PROLOGUE

THOSE WHO SET THINGS IN MOTION

The boy let out a resigned, exasperated sigh.

“You sure look depressed about something. Was there a problem?”

He was asking a man wearing an asymmetrical mask—Laplace, a magic-born and member of the Moderate Jesters. A man that Yuuki Kagurazaka, the boy facing him now, counted as someone he trusted.

“You could say that. I got an invite, so I stopped by to pay a visit, but I’m telling you, my jaw practically hit the floor. I suppose you could say it was a big hit to my confidence—or that I thought we needed to reconsider our plans.”

“Reconsider our plans?”

Kazalim, the ex–demon lord now passing herself off as Yuuki’s secretary, Kagali, repeated the words right back at Laplace.

“Right, right,” a depressed-looking Yuuki replied. “I’m thinking we don’t want to get on that slime’s bad side, if we can help it.”

“So why not retain a close relationship, then? I’m set to explore those ruins before long, so I assumed we would stay on friendly terms for the time being…?”

“No, the plan’s still the same as always. It’s just that now, it’s gotten a lot harder.”

“And why’s that? You keep it cool, don’t make any waves, and nobody’s gonna get hurt, right?”

Laplace was no fool, either. Given how his friend Clayman was no longer alive, he did have a bone to pick with Rimuru—but he wasn’t willing to defy their boss Yuuki’s orders just to start a fight. And Laplace wasn’t alone. Footman and Teare had the same opinion, and as leader of the Jesters, Kagali understood well enough the dangers of letting emotion drive your behavior.

In this world, the one supreme rule was survival of the fittest. Through their shared experiences, Laplace and his team had learned that nothing good comes from taking reckless action before victory was assured. Not only did Clayman completely fail to obtain his revenge against the demon lord Leon; he even died in the attempt. Thanks to that, even with the former Kazalim returned among them, the Moderate Jesters were right back where they started from. If they decided to open hostilities against the demon lord Rimuru at this point, revenge against Leon would be the least of their worries.

They all understood that, and so the Jesters bade their time, just as Yuuki ordered. But then Yuuki informed them of a problem.

“Well, on that note, I think that’s gotten a little difficult for us, too,” said Yuuki.

“…Meaning?”

“It’s looking like that slime is starting to suspect something with us…”

“Whaa? Hang on, did you do something to make ’im catch you out?” Laplace asked.

“Oh, don’t be silly, Laplace! Unlike you, the boss would never make a mistake like that!”

“Ho-ho-ho! You’re right. I don’t know anybody nearly as wary as our boss here. I sincerely doubt he did anything ill-advised.”

The eternally careful Yuuki seemed to be suggesting he was the one at fault—but Laplace’s response was quickly shot down by Teare and Footman. That was the sort of respect Yuuki had earned from the Jesters.

“Calm down, guys,” rebuked Kagali, their leader. “It’s no mistake Sir Yuuki here made. The slime was quite cautious indeed, as it turned out. Facing up to him myself, I could tell there’s nobody else like him. He made me feel like my whole body was being watched—like I couldn’t let my guard down for a moment. I couldn’t fully suss out the force he has to work with, but he’s a formidable one, no doubt.”

Having gone toe to toe against Rimuru once before, Kagali was able to instinctually feel the danger the slime presented. He wasn’t even Leon’s equal in terms of strength, but that ability to see and react to everything in the world was a threat, she felt.

Yuuki nodded at her. “No, I think that slime—the demon lord Rimuru—I think he’s a menace. One of the leaders of the Council was there, one of our main sources of funding, and he met his intellectual match pretty quickly with him. He’s crafty, he’s careful, and he’s merciless against his foes. Normally, he’s kind and gentle, but get him riled up, and there’s no controlling him, you could say. And since I tried and failed to use that man, it’s little surprise I’m under suspicion.”

He shrugged.

“Well, yeah, Boss, but whatever he thinks about ya, he ain’t got no evidence, does he? So just go with it and play it normal, and he can’t do nothin’ about that, right?”

