them for yourself."

"Heh! Like I need some little cockroach who's too much of a wimp to even show himself until now telling me that."

"Again, you'll have to see for yourself."

Vega sniffed at Zegion's reply. Then he took up a fighting stance, turning up the knob on the intimidation he let out.

"All right. Lemme show you something, then. I wanna get this boring-ass fight over with real fast, okay? I got a whole world out there to conquer."

He continued to look down on Zegion the whole time. Zegion responded with his usual cool demeanor.

"…I suppose you're right about one thing. You will *not* enjoy this fight."

Ever so calmly, he prepared himself. Vega almost felt sorry for him.

"Wow. Pathetic. You still think you're not going to die, huh? Well, you got the wrong idea there, man. This whole labyrinth is under my control now!"

The only pathetic one here was Vega. He was the proverbial emperor with no clothes, howling away without even realizing what Ramiris had done to him.

"I assume you think you can just come back to life if you did, huh? That's why you're daring to take on someone as vastly superior as me. Except you're nothing but a little bug who— *Brphhh?!*"

That was all Vega could force out. In essence, the point he was making (with his very incorrect knowledge) was that Zegion could keep on trying his luck against him if he wanted, without necessarily being a match for him at all. However, he failed to get the point across. He wanted to say that he had taken away the immortality the labyrinth offered, hoping that it'd shake his enemy and doom him to eternal death. But Zegion had made his move before he finished.

Really, he just talked for too long. In Zegion's mind, continuing to babble away in a fight after your opponent squared up was an unbelievable piece of buffoonery. Even worse, his patience had reached its limit. Anyone who dares to defile the labyrinth shall die—that was Rimuru's decree to him, and it was the credo he lived by. He had been briefed by Benimaru about the Ramiris-approved strategy of letting Vega take a piece of the labyrinth, and he agreed

with it, too—but it was still difficult to keep himself serene. Defiling this place was the one thing you could do that'd guarantee uncontrollable rage from Zegion.

Now that Ramiris was finished with her work and this floor was fully quarantined, there was no longer any need to hold back. Listening to Vega talk was just his way of showing a little compassion—but now he was unleashing his anger, silencing Vega mid-sentence.

"Y-you…?!"

Vega glared at Zegion as he held a hand to his bleeding nose.

Wait, wait, this is so weird! I consumed the labyrinth. I should be immortal!

…Oh, wait, I'm not dead in the first place…

Finally, Vega realized it. Whether he was immortal or not didn't matter at the moment—as he now saw, his strength hadn't changed one bit from before. He thought he had just unlocked an inexhaustible supply of energy for himself…but that didn't mean he had boosted his instantaneous firepower at all. One's EP didn't directly correlate to fighting force; if you were allocating resources to things not related to combat, then your point total wasn't all that useful of a metric. Evaluating someone based on magicule count was a more realistic approach, and in that sense, Vega's fourfold EP advantage over Zegion didn't mean he was guaranteed to win.

Zegion silently pursued him. Vega, who still had no idea what just happened, began to lose his vision.

This was all the work of a kick from Zegion. Vega didn't see when he had closed the distance between them, but that leg, raised high in the air, revealed the exact type of attack laid upon him.

Slowly lowering it, Zegion kept Vega in his sights. "You're very tough. I will go a little harder next time."

And then he disappeared. This was Zegion's Divine Mobility skill, which was far beyond what Vega was capable of following. No matter how hard he invoked Magic Sense or Grasp Space, no matter how much he used Hasten Thought to figure out what was going on, it was impossible for Vega to capture Zegion on the move.

The reason was simple. Zegion wasn't merely fast—he was

existing in a mixture of reality and illusion, of truth and falsehoods.

……

……

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Through his on-the-ground experience in the labyrinth, Zegion's approach to battle was evolving on a daily basis. As the strongest in the labyrinth, he was something of a pioneer this way.

Since he and Apito were connected by their souls, they could each reproduce the other's powers to a certain extent. Thanks to that, Zegion was currently undergoing a truly terrifying evolution. He was diligent by nature, studying and researching all kinds of abilities. Within the Fantastical World of the ultimate skill Mephisto, Lord of Illusion, he had done field tests on every sort of skill out there. His particular focus was on Control Dimensions, applying his own interpretation to it in order to improve on the Veldora-Style Death Stance.

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Being able to perceive the movements of someone like Zegion at first sight was therefore an extremely difficult task. There was no way someone like Vega could do it—but thanks to his quick thinking, he survived that first salvo. The ultimate enchantment Multi-Weapon, obtained after consuming Orlia, was doing its job well—Vega, now in his magic-born form, had his entire body protected by an alien-looking, God-class suit of armor. An ordinary magic-born could never break through it; even demon lords would have their work cut out for them.

And this was the question—what would happen if someone like Vega stopped caring about how he looked and focused entirely on defending himself?

His whole body let off an eerie glow as he brought out his full strength. He thrust both his arms forward, and a set of three kite-shaped shields, their contours rounded like an almond, appeared in front of him.

But despite this exaggerated approach to defense, Zegion

responded with nothing but a simple punch. His arms were covered in crimson steel, so the power of this strike was beyond any measure. It immediately shattered two out of the three shield layers, even cracking the last one.

The feat was more than enough to change Vega's perception of things.

This guy's a monster! Ugh… I didn't think there was still anyone like this left. Maybe I underestimated the demon lord Rimuru juuuuust a little…

Yes, Vega regretted looking down on Zegion now. He had completely underestimated his enemy, and not "just a little," either, but that was still admitting a lot by Vega's standards. His lack of regret over things that went wrong was a bad habit of his—but then again, his constantly positive outlook on his chances was probably one of his better traits.

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Now that he saw Zegion for the threat he was, Vega began to reanalyze him.

Looking at his overwhelming battle sense and destructive power, he appeared to be superior to Vega when it came to close combat. Judging by his movements, which seemed to transcend the laws of physics, Vega was convinced that he was something close to a spiritual life-form.

Heh-heh! But I'm still gonna beat him!

Those God-class kite shields were shattered without an effort, but that's because it was all inferior, Vega-crafted gear. He could regenerate them anytime he wanted, so it wasn't much of a loss. With all the energy he still had, he could easily make up for his losses so far.

I gotta think about it the other way around. It's not that he broke two whole shields. It's that he only *broke two!*

His optimism was one of his greatest assets, and it served him

well here, too. The moment he realized the three layers of shields wouldn't help him, he shouted out:

"Protect me… Ring of Invincibility!"

In response to the command, four rings, each three or so feet across, appeared in the air. Each one offered God-class defense, and now they were automatically giving Vega protection. If three weren't enough, he could just make four instead.

For Vega, this really was an invincible sort of defense. Even if he failed to perceive an incoming attack, the Ring of Invincibility's automatic defense kept him perfectly safe. It could deal with attacks from any and all angles, perfectly protecting its master at all times—and if they were ever shattered somehow, they could instantly regenerate for him. With all that in mind, Vega was confident that defeat just wasn't in the cards today.

His composure now fully back, Vega smiled broadly at his enemy. "Hey… You think you got me beat, huh? Think you already won? Well, tough luck for you. I haven't even *started* to get serious."

"…"

"Don't ignore me, man! You think you're better than—? Eep?!"

Two rings, layered on top of each other, shattered at once, making Vega swallow his words in fright. Zegion, paying this no mind, continued to calmly attack. Rings were shattered, then regenerated, and so on without end. Vega was frightened by it at first, but once he realized none of the attacks were reaching him, he quickly regained his confidence.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! How d'you like the Ring of Invincibility? Pretty neat, huh? You're a little better than most people, but you're still just a wimp. No match for me at all!"

Vega couldn't help himself. He was so overconfident of his own strength that there wasn't a single doubt in his mind that Zegion was giving this his full power.

Just like I thought. He's a hell of a brawler, but that's all he is. If he doesn't have a way to break my shield, then I never had a thing to be afraid of.

Being afraid in the first place was a little telling, but Vega didn't care. In his eyes, Zegion was just this guy blindly repeating his

useless attacks. His optimism was veering dangerously close to stupidity.

"Well, that was a pretty neat performance. Lemme pay my respects and show you what I'm *really* made of!"

Vega thrust his arms toward Zegion. They joined together, forming a shape similar to a gun barrel.

"Time to die! Infinite Eater!"

It was Vega's strongest attack, one unleashed with unwavering confidence behind it. Moss had used it to great effect in the battle at the Englesian capital, and Vega learned it through the eyes of a dracobeast. It was surprisingly well suited to Vega; Moss couldn't reuse the energy it absorbed until it had been completely sublimated, but that was irrelevant to Vega, thanks to possessing Azhdahak. In other words, he could use it like a rapid-fire automatic weapon. His magi-bacteria, capable of devouring all matter and turning it into dust, was transformed by this skill into a wave of annihilation that gouged through its foes. It could reduce all wavelengths—the frequencies energy ran at—to zero, making it a destructive force that nothing could defend against.

If an enemy had an existential rating beneath his own, he could eat them without much resistance at all. It was an unbelievable feat of strength, but its simplicity is what made it so extremely effective. This applied to living matter as well, and spiritual life-forms like angels and demons were no exception. In fact, the more energy in a body, the purer it was, making it the perfect prey for him.

Vega had become invincible after mastering this technique. His current EP count was just short of twenty million, making him the strongest of the Seven Heavenly Generals and up there with Zarario and Jahil of the Three Stellar Leaders. Zegion, on the other hand, was under five million. A vast, hopeless gap existed between them.

But even when faced with the fury of a full-power Infinite Eater:

"Useless. I know all about that move—and so it won't work on me."

Despite being bombarded up and down his body by this vicious, destructive energy, Zegion didn't move an inch, as if he was standing on a windless field. He exuded the air of the overwhelmingly strong,

almost chiding Vega as he informed him how useless his effort was. Vega might not have expected it, but he chose the wrong person to pick a fight with.

Zegion had engaged in a long series of simulated battles with Moss. He had experience with his techniques. The first time he got hit with it *did* cause a lot of damage, even though the EP difference meant Zegion won the fight anyway. Even he had to admit to how dangerous that technique was—and he wasn't going to leave that unaddressed. After carefully assessing the nature of this skill, he developed a countermeasure—something he invented long ago.

The essence of Infinite Eater lay in its waveform. Once it reduced the wavelength of energy to zero, it would then take it in as its own—or consume it, in other words. If Vega didn't want this to happen, all he had to do was counteract it with a waveform in the opposite phase. What's more, Vega's skill with this technique was still inferior to Moss's. His powers let him perform a pretty close imitation, but he was nowhere near as proficient in it, and it was an incredibly inefficient use of energy in his hands. For Zegion, defeating it was no sweat.

"Y-you're kidding me! That's impossible! How can you be so unaffected after taking Infinite Eater?!"

Vega was pretty upset about it, but there was nothing out of line about that reaction. Even Moss was left at a total loss once Zegion cracked his technique—and now Zegion was telling Vega what he said to Moss then.

"Ridiculous," Zegion scoffed. "A wave is the perfect thing to cancel out another wave with. Once you have the knack down, all you have to do is envelop it in your own. You must go with the flow, not attempting to resist it—the way of the universe. And as my illusions absorb themselves into the phantom realm, it is far too easy for me to see through your waves."

He made it sound simple, but such a feat was normally impossible—or should have been anyway. At the very least, you'd need the ability to fully outperform your opponent's computational power…but Zegion had already figured out the limits of Vega's.

"That makes no sense!" Vega snapped. He was trying to escape

from a reality he refused to acknowledge. This was supposed to kill Zegion, filling the entire space with waves of annihilation—but he was standing right there, unharmed. And now Vega understood that his superior existence rating meant nothing.

Fear began to grip his heart.

"How foolish," said Zegion. "You were never any match for me—"

"Stop! Stay away from me!"

"Know that to Sir Veldora and Sir Rimuru, you are nothing more than a speck of dust."

Zegion took his time walking up to Vega, who was terrified. The Mist Lord had already seized control of this quarantined space. From the very beginning, everything had been managed by Zegion's authority—the Fantastical World ability he received from the ultimate skill Mephisto. They were in a world where even the flow of time could be twisted any way Zegion desired, where everything was decided exactly as he wished. No matter how much Vega struggled, it would all be in vain.

"Dammit! You're not any better than me! Just because you can block an attack doesn't mean *yours* will get through to me!"

As he fled from Zegion, Vega decided that corroding the labyrinth would need to be his first priority. If he could take control of it and secure his own immortality, Zegion would no longer be a threat to him. It might not happen instantly, but Vega was sure he would win eventually. He so innocently thought that all he had to do was hold out until then.

But Zegion would never allow that.

"It's about time to end this farce. Let's do it now."

He was acting solely on his own emotions, no matter what Vega wanted. And now those emotions directed him to slam his fist into the rings in a fit of rage.

"That's not gonna work on—"

On me was what he was about to say, before he was rendered speechless.

Zegion's fist shattered the circle, like it was made of paper. The four rings overlapped one another and broke into a million tiny pieces.

In a panic, Vega created the maximum number of rings he could deploy at the same time. But Zegion casually destroyed them, one by one. Vega was flabbergasted. No matter what he did, it was useless. The Ring of Invincibility was broken.

"Ah, ahhh…?!"

Vega fell on his rear end, a pathetic sight. Even he had to admit it now—regardless of how hard he struggled, he could never beat Zegion.

"…Your ability may give you absolute power in the physical world. In the spiritual world, it is weak. And here is the result."

"Wait! Take a second to listen to me!"

No longer caring about appearances, Vega pleaded with Zegion, but to no avail. Sensing the danger, he crawled back a bit, summoning his Ring of Invincibility. As long as he kept breaking these out, no attack could reach him—and as long as he was safe, all was well.

Zegion's left hand began to glow. A dimensional-level slicing wave shot out from it, and the next instant, all the rings protecting Vega were cut to pieces. And at the same time:

Th-the next one! I gotta get the next one ready—

The panicked Vega found the characteristic shine of crimson steel embedded in his abdomen.

"Hrrrghhh!!"

It was only the lingering glow. Zegion's backflip kick, released at lightning speed, had struck him. The glow gently faded away, and all that remained was Vega, his face covered in tears, snot, and vomit. He crouched down, hands on his stomach, and begged Zegion.

"J-just stop! Help meee!"

It was an eye-popping plea for help. There was an unbridgeable gap in ability between the two of them. Pure power—something that couldn't be measured by existence points—had won the day. Zegion had trained hard for this moment, and now there was no way Vega could beat him. That was the reality, the eternal truth.

Zegion's left fist began to dully glow.

"S-stop—!"

Vega's scream split the sky—and at that exact moment,

something unexpected happened to the labyrinth.



Everyone in the Control Room was speechless.

(The target is cornered.)

Zegion informed Benimaru of this through a Thought Communication. There was no reason to stop him, so Benimaru gave the necessary permission—but it hadn't even been five minutes since Zegion was deployed. Apparently, Vega had been subdued without much trouble at all. He was in a quarantined part of the labyrinth, so they didn't have a visual on what was happening in there. They could only imagine what kind of battle took place, but it must have been incredibly lopsided, either way.

"Dang…" Ramiris was stunned. "Zegion's just too darn strong, ain't he?"

"I have to hand it to him," said Benimaru, nodding. "He must've made it look easy."

No one could argue with that. It was obvious who the strongest warrior in the labyrinth was. Everyone was nodding in agreement.

"I gotta say," Benimaru added with a sigh of relief, "Zegion sounded really pissed off. I'm just glad he went along with the plan."

They needed to dispose of Vega, and that meant preventing his escape. That's how they came up with this isolation-based approach, but the idea hadn't come from the labyrinth managers at all. Zegion wasn't technically under Benimaru's command, but even so, he obeyed his orders, likely because he was convinced it was the rational way to go. With Rimuru gone, they couldn't afford to have disunity in the ranks. Everyone understood this, and that's why they readily accepted Benimaru as their commander.

"Well, unlike you, he can think calmly, is why."

"I can think calmly, too, Commander!"

"Oh yeah, sure! I'm impressed you can put up such a great acting job in a situation like this!"

"I am honored by your praise, Lady Ramiris."

Benimaru and Ramiris nodded at each other. The mission was almost at its climax, and there were bright faces across the room. Vega would soon be dealt with, and things were about to finish up over at the battle arena, too.

It's all going to be fine, Sir Rimuru. I'm here to protect the labyrinth with my life!

Now that Rimuru was absent, Benimaru was the highest authority in charge. Ramiris's cooperation was appreciated, but it was still too soon to let their guard down. So Benimaru pointed his motivation toward the future. The real work was just beginning.



As Zegion was locked in deadly combat with Vega, Ramiris was staring at the friend shown on the big screen, a worried look on her face.

Deeno is such an idiot. What is he doing? Now of all times…

The operation was in its final stages. She wanted to let Deeno and his party in on the truth soon—no later than when Vega was taken care of. Then he'd need to decide. Did they want to keep being Feldway's puppets, or did they want to regain their complete freedom and join Ramiris's side?

If Deeno and his friends refused the proposal, she couldn't do much about that. She didn't want to kill her friend, so instead she planned to throw him into the Labyrinth Prison, a bit of the labyrinth that she remodeled for the purpose. She had based it on the "secret of the infinite corridor," something Rimuru had obtained from one place or another, and it worked by constantly changing its spatial coordinates, preventing all escape. The labyrinth had become a bit of a rough place as of late; more and more idiots were going in and wrecking the joint, so Ramiris wanted a way or two to punish them. It looked to her like she'd get to test them out real soon. Having to recalculate coordinates all the time to prevent escape was a little

irritating, but it still beat killing Deeno and his friends.

But what Ramiris really wanted to see wasn't anything as trivial as that.

Come on, Deeno. Let's carry on like idiots again and conduct some more experiments together. All right?

That was her hope. She believed in the strategy that Rimuru devised, and she prayed that Deeno could become her friend again. The feelings came across to everybody present—and now they were inspiring Shuna to act.

"Would you mind if I tried to persuade Deeno's party?" she asked, smiling gently at Ramiris.

"Huh?"

Ramiris gave her a close look. Shuna was the true leader of this nation of monsters, along with the labyrinth it housed. Not even Rimuru was able to turn down a request from her. She was always there if you needed help—and most importantly, if you wanted to keep your allowance (and be fed by the kitchen), those were both her domains.

"Are you sure, Shuna?"

Ramiris and Benimaru both gave her a concerned look. But Shuna just grinned and nodded back.



Deeno was exhausted.

They were having a break at the moment. He had already been killed four times, and the experience was wearing him out.

"There's more where that came from," said Beretta, who offered him a Resurrection Bracelet. There was no doubt a devilish smile underneath his mask.

He was a demon after all, thought Deeno, his eyes turning toward the heavens.

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After dying so many times, he was starting to get used to it. He was beginning to accept the situation he was in—in fact, it was starting to feel more and more pleasant, although he assumed this was just in his imagination.

Why was Ramiris doing this? If it was just for revenge, she wouldn't have gone this far. She *was* the type to hold a grudge, yes, but she also had a memory like a sieve, so she was normally never this persistent.

Nah, it's really not surprising at all, huh? It's just her as usual.

Deeno chided himself a little.

But yeah. Ramiris is angry because I'm doing whatever Feldway tells me to. But I can't do anything about it. As long as I have an angelic power like this, I have to do his bidding…

With Ultimate Dominion, there was never any room for back talk. It didn't deprive Deeno of his free will, which was fortunate, but that was only because he was playing along with it. If he rankled Feldway any more than he already had, things could get a lot worse quickly.

In his current state, he was able to defy his will for only a single moment at a time. In that way, if he could turn against Feldway at just the right moment, he ought to be able to help Rimuru and Ramiris if needed. He had already been leaking information to Ramiris and the others, making sure Vega never picked up on it. He felt he'd become a pretty valuable informant and deserved to be treated a little better than this.

I mean, this is just her looking to see what kind of effect dying has on this power, isn't it? But Ultimate Dominion isn't that simple, you know…

If it could be removed, he would've done it already.

After probing his state at the moment of death, he found that Feldway's power was tightly bound to his soul. To be precise, the ultimate skill Astarte, Lord of High Heaven, had taken root in his soul, controlling his body's internal command center. The only way to break this was to completely erase the authority at the root—in other words, to die. That or overwrite it with some other ability.

But that's impossible, though…

Deeno did have another skill. The unique skill Sloth, to be exact—although it had since evolved into the ultimate skill Belphegor, Lord of Sloth. The power seemed to embody the essence of Deeno himself. If he could set it on Astarte, it might just be possible to jam Ultimate Dominion…but he hesitated to try it.

Like…if it actually works, Feldway's definitely gonna find out, so…

And when he did, Deeno's friends Pico and Garasha were doomed to have their free will taken away and become puppets. They'd try to capture Deeno, and they wouldn't be able to avoid a fight then. He wasn't that close to Mai, but he didn't want to just abandon her, either. She took care of her companions, that much was clear by now, and Deeno had a certain sense of ease when he was around her. She was better as a friend than as an enemy, at least.

Deeno was kind that way, despite it all. He didn't want to see his friends get hurt, and he definitely didn't want to be the one doing the hurting. He might be able to escape from this thrall alone, but that wasn't good enough for him.

So I just gotta keep things as they are, huh?

But just when he was about to give up for good:

"Is that really what you want, Sir Deeno? Can't you save everybody at the same time?"

The voice seemed to encompass everything around it, a blanket that gave him a sense of security. *This must be Shuna*, he hazily thought. But why was she talking to him? Was he imagining it, or was this real…?

I mean, yeah, it's damn scary whenever Shuna is mad, but her speaking to me this kindly…?

That was even scarier, as far as he was concerned.

This wasn't a question at all. It was an order. He was being browbeaten into doing it, and if he replied that he couldn't, he could imagine how disappointed she'd be. As lazy as he was, even Deeno knew he didn't have that in him.

So there was just one answer. He had no choice but to do it. Besides, he had a lot to lose but a lot to gain as well. He steeled himself, recalling Ramiris's smile.

Yes… That's exactly right. Why was I hemming and hawing over

this? I'll give it a shot, and if it doesn't work, I'll quit then. But just whining about it and not doing anything? That's not like me at all!

Deeno's hesitation was gone. It didn't really matter if that was actually Shuna or not. What did was that he made up his mind to follow that voice. He had decided to take action before he lost his motivation for good.

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Clenching his fist, he punched himself on the cheek as hard as he could. There was no pain, but it was still an eye-opening sensation. There was a considerable amount of damage, numbing his brain, but all the worries that had been smoldering inside of him had been whisked away.

"Okay, guys! I've made up my mind. I'd rather take my chances and win my freedom instead of living all half-assed like this!"

The loud declaration was met with cold stares by Pico and Garasha.

"It's about damn time," Garasha spat.

"You're so slow that it took dying *four times* for it to dawn on you?" Pico added.

"Yeah, after you kept telling us to reserve our energy and everything. What were *you* doing this whole time?"

"Like, you're so trashed, you couldn't run away from here even if you wanted to."

The verbal bullets came careening toward Deeno. He was about to ask for their trust, but all these accusations were about to make him burst into tears instead.

"So you finally made up your mind," Mai said, driving the final blow. "You really are the most indecisive man I know, you realize that?"

Those were her true feelings, as much as they cut into Deeno's heart. For him, though, they were nothing short of a compliment.

"Yeah, well, you won't find anyone as unenthusiastic about stuff to the very end as me, y'know?"

The smug response received a pretty cold reaction.

“I wasn’t complimenting you,” Mai told him.

“I can’t believe how self-centered you are,” said Garasha.

“Well,” Pico added, “it’s certainly in character for you, at least, huh? ♪”

Still, there was a certain trust behind Pico and Garasha’s words. Deeno couldn’t hide his surprise. He never really expected them to trust in him; in fact, he anticipated needing a lot of time to make them see things his way, and he feared Mai wouldn’t bother listening at all.

“Um, so you’re okay with this? Because I haven’t even told you about my plan yet…”

But all that came back was encouragement.

“Just *do* it, man.”

“If you mess it up, I’ll kill you.”

“I guess we’ll just have to trust him, huh? Feels kind of like a bet, but…”

So Garasha, Pico, and Mai (in that order) volunteered their trust in Deeno.

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With a bold smile, Deeno turned to Beretta.

“Right, so first off, do something about this metal that’s hardened up to my waist!”

“…”

Without a word, Beretta released him.

“Okay,” Deeno said, standing up. “Sorry if I made you guys wait a while.” He stretched out his arms and gave his friends a refreshed smile. Then he looked at everyone in order, his expression stiffening.

“Right. Time to get serious for a change.”

His eyes, always half-open and sleepy, widened. This would be easy enough to do—if it was only him, at least.

“See, the reason we can’t defy Feldway is because of the override circuit built into angelic ultimate skills.”

Everyone listened on, sober looks on their faces.

