

CHAPTER 2

WORD FROM RAMIRIS

Just as the summit was winding down, and I felt it was time to wrap things up:

Bwaaam!!

The doors flew open as someone stormed in.

“I heard all that! Tempest shall fall to ruin!!”

There was a tiny winged girl—and while it was hard to believe from looks, it was Ramiris of the Labyrinth, one of the world’s ten demon lords.

I wasn’t exactly sure how to take this. Should I open my eyes wide and go “Wha-what was that?!”? I didn’t have much time to react, because Ramiris was flying straight for me, while Beretta was kindly closing the front door behind her. Long-suffering is the way I’d describe that demon’s body language, and I bet I was right. Getting bossed around by Ramiris all day would do that to anyone.

Now Diablo was standing in front of her, dressed to the nines in his butler-y outfit. He had been stationed behind me, quietly listening to the proceedings, but he wasn’t willing to let this interloper barge in. And really, he made capturing Ramiris look as easy as grabbing a dragonfly out of the air.

“H-hey!” she shouted, flailing around. “What’re you doing to me?!” I just love her. She doesn’t act the part of a demon lord one bit, and it’s just adorable.



“Sir Rimuru,” Diablo said, walking back to me, “I have captured an intruder. What should we do with her? She raved about this town falling to ruin, but how should we address this insolence?”

I looked at Ramiris. She was batting her wings helplessly, trying to escape Diablo’s grasp. “Gehhh! I’m using my full magic force, and I still can’t escape him?! This, this can’t be any kind of regular bodyguard! Who are you? What did I ever do to you?!”

She never was very quiet. And no offense, but given the incomparable difference in power, I didn’t think Diablo would lose her anytime soon. And this was a demon lord? See, this is why I sometimes wonder if being a demon lord is anything special at all.

“Do you know this fairy, Sir Rimuru?” Fuze asked. Oh, right, we were in the middle of a summit. Right toward the end, in fact. If she had only come in a couple minutes later… She never was good at taking social cues like that, either.

“Yeah, I do. This is Ramiris, and she might not show it, but I guess she’s a demon lord, too?”

“Hey! What d’you mean, I don’t show it?! I am feared as the strongest out of all ten demon lords, I’ll have you know!”

She flashed me the most arrogant smile possible, still stuck in Diablo’s grasp and oblivious to how nonthreatening she looked. The audience was nonplussed, a few giving comments like “Huh? A demon lord…?” and “Someone like that?”

“…What? Like, whaaaat? Come on, what’s your problem? You’re supposed to act more surprised! I’m kind of a demon lord, guys! Ramiris of the Labyrinth, in the flesh, all right?! Why is everyone acting so uninterested?”

I mean, demon lord or not, you’re kind of caught between two fingers right now. If I had to guess, everyone thinks you must be some kind of poseur, you know? I’m too kind to actually voice this, of course, but…

“…Well, as a demon lord himself, it’s only fair that Sir Rimuru would be acquainted with other demon lords, I suppose…”

“If anything, the Storm Dragon’s resurrection was such a shock, I don’t think anything could surprise me at this point…”

Our audience was nodding at one another. I suppose that makes sense, actually.

Ramiris, on the other hand, was less than satisfied with that.

“Huh? The Storm Dragon? Veldora’s been revived? You guys are being tricked! I beat Veldora into the ground with a single punch! That guy was all roar and no bite. Besides, his era’s over now. If you want someone to fear, you can start being horrified around my presence today!”

She punctuated this with a high, haughty laugh. If anything, she had an even bigger mouth than Veldora. I had Diablo hand her over to me and took her to see him.

“Veldora, you mind entertaining this girl for me? She’s a demon lord, too, more or less, so maybe she’ll wanna be friends with you.”

“Mm? I am busy unraveling a grand riddle at the moment.”

I didn’t have time for his sulking.

“Oh, that manga? The murderer was [REDACTED]. You’re good now, right? Thanks.”

With that bout of mercilessness, I returned to my seat. Veldora looked shocked, eyes wide open. Maybe it wasn’t the nicest thing to do, but we’re in the middle of a summit. I wanted him to think about his actions a little, not let him do whatever he wants.

Besides, the sight of Veldora had already made Ramiris faint on the spot. Two problem children taken care of in one stroke.

So wrapping up, I wanted to go over everything we had to do.

“Benimaru, our next target is Clayman. I want him taken down!”

“Just what I’ve been waiting to hear!” Benimaru gave me a fearless smile, flames dancing eerily in his eyes. The rest of the Tempestians in the audience were similarly elated; I guess they’d all become would-be warriors over time. Didn’t they all just have a huge battle in town a few days ago? Ah well. High morale’s never a bad thing.

“As for the Three Lycanthropeers and the beastmen under them…”

“No need to say it,” Alvis growled. “We are under your command, Sir Rimuru.” Phobio and Sufia seemed just as enthused. I shouldn’t have bothered asking.

“And you think you can beat him with this team, Rimuru?”

“I will. He’s riled me.”

“I see…” Gazel gave me a wry grin. “I will trust you in your word, then.” And in a smaller voice that I figured only I could hear: “Here I thought you were my junior training partner. You’ve grown far too much…”

“But I do not believe you can afford to think lightly of Clayman,” observed a concerned Erald. “He holds sway over a vast army of magic-born, and rumors tell of close connections with the Eastern Empire…”

“That doesn’t matter. War is about quality, not quantity!”

“Heavens, I think I can hear my common sense collapsing as we speak…”

It was, indeed, totally lacking in common sense, but it was enough to quiet him. I could tell he was interested in what I had now. I knew it was crazy, too, but I also knew I was right. The larger army usually wins the battle, but that didn’t apply to this world. The orc lord was a good example of that. As long as you can decapitate the leader, it was always the more adept fighters that dictated the results.

Besides, this time, we didn’t lose out in numbers, either. I had cut it out from the summit for brevity, but Soei had already briefed me on Clayman’s movements. Soei was still pinning down an exact number, but they were moving sluggishly and still stuck inside Milim’s domain. His Replication would be back here soon, though, and I could save my final decision for then.

That strategic meeting could come later, but for now, we needed to make sure we had the script down for conquering Farmus. We’d release the king, then have the Marquis of Muller and Count Hellman pursue his blame, beseeching him to take responsibility for his failure. Depending on how he reacted, Yohm would then spring into action.

“Regarding any actual war with them, that will be our issue to tackle. For now, I want all of you to trust in me and leave Farmus for us to worry about. It shouldn’t be long before I’ll ask you to help us make Yohm into the champion king of a new generation.”

The audience nodded their approval. When it came to human affairs, we’d make a lot fewer mistakes relying on them instead of trying to go it alone. I was looking forward to their support.

“Now, Fuze, I want you to contact Muller and Hellman confidentially.”