“There’s no physical evidence, no. But you know, I’m the one who leaked the fate of Shizu to Hinata, and that’s some pretty damning circumstantial evidence, I bet. Plus, at the very end, he rounded up all his people to discuss their future direction, but I guess Rimuru chose that meeting to round up all his suspects, too. It’s pretty fair to assume that our cover’s been blown.”

“Oh my…”

The group looked on, distressed, as they listened to Yuuki’s rundown. Kagali, unsurprisingly, was the first to recover—given her demon lord roots and experience with life-or-death situations, she’d always be the quickest on her feet.

“Fair enough, but it was bound to happen sooner or later, wasn’t it? That slime truly is a threat. So how should we revise our plan, Boss?”

“Well, we’ll stay on the quiet side, like before. As long as Rimuru has nothing damning against us, I doubt he’ll decide to get openly hostile. He might look like he’s playing it all by ear, but he’s actually a pretty meticulous leader. I’m sure he’s worked out everything he stands to gain and lose.”

“All right. Him telling us about the ancient ruins was probably his way of feeling out how we’d react, then. His way of saying Try anything funny, and I won’t go easy.”

“I think you’re right. People have a way of changing their minds on you. They even have a saying for it—Yesterday’s foe is today’s friend. So if we can make him think that now’s not the time to fight, no matter what’s changed, I’d call that a victory for us.”

Yuuki looked around at his companions, gauging their reactions.

“So we’re gonna stay buddy-buddy with ’im?”

“We could easily make him do our bidding, but if that’s your take, Boss, very well.”

“How stupid are you, Footman? We’re having all this trouble because we can’t do that.”

“Nah, nah, I get where Footman’s comin’ from, y’know? It’d annoy anyone if some new guy treats you like dirt. Thing is, maybe we could win in an all-out war, but they even got Veldora on their side. I don’t see much point in bettin’ against the odds right this minute, you get me?”

“Exactly. So it’s best for us to quit overthinking this and just follow our orders from the boss and our director!”

“Isn’t that what they asked us for from the beginning? And I’ve got no problem with their takes, either.”

The three Jesters seemed less than enthused but were still in agreement with their bosses’ general direction.

Once he was assured of that, Yuuki nodded at Kagali. True power in the Western Nations was largely claimed by two factions—the Holy Empire of Lubelius (and the Western Holy Church they backed) and the Council of the West, the parent organization of the Free Guild (not to mention the Rozzo family that ruled the Council’s core). Now Tempest, governed by the demon lord Rimuru, was part of that mix. And now that he was fresh from the Tempest Founder’s Festival, Yuuki had come to realize just how foolish it was to rile Rimuru.

I was a little worried, though. If I declared that I wasn’t going to fight Rimuru, would these guys be willing to meekly accept that?

The thought occurred to Yuuki, but it appeared to be baseless. Kazalim might’ve acted differently, but losing to Leon once had taught Kagali a little prudence. The Jesters had been working to realize their ambitions for years; to them, patience was already a virtue. To Yuuki, it didn’t seem like any of his faithful companions were hasty enough to thoughtlessly go out of control.

“I’m glad to see that,” he said with a smile. “Now, I think I’ll let you take over the work I had assigned to Damrada.”

“Huh? Meanin’…the classified goods?”

“What?! Leaving that work to us?”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! Are you sure, Boss?”

This instantly unnerved the three Jesters. Yuuki kept smiling at them.

“Mm-hmm. You can handle that, right?”

“Oh, you’re on, Boss! Yer just worried that we’ll go outta control and start a buncha crap, aren’tcha? Well, no way we’re gonna. Even if we think we can win in a fight, we ain’t gonna so much as lift a finger, I swear to ya!”

“Right, right! Even Clayman lost his cool at the last minute, after all… If we made the same mistake, I wouldn’t be able to rib him for it in the afterlife.”

“True enough. Acting from a place of anger only leads to mistakes. As the Angry Jester of this bunch, that’s something I’d be particularly prudent to remember. The demon lord Leon swore revenge against him someday, but I think that ‘someday’ will need to wait.”

