

CHAPTER 4

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Glenda Attley, the beautiful ex-mercenary, pulled the trigger with every intent to kill.

The gun she had kept since she was summoned to this world didn’t betray her. It was already a part of her body, to the point that it no longer even required maintenance. Combine that with her Sniper unique skill, and there was nobody who could stop her.

Sniper, as a skill, provided three abilities. One was Magic Sense, tuned to a perception level far beyond the norm; one was Compute Prediction, letting her read and understand the results of people’s actions; and the other was called Control Space. This third ability, in particular, made Glenda practically superhuman, allowing her to connect any two points in space that she could picture in her mind.

Anything she had physical sight of was within gunshot range for her. She could shoot from directly above the heads of her targets, and she was free to ignore any obstacles in her way as she landed a bullet home. She could also ignore all gravity and air resistance, making long-range shots possible without a sniper rifle.

Put this all together, and Glenda had never failed a mission. But after her last blunder, she came to realize that there was always someone better out there.

That was doomed. A monster like that’s too much for me.

The moment she saw him, Glenda realized how dangerous this opponent was. That man, Diablo, was impervious to her handgun. It wasn’t a matter of physical attacks not working. Glenda had two types of bullets, a normal one and a magic-infused set. The first type was for when she couldn’t leave any magical traces behind, but for monsters with physical resistance, Glenda concentrated her own magical force into bullet form, an original magic skill of hers.

She treasured the ability to handle anything that came her way, and so Glenda truly had no blind spots. But Diablo didn’t work that way. Her instincts warned her to run from him, her Compute Prediction skill foreseeing nothing but her death. Even with her standard-breaking strengths, she could see no possible path to victory—a hard lesson in reality for her to take that day.

And now Glenda had stretched her Magic Sense skills to their limits to carry out an assassination.

The bullet she fired appeared just a foot or so away from her target. Now, in the blink of an eye, it’d demolish his head—or it should have.

That eighteen-inch (or so) gap was very carefully selected. When connecting two points in space, the connection would fail if the destination point overlapped with a certain amount of mass. In other words, if the target unexpectedly moved, the connection Glenda built might cut out. That’s why she settled on eighteen inches. Even someone with godly reflexes couldn’t respond quickly enough to something that close, especially a bullet traveling at the speed of sound.

That monster is one thing, but the prince of a kingdom is no sweat. Well, no point crying about it. I’ll have to come up with a strategy for the next time I see him.

She was much more confident about today’s mission—but at the next moment, her face filled with surprise and foreboding. The bullet that was supposed to shatter the prince’s head had vanished.

“No! What just happened?!”

The unthinkable had occurred, something impossible under any normal circumstances. She didn’t know why it took place, but if someone had done something, it had to be that demon lord.

“Him! That devil bastard’s boss! Did I underestimate him, too?!”

That was Glenda’s initial reaction.

For a moment, she thought about firing again. Her perfect ambush had just failed, so any further attempt had even less of a chance. She knew that, but it meant that she’d fail her mission. Her bosses—Maribel and the elder Granville—would never allow that. It made her hesitate, and thus she failed to escape soon enough.

“Heh. I would say so. You did underestimate Sir Rimuru. And I have no interest in forgiving you for that.”

“Tch! Who’re you?”

“My name is Soei, faithful Covert Agent of the demon lord Rimuru.”

Glenda was shocked. But quickly, she resigned herself. The man didn’t ask her name in return—not because he didn’t care about her, she thought, but because that could wait until he captured and interrogated her. If she could just get away, she could keep what she knew concealed.

The assassination failed. And being captured afterward would be an even worse fate. Any further mistakes, and she’d be disposed of as useless. Glenda had seen many of her compatriots walk that road, and to her, getting away was job number one right now.

She squared up against her foe.

“…So you were expecting an attack?”

“Yes. Everything was worked out in Sir Rimuru’s mind. If you want to resist, go right ahead. I have no interest in killing you, but the more you resist, the more painful this will be for you.”

“Hah! How kind of you. In that case, I’ll do what I want here, thank you.”

Without hesitation, Glenda fired instead of waiting for a response. This was a single, regular bullet; she had sixteen left, but she doubted they’d work against the magic-born who called himself Soei. A magic bullet would, probably…but instead, Glenda took out her military knife, slashing at Soei with a refined, well-honed motion.

Soei dodged it with the minimum movement required. Glenda smiled at this. The knife was infused with her magical force, making it both a physical and magical weapon. She did this when facing foes where physical attack wouldn’t be enough, and Soei just revealed that he saw it as a threat.

Plus, Glenda had noticed another habit of Soei’s.

This guy’s the type who hates extraneous motion. He may be more susceptible to simpler methods. Let’s see how comfortable he’ll be in a moment…

She unleashed another attack—knife in her right hand, gun in her left. Unhesitant, she repeatedly pulled the trigger, gauging Soei’s response. As she predicted, there was no reaction. He must’ve known they’d have no effect on him—but he kept his guard up, staying on the alert for her knife.

Not bad. Maybe the strongest opponent I’ve ever had.

Diablo didn’t count in Glenda’s mind. Foes she never had a chance against weren’t tabulated in her records.

Soei’s left pointer finger moved. Glenda didn’t miss it, sensing the danger and instantly performing a backward somersault to dodge. There was now a sizable distance between them, and that was the right move for her to make, because in the next instant, an ultra-thin wire advanced upon her original position.

“Hohh. You have good instincts.”

“Well, thank you. You’re not so bad, either.”

The light exchange was punctuated by a gunshot from Glenda. It wasn’t a threat to Soei. He went straight at her, not bothering to evade.

So simple. I’m glad to have opponents like these. They’re so easy to deal with.

Magic bullets didn’t require any firing. They could be shot without a sound, so if she mixed one in with her regular bullets…

Now that her attack pattern was established, she’d strike with her real attack while his guard was down. That was Glenda’s standard strategy—take a seemingly wasted shot and turn it into an instant kill. Even if you were expecting it, it’d be tricky to dodge it out of the blue.

And Soei demonstrated the same reactions all the other titans she defeated before did. He took the bullet in the right shoulder and was sent flying back.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! So much for you, handsome man. Rama fell for the same trick. The more confident you are, the more effective a simple move like that becomes.”

Glenda laughed loudly—but her eyes were still alert, surveying the damage to Soei. Going easy after felling your prey was out of the question. That was the ironclad rule of the battlefield, and Glenda would never relax without checking her foe for a pulse. Besides, she didn’t think she killed him with a single shot anyway.

“…I see. More of a handful than I thought.”

“Being a sore loser now? Well, sorry. If you’ve seen my face, my only choice is to take you out.”

Soei, back on his feet, had lost his right arm. The fight seemed to be Glenda’s to win. That’s why she was more careful than ever as she pointed her gun forward.

Magic bullets work on him. And now, with my next move, I’ll blow his brains out.

Launching her Sniper unique skill, Glenda cautiously steadied her aim.

“Heh. Don’t worry. I’ve been asked to capture you. I imagine Sir Rimuru wants information from you, but he’s a gentle person. Cooperate with him, and you won’t be killed.”

“Don’t lecture me like that now!!”

With a shout, Glenda fired—three bullets toward his head, two toward his heart. Five magic bullets, whizzing straight to their targets. Then the first three made the leap in space, reappearing in front, above, and to the right side of his head. The other two quickly followed, materializing before his heart and at an angle behind it.

All five bullets hit home, shattering Soei’s body.

These Warp Shots were Glenda’s pièce de résistance. Magically created bullets, unlike their regular counterparts, could disrupt and scatter magicules. Even if he could regenerate his body, those shots made it impossible.