“Sure thing,” he replied.

Again, we’d likely work out the details in a later meeting, but we had a plan of action now. First, we’d portray things so it was Yohm and his forces reclaiming the king from us. We’d then have the Marquis of Muller put the king under his protection, providing backup for Yohm the whole way. And about those three POWs, actually:

“By the way, Shion, how are those three dealing with your questioning? Did they give us anything useful?”

I had forgotten about that—it didn’t really matter, in the grand scheme of things—but I had left our prisoners in the care of Shion this whole time.

“Heh-heh-heh… Of course they did, Sir Rimuru!”

Ooh. Somebody sure is confident. I had a bad feeling about that. I turned toward Yohm and Mjurran, who were supposed to be present during all the questioning. They awkwardly turned their eyes away.

“Um,” Yohm began. “Yeah, um, questioning? Interrogation? Either way, they talked a lot, pal.”

“That they did,” agreed Mjurran. “But that was no questioning. It was something surreal. I’m not sure you could even call it interrogation.”

I really don’t want to hear anything else, thanks. Shion overdid it, no doubt about it—but then, I let her. It’d be unreasonable for me to complain about it, and I had no intention to. Even if I wanted to stop her violent rage, I guess I was cooped up in the cave and beyond contact range anyway. In a way, it’s my fault for not being there. Let’s just assume I never noticed.

Sorry, people of Farmus. But then again, you guys struck first. Hopefully, you’ll consider yourselves lucky for surviving at all.

Either way, we had three prisoners in custody, and following Shion’s interro—um, questioning, they seemed fairly willing to talk.

“First off,” Shion began, “Ed, Ednoyol? Ed…”

“…King Edmaris?” whispered Shuna into her ear. Thanks for that. But really, Shion? You couldn’t even come up with the king’s name? I know it’s kind of a weird one, but…

“King Edmaris had apparently made contact with a merchant, one who brought him silken fabrics from our nation and whetted his appetite for conquest. The king also feared that trade would drift over to our nation in the future, which also led to those moves on his part…”

Shion’s rundown continued, the content of which didn’t surprise me much. The only thing it made me wonder about was whether that merchant deliberately spurred Edmaris to action.

“Do we know who this merchant is? Some black-market dealer?”

“I apologize, my lord. That much we do not know.”

She looked so sad about it that I felt the need to hurriedly console her. The question wasn’t that important anyway. Let’s switch subjects to Archbishop Reyhiem.

“That’s fine. What about the Church?”

“Ah yes! He revealed who was pushing him behind the scenes. The name was—”

It’s a long one, Shion. You think you got that one remembered at all?

“…The core of it all was Cardinal Nicolaus Speltus,” Mjurran said after Shion shot her a pleading look. Shion was great at extracting information from people, but anything else? Forget it. She had some kind of mental block keeping her from remembering proper names. Better give her some other assignment next time. Good thing Mjurran was around. I can’t really expect much in the critical-analysis department from Yohm, either, so she no doubt provided some handy backup.

According to her, Nicolaus stated that they planned to take us all down, as a nation clearly against the will of their god. Planned to anyway.

“I see,” Fuze muttered. “So Archbishop Reyhiem wanted all the glory of defeating a godless enemy, so he could earn extra clout with the central authorities?”

Everyone seemed to agree with this.

“Either way, we still have some wiggle room. The Western Holy Church hasn’t made a definitive decision yet. Perhaps there’s a way to negotiate ourselves out of being designated hostile.”

“In that case,” Fuze said, “let me handle that.”

His approach involved taking advantage of the Council’s presence. They would release a statement declaring that the nation of Tempest should be recognized, putting pressure on the Church to act. Appealing to the Council would also place the spotlight further on Tempest as a waypoint along a series of new trade routes. The fact that monsters lived there was an issue, but they were all both kind to strangers and fully capable of speech. If anything, they’d gladly be your friend.

That much, of course, we had already proven. Or really, we’d made it happen through all this astonishing evolution. In so many words, our aim was to earn treatment from the humans similar to what dwarves, elves, and other demi-human races enjoyed. King Gazel would back us up as well, keeping up a lively trade relationship with us and advertising the benefits of Tempest with more energy than ever.

This, I imagined, would likely not be enough to make the Western Holy Church abandon their core tenets. But Dwargon and Blumund already had formal trade relations with Tempest. Not even the Church had the kind of power to annul those agreements. And with us having such deep ties with a small group of human nations like this, other countries were bound to grow curious soon. Plus, we now had the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion declaring their allegiance. That put even more pressure on the Church to settle matters.

“Not that this is for me to say,” Fuze added, “but recognizing Tempest is a double-edged sword. We all need to be careful to make sure we don’t accidentally stab ourselves in the process.”

He was right. Blumund was in the tightest spot out of them all. Dwargon and Thalion were essentially beyond the range of Holy Church influence. Both were powerful enough that they could give the united Western Nations a run for their money. Blumund, meanwhile, was a blip, all too susceptible to pressure from outside its borders.

—Except all that was a thing of the past.

“Heh-heh… Fuze, was it? No need to fret. We dwarves can make runs through Tempest to access your markets as well. And with the stronger position that will put your nation in, the Council will find it prudent to tread lightly with you.”

Gazel’s right, I thought. Two nations, Dwargon and Thalion, both with different cultures and technical expertise, were interacting with each other through Tempest. This town was going to grow exponentially, I was sure of it—and then, a new culture would bloom. Culture and technology. The sorcerous science Thalion boasted and the spirit engineering Dwargon cultivated would connect on our doorstep, two different families of tech rolled into one. It could create an industrial revolution straight out of fantasy, and the kingdom of Blumund would have dibs on enjoying it first. Even in terms of pure accounting numbers, the potential profits were enormous.

Meanwhile, the new kingdom of Farmus created by Yohm would be reborn as a breadbasket to the entire region, filling the people’s stomachs and planting the seeds for an entirely new food culture. We’d need to spread the wealth around, to make sure none of us was competing with another member of the alliance in each specialty—but I was planning to attend to that anyway, on the sly. Raphael, Lord of Wisdom, had calculation skills that went beyond what even quantum computing could manage. Calculating global economic effects was no sweat—and at accuracies far greater than even the Earth Simulator supercomputer in Japan could manage. That kind of made me sound like the “man behind the curtain” ruling the world, but I am a demon lord, so at least it’d be in character.

I could understand Fuze’s concern, too. Blumund was so tiny, it might wind up being exploited by its bigger neighbors without any recourse to turn to. That’s why it was so hard for them turn away from the Council, as friendly as that alliance was to smaller nations like theirs. Of course he’s worried.