The trio each reassured Yuuki with their own choice of words. He gave them a light nod.

“You’ve matured more than I thought,” Yuuki muttered, before recalling something else. “By the way, the mention of classified goods reminded me—Rimuru brought the children I took in over to Tempest, didn’t he?”

“Ah yes, the ones Shizue Izawa prevented us from reaching—”

“Right, those. He had a built-in excuse, wanting them to see the festival and all, but thinking about it, he really does suspect me, doesn’t he? Which is fine. I just can’t get what he said off my mind.”

He paused for a moment. The children were growing stronger and stronger. That was no doubt because of what the demon lord Rimuru did to save them. And while he said it was a secret, he let on to Yuuki that he wanted the kids to learn more about the spirits within them.

“He kind of glossed over it the last time I asked, but…”

“Perhaps they’ve gotten so strong that there’s no glossing over the subject any longer.”

“Well, who knows? I got all excited, thinking he had some kind of scheme in mind for them. But there’s no doubt that he’s using their elemental spirits to neutralize the magicule counts in them.”

One could never leave their guard down around the demon lord Rimuru. A scheme, Yuuki thought, could easily be in play. He shrugged.

“True,” Kagali said. “And Shizue Izawa was an elementalist capable of wielding high-level flame elemental. So is it possible, then, to use spirits to take the ‘failed Heroes’ that weren’t fully summoned correctly and utilize them for their intended purposes?”

This seemed to ring a bell with the Jesters.

“Ohh! Is that what Leon was after? He seems to be collecting otherworlders from failed summonings. You think he could raise ’em into fighters?!”

“Ah, now I remember! Ifrit used to be in Leon’s service, too, wasn’t he? Clayman ordered his armies to attack him several times, but Ifrit killed them all off.”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! And now he’s using the same method to create more elementalists like Shizu? Then perhaps he deserves to receive those classified goods after all.”

They excitedly talked among themselves. Footman may be right, thought Yuuki. But that left a few things unexplained.

The classified goods were, in fact, a group of children that had been subjected to failed summonings. Even now, in an undisclosed location, these summonings were taking place again and again—within the Western Nations, while Shizue Izawa was never informed. More attempts, of course, meant more failures, and it was Damrada and his team in the Cerberus group that retrieved them—as they could never be allowed to become public knowledge. They were marked as test materials, but there was another purpose meant for them. That purpose was the demon lord Leon. And Leon’s order was to gather “otherworlder children under the age of ten.”

Hmm… Is Leon trying to build more power for a war? That sounds convincing, but why not do that himself, then? And by the way he’s leaking new theoretical summoning techniques to the Eastern Empire and Western Nations, it seems like he’s got other goals in mind. Better keep an eye out.

Yuuki couldn’t reach a conclusion yet. Thus, he was forced to stick with the pact Leon signed with them and keep up their current obligations.

Yuuki frowned as he gave the Jesters his orders.

“All right. I’ll leave the negotiations with Leon to you. If you can determine whether he’s trying to improve his armies or has some other purpose, try to figure it out. Misha is handling negotiations with the Rozzos, so take the goods from her and get moving.”

“Roger that. No problem!”

“Yeah, yeah! I’ll do my best!!”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! Very well.”

Kagali smirked at her enthusiastic group. “Just don’t get so excited that Leon figures out who you are.”

“Listen, be as careful as you can, okay? We don’t have the capacity to take on Leon as well right now.”

The trio nodded at Yuuki’s reminder. Laplace and his cohorts were no fools. His trust placed in them, Yuuki began to explain the details behind his plan.

With the Jesters given their orders, it was now Kagali’s turn. She turned to Yuuki, dour-faced.

“So what should I do?”

She was asking about the expedition into the ruins. But ruins was a misnomer. Really, it was a city that Kagali and her acquaintances knew well.

Back when she was still the demon lord Kazalim, Kagali had constructed a defense system for a city that used the most advanced of magical techniques. That city was the so-called ancient city in question. Its name was Amrita, and unlike the surface zone protected by the system Adalmann was part of, Amrita used a combination of a golem army and intricate, Kazalim-woven spells for its defense. Even Viola, the masterpiece Clayman crafted with the skills he inherited from Kazalim, was only slightly above average compared to the golems guarding the ruin.