No matter what your skills were with a sword or spear, being targeted by supersonic bullets from all directions would be impossible for even the greatest of masters to handle. Based on her past experiences, Glenda knew full well what she was capable of. That was the secret to her continued survival—and that was why she now checked to be sure Soei was dead.

His body was, in fact, collapsing into black smoke in front of her eyes. She breathed a sigh of relief. Since the moment she caught sight of him, a dark anxiety had been smoldering in her heart. It wasn’t as vivid as it was with Diablo, but her instincts told her this was a dangerous foe.

“It’s over. You were a tough one. I didn’t have any capacity to go easy on you.”

Glenda was so relieved that the words just fell out of her. But that relief came just a bit too early. Suddenly, behind her, she heard a voice that couldn’t possibly be there.

“Oh, really? In that case, why not give up and let me capture you?”

She reflexively leaped out of the way. Turning around in a panic, she saw Soei himself standing there.

“Th-that’s crazy! Didn’t you die just now…?!”

“Heh. You’re the crazy one. You think that was enough to kill me? I have no reason to lose to you anyway.”

“Then I’ll just do it one more time—Whoaaa?!”

Glenda froze. Anyone would. Unbelievably to her, she now sensed Soei’s presence on all sides of her. She immediately activated Magic Sense, but it just revealed the very truth she didn’t want to know.

“It—it can’t be! Wh-why are all of these physical bodies?! That’s ridiculous! What kind of joke is this?!”

“It’s simple. I have a skill known as Replication. That is all. And while my Replications aren’t as powerful as my true self, you should be proud that you defeated at least one of them.”

Soei—or at least, one of the four Soeis in the room—offered Glenda his sincere compliments. But now, escape was possible.

“Goddamn it…!!”

With a barbaric scream, Glenda lunged at Soei—and at that moment, her desperate last stand began.

On a balcony overlooking a garden blooming with flowers, a girl, a boy, and an old man sat at a round table facing one another. It was Maribel, Yuuki, and Johann.

“We messed up. We botched it,” Maribel said quietly. Despite that, she didn’t seem too affected. She had predicted this, and in a way, it was part of the plan.

“What a disaster for Gaban, though. After all the devotion he had for you.”

Johann, seated in front of Maribel, was holding a glass of wine as he lamented the count’s fate. He may not have felt that strongly for him, but even he had just a twinge of sympathy for the man. Gaban, after all, was one of the Five Elders, just like Johann—or maybe was, by now. His fall was already in progress.

“Gaban was incompetent. All that time he spent living in Englesia—did he develop a love for its king, perhaps? He would certainly have brought them under his control faster otherwise…”

“Don’t be silly. Not even we in the Rozzos have reached into the central core of Englesia yet. Gaban couldn’t—”

“No. No, you’re wrong. It’s easy to seize the core. Just kill them all and leave a single infant remaining. And if that infant shares a blood lineage with Gaban, all the better.”

“Well, yes, if you put it that way, but…”

To Maribel, and all the bloodstained history she knew, this wasn’t that radical an approach. In fact, she thought it was the peaceful way. It kept the body count low. But Johann wanted to explain to her that Englesia’s security wasn’t about to just let that happen. It was an easy thing to envision—less so to act upon.

“But I’m interested in those magical inquisitors.”

“…Those unusual-looking people who served the king?”

“Yes. Impudent, aren’t they? So impudent. They must’ve built up their military to oppose the Rozzos.”

“What do you think of them?”

“Mmm, they’re strong, I suppose. Gaban told me as much after he experienced them for himself.”

Maribel was able to share information with those under her Avarice rule, to a certain extent. Anything her target learned, Maribel could tap into as well. Thus, she now used Gaban as a throwaway pawn. She wanted to learn about those inquisitors, so she had him engineer a crime so heinous they’d have to step up. All that foolishness aimed at the demon lord Rimuru was perfect for that, and considering Count Gaban was Englesian nobility, the magic inquisitors were bound to come knocking.

She saw all of that. And just as she hoped for, she now knew the secrets behind the inquisitors. In fact, they weren’t anything too deep—just people infused with enough monster force to become magic-born. They hadn’t worked and trained themselves to perfection, like the magic-born Razen of old Farmus.

To Maribel, these inquisitors—bereft even of sentience, a side effect of their bodies rejecting the monster elements injected into them—were just uninteresting toys. But they regained that sentience when not in magic-born form, so depending on what you implanted in them, they could work in a variety of environments. Their strength, each an over-A by themselves, was nothing to sniff at, either. As she saw it, they could be useful enough.

“How fearsome. So you approved of Gaban’s scheme, even though you knew it would fail, just so you could learn that?”

“No. My goal was to help build up your trust. Now the demon lord Rimuru sees you as trustworthy.”

“Do you mean…?”

No, he didn’t need to ask. He understood it well enough. Her goal from the start was to eliminate Rimuru; the magical inquisitors were just a nice bonus. Maribel just wanted Johann to tell her about Rimuru’s internal dealings.

And if I don’t give that to her, I’ll be snuffed out as quickly as Gaban was…?

He didn’t think he was as incompetent as Gaban. But nonetheless, Johann felt an inscrutable sort of fear toward Maribel.

You—you must be kidding. Here I am, one of the Five Elders, and this little girl is bossing me around…

He may have thought that, but he would never daresay it. So he decided to return to their main subject.

“What do you think about pitting these inquisitors against the demon lord? Pin some manner of crime on Rimuru—”

“We can’t. We just can’t. All it’d do is anger the demon lord. Yes, the magical inquisitors are strong, but that’s it. Nothing at all that could hold its own against a demon lord. It’s silly even to consider it.”

“That much so…? So wouldn’t teaming up with the demon lord be our best bet, then?”

Maribel shook her head. “That won’t work. It won’t work at all. Besides, apart from Grandfather, every single one of you are suffering under a serious misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?”

“Yes. Yes, exactly. The misunderstanding that humans are equal to monsters. Do you understand why I proposed to Grandfather that we eliminate the demon lord?”

“Because he’s building a new economic bloc that will eventually become a financial threat to us?”

“Right. But that’s just our cover story. The real reason is because, in time, we’ll be helpless against him.”

Maribel, this little girl, struck fear in Johann’s heart—and now this girl was looking fearful herself as she spoke.

“How do you mean by that?” Johann asked, pressing her to continue.

“The demon lord Rimuru possesses a staggering amount of war power. With that backing him up, what do you think would happen if he decided to negotiate with someone?”

“That…?!”

Only then did Johann stumble upon the true danger. In this world, wars between nations almost never took place—they needed to save their fighting ability for the monsters who threatened them. The Council stepped in to handle cross-border issues, and that inevitably meant those with the most economic strength were able to speak the loudest. Even the largest of states, such as Englesia and the former Farmus, didn’t have enough of a military to make enemies out of every Council member.

“And you realize that their military’s not their only asset, either, right? Being bound by rules is the same thing as losing your freedom…but if you can create the rules yourself, you don’t have to lose anything, do you see?”

Tempest might follow the Council’s rules at first, but after that, nobody could say. And if Tempest decided to spread its own values to the Western Nations, soon the entire region would have to take orders from them. The demon lord’s rule would be complete—a totally peaceful coup. He could threaten them with warfare, he could apply economic pressure—but either way, the stronger nation always gained the power to punish others.

“It’s funny. So very funny. And as time passes, there will come an era where everything will need to go through the demon lord.”

“And—and if…”

If that happened, even Johann know where it led.

“But doesn’t the demon lord seek to coexist with…”

Maribel stopped Johann with her cold eyes. “It’s stupid. So stupid. Not just you, but the entire Council. They’re all idiots.”