Maybe, in the short term, it would’ve been better for them to keep dealing with the Council. Pool all their intelligence skills together, and Blumund might’ve even been able to force the Western Holy Church into all-out war against us. If that was the choice they made when they first met us, I might’ve been slain by now. But the Blumundians didn’t opt for that. They trusted me and decided to walk down the same path.

You do the deed, and then you get rewarded for it.

Blumund had already picked me. I didn’t see any reason not to take the hint. Living together in harmony was right at the crux of my ideal, besides.

“Fuze, when you return home, I want you to tell the king that I have a favor to ask.”

“A favor? Not another painful one, I trust?”

“Kinda rude, wouldn’t you say? It’ll take a while to explain, and I’ll probably fail to get the point across to you, so I’ll visit later to go over it in detail with him.”

“Hoh! And I’m the rude one? You make me sound like some kind of dullard!”

“No, no, I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean, you know, do you know much of anything about economics, Fuze?”

“I… All right. I will give word to the king and arrange a time.”

“Great.” I nodded.

Blumund’s role here would be to keep statistics on the amount of trade in all the main manufactured goods of the region. I’d have them examine the products imported and exported from each nation, then make sure that the necessary items were shipped to the necessary place. To put it another way, I would have Blumund become the first large-scale trading company in the world. Get it right, and there’d be nothing “small” about this nation any longer. They’d be a financial superpower, wielding influence beyond comprehension.

Considering Blumund’s geographical location, I wanted them to be a trade hub going forward. But that would wait until everything else wrapped up. I needed to defeat Clayman. Yohm needed to build a new nation; Fuze and Blumund needed to use their information access to check on the movements of the Western Council and Church—until we won, at least.

My main concern was the Church. I didn’t think they’d make any sudden moves, but they still needed to be kept in place. Neither they nor the Holy Empire of Lubelius were willing to recognize our nation. I wanted to postpone any conflict for as long as I could, giving us time to prove our effectiveness and devotion to common harmony. If we had to fight, I’d like to keep it peaceful…but judging by Hinata’s reaction to me, that might be tough.

None of these problems would be wiped up that easily. Everything depended on what we did from here on out.

So about those three prisoners—hmm? There’s King Edmaris, Archbishop Reyhiem, and…who was the other guy? Oh, right! The dude who survived my attack. Were we safe letting him go?

“Shion, we had three POWs, right? The one who survived all the killing? That guy has to be pretty bad news, right?”

“Huh? Oh, um, yes. That terribly frightened man.”

Frightened? Hmm. Maybe he was just some wimp who managed to survive through sheer luck.

“Hoh? The final survivor? If I had to guess, perhaps Folgen, captain of their knights?”

If Gazel knew someone on that force by name, he must’ve been at least a half-decent military officer. So maybe it’d be risky to free him? I turned to Diablo.

“What kind of guy was he like? Pretty strong, right? You think it’d be all right to let him off the hook?”

“No, Sir Rimuru,” he replied, smile still on his face. “He is a minnow, incapable of being a problem at all. By human standards, however, he does seem rather well-versed in magic.”

He’s a magician? Maybe not a knight captain like Folgen, then.

“Do you know the name, Shion?”

“Yes! It’s Ramen, sir!”

Ramen. Hmm. I haven’t had ramen in years, actually. Nothing like a steaming cup of instant noodles during an all-night deadline crunch at work. I miss that. Maybe I’ll try to fashion some later.

“Ramen?” Fuze asked as I basked in fond memories of my past life. “Was there someone named that in Farmus?”

“It does not ring a bell,” replied Erald. “And a magician, you say? I am aware of a magic-born named Razen who should still live there…”

“Razen the champion? Mm, a man who should never be omitted from the story.”

“I know that name,” Phobio chimed in. “It is well-known even within the Beast Kingdom. The guardian of the great land of Farmus and among the most intelligent of magic-born!”

“Yeah, I know him, too. A human who’s mastered magic up to the wizard level and beyond. I’ve always wanted a chance to challenge him!”

“I’m sure we’d win in close-quarter combat, but he is not one to trifle with, no…”

All the Lycanthropeers knew him, which surprised me. There was someone like that still left in Farmus? This Ramen guy didn’t matter to me, but Razen certainly needed some attending to.

“You’re sure the man we have is named Ramen, Shion?”

“Y-yes, er… Probably. But he’s just a young man! One of the people who attacked this town. Certainly not the master magician you all are talking about!”

She sounded a lot more assertive on the second half of that statement than the first. But hang on, didn’t Diablo just describe our prisoner Ramen as a magic-user? Curious, I decided to get the story from a few more witnesses.

What we knew for sure is that our captive was a young man, an otherworlder, who had participated in the attack. Everyone was in agreement on that.

“Diablo, are you making up stories in an attempt to earn Sir Rimuru’s praise?” Shion goaded him.

“Not at all. I would hardly expect to be heaped with adulation for having defeated someone of such low caliber. I simply seek recognition that I have carried out the work provided by the master I serve.”

That’s true. Diablo wanted me to know he was a good servant, but he didn’t say anything about his opponent being tough at all. He was dissing the guy every chance he had. So…

“…Come to think of it,” Hakuro mused, “when Geld and I cornered that otherworlder, a fairly powerful magic wielder interfered. I believe that man was named Razen, actually. He had prepared a type of nuclear magic he was ready to unleash at any moment. So we let the otherworlder go, since this wizard was much more of an imminent threat.”

So it is Razen, not Ramen? Razen, this guy I wanted to keep an eye on, was involved in the battle after all?

Report. Using certain secret rituals in the realm of spiritual magic would allow one to leap between physical bodies.

Oh, right. That.

“D’you think maybe that Razen guy took over the body of the younger dude?”

“Wha?!”

Shion was floored. She never seemed all that sure about our prisoner’s name. I was fairly certain my theory was correct.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh… And I am sure we will discover our ward’s true name shortly.”

Diablo pounded the final nail into Shion’s coffin. It almost drove her to tears.

Our man turned out to be Razen, in the end. Nobody named Ramen out there after all. All right? So enough bullying Shion over this. What do you want from her? She’s Shion. Asking any kind of brainwork out of Shion is a mistake in the first place.

But:

“You dispatched Razen himself that easily?!”

“I cannot believe it. The champion who supported Farmus for centuries…”

“He was one of the rare humans who was equal to me as a wizard. Superior, even…”

All the shocked eyes in the room turned to Diablo. If you think about it, he is kind of a mystery. Why’s he so keen on being my servant? He claimed to be willing to work for free, so I had no real reason to turn him down. The guy describing this amazing wizard as a “minnow” kind of confirms how strong he is. And this was before I named him, too…

And right now, this guy was choosing to lord it over Shion. She gritted her teeth, no doubt frustrated over how she brought this fight to him and lost big. Ah well. Nothing should come of it, as long as Shion doesn’t go and start acting like they’re bitter rivals. Having both a talented secretary and a ditzy one on board is going to lead to a lot of jealousy, I’m sure.