"That's why we're being forced to submit to a higher authority, but—"

"But if we had the administrative rights to erase that, like Obela did, we could've gotten away, huh?" Garasha cut in bitterly.

"Yeah," Pico agreed with a nod, "that was pretty bold of her. Too bad we can't do that any longer."

Mai was one thing, but Deeno and his two friends *did* have those rights handy. It'd be a shame to lose a skill granted to them by Veldanava, although anything was better than having to bend to Feldway. It was possible for them to simply erase the ability, or it used to be—but sadly, that move was now prohibited.

If Obela hadn't acted on her own like that, erasing would've been the move to make. They had to resent her for not consulting with them before going ahead with it. She was kind of in a hurry, it was true, but even so, there really needed to be more discussion.

There wasn't much point complaining about that now, though, so Deeno veered over to the main topic at hand.

"Hey, listen up one sec. What I'm trying to say is that if we can get rid of that override circuit, we can break out of this."

"But how?" Pico asked.

"If we could *do* that, we wouldn't *be* in this mess," Garasha noted.

"…A way that doesn't involve having those administrative rights? Because I don't have those," said Mai.

All three members of the audience had their own opinions about this.

"Well, actually, yes. Exactly that. The problem is how we'll time it."

As he subsequently elaborated, Deeno thought that he might be able to use his skill Evolution to remove the override circuit. Only he was capable of doing that, but he thought he could maybe use the momentum from that to forcibly intervene into everyone else. That was the first bet—he had never tried anything like this, so they'd be going in without a net. And even if it worked, there was a good chance Feldway would notice and interrupt him before they could

wrap it up.

"Sounds like a pretty slapdash plan," Mai ruefully said. It *was* a gamble—a big gamble, as far as she was concerned. But that didn't change her decision at all. She had decided to take the plunge, and there was no turning back now…and if that's how the most serious-minded person in the group reacted, Pico and Garasha were ready to follow her lead.

"Do it before he finds out," said Pico.

"If you say you can't do it later on, I'll kill you," added Garasha.

They wanted to get started as soon as possible, seemingly assured that there was no way Deeno would fail them.

Right, he thought, nodding at them. But then:

"Let me help you as well."

Shuna was walking over to them, smiling.

"Um…?"

Deeno, thrown by this, tried to figure out what she was up to.

"I will support you on this, Sir Deeno. I will imitate your intervention and perform the same action on the other three. So do not worry."

The assurance and the smile seriously perplexed Deeno. *Um? She's serious…right? Can she even do a trick like that?*

If she could, it'd mean she was virtually godlike in power. The sort of skill evolution Deeno was talking about was fairly close to impossible as it stood, but Shuna was going to decipher it, make it her own, and use it on the others at the same time? It just seemed so far beyond the realm of possibility.





Ah, but Rimuru's crazy enough that he might've been able to, actually.

"I think," Shuna said, perhaps reading Deeno's mind, "that Sir Rimuru had seen all this coming in advance. He believed all along that you would join us."

"Yeah," echoed the voice of Ramiris, *"and I believe it, too! So listen, Deeno, if you make this work, all is forgiven, okay? Just trust in Shuna and get yourself back to normal already!"*

"Um, okay."

All Deeno could do was nod back. He was intending to power his way through this, and if this improved his chances for success, he couldn't wish for a better offer. He had no reason at all to reject it.

"All right. I'm gonna do it, then."

"Yes, go right ahead."

Shuna looked Deeno in the eyes and nodded.

It was kind of doubtful whether Rimuru had foreseen this moment or not, but Shuna didn't fear the situation at all. Deep within her soul, she still felt a palpable connection with Rimuru.

Guiding Deities, the ultimate skill she had just acquired, was proof of this. It was an amalgam of every other skill out there, the culmination of all the skills that Rimuru had collected and analyzed. It was, in fact, the heaven-sent child of Rimuru's own ultimate skill Shub-Niggurath, Lord of Abundance, and thus, there was no way it could fail.

Deeno activated his ability, invoking Belphegor to counteract Astarte. This temporarily disabled the override circuit, and at that moment, he set another skill upon it.

"…Evolution."

Could he pull the wool over Feldway's eyes? It was a gamble…but it paid off. The next moment, Belphegor and Astarte clashed with, then merged with each other. With that, he acquired the ultimate skill Astaroth, Lord of the Fallen—an incredibly powerful ability combining the creativity and destructive force of Veldanava's beloved Astarte with the absolute mind superiority provided by Belphegor.

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At one point in the past, Deeno was the trusted servant of Veldanava the Star-King Dragon. He always stood by his side, acting as the sword Veldanava fought with in battle. That was in the past, but even now, he enjoyed a reputation as the strongest swordsman that ever was.

Over time, the world had settled down, conflict disappearing from the land. From that point, he was appointed the "guardian" of the planet by Veldanava, and his journey across the world began then. But then Veldanava passed away, as if waiting for the exact moment Deeno was away to do so. Him and Lushia, his beloved wife.

The creative forces of Astarte, Lord of High Heaven, could also be an incomparably powerful destructive force. Deeno's fierce anger and hatred drove him to run wild across the land, destroying rich and powerful nations in the most cruel and pitiless manner. But it did not calm him down.

He regained his reason once he had completed his revenge, but now nothing mattered to him at all. He even considered destroying the world itself, but he also understood that it would make everything truly meaningless. Deeno was always half-hearted that way. He was too rational for his anger to last long, but he couldn't retain a positive view of the world, either. He needed a clear reason for whatever he did, and if he couldn't find one, he unconsciously set limits on what he could do. Astarte, his own power, had been sealed away because he felt responsible for all the destruction he did during his rage.

Then Deeno lost sight of the meaning of life. This was the point when he truly became one of the fallen. He was fortunate, at least, that his colleagues Pico and Garasha stuck with him. If it had been just him, he might have disappeared without a trace.

Several thousand years later, Deeno continued to carry out his duties as the world's guardian, but he still hadn't found meaning to his life. In the process, he had discovered Milim, the orphaned child of Veldanava and Lushia. He had no intention of becoming a servant to her, so he only observed her from discreet hiding spots, but she at least helped stave off his boredom. He was firmly entrenched in his

lazy lifestyle by this point, but he was still having Pico and Garasha gather information for him.

Somewhere along the line, Deeno had become a demon lord.

Milim went berserk at one point, and Guy and Ramiris stopped her. Deeno helped from the shadows back then, too, seeing such a dangerous person as too risky to leave unchecked. The next time she went out of control, she might very well destroy the entire world, and Deeno felt it was his role to prevent that. In this way, Deeno found a new meaning to his life.

Even after achieving demon lord status, his daily life just dragged on, the same as it always had. The first sign of change came at the Walpurgis Council where Rimuru joined their ranks. Clayman, a small creature who hardly seemed worthy of calling himself a demon lord, threw a punch at Milim. As sluggish as Deeno was, it was such a shock that he snapped out of it in an instant, fearing what would happen if Milim went berserk. It turned out that Milim was acting, though, and when he looked into why, he found that the reason was Rimuru, the new guy.

From then on, he took an interest in this demon lord. And when he came into contact with his true nature—whether by chance or fate—Deeno once again found something to live for.

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"Man, am I awesome or what? I actually removed the override circuit."

Deeno was preparing to brag all about it, but when he saw what was around him, he stopped, speechless. Shuna was even more awesome than he was.

"…Imitation."

Shuna had just copied Deeno.

Normally, this would mean that Deeno was still the awesome one, since he came up with it first. But not here. Shuna had used Analyze and Assess to figure out what Deeno was doing, extracted the key points from it, and manifested them herself in an instant. In addition, she was simultaneously reading and interpreting all the

various and diverse powers of each of her targets. Deeno was working strictly with powers he already had—*this* was several times more difficult. Fully understanding someone's skills in an instant? It was too hard to believe, but the ease with which she did it clearly showed how awesome Shuna really was.

"No way," he muttered to himself.

He couldn't believe his eyes as Pico, Garasha, and Mai's powers were rewritten on the spot. Pico's ultimate skill Jibril, Lord of Rigor, was remade as Jibril, Lord of Severity, a better version that allowed for more freedom. Garasha's ultimate skill Haniel, Lord of Glory, was turned into Hamiel, Lord of Splendor, a version that couldn't be influenced by anyone else. Finally, Mai Furuki's ultimate enchantment World Map evolved into the ultimate skill Tera Mater, Lord of Starry Skies, a skill that reflected Mai's own wishes much more closely.

All of this had been done with Shuna's power alone, a feat that was impossible to believe. And the only person who could have ever made that possible…

"Yep. Just as I thought, that bastard Rimuru saw the whole thing coming…"

The image of the shameless Rimuru came to Deeno's mind. He was the only person he knew who could pull off such impossible tasks and make it look so easy—and he probably did it again, just now. He wasn't there presumably, but it was like he was exercising his skills through the eyes and hands of his staff.

And Shuna wasn't denying it, either.

"…Well, yes, I'm sure, Sir Deeno. As you surmised, this was not strictly my own power."

She didn't think this was Rimuru at work, but it was certainly his powers, at least. Her Imitation skill worked at the exact moment it needed to because *someone* was there making sure of it. If she was asked to do it again right now, she probably wouldn't be able to. It was likely only possible because she received the right data at the right time…from somewhere.

Who sent it…? She opted not to think about it. For the moment, she should have been happy that everyone was freed from Feldway's control…

…but just as Shuna was thinking that, things began to change.

There was a rumbling across the labyrinth. That wasn't supposed to happen. Everyone immediately knew that some kind of anomaly had occurred. It was precisely at that moment when Zegion prepared to deliver the final blow to Vega.

"…What is this?" an astonished Shuna asked. The sensation was the same as back when floors of the labyrinth were being destroyed. Only a very few people, even among Tempest's executive ranks, could do such a thing. What's more, this tremor was even greater than the one before—when Velgrynd herself was wreaking havoc.

"…No way. Don't tell me Vega really *is* trying to consume this place?"

"Yeah, right."

"But this shaking…"

"I doubt Vega could do anything like that. If he could, he would have first thing."

It made sense to everyone on hand. So what happened? They looked at one another, confused over this unanticipated, unwelcome event.



The Control Center was just as surprised, but the most shocked of all was Ramiris, the labyrinth's creator.

"Oh, come on! I had him quarantined and everything…but, ahh, who cares about that? We got way bigger trouble now!"

The floor where Vega was being held had been blown out entirely. That was certainly surprising, but what shocked Ramiris even more was the fact that another hostile presence had just infiltrated the labyrinth, one with an EP off the charts.

"The existential rating of the intruder has been measured. Its identity is confirmed to be Zeranus the Insect Lord, and his EP is one hundred and fourteen million…"

The operator fell silent. One hundred and fourteen million points. An epoch-destroying monster. Even Milim and Guy would have their work cut out for them, let alone Ramiris.

"…Pretty tough."

Benimaru wouldn't stand a chance, either.

"You could just say it's impossible, you know," joked Ramiris, but there wasn't much energy in her voice.

They were lucky to detect the intrusion, at least. If someone as strong as Zeranus caught them by surprise, they'd be helplessly defeated. Seeing Zegion get defeated in an instant was proof enough of that.

But despite the hopelessness across the room, one person was still smiling. It was Diablo.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… He defeated Zegion, then? Interesting. Shall I take this one on?" he offered, brimming with confidence.

"You can't," Benimaru said.

"Yeah," added Ramiris, "you're trying *way* too hard with that act."

If Beretta was there, he would have been all for it, crowing about how nobody could stop Noir and all that—but he wasn't, so the no's had it.

"You never know until you try, though," responded Diablo, looking a little put off.

Before the mood turned even more sour, Treyni stepped in. "Actually, I know that all of us aren't in the best of health right now, Benimaru included. Diablo seems to be the only person who can take him on. Why don't we leave this to him?"

She was speaking the truth. No one could argue against her. Gabil was seriously injured, and after taking on Geld's own wounds, Ranga was seriously depleted of magical force. Gobta, Rigurd, and the rest were out of the fight. Zegion and Apito were on assignment, as were Kumara and Geld. The only member left was Diablo. Charys, the guardian of Ramiris, could be counted on as a fighting force as well, alongside Treyni's kin and the four Dragon Lords. But that was a last resort, and to begin with, none of them could possibly stand up to Zeranus. Zegion could always be relied upon, but, well…

So, without further objection, it was decided that Diablo would

deal with Zeranus.



The labyrinth violently shook again. The source of the tremors was rapidly approaching the floor Deeno and his crew were on.

"I have a real bad feeling about this…"

"What a coincidence, Pico. I do too."

Pico and Garasha sounded concerned, and it seemed like their fears would soon become reality.

The labyrinth ceiling cracked as each floor was broken through with a force beyond imagination. This would normally be impossible, as the labyrinth interior used different dimensional layers for each floor, but that was not the case for this kind of common sense–defying force. In fact, there were several Tempest residents who could tap into limitless power to do that.

But *this* was a different phenomenon. It looked to Deeno like the intruder was just ripping whole dimensions open with simple force alone.

"This is bad, isn't it?"

"It sure is. I mean, can you even do stuff like this in real life…?"

Ramiris's labyrinth was easy to escape from but difficult to break into. Magic Sense stopped working well once you were more than a couple floors away, so it wasn't possible to do something like teleport to a given person's location. But this being, radiating a furious aura and not trying to hide it, was heading straight for the arena where Deeno and his friends were. An insider might know who was where at a given point in time…but Deeno couldn't guess who that insider could be.

Still, the fact that this person was breaking down entire floors of the labyrinth narrowed down the candidate pool pretty quickly.

Who is this? Daggrull is fighting Luminus right now. Could it be Feldway or Zeranus? Or someone else?

He tried to figure it out, but he might not have to before much

longer. It'd probably be quicker to just ask the guy when he showed up. Clearly, Deeno was being targeted, although he really didn't want to admit it.

"Hey! Ramiris! What the hell's going on?!" Deeno shouted.

"Well," a panicked-sounding Ramiris replied, *"some really bad stuff, pretty much! I'm busy, so I'll talk to you later!"*

"Whoa! Wait! Who's attacking—?"

But there was no longer any need to ask, because a strange-looking figure had just leisurely descended from a rip in the ceiling.

"Zeranus…?"

A mere glance indicated how strong he was. But even more dreadful was the person Zeranus held in his left hand—the strongest warrior in the labyrinth.

"Oh, no way—Zegion *lost*?!"

Zegion, who had never imagined being defeated, was being dragged around unconscious.

At this point, the group was split between calmness and panic. Shuna, Geld, and Beretta kept their cool. Apito didn't.

"Zegion!!"

She was about to fly toward him, but Geld stopped her.

Kumara and the rest were too dumbfounded to speak. They knew how strong Zegion was, and they couldn't accept that this was real at all.

"Now's no time to just be standing here!"

It was ultimately Shuna who ordered the retreat. They were wearing Resurrection Bracelets just in case, but she thought it was smarter to stay on guard and avoid becoming hostages.

Beretta secured the escape route, ensuring everyone got out safely. For now, the plan was to flee into the Control Center; they'd rescue Zegion once they had a better idea of the enemy's strength. If they charged in without a plan, they knew they'd pay for it quickly.

So they all went on the move, but…

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“You’re not going anywhere.”

Zeranus moved faster than anyone could track. He was after just one person—as he landed on the ground, he aimed at Apito, who Geld still holding back.

“Nhhh?!”

Geld stepped forward to protect her, but it was no use. He was casually knocked away by one of Zeranus’s slender second pair of arms. No one could rival Geld in defense, but a casual slap from Zeranus was enough to knock him out. That was unbelievable enough, but after the reality of Zegion’s defeat, people were a lot less surprised by it. Right now, job one was to get as far away as possible.

“Don’t worry!” echoed the voice of Ramiris. *“I changed the resurrection point!”*

As if to prove it, everyone’s Resurrection Bracelets were shining on their wrists. Even amid all this chaos, Ramiris was taking the proper measures.

We were enemies until a moment ago. Is it really okay for her to trust us that readily?

Deeno felt that simply running away with everyone else wouldn’t do much to earn everyone’s trust. There was no defying Feldway, but if they acted too readily like they were all full-fledged buddies again, they might wind up facing some blowback.

“Pico, Garasha, are you gonna join me?”

“Of course!”

“Ahh, I knew you’d say that.”

Deeno’s thoughts were easily readable by his two longtime friends. Pico and Garasha drew their weapons and stood alongside him. “I’m here, too,” Mai said, bow and arrow at the ready as she stood behind them.

Zeranus gave the group a quick glance. “Heh. You were part of Feldway’s force, weren’t you? So you betrayed him?”

“No, it was Feldway who betrayed us,” Deeno told him.

“Exactly,” said Pico. “Taking over our minds like that… Totally awful.”

“Mm-hmm. So if you’re gonna fight us, Zeranus, you better be

ready," added Garasha.

It was all a bunch of bravado, but the three of them didn't have much other choice at the moment. They sure didn't feel like they had any chance, although there was still the faint hope that he'd maybe back down for them.

But naturally, Zeranus wasn't fooled.

"Ha. Give me that woman, and I'll let you go."

He was talking about Apito. Deeno reasoned that Zeranus needed her because she was the same race as him. Zegion was still alive, too, come to think of it. It wasn't that Zeranus couldn't kill him—he wanted to bring him out of there. He was aware that killing him in the labyrinth would just revive him again. On the other hand, he could kill him all he wanted to outside of this place. He might be wanting to add them to his ranks, too, but either way, this wasn't good news.

Whether he'll kill them or recruit them, it doesn't matter. If he brings them out of the labyrinth, we lose.

Deeno was right to think that. Zeranus didn't really care which of those two things happened. Zegion and Apito had already been incorporated into Sefirot, Lord of Life, the ultimate skill possessed by Zeranus. Killing them would let him obtain their powers, and recruiting them would give them time for those powers to develop further. Either way, if anyone got in the way of him, he was ready to dispatch them at once. He had enough power to do that, for certain.

So no one could dare to take him on—

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Not so fast, king of the insects."

But there was one obstacle left in his way.

"Diablooooooo!"

There was palpable delight on Deeno's face. Diablo was the worst person to have as an enemy, but there was no one he'd rather have fighting on his side. No matter how much despair Zeranus had plunged them all into, there was still the assumption that Diablo would work something out.

Diablo sized up Deeno with his cold eyes. "Stop acting so strange, Deeno. Take everyone to a safe place at once."

With that, he walked in front of Zeranus—and that was how the

battle between the dark lord and insect lord began.

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Zeranus stood on the ground in front of Diablo. He tossed Zegion aside, as if he was in the way.

He was a coward at heart, so he had already sniffed out the most dangerous people in the labyrinth. None of them were there at first, but the moment he saw Diablo up close, he felt a sudden chill—a sign of danger, the same as the one he felt when facing the demon lord Milim.





This opponent struck a small presence, but he still wasn't someone to take lightly. Simply realizing this meant Zeranus was smarter than a lot of his other opponents.

"Insect Lord Zeranus…it is time to test your abilities."

"You must think you're so smart, demon."

The conversation immediately ended as Zeranus went on the move. Slipping through all air resistance, he went around to the back of Diablo, then released a rear roundhouse kick. It was aimed at the unprotected back of Diablo's head, but Diablo reacted like he saw it coming. He leaned forward, then launched a rear-facing kick of his own, blocking Zeranus's attempt. The insect lord was a measure larger than Diablo, and there was untold force behind that kick, but Diablo successfully countered it.

The sheer power was even greater than the strike that broke Carrera's arms, but Diablo remained calm. The two of them kept their distance from each other, the exoskeleton covering Zeranus's entire body glowing in a rainbow of colors.

"My, my. Is that crimson steel? That's going to be hard to break."

Diablo transformed his magical power to manifest his demon scissors, a set of five blades that also had a dazzling glow to them—the mark of a God-class weapon.

"Ha. Don't even dream you can do that."

Zeranus circulated power across his whole body, as if he was breathing. The silvery cilia that flowed from his forehead down his back stood on end, appearing to shine as they reflected the light from the labyrinth. The two pairs of wings from his back and waist were spread wide and glowing red, as if he was taking a threatening posture.

Uncrossing his three pairs of arms, he took his stance. The lower arms prepared to cast magic, while the more slender upper pair vibrated, taking on a bladelike quality; parrying that with your bare hands was like asking to be cut to pieces. Finally, the middle arms were poised to absorb any attack Diablo tried on him.

He had no weak points; he could deal with every situation perfectly. He also had no weak attacks; his moves could deal with any target, whether from long, medium, or close range.

One’s existential rating factors in certain values unrelated to combat. It can include powers that aren’t normally used much, which means someone may perform under their EP some of the time. But in the case of Zeranus, nearly all his point total reflected what he could actually do in battle. If there was ever such a thing as the ultimate battle life-form, Zeranus was it.

But Diablo wasn’t fazed. He might have had no chance to beat Zeranus, but he was enjoying every minute of this battle against a foe so overwhelmingly superior to him.

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It was common knowledge that one’s “magic force”—the size of their maximum instantaneous magic output—was more important than simply retaining a large amount of magicules. Along those lines, Diablo was specially geared for magic force. If you were lacking in magicules, you could always replenish them from the surrounding air. That was why Diablo didn’t let himself be fooled by numbers and other silly things. Pure strength was what he looked for.

Humans were a readily available way for Diablo to stave off boredom. Most of them weren’t entertaining at all, but some had souls that shone with a unique beauty.

That woman, Shizue Izawa, was one of them. She had the courage to challenge an opponent who was certain to win, an element that always attracted Diablo’s attention. The way she struggled desperately against her fate, no matter how clumsy it made her look, was something he found beautiful. That’s why Diablo, despite being such a good fighter, was also very particular about *how* he fought. He didn’t just want to win—he strove to be the kind of dominant force who could win no matter the situation.

The experience would come in handy for his fight against Zeranus.

Most battles fought at this level either ended in an instant or dragged on for extended periods of time. Diablo was well aware of this, and he saw no need to hurry things along. If Zegion, a fighter

Diablo knew was talented, had been defeated, there was no doubting the strength of Zeranus, then. Attempting to defeat this kind of opponent in a big rush would come back to bite him.

There were almost no techniques effective against Zeranus. If there was any chance to win, it'd involve a direct hit with his most powerful move at the very moment he dropped his guard. Until then, all Diablo could do was endure—and yet he seemed to be enjoying this from the bottom of his heart.

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"Can't you understand the difference in ability?"

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh. If that's what you have to say, why don't you defeat me already? You can't, can you? And that proves you aren't as great as you think you are."

He was in well over his head, but Diablo was fighting in top form. He was certainly winning the verbal battle, at least.

Zeranus wasn't too amused by this, but that didn't mean he was slacking off. As cautious as he was, he'd never let the enemy's words mislead him. Diablo had to praise him on that point. If his enemy was more weak-minded, he would have defeated him long ago.

Instead, Diablo found himself annoyed by Zeranus's extreme caution. The man never tried any big fancy moves. He just radiated vast amounts of energy, enough to make you think he could make Diablo disappear whenever he wanted…and yet he never broke out any energy discharge techniques. He had been sticking strictly to martial arts so far; there were explosions of compressed air all over the place, but that was the aftermath of his aura releases.

He was overwhelming Diablo, using only his body as a weapon—but Diablo wasn't falling behind, either. He could be hit head-on with a knockout blow, but as long as he parried it, there was no problem. His mind was like a supercomputer as he skillfully led Zeranus around by the nose.

"Impertinent little…"

It wasn't abject panic, but there was a slight ripple of emotion arising within Zeranus. He felt irritated.

Unlike with Milim, he was sure that he'd never lose to Diablo. That was why he had no intention of throwing in the towel. But this was also the first time he encountered a foe this tenacious and persistent, and it was proving to be extremely troublesome. There was no way this enemy could ever stand in the way of his dominance—and yet he was constantly doing just that.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh, what's wrong? Tired already?"

Diablo nonchalantly taunted Zeranus. It only made him more irritated. In the back of his mind, he was thinking, *How dare this puny little thing stand before me, Zeranus, the future god of all creation*, and so forth. But Zeranus still wasn't the type to panic over this sort of thing. He wasn't going to break out his most killer skills against someone like Diablo—this wasn't Milim, after all.

In a battle between two transcendent fighters, the key lay in how well one could exhaust an opponent. And as long as Zeranus kept fighting the way he was, there was no way he could lose.

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Diablo, fully in his element, was admiring Zeranus, who was currently immobile.

He's more trouble than I thought…

Even he could admit to how fearsome he was. He could only deal with Zeranus because he was still sticking to martial arts alone. That was good news for him, more or less, but it also meant Zeranus would never, ever be open and attackable. There was no way to turn the tables on him.