Then she took pains to explain matters in a way Johann could understand. Essentially, things may be fine now, but the future was an unknown. If humankind, after forgetting about the threat of the Storm Dragon, ever did anything to cross Rimuru…

“I don’t know what the life span of a demon lord is, but humans are such short-lived animals. If we don’t stop the demon lord’s ambitions right here, the Rozzos’ one fervent desire is as good as scuttled.”

A demon lord could always change his stripes. And while humans may come and go, Maribel absolutely refused to expect human values from such long-lived rulers.

“You see? So that’s why ideas like partnering with a demon lord, or taking advantage of a demon lord—they’re all wrong, down to the very roots. None of them would ever work.”

Johann was silenced. Then, like the final nail on the coffin, one of her Blood Shadow troops chose that moment to make a magical call to her.

He was reporting on Glenda’s defeat.

“No… They captured Glenda?!”

Johann looked shocked. “…Is that true?”

Not even Maribel could hide her surprise. Glenda’s wariness was always commendable; no matter the danger involved, she always made it home alive. Maribel trusted her—not her personality, but that animal-like craving for life.

“I can’t believe it. That clever, conniving vixen…”

Glenda was one of the standout results from the Rozzo family’s secret summoning program, an otherworlder forced by their spell to remain faithful to them. Her strength was well-known by now, and the family treated her like a full-fledged tactical weapon.

The idea of her being defeated and captured was beyond belief for Johann. Elder or not, he was a normal human, and unlike Granville or Maribel, he could only think about things in standard human terms.

Maribel ignored his awestruck muttering as she pondered her options. Defeating him is out of the question. But if we can take rule over him, all our problems are gone. We’ll have to do it.

“…We’ll set a trap,” Maribel said.

“A trap? What are you intending to do?” Yuuki asked, breaking his silence.

She turned to him. “Right. A trap. Your people are going on a ruins expedition trip with the demon lord Rimuru, aren’t you? We’ll set a trap there.”

She wasn’t asking for his opinion. This was a finalized plan, and it was set in stone.

“Right, Kagali’s headed there…but I don’t think that’s such a good idea, y’know?”

“Why is that?”

“Because the demon lord Milim’s joining them,” Yuuki warned. “It’ll be too dangerous to hatch anything.”

In his opinion, they needed to win Rimuru’s confidence first, then work out more of a long-term plan with him. But Maribel’s mind was already made up.

“No. No, I can’t have that. The more time we give him, the more trouble that demon lord will be. That’s what my instincts are telling me. Yuuki, is there a way you can keep Milim from coming along?”

“That’s even less possible. He’s already eyeing me. If I try putting a stop to it, it’s basically admitting that I’m tricking them.”

“Fair enough. Then let’s bring down the demon lord Milim as well.”

“Huh?” Yuuki asked, dazed.

“That’s ridiculous! Maribel, that’s not just beyond reckless; it’s beyond the realm of possibility!” Johann stood up out of his seat.

Their reactions were perfectly understandable. Even crushing one demon lord required a careful, foolproof plan. But two at the same time? It was deliberately giving yourself no chance.

But Maribel still smiled. “I will put everything I have into it. Everything, do you understand?”

“It’s still impossible!” Yuuki cried. “You say ‘everything,’ but my Moderate Jesters are all busy with their own work right now. And—”

“I don’t know how useful they are, but if they’re not available, we’ll proceed without them.”

Maribel shuttered Yuuki’s objections before he could finish stating them. To her, the Jesters weren’t worthy of consideration—or, to be more accurate, she already knew a better force, a large one, that could take on demon lords for her.

“…But you know, Yuuki, I had you supply a certain something from the Dragon’s Nest for me before. I think it’s high time we use it.”

“You mean that? That’s such a bad idea! Not even I can control it!”

“Not a problem. It belonged to the demon lord Milim anyway—we’re just returning it for her. Maybe we could say that Clayman was saving it as his last resort, and his surviving loyal troops set it off? Then Milim’s rage won’t be directed at us.”

“If something goes wrong, it could cause untold damage to human areas…”

“And?”

“N-no, um…”

Johann attempted to talk Maribel out of this but was completely shut out. She might’ve been theoretically open to alternatives, but flat rejections would never grab her interest. And since Johann had no other suggestions, Maribel’s strategy won the day.

As Johann struggled against her, Yuuki kept talking, trying to figure out her thought process. It made him realize this operation had a better chance of success than he thought. “…All right. In that case, Milim’s likely to take it on herself. She’d stop Rimuru from doing so, for sure, and it’d be the perfect way to separate them, maybe.”

“Hee-hee! Very good. Very, very good. And while the demon lord Milim’s playing around with it…”

“We go in and take over Rimuru’s mind?”

“Yes, precisely.”

“But I’ve still got one worry…”

“The Storm Dragon?”

“…Yep, you guessed it. If we fail to take over Rimuru, and Veldora goes on a rampage, what’re we gonna do then?”

That—or their target might fight back more than they expected, giving them no time to take over his mind. If it came to that, Yuuki would have no choice but to kill Rimuru. He attempted to voice his concerns about that, in a roundabout away, but apparently that was an acceptable consequence of her plans.

“No need to worry about that. No need at all, Yuuki. Don’t worry about a thing. Just focus on defeating the demon lord Rimuru.”

Yuuki didn’t defy her. In the end, he did what he was told. “…All right. If you say so, I’ll believe in you.”

Maribel gave him a nod.

Thanks to what her grandfather Granville told her about demon lords, Maribel saw much deeper into the world than most.

If Rimuru should fall, and Veldora the Storm Dragon flew into a rage, the demon lord Luminus would likely step in to handle it. Paradoxically, that would actually be better for her than Rimuru keeping up his current rule.

He and Luminus had already joined forces—which essentially meant that Luminus left management of the Western Nations to him. The Queen of Nightmares herself, someone who saw humankind as little more than vampire food, had let the Seven Days Clergy do that before, but—as shown in Granville’s own fall—they were no more. He had lost Luminus’s protection, and with that, the authority he had to influence the Western Nations.

From now on, Hinata the Saint would doubtlessly gain more political clout…and considering their relationship, the rising rule of the demon lord Rimuru would grow even firmer with her.

No matter what, I’ve got to stop that.

And as she secretly thought this, it didn’t matter if she needed to expose the world to the threat of Veldora to do it.

Maribel and Yuuki spent the next little while fleshing out the details of their plan. By this point, there was no room left for Johann—all he could do was pray they succeeded. Thus, these magic-born, packing as much malice as they could into their intricate plans, began to devise a way to suppress Rimuru for good.

After that long, long session was over, we all regrouped back at the café. I was relaxing in my seat, the tie on my business suit loosened. I could’ve used Spatial Motion to come home now, but Soei still hadn’t caught our culprit, and there might be some unforeseen snags, so I decided to stick around for a bit.

But…man. That conference was so exhausting. Prince Elrick of Englesia’s intrusion, that guy Gaban pulling the strings behind him, all the councillors whose support they enjoyed…but it all ended with their mouths agape.

Gaban was a high-level noble, I guess, but even he got taken away by those scary-looking “magical inquisitors.” The other councillors in on the conspiracy were saved from that by diplomatic immunity, but thanks to the ledgers I submitted to the authorities, I think their home nations will be investigating them shortly. They’ll lose their posts, no doubt, and a lot of them looked pretty alarmed about that, but they had it coming.

Even a lot of the councillors who weren’t involved at all treated me with, shall we say, “noble” indifference. I let the innocent ones go, but judging by my ledgers, a lot of them were criminals indeed. So I planned to alert their home nations about my evidence as well. The more the merrier, and all that. That ought to shake up things a bit among those fools, a lot of whom used their posts to fatten up their own coffers. The sooner they were gone, the easier things would be for me later.