Right! So let’s do this:

“Yohm, I want you to take the three prisoners and do something with them for me. Diablo, I want you to join him.”

Now Diablo was looking panicked at me. I could see Shion sneer back at him, but that order wasn’t for her sake. This was the result of more serious thought. I was just thinking about who I could have help out Yohm’s team, assuming I left Veldora to keep the town safe. Someone who was reasonably intelligent, strong enough to handle anything that came his way, and could move fast if needed.

Soei would’ve been the best choice, but I needed him on the battlefield. Benimaru was my general field commander. Shion was out of the question. Hakuro couldn’t use Shadow or Spatial Motion, so it’d take time for him to travel anywhere. Geld and Gabil would stand out too much in human society.

Meaning Diablo fulfilled all my conditions. He said he’d lend a hand when it came time to take Farmus down, so I doubted he’d have any complaints. He’d have no problem guarding someone as potentially harmful as Razen, either.

“I will leave this to you, Diablo!”

“Ah, I understand, Sir Rimuru!”

He gave me a delighted smile. Something didn’t seem quite right about it to me, but if he said yes, then no complaints. Right now, Diablo was probably third in strength after Veldora and me. No matter what happened, he’d have it handled in a flash.

“This job might take several years, so I hope you’ll be patient with it. Contact me with Thought Communication if anything comes up.”

“Not a problem, sir. I will be happy to handle this mission well before the allotted time.”

He sure had a lot of confidence. This was an entire nation I was asking ’em to take down…but again, that’s another reason I felt safe giving him this assignment. Now, with all the plans settled, we could end this summit between nations—and now I could focus my full attention on all-out war with Clayman without any regrets.

To finish off, I asked if anyone else had something to say.

A hand shot up. It belonged to Erald, who was looking expectantly at me.

“Yes?” I asked.

Erald had been waiting for this. “Our nation and yours are separated from each other by extremely treacherous forests and mountains. If we could connect ourselves directly through that region, that would allow us to cut the travel distance by quite a margin. A highway, in particular, would make the trek far easier…”

He shot me a glance. Ah-ha. I knew what he was getting at. If we were gonna be building a formal relationship with Thalion, of course we’d want a direct link between us. We’d have to do that, of course. Products that used to require long detours to deliver would naturally be more attractive once we had a better road. That was a part of my plan from the start.

Of course, it’d also mean we’d have a lot of civil engineering to do—cutting down trees, building tunnels, paving the roads. The budget would be huge, and maybe they were a superpower, but it wouldn’t be that easy to procure a budget like that. No doubt Erald already had some ballpark figures he composed himself, in hopes of forcing the whole job upon us.

“Erald,” Gazel commented, “you are asking for too much. Not even Rimuru can accept such a massive undertaking so lightly.”

Well, hang on. I’m pretty sure we covered all the work and expenses for the highway to the Dwarven Kingdom, didn’t we?!

“Don’t be ridiculous, Gazel! If it was Sir Rimuru saying that, I would accept it, but not from you of all people!”

Ah. Guess Erald knew, too.

So if I’d already accepted the job from Gazel, would it be wrong to say no to Thalion? In my honest opinion, I had no problem being left to the task. A highway was a small price to pay for their recognition, really. But if I kept taking these low-paying jobs, so to speak, every country we ran into going forward might expect a similar handout. Humans are sly like that, something I was sure reminded of by my experience in Blumund. They had me right where they wanted me.

Let’s get a thing or two straight before we go any further.

“I understand your suggestion, Duke Erald. We would be willing to accept your request for a highway. However…”

“However?” Erald nervously swallowed as he looked at me. Don’t worry, man. I’m not gonna ask for much.

“However, I want you to let us handle the highway’s security and lodging facilities. Of course, we would take payment for this, in the form of a small transport tax on top of operating expenses for those services.”

It would be like running a toll road. We’d set up stops at decently sized regular intervals where people would have to pay fees to advance. That would provide us with permanent funding. We might start in the red, but over the long term, it’d probably lead to profit. Our special interests at work, you could say. On top of all that, we’d keep the highway maintained for them. A bargain, really.

“…I see. Impressive. And only natural to demand that much. However, I would like to have the right to negotiate this transport tax, perhaps once every few years.”

Hohh? Erald’s pretty impressive himself. He immediately saw what I was trying to accomplish. Of course, none of this would happen without both sides coming to an agreement. No point setting that tax too high. I’ll take the offer.

“All right. Let’s go with that!”

“That’s it?!”

Fuze seemed flabbergasted, but I let it slide. In diplomacy, the power to make a decision trumps all else.

“Geld! We got a new job for you!”

“Yes sir! It gladdens me to hear. We have the teamwork to handle every step of the operation, the supply lines to transport the needed materials, and people with skills that knead and control the earth. The work you provide us is our very nourishment, Sir Rimuru, the best military training ground we could ever hope for!”

Huh?! Oh, uh, yeah… That’s the motivation they go with, huh? And here I thought Geld had some common sense. Maybe not so much? It was so surprising, I didn’t know how to react for a moment.

“Um, yeah. Well, in that case, we better get this war finished up so you can get to work.”

“Indeed. Soon you will enjoy the results of our daily training regimen!”

Geld was really up for a fight. I’m sure he’ll be an asset in the one against Clayman.

That was the last of the feedback I received—and thus, after several twists and turns, our summit was finally over.

A wealth of nations came to the bargaining table today, each with their own motivations, duking it out with words in search of a world where man and monster live hand in hand. It might have come out of nowhere, but this so-called Monster-and-Man Summit would later wind up becoming a turning point in history.

I had once again taken a major step toward my ideal.

With our talks between national leaders complete, it was finally time for our anti-Clayman strategy conference. I figured we all needed to hear Soei’s report first, so I ordered the meeting hall to be set up once more.

As I did, I had the nagging feeling I was forgetting something. And it just so happened that I was. Ramiris. What was that noisy little pixie going on about? Was she still unconscious?

Worried, I headed over to Veldora, only to find… Well, take a guess. It was Ramiris, entranced by the manga she was reading! I was concerned she’d start bawling unless I gave her some attention, but I had nothing to worry about.

“…Hey. Hey, what’re you doing?”

“Shut up a second. I’m just getting to the good part.”

She didn’t even look up at me. Why was she here again? That manga had her full attention right now, but she had something important to do here, right?!

I suppose she must’ve woken up, set off to yell at me again, and then noticed the manga volumes strewn all over the sofa. They must’ve captured her imagination so thoroughly she didn’t even realize the summit was over. She must’ve made amends with Veldora as well, because now he was happily being served by Beretta, as if that whole fainting spell never took place. Eesh.