So he tried to agitate him, chipping away at his composure, but Zeranus wasn't easily moved that way, either. He was merely demonstrating a little bit of irritation. The sheer nerve, the mental strength he showed, was tremendous. Diablo himself didn't like it when some wimp tried to verbally diss him in a fight, after all—and he had crushed more of those guys like a bug than he could count. But Zeranus showed no sign of deviating from the path of victory he

mapped out for himself at the start.

At this rate, Diablo's only choice was to shake things up a bit…

But that's not a good move. It could be suicidal if I'm not careful.

Maintaining the status quo, in other words, was his best option. Even if he couldn't defeat Zeranus, Benimaru was waiting in the wings. Zegion was likely to come back soon as well, and the rest of Tempest's best were healing up as well. The Control Room was recording every aspect of this fight, so they could refer to the tape for next time. That was certainly one way to picture things…but even then, Diablo saw a rocky road ahead.

Zeranus's strength was simply abnormal. He was almost treading into divine territory. If they started staging total war, it might have been possible to beat him, but if they moved up to the surface to fight it out, it'd lead to staggering losses. They might not have had a choice, though—the labyrinth seemed to be collapsing in on them. If that happened, the scale of the damage would be immeasurable. Rimuru would be *so* disappointed when he came back.

And I absolutely cannot allow that, Diablo thought as he kept on fighting.

It was clear that Zeranus was targeting Zegion and Apito. If Diablo was defeated, their fates would be sealed, and Zeranus would become even stronger. So was protecting them his best bet? Diablo was regrettably unable to agree with that. Zeranus had broken through many layers' worth of labyrinth in search of Zegion and Apito—which meant he had a super sense that let him pinpoint their location. Protecting them might wind up endangering everyone else around them.

From that perspective, one might conclude that it was similarly dangerous to keep fighting in the labyrinth at all. But leaving the labyrinth would rob the fighters of Ramiris's resurrection abilities, and it'd become even harder to beat Zeranus then.

Perhaps we'd make it out alive, but most of our people wouldn't…

Over half of the Twelve Lordly Guardians were incapable of resurrecting themselves. You had to be a full-fledged spiritual life-form, or else once you died, it was all over.

Either way, panicking was not an option. The best thing Diablo

could do was to keep gathering information. He could seek out Zeranus's weak points, and at the decisive moment, he could go into an all-out attack. That was the simulation he was running in his mind over and over, provided that he could continue to fend off Zeranus's attacks without making a single mistake—an impossibility usually, but Diablo wasn't worried. He would never make a mistake, a belief he was absolutely firm on.

Unfortunately, the inconvenient truth was that there are no such things as "absolutes" in this world.

Zeranus sneered. "Heh. You're a petty creature who can resort to nothing but petty tricks. A perfect match for the lowly slime that you serve, no doubt."

Now it was him taunting Diablo. There was no way to disturb Diablo's emotions, no matter what anyone told him. He might get a little angry, but he'd be able to easily shrug it off.

This time, however, was different. Zeranus's words were taboo, plain and simple. At the very least, he should never have uttered them within Ramiris's labyrinth.

"…What?"

The light disappeared from Diablo's eyes. Those twin abysses of darkness peered into Zeranus. Without realizing it, Zeranus had touched upon a forbidden subject.



Deeno and everyone else watching Diablo's battle were stunned by how ferocious it was.

He had ordered them to evacuate the area, but they ignored him. They didn't see any reason to heed his demands, and they wanted to watch the battle anyway. Now they regretted it—and feared that they lost their chance to escape.

This was all going so quickly, any spectators needed Hasten Thought turned up to maximum to even recognize a battle was taking place. There were loud explosions everywhere, but that was

just the aftermath—the real attacks involved simple hand-to-hand combat.

Diablo was parrying Zeranus's blade with his demon scissors. Zeranus used his silver cilia to try to lop a limb off Diablo, who responded by elegantly working his magic to create dummy versions of himself. He attempted to counterattack whenever he saw an opening, but Zeranus's ironclad defense blocked him each time, so he'd quickly give it up and prepare for the next wave of attacks.

It was a true model of fighting, as if Diablo had written the book on how to battle someone of a higher level.

"Hey… Can *you* fight like that?" Deeno couldn't help asking Pico, Garasha, and Mai.

"No way."

"Stop asking stupid questions, dumbass."

"What kind of answer were you expecting, huh?"

However, his three companions were less than cordial with him. What kind of answer was he expecting? Deeno didn't know either, which troubled him.

Mai, for that matter, wasn't able to perceive this battle whatsoever. These two men were appearing and disappearing at random, and there were occasional explosions, but that was all she could see. She just wanted to get out of there as soon as possible, because she certainly didn't have what it took to intervene.

She wasn't alone, either. Apito, with all her speed, could perceive the battle just fine, but if she ever stepped in, she assumed she'd be blown to pieces in an instant. When a battle was going on, Diablo turned into this whole other person.

"Honestly, I was going to step in and look cool fighting, but even if I went all out, I'd still get my ass kicked."

"Yeah. You'd be lucky to survive for even a few minutes."

"You could probably last longer, Deeno, but I sure couldn't. One strike from those guys could cut me in half."

Mai, who couldn't even see the fight, refrained from offering an opinion. She realized that if things didn't work out like this, it would have been a suicidal fight for them all, and the thought made her shudder.

Apito was sticking around, presumably worried for Zegion. Pico and Garasha were healing him, but they weren't particularly great at that, so he still wasn't awake yet. Mai was staying on guard, ready to run at any time, but she knew she was just kidding herself. If she was attacked before she had the time to realize it, she'd be dead before she could react.

All she could count on was Ramiris's announcement about changing the resurrection point for them. And the only other thing any of them could do was pray for Diablo to win.



Unlike all these onlookers, Shuna had quickly evacuated to the Control Center. Beretta, Geld, and Kumara were with her; Beretta was carrying Geld and Shuna; and Kumara provided support.

There was nothing any of them could do in this battle. Getting killed and revived over and over again would only increase the burden on Ramiris. Shuna wasn't even a combat-oriented skill user in the first place. Having other people feel obliged to protect her would just make her a hindrance, so she wisely opted to stay out of the way. Geld, of course, was downed with a single blow, and Shuna and Kumara couldn't fight any better than him.

"Welcome back!" came the greeting from Ramiris.

"Thank you," Shuna said with a light bow. Only then did she begin treating Geld.

Looking at the large screen, she was struck dumb by the ferocity of the battle unfolding.

"If it weren't for Sir Diablo, we all would have been wiped out, wouldn't we?"

"Looks like it…"

"I can't deny that."

Ramiris and Benimaru agreed.

Beretta was watching the battle, too, similarly incredulous.

"Just what I'd expect from Sir Diablo…," he muttered.

He sounded wowed by him, but not even he would have lasted more than a few seconds against that barrage.

"Honestly, I can't say I understand very much of what's happening," remarked Gabil.

"It's an all-out battle, but neither of them is making any large-scale moves," Charys explained. "They're both taking pains to keep from consuming too much of their strength, even when one side gets exposed a little. It looks pretty humdrum at first glance, but it's clear to me just how skilled they both are."

"Boy, forget about this. I could use all the intuition I've got and I'd still never win."

"Do not fret about it, Gobta. I would be helpless as well."

That wasn't the most encouraging of responses from Ranga, but Gobta didn't mind. Or rather, it was pointless worrying about it, because it wasn't like they had any chance of winning.

The Gobta/Ranga duo was having trouble keeping up with Diablo and Zeranus's moves. Ranga had Keen Smell to provide him some help, but if *this* was how fast they were moving, it was simply impossible to track them. The battle was already at a level where it'd be impossible for the two of them to win; stepping in to provide support would be a good way to get killed.

Kumara was also the same way. If Ranga was helpless to do anything, so was she. She couldn't even understand what was happening, so she would've been killed out there before she knew what was up. This battle was just in a world so far removed from their own.

"I fear that we left Apito behind…," she said.

"Don't worry about it," Benimaru told her. "You did the right thing. Zeranus is targeting her and Zegion, not us."

"Yeah, exactly," said Ramirus. "And I don't feel too great about it, but I set Apito and Zegion's resurrection point to the Labyrinth Prison. Better that than to have them drag us down with them, y'know?"

"Sure…but I guess those Resurrection Bracelets won't come in so handy now."

Benimaru had reached the same conclusion as Deeno. If Zeranus

wanted to kill Apito and Zegion, he'd have to do it outside of the labyrinth, so there wasn't much point setting up a special resurrection point for them. This was just a precautionary measure, in case the two of them sacrificed themselves as a lure or something.

It may have sounded cold, but this was the painful decision Ramiris and her cohorts had to make. She and Benimaru weren't Rimuru or anything—they couldn't pull a miracle out of their pockets to save everyone in the nick of time. All they could do was believe in Diablo's ultimate victory.

But just then:

"Heh. You're a petty creature who can resort to nothing but petty tricks. A perfect match for the lowly slime that you serve, no doubt."

Zeranus's comment reached the Control Center. He had interrupted the battle on purpose so he could provoke Diablo a little.

"Ah…"

Someone groaned to themselves when they heard it, probably Ramiris or Treyni.

This was forbidden territory. It made Benimaru slam his fist down on his desk, breaking it.

"Um, that's kind of expensive…," complained Ramiris, although she had the self-defense instincts to do it in a low whisper.

The Control Center was now filled with murderous fury. But nobody in there had any part to play in this. Someone else on the scene was just as furious as them, if not more so.



The warrior awakened. The rage, the fury that burned hot enough to incinerate every cell of his body, had brought Zegion back from the brink of death.

Was this a mere coincidence, or was this inevitable?

Those wholly unnecessary words had just thrown fate off its plotted course.

"Huh. Deeno, then? Looks like I owe you one," Zegion said, and he calmly stood up.

"Whoa, don't try anything reckless."

"Yeah, you're not fully healed yet."

Garasha and Pico attempted to stop him, but Zegion paid them no mind. His gaze was fixed on Zeranus the Insect Lord as he set out to complete his mission.

"You see how Diablo's faring against him," ventured Deeno. "It's gotta be tough for you, too, right?"

Zegion just smiled a little. "Watch Apito for me," he said, pushing Deeno aside as he walked forward.

"…Can you beat him, Zegion?"

"Of course."

The unwavering reply made Deeno chuckle. He didn't just think it'd be a little tough—he seriously believed that he had no chance. But now Zegion was declaring victory like that was the most natural thing to do. The confidence was laughable, doing a lot to lighten his mood, and so Deeno impulsively handed over the large sword he was holding. It was Fangsmasher, the God-class broadsword he was fond of.

"Here. Go beat his ass and make my life easier for me."

You haven't even done anything yet!

Deeno thought he heard a voice from somewhere far away say that, but he just ignored it.

"Very well," Zegion said, accepting the sword.

Then, with a nod, he took it with one hand and placed it on his back. At that moment, Fangsmasher sparkled in glowing light—and when it died down, a pair of shining wings appeared on Zegion's back. This was the reborn form of Fangsmasher after fusing itself with Zegion, and it marked the birth of Wingsmasher, a new power of his.

"…Fangsmasher wasted no time accepting you, huh?" Deeno mused. "It never even accepted *me* as its master…"

Zegion continued to the battlefield, paying Deeno no mind.



Zegion quietly stood next to Diablo.

"Let me tag in."

It was right when the enraged Diablo was trying to land an attack on Zeranus, but his calm, unaffected voice made Diablo regain his composure.

"…You *do* realize he has insulted Sir Rimuru, right? We cannot allow this to stand."

"Of course not. I will dispatch him, I promise."

Zegion never made promises he couldn't keep. Diablo, fully aware of that, briskly nodded.

"All right, then. You have the floor."

"Thank you."

So Zegion switched places with Diablo. This was now the father-and-son battle of the century.

Zeranus somberly took his position. He had already defeated Zegion once, so his mood wasn't exactly tense. Things could get thorny if Diablo provided him assistance, but either way, he was confident victory would be his. And now that he knew Zegion was intent on fighting solo, he was internally laughing at him, calling him a fool.

Killing him inside the labyrinth, where he'd just be resurrected again, would be meaningless. But what if he consumed him with Devastator Virus while still alive? He'd likely be resurrected if his soul fled on him, but could he put a cap on Zegion's power that way?

Ramiris and the others had feared such an approach. They hadn't tested out whether people eaten alive in the labyrinth would be resurrected, so it was still an unknown, and they didn't really want to attempt it. The best thing was to avoid such a situation in the first place.

But that was exactly what Zeranus was thinking of. Zegion *was* his son, and he wanted to take him out of the labyrinth and have

him rejoin his family lineage if he could. He wanted to have him swear loyalty to him once more, then present him as the new god of creation…but if he was hostile, that was another story. He wasn't *that* intent on keeping Zegion alive—there was always Apito, too.

It will be quite a struggle to create new members of my clan, but if I use that girl Apito as the mother, it should produce me a very stout set of sons.

Then Zeranus would pit those sons against each other and take in their power. He didn't hesitate to take every measure possible to strengthen himself.

"My son, I will give you a single chance. Swear your loyalty to me and come work for me. Do it, and I will promise you the position of the next god of creation—"

"I refuse. I already have my god."

The proposal that Zeranus offered with all the mercy he could muster was promptly turned down.

"Then *die*!"

He had refrained from any large-scale attacks against Diablo, lest he leave himself wide open. But if this was only Zegion he was fighting…

"…Devastator Virus!!"

With no apparent further need for caution, Zeranus launched the attack.

He began by releasing what looked like a punch, but then his arm turned into a black mist that clung hard to Zegion. It was a dark, ravenous monster that devoured everything in its way, and Zegion had no way to fight back as it sucked his bones dry…or it should have anyway. Instead, the aura that covered Zegion's whole body completely obliterated Devastator Virus the moment it came into contact with the mist.

"Wha—?!"

Zeranus had held back his force during the fight against Diablo, but he had just made a terrible mistake. Rather than worry about that, though, he wondered what exactly Zegion just did to him.

Zegion's whole body was shining in a dazzling array of colors—the trademark crimson steel sheen that Zeranus also had. His presence

grew larger and larger—a presence so powerful that not even Zeranus could ignore it.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Well done, Zegion. I see you've opened the 'door' as well," said Diablo.

"Of course. Our god has always showered his love upon his lowly servants."

"Exactly so. However—"

"Don't worry, Diablo. I am not foolish enough to let myself be drowned by this power."

With that, Zegion took a step forward. The sheer pressure caused the ground to shake. The labyrinth rumbled.

"Seriously, what's with that?" asked Pico, who was watching the fight alongside Deeno. If she didn't know, there was no way Deeno did.

"Don't ask me. Here, Diablo, you explain it instead!"

He turned to Diablo, who had retreated back to them, but the request was greeted with a cold brush-off.

"Foolish idiot. Just shut up and watch."

"…Okay."

Diablo had no interest in dealing with him. Deeno had no choice but to back down.

"Laaame."

"How embarrassing can you get?"

"…Yeesh."

Deeno's friends were no more supportive.

Friendship can be so fleeting, can't it? thought the lonely Deeno, although he wasn't sure whether he had any friendship from them in the first place.

The giant screen depicted the heroic figure of Zegion, more than holding his own against Zeranus.

"What's up with all this, huh?" said Ramiris.

The statistics said that this shouldn't even be possible. After taking up Fangsmasher, Zegion's existence points had swelled up to just under eight million. Just as Deeno said, the blade had fully recognized its new master, activating all this power for him.

Even so, it paled in comparison to Zeranus. But Zegion wasn't backing down one bit. Or rather, he was starting to slowly overwhelm him, bit by bit.

"Oh. So Zegion has *that* power, too."

"You know what this is, Benimaru?" asked Ramiris. "Then tell us!"

But Benimaru was hesitant. It was a difficult power to explain.

This is probably the same power that Sir Rimuru lent me…

That was about all that he could say about it, too.

In truth, Benimaru had at least a vague awareness of another presence within Rimuru, one that went by the name of Ciel. Something had guided him to this new power, and thanks to that, the Prominence Acceleration he threw at Milim had all that incredible force behind it. As a result of that, though, he was now terribly battered and bruised. The price of using Void Collapse, a skill not even Rimuru could fully handle, was greater than he thought. It caused him damage that couldn't be healed with potions or magic, and he was out of battle for the time being.

Sir Rimuru is one thing, but that power is just so dangerous for us. Letting that power dwell within himself… Zegion's being way too reckless…

Even if you tapped into it for just a moment like Benimaru did, the repercussions were gigantic. Use it for any extended amount of time, and the price you'd pay would be dear indeed.

Thinking about it that way, Zegion should have stopped using it immediately. But if he stopped, that wouldn't be enough to beat Zeranus. So Benimaru remained silent, believing in Zegion's victory.



Zeranus was sorely shaken.

Zegion, his own son, had shown him some very unexpected power. It was well past what Zeth could do, reaching a level that not even Zeranus could afford to ignore. The chill he felt facing off against Diablo had now come back to haunt him anew.

That child's exceeded my expectations… No! Wait! This much still isn't a threat to me yet!

Zeranus was cautious. It wasn't easy to deceive him, and he never made the mistake of losing after overestimating his enemy. He suspected there was some kind of trick behind this abnormal new power of Zegion's—there was no other way to explain it. And if he wanted to keep this level of enhancement going for a long time, the burden on him had to be beyond any measure.

Thus, all Zeranus had to do was fight without depleting his energy, just like he did against Diablo. Once he did that, he'd be assured victory in a reasonably short period—and then he could take his time more fully investigating the secret of Zegion's newfound force.

With that in mind, Zeranus remained calm, his attacks falling into a monotonous pattern. Zegion, too, dealt with them without breaking a sweat, and this back-and-forth continued for a while afterward. Neither side let their guard down, and neither was unleashing any particularly major attacks. The battle devolved into a mechanical process, a constant repetition that threatened to last forever.

Certainly, Zeranus had his regrets. He had tried to consume Zegion without warning via Devastator Virus, but now that seemed like an error in judgment. He really should have softened Zegion up a bit before breaking that out for the surefire kill.

It was with a new determination not to make similar mistakes that Zeranus attempted to corner Zegion. But as his silver cilia flowed and he closed in to cut his foe to pieces, Zegion's new Wingsmasher prevented any strike from hitting home. His cilia even brushed against it, but they weren't weak enough to be shattered by it, instead just repelling it away. Even so, it meant that Zegion wouldn't allow Zeranus to attack him.

For a single moment, there was a look of astonishment on

Zeranus's face. Zegion, who wasn't about to miss this opening, released his fist to keep up the attack. Zeranus, of course, avoided taking it directly. It lightly grazed him, but that wouldn't be nearly enough to scratch his crimson steel exoskeleton.

"Bold of you," said Zeranus.

"Ha. Trying to defeat me with these ridiculous techniques… All you're doing is shortening your own lifespan."

"What did you—?"

Before he could finish the question, Zeranus jumped back, feeling a sharp pain on his side.

"Veldora-Style Death Stance—Fist of the Hollow Sky."

That was Zegion's reply, explaining to Zeranus exactly what he had done. This killer move compressed energy to the very limit within his fist, creating a single blow with deadly force inside. Even if his foe evaded it, the ideal was for it to kill even with a glancing blow—or so Zegion was taught. A technique like that was an impossible fantasy, of course, but with Control Dimensions (not to mention the other skills in Zegion's possession), it suddenly was not a pipe dream at all.

The simple contact from Zegion's body to Zeranus's allowed him to transmit that energy over to him—and with the destructive energy of Void Collapse stored in his striking fist, he had struck home even as Zeranus thought he had avoided the attack.

The energy spread through Zeranus's body like a wave. The crimson steel exoskeleton offered no protection from the destructive force, accompanied by terrifying pain that raged from the side of the body he had been hit from.

Zeranus howled, eyes turning red with rage. This was nothing short of an insult. He had been outwitted by his own son, someone he once thought of as truly insignificant. It was an unbelievable reality to face, and it consumed Zeranus with a rage that he didn't have any outlet for.

"Getting emotional on the battlefield," he matter-of-factly stated to himself. "I must be more immature than I thought."





It served as a declaration that things had just changed in this battle. And from that point, Zegion's fierce counterattack began.

Clearly, Zegion was enjoying far more power than before. His entire body was shining a rainbow of colors, indicating that nearly the entire exoskeleton covering his body had evolved into crimson steel. The power within his fists was dominating, well beyond anything demonstrated before. They tore through the sky, torching the earth, as his speed continued to ratchet up to levels beyond even what Apito's divine velocity could reach.

Zeranus's ability to deal with this was in itself amazing, but Zegion's onslaught was simply beyond comparison. There was a good reason for it, too—he was circulating the energy from Void Collapse within his body, like blood. This power coursing in his veins was so dangerous, a single mistake in controlling it could very well destroy the whole world. The sheer force it conjured was terror in itself. Zeranus's reaction speed just couldn't keep up.

Little by little—fist after fist, kick after kick—it all began to start hitting him. Then, in an instant, the balance was utterly broken.

Zegion threw a punch.

Zegion kicked.

Zegion broke his opponent.

Zegion stabbed him.

Zegion threw him.

Zegion slammed him.

No counterattack was allowed. It was sheer, one-sided violence. Zegion had become a lord of destruction, wielding overwhelming power. Zeranus's own power was the real thing; as Insect Lord, he had reigned for a near eternity—and yet he was no match for Zegion.

"No…"

He just couldn't understand. His consciousness was in a state of confusion, unable to grasp what was happening to him.

Then Zegion stopped.

"Hrrkkh?!"

Zeranus crouched down, coughing up blood. Zegion coldly looked down on him. He wasn't naive enough to hesitate finishing him off simply because he was his father. He had fled to this key world, protecting Apito along the way, because Zeranus treated him and his kind like disposable pawns. He never had any intention of exacting revenge upon him, but now that things had come to this, it was simply fate at work.

Hurting Zeranus this much still wasn't going to prove fatal. With enough time, he'd be able to revive himself. Zegion knew this, so he tried to release all his power in order to seal the deal for good. His aim now: to release Dimension Storm, a power that could turn all that exists into nothing at all. Zeranus was powerless to stop it.

"Wait…"

Zeranus uttered the word as if it took a herculean effort. And perhaps it did. His entire exoskeleton was shattered and torn, his limbs ripped into shreds. It wasn't enough to move Zegion.

"Begging for your life is pointless."

"No… My son, you have beaten me. I will admit it…and I will grant you this…"

He wanted to entrust him with Sefirot, Lord of Life—which was, in a way, Zeranus's everything. The reverse was also possible, since he could make the powers of his followers his own, but that was limited strictly to the moment of his own death or destruction. For Zeranus, this moment—the instant he had admitted defeat—was when he was able to transfer his royal authority to another.

It was like the crowning of a new god of creation.

"Ridiculous. I have dedicated my life to the god Sir Rimuru. I have no intention of taking the throne. Your ambitions are doomed to be crushed right here, right now."

Zegion sounded completely indifferent about it. But Zeranus happily smiled back at him.

"It is fine. You may live as you like, my son… I am satisfied with that. I was never able to surpass my father, as I hoped for all my life…but if my son now surpasses me…my wish has been granted."

Such were the last words of the Insect Lord Zeranus. He had been using the power of his ultimate skill to maintain his existence,

and now, by cutting the "curse" with his own two hands, he had ended the generational thrall this lifelong wish had put upon him.

"…So foolish. Rest in peace, Father."

Dying may not mean that all sins are forgiven, but nevertheless, Zegion forgave Zeranus. Apito, standing next to him, offered a silent prayer—and in this way, the karmic chain of events between father and son was finally broken.



Everyone in the Control Center was speechless. Even Geld, who had just woken up, was stunned. Gabil, meanwhile, had his mouth hanging wide open. Gobta had been cheering on Zegion, carefree as always, but about halfway through, all he could say was "Ohhh, man, this is crazy" while Ranga curled up into a ball next to him, tail tucked between his legs.

That's how shocking a sight it was. After all, Zeranus *the* Insect Lord, the most terrifying incarnation of despair in the world…

"…Zegion's kind of scaring me."

Benimaru briskly nodded at Ramiris's whispered evaluation.

What is he anyway? I know he had to have used that *power. So how is he so calm and collected now?!*

He was genuinely flabbergasted. There was no way that he'd be able to withstand so much power flowing within him, or so he thought. Everyone knew that Zegion was an outstanding fighter, but the battle that just ended was so beyond reality, that "power" alone couldn't explain it. Actually defeating the Insect Lord was nothing short of a miracle—but it was such an overwhelmingly one-sided victory that it now felt like this had been fated for them all along.

"Could *you* beat him, Benimaru?"

"Do you really need to ask that?" he mumbled back to Ramiris. As the real commander around here, picked by Rimuru to handle Tempest's military affairs—and not a ceremonial one like Ramiris—he didn't want to so readily admit to his inferiority, but…

"I don't think I could beat Zegion right now, at the very least."