I sipped my coffee as I thought all this over. “Well, a lot happened today, but now I’m glad Hinata and Shuna got angry before I did. I am the demon lord here, so I figured it wouldn’t look too good if I started bashin’ heads in first thing.”

“Oh, I didn’t ‘get angry.’ Some of the councillors were being discourteous in their diplomacy, and I just offered them some etiquette lessons.”

“Neither did I, Sir Rimuru. I just helped a few rude gentlemen see the errors of their ways. If I was truly angry, there wouldn’t have even been a pile of ashes where they once stood.”

Hinata and Shuna smiled at the same time. Perfectly in sync. It was a little frightening. Against that sheer impact, all I could do was nod and say “Uh, yeah” back.

“But it was a good experience for me,” interjected Benimaru.

“Hmm?”

“I mean, I got too angry up there. My mind became a total blank, and I didn’t know what I should do about it. If Shuna had waited any longer to act, I might’ve torched every human in that room.”

I nearly did a spit take with my coffee. Yeah, I sure thought Benimaru was coolly eyeing the proceedings. I was glad to see him act all mature for a change—but he was actually so enraged that he lost hold of himself. Guess I shouldn’t have been so impressed. But man, was that close. If I oversaw a bloody massacre in there, the entire human race would have it in for me.

“Look, whatever you do, don’t do that, all right?”

“Ha-ha-ha! I was just kidding!” Benimaru tried to laugh it off with a breezy smile, but he couldn’t fool me. He was serious. I’d need to pick a representative to send to the Council before the next meeting, and I better choose damn carefully.

We were still talking, me finishing my coffee, when Soei’s report came in.

“Sir Rimuru, I have captured the assassin.”

I figured he’d manage the job fine, and I was right. What a talent—always doing a perfect job with the work I assigned him.

“She was an able fighter, to be sure. She didn’t give her name or any other information about herself…but she referred to you as that devil bastard’s boss.”

Hmm. A crack professional assassin, no doubt, one who wouldn’t divulge her identity that easily. But “devil bastard”…?

“Did she mean Diablo?”

“I couldn’t imagine anyone else.”

Made sense.

I didn’t receive any report along those lines from Diablo—at least, I don’t think I did—but he’s the kinda guy who treated even Razen like a snot-nosed kid. If he and this assassin ever fought, chances are the girl didn’t even register in his mind. It reminded me once again just how sky-high Diablo’s standards were.



Razen himself, after all, was a human strong enough to be worthy of a magic-born title. The way Hinata described it to me, there was almost no person stronger than him in the Western Nations—and if he called him a wimp, then Diablo’s sense of judgment must’ve been completely out of whack. I should probably teach him more about what passes for “strong” in this world.

I ordered another cup of coffee as I considered this. Shuna, Hinata, and Benimaru were going with tea instead, as well as some cake for dessert… Whoa, you too, Benimaru?! Guess I might as well join in, then. I’ll never say no to a good shortcake; that’s my favorite.

So I had the waitress deliver coffee to us both when Soei arrived. The waitress was clearly blushing, which Soei prudently ignored as he drank it black. Coffee really completes the picture with him, although I personally sided more with Benimaru and his sweet tooth.

Thus, we enjoyed our drinks as I asked Soei, this perfect specimen of a man, for his full report.

“…And that’s everything for now.”

He wrapped things up by the time I got to the end of my second cup, using Thought Communication to replay the memory of what he saw to everyone. Based on that, it looked like Soei managed to make this assailant throw every type of offense she had at him. She was pretty beautiful, too, but Soei showed her no mercy. It was kind of like cheating in an old-school online game, taking advantage of some bug to get infinite energy. Letting your opponent think they had a chance to win—and just laughing in the shadows the whole time. If you can get your foe thinking they’ve almost won, that’s when you can get truly malicious, forcing them to use all their items and so forth. That’s the strategy Soei must’ve used to get information from the assassin.

Of course, this wasn’t a game—and in an intelligence operation like this, you had to know how to read the story behind your target. Soei didn’t mess that up at all; I think he deserved praise for a fine job.

“Good work. You always impress me, Soei.”

“I tested out the strategy you described to me, Sir Rimuru, and it proved surprisingly effective. The key is to show yourself struggling a bit first, isn’t it?”

Um…?

Oh. Right. I think we did talk along those lines. I definitely recall talking to him about spy movies, but maybe we discussed online games, too? It was such an inconsequential conversation that I forgot all about it. I internally apologized to Soei—didn’t mean to implant any “malicious” ideas in him.

“Ha…ha-ha-ha. Glad to be of service.”

“No, I still have so much to learn. She eliminated three of my Replications.”

“Oh, did she? Well, at least we can get some clues about our enemy now.”

“Yes. I will handle the interrogation.”

Interrogation, huh? Hmm… Should I say something about that?

As I considered whether to, Hinata interrupted us.

“You know, I wasn’t sure whether to speak up about this, but I’m sure you already know anyway, so… The assassin Sir Soei encountered used to serve under me. I didn’t know what kind of powers she was hiding, but it sounds like she was more trouble than I thought. Now I see how she managed to beat Rama. If a bullet appeared two feet away from you, you probably couldn’t react in time, either.”

“Who’s Rama?”

“Oh, sorry. He was a man in my force, one of the Three Battlesages. Glenda beat him, and later he started working for her.”

Maybe Hinata could dodge a bullet that close to her, but most people couldn’t. There was no doubting the danger Glenda’s skill posed.

But this Rama guy was a Battlesage-level fighter, huh? That made him potential demon lord material. Serious strength. And—

“Soei talked about one of his Replications getting blown off its feet. That was probably a hand grenade, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, you mean that exploding ball of hers?”

“Yeah, that. It doesn’t sound like magic, and I think it’s a weapon from my old world.”

Understood. It is believed to be magically generated by the subject Glenda. It is a force somewhat similar to Materialize Weapon, allowing her to bring things in her memory into reality.

M-Materialize Weapon?! So she’s not only a born sniper, but she’s got that, too?

According to Raphael, the full-on Materialize Weapon let you fully regenerate any weapon in your memory. With Glenda, the skill wasn’t quite as well-defined, so she could only create imitations with similar effects to what she pictured. Even that, however, was enough of a threat.

“I agree with you. I haven’t seen a real one, but it sounds like the ones in movies and stuff. Should we assume Glenda’s an otherworlder, too?”

“I don’t think there’s any doubt about that. Especially if she’s using her memories to create Earth weapons.” I sneered triumphantly at Hinata.

She leered back at me. “Why do you know that?”

Oops. She’s sharp. I was still keeping Raphael a secret. Better talk my way out of this. That’s what I get for being a know-it-all, I thought. “Oh, just a hunch. When you get to my level, you start to get hunches like that.”

Benimaru looked over to me, wonder in his eyes. It comforted me a bit as I gauged Hinata’s reply.

“All right. But do you think I could help interrogate her? There are a few things I’ve been meaning to ask Glenda if I had the chance. Saare and Grigori never returned, either, and I think she might know something about them.”

Good. She let it pass. And if she wanted to talk to Glenda, I had no reason to deny her the chance. There was no need to hide our prisoner, and I definitely didn’t want Glenda exposed to whatever awful things Shion did to hers.

It sounded like Glenda had an encounter with Diablo, one she fled from immediately. The whole Prince Elrick thing was nothing to do with us, really; so as long as she gave us her information, I wouldn’t get rough with her. I guess Soei gave her quite a fright already—not physically, but in the “break your heart” kinda way.