I turned toward Beretta.

“Congratulations on your evolution to demon lord,” it said with a polite bow. “Allow me to thank you, grand master, for letting me share in the benefits of said evolution. Thanks to you, I have transformed from an arch-golem into a chaos golem.”

This evolution had imparted elements of both holy and demonic force into it. That was mainly thanks to the skill Reverser, which allowed the user to obtain two diametrically opposed essences at once—in Beretta’s case, aspects of both demonic and angelic power, I suppose. A new spirit core was born inside it, fusing with its older, demonic one to create a new chaos core. This let it handle holy-element attacks, something it was weaker against before.

I couldn’t have been the only one who saw that as incredibly unfair. That rock-solid magisteel body, already impervious to most physical attacks and magic, and now it was even covered for what few weaknesses it had. You couldn’t ask for a better upgrade than that.

This unique skill Reverser was something involved with me, it seemed. A lot of the panic I felt at the time must’ve come across to Beretta. When I was encased in that Holy Field, my emotions when I was left powerless by the sealed-off magicules must’ve affected how this power manifested itself, I think. Given that an arch-golem runs on magicules, it must’ve feared that it, too, would stop in its tracks. So it came up with this countermeasure.

Between Reverser and that chaos chore, Beretta was turning into one extremely interesting research subject.

Report. The unique skill Reverser is already integrated into the ultimate skill Uriel, Lord of Vows. Its effect can be re-created by applying Control Laws to metallic elements. Creating a new chaos core requires providing the correct conditions and materials to…

What?!

Raphael just chucked that out offhand, but I couldn’t believe how useful he was. That’s it—Food Chain! I have Food Chain as part of the ultimate skill Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony, so I can obtain the original model for any skills owned by my friends.

Beretta had it, too, so we talked about it for a little bit. It seemed rather satisfied with the skill and the fun it had experimenting in the labyrinth. Following its evolution, it figured something similar must’ve happened to me as well, too.

“In any case,” I said, “I’m glad you’re still doing well. Once this is all settled down, we should talk a little more in-depth.”

“Ha-ha! I appreciate you saying that. Now I have something to look forward to.”

“Yeah. I’m also glad you’re still listening to Ramiris. Keep that up, unless she gives you any orders that’re too crazy.”

“I will be happy to. I promise I will not betray your expectations!”

“Great. Hang in there. By the way, what’re you guys here for?”

I shot a glance at Ramiris, still enthralled by her manga.

“We…”

Beretta must’ve forgotten, too. It made a beeline for Ramiris, bringing her out of her trancelike state.

“Lady Ramiris, now is not the time for this. We must inform Sir Rimuru of the news…”

“Shut up! I’m really busy right now!”

“Please, my lady, recall your goals traveling here.”

“I told you! Fate has brought me and this wonderful thing they call manga together! Oh, which suitor will she choose in the end…?”

You can’t argue with that impassioned logic. Literally, you can’t. Oh, the pains Beretta must go through. I couldn’t let this go on. I had a general idea of what she was reading, so—with a sigh—I decided to threaten her a little. If I didn’t, we’d all be forced to wait until she was done with the series, and that one was an epic running over forty volumes, so even someone as calm and Buddha-like in his patience as I couldn’t hold out that long.

“Hey, Ramiris? If you don’t want me to spoil it for you on who she goes with, then tell me why you’re here already!”

The threat produced immediate results. “Right!” she shouted, saluting to me and hurriedly flying into the air, not a care in the world. It couldn’t have been anything serious—just her overreacting and carrying on as always. The rest of our visitors had stopped their chatting as they prepared to leave, also remembering that Ramiris was still there. I guess they all wanted to satisfy their curiosities before going.

The fairy noticed the attention and proudly puffed out her chest (or lack thereof), crossed her arms, and gave me the boldest nod she could.

“I’ll say it one more time! Tempest shall fall to ruin!!”

“Wh-what did you say?!” I replied without enthusiasm, following the script. She took the bait.

“Hmph! You know,” she said patronizingly, “that isn’t something I want to happen, of course. So I came all the way over here to tell you. You better thank me!”

I tried my best to avoid all her little jabs at me. Giving them attention would just prolong the conversation.

“So why’re we falling to ruin?”

“Well, before I tell you…” She stopped, turning serious as she looked around to size up the dignitaries around her. Then she nodded to herself. “Ah, I suppose this has a lot to do with you humans, too. All right—listen up, all of you. Clayman’s just proposed that we launch a Walpurgis Council!”

“A Walpurgis what?”

“Right, a Walpurgis Council. A special meeting of all the demon lords!”

Oh. She said “launch,” so I thought it was some kinda huge magic spell at first. I was planning to storm Clayman’s domain, so if she told me that Clayman was attacking first, I would’ve freaked out.

Pressing her for more details, Ramiris stated that staging Walpurgis required the consent of at least three demon lords, and once convened, attendance was very much mandatory. Absence was never forgiven. It was one of the very few things the capricious, self-serving demon lords had agreed to on paper (although this still didn’t prevent some extremely lazy demon lords from sending a representative with full rights to the Council instead).

“…I think I have read about this,” Erald said. “Once, all the demon lords came together to wage an epic battle, one that the Western Holy Church named Walpurgis, or the feast of demons.”

This was something he had apparently read in some records dating back a thousand years ago. The war was a costly one, causing serious damage and disasters across the land. Walpurgis, the term coined by the Holy Church for it, had the connotation of not just a demonic feast but one attended by those who spread chaos and destruction worldwide. These were worldwide affairs, I supposed.

So if demon lords gathered together like this, did it mean war among themselves, or them teaming up against some other enemy?

“So are the demon lords about to declare war on something?”

“No! I’m a busy woman! I don’t have time for wars and other annoying stuff like that!”

Ramiris looked like she had a lot of free time, but never mind. She was a demon lord, one who had been around for a long time to boot. Maybe she was part of those conferences of a millennium ago; it wasn’t out of the question.

Erald nodded at her. “I believe the demon lord Ramiris is telling the truth. The war in the records I read was officially called the Temma War, the War Between Heaven and Demon. It was fought by multiple factions, all vying for power. Of course…”

As he put it, these Temma Wars (or Great Wars) were triggered every five hundred years. There was a reason for that. It was because the forces of heaven—in other words, the angels—came down to earth at around that cycle. These angels were kind of natural enemies to demons, I suppose, but oddly enough, they would attack pretty much everyone indiscriminately. Developed cities and towns, for some reason, were a particularly favored target. Nobody knew why, but there you go.

“That is the reason why we never left the underground,” Gazel said—and maybe they had the right idea. As advanced as they were, they’d stick out like a sore thumb. The Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion took the same tactic, building a city in the hollow of a gigantic divine tree—that “fancy tree city,” as Gazel had mockingly called it. As superpowers, both nations spared no expense in keeping their lands safe.