He had to admit the truth, though.

The operator who had been reporting existential ratings, by the way, was so shocked that she couldn't speak, instead flapping her mouth open and shut. But everyone else was too preoccupied to notice.

Name: Zegion (EP: 68,889,143)
Race: Micro-god; highest-level chaos elemental Spirit Insect
Protection: Rimuru's protection
Title: Mist Lord
Magic: Watersoul magic
Abilities: Ultimate skill Mephisto, Lord of Illusion; Hasten Thought, Universal Detect, Lord's Ambition, Dominate Water & Lightning, Dominate Dimensions, Multidimensional Barrier, All of Creation, Spiritual Domination, Fantastical World, Dominate Life (Sefirot)
Tolerances: Cancel Melee Attack, Cancel Ailments, Cancel Spiritual Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Resist Chaos Attack



Deeno's group was just as stunned by the result.

"Ow! Why are you pinching my cheek?"

"Oh. I was just wondering if this was a dream."

"Yeah. I thought it was a nightmare, too, but I guess it's real after all."

"No! Listen to me! This seriously hurts, you know!"

Pico was pinching Deeno's cheek to figure out whether this was a dream or not. Only Deeno was complaining about it.

"Can you stop playing around," asked Mai, "and explain what just happened?"

She could tell that something amazing had occurred, but she had no idea exactly what. Seeing Zeranus the Insect Lord lying in a heap on the ground was simply beyond belief. How could something like this ever happen? Yes, Zegion was clearly a fearsome fighter, but she thought there was this unbridgeable gap between them.

"Well, um…"

Deeno didn't really understand, either. Zegion had suddenly gained a massive amount of power, and he couldn't think of any reason why.

Was it just the weapon? …No way. It had to have been something he did himself…

If it couldn't be explained, pin it on Rimuru. It was enough of an explanation for nearly anything. And if that's how you thought about things—well, it simply showed how crazy that slime was. That much was obvious from the look of ecstasy on Diablo's face.

"Ahh, Sir Rimuru is just as wonderful as I thought! I saw this coming from the moment I met Zegion!"

All of this was meaningless to Deeno. He wasn't sure if he should ask him to say that again or just stop him from talking. Once Diablo went into "all hail Rimuru" mode, there was just no end to it. But he seemed to know something, at least, and that made Deeno curious.

"Um, could you explain it to me, too?" he decided to ask. But Diablo just gave him a cold look.

"Huh? Stop being stupid. Why should I be obliged to share this excitement with you?"

Deeno was left speechless. But the true reason behind Diablo's denial was to prevent the secret behind that "power" from leaking out.

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After all, this was the energy of Rimuru's Void Collapse at work.

Only those connected to Rimuru via soul corridor who had opened the "door" had the right to borrow that power. But it was a catastrophic force, the kind that could destroy you after even the slightest mistake. With Rimuru absent at the moment, casually

drawing from this power would be suicide.

When Zegion began circulating that Void Collapse power around his body, Diablo began to wonder if he had lost his mind. But at the same time, he had a question: *Why was Zegion safe?* Doing something like this should have destroyed him in an instant.

Thinking about this, Diablo came up with one possible answer—the fact that a certain percentage of Zegion's body was made up of Rimuru's cells. Diablo wondered if Rimuru had given some of his own cells to Zegion because he anticipated a situation like this. If it was true, then everything else made sense. Thus, all that remained was the simple task of praising Rimuru.

Of course, Rimuru hadn't foreseen any of this. He had saved Zegion just now without intending to. And for that matter, Rimuru's cells were used within Apito's body, too. This was a pretty lazy habit of Diablo's—making convenient assumptions about things and trying to reconcile them with the truth. Whenever Rimuru was involved in something, it always clouded Diablo's good sense.

But he was still partially correct—and being not completely off the mark was one reason why Diablo could so effectively delude himself like this.

In reality, the reason Zegion was safe was because the all-purpose cells within him—also known as Rimuru cells, or slime cells—had changed in response to the energy of Void Collapse.

Just like Diablo, Zegion was giving far too much credit to Rimuru. He was convinced that this body Rimuru gave him would hold out against whatever he tried to do. But there was no basis for that. The only reason Zegion was okay was because he got lucky.

Still, all that really matters are results, and once Diablo clammed up about it, the entire matter was buried in the dark.

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Deeno, aware of none of this, was shocked by the rejection. He was ready for more irritating Rimuru worship, but instead he was brushed right off.

"Wow, mean…"

“Well, you know how Diablo is…”

“You’re lucky he didn’t punch you, huh?”

“Right? Ha-ha-ha!”

Deeno was looking to his friends for comfort but failed miserably at receiving any. Seeing poor Deeno like that made Mai let out a big sigh.



A relaxed atmosphere began to settle across the labyrinth. Now that the Insect Lord Zeranus had been overcome, everyone felt a lot safer.

But the crisis wasn’t over yet. There was still a survivor in the labyrinth—the personification of evil, in fact.

“You bastard… All of you, looking down on me… Treating me like a piece of crap… Goddamn you all!!”

Vega, who looked well on his way to the grave, was stuck to the ceiling of the labyrinth, cursing anything and everything in the world, damning everyone who humiliated him like this.

Despite it all, he still had a streak of good luck. Just when Zegion was about to kill him, Zeranus intervened to save his hide. So he was up on the ceiling now, holding back as he waited for his body to heal.

Secretly, he had been tapping into the powers of his ultimate skill Azhdahak, Lord of Dark Dragons, spreading his roots across the labyrinth and absorbing its power at will. The floor he was located in had been isolated by Ramiris, but Zeranus’s appearance had opened up a connection to the lower floors—and by making his exit through there, Vega had now latched on to the labyrinth itself.

This anomaly should have been noticed immediately, but once again, Vega was unconsciously lucky. All surveillance within the labyrinth had been focused on dealing with the threat of Zeranus, which made other areas less guarded. That wasn’t Ramiris’s fault; Zeranus *was* a major threat, after all. But as a result, Vega had

managed to narrowly escape death—something he had done multiple times as of late.

And right now, there was a better-than-ever meal lying at his feet. It was the corpse of the Insect Lord, who had been defeated by Zegion. And what's more, no one had even noticed that Vega was alive, much less present here. With the magicules in the area in major disarray, Magic Sense alone wouldn't be enough to pick up on him.

Zegion and Apito had left the area, leaving their tasty meal in the center. Was it a trap? An unusually cautious thought entered Vega's mind, but he chose to ignore it. As long as he got that power—the overwhelming power of Zeranus—not even Zegion would be any kind of match for him.

After all, Zegion looked downright exhausted. There was no liveliness to him—the fallout after exerting so much force against Zeranus, no doubt. This was no time for indecision. At this very moment, Vega had the biggest opportunity of his life.

"All right, dracobeasts, start kicking ass!"

With that shout, Vega created four dracobeasts, the most he could produce at once, and ordered them to rampage around as they pleased. Deeno and his cohorts were there, but from Vega's point of view, they were essentially traitors to the cause. They didn't even try to attack the weakened Zegion—in fact, they seemed to be on friendly terms with one another.

Well, I'm gonna eat all of you, too, okay? Don't hate me for it.

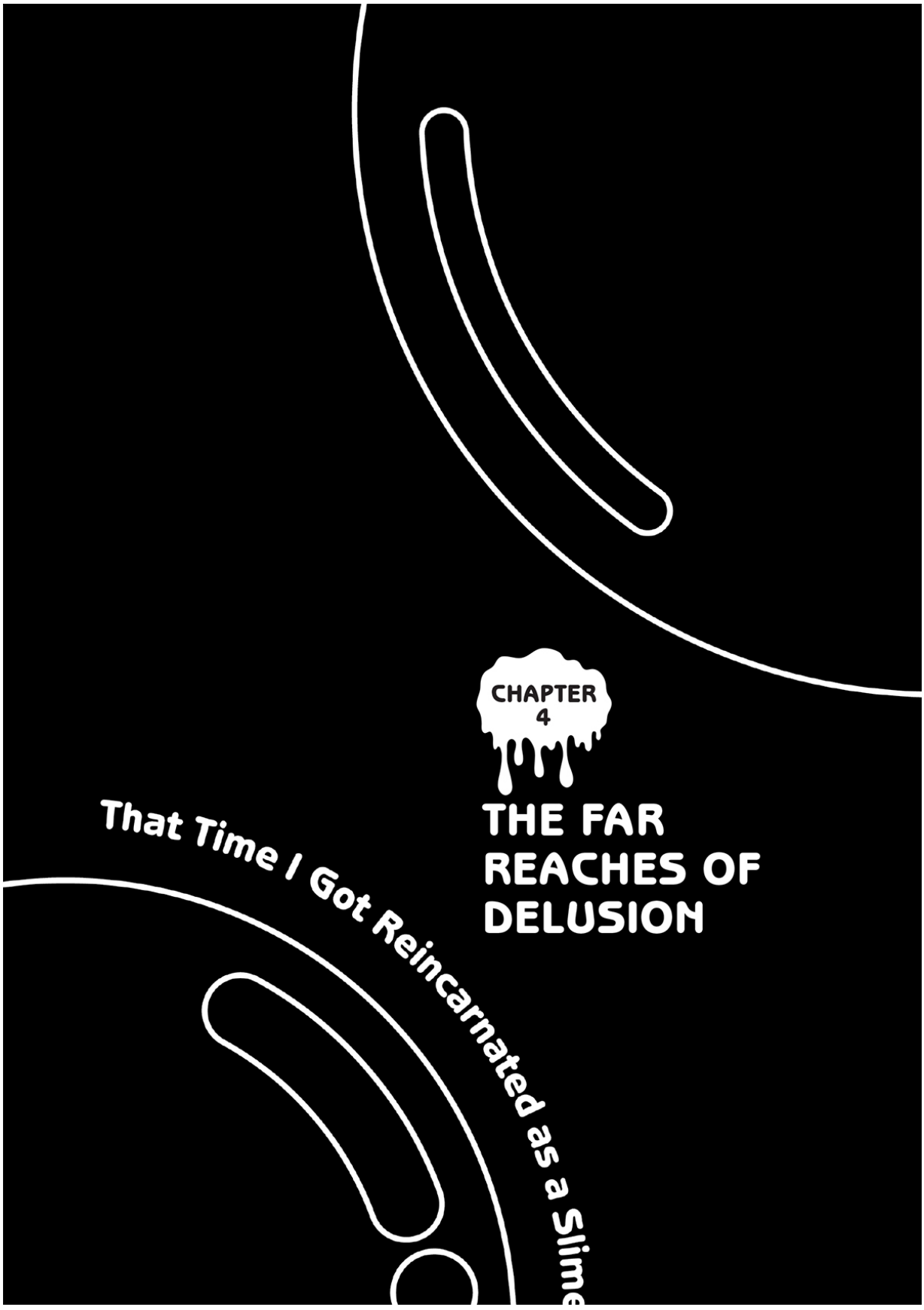
So Vega watched the situation unfold, thinking only about what was convenient for himself. Then he was blessed by the biggest stroke of luck of the day. Everything moved in exactly the most helpful way for him.

One of the beasts foolishly headed straight for Diablo and was promptly annihilated. One headed off somewhere and left the labyrinth floor entirely. The other two began their rampage on this floor. It was chaos, and Vega wasn't going to miss his window. Without thinking about any of the consequences, he lunged straight at Zeranus.

Then:

“Infinite Eater!!”
He successfully devoured Zeranus’s corpse.

Malice began to bare its fangs.


CHAPTER
4
THE FAR
REACHES OF
DELUSION
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



CHAPTER 4

THE FAR REACHES OF DELUSION

Diablo only realized that Vega was there after things had already taken a sudden turn for the worse.

"All right, dracobeasts, start kicking ass!"

Vega had kicked off his attack with that shout. Diablo instantly reacted, of course, in battle position and ready to take on Vega. The same was true for Zegion; he was able to fight, no matter how much damage he took. However, Zegion hadn't yet made the skill he had received from Zeranus his own; he was still in the process of integrating it into his body. Just as Vega anticipated, he wasn't in his best form—in fact, he was in such bad shape that he was liable to pass out at any moment. The backlash from Void Collapse was so intense, it was a mystery how he still stood up at all. The fact that he kept this hidden from everyone showed just how amazing Zegion was.

Deeno's group reacted a beat later, but two dracobeasts made for a pretty hard struggle. It didn't look like they'd have time to handle Vega at all. In fact, they had completely let their guards down—or really, they didn't think they'd be targeted, since Vega was supposed to be on their side. *That* was what people called carelessness.

"Sorry," Deeno said with a smile, "but I can't fight. I gave my weapon to Zegion."

That excuse, of course, wasn't going to work.

"Don't give me that, you idiot!"

"Get serious already. Then I'll forgive you."

Garasha and the others were merciless with him.

Diablo, swiftly realizing that those fools could be left to themselves, faced up to his main target.

"I'll take this one, Zegion," he sneered. It wasn't a proposal so much as a final decision, and Zegion had no reason to reject it. He obediently nodded and backed away, Apito supporting him.

Vega, his eyes red, landed in front of Diablo. He'd shouted loudly in order to attract the group's attention—and while Diablo was distracted, he managed to consume Zeranus's corpse.

"Gah-ha-ha-ha! Wow! Amazing! This guy's got some *real* power!"

He couldn't have sounded more delighted. A little earlier, Zegion nearly killed him—but Zeranus's intervention saved his life. He could have just bowed out then and there, but instead he waited for his chance…and this was the time. Zeranus's power overwhelmed Zegion at one point, and now it belonged to Vega. It was so beyond anything else, Vega felt like his power had increased several times over in the blink of an eye.

"You're Diablo, right? I'll let you live if you swear to become my servant."

Vega saw Zegion was a dangerous opponent, one he needed to watch out for. Now that he was out of the picture, it was the perfect time to kill him and take away his power as well. He wasn't interested in Diablo interfering with that—but after seeing Diablo instantly kill that dracobeast, he realized that this was a pretty capable opponent, after all. Still, Vega had also seen the difficulty Diablo had fighting Zeranus, so he was still fully confident of his chances. Once he consumed Zegion as well, victory was guaranteed.

But there was no way that was going to work.

"…What?" Diablo looked like he failed to understand what he had just been told. "You don't happen to be looking down on me, do you?"

He found it hard to believe. Being seen as inferior by a minion as wimpy as Vega was more than wounding his pride. It was an outrage, an unforgivable one. Speaking ill of Rimuru was a taboo around Diablo, but he also had serious issues with anyone acting like they were better than him.

Without realizing it, Vega had already stepped on a land mine.

And then:

"Yeah, I sure am. But it ain't a bad offer, right? I mean, Feldway's probably killed that smug slime bastard, so— Ooph?!"

At that moment, Vega's fate was decided. Before he could even understand what had happened, he was knocked down. It was more surprising than painful.

"Kahh… Rrgh! What the hell did you do to me?!"

"What did I do? What kind of nonsense are *you* talking about?"

The same bottomless darkness that had descended upon Zeranus a moment earlier—the power of the void, straight from the abyss—was about to envelop Vega next. It was just like how Zegion was able to open the "door" at will; if anything, Diablo was better at it than him. There was no longer any measuring him by numbers.

"Hngh?!"

Vega felt an instinctive sort of fear. Finally, he recognized that Diablo was a dangerous man to cross. He had just been punched in the cheek, and the pain was virtually unbearable. Sensing pain was something he stopped having to do long ago, but something about this was directly affecting his soul instead.

"Are you ready for this?"

"W-wait!"

He attempted to bargain with him at this point, no matter how bad it made him look, but it was already too late. There was no other way left for this to go.

"No, I am not going to wait."

Diablo's reply confused Vega. *Am…am I going to die? Me? No. No, I could never…!*

In his terror, Vega let loose with all his abilities. It didn't matter if he couldn't beat Diablo. He had to find a way to escape, and he released all of them at once, hoping against hope that something would stick. And thanks to that, something very unforeseen happened.

✳

Vega's labyrinth integration began to accelerate.

His ability allowed him to run his own roots through the earth in order to gain nourishment. As evidenced by his labyrinth corrosion work, it didn't stop at corpses alone—it could gain nutrients from just about anything. He had been unable to leverage his own immortality, thanks to Ramiris isolating him from the rest of the labyrinth, but no longer. The labyrinth was now providing an inexhaustible supply of energy, and he had also just taken in Zeranus, the greatest meal of all.

Now he felt more full of power than ever before. But somehow, it wasn't working on Diablo.

Realizing that a half-hearted effort wouldn't be enough, he went beyond all his limits, taking in more and more power from the labyrinth. It blew him up until he was gigantic in size…but it still didn't satisfy him.

No! I need more! This ain't gonna be enough to fight this monster with! I can't just take in the labyrinth. I gotta eat everyone hiding in the lower levels…

His desires grew as much as his body did. It was akin to suicide—uncontrollable power ultimately destroyed everything—but Vega was obsessed with this need for more power, like he was trying to run from his own fears.

This labyrinth was teeming with monsters—not just Zegion, who had overwhelmed Vega, but also this demon Diablo, just too dangerous to take on. Diablo's demon scissors had just cut one of his dracobeasts completely to pieces; it had disappeared completely instead of regenerating on the spot. Vega saw it with his own eyes, so there was no doubting it. The current dracobeasts were stronger than back when he fought Hinata. That was why there were only four of them; creating a horde of weaker ones seemed pointless.

So Vega had been learning lessons from the past, but it didn't mean anything against Diablo. Two of the other dracobeasts were targeting Zegion, but they couldn't be counted on much, either. If Zegion was enough of a monster to defeat the Insect Lord, those guys weren't likely to take him down, either, even if Zegion was in a weakened state.

This was why Vega was so driven to try whatever he could. He wanted to take in more power—more and more—so he could surpass both Diablo and Zegion. This was why he accelerated his labyrinth corrosion, assimilating it into himself so he could take it over. But there was no way he could have emerged unscathed from this.

In no time at all, Vega's vision grew hazy. He was now fully out of control, turned into a beast whose attention was devoted solely to the large masses of energy he needed. In essence, he had lost his mind.

"I'll eat you. All of you. I'll eat you all and prove that I'm the strongest!"

He was spraying spittle as he shouted, his expression tinged with madness. He was trying to be intimidating, but intimidation was just the flip side of abject terror. Seeing it made Diablo let out a sigh.

Well, great. If he's expanded his strength this much, he is certainly a threat, no doubt, but…

But it just seemed so boring to him. Vega's abilities were a pain to deal with; he could see why Testarossa let him go. Since he had now firmly taken root in the labyrinth, he'd just regenerate if Diablo defeated him as he was. He had become a nearly immortal being, constantly replenishing his energy from the labyrinth's coffers—and worst of all, he had consumed Zeranus's body.

Diablo had to admit that was a blunder. The combination of Vega's ability to eat everything and Zeranus's Devastator Virus—the power to control tiny, will-driven dark cells—was an incredible combo. Zeranus's dark cells were not, strictly speaking, cells or living organisms at all. They merely appeared to be, but now that Vega had them, their nature had likely changed into something a lot more troublesome.

Fortunately, Vega himself was not aware of this. Perhaps it was a good thing he was such an idiot…although from Diablo's point of view, he was just this bore that wasn't even worth fighting. He wasn't driven by any belief system; he had no resolve at all; he couldn't control his own desires; he was an immature fool. This wasn't the sort of opponent that would ever give Diablo a surge of

emotion, and there was no beauty to be found in that. Even Zeranus the Insect Lord, as emotionless as he seemed, had a passionate soul compared to Vega.

If this is how it was going to be, I really shouldn't have turned him over to Zegion.

Diablo regretted that a little bit.

Either way, if things continued like this, it was going to lead to one very painful situation. It was Ramiris and her crew at the Control Center who failed to keep Vega isolated, but it was also Diablo's fault for overlooking that error. Resorting to excuses like "the threat of Zeranus shook my concentration" would never fly—Diablo was now determined to step up and deal with Vega.

"Control Center, are you aware of the situation?"

"Of course. Uh, Lady Ramiris isn't in a condition to respond at the moment, so I'm taking over for now."

"Roger. So there's one dog still on the loose here, but can I count on you to handle everything else?"

"Yes. We've immediately changed the structure of the labyrinth, first thing. The four Dragon Lords and Hakuro are on standby on Floor 100 at the hall Sir Veldora calls home. I'm not sure if they'd be able to defeat them, but they could buy some time, at least."

As Benimaru stated, there was no need to go out of their way to defeat the dracobeasts currently doing their own thing. Once they killed their master, they could be easily handled after that. The Dragon Lords would be enough to address them, since they could revive as much as needed within the labyrinth—and with Hakuro also on the scene, things seemed pretty safe in their hands.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh. You're always on the ball, Sir Benimaru. I see I had nothing to fear."

"Not at all. Thanks for the advice. Don't try anything too crazy."

"Surely you jest."

With that, the conversation was over. Diablo looked at Vega, wondering how to handle this situation.

As one could surmise from Diablo's and Benimaru's conversation, the Control Center was in a state of utter chaos. Ramiris, in particular, was beside herself, eyes darting around from place to place.

"Ahh, ahh, ahh, ahh, this is so bad! My labyrinth's gonna be gobbled up!"

She had been shouting about that for a while now, but she seemed more interested in flying around and making a big fuss than actually doing anything. So at Benimaru's orders, assorted defense mechanisms in the labyrinth had been put online. They had a procedure outlined for exactly this sort of situation, and it was proving useful right now.

"I'm reminded all over again how great Sir Rimuru is," muttered Benimaru.

"Yes," said Shuna, her head drooping a bit. "I didn't think it was to this level, but just look at the situation we're in without Sir Rimuru. We have a lot to reflect on, I think…"

Rimuru always anticipated the worst when he acted. He was just overthinking things most of the time, but that approach never caused him harm, at least. "Always assume the worst," he was in the habit of saying, "and then you won't panic when the worst happens, right?" That was the credo behind the almost excessive training he gave to his defense forces.

But despite all that, here was the situation they were all in now. They seemed to be lacking in virtually everything, forced to face up to their own lack of foresight, and Benimaru had no choice but to regret his own inexperience.

"Lady Ramiris, please calm down. I'll help out as well, so let's start by isolating the corroded labyrinth floors, all right?"

Treyni was attempting to make Ramiris stop flying around at high speed. Benimaru needed her back to her senses soon, so he did what he could to help.

"She's right. Sir Rimuru always said to do what you can and do it right. I'll pitch in, too, so let's start with some safety measures first."

"Yes," added Beretta, "no need to be reckless here."

Benimaru agreed with that. There was something about Rimuru's words that just made him feel calmer. That, he felt, was the quality

of a true leader.

"Y-yeah, you're right!" said Ramiris. "I…I totally wasn't freaking out, but if that's what you all say, I'll join the effort!"

The more frazzled you are, the more it helps when you have something to do…and if it's something you do as part of your normal routine, that makes it all the more effective.

Ramiris, who was panicking about Vega taking away her ability, was finally showing signs of recovering. Benimaru was just as driven to fight, too. To him, the counterattack was just getting started.

So what to begin with? Whenever starting something, the best practice was to follow the basics and scope out the current situation.

Job one was to secure a safe space. The Control Center was the safest spot in the labyrinth. Benimaru's biggest concern was for his wives, and they had been evacuated to a waiting room next door. Letting them see how this battle was unfolding could potentially be bad for their unborn children, so he wanted them to be able to have some peace and quiet for the time being. Other children had also taken refuge in there, so Momiji and Alvis should find it relaxing enough—and there were toys as well, so no one should be bored. They might yell at Benimaru later for treating them like children, but that was in the future.

Next was Rimuru's cherished city, the capital of Tempest. Vega couldn't make it in here, either, not unless he broke through their final line of defense. All other exits had been sealed off, so the only way to access it was through Veldora's hall. The main force of floor bosses had been mobilized to defend it, which meant that each floor of the labyrinth was almost wholly undefended. There was nothing to stop the dracobeasts that Vega unleashed from invading, so Benimaru decided to concentrate the remaining forces in one place, as he explained to Diablo.

It wasn't known yet, however, if this would be enough to counter the dracobeasts. Hakuro, in particular, was a concern. He was so eager to protect his future grandchildren that he had left without listening to Benimaru's attempts to stop him. He was certainly a powerful ally to have in the fight, but they couldn't afford to underestimate Vega's dracobeasts, and whether his swordsmanship

would be enough to beat them was an open question.

Of course, if they're connected to the corroded labyrinth by now, they'll just be reborn again and again. If you wanted to defeat them, you first had to isolate them from the rest of the labyrinth. In other words, it all came down to Ramiris. She was currently working as hard as she could to repair the labyrinth's function set and isolate Vega, as if to make up for her previous mistake. Treyni was apparently supporting her in various ways, Beretta also helping with the needed calculations. It seemed safe to leave things in their hands—or rather, given the situation, watching them at work was about all they could do.