That ruin of Amrita, a ruin with such an impervious defense system, housed—in essence—the true hidden value of the Puppet Nation of Dhistav.

Why were a bunch of ruins like Amrita guarded by such advanced defenses? To learn the answer, one has to go far back into the past.

Long ago, a city of magic, once ruled by the elves during their heyday, fell thanks to their own foolishness. After riling the anger of a non–demon lord—the Dragon Princess Milim—it was wiped off the face of the planet in a single night. These formed the ancient ruins that are now referred to as Soma.

The surviving elves swore to rebuild Soma someday—but they never did. Unable to resist the violent rage of the Chaos Dragon, the most horrid of monsters born of their own hands, they were all but forced out of their homeland. The Chaos Dragon was a Catastrophe-level threat, not as powerful as one of the natural-born True Dragons but still nothing the elves could have ever handled.

Thus, the surviving elves scattered across the land, each taking their own path. The unlearned peasant classes, lamenting their sudden misfortunes, relied upon the elven leader; those with more strength and intelligence cleared out space to build their own nation. Some of them simply fled, blending into the background. Thus, thanks to only a small handful of people, the elves’ glory days were over.

Now the dark elves, accursed by their own sin, set off for new and distant lands, hoping to escape Milim’s watchful eye. Kagali—the demon lord Kazalim—was among them, one of the few members of elven royalty to experience Milim’s rage and live to tell the tale. Not a demon lord yet at the time, Kazalim built a city in the region he eventually found himself in, modeled after his homeland. It was his way to leave everything elven technology produced intact before it was gone forever.

That city was Amrita, the capital of the Puppet Nation of Dhistav.

Kagali shook her head, driving the memories from her mind.

“Amrita’s defense system is still active. Could we use it to lure Rimuru into a trap?”

Based on their previous promise, Kagali would be joining him as they explored the ruins in Clayman’s domain. If she was asked to direct Rimuru into an ambush, that would be simple for her. Besides, the only real threats in Kagali’s mind were Milim and Veldora. If she caught Rimuru alone, she thought, she’d be able to do away with him. She had no doubt she could activate the defense system, at least.

But Yuuki didn’t waste a moment to reply.

“That sounds like a neat idea, but you realize the demon lord Milim might be joining you, right?”

“Well… I think we can work something out. If it’s simply activating the system, I can do that without coming under suspicion.”

Kagali, or Kazalim, had already had a nation destroyed under her feet. Yuuki worried about whether that still traumatized her, but she didn’t seem to pay it much mind. She had transformed from an elf to a dark elf, then to a walking dead and demon lord. Any hang-ups she had about Milim had been fully conquered in the midst of that. Did that mean Kagali thought she had a chance against her? No. It wasn’t impossible so much as it was suicidal.

“All right! In that case, have at it. I doubt it’ll defeat him, but I was just thinking we need some data on how well Rimuru can actually fight.”

“You think he can handle all that?”

“Oh, no doubt. So please don’t do anything that might reveal yourself, all right, Kagali? I know he’s suspecting me, but right now, you’re neither a friend nor a foe to him. Be careful that you don’t give him any kind of information.”

“I know, Boss.”

They smiled at each other.

“Great! In that case, we’ll all go make contact with Misha.”

“And I’ll stay here and keep preparing. So what will you do, Boss?”

“Me? I’m planning to contact Damrada and expand our bases of operation in the East. That way, if something happens, I can always flee over there. But first…”

“Oh, so you are scheming somethin’, then? You’re tellin’ us to lie low, but you’re out pullin’ who knows what?”

Yuuki snickered. “Nothing like that, Laplace. It’s just, you know, I’m thinking I should play whatever cards I have in my deck. I haven’t given up on ruling the West, after all.”

He grinned—and then, as they sank into the darkness, the magic-born quietly began to set their plans in motion.