Whether we’d let her go, on the other hand, was a tough question. She was a tougher foe than we thought; she might be dangerous if set free. But I wasn’t sure handing her over to Englesia was such a great idea, either. Let’s save that question for later.

“Okay. Wanna join me?”

“Please,” Hinata said, nodding.

For now, we’d need to go meet Glenda first, gauge her demeanor, and figure things out from there. We decided to get going.

By the way, I covered our tab at the café, just like I did yesterday. I didn’t exactly appreciate Hinata’s check making its way over to me, but should I have forgiven it like the generous man I am, or should I have said something? I’d hate to be called cheap.

Then again, worrying about little things like this would probably get me pegged as a member of the lower class. The question weighed on my mind as we put Englesia behind us.

“Ughh, Chief?!”

We were all back home, meeting up with one of Soei’s Replications there. There we saw the captured Glenda open her eyes, only to find Hinata right in front of her. And she screamed in response.

This was in a plain old reception area, not an interrogation room. Benimaru and Soei were guarding me on both sides, and Hinata was there as well. We were all having tea from Shuna as the interrogation began.

“It’s been a long time, Glenda. Glad you’re doing well.”

Hinata went first, coldly looking down on her. She never did go easy on her opponents, and while Glenda was thrown at first, she regained her composure quickly.

“Hah! I guess this is it for me, then,” she brazenly said. “If you’re gonna kill me, go ahead. The fates of captured spies never change much in history.”

“Silence. All you need to do is answer Sir Rimuru’s questions.”

Soei was being just as merciless with his follow-ups. “Sir Rimuru, should we amputate her limbs to train her to be a little more complacent?”

Um, no thank you. And if Soei said he’d do it, he really would, so…

“No, no, just because we’ve got healing potions…”

“Ah, meaning we can give her that painful experience time and time again?” Shuna interjected. “That does make sense—”

“No! I mean, just because we have healing potions, it’s not nice to go so far with this!”

Seriously, stop. Shuna was smiling and nodding her agreement, but Hinata’s eyes were killing me. Not even I would go that far against a woman. And Glenda didn’t seem completely disinterested in talking—I felt like we could negotiate something.

“All right, Glenda. We haven’t met before, have we? I’m the demon lord Rimuru.”

“…Hello. I’m Glenda. One of Lady Hinata’s old troops and part of the Three Battlesages.”

For her part, she understood that jokes and bargaining wouldn’t work against Soei. She provided her name, at least, perhaps figuring I was better worth giving answers to.

She certainly knew Diablo, and I could see it if she ran after realizing she couldn’t win. Very few people who shout out “kill me” actually want to die. I felt safe assuming she was attached to her life. But I was also interested in why she betrayed Hinata. Even if she didn’t reveal her client for this murder attempt, maybe she’d be more willing to discuss other matters.

Well, regardless of how open she is, I’ll just have to ask whatever I can.

I began with a calm approach.

“So you were definitely aiming for Prince Elrick. Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“And was that in order to frame me for it and get me kicked out of the Western Nations?”

“Probably. I didn’t hear any reason. I was just told to do it.”

All right. That didn’t seem to be a lie.

“Can I ask the next question?” Hinata asked, eliciting a nervous shiver from Glenda.

“What is it?”

“I assigned you to a commercial hub city so you could have more freedom of movement. I told you not to listen to what the merchants there told you, but had they already won you over by then?”

“No comment there.”

“Were you ready to betray me from the beginning? Because you were ordered to?”

“…No comment.”

“I’m thinking your backers are the group controlling the Council. Who are they?”

“……”

“I always thought it was strange. The Council would sometimes make these moves to indicate they had an eye out for the Western Holy Church. I figured there had to be a spy, and you were my prime suspect. I was waiting for a chance to expel you, but if you tell me your employer’s name, I’m willing to subtract from your sentence.”

“I told you, no comment!”

“No? All right. One more question. Did you believe in Luminus?”

“Tch! There’s no god out there. If you want me to believe in that, pay me—”

The next instant, Hinata had her rapier out. With a pure, melodious clang, I stopped it with my own sword.

“Whoa, Hinata! Not the head! You interrogating her or killing her?!”

“…I didn’t intend to.”

“You liar! You had every intention of it just now!”

Eesh. Gonna have to keep a constant vigil, I see. Hinata absolutely would’ve decapitated her. I managed to react because I had an eye out, but we came this close to losing a valuable information source.

“It’s all right, Sir Rimuru. I can use her as a test subject for my resurrection magic.”

Shuna was there smiling, like always.

“That’s true. And I can use divine miracle resurrection as well. There was hardly any problem with it.”

I wasn’t sure how much of this was an act. Both Hinata and Shuna were griping at me now, but I didn’t really think it was okay to kill someone just because you could resurrect them later. I didn’t think so, but there was a certain type of persuasive logic to it. It’s strange.

“Look, can you just shut up for a second, Hinata?”

Time to tag back in. This was going downhill really fast, so I better have Hinata cool off for a bit.

So. My turn again.

Raphael, do your stuff!

…Understood.

Raphael eagerly accepted the challenge. I simply voiced what it told me.

“I’m assuming a professional like you isn’t gonna just tell me everything because I asked nicely. So you can just listen to me instead, okay?”

Hmm. Interesting. Prod her and gauge what she knows from her reactions, then?

“Try not to lose your poker face, then.”

“Hah! You better not look down on me. I don’t need you to remind me!” Glenda’s up to the challenge, huh? So who’s gonna win this? I wondered, as if I were part of the audience.

“Unique skills often take root in people’s souls. You’re a good example of that. Yours is bound fast to your soul with a powerful force.”

“Huh. Didn’t know that. So?”

“So in that conference I attended, a lot of the councillors were tarnished by their vast, greedy desires.”

“Uh-huh…”

“These desires were forcibly planted into them. There’s a force involved that can directly impact people’s souls, and I think that’s what guided their moves.”

“……”

“And you’re under that same influence, Glenda.”

“What?”

“In your case, though, your unique skill is providing protection to your soul, so this influence hasn’t fully clouded you yet.”

“Ngh…” Glenda wordlessly scowled. Maybe she couldn’t find a way to deny it—it was kinda news to me as well, but still.

“But as amazing as your unique skill is, there are people out there who can see it for what it is.”

“…You mean with Appraiser’s Eye?”

“Certainly. Dragon’s Eye, from the demon lord Milim, is more famous. Not that I’m up on this stuff, but there’s an old story about how Milim can see everything, right? Apparently, that’s really true. One glance at someone, and Milim has a general idea of what kinds of skills they have.”

That was true, although she couldn’t guess someone’s internally manifested skills and couldn’t give you details unless the subject invoked them. She could gauge their strengths, as well as whether a given skill was “extra” or “unique” in nature. It was just harder to give you finer details—for example, if someone had two or more unique skills, she’d have trouble telling whether it was two skills or one really powerful skill.

I was actually the same way, too. My Analyze and Assess was now accurate enough that I got a hazy insight into the skills of other people, and I also learned how I could conceal mine from others, the way Guy Crimson had hidden his own magicule count. When I first met Guy, I assumed your skills stayed hidden unless you showed them off to people. I was wrong—like I said, an Analyze and Assess skill forged well enough can detect them, with the one being assessed none the wiser.

Looking back, I was pretty lucky, actually. Thanks to having four different ultimate skills, Guy must’ve taken one look at me and assumed I couldn’t be toyed with. Raphael was the one skill I absolutely had to keep under my hat, so that was the watchword for my future moves from that point forward.