Benimaru recalled Rimuru's words.

"If you can imagine the worst possible situation, think about how you can prevent that from happening. Look for things that're absolutely indispensable for that and go from there. That way, the 'worst' will stop being the worst."

Just repeat that, he said, and you can find ways to stabilize the situation. With that in mind, Benimaru mulled over their current crisis.

The worst possible outcome is if Vega takes the labyrinth away from us completely. If we can prevent that, we'll have plenty of time to get back on our feet.

That was the conclusion he came to. If Vega got away from them right now, it'd be trouble, but they could still deal with it. They could always buy themselves more time, letting them think about countermeasures before they had to encounter him again. As long as they didn't lose the labyrinth—or more strictly, as long as their comrades and the townspeople were safe—they could stage a comeback.

Then there's no problem, Benimaru thought, an assured smile on his face now that he had made up his mind.

"Uh, Benimaru? Why don't you look worried at all? You're, like, the vice commander," said Ramiris.

"Yes, I am, Commander. But it's simple if you think about it."

"Huh?"

"We can just dispose of everywhere Vega's corroded."

“Um… What?”

“The labyrinth’s in bad shape, that much is true, but it’s only a matter of building it over again. We created it from scratch, after all, so maybe it’ll turn out even better next time, right?”

“I suppose, but…”

“Then there’s no time to hesitate. The residents are all evacuated, and we’ve also quarantined as many monsters as we could. I know it feels like a waste, doing away with all these things you worked so hard to create, but like Sir Rimuru said, sometimes you need to know when to cut your losses.”

“Yes, well, that’s true…”

Ramiris nodded her agreement with Benimaru’s imposing words.

“Those dracobeasts will lose the ability to regenerate, too, once they’re cut off from their master. So let’s quarantine the entire area where Vega’s planted his roots, starting with the floor where Diablo and the rest are fighting.”

With as much force as he was putting into his words, Ramiris began to think that it might just be possible. She was pretty easily persuaded that way, so once she knew what she had to do, she quickly got on with it.

At once, she froze all operations, including the rebuilding of the labyrinth. Keenly analyzing the safe floors, she then quarantined any floors that looked suspect to her. Floors 71 to 80, which were under Zegion’s control; Floors 81 to 90, which Kumara ruled over; and Floors 61 to 70, where Adalmann was rebuilding the castle with the imperial soldiers—all of them were cut off. Adalmann would likely be the saddest about it, but as long as there was no loss of life, they could always regain what they lost.

“Wow, what was I panicking about again?”

“I can’t say exactly, but I’ll leave it to you to explain things to Adalmann, all right?”

“Hey, whoa! You’re the one who told me to do it…”

“What are you talking about, Lady Ramiris? You’re the commander right now, aren’t you? It’s only natural for the responsibility to fall upon *your* shoulders.” Benimaru flashed a gleeful smile.

He was right, though, as speechless as Ramiris was about it. But she was clearly brighter now, too, which greatly relieved Treyni and Beretta.

"It's fine. I will explain things with you to Adalmann!"

"Indeed, I am sure he'll understand."

"Great to see you guys're always on my side, unlike Benimaru here!"

Ramiris glared at Benimaru as she pretended to be so greatly moved by her friends. It made Benimaru chuckle.

"All right. I'll go apologize to him with you, too, so don't exclude me, please."

"Hee-hee! Well, if you insist! So now that Benimaru and I have made up, let's get this work done real fast!"

Seeing Ramiris in good spirits was a relief to everyone. It was now time to focus on the battlefield again, so they could settle things with Vega for good.



Deeno's group was struggling mightily against the two dracobeasts from Vega. Deeno, in particular, was getting kind of desperate—running around weaponless and frantically calling for help. Everyone ignored him, though.

"There, you see? I get bullied by everybody! Apito and Beretta, too!"

He was still attempting to plead his case, but it wasn't about to win him anyone's forgiveness.

"Like I care, you freak!"

"That's what you get for being so lazy, Deeno. You've been that way forever, and now you're paying the price."

"Pico's right. If you had put in a real effort at any point, you wouldn't be running around like a fool right now."

Any sort of reaction from them was appreciated, but then again, this was more than a little harsh.

"Aw, I don't know—I was pretty serious just a bit ago. I was resisting all that pain as best as I could anyway!"

Pico and Garasha looked at Deeno like he was an idiot. Why would a spiritual life-form with no sense of pain talk about "resisting pain" at all?

"Wh-what? C'mon, you two. I got a lot of stuff to deal with, too…"

Deeno was about to make more excuses, but they were quickly shot down, forcing him to rejoin the battle.

"God dammit! I thought you were my friend, Vega!"

"What a lie."

"Such an obvious one. Ugh."

Pico and Garasha were already back to picking on Deeno.

"How can you say such careless things all the time?"

Even Mai was joining in. She had gotten too used to these exchanges not to, it seemed. It was enough to make Deeno, at long last, give in.

"Okay, whatever. I guess even *I* will have to get a little serious about this."

He looked up at the sky, as if he had given up on everything. But the next moment, with a deadly serious expression on his face:

"Divine Spirit Armor—manifest!"

For the first time in quite a while, Deeno revealed his true form. Just like with Chloe the Hero's own Divine Spirit Armor, all the gear on Deeno and his friends had now reached God-class. They normally hid their true nature, but at this moment, all their abilities were released.

What's more, Deeno had put himself through the process of Apotheosis. This was a feat that allowed a divine authority to be housed within a physical body. Deeno, Pico, and Garasha had all set limits on their bodies while they were active on the surface of the planet. They had never released these limits before, so not even Deeno was sure what would happen—but he decided to do it anyway.

Now Deeno's most powerful battle form was clear for all to see. He had six pairs of glittering black-and-white wings that made him into a truly radiant presence. A black minister-like spiritual robe

covered his body, and two summoned swords were in his hands. One was gold, the other a dark silver. They were God-class, of course—among the strongest of them all, forged from the core of a star. One holy blade and one demonic blade—white and black. Excalibur, which shone with a golden sheen, and Caliburn, a jet-black blade studded with stars.

This was Deeno's true form—a twin swordsman who skillfully wielded two blades that were the opposites of each other. Fighting with Fangsmasher was just a temporary style for him, the reason why Ramiris was sure that Deeno wasn't taking things seriously. If he had broken those twin swords out earlier, he would have surpassed even Alberto and Glasord with his skill, for with them, he truly became the strongest swordsman in the world.

"It seems," said Zegion as he looked on admiringly, "that you've broken the Dream End seal that I carved into you. My eyes were not mistaken after all."

Zegion recognized Deeno for who he was. He had expected, to some extent, that he wouldn't be able to completely control Deeno, and he knew he had some hidden powers as well. That's why he was able to leave Apito in his care.

"Huh? Oh, wow, you're right. Great, so now I'm no longer under your control… Or really, you never intended to kill me from the start, did you?"

Zegion gave Deeno's smile a little chuckle. "I am not at full strength yet. Diablo will take care of that thing, but can you handle the other minions?"

"Oof… Well, I guess I have no choice. Leave the rest to me, then."

Deeno had no intention of betraying anyone from the start, but now he truly did feel like he was back in action. Perhaps that was why he finally got honest with himself and made a long-overdue apology.

"I'm sorry, Ramiris. I didn't mean to betray you, but I had reasons deeper than the sea and higher than any mountain. Do you know what I mean?"

That was the best he could do, and he thought he sounded

honest enough with it. But:

"Hohhhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Well, it looks like I was right all along, wasn't I? All right—all is forgiven, Deeno! So go beat those scary guys for me!"

Such was Ramiris's reaction. She had regained her composure a moment earlier, and now she was more relaxed overall. That's what allowed her to forgive Deeno from the bottom of her heart, with as much generosity as she could manage.

Deeno was only half smiling about it, but inside, he did feel relieved. Apologizing was never easy, no matter how old you got. Seeing it all turn out well was a great relief.

Now his expression tightened again as he looked at the dracobeasts he needed to defeat.

"Time for me to step in," he said, having his three struggling companions move aside. The sight of his transformation made Pico and Garasha overjoyed.

"Ah yes, it was that sort of thing, wasn't it? You actually look pretty cool!"

"All right! Get moving, Deeno! Blow those monsters away!"

"You got it!"

And with that, he instantly chopped up the two dracobeasts. The sheer speed of it rendered everyone speechless.

"Whoa… That was actually *cool*, wasn't it?"

Mai was stunned, unable to believe her own eyes. People have trouble handling sudden changes like this. Deeno had made it his business to show nothing but his bad side to everyone, and all of a sudden, he was as serious as a heart attack. That alone did wonders for his coolness factor, but instantly killing an enemy that Mai and the others were struggling hard against… Well, it was easy to admire him now.

Pico looked so proud, like those exploits were all her doing, but her words were as harsh as ever.

"You *could* have just done that from the start, but *noooo*."

Not even she could hide her happiness, though. Garasha was similarly taking deep breaths. It had been a long, long time since she had seen Deeno like this—all the way back to when Veldanava

was still alive. But his presence alone made her feel so much more secure. Now she couldn't see how they could lose, no matter the enemy. She had same feeling back then, too.

Ugh… I can't believe how lazy he is…

But despite her dismay, a natural smile appeared on her face.



He would have been a lot happier giving in to his instincts and running wild, but Vega's senses had returned to him, if only a little. This was the Parallel Thought aspect of Azhdahak, Lord of Dark Dragons, doing its work, independently deriving another sense of ego from a body that had gone out of control.

At the same time, his current situation began to dawn on him. The amount of magicules in his body was now gigantic and growing. His existence points had ballooned—which was natural, since he had gobbled up the remains of Zeranus and was continually absorbing the labyrinth itself. By contrast, Diablo—the enemy he was trying to kill—was completely stable, showing no fluctuation at all. That scared him all the more. From the start, here was an opponent that was consistently well below Vega's numbers—but it was Vega being pushed around.

He stretched out numerous tentacles to capture his foe; the demon scissors cut them all to pieces. He tried launching a powerful high-caliber beam, but it deflected off him. Diablo's skills were just that outstanding; he took every approach possible to escape from his fear of him, but it just didn't work.

At this point, Vega finally understood that strength was about more than having a high EP—victory depended on a combination of factors, including luck. He was faced with a critical lack of battle skills. After becoming decently strong without making any real effort, he only had experience with a simple rote sort of fighting approach. Diablo had stopped growing so that he could continue to enjoy fighting, but the difference between them was like heaven and

earth, one impossible to bridge at all.

There's no way I can kill this guy…but not like I'll get killed, either.

Right now, Diablo was fighting extremely passively, not attacking at all. He wasn't aiming for Vega himself, like he had done when cutting up the dracobeast. However, the intense pain from the blows he delivered earlier hadn't disappeared. If he took many more hits like that, it was bound to drain his spirit in time.

And:

I don't get it. Maybe he's aiming for something else…?

Not being attacked like this was scaring Vega even more. Diablo had this fearless smile on his face, never doubting his victory and probably seeing Vega as a weakling of an opponent. That wasn't him bluffing, either. Vega understood what being weak was like. Despite his still-growing omnipotence, there just wasn't any shaking off his fear of Diablo. Clearly, it was a sign that he'd never be able to beat him.

In this case, the only option left for Vega was his usual move—fleeing. But that wasn't going to be too simple here. Vega was continuing to corrupt the labyrinth, albeit unconsciously, but the corrosion rate was only about 30 percent. That was pretty good progress—an amazing feat, in fact. But now he had a problem.

Oh crap. There's nothing beyond this…

Yes, his enemies were taking countermeasures. It looked like Vega was being quarantined again. Without any teleportation skills, Vega was caught in a situation he had no way to escape from.

But there was still a possibility. If there were any of Vega's split-off cells left somewhere, he could completely revive himself from them. Of course, mere fragments of cells wouldn't cut it—he'd need a Duplicate at least on the same level as his dracobeasts. Preserving this Duplicate would be impossible, since it would die once it got far enough away from Vega. This strategy might have sounded useless, then, but it wasn't. Vega could leave it on the far end of his sphere of influence, and it'd make a great insurance policy in case of emergency.

In fact, he used a Duplicate to escape the cunning, treacherous

Testarossa earlier, a feat he could be proud of. Before diving into the labyrinth, he had left one Duplicate outside the front door, although he had since lost contact with it because the labyrinth's interior and exterior operated on different dimensions. Right now, all he had left was the dracobeast heading for the bottommost floor of the labyrinth.

I could order it to go outside… Ah, but the entrance is sealed up, too, right?

One thing he learned while consuming the labyrinth was that any rule set by Ramiris in this space could never be defied. One such rule stipulated that you must always maintain a connection with the real world; another said that every dimensional floor needed to have an entrance and an exit. To sum up these rules, the different dimensions at play in the labyrinth always needed to be connected.

This could be explained by picturing a space elevator connecting a satellite to planet Earth. However, unlike a satellite, which was pulled by the Earth's gravity, the position of man-made objects in this "other world" was not fixed. It was possible to build more, but it had to be connected elsewhere, otherwise it would be left behind by the planet's rotation and fly off somewhere. In much the same way, Ramiris's labyrinth was connected to other worlds and dimensions, so there needed to be connection points put in place.

The entrance that Vega's party had broken through had long since been sealed shut. Now it looked like a new entrance had been opened up, but it was both fortified and ran through the great hall of Veldora, the final line of defense.

If so, it'll be a gamble. I'm glad I could share as much power as I did. At the very worst, one of us will survive, right?

Vega was reasonably certain that the dracobeasts could survive. Since he could only summon four dracobeasts, each of the current ones had an EP count of just under five million. Their outer skin was God-class in strength, making them a force that could trample over any opponent. Still, he had just learned that strength was about more than just statistics, so he couldn't rest on his laurels. So he used all the wisdom he had on hand, searching for a path to survival.

It was clear to him by now that forces within the labyrinth were conspiring to defeat Vega himself. He would have to work faster. There might have been more than Diablo and Zegion to worry about, but he figured that if he went on the rampage around here, they'd go easier on the dracobeasts for him.

I'll do it! I swear I will! Besides, once I kill these guys here, all this pointless worrying will go away!

He knew that was impossible, but that didn't faze him. It was an empty show of courage, and yet it was admirable of him to go that far with it. Diablo was a scary presence, but maybe luck would be on his side here. Vega felt he was a lucky person, and with that confidence, he had no doubt that his strategy would succeed, no matter how little evidence there was. That luck had long since run out (unbeknownst to him), but Vega was on the rampage again, sensing that it was all riding on this.



What does he think he's doing?

Diablo narrowed his eyes and looked at Vega.

Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh. He's just desperately trying to survive now. It's a futile struggle for him, but I may as well play along.

He wasn't being careless. He would never make the sort of mistake that Vega was hoping for. That was impossible now.

The reason Diablo hadn't attacked yet was because he was trying to get an accurate gauge on Vega's strength. That task was now nearly done. He had factored in Vega's growth speed, and by the time the labyrinth's isolation was nearly complete, he had also worked out the upper limit for Vega.

Now all that remained was to annihilate Vega and not leave a single trace of him behind. However, one troublesome fact had come to light. After analyzing his powers, it looked like even if he disposed of Vega's main body, he could still revive himself from the cells that had branched off from him.

Surely, this revived body would still have Azhdahak, not to mention the information in Zeranus's dark cells. I could dispose of Vega right now, but the escaped dracobeast would just revive and become the new Vega…

Diablo bitterly figured that must have been why Testarossa let Vega go. He couldn't allow himself to make the same mistake, and for that reason, he was a little concerned. Killing Vega was easy enough, but if he wanted to be sure he couldn't revive himself, that required a proper procedure.

Two other anxieties were in his mind as well. One was how Mai was being targeted. Vega didn't have teleportation skills, so it was obvious that he'd want to forcibly take hers. But if you knew you were being targeted, you would naturally take countermeasures. Zegion was keeping a close eye on this situation, though, so Vega was unlikely to get his wish.

The second issue was the real problem. Given what he knew about Vega's personality, it seemed unlikely that he'd go through with this, but there was no telling what a cornered rat would try.

As he was pondering away, Diablo received a Thought Communication from Benimaru.

(We've decided to scrap all the floors that we're trying to isolate Vega in.)

(Right. That much seems sound to me, at least.)

(…Mmm? Is there another problem?)

Benimaru was also watching the situation on the big screen, but it was hard to grasp what was happening on the ground, so he wanted some feedback from Diablo. Even the smallest problems need to be shared—that was Rimuru's policy.

(Well, you see, if I dispose of Vega as is, it is very likely that he'll transfer himself into the dracobeast currently headed for the lower floors. We have to dispose of that one first, to prevent that from happening.)

With someone like Vega, the sooner he could be taken out of the picture, the better. The longer they waited, the more weird and wholly unhelpful powers he might obtain and the more trouble he'd become. Diablo knew that, but he hadn't done anything so far

because Testarossa made the mistake of letting Vega escape last time. Diablo had run her over the coals about that, but he didn't think she was a fool. If she had made that mistake, then he needed to give some credit to her enemy.

Now he had a much clearer picture of the trouble Vega posed. The more troublesome an opponent, the better off he was taking the long way around to ensure everything went smoothly. That much was crystal clear now, and Diablo steeled himself for what was to come.

The dracobeasts that Deeno's team was dealing with had already been revived several times. So was the one Diablo first defeated, so now they were dealing with three at the same time. They were still no match for Deeno at his best, but it did feel like they were gradually getting stronger; Vega must have been giving them more and more of his power. The one that dove into the lower levels was separated from the main body of Vega, so it probably didn't have that kind of immortality…but either way, it was irksome for Diablo.

(All right, then…)

It was giving Benimaru a headache, too.

Once Diablo beat Vega, the quarantined part of the labyrinth would need to be fully destroyed. That way, even if Vega somehow revived himself, he wouldn't be able to return to the labyrinth. However, once the isolation was complete, they wouldn't be able to monitor what was going on in the affected floors any longer. He needed to talk with Diablo before then, to ensure they were all on the same page—and now he regretted being overly optimistic earlier.

(I understand now. We'll take care of the situation over here, so keep up what you're doing.)

(I'll be waiting for your contact.)

Diablo ended the Thought Communication. Then, with a peeved expression, he began chipping away at Vega's power.



Deeno was getting used to things, fighting with a newfound energy, but it was rapidly petering out on him. What used to be two dracobeasts were now three, and it was really hurting his motivation.

"We're never gonna get anywhere like this," he whined as he slashed down the dracobeast that just attacked him.

Vega was trying to seize control of the labyrinth, and he was succeeding, if only halfway. Ramiris was in the process of quarantining Floors 61 through 90, and Vega's rule was beginning to extend its way over them. This meant that as long as he didn't completely tap out the labyrinth's energy, these dracobeasts would endlessly come back to life. Even worse, Deeno was mowing them down with a single blow at first, but they seemed to be gradually strengthening over time.

There was a limit on how many could be summoned at the same time, luckily, but there were other issues to deal with as well. Deeno had just fired a Deep Bullet at the second dracobeast, a concentrated bullet of pure magic, and while it opened up a clear hole in its chest area, it didn't kill it.

"Projectile weapons are meaningless against them," Zegion warned. "They do nothing but benefit the enemy."

Being the strongest guardian in the labyrinth, Zegion was in a good position to know how things worked in here. He therefore knew what should be done in a battle and what shouldn't.

"Huh?"

The verbal warning made Deeno realize what was going on. Diablo, he now realized, was using nothing but melee blows and slashes against Vega. Now it made sense. Vega was aligning himself with the soon-to-be-isolated floors, so any energy released within those floors would just be absorbed by him—that was the way to think about it.

Deeno wasn't totally incapable of deductive thought, but he *was* incapable of not being lazy. Unlike Diablo and Zegion, Deeno wasn't the type to work things out by himself without being told what to do—but then nearly everybody else seemed like distracted little children by comparison.

Being a demon lord, Deeno had a pretty gigantic magicule count himself, so firing off a few thousand or so magic bullets was no problem for him. If all that energy was just flowing directly into Vega's coffers—well, that wasn't very reassuring.

"Seriously? So the labyrinth's protecting Vega and Vega alone here?" Deeno asked.

Zegion gave him a silent nod. And if those were the facts, unless they defeated Vega's main body, this battle was never going to end for Deeno and the rest. It was enough to make him feel really depressed in a hurry.

Those dracobeasts, infinitely regenerating until all energy was depleted, were getting stronger with every sortie. You didn't need to be Deeno to feel a little despondent about this. The only saving grace was the total lack of seasoned fighting skill those beasts had. If these were Separate Bodies of Vega himself, like what Velgrynd had, there'd be nothing they could do.

And yet as useless as all this seemed, there was no recourse but to keep going. Deeno, as reluctant as he was, resolved to continue engaging the dracobeasts with nothing but his twin blades.

(Hey! Ramiris! Your labyrinth's gotta have some kind of weak point, doesn't it? Tell me what it is or else I'm gonna be killing these guys the rest of my life!)

The secret Thought Communication revealed that Deeno was at least being somewhat proactive. But there wasn't going to be an easy way out of this.

(What are you, crazy? My labyrinth doesn't have any weak points at all! Hmph!)

(Will you quit acting all high-and-mighty? Vega just stole that thing from you!)

(Uh-uh! No, he didn't! He's just making a bad impersonation of my powers! I'm shutting him away from down here!)

That didn't satisfy Deeno much.

(Quit being stupid! We're having to work so damn hard over here because of that!)

His twin swords sparkled in the air as he exchanged these words with Ramiris. A dracobeast fell and faded into dust. For all his

grumbling, Deeno was incredibly sharp; even Ramiris was impressed.

(Good job there, Deeno! Keep that up and maintain the status quo for us!)

(Huhhh?)

(Because Diablo and Benimaru are talking right now… Umm, there's another one of them headed this way, and if we don't defeat it, Vega might take it over, we think.)

This wasn't nearly enough explanation, but Deeno understood the situation well enough. *Aha. So that's why Diablo's been doing all that prep work this whole time.*

As he fended off Vega, Diablo had been carefully building up his magic. It was already at a density he could use to defeat Vega, but he still wasn't making any moves along those lines, and Deeno wasn't sure why. But if Vega had an escape route ready to go after getting killed over here, Diablo's approach made sense. Unfortunately, it meant Deeno was on dracobeast-killing duty until Ramiris and the others were all set to go.

The holy and demonic swords in Deeno's possession shone, enveloped in energy that glowed white and black respectively, as he skillfully wielded them against his enemies. There was no end in sight yet, so he switched himself over to energy-saving mode.

"Sounds like we'll have to keep this up for a while longer," he said, his back still turned to his friends. "Sorry, guys, but can you pitch in, too?"

Pico and Garasha, with their Divine Spirit Armor on, had already activated Apotheosis on themselves. One look at them, and it was clear how motivated they were.

"Great! It's finally my turn to shine! ♪"

"Deeno can't do anything without us, can he? Guess we'll give him a hand."

They had been planning to join in from the start, but they still didn't miss a chance to whine about it a bit before they did. The three of them now fought together, clad in matching gear and providing support to one another.

The dracobeasts might not have had any sentience, but their

instinct-driven attacks were still clearly dangerous. They now outclassed Deeno's party in terms of existence points, at least before Apotheosis, and fighting them while trying to conserve energy as much as possible was tiring in and of itself—not physically but mentally. Rote labor like this made all of them more prone to making mistakes, which was why Deeno asked for help instead of acting like he didn't need it.

That was the right thing to do, because as a trio, they were the perfect fighting party. Garasha kept the enemy pinned down as Deeno slashed away, and Pico moved around quickly, providing support while not getting in the way. The three dracobeasts came at them one after the other, but they were easily repelled each time. They might have been stronger than before, but against this three-pronged offense, it seemed they were no match at all. Between Deeno's sword skills, Garasha's shield handling, and Pico's situational awareness, they had an excellent setup for long-term battle without exhausting themselves.

Apotheosis, in truth, put a major burden upon them. It wouldn't harm them at all in the short term, but over an extended period of time, the repercussions were downright frightening. In fact, it could peter out on them without warning in the middle of battle, which would be lethal. They naturally had to address this, and with the setup they were currently using, they could keep this up for hours at a time.

But just when he believed there was nothing to worry about, Deeno received a sudden Thought Communication from Ramiris.

(Oh, right, one more thing. Once that area of the labyrinth's completely quarantined, we won't be able to see what's going on down where you are.)

(Okay. And?)

This didn't seem too worrisome to Deeno. But what Ramiris said next floored him.

(So that means my own skill won't reach down to you any longer.)

Ramiris thought she was stating the obvious, but it came as a total surprise to Deeno. After all, that meant…

(Huh? Wait, so your Resurrection Bracelets won't work anymore…?)

(Well, yeah, what did you think?)

What did I think…?