So what about the Western Nations? The Council of the West was established to protect themselves against monsters, but also so they could survive an upcoming Great War. Member nations worked together, while Dwargon and Thalion basically hunkered down.

But the angels weren’t the only enemy to worry about. As if responding to their descent, the monsters on the ground would suddenly explode into action—in this case, the magic-born, knowledge-bearing monsters. Some demon lords would use Temma Wars to stage invasions of human nations as well. The Great War of a millennium ago saw that happen, which led to a lot of tragedy for everyone involved.

The humans, to their credit, weren’t anyone to be trifled with. That could be seen in what was likely to be the largest antagonist of the next war—the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire. The Empire’s thirst for power could strike anytime, anyplace. If the Western Nations showed any sign of weakness, the eastern power could bare their fangs at a moment’s notice.

Thus, you would have these wild, frantic world wars, with angel and demon and human brutally slaughtering one another. That was your typical Temma War.

So I guess it was kind of slander to accuse the demon lords of triggering them. Not that I wanted one of those, either. And what’s with angels setting their sights on the bigger cities? I wanted my city to be the richest one in the land, incomparable to anything else—but maybe I ought to wait a bit. Maybe it’s smarter not to develop the most important facilities we needed until we had the resources to defend them. But this was all in the future anyway. Let’s just put it in the file for now.

Back to this Walpurgis.

“So what is Walpurgis, though? What do all the demon lords assemble for?”

If it didn’t have anything to do with a Great War, there had to be some other motivation.

Wait. Is it that, maybe? Like, what Milim was talking about, how they punished anyone else who declared themselves to be a demon king? Are they gonna decide who’ll do me in?

“Um, well, first, I think you have kinda the wrong idea, so lemme start with this.”

What Ramiris had to say hadn’t occurred to me at all.

“These Walpurgis Councils, y’know; we hold a lot of them. All you need is three demon lords to agree to one, which is pretty darn easy. Back in the day, it’d just be this informal chat over tea with me, Guy, and Milim… But Walpurgis is just a place where demon lords come together, catch up on news, and talk about whatever’s happened lately. It’s really not a huge deal; it’s just that humans don’t know about it.”

This sounded like quite a revelation. Maybe she saw it as nothing, but it was almost scary how lightly she treated the demon lord job sometimes. Maybe I should take what she said with a grain of salt. If I accepted it as the unvarnished truth, it might come back to bite me in the ass sometime.

“Okay, then, stupid, if it’s just high tea with your friends, then why’s this nation gonna fall to ruin?!”

Even someone as kind as I am felt the need to yell at her a little. This kid just has no idea what’s going on.

“Look, no, all right?!” She waved her arms up and down. “The problem isn’t that they’re holding Walpurgis; it’s what they’re gonna talk about!”

What they’ll talk about? If they’re all meeting together, it’s gonna be about killing me, isn’t it…?

As Ramiris put it, two people agreed to Clayman’s initial Walpurgis request—the demon lords Frey and Milim. That triggered it—and the topic of discussion: “The new force born in the Forest of Jura and their leader assuming the title of demon lord.” So me, then.

“So you… You declared yourself a demon lord?”

I nodded. “Yep. And I don’t regret it one bit.”

“Mm, well, that’s not so weird coming from you. You might have to deal with a few tricky spots, but with all the power you’ve got, it oughtta work out, huh?”

Ramiris made it all sound like it wasn’t her problem at all. Which I guess it wasn’t. I mean, I was prepared for this, but still.

“You think they wanna punish me for it?”

“That’s how they’re phrasing it,” she replied, “but one of the unwritten rules in our line of work is that if you wanna punish someone, go do it yourself, if you care that much. They’re holding Walpurgis this time because they were betrayed by the demon lord Carillon. Plus, Clayman was going on and on about how Mjurran, one of his underlings, was killed.”

“What kind of ‘line of work’ is demon lord anyway?”

She ignored the question.

But apparently Clayman had already fingered “Rimuru, so-called new demon lord” as Mjurran’s killer. Which meant his goal was—

Report. It is believed to be the takeover of the demon lord Carillon’s territory and the suppression of the Forest of Jura.

Yeah. I think so, too. So that’s why his army’s en route. I guess he made the first move before we even realized it. Shrewder than I thought, I guess…

“Hey! Are you listening to me?” Now Ramiris was giving me an uncharacteristically stern look. “You’re acting like this no big deal, but it’s huge! Milim’s already taken down Carillon, I heard, and Clayman’s ready to send an entire army of magic-born someone’s way. Punishment, heck—this is war! Clayman’s come up with an excuse to take each and every one of you down, all right?!”

The summit attendees began to stir. Having one of the demon lords “taken down” was serious news to the superpower nations. I suppose it would be. It could totally disrupt the balance of power between them. And while it had already happened, the news was a total bolt from the blue for everyone else. Pretty heady stuff.

That, and:

“Lord Carillon, a betrayer? How dare that brute accuse him!”

“Clayman will pay for this. I’ll crush that upstart with my own two hands!”

“Whether Lord Carillon is there to lead it or not, our armies are unhurt and in full fighting shape. We’ll never let Clayman’s minions seize our land!”

It goes without saying that the Lycanthropeers had the most visceral reaction to it all. Nobody likes their master being called a backstabber, I suppose. Plus, from what Ramiris said, apparently Clayman was gunning for his whole territory.

Man, we really got a late start, didn’t we? I had no idea he’d be moving this fast. Better dispatch him quick—he can’t be up to anything good.

“Calm down a sec, Ramiris. Yes, it’s true I declared myself demon lord, but I didn’t kill Mjurran.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Clayman’s telling you a pack of lies. I expected him to come out against me with that accusation.”

Plus…

“Wh-what?! You got any evidence to show for that?”

…either way…

“…Um, demon lord Ramiris? Pardon me for speaking me out of turn. I am Mjurran, the magic-born servant of Clayman who was allegedly killed…”

…I’m gonna crush Clayman.

The moment I made him think Mjurran was dead, I knew he was going to react sooner or later. I didn’t take the bait—Clayman was just hooked by my lure. The rest of the demon lords weren’t involved.

The sight of Mjurran threw Ramiris for a loop.

“Huh? Wha?! Wait, so… Now I get it! The demon lord Clayman’s the real culprit now, isn’t he?! I knew it!”

Good thing she recovered so fast. Too bad that was incredibly obvious to anyone else in the room. I felt bad for her, so I decided to follow up on something else I’d wondered about.

“Yeah, I agree with you there, but I wanted to ask you something.”

“Mm? What? Just ask Detective Ramiris here, and she’ll crack the case!”