So I switched my way of thinking and assumed there was no way to hide skills, but that was actually pretty possible. If you’ve built up a skill to the point that it’s completely your own, you can actually defend Analysis skills from picking up on it. It wasn’t perfect yet, but that was the result of the experiments I had been doing.

“What are you trying to say? Yes, I have a unique skill. But even if it’s protected me from the desires, so what?”

My little pause there must’ve irritated Glenda. Hearing about these outside influences inspired her to play along with me. I wanted to give her an answer, but Raphael’s roundabout descriptions were getting a bit hard to grasp. Parsing it into something I could reasonably explain took some time.

Suggestion. Use Hasten Thought?

Yes

No

Oh, yeah, there was that. I thought Yes, cursing myself for not doing that in the first place. Now let’s hurry this up and get Glenda on my side already.

“Whether your mind’s clouded by greed or not is none of my business. But one thing’s for sure: Your employer’s got a pretty powerful unique skill running. That’s true, isn’t it?”

“No comment…but I guess there’s no denying it, either.”

“Thank you. So, building on that, there was a man at the Founder’s Festival whose desires were being harnessed like that. His name is Gaiye, and Shuna took care of him at the Council this afternoon. The other festival visitors weren’t subjected to interference that way, but some of the merchants were. And if a large number of people are brought under a skill’s influence at once, chances are that the skill user is physically nearby. That’s what I thought.”

“……”

Gaiye was completely hooked by it, but the farther away you got from the skill user, generally, the weaker the skill got. Masayuki’s skill was another monster, but the rumors that spread around about him only added to its synergy. That foundation is why the skill propagates so much further than he means it to.

Influencing people’s desires, meanwhile, was purely dependent on the skill’s power itself. Beyond that, the user could utilize their strength or some other element to enhance the effect if they wanted. Basically, though, if you told me our skill user attended the Founder’s Festival, I’d certainly believe it.

Along those lines, I had a suspect in mind. Someone I speculated about enough that I had Soei look into her. “Have you ever heard the name Maribel Rozzo?”

Raphael sure was cutting to the chase. The name came straight from the dossier Soei prepared for me.

“…!!”

She might’ve been trying to hide it, but Glenda gave me an ever-so-slight response. So that was a yes.

“My Analyze and Assess skill is pretty good, y’know. Not only can it detect what skills a person has, but it can also tell if someone’s hiding one of them. I was sensing the latter all throughout the Founder’s Festival, and one of the people I got that vibe from was that girl Maribel.”

I could see Glenda grow paler as I continued. I couldn’t tell if she was getting hot or if it was a cold sweat running down her cheek. Either way, she was getting nervous.

“Y-you—”

“Maribel Rozzo, you said? The Rozzo family… Hmm. I see.”

“Ah…?!”

Hinata interrupted Glenda just when she was about to say something. I should’ve been annoyed, but looking at Hinata, I didn’t need to be. She had a delighted expression, like she had just found the answer. Glenda, meanwhile, made it clear that something had gone awry with her plans.

“Granville Rozzo. The founder of the Rozzo family and a former Hero. I’m sure you know him, too, don’t you, Glenda? That—and he was the real person behind Gren, the Sunday Priest and head of the Seven Days Clergy…”

Just as I thought—Hinata was at the truth now. I could see her mentally connecting the dots on the people she knew.

“Seven Days, huh? Those guys we met before? I heard they had all died, but Granville’s still alive?”

“Nicolaus said he landed the final blow, but we’re talking about someone who ruled over the Western Holy Church for centuries. I wouldn’t be surprised if he survived it.”

So Maribel was the skill user behind all this greed manipulation. And Granville Rozzo—Gren from the Seven Days—was the head of her family. Mm-hmm. And if Gren’s the kind of monster who can survive for hundreds of years, he’s likely got the Council in his pocket.

“So should we assume Gren’s our mastermind here?”

“No doubt about it. He’s using Maribel’s powerful skill for some kind of scheme of his.”

Hinata and I were now comparing notes, ignoring Glenda entirely. We basically had our answer, and Glenda had just lost her value to us.

“Goddamn it! Why do you know so much? I didn’t even tell you anything! This is basically the same damn thing as me revealing it all!”

Mmm, yeah, sorry about that. You picked the wrong team to mess with, is all I can say. Raphael’s too much of a talent to compete against.

“I suppose they might think you did, wouldn’t they?” I said.

“Well, that’s what you get, Glenda,” said Hinata. “A fitting end for a traitor.”

“Dammit. I… I… They’re going to kill me…” Seeing Glenda whisper to herself, face drained of color, I felt a little bad for her.

I had no intention of killing her; now that I had my info, I was ready to hand her over to Englesia. But…yeah. Wherever she went, she probably wasn’t gonna be alive much longer. I figured she had the talent to flee to safety, but judging by how unnerved she was, she was dealing with some pretty ominous odds.

“Is this Maribel girl that powerful?” I decided to ask.

“…She’s not that big an issue. But summoned people like me are bound by spells that we can’t resist. The moment they decide I’ve fled from them, they’ll crush my soul, and that will be the end for me.”

Gee, that doesn’t sound nice…

“So you didn’t betray Luminus out of your own free will? It was because you didn’t have any other choice?”

“Well…it’s complicated. I wanted to throw myself upon the mercy of my god, but Granville’s eyes were on me. Really, there was nothing I could’ve done about it.”

Maybe I was right to sympathize with her a little. Hinata was still giving her a cold look, but I think she wasn’t so angry now. She wanted to murder her less, at least.

“No, you’re right about that. If your soul’s shattered, not even Resurrection can help you then.”

Wow. Guess even Hinata can be gentle sometimes. She was still stern, but now she was looking for a way to help Glenda. But could I undo that spell?

Understood. It is not a problem. Remove the spell?

Yes

No

That was easy.

And so it was off.

“It’s over now,” lamented Glenda. “Maribel… She’s reading my emotions. I may not have intended to betray her, but she’s gonna judge me now…”

So I let her in on what I just did.

“…What?”

“Yeah, no need to worry. We’re all done with you, so go live whatever life you want. I’m pretty sure she thinks you’re dead now.”

“N-no, um, I wasn’t talking about that. You mean to say you undid the curse ruling over me?!”

“Yeah, pretty much. But lemme just remind you: You get hostile with me, and I’ll show you no mercy.”

“Yes, I suppose I’ll look the other way,” Hinata said. “If I kill someone Rimuru let go, he’ll never let me hear the end of it. But keep this in mind: You have betrayed Luminus herself. The Western Holy Church will never forgive you for that.”

Glenda was a strong girl. A threat. But now that she was free from the rule of Maribel or whatever, we didn’t have much reason to remain hostile. If she started trouble with us again, we could always do her in then. Personally, I didn’t think she caused that much of a headache, so I was ready to forgive her. Hinata seemed willing to do the same; I guess she felt she couldn’t be so narrow-minded about someone I let go free.

Besides, in a way, Glenda really was just following orders—not with her brain, exactly, but with the influence of the curse forced upon her. This time, I was willing to give her a slap on the wrist.

“So right, you’re free to go. If you want to stay in my nation for a while, you’re welcome to, but if you cause any trouble—”

“W-wait a… I mean, wait a second! You’re really letting me go?”

“Uh-huh. I don’t really feel like killing you anyway.”

“If Sir Rimuru has forgiven you, we have no reason to defy his will,” said Soei.

“Not that you’re much of a threat anyway,” Benimaru added.

They were willing to go with me, too. I didn’t much appreciate the way they phrased it, but they didn’t seem to have any complaints. They didn’t see her as a threat, I imagine—which I wasn’t too sure about, but to them, it was the truth. She’d never beat Benimaru’s full effort, much less Soei’s. Glenda struck me as the kind of woman who took a profit-and-loss approach to living, so she’d never do something stupid like challenge an unbeatable foe. Letting her go didn’t seem like that big of a problem.