Deeno wanted to bury his head in his hands.

(Whoa, whoa, so how're we gonna get out of here once this floor's fully isolated?)

Ramiris had explained to them earlier that they were going to dispose of these floors once they were fully isolated. If they were still in there at the time, they'd be doomed to wander this rift in the space-time continuum with Vega forever. The concept alarmed Deeno.

(Oh, that? Well, Benimaru's gonna come down there for you once the time comes.)

As she explained, Benimaru's Control Dimensions skill would make the necessary spatial connections to ensure everyone could escape. It all sounded very untested, though.

(…Are you sure it'll work? Like, he can really pull that off okay?)

(It's not a matter of 'can' or not. He will, all right? 'Cause there's no other way outta there!)

(…Oh.)

Deeno gave up. Clearly, further dialogue wasn't going to help him any. If Ramiris said they had to do it—well, they had to do it. All that remained was to somehow make this plan work.

After this chat with Ramiris, Deeno explained matters to everyone else. They were all still fighting the whole time, so there wasn't much time to talk.

"…So all we gotta do for now is keep going with this, okay?"

"Yeah, well, at least we can see the end of the tunnel."

"I guess so. I got a feeling that provoking Vega any further is gonna be bad news for us, besides. We're probably safe leaving him to Diablo."

What mattered the most was the timing of the whole thing, and no one had any objections to that. If they did, well, it's not like they

had any better ideas, so following the plan was the only real option.

Then Mai, who was still devoted to rear support, casually spoke up.

"Um, what about me?"

She thought that with her teleportation skills, escape would be pretty easy for her…but since the other three were such a complete perfect team, Mai didn't think to bring it up until now.

It was a surprising proposal for Deeno. He was the sort of person who loved to laze out even at times when he couldn't afford to, so he wanted Mai to rest when she could as well. So he pointed out Zegion to her.

"Mai, you stay on standby over there. I'm sure Zegion will protect you if needed, so you can back us up from there, okay?"

"Yeah. It'd be too dangerous to stand in front."

"You can leave this to us, Mai!"

So Mai stood next to Apito, who had been offering her support to Zegion, and decided to place her faith in Deeno's party.



Benimaru had just wrapped up his situational briefing in the Control Center.

"You're kidding me. He really *is* a heap of trouble, huh?"

"The quarantine strategy was the best thing after all, wasn't it?"

"Oh, absolutely. I was hoping we could reuse that part of the labyrinth later, but I think we'd get all paranoid that he might still be alive in it somewhere."

Call it the "ick factor"—or to give a real-world example, it was like not wanting to use a toothbrush again after dropping it in the toilet, no matter how much you wash it.

A lot of the Control Center agreed with the idea. Treyni was one of them, she and Ramiris eagerly nodding at each other. She'd probably go with anything Ramiris told her, of course, so maybe she was thinking something different on the inside, but that wasn't

important right now.

Beretta brought some juice over to Ramiris. She readily gulped it down.

"But," she said, "can we really beat that dracobeast?"

That was the big question, one that Benimaru was also concerned about. He had tried to put on a bold front around Diablo, but the four Dragon Lords and Hakuro didn't seem to him like they'd be enough to beat the guy.

"I think I'm gonna have to go down there," he announced.

On the big screen, Hakuro was currently slashing away at the dracobeast. His swordplay was nothing short of brilliant, but sadly, it wasn't enough to dispatch this beast for good. It had lost its connection to Vega and therefore couldn't resurrect itself from the dead, but it still had Ultraspeed Regeneration, which let it heal itself time and time again. Hakuro was cutting down a foe that was over fifty times stronger than him, which made Benimaru proud to have him as his master, but it was now clear that Hakuro alone couldn't defeat him.

What about the four Dragon Lords, then? Euros, the beautiful Brimstone Dragon Lord, had bound the dracobeast with a flaming whip that enveloped it in searing heat. Her hope was that the continual heat damage would burn it away at the cellular level, but it was clear that this potential killer strike came at a dear cost to Euros. Her revealing dress didn't hide her reddish-brown skin, and she had unhealed wounds all over her body.

A thin, handsome man was leaning against the door. This was Zephyros, the Frostkeep Dragon Lord, and despite his gentle, graceful looks, he was glaring at the dracobeast with a piercing gaze. He, too, had taken a lot of damage while trying to assist Euros.

In even worse shape was the Skythunder Dragon Lord, Notos. This small, young girl had tried using her superstrength to keep the dracobeast down, but the difference in power was just too great. If this opponent had any sentience, Notos wouldn't have stood a chance.

Finally, Boreas, the Earthshaker Dragon Lord, was also putting

everything he had into the fight, protecting the fallen Zephyros and Notos, even as the dragon scales covering his body began to crack and shatter.

Euros's flame whip was broken apart by the dracobeast's sheer power. The gap was just too great, and the continuous damage from the whip couldn't outclass its target's healing rate. It had successfully stopped the beast for a moment, but that was all. Euros clicked her tongue, beyond frustrated—perhaps an unseemly gesture for a woman as beautiful as her, but she still made it look attractive.

Hakuro took over for her. She was clearly outmatched with no way to defeat the dracobeast, so retreat was the only option for now—but Hakuro wasn't faring much better.

The effort everyone was making certainly deserved praise, but merely holding the beast back was the best they could collectively do. Things would have been fine if they had been able to stick to the original plan, but this particular group of fighters just didn't have what it took to defeat a dracobeast. Just as Benimaru feared, some reinforcements were necessary—and if Benimaru himself were there, the tables would be turned very quickly…

"Um, Vice Commander? Don't you already have this, like, really important mission? You have to bring Zegion and everyone else back from the floors I'm quarantining."

Ramiris was right. And it was important to time that properly—he'd need to be quick on his feet just when the dracobeast was defeated.

If Benimaru couldn't do it, they didn't have many fighters left who could. Soei had his Replications deployed far and wide, gathering intelligence. Gabil was recuperating; he might have been able to pull this off if he was in perfect shape, but a dracobeast with double his EP would still be an uphill battle. If he hobbled over there right now, his chances were pretty slim.

The same was true for Ranga—at full strength, he was a cinch to win, but the burden he had taken from Geld had exhausted him and he couldn't perform any large-scale moves at all. Sending him over there would just be a waste of time.

Instead, it was Beretta who stepped forward.

"In that case, I'm afraid I will have to go in there…"

Ramiris instantly rejected the idea.

"What? Of *course* you can't, Beretta! If you're not helping me with these calculations, there's no way I can dispose of these labyrinth floors on my own!"

It wasn't impossible for her, but it'd take more time. That would give Vega more of a chance to recover…and that would mean the failure of the entire mission. There was no choice but to have Beretta do his best to help Ramiris.

At that point, one person stood up.

"It seems my turn has finally arrived."

The one who declared this was a fighter with tanned skin and black-and-red hair like a roaring flame. It was Charys. Having achieved complete fusion with his dragontite host, he had taken on even more of a dignified look than before, all while his inner self had grown more substantial over time.

"Charys!"

Ramiris brightened up, as if she had only just remembered him now.

"Ah yes," Benimaru said with a nod, "if he's been assisting Sir Veldora, I think we could trust him with this vital role." He had seen Charys's power at a glance, and in his eyes, he had what it took to beat a dracobeast.

If he had Benimaru's seal of approval, no one else here was going to object. Charys had almost been forgotten about, but now he was deploying out in high spirits.

After he left the Control Center:

"By the way, what was Charys's existential rating?" Ramiris asked an operator.

"Um, at the moment it's 2.74 million."

Numerically speaking, that was lower than the dracobeast's, but it also put Charys up there with the rest of the main executives here.

"You sent him out without knowing that, Lady Ramiris?"

"Oh, stop being so uptight, Vice Commander. It's fine! It's totally

fine! Charys is my master's assistant, and he's a real hardcore fighter, too! No way he's gonna lose!"

Among Ramiris's peers, it was now common knowledge that the nature of one's EP rating could vastly affect how well you fought in combat. That much had been well demonstrated in this battle so far. EP was a useful indicator, but it didn't mean everything.

Charys's abilities were primarily being used for peaceful purposes, but all his powers could quickly be diverted to combat. In a crisis like this one, he would immediately go into combat mode without a hitch. This all-in-one versatility was Charys's strongest point—use him right and you were made in the shade.

This was why everyone assumed Charys would win, and that prediction wasn't off the mark, either. At long last, Benimaru smiled a little as he applied the final touches to their plan.

✳

Upon opening the door to the battlefield, Charys saw Hakuro fighting and holding his ground.

"Crestwater Slash!"

He used his hidden blade to catch the dracobeast's fist, deflecting it. That fist was God-class in power, but it still didn't break Hakuro's sword—the sign of a highly skilled swordsman at work. That wasn't all, though—Kurobe had retempered it, turning it into the very best of the Legend-class. This was Samegumo, or Shark Cloud, a hidden blade that Hakuro had adopted as his most beloved of weapons. It was unbendable, unyielding, unrelenting, and unbreakable. Flexible yet strong at its core, it had been finished exactly as Hakuro ordered. Sturdiness, not power, was the watchword behind Samegumo's design, and Hakuro felt safe carrying it in front of him. He was also protecting it with his own aura, taking special care to prevent it from breaking, so the blade never chipped at all as it cut through his foe's God-class outer shell.

Charys thought it was a wonderful performance. Unfortunately, it

wasn’t enough to defeat the dracobeast.

Zephyros, Notos, and Boreas, all near the door, gave way for Charys. His and Euros’s eyes met along the way; she blushed a bit and nodded at him. Euros admired Charys, and even in a situation like this, his presence gladdened her. Charys lightly brushed off the gesture, however. His ability to do that had been honed to its maximum by Veldora.

Striding forward, sheer dignity in every step, he stood before Hakuro.

“Allow me to take your place.”

“Mm? Charys, is it? Well, it looks like my shift is over, then.”

“I think you’re satisfied enough with your performance today, aren’t you? A performance heroic enough that I’m sure your unborn children will be told all about it.”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! You’re more of a flatterer than you look.”

“I was trained by Sir Veldora at it.”

Those words contained Charys’s innermost feelings. Anyone who’s ever had a boss that made unreasonable demands could probably sympathize with him. Beretta, who wasn’t there, found a lot to agree with; he and Charys were drinking buddies, and they weren’t shy about trading opinions with each other.

Regardless, Hakuro stepped back without further protest. He was told they would just be trying to buy time, but now things had apparently changed.

“You don’t need any help, I presume?”

“No, I think I should be fine on my own.”

That wasn’t meant as an insult to Hakuro—just genuine consideration, ensuring he’d be kept out of harm’s way. Charys’s battle style, after all, involved conjuring up super-high temperatures to burn everything down to nothing. If Hakuro was still around, he wouldn’t be able to fully demonstrate his true ability, hence why he wanted him safely away with the Dragon Lords.

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! Very well, then. I wish you good luck.”

“Thank you. I promise I will win.”

The conversation was over, and Hakuro retreated to the door with Euros and the others.

So Charys faced up to the dracobeast. If it was strictly a matter of strength, the dracobeast was guaranteed to win—but in terms of fighting ability…

"I'm told that I don't have much time. I was hoping to see how much of a challenge you'd be, but instead I'll have to end this more quickly."

He wasted no time making this unilateral declaration. The dracobeast, who couldn't understand him, immediately recognized Charys as its enemy and attacked.

And then…Charys just kicked it up into the air.

"Hreeeh?!"

The dracobeast let out a cry of surprised agony at the unexpected impact and its fallout. Charys, ignoring it, kept up the attack.

"Veldora-Style Death Stance: Burning Bullet."

He released his fists at a speed impossible to keep up with. They heated the air, turning into bullets as they generated plasma and landed in rapid succession on the dracobeast.

"…?!"

It let out a silent scream, but Charys didn't care. While the beast was still airborne, he drew a magic circle on the ground. Another moment, and it was activated by:

"Let's finish you with a skill near and dear to my heart. Dragonic Flare."

The technique was completed just when the falling dracobeast entered the dome around the circle. It was an evolution of Flare Circle, the finisher that Ifrit used against Rimuru before getting defeated, and its power was now something else entirely. After multiple cycles of improvement and evolution, it was finally refined enough to use on the battlefield. Its range had been considerably narrowed, so it only worked within a ten-foot diameter, but that proportionally increased the heat energy stored inside it.

This was the ultimate finisher among heat-based attacks, surpassing even Benimaru's Hellflare. After all, it didn't end once activated. Charys himself had turned into flame, and he could adjust his internal temperature as he pleased. After considering what he

lacked after the fight with Rimuru, he had learned how to concentrate all that heat on the enemy that he now engulfed. There was no escape within that dome, and the heat of Charys would not flicker out until it had burned away everything.

"Rraahhhhhhh…"

The dracobeast was thus burned into extinction, a soul-piercing scream serving as its last words. No comeback from this was ever going to be possible. It was a total victory for Charys.

"Brilliant work."

Hakuro had nothing but praise for this convincing win.





"No, no. I think this is exactly why I wasn't tapped until now. Winning this needed to be a given all along."

Charys was smiling, but his inner thoughts were elsewhere.

There's not a single doubt that Sir Veldora forgot about me, is there? I mean, I'm sure he's glad that Sir Rimuru asked so much of him, but I wish he could have taken me with him…

He was still bearing a grudge against Veldora for leaving him. But the Dragon Lords, unaware of this, were moved by his gallant figure.

"Wow! Just what I was hoping to see, Sir Charys! So lovely! ♡"

Euros had already publicly declared herself Charys's biggest fan, and now she was heaping praise upon him, her cheeks flushed with emotion. She might look like a fierce, beautiful ball of rage, but now she was gesticulating like a maiden in love.

"Heh. We have a while to go, don't we?"

"Well, no denying that for now. We'll just have to work on gaining more experience."

"Yeah, we can't afford to fall behind at all. Maybe we'll never reach a position like our boss Sir Zegion, but we're still the Dragon Lords that protect the areas before the bottom floor. We need to step it up."

Boreas, Notos, and Zephyros all spoke their minds. The frustrations they felt today needed to function as a springboard, filling them with more determination than ever before. And in time, their subsequent efforts would make the labyrinth's difficulty level skyrocket even further than before…but that was still far in the future.



Charys's victory excited the entire Control Room.

"There, you see? I *told* you it'd work out!"

Ramiris, acting like this was her own accomplishment, was being coddled by most people in the room, who were saying, "You're right!" and other such compliments to her. Beretta was too busy with

his calculations to butt in—or really, this was the same as always, so he didn't bother trying to. If anyone was going to snap her back into reality, it was the vice commander, Benimaru, but he had already left for the quarantined floors, leaving the room entirely in Ramiris's command. Gabil and Ranga didn't even have the right to speak up against her.

But the tension hadn't fully disappeared. Static began to appear on parts of the big screen; the isolated floors were starting to go offline for them. The battle was reaching its climax. All that remained was to defeat Vega and do away with the quarantined section of the labyrinth for good—that and pray that everyone came back safely.

Ramiris and her team might look like they were having a great time, but that was just them masking their anxieties. She was eagerly awaiting word from Benimaru, trusting in the success of their mission.

Diablo, seeing Benimaru stepping onto their floor, realized that the time was drawing near. So far, everything was going well, but he couldn't afford to let his guard down. After being this cornered, if Vega was going to make a move, it would happen right now.

He glanced over and saw Zegion nodding like he understood. It was like they were reading each other's minds. He saw no reason for concern now—and that was just when Vega finally shouted out:

"Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes, this *could* work, couldn't it?!"

The tentacles that had been crawling along the ground, pretending to be aimed at Diablo, began to writhe in place. They all stretched out at once, approaching Mai at super speed.

"Huh?"

She turned around, sensing them. The numerous tentacles filling her field of vision astonished her. She had focused so much on backing Deeno's party up that she hadn't been paying as much attention to Vega himself. Never did she dream that she'd be targeted.

But the tentacles never reached Mai.

"Don't waste your time."

Zegion's words hit Mai only after she could see the remains of these tendrils scattered before her, in the void. Zegion's Insect Space shimmered a pure blue color, clear and transparent—but as beautiful and ephemeral as it looked, it was actually much more powerful than Apito's, incomparably so. It functioned as both an attack and a defense, even capable of striking through disconnected reaches of space at Zegion's will.

This was what blocked Vega's tentacles. They couldn't even touch Mai before being chopped up and scattered by the twisted maze of space-time slices that defended her.

"I… Was that targeting me?"

She only realized it after it was all over.

Vega, now cornered, had just had his last ray of hope taken away. He never really had one to begin with, but the sight was more than enough to make Vega wail in despair.

"It…it can't be!"

But shouting about it wouldn't change anything. It now looked like everything would end safely after all.



What? This is ridiculous! Impossible! Am I really going to die here? No! I refuse to accept it! Never!

Vega's fear and confusion had reached their peak.

He had come up with a brilliant plan—consume Mai, take her powers, and then escape—but it had been completely thwarted, as if they had read him the whole time. It just made no sense at all to him.

How can a warrior as superior as I meet his end in a place like this…?

There was nothing more he could do. He had dearly underestimated Diablo, who turned out to be this monster beyond

imagination. It was like they could see through everything, canceling out his attacks no matter what he tried. He thought he could rely on the dracobeasts, too, but they had sorely disappointed him. Now, seeing the new warrior—Benimaru—arrive, it was clear that the beast Vega sent to the lower levels had been killed.

This was when Vega finally gained a full awareness of what was happening. He was trapped, with no way out, and now his brain was firing hard to find a way to survive. But even so, there was just no possibility left to pursue. Diablo and his allies were up to something, that much was clear, and Vega was unlikely to hold out against it. Maybe if he used the immortality he had gained, he could find a way to survive…but he had no interest in taking a life-or-death gamble like that.

It was frustrating. He had grown strong enough that everyone had to see that, but he had failed to gain anyone's respect. He had no friends he could trust. He had nowhere to settle down and feel safe. His heart was never satisfied. His greed never reached its end. That was only natural; it was the result of his own actions. If you didn't trust others, there's no way they were going to trust you. Being nothing but strong and arrogant wouldn't accomplish anything for you.

People could see through others a lot more than one might think, a fact Vega didn't understand. Just wanting something didn't mean you could get it. Sometimes, you'll give and receive nothing back—but if you don't give, nothing's ever going to get off the ground. Vega had lived his life so far without knowing this. Much about his upbringing was worthy of sympathy, but he also had many opportunities to shape up and reform himself. In the end, the only person who could take responsibility for his actions was Vega himself.

But Vega wasn't about to accept this.

"To hell with all of you, you sons of bitches!!"

He used his entire body to express his rage. Then, at that moment, he had a forbidden thought.

Yes… Yes. Why should I be the only one who dies? That's just crazy. Lemme take 'em all with me instead. That way, I won't have

to be lonely in the afterlife, either!

It was the exact possibility Diablo had been worried about. He believed that Vega was too much of a dirty coward to make that move, but Vega was also unintelligent enough that Diablo couldn't shake off the possibility. This was a man with no real ideology in life, following his passing whims day after day, a man foolish enough to carry out any plan that came to mind without carefully considering it first…

This was exactly why Diablo remained on his guard. He figured that at any moment, Vega might be aroused by a sudden impulse of fatalism. And now that premonition was coming true.

Vega grinned. "Heh-heh-heh… I get it. You're stronger than me; I'll admit that…but I'll be the one laughing last. Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That's right! I should've done this from the very beginning!"

His laughter turned into a roar, the evil aura he emitted growing denser and denser.



Diablo clicked his tongue.

He had anticipated this scenario, even taking measures against it, so he was able to suppress the magi-bacteria Vega was trying to spread around. But those bacteria, after fusing with Zeranus's dark cells, were now stronger than before. Already, some of the cell fragments Vega had shed during his time in the labyrinth were filling the air. The remains of the tentacles from earlier must have also been transformed into magi-bacteria.

I didn't expect them to be this much trouble. They'd be a lot easier to thwart if they were still in their original state. Damn him…

Even during this current battle, Vega had been gradually strengthening himself. He had also acquired some sort of other distasteful power, only adding to Diablo's concerns. If things continued like this, it'd be impossible to stop him. All that advance

prep he did was the right move, in the end.

"…Abyssal Plane…"

So he began to act.

Vega's body was now trapped within Diablo's Azazel, Lord of Temptation. This cut off all contact between him and the outside world. In an instant, Vega's main objective was stopped—in other words, Diablo had just prevented him from blowing himself up.

"Hmm. I see. So you were trying to take all your cells that fill this isolated space and collapse them at once?"

Collapse wasn't quite the right word. The amount of energy Vega concealed from Diablo was massive, and that meant an equally huge explosion was in the cards for them.

Diablo does it again, thought Benimaru.

"Exactly. With someone like this, there's no telling what they're thinking. It's best to sweep them out sooner than later."

Diablo was confident that he could survive such a blast, but the extent of the damage on his exhausted allies was harder to predict. Decisive action was needed to stop this, and that's why he acted the way he did. In any other situation, Diablo would've been finished dealing with Vega long ago. If he was willing to allow the less certain elements of this to remain unaddressed, there was no telling what kind of disaster might have resulted.

But now that everything was fully in place, all they had left to do was bury Vega and trash the quarantined floors. Or that should have been it. But then something happened to Vega—or his dracobeasts. That futile struggle of his wound up being the trigger that gave him even greater power.

"Hyah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I did it! I win again!"

It was the dracobeast crying out. There were three of them earlier, but now only one was alive and well. That one now belonged to Vega, and it exuded a presence unlike anything seen before. His ultimate skill—Azhdahak, Lord of Dark Dragons—also had the power of Parallel Existence, and now he had used that power to settle down within the dracobeast's body.

"""…?!"""

Diablo, Zegion, and Benimaru immediately realized the danger.

Deeno and his allies were just one step behind them. But nobody could make a move. Diablo was too occupied sealing off Vega's original body. Benimaru had Control Dimensions activated, attempting to connect this floor to their evacuation point. Deeno looked delighted with himself, seeing a chance to lie back and take a rest really soon. Pico and Garasha were the same. Apito looked just as relieved, supporting the battle-weary Zegion, who hesitated to attack.

This was because Vega was now on top of Mai. She had been protected by Zegion, but for some reason, she had jumped right in front of Vega. Zegion never saw it coming, making it too late to deal with.

It looked like Vega's thought processes were in the dracobeast now, but he hadn't fully mastered all this creature's powers. Even so, the fact that he made the leap from Diablo's Abyssal Plane to a Parallel Existence said a lot about his persistence. Diablo had taken great pains to seal him away, but if he consumed Mai and escaped right now, victory was his—and even if he couldn't do that, he could blow himself up, take everyone with him, and gain vengeance that way.

Now he was spreading his malice far and wide, his mind controlled by ugly emotions that went far beyond mere resentment. *If only we could have banished him with the quarantined floors*, everyone thought. And then:

"I knew this would happen. You really *are* a stubborn little bastard," Mai resignedly muttered. Her voice was soft, but it still rang out amid the quiet.

"Huh?"

She gave Vega the dracobeast a defiant look. "Look, I'm taking you out, all right? I'll banish you to some far-off, unknown place, where you'll stop being a nuisance to everyone."

"What? The hell're you talkin' about?!"

Vega was desperate for an answer, but Mai wasn't giving him one.

"Whoa, stop—"

Before Vega could react, Tera Mater, Lord of Starry Skies, began

to shine. Mai wasn't about to sit here and be protected the entire time. She was observing Vega, fearing how stubborn he was, and she had more than a faint hunch that this would happen. That's why she never dared to run away from this, even though she could tell Vega was aiming at her. If she sacrificed only herself alone, that might be enough to protect everyone else.

Tera Mater's light faded. And at the end, the fleeting image of Mai's thoughts reached Deeno and the others.

Farewell, Deeno. You were so cool when you started giving a crap. Thank you for giving me courage.

Farewell, Garasha. You were like a big sister to me.

Farewell, Pico. I didn't know you for long, but you felt like a good friend.

Farewell, everyone. Take care. You guys can all live forever, so I'm sure you'll forget about me real soon, but…

Then Mai's voice broke off. But Deeno thought he caught one final snippet of it:

…it'd be nice if you could remember me.

✳

Mai was gone and so was the threat. Vega's original body was still there, and there was no reason to keep it alive now. Diablo wasted no time dealing with it.

"…End of the World."

There was no way it could withstand the collapsing of its world. At that very moment, Vega's main body was destroyed. However, it was likely that his skills and authority had all been transferred to the dracobeast that disappeared with Mai—and so he was completely revived as the real Vega.

The idea disgusted Diablo. Thanks to this, he missed his chance to lord it over Testarossa all day.