Uh-oh. I wound up just egging her on, didn’t I? “Detective?” Seriously? She must’ve been peeking at whatever Veldora was reading, huh? I opted not to pursue that for now.

“How do you think the other demon lords will react to this?”

I wasn’t expecting much, but figured I had to ask. She had been a demon lord for ages, so I couldn’t deny the possibility that she had something to go on. The room went quiet, awaiting her response. It was a question of deep interest to everyone else, too. Too bad Ramiris was so indifferent to that.

“Huh? Well, I dunno. It was just, like, ‘Here’s what we’ll talk about during the party, so join in,’ okay?”

So nonchalant with it. I shouldn’t have expected anything else. Just a kid. I should be glad she came over to tell me at all.

Next question.

“Okay, so when is this Walpurgis, Ramiris? Do you know the exact date and time?”

I’d want to know that before we formulate our anti-Clayman strategy.

“Oh, didn’t I mention it? Um, it’s gonna be three days from now, on the night of the new moon.”

Three days? That’s sooner than I thought. Gonna be kind of hard to finish him off in just three days.

So…is this showdown gonna have to wait until after Walpurgis?

Another issue to bring up with the gang, I guess.

That was about all I wanted to ask Ramiris. That was all she was here for, it turned out, and it wasn’t like I’d be able to glean anything else useful from her.

Then a sudden thought came to mind.

“So why’d you come all the way here to tell me?”

“Mm? Well, really, it’s like, if you get killed, what’s gonna happen to my Beretta here? So I decided to take your side on this, and that’s why I’m here. That kinda thing. And I’m gonna build a labyrinth entrance here, but is that okay?”

“No, it’s not okay! Where’d that come from?! What kind of entrance anyway?!”

I appreciated her bringing the news, but this came right out of nowhere.

“Huhhh?! What’s the big deal? Don’t sweat the small stuff!”

She never was one for listening. No, she was much more for talking—and arguing her point until she got it. As far as she was concerned, this conversation was already over. She’s one of the most free ’n’ wild fairies I’ve ever met.

“I am sweating the small stuff, and you should, too! And don’t go around thinking that Beretta is all yours, either!”

I held my ground, refusing to let her get her way. Any “entrance to the labyrinth” built around here could never possibly bode well for us. And Beretta’s fate wasn’t just in my hands—it had a lot to do with the golem, as well. It wasn’t something she had any right to dictate. A simple question on my part led to what I could only call an outrageous proposal.

We argued vehemently about it for a while, to no effect, before the crowd finally broke up. I was too busy to deal with her any longer, and Ramiris, her business apparently done, went back to her manga.

As they left, I promised all the attendees that I’d inform them of whatever new information I found. They all agreed to this before they went their separate ways.

Fuze planned to stay the night at the inn before heading home. “I hope you’re prepared for what lies ahead,” he warned. “It’s your country being targeted this time. A demon lord is a very dangerous thing. I think I know how strong you are, Sir Rimuru, but…”

I understood what he meant. At worst, I could wind up making enemies out of several demon lords at once. Out of the ten of ’em, who could I count on as nonhostile? Carillon was AWOL. Ramiris promised to back me up, so there’s one. Milim… Milim’s my biggest worry. I’m pretty sure she’s just being tricked, but I’d still need to prepare myself for the worst.

So if I managed to completely screw up everything, I could have eight demon lords wanting me dead. Of course, if it looked like I was gonna lose Milim before that, it was probably best to run for the hills immediately at that point.

“Oh, I’ll figure something out,” I reassured Fuze.

Erald and Elen also whined at me about wanting some time to talk to each other. I agreed to have them stay for several nights before leaving—not at the inn but at our luxury ryokan-style hotel. All of Tempest was proud of that place, and if we could earn the duke’s praise for it, he was welcome anytime.

It was funny, though, seeing how different Erald the statesman was from Erald the person. He was so preoccupied with his daughter that I was worried she’d run off on him—I just had to pray he wouldn’t do anything to make her even angrier.

Gazel also opted to stay a few extra days, so I lodged him in the ryokan as well. As I guessed from seeing them speak, they had known each other for ages, even fighting in battles together. Erald must’ve really been a hell of a wizard. And now, funnily enough, they were using Tempest as a new channel to build geopolitical ties with. It’s always better to get along, of course.

We really enjoyed a celebrity lineup at this summit, though, didn’t we? Leaders who’d hold major sway over human nations in the future. And—if you think about it—I was standing on equal footing with them. Having that selfish fairy crash it at the very end made for a less-than-snappy ending, but I think it’s safe to say I gained a lot from it all.

We would’ve liked to rest up as well, but that wasn’t happening. I didn’t want demon lords breathing down my neck, and we needed some countermeasures.

After a meal, we all gathered again in the meeting hall. The Three Lycanthropeers and Mjurran were our only guests this time. Yohm and Gruecith were already preparing to depart—Gruecith really wanted a seat in the conference but relented after Phobio screamed at him. They had an important job to do, so I really wanted them to focus their full attention on that. I was hoping Mjurran would join in the preparations as well, but she was the one with concrete intelligence on Clayman, so I had to ask her to join.

And for some reason, Diablo was joining us. “Heh-heh-heh-heh… I hardly have any need to prepare,” he declared, and really, I had to assume he was right. There wasn’t any reason to kick him out, so I gave him permission.

The moment I entered the hall:

“Oh! You! You! What’re you doing? What’s the meaning of this?!”

Ramiris accosted me yet again.

“What do you mean?” I asked. Then she began yelling at me, her face turning red.

Here was the basic story: During this break period, she was called into the dining hall. I had totally forgotten about this, but Ramiris had a long history with Treyni and the other dryads, who served her back when she was still Spirit Queen. Treyni recognized her at once, of course, and it wasn’t long before they were all giving her the royal treatment, answering her every beck and call.

“That’s pretty great, huh?”

“Yes! Yes, it is great! Really great! So I’ve decided to live here, too, Rimuru!”

Guess Ramiris really likes this town. And as a lonely demon lord with no minions to serve her, I’m sure the dryad kindness lifted her spirits sky-high. Between that and being guided around town, soaking up all the sights, she decided to take the plunge.

“I told you to stop making all these unilateral decisions! Plus, remember, Treyni and the dryads are kind of busy managing things in the forest. They don’t live with you anymore! They can’t spend all day dealing with you here.”

I gave the three doting dryad sisters waiting behind her some serious side-eye as I lectured Ramiris. She wasn’t interested in listening.

“Oh, don’t be so stingy! What’s the big deal? If anything happens, I’ll help you out of it! Ol’ Ramiris is the strongest gal you’ll ever find!”

With your help, I’m headed straight for the— No. Never mind. If I said that out loud, it’d make her cry.