As I convinced myself to take an optimistic approach, Glenda turned to me, kneeled, and said something extraordinary.

“I—I have a request! I’ll tell you everything I know, so could you please give me some employment? I’ll do anything you want, even dirty work, so please!”

Benimaru and I looked at each other, passing messages with our eyes:

Now what?

Do whatever you want.

But “employment”? What about the money? I had more to work with, but we were still sorting out salaries for my top officials. Working for free was still the norm around here.

“Hmm… I appreciate the sentiment, but we’re still busy developing ourselves. We’re pretty far behind in terms of organization, so we’re not paying anyone a salary yet…”

Times like this, you gotta just be honest. No point trying to smooth over things.

“…Huh?” Glenda froze. But the next thing she said surprised me instead. “Well, I’m used to that. I was stationed with the Master Rooks in the Holy Empire of Lubelius, but they didn’t pay us there either…”

Dang.

Even the Three Battlesages, the best Lubelius had to offer, didn’t get any money. They were paid in goods—and any money they needed, they were expected to scrounge themselves. They had an illustrious name to leverage, though, and I’m sure they got treated like kings wherever they went. Sometimes they’d receive payments for resolving crimes, too, so they led pretty decent lifestyles.

“Wait, so you get nothing, either, Hinata?”

She sure racked up a hell of a bill at the festival…

“Tch… No. Lubelius is an advocate for equality, so there’s no public salary at all. We all get paid in goods.”

That was a surprise…but also a relief. Lubelius has a long, storied history, and it made it this far without salaries. Maybe we shouldn’t be in any hurry to enact them, either.

By the way, thanks to running the Crusaders and the Imperial Guard, Hinata was given access to some of the government budget. Between that and monster-hunting rewards, her income was actually pretty upper-class.

“And yet you made me pay for you?”

“Quit sweating the small stuff! I’m just saving money.”

She brought the kids all kinds of stuff, but with me, it’s all “Ooh, gotta save money.” And actually, did Mjöllmile pay her the labyrinth reward fees yet? The thought just occurred to me, but I didn’t want to prod that hornet’s nest. I was too scared to ask, so I didn’t.

“But I’m pretty well-known around the Western Nations. Even if I’m free, I don’t have any work waiting for me. No nation’s gonna hire me now, and I’m not cut out for adventuring work. Besides, you’re on the cutting edge in culture here, so if you can guarantee me meals and a roof over my head, I’m good!”

Judging by how desperate Glenda was sounding, I doubted she was trying to deceive me.

And I had reason to believe her. If Lubelius was in pursuit of the Three Battlesages, everyone would have to assume a betrayal was the cause. She’d never find a nation willing to employ someone as politically touchy as her. Even if she became an adventurer under an assumed name, I could get it if everyone kept a prudent distance. If her cover got blown, she might have Lubelius and Granville come after her, too. Any kind of stable life was impossible.

“Yeah, I guess you’ll have a hard time of it without support from somewhere.”

“Right? So please, Sir Demon Lord! I know you don’t believe a word of this, but I swear I’ll stay faithful to you!”

There’s no way I could believe it. But somehow, I just couldn’t find it in myself to hate her. She was the classic spy-film femme fatale, and I couldn’t just abandon her.

“Can I leave her to you, Soei?”

“As you wish, Sir Rimuru. I have no objection.”

“Great. Thanks. And I can’t have her turning traitor, so deal with that if it happens, okay?”

“Absolutely. In terms of battle strength alone, I would rate her above Soka, so perhaps I could establish a special-ops team for her that answers to me.”

“Oh, kinda like a team all the problem kids get thrown into?”

“Something like that, Sir Rimuru. I’d like to scout out members locally and elsewhere.”

Soei’s got some ideas brewing, doesn’t he? Diablo was still off searching for an army, so it wouldn’t be fair to turn Soei down. Let him do what he wants.

“Right! I’ll leave all that up to you! You can work out a budget with Mjöllmile later.”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru!”

We wrapped that up fast.

“Can you not call me a problem child in front of my face?”

Glenda was whining about something, but if she had an issue, she oughtta try to win my trust first. Either way, she was now part of our team.

Before leaving Glenda to Soei’s management, we decided to have Glenda tell us everything she was aware of. It was no longer an interrogation, so we decided to talk over dinner.

“In the dining hall, you pick up these boards with menu items on them and take them to the window over there. There’s a selection of three items each day, plus a regular special. If you get promoted to management, you’ll get to order one item of your own, too.”

“Oh, really? Because my meals always get picked for me.”

They were always good, I felt, but I never went through that board trade-in thing. The managerial dining hall brought food over to you without having to say or do anything. That—and Shion and Gobichi would occasionally rent kitchen space so they could develop special new meals of their own, but that was another story.

“Today’s special is our most popular menu item,” Shuna explained with a smile. “Normally, you’d either reserve it with merit points or get in line early for a chance at it.”

Ah. I always thought the desserts were really fancy here. I guess I wasn’t alone.

“We always get this, don’t we?”

“Yeah. I make sure I get my share.”

Benimaru and Soei order the special, too? I wondered what Soei meant by that. Did he have one of his spies stand in line for him? I hope he’s not resorting to silly cafeteria antics like that.

With the dishes on our table, dinner began.

“Right, so let’s begin with—”

I was trying to talk to Glenda…but she was completely focused on her food, a woman possessed. It was good, I’ll admit—definitely worth being called a special. So I decided to wait. It’s nice to have more pleasant conversation during a meal anyway.

After we were done:

“Up until now, I always thought money was the most important thing in life. But today, I’ve changed my mind. From now on, I live for nothing but merit points!!”

If she meant it, she was way easier to take down than I thought. But whatever. If that’s what motivates her, then hey, knock yourself out.

“All right. So what do you know? Give me the unembellished truth,” Soei pressed.

And Glenda finally started to talk.

First, about the Council. This organization was under the control of five senior councillors, known as the Five Elders. These were headed by Granville, whom we had discussed earlier. As for the other four? Amazingly, one of them was Count Gaban, the mastermind behind today’s events. Prince Johann of Rostia, one of the councillors relatively supportive of me, was another.

“How come there are so many differing opinions among the Five Elders?”

“That’s how Maribel likes it. She pits the Council against one another so they can keep the mainstream faction the strongest. It’s kind of fixed, you could say, but to the people involved, it’s a serious battle for survival.”

Hmm. A way to encourage activity within the group? It’d be more efficient if they all worked together, but that’d open it up more to stagnation and corruption. You often hear about family-run companies getting ruined by whoever was at the top. Besides, if Johann successfully earned my trust, it’d be easier for him to learn more about our inner workings. If they had booted us out today, then fine; if they didn’t, now Johann was no doubt ready to extend his feelers toward us.

“It’s all kind of malicious, isn’t it?”

“I wish we could just burn it all up instead of deal with it.”

Just hearing about all this made my eyes water. You had to know who your friends and enemies were, or else you’d quickly be ruined. That’s how they did things in the nobility—and if I didn’t know that, I would’ve been on the cusp of trusting in Johann. Maybe taking Glenda in was the right thing after all.

The other two elders were Margrave Cidre, tasked with protecting the northern regions of Englesia, and King Doran, leader of a small military kingdom also called Doran. This meant two out of the five elders were Englesian, which showed how much Granville valued that nation—close to the Holy Empire of Lubelius, far from the Forest of Jura, and one of the safest countries in the world. He must’ve marked it as the nation most worthy of serving as his political and economic center.