Well, he thought, *whatever.*

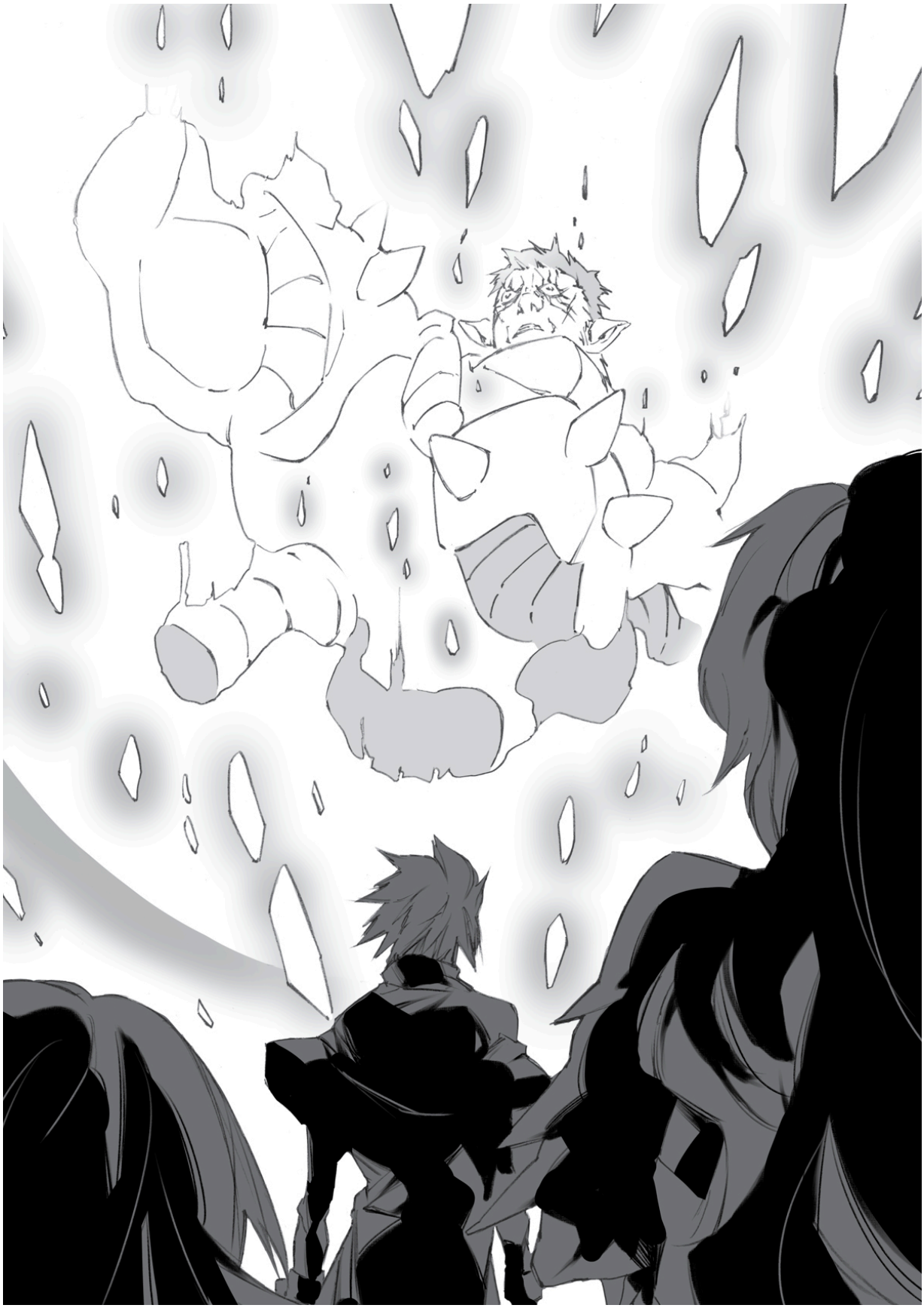
"Let's get this over with."

He didn’t know what sort of evolution Vega had undergone after consuming Zeranus. There were millions of his cells left floating around the quarantined floors. Left unchecked, there was a risk that they’d consume the local monsters and revive themselves. Now was no time for sentimentality—they had to carry out the plan they agreed to beforehand.

“Quit staring into space, Deeno,” said Diablo.

“Ah, but—”

“No buts. If your trivial emotions prevent you from fulfilling your mission, that will be a problem for all of us.”





Diablo was being cold with him, but Deeno knew he was right.

"Well, let's give her a parting gift, at least. A real flashy one, too."

Benimaru tried to collect himself. Then everyone else went on the move, working to make it happen.

Hopefully, Mai will like this, Deeno thought. *Actually, no. I'm sure she'd get all angry about it.*

As serious-minded as Mai was, she wasn't a big fan of being conspicuous, and she probably didn't like flashy stuff at all. Deeno knew that, but he refrained from saying it out loud.

✳

The evacuation zone Benimaru had connected them all to via Control Dimensions was located on the so-called "outer rim" of the labyrinth. It was called that despite being well within the labyrinth's borders for a reason—it was a literal gap in time and space.

This labyrinth was in a place adjacent to another world—a subspace, in other words—and this also brought it in contact with many other worlds in many other dimensions. Thus, if the key world existed outside of the labyrinth, then the outer rim of it had to be located within it.

Standing there, at the far edge of the labyrinth, were Benimaru, Diablo, Zegion, and Deeno. They were about to launch a huge fireworks display at Benimaru's suggestion. It was only those four because none of the others had access to Control Dimensions and thus couldn't act upon the space beyond here.

Zeranus had entrusted Zegion with that skill, so his Control Dimensions had evolved into Dominate Dimensions. Diablo had obtained the same thing long ago, annoyed that Michael's Time Stop had stymied him so much. Benimaru, too, had trained with Diablo long enough to take his Dominate Space skill and turn it into Control Dimensions in a very short time—but he had only just mastered it, so it was little surprise that none of the others had. Dominate Space was the best that even Pico and Garasha could do, so it was difficult

for them to maintain their existences within subspaces like this. That's how dangerous this area ahead was.

Benimaru and the other three were determined to take on this difficult challenge, but before that, they didn't forget to restore normal functionality to the labyrinth.

"Great job, all of ya! I knew I could count on you!"

They could hear Ramiris's joyful voice. Being back in the labyrinth gave them a fulfilling sense of security; the Resurrection Bracelets would do their thing if they died here, so no one was particularly stressed. At the same time, though, Ramiris's labyrinth laws wouldn't apply where all of them were going…

"So you're really gonna do this?"

What Ramiris truly wanted to say was, "Why don't we just leave good enough alone?" This quartet was about to attack the abandoned Floor 30 with all their strength. Benimaru had explained everything via Thought Communication, but she still wasn't too enthusiastic about it. Between him and Deeno, they all shared in a strong determination that Vega must never be allowed to revive. She could sense that, and that's why she was so against it—but knowing how they felt, she didn't try to stop them.

The now-abandoned Floor 30 was currently visible from the refuge zone connected to it. If left alone, it would be swallowed up by some other world in time, shot far away to parts unknown. Phase fluctuations were a constant occurrence in subspace; they were completely unpredictable, and if caught up in one, there was no way to predict what other dimensional space you'd be sent to. The very flow of time might be distorted at your destination. Thus, whether you mastered Dominate Space or not, it simply wasn't realistic to return to the same place and time you were thrown from. Velgrynd pulled it off, but it required a culmination of miracles and coincidences working in her favor.

Survival in a place like this was all but hopeless, even for spiritual life-forms. Ramiris, knowing this, gave them one final warning.

"Well, listen. Each of you needs to set up a barrier to protect yourself, all right? And don't you dare let go of your lifeline. If you get swept into subspace, there's no telling where you might be sent

then, y'know?"

Deeno nodded at this advice. The other three—Benimaru, Diablo, and Zegion—were all linked by Rimuru's soul corridor connection. Out of the four here, only Deeno lacked such a firm bond.

"Yeah, well, Pico and I will support you, so don't worry, okay?"

"I'm pretty shocked *we* don't have any link like that."

"Hey, don't worry about it!"

"Right? We're all friends. We trust each other. That makes a lot more sense than some stupid 'soul corridor' thing."

Deeno agreed with them, but he was still saddened a bit.

Regardless, they had to be careful from here on. There wasn't anything like footholds in subspace, so they had to rely on their lifelines. It was highly dangerous, just as Ramiris said, but Deeno was feeling unusually motivated. To him, any option that meant not having to work was the best one. That didn't mean he *couldn't* work; he just didn't want to. Therefore, whenever he was motivated to work, he made sure to wrap it up quickly. If he had to put in an effort, it was better to get it all squared away in a hurry—that was his credo.

That's why he was the first to jump into subspace. Zegion arrived soon after, located on the opposite side from him. Benimaru had the least experience with this, so he was still positioned pretty close to the safety zone. Diablo, meanwhile, had showed up way in the back, the most dangerous place to be. From Deeno's point of view, they had formed an equilateral triangle, and to the outside observer, they had formed a four-sided pyramid with Deeno on top and the other three below.

Everything was ready.

This ritual required at least four people to work. Ramiris was the one who suggested it, since they had a quartet, and Diablo was all "keh-heh-heh-heh-heh, how interesting" in response. Zegion silently agreed as well, with Benimaru and Deeno saying yes to it a beat later.

However, this ritual was just as dangerous as the place they were in.

Ignoring Diablo for the moment, it'll be with Zegion and

Benimaru, huh? Wow… The magicules are rising again, aren't they?

He had seen Zegion in the previous battle, so he could understand him, although he wish he didn't. But now, at some point, Benimaru had become as powerful as Deeno in "serious" mode, too. He wondered why but didn't have the energy to bring it up. Instead, he focused on the plan.

"Careful, now!" came an anxious warning from Ramiris. The real show would begin once everyone had reached their designated positions. Two people could connect the dots between each other to create a one-dimensional line, three would create a two-dimensional plane, and four would make a three-dimensional space.

Each of them stood at a vertex of this pyramid, their target point in the center. What they were trying to do, in other words, was to have each person smash their finisher move from the edges of the completed pyramid into the abandoned Floor 30 perched at the center. It was much more than a layered magic circle—instead, they were forming a three-dimensional spatial magic circle.

But this is gonna take an insane amount of power. Like, seriously.

Deeno held his breath. The more he thought about it, the more insane this felt. He had gotten carried away enough to play along with this, but now that he was more collected before the big moment, he was really starting to sweat the danger. The other three seemed a lot more enthusiastic.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… I haven't been able to go all out like this in a while."

"Indeed. I can use this opportunity to learn where my limits lie."

"Right? I know my body is a wreck at the moment, but I still feel like I can do this."

First off, Diablo, please don't go all out, all right? Next, Zegion, you don't have *any limits, okay? Finally, Benimaru—if you're that messed up, why did you suggest this in the first place? These people are all maniacs!*

Deeno felt like screaming hard at them all. But it was too late for that. Saying anything would be pointless—at worst, it could ruin the whole atmosphere. He could be unexpectedly considerate that way.

So, with Diablo and the rest of Tempest's leaders starting to

seriously give him the creeps, the countdown began.

"You know what to do, right, Deeno?" asked Diablo. *"You'll be the main driver of this. We'll time it based on you."*

Benimaru and Zegion had no objection. If it were only those three here, they could time it perfectly without any previous setup, but that'd be asking too much of Deeno, the newcomer. They therefore decided Deeno would launch the skill, and the three of them would follow his lead. Deeno had no complaint about it—in fact, not having to coordinate such a difficult ritual strike with three other people came as a great relief to him.

"Got it. I'll be going full power on this!"

He honed his spirit, focusing his entire consciousness so he could unleash the best blow possible—and at that moment, his six pairs of black and white wings began to shine. An immense power began to concentrate around his twin swords of golden holiness and dark depravity.

"Fallen Crusade!!"

The blades of white light and black shadow left afterimages in the air as they beautifully crossed each other at the center of the pyramid. Then, at that very moment, a garden of skills began to bloom with staggering intensity.

"Prominence Acceleration!"

"…End-of-World Requiem."

"…Devastator Storm!"

Prominence Acceleration, released by Benimaru, required no introduction—it was, needless to say, his strongest technique.

Diablo's End-of-World Requiem was the ultimate in illusory and elemental destruction magic, simulating the destruction of the world to cause catastrophic local damage. It was Diablo's own invention, the most powerful of his secret Arts—a combination of skill, technique, and magic.

Finally, Zegion's Devastator Storm was an even more vicious evolution of Dimension Storm, Zegion's ultimate finisher that had been powered up by everything Zeranus had entrusted him with.

Each of them had broken out the greatest power they could possibly produce. All these astounding techniques, released without

a moment's delay between them, reached the center of the pyramid at exactly the right moment, overlapping exactly with what Deeno released first.

There, in the abandoned part of the labyrinth, a colorless sort of polar light was blooming, bathing the subspace in dazzling hues. It was a beautiful and truly worthy tribute. But the power inside was greater than anything seen since the beginning of the universe, creating a truly calamitous amount of destructive force. This disaster filled the insides of the pyramid, constructed so as to keep the power from escaping.

Quartet Skill: Breakdown Nostalgia

The power of these four combined to create an unprecedented, ultimate form of destruction. If the timing was even slightly off, the danger would extend to the casters themselves.

Deeno, experiencing this up close, was shaking with fear. "I thought it was way too dangerous to try without any practice," he'd later say—but either way, this was the moment that a new heroic tale began to spin itself.

✳

This was all being covered in the Control Center.

Everyone witnessing the scene was silent. There was no sign of this raging storm of destruction ever ending. It was fortunate that this was happening inside subspace, because if they were still in the labyrinth, there was no telling how many floors would have been leveled.

"Um…that's kind of crazy," Ramiris admitted.

The abandoned Floor 30 in the middle of it had been forced out of existence the moment it contacted all that energy. If this sort of vicious attack had ever been tried on the surface of the planet… Well, it would likely erase the whole thing, along with the solar

system it was in. They had truly outclassed the power of Velgrynd with this one, these four giants combining their powers to create a synergy that produced unimaginable results.

But as silent as the Control Center was, some of the people returning to it were happily conversing among themselves. Diablo and Benimaru were first.

"That was certainly an engaging experience."

"Oh, absolutely. My body was screaming at me, but once it came time to do it, I felt a rush of energy like nothing else. I'd love to do it again, but I don't think we'll have the chance anytime soon, sadly."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Carrera was talking about how much fun it was to break through labyrinth floors. I think I understand her point of view now."

"…Indeed. Testing the limits of your strength like that… It is not a frequent occurrence."

Zegion had joined in at the end, adding more fuel to the conversation. It was a much different atmosphere from the rest of the Control Center, and Ramiris was unable to keep from trembling at it. Her anxiety was now transformed into anger. She flapped around the room, declaring to the returning Benimaru and his allies that all talk along these lines was absolutely forbidden.

Amid all of this, Deeno was just casually hanging with them, too tired to do much of anything else. Pico and Garasha were also lounging on a nearby sofa, as if they deserved to be. Shuna quietly offered the three of them some tea and snacks.

"I'm sure it was very hard work for all of you," she said with a smile—the sort of act that any man would immediately fall for. Deeno was no exception. Now all this hard work felt like it was worth it. Unlike his three companions, he had been fighting strictly with his own energy, so he felt he deserved a little reward. He sprawled out on the couch, acting like this was his God-given right.

As Deeno relaxed, he asked Shuna for a tea refill. This was how he recovered from fatigue, and the act completely flummoxed Benimaru.

"Hey."

"Mmm?"

"Why are you so relaxed like that?"

"Um? Well, like, my work's done, ain't it?" came the carefree reply. It infuriated Benimaru.

"Well, why don't you just go back home, then?"

Deeno looked back at him, confused. Benimaru was unsure what to make of this.

"Huh? Well, you know, once all the dust settles, your worst enemies often wind up becoming your best friends, right? So in terms of my 'home,' well, where else would that be besides here?"

His cheerful voice was awfully convincing. It was almost breathtaking, how he thought only about what was best for him and him alone. He even winked at Benimaru, pushing his irritation that much closer to maximum.

At long last, Benimaru fired back.

"I'm not even talking about that! All of you were enemies until just a little while ago, weren't you?!"

Deeno *was* a demon lord despite it all, and Benimaru was running the risk of sounding rude to him…but Pico and Garasha sure weren't complaining. Their respect for Deeno wasn't all that high in the first place. Deeno, for that matter, didn't mind at all, brushing it off and turning toward Ramiris.

"Aww, c'mon, we all kissed and made up, right? Didn't we, Ramiris?"

"What? Well…I suppose so. If you want to work here again—well, I ain't opposed to hirin' ya!"

Ramiris was back to normal. She was all smiles after remembering that she already made amends with Deeno.

Now they were all enjoying the snacks together…but it was too early for that. They were still in the Control Center, and while the danger within the labyrinth was a thing of the past, there was still a lot of hardship unfolding worldwide. Soei was constantly flying around, collecting information, and they were far from solving everything quite yet. But here's Deeno, acting like it was nothing to do with them any longer. Pico and Garasha were the same—or even worse actually, wholly ignoring the conversation as they got to work on a cake in the middle of the table.

"Wh-whoa! This is, like, *so* good. Hey, since we have three of them, can I reserve that one over there for myself?"

"Not so fast, Pico. I was aiming for that one."

"Huhhh? Oh, come on. I claimed it first! I have every right to it!"

A truly ugly fight had broken out over the cakes Shuna whipped up. A fight Deeno was ready to dive into. Or really, he was the main instigator.

"…Hey! That's not leftovers or anything—it's *mine*! I don't remember giving you guys any 'rights' to begin with!"

With that shouted defense, he attempted to secure his own share of the cake in a panic. His pleas went unheard. *Even friendship is powerless in the face of that cake…*, the Tempestians in the room thought.

Benimaru sighed as he watched them. He loved Shuna's desserts just as much as any of them, but this show was really just an awful sight.

"Well, look, I don't think we should spoil lazy bums like you…but Shuna, would you mind baking one more, please?"

He was the first to give in. As far as he was concerned, if things continued like this, they were going to be here all day without making any progress. It might've been mean, what he called Deeno, but he couldn't help himself. He just didn't *act* like a demon lord at all.

Shuna nodded with a snicker. But Deeno and his friends hadn't been alerted yet. They were still sitting there, bickering endlessly about cake. Friendship really *is* such a fleeting thing, in the end. Compared to this global-scale battle, it was just a cute little thing, but the three of them were now scowling at one another, none of them giving an inch. The fight continued until Shuna brought in more of her fresh-baked best.

So after everyone finally had their fill of delicious cake, Deeno and his cohorts agreed to work with Benimaru. They must have realized that this man—the elder brother of Shuna, who worked magic in the kitchen—really shouldn't be antagonized so much. In

any world, those in control of meals always wielded a great deal of power.

"Well, I *am* a demon lord, remember. Don't take this as you bribing me or whatever."

"Right? But we want three of these per day, all right? Otherwise, what are we even *doing* here?"

"But you know, if the world gets destroyed, we won't get to enjoy these any longer, right? We gotta keep helping out a little longer, I guess…"

So the negotiations paid off. The three of them would be hired by Ramiris in time, but that too would depend on their talks. This world needed to be protected first, and they were under Benimaru's command for now because that made things more efficient.

Much like Diablo, Benimaru had no doubt at all that they'd win in the end. They'd win on a global scale, too, transcending borders wherever they went. *They're all still young*, Deeno thought, *but* man, *are they something.*

Watching Benimaru and the others, another thought came to Deeno's mind:

Maybe we'll see Mai come back safe, too, huh?

He had never imagined for a moment that his serious-minded colleague would ever do something so self-sacrificial like that. Her actions had saved them all, but now there was no way to pay her back, no matter how much they wanted to. It left a bad taste in Deeno's mouth, so he decided to at least help Benimaru and his team in the meantime. Otherwise, he never would've volunteered for any of this.

Once Mai is back, we've simply got to have her try some of this cake.

And just like Garasha said, they needed to keep this world peaceful first. Deeno really didn't want to work at all, but this time, he felt like his hands were tied.



Mai Furuki was floating in the unfamiliar space she had jumped into with all her might. This was probably a dimensional rift, the kind they called subspace. She had made a disordered jump out of Ramiris's labyrinth, so she had no idea what her positional coordinates were. She was alive, at least, thanks to her powers automatically adjusting the space around her to make it survivable. She wasn't aware of that, but either way, she was thankful for her good fortune.

That, and for some reason, she had the worst hankering for some cake right now. Maybe it was a sign that someone was talking about her, but why on earth would she suddenly think about *cake* at the moment? That was a luxury, something she could hardly ever get to try. Where she was from, they mainly had things like baked cheesecake and pumpkin cake; she had never seen any shortcake or fluffy sponge cake before. Maybe she could find some if she looked, but the bakeries at the imperial capital were too expensive for her salary. Yuuki would sometimes bring her things like sweet potatoes as a gift; they were the best reward she could possibly think of, although she didn't tell him that.

And now Yuuki's been killed by Jahil, so…

She was starting to feel sentimental about him. When she was wandering around the Empire with no idea what was going on, Yuuki had stepped in to lend her a hand. She had been striving to live ever since then, dreaming of the day when she could come back to her own world. Now, of course, she had stopped being human at all. She had gained the power to survive well near anything, including this mystery space she was in right now. It was very strange—but it didn't mean Mai's wish had come true.

Obtaining Tera Mater, Lord of Starry Skies, had so far done little apart from teach her how cruel reality was all over again. The chances of her returning to her own world were impossibly low. It was theoretically doable but not for Mai. Crossing dimensional

barriers requires an enormous amount of energy, along with long strings of complex, arcane calculations and a vast amount of spatial and temporal position data.

Given her current situation, Mai's despair seemed understandable…but on the other hand, it was exactly why her safety was guaranteed. She was still stuck in Vega's grasp, but there was nothing to fear. Even in this situation, she knew she wouldn't be killed right away.

"Why the hell are you smiling?" Vega asked grumpily, still holding on to her.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking some cake would be nice."

"Heh! Glad you're so unconcerned about this. Maybe you think you can get away on your own, but you can't, all right?"

"Get away? No, that's not possible."

"…Huh?" Vega looked at Mai, puzzled. Then his face contorted into a smile. "Heh-heh-heh… You know, if my main body gets killed, the ultimate skill Azhdahak will get housed in this one, right? And if it does, you'll be the first thing I'll eat."

That meant he'd obtain Mai's Instant Motion, making him stronger—and able to return home. The thought made Vega grin.

By this point, however, Vega's original body had already been destroyed. Azhdahak, Lord of Dark Dragons, was actually dwelling inside of him at the moment; he just wasn't aware. It was almost comical at this point, but there was no better proof of how little Vega understood any of his own powers.

Mai wasn't cowed by Vega's threats anyway.

"You can't," she said.

"Don't get cocky with me! Because if you're talking about them sealing away my main body without killing it—"

"Oh, that's not what I'm worried about."

Mai had considered that possibility. If they killed Vega's original body, the dracobeast before her eyes would just become his new main body. Knowing this, they'd probably take the step of sealing that original body away somewhere, right?

That's what she thought…but then she immediately rejected the idea. It was just too dangerous. Vega could evolve himself at

extraordinary rates, so wouldn't it be better to destroy whatever parts of him they could?

That was, in fact, exactly what happened. Mai was correct, and she was confident she was—for the same reason why she knew her biggest wish would never be granted.

"It'd be a gamble, wouldn't it? You don't really know if you can take my powers at all."

"Shut up, you fool! I know I can do it."

Maybe, Mai thought. But she avoided saying that.

"But you can't read positional data, can you?" she asked Vega.

"Huh?"

"If you want to move through a space, you need to be able to calculate coordinates. You'd need at least those figures for your current position and the destination you want to reach."

"Mm…"

"And if you kill me, you'll never get that information."

Mai's power—the evolved Tera Mater—gave her the skill Dimensional Leap. However, as she just said, it required a lot of data to work. It was possible to leap toward the wavelengths released by a living target, but if they existed in another dimension, it was impossible to reach them. Even if she knew the timeline, position data, and other information she needed for her target location, if there was a dimensional barrier separating her from it, she lacked the power to cross it at all.

This was why Mai gave up on returning to her original world.

In some instances, it was possible to cross this barrier if you were just going to an adjacent dimension. It was a case-by-case thing, though. The "walls" in question could be of varying heights, so sometimes it wasn't doable, no matter what. The only way around that was to find an Underworld Gate or some other rift and just explore, explore, explore.

Mai had an essentially infinite lifespan now, but even then, she had to write it off as undoable. Every dimension, after all, ran on its own temporal axis. If two worlds ran on synchronized axes, there'd be no time difference if you jumped between them—but in reality, this wasn't something to expect. Even within the same universe,

space expanded faster than light. The resulting correlation between time and space was beyond Mai's understanding, and without that, the probability of reaching the exact time and place where her brother was alive and well was infinitely close to zero.

If Mai had more power, maybe she could leap through time and space at will. If she was a True Dragon, for example, she could just do that for as long as it took. But it wasn't possible for her. That's just the way it was. Since she had made that leap just now with all her might, she was unable to read any information about her current location. Whether she escaped from Vega or not, any sort of return was hopeless now.

It wasn't worth hiding at all, so Mai was honest about it. Of course, even this went way over Vega's head.

"What…? Um, so you mean…?"

"I mean that unless you have my full cooperation, you'll never be able to use my power properly."

Mai's aim was to strong-arm Vega and get him to delay the decision he had to make. She was succeeding, too. But she knew full well that this was just a stall tactic.

Vega's head spun at what Mai told him. He couldn't deny any of it.

In the first place, he really wasn't making the best of his ultimate skill Azhdahak. Like Mai said, it seemed certain that if he stole her power from her, it'd just go to waste in his possession.

Only then did he realize that Azhdahak, Lord of Dark Dragons, was within him at that moment.

D-dammit! No, maybe I can't handle complicated abilities. But… what should I do, then?

He hated Mai having the upper hand like this, but even if he killed her and took her ability, it'd mean nothing if he was still stuck in this dead end.

Vega was at a loss. Unless something changed, he and Mai would remain stranded in this unknown subspace. If he wanted to leap out of here, that depended on Mai. He'd have to wait for Mai to recover

her energy, and then they'd have to take random Dimensional Leaps all over the place. They'd need to cooperate that whole time, and Vega would have to stay on Mai's good side that whole time.

It all sounded like such a hassle to Vega. If he stayed there and kept on thinking about it, he likely would've reached the conclusion that he ought to eat Mai up anyway. He was done for if she escaped him, and staying continually latched on to her would be far from easy. Better to just take away her powers now and figure things out on his own—that was how he would've reasoned it.

But before Vega could find that answer, he lost his chance for eternity.

"…Huh?"

"Oh, wow, what's—?!"

Was it Mai who noticed it first or Vega? An incomparably powerful space-time storm had suddenly appeared before them.

The laws of subspaces were beyond human understanding. Would they be all right if they got caught up by that storm? There was no way to tell.

"We'd better get out of here."

"You don't need to tell *me*—"

Vega couldn't finish his sentence. A new space-time storm had just spun up, centered right on Vega, and it was emitting an even more powerful force.

"…Ahh?!"

"Arrrrrrrrggghh?!"

The torrent of energy was so indescribably powerful, there seemed to be no way to resist it.

Vega's hands lost hold of Mai. It was a great opportunity for her, but she was in no condition to seize it. The light danced around her—and despite being a spiritual life-form, this vortex of time and space she was caught up in was making her pass out.

I know you said not to give up, Yuuki…but I'm sorry…, she told herself before letting go of her consciousness.

The space-time storm passed in another instant—and Vega alone had stubbornly survived.

"Heh-heh-heh… That wasn't any big deal at all!"

It's often said that people become a lot less religious after the danger has passed, and that's exactly how Vega was reacting. So instead of reflecting on his actions, he kept on making the same mistakes.

"Tsk… Well, guess I lost track of Mai. If she took a direct hit from a torrent of energy *that* powerful, she might be dead right now, for all I know."

But Vega had always been a lucky man. His survival alone proved it well enough…or so he thought.

But he was wrong. Vega's luck had run out a long time ago. And the fact that he had let go of Mai proved it.

Here was a place that nobody knew about.

There was nothing. No sea and no sky. No heaven, no ground, no up, no down.

"Uh?"

Finally, Vega realized the situation he was in. No stars shone in this place. There was no light, which meant there were no colors. Nothing at all existed. It was a complete void.

"Whoa, whoa…"

At long last, Vega realized this wasn't too good a place to be in. There was nothing, and that meant no indicators of where he was. He could try to move, but he couldn't tell if he was even moving forward or backward.

There were no magicules. The ones leaking out from Vega might spread out around him, but there was no sign of them hitting anything. For that matter, maybe time wasn't even flowing at all.

Suddenly, fear welled up in Vega's mind. He now fully understood that he was alone. There was nothing to do. There was nothing he *could* do.

"Whoa, whoa, wait a minute. What's going on? Goddamn it…

Hey! Is anybody *here*?!"

His fear turned into anger.

"God*damn* it! What did I ever do? Don't give me this crap!"

He shouted into the void with all his might. However, nobody gave him a reply.

There was no reaction at all. No one he could act tough around. There was no point to that, but he tried again.

"Hey! Quit messin' around with me! I'm the immortal Vega! The strongest, most invincible being in the whole world—"

Reaching that point in his tirade, Vega suddenly felt very empty. Empty and scared. Yes, Vega *was* immortal. He had just remembered that.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a minute. Wait just a minute…"

He tried to set off a huge explosion centered on himself, releasing all his energy. But nothing changed. Vega was just resurrected without a moment's hesitation. Then, after some time, he was fully back to normal.

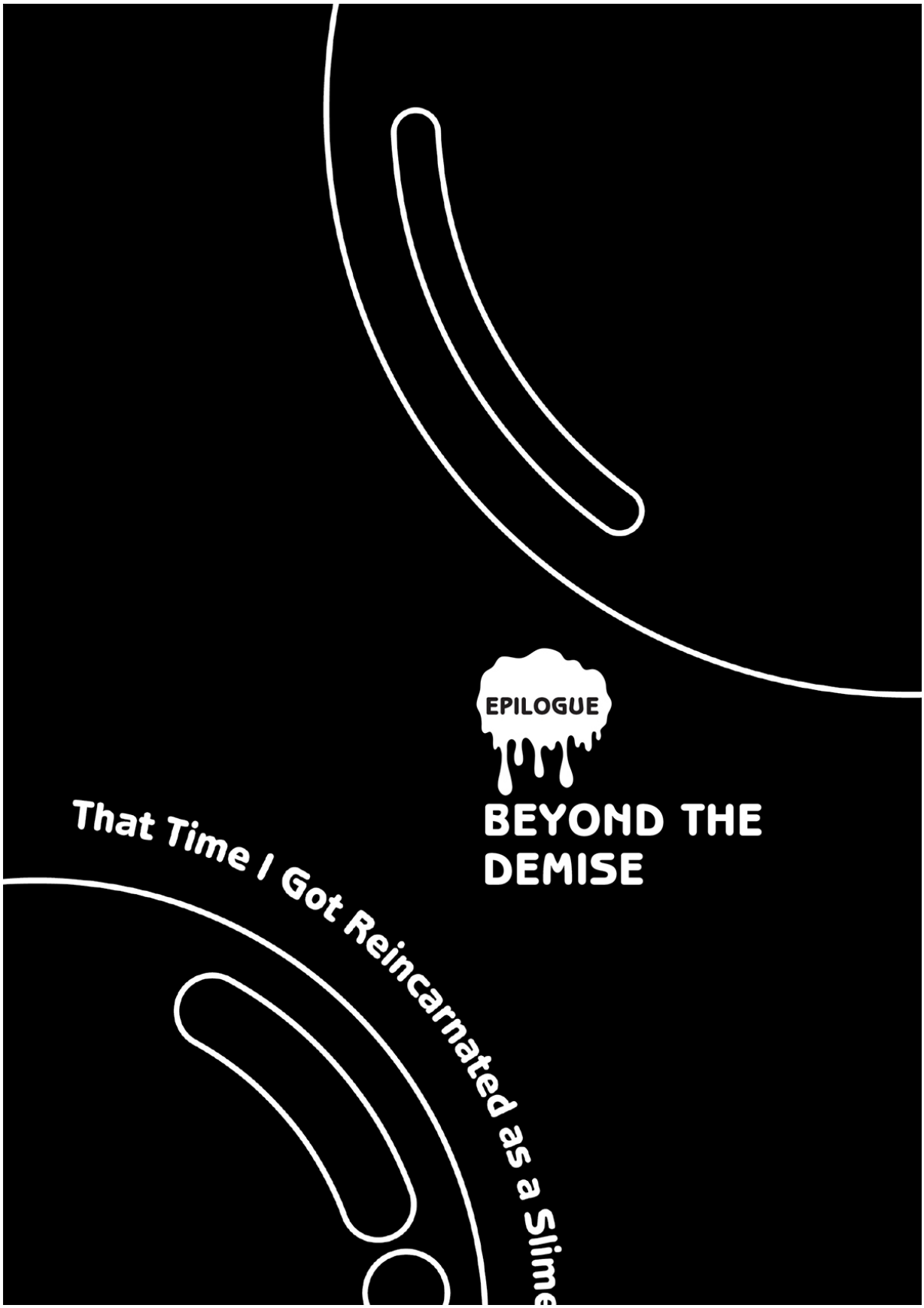
His boundless energy showed no sign of running out, so no matter how much energy he released, it would always be replenished for him. He had Zeranus the Insect Lord to thank for that, after eating his corpse.

Now he hated it. His body was immortal, and his energy would never run out.

Even *suicide* was impossible.

"…Huh? No, wait… No… Wait… Wait a sec…"

His resentful voice reached no one. Before long, it turned into a wail. In this lonely, empty place, he wallowed in his own foolishness, unable to even end it all. He would be alone forever and ever…


EPILOGUE
BEYOND THE DEMISE
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



EPILOGUE

BEYOND THE DEMISE

I opened my eyes a little. I had been grappling with Milim, and then Feldway interrupted us, and then—

Have you woken up?

Oops. Ciel was talking to me.

If Ciel was safe, that meant I was still alive, too. That was kind of a relief, but it led to a lot more questions. I couldn't help but start with the biggest one first.

"Where am I…?"

My vision suddenly began to blur, for reasons totally beyond me. But in my confusion, Ciel casually answered my question.

This is the End World. It's also referred to as the End of Space and Time.

Huh?

You were thrown here by Feldway after he applied a Dimensional Transfer to you.

Per Ciel's explanation, I apparently allowed Feldway's Chrono-Saltation to take effect while I was trying to deal with Milim. Adding one time stop to another one doesn't change anything, but multiplying them together will bring about dramatic change. That was Dimensional Transfer, or Chrono-Saltation, a technique that

stopped the flow of all time and focused it entirely on the target alone. You had the flow of time, paired with the resistance produced by space, trying to hold everything in place. The stronger both were, the further they could bury their target here, in the far end of everything.

Thanks to that, I was now at the End of Space and Time—apparently, a place where withering time and space intersected, in the distant future. And at that moment, Feldway was no longer able to ignore me, given that I was capable of freeing Milim from his control.

From Feldway's point of view, he likely avoided fighting head-on with you, as you had become a higher existence that could rival or even surpass him.

In other words, Feldway didn't think he could kill me.

I couldn't be taken down too easily, so he sent me somewhere else so I wouldn't get in his way. At first glance, that just sounded like putting off the problem for later, although in my eyes it seemed like a pretty rational approach. I mean, the fact of the matter was that I'd totally lost track of where I was, so…

Telling me that this vast, colorless, featureless space was the End of Space and Time didn't give me a lot to work with, though. Time wasn't flowing at all in this place…but unlike the world of stopped time I was familiar with, I couldn't even perceive the expanse of this space by manipulating the data particles around me.

That is correct. Time has stopped in this place. The expansion of space has also reached its end. The law of entropy has guided this universe into its final stasis.

It has?

You seem to know an awful lot about all this. Like you were there to see it or something.

That is correct. Via Feldway's Chrono-Saltation, we have been sent to the far reaches of time and space. Here, the stars had long since exhausted their natural lifespan, but the world itself had not yet collapsed. It is presumed that Feldway's power was limited strictly to destroying the universe of the key world.

Ciel didn't know exactly what had happened in that timeline, however. By the time it had been thrown over here, everything had already ended. We didn't know what happened to Ivalage or how things had worked out at all, but what's certain is that the world did not end. I'm not entirely sure if that's what Feldway wanted, but it didn't really matter anyway.

After that, I wandered around in this space bereft of the twinkling of any star, and there I saw the end of the world.

I didn't really get what Ciel was talking about. Did it mean that it had been sent to the far edge of time, and then, a while after that, it reached the End of Space and Time? And who knows what it even meant by seeing the end of the world? How can you even survive something like that?

If you're going to lie to my face, at least make it a better one, I thought. But then I remembered that Ciel never lied. It might trick me sometimes, but that wasn't lying. I just misunderstood Ciel—or was made to misunderstand it, I suppose.

So is this really the end of the world, then?!

Yes, that is correct.

Ciel confirmed as much, sounding perfectly casual about it, like this was just a nuisance it ran into on the way to work.

For me, it was far from that. As my brain caught up with all this, the seriousness of my situation became clearer. I assumed Ivalage went on a rampage while I was gone, destroying the world the way

Feldway wanted. But even if Ciel was telling me that *didn't* destroy the world, I couldn't really call this much better.

So, um…are we good or…?

I was well and truly beaten. I never thought he would play a trick like that…

Oh, no way! So we *did* get beaten?!

Feldway had used that trick to send Velgrynd far, far away before, but I never thought he'd pull the same thing on me. I assumed that the same trick wouldn't work on Ciel, but maybe that was being overconfident. Still, I can't believe Ciel's actually admitting defeat here…

No, I am not. Why don't we declare the match a draw due to injury?

I mean, you said you were "beaten." How is that not being defeated?

No, that was just your imagination.

That absolutely wasn't my— You know what? Never mind.

In that case, what would you like to do next?

What'll I *do*?

A great deal of time has passed, so the energy derived from the Void Collapse has accumulated to a massive extent. Veldanava lost Void Collapse when he created the world, but since you have Complex Space, that was not a problem.

Not a problem how exactly? That sounded like a lot of problems to me.

I guess my Complex Space was infinitely vast. It was filled to the point where I could rebuild the world thousands of times if I wanted to—but it still wasn't full. I was wondering what that had to do with any of this, but then Ciel shocked me again.

…It is possible to recreate the memories of everyone involved with you, as well as the world's environment, and willfully create a world that is as close to our original time frame as is feasibly implementable. What will you do?

Huh…?

Ciel's question left me speechless. But that's what it was, huh? Everything was over in this place—there was nothing more to be done. Yes, this *was* the end. The world after everything else was done for. Now I finally understood that all the people I loved from the era I lived in—Benimaru and Shuna, Shion, my Tempest pals, Diablo and the demons, Guy and the demon lords, Milim and Ramiris, Hinata and her crew, and lots of other folks—were nowhere to be seen in the world I was currently in.

That's basically the same as defeat—

No, that is not true. You are alive, Master, and besides…

Yes, I was alive. And I could just recreate everything and live in peace, pretending that nothing had happened at all. Ciel said it was possible, so there's no doubting that much.

But it wouldn't *mean* anything. Being the only one left alive in a world where I knew I failed to protect the people I loved—that wouldn't make me happy at all. If I didn't have my friends to share my joys and sorrows with, it was like losing all reason to live.

Maybe they'd have as close to the same memories as possible. Maybe their DNA would all be completely identical, too. But if that

was all created with my own two hands, it'd be impossible to claim they were the same thing. I could never be thick-skinned enough to be able to interact with them the same way as before. The idea of a world where you had this godlike perspective, where you could just start over if things didn't go your way—that was just kidding yourself. A world like a living hell, not at all what I wanted.

Ciel seemed to think we could just build the new world that I wanted, in the most rational way possible, but there was absolutely no way.

I mean, on the surface, this was probably the right answer. It made sense on paper anyway, and maybe you'd think there was nothing wrong with it. But that couldn't satisfy me. Reality isn't a game, and there's no convenient reset button anywhere you can press. You can go ahead and laugh at me or call me a sentimental fool, but would you want me to bring back my dead comrades like a magic trick so I wouldn't feel lonely? I'd sooner die, frankly.

I know this is selfish of me, but this is exactly why I can't let myself create a world that's suited only for me. If I was stuck in a world like that, I'd just rot and die. If clinging to the past was the only way I could find comfort—well, I'd rather live in solitude and retain my pride.

I thought that you would give an answer like that, Master.

Then quit giving me all these pointless offers to— What?

I was about to shout out in anger, but Ciel seemed incredibly happy instead. It was like being hit with a bucket of ice water on a hot day—this very familiar reaction of utter triumph. Come to think of it, Ciel often acted like this whenever it was up to no good…and I was right on the money, because it was about to make its most ridiculous comment yet.

I was going to mention this earlier, Master, but you have not lost. We can still go back in time and defeat Feldway.

Ciel said this in the most matter-of-fact tone.

What? Go back to the past? We can just pop on back and defeat him?!

I didn't see how this was remotely possible. Maybe Chloe could leap through time and read memories from the future, but that skill only gave her the ability to return to her past self, and it certainly wasn't available if time itself was stopped. Here at the End of Space and Time where no time flowed, I was fairly sure that not even Chloe could return to the past.

But as I thought this, Ciel whispered to me.

I have developed a skill called Time Warp in case something like this happened.

Time…Warp?

Like, combining time distortion with space distortion to make it possible to move around as you please?

That is basically correct, yes.

…

That's kind of crazy, isn't it? It violated more than just the laws of physics. This was a power so versatile, I'd never seen anything like it before—not among any of the spatial-movement powers I knew of. Mai's Instant Motion was pretty amazing, but this was even better.

The ultimate enchantment World Map granted to Mai Furuki was recovered by me when Michael was absorbed.

Um, what?

Like, don't you think you should've told me something *that* important if we're in this situation right now?!

I was pretty furious about this, but Ciel was cold as ever.

I did explain it, Master, but you were too distracted by your conversation with Raine to listen to me.

Oops…?

Things were starting to look a little bleak for me. This conversation with Raine—was this when we were making the deal for those paintings?

I mean, sure…there were a few times when I negotiated with her about those after I absorbed Michael…

I began to get the feeling that I was in the wrong here.

But wait just a minute. Why would you try to explain something this important while I was up to stupid antics like that?! You're just screwing with me, aren't you?

No, I am definitely not. Absolutely not.

I was speechless. A double denial like that made this a ton more suspicious, didn't it? I couldn't help thinking that Ciel was testing me, in order to get back for what I did back then…but I also felt like pursuing this matter further would be suicide.

What mattered the most now was how to get back from here. I decided to shift my attention to the future—a good way to turn away from the more inconvenient truths in my life.

✳

After collecting and researching Mai's powers, Ciel was pretty confident that it had succeeded in developing this all-powerful Time Warp ability.

It was a pretty amazing ability, apparently. Mai's World Map served as a sort of prototype; the Instant Motion skill contained within it, although incomplete, was a huge mass of potential.

The real essence of it, according to Ciel, wasn't the ability to

freely revisit places you'd been to before. It was more like crossing all of space and time to reach whatever place you desired. Mai just lacked the raw power to make the fullest use of it.

In my case, though, I had the cheat-level Dominate Dimensions, along with a new incalculably massive energy store, like Ciel mentioned a moment ago. Apparently, this was the exact environment I needed to exploit Time Warp to the hilt.

You already have the ability to dominate time and space, Master. With those two skills, transcending time itself is a simple matter.

Ciel sounded pretty proud. From the start, it must've seen exactly what I wanted.

So I guess I really *can* go back after all?

That will not be a problem. You have many people connected to you via a soul corridor, so we already know the space-time coordinates for the relevant point.

Oh, we do? So it's easy, then?

"Easy" might be a misnomer, but yes, you can go back.

Well, *that's* a relief. And if you think about it, this sounded a lot less difficult than creating a whole new world. Having Ciel around like this was a huge help.

I figured it was time to zoom on back, but:

One moment, please. Since we are already here, I think we should wait and observe the situation until the last minute, then take down the enemy in one fell swoop.

…I'm not wholly sure that's a smart idea, though. What if

something gets screwed up and we take casualties as a result? I can't have that.

I am aware of that possibility, yes.

As usual, Ciel was brimming with confidence. It had just been tricked by Feldway's plans, but it didn't seem shaken at all, which was pretty impressive.

But then again…if that was the plan it proposed, did I really need to get hit by that Dimensional Transfer? Because it sounded like Ciel had completed a full analysis of the Chrono-Saltation through its—in other words, my—direct experience with the skill. That wasn't on purpose, was it? I had every right to think that, and the more I listened to Ciel, the more I couldn't help but suspect as much.

Since you can return at any time you like, Master, why don't you take this opportunity to gain a full grasp of your powers? For example…

Then Ciel started bragging about its powers beyond my ability to tolerate it at all.

I mean, okay, it *did* warn me to run away from Feldway back then. I knew Ciel didn't want me to take that shot on purpose, but the results were certainly to its benefit in the end. I secretly wished I could have some of that insane luck rub off on me.

So I listened to Ciel's chattering for a while to come.

It was just the two of us, but Ciel was full of life. It was impossible for it to hide its joy as it spoke. It explained all my powers to me in detail, as if we had all the time in the world to do that. In fact, it was so joyous that I wondered if this was the exact kind of situation that delighted it the most.

A very unusual sight, indeed, but it was probably natural. I had only just woken up, but Ciel had been waiting for me to open my

eyes for what must have felt like an eternity. All alone in that solitude… Talk about having a tough mind. I couldn't have endured it—that's for sure. Truly amazing. I know it's not something you can sum up in one word like that, but I don't really have the vocabulary for it at all. Forgive me.

Anyway, as I listened to Ciel's story, I came to understand exactly what I could do now as we prepared for the future. I felt I was kind of in a desperate situation, but there was also plenty of time to work with—or really, time wasn't flowing at all, so it was actually *zero* time, not plenty of it. I was fine either way, though. The whole thing was pretty strange.

In any case, I was now fully prepared. A lot of my powers couldn't be used unless time was activated, so I was gonna need to go in without a net for a lot of stuff. Even so, my anxiety was completely gone. I had a lot of debts to repay, and I hate losing…but I didn't think I was about to lose any longer. There was still Milim to free as well; she was being controlled, and I had a lot of unfinished work there. Better do this fast so I could whip Feldway's ass and get a move on.

✳

I then got to have my first experience trying Time Warp out, and it wasn't the greatest. I felt like I'd knocked something over as I traveled—there was an audible *thump*.

Hmm. Was that me acting like a beginner driver and getting in a fender bender or what?

That was just your imagination.

Oh, was it?

Ciel declared as such before I could say anything else. If it said so, then that must have been the case. Whatever that was got sent flying down the same distorted space-time path we passed through

before, but it was probably just some trash floating around in subspace. As long as Ciel wasn't bothered by it, we were probably good. It was our first Time Warp, after all, so there were bound to be little mess-ups.

These things happen, I figured, so I didn't let it bother me.

So without further ado:

"Let's go!"

As you wish, my master…!!

Ciel answered the order.

As always, it felt so easy and so natural. I could sense Ciel's absolute faith in me, and I burned the feeling into my mind, so I'd never disappoint it later.

Now was time to choose the world that I felt was right. I might mess up again, but I won't lose. It's time to end this chain of misfortune and build a bright future for all of us!

And so I Time-Warped toward the past, where everyone was waiting for me.





AFTERWORD

Thanks for your patience! Volume 21 is here.

I hope that all of you enjoyed this installment, but I always get the most nervous the moment I deliver a new piece of work like this. I, my editor, said this to me upon reading the completed manuscript:

"There's no way this is gonna end in the next volume, is there?"

My response was totally curt. It was far too early, I said, to give up on that!

"You're the only person who *hasn't* given up on it, Fuse."

That was what my editor had to say. I's penchant for sharp retorts like that had recently earned them the nickname "Razor I." I keep hearing voices that I'm the only one who uses that nickname, but I'm sure it's all in my head.

Sugi-P, producer of the anime, sent me his own message after reading this volume, saying, "No way you're gonna finish this in the next volume!" Phrasing it as an exclamation instead of a question left quite an impression on me.

But good heavens, what are all these people saying? I just couldn't understand any of it. And yet…once I wrote down a list of the remaining events left to cover…that one, and that one, and that one, and…hmmmm.

Hang on… I think the winds are changing direction on me.

But hey, if it's the final volume anyway, we could always end up making it really thick, right? That, or if we do a Volume 22, Part 1/Volume 22, Part 2 sort of thing, maybe I could wrap this up in the next volume after all. Besides, some series make the last volume a *three*-parter and then move straight on to the Final Chapter, Volume 1, after that. There are tons of ways I could do this!

All joking aside, though, I really do want to finish this up in the next volume…but calculating backward from the number of events left to cover, I can't deny the possibility that there'll be a bit more text than usual. If I'm calling it the "final volume," I certainly can't leave any stones unturned; I want to get it all written down in one go.

So I guess I'll just think about it after I'm done writing, then! I can't promise whether the next volume will be a single book or not, but I'll do my best to finish things up in the next go-around. From now on, I want to try and create the best possible plan for the story's conclusion, and I'll also try to craft a volume that everyone can enjoy while I'm at it.

Thanks for supporting me up to the end! I'll see you all in the next installment!!

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