“So why do they see me as the enemy? I’m so harmless! I wouldn’t hurt a fly.” I kind of let that slip out. It seemed to surprise the group.

“Huh? If you keep picking the kind of fights you pick, of course people are gonna be hostile.”

Pardon?

“Yeah, I thought you were picking fights with people, too. Diablo told me all about how Sir Rimuru was going to have the world economy in his grip before long, so I thought you wanted to take over the Council.”

What?! And hang on, Diablo’s saying stuff like that?

“That was my intention as well. My information gathering was part of that effort, I thought.”

Well, no, I’ll admit that was what it’s for, but…

“…Don’t tell me you didn’t even realize you were doing it?”

Not you too, Hinata! Why’s everyone looking at me like that? “N-no, um… I’m not gonna say I didn’t mean it, but I didn’t intend to hurry things along that quickly. So for now, I just wanna keep things to peaceful negotiation…”

Hinata sighed and rolled her eyes. “If some new merchant comes along and ruins your marketplace, you won’t find a lot of merchants softhearted enough to forgive that, either.”

Oof. Maybe not.

“Well, all right, all right. We were gonna clash in the future anyway, so let’s just treat ourselves to the main support of economic activity in the Western Nations, all right?”

“That was my intention all along. My job’s to shore up their defenses, but…”

“And I will investigate the Rozzo family and the Five Elders.”

In a way, it was good that we knew our enemies now. Befriending Glenda was an unexpected windfall, and thanks to that, we had a direction to go.

“Okay. Be careful on that. I don’t want to wage a two-front war against Yuuki and the Rozzos.”

“I’m aware,” Benimaru said with a nod, while Soei gave his own agreement.

I was taking a wait-and-see approach with Yuuki as we waged information and economic warfare with the Rozzos. There were no real bullets flying around, at least, which made things easier on me.

So I was about to wrap things up, wondering if I was worrying too much about this, when Hinata stopped me.

“Wait a minute. Yuuki and the Rozzos? Why are you suspicious of Yuuki?”

I was thrown for a moment, but then I realized Hinata might be oblivious to all that.

“Well, thinking about it, if you look at the list of people who know I’m a reincarnate involved with Shizu—and who could’ve leaked that info to the Eastern merchants…”

“Yuuki’s about it, isn’t he?”

“Pretty much. And while I’m at it, I think that Roy, the guy who played the role of a demon lord, was killed by this guy Laplace, member of something called the Moderate Jesters. Sorry if I’m wrong about that.”

“No, I appreciate it. I don’t have any stake in that, but if he’s working against us, I can’t stand for that.”

She was willing to accept Laplace and his cohorts as our foes. She gave a cold, cold smile, one that froze my spine in place. Man, that’s scary. I definitely better make sure I don’t rile her.

After that exchange, Hinata stood up, preparing to head home.

“Ummm, actually, about that…,” Glenda timidly spoke up. Guess she still had something to say.

“What is it? If you wanna say something, don’t hold back. Did you remember something else?”

Then she dropped the biggest bombshell of the day.

“By Yuuki, you mean the grand master of the Guild, right? He’s connected to Johann of the Five Elders, but I’d say he’s pretty much under Maribel’s complete control.”

Huh? Yuuki’s being manipulated?!

“Are you serious?”

“I’m not shameless enough to joke at a time like this.”

No, I bet not. “…Well, why didn’t you tell us sooner? That’s important!”

“Um… You know, I answered directly to Granville for the most part, so…”

Essentially, two people had the right to give Glenda orders: Granville and Maribel, although it was Granville nine times out of ten. As a result, Glenda didn’t get to talk with Maribel often or get much of an insight into her mind.

I picked her brain a little more, seeing if I could get anything else. We learned about more of her underlings, as well as the Blood Shadow, a group that handled the Rozzo family’s dirty work.

“That is a problem,” said Shuna after a moment of reflection. “It might be that whoever’s controlling Yuuki drove him to leak your secret for some reason.”

Hinata was lost in thought as well. It looked like we’d need to reconsider matters from the ground up.

……

Even Raphael was thinking in silence for once. That’s a rarity, but if it couldn’t come up with an answer, worrying about it might be a waste of time.

What we needed here was a clear solution. If thinking won’t solve a problem, we can think later. When taking an exam, it’s always smarter to leave the tougher questions for later—wasting valuable time was never a good idea.

“Well, either way, Yuuki’s still suspicious, so let’s keep an eye on him… Actually, wait a minute.”

As wary as Yuuki was, I couldn’t imagine him trying to spring something on me. But if he was under someone’s thrall, that was another story—and since that someone’s the clearly hostile Maribel, maybe the assumptions I’ve been working with were wrong all this time, huh?

“Hey, if Yuuki can’t defy Maribel’s orders, you think he might be scheming something no matter what his position is?”

Yeah. That’s the thing. Maribel wanted us out of the picture, and she might be willing to use Yuuki for that goal, keeping her own hands clean. Trying to avoid a “two-front war” was the least of our worries.

“That doesn’t sound too good, does it?”

“Given that we’re in the info-gathering stage, the Rozzos can’t make any flashy moves, I imagine. But…”

“Soei and my brother are right. You’re about to venture into the ruins with Yuuki’s assistant, the Guild vice-master Lady Kagali, yes? They might be planning something in there…”

Mmm. Looks like everyone’s reached the same conclusion. Maybe the wait-and-see approach was too optimistic.

“I can’t lie and claim that’s not a worry of mine. Maribel and the Rozzos can always say they didn’t know what Yuuki was doing, too. They can pin all the blame on the Free Guild and cause a rift between us…”

“…And that would ruin your plans, Sir Rimuru.”

“If we stay on the sidelines like this, they might strike first.”

Mmmmmm.

But I felt we were already on guard enough. Security was stepped up across town. They could try to rile up our townspeople, but it wouldn’t go that easy.

So…

Suggestion. You could deliberately open a soft spot to lure them in.

That’s it!

“Perhaps we could cancel the expedition?”

I shook my head at Benimaru. “No. Actually, let’s take advantage of it. Milim will scream at me if we cancel it, so let’s go through with it. Let’s go in as prepared as we can for anything that could pop up—and when it does, let’s engage it!”

Milim was looking forward to exploring the ruins. It was like a field trip to her, something to take her mind off homework, and she’d fly into a rage if I told her it was off. I didn’t want to create yet more problems for myself, so I really wanted to avoid that.

“But wouldn’t that be dangerous?”

“With Milim there? And I was going to take Shion to guard me anyway.”

“Ah, that should work, then. I’m sure she’ll be glad to hear that, given how she was on home duty.”

Benimaru had no complaints, so Shion it was.

“And I’ll take Gobta and Ranga along, too. That should be more than enough of a fighting force, shouldn’t it?”

“Understood. We’ll make sure nothing happens in town in the meantime!”

“And I’ll help my brother strengthen the barrier around it.”

“I’ll keep a steady watch for any unusual movements between countries—especially the Five Elders Glenda mentioned.”

“Thanks. And we have Veldora in the Dungeon, so if things get really bad, turn to him.” I gave each of them my approval.

“Well, I need to bring all this discussion back to Lady Luminus,” said Hinata. “Be careful, all right? Because you have a tendency to get careless sometimes.”

“Quit reminding me!”

So she magically willed herself back home. She’s usually cold to me, but sometimes, in her own way, she can demonstrate legitimate concern, too.

Was this her idea of flirting?

Understood. No.

No dice, huh? I was hoping I’d get to dream a little, but reality isn’t so kind, is it?

Anyway, we had our walking papers. Now we just had to prepare for the big day.