“Sir Rimuru,” Treyni said, “we promise to take care of Lady Ramiris. I do hope you will be forward-thinking in your decision.”

“““Do it for us, please!””” her sisters said in chorus. I dunno. She’s gonna be such a troublemaker. We’ll be dealing with even more humans here before long, and Ramiris flitting around will be hard to ignore.

Hmm… Another issue for the back burner, then.

“All right. I’ll think about it.”

“You will?! Oh, Rimuru, I knew you’d see things my way!”

Let’s give some thought later to how Ramiris’s presence would impact the town. I had other issues to take care of before that.

With Ramiris suitably placated, it was time to start the conference.

“Right. I know it’s tough, having all these discussions at once, but bear with me. We have two items on the agenda here: fighting Clayman and the Walpurgis Council. Ramiris here has just informed me that I am being targeted. First, I’d like you all to hear Soei’s report and discuss our strategy. Soei, give us your briefing on Clayman’s forces.”

“Sir!”

He began right after my introduction.

While we were holding our summits, Clayman’s army had been busy. They had stopped in Milim’s domain to rest and organize their troops.

“They do not appear to be led by Clayman himself,” Soei stated. “Their leader is accompanied by a slew of magic-born and boasts a great deal more magicule energy than the rest of them, but even then, his force is along the lines of the Three Lycanthropeers. If that is the demon lord Clayman, he is far too feeble a threat.”

Man, he’s brimming with confidence, too, huh?

“In terms of Lycanthropeer-level strength, I can think of three magic-born serving Clayman who would fit that description…”

That many, huh? Yep. He’s sure a demon lord, I gotta admit. These three were three of Clayman’s five fingers, his most favored of assistants: Yamza, the middle finger; Adalmann, the pointer finger; and Nine-Head, the thumb. Mjurran, by the way, was the ring finger. The final little finger was named Pironé but was mostly involved in intelligence gathering and rarely appeared in public.

I had been wondering about the Moderate Jesters group and their relation to Clayman, but Mjurran apparently knew nothing about them. “Clayman was never one to trust in his underlings,” she explained, “so it wouldn’t be strange at all for him to put observers in place to keep tabs on us during missions.”

You could call them the audience for his puppet shows, I suppose. They might’ve been active without any of Clayman’s forces knowing, like in the orc lord battle. Better make sure I don’t forget that.

“So who’s their commander, Mjurran?”

The leader Soei had spotted was a thin, frail-looking magic-born. His Thought Communication broadcast a perfect image of him to all of us.

“This is Yamza. Yamza, the Frozen Swordmage. He is a cruel, unfair, merciless lowlife but a regrettably talented one. He willingly swore his loyalty to Clayman, and we never did get on well after that.”

So the army was led by Yamza, a magic-born and (according to Mjurran) the strongest of the five fingers. Clayman had granted him an ornate, expensive magic sword with the power to freeze its targets, earning him the nickname. In other words, there was no guessing what his latent skills were without that weapon.

Yamza was commanding an army of some thirty thousand magic-born, all with varying levels of power. By Soei’s estimation, around four-fifths were a solid B rank, the rest mostly an A-minus. There were a few solid A’s at the top, but we’re still talking Gelmud level at best. That made them stronger and dicier than the Farmus army I annihilated but still nothing to really break a sweat over.

“A little too weak, aren’t they?”

Right now, the number of refugees we had taken in from the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania had surpassed twenty thousand. Around half, ten thousand, were in fighting shape, each averaging a B rank—which went up to A-minus after their beast transformation. It was a surprisingly powerful force. Even Farmus’s most elite knight corps were lucky to average a B, and that was with assorted magical enhancements placed on them, so it said a lot about how strong Eurazania’s fighters were.

Humans and beastmen were just different, down to the foundation. We had a big force of them, but Carillon’s domain still had more on reserves. These were beastmen that the army recruited from nearby villages during the capital evacuation, only to have them spread out across the countryside. The most powerful officers of the Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance had brought them back together, regrouped them, and sent them off to hide out at strategic points. Add their numbers up, and they, conservatively, amounted to over ten thousand themselves.

Thus, we had a total of twenty thousand A-minus fighters on hand. Carillon really was a demon lord. What a force he’d had on him.

“It is strange, yes,” Alvis said. “Yamza is undoubtedly a powerful magic-born, but we Three Lycanthropeers would never lose to him. And while his force outnumbers ours, we hold an overwhelming advantage in training and fighting ability.”

“Yeah,” agreed Phobio, “if you want leadership, we’ve got loads of it!”

“Do they think that Lord Carillon died, and we’ll just fall over like trees to them?” Sufia sniffed. “No, Clayman can’t be that much of a fool…”

All seemed to believe that Clayman’s force wasn’t much of a threat.

Benimaru wasn’t as sure. “One moment, though… Could Clayman be aiming at something besides this town?”

Ah yes. Maybe we had the wrong idea. Everyone was always trying to hit this town first, so Ramiris sort of assumed Clayman was after me once more and flew on over. And here I was hoping we’d get to strike them from both sides once the army left Eurazania. The best-laid plans and all that.

“So are they marching for the Beast Kingdom?! There are nothing but refugees left there, plus over ten thousand fighters. They may be better in combat, but Clayman’s numbers could overwhelm them!”

Right. Soei reported that they were camped in Milim’s domain for now, but they had already reorganized and were ready to head into Eurazania territory tomorrow or the next day. I didn’t think they’d attempt a night march, but we’d need to factor that possibility into the equation, too.

“I wonder if they are aware at all that we are on the lookout for Clayman,” Geld gravely stated. I wasn’t so optimistic about that. Better to assume the worst; then we can take action when it happens.

“But even if they are marching for this town,” observed Mjurran, “Clayman would never ignore danger from the rear. He would snuff out the source of that first before proceeding.”

Yeah. So would I, actually. But…“snuff it out”?!

“Wait, so you mean…Clayman’s intending to kill off all the fighters in the Beast Kingdom?!”

And who can say if it was just the fighters…

Understood. I have predicted the actions of the demon lord Clayman. There is a 100 percent likelihood that he seeks to awaken himself to become a “true” demon lord. I do not believe this town factors into his plans. However, to achieve this, he is likely taking the crude and uncertain tactic of hunting down all remaining life in the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania.

Ah. So genocide, then. I’m a total hypocrite for saying this, but I can’t say I’m a fan of his any-means-necessary approach.

Clayman never left any stone unturned. I was sure he’d been observing the highway leading out from this town. The moment we sent out reinforcements, he would know. And even before that—

“Clayman is a master of intelligence gathering. I imagine he’s aware that we Lycanthropeers and the main Carillon force have evacuated here. Even if we marched for home right now, it would take two days, at least…”

We’ve totally been given the slip. Just as Alvis said, Clayman had read through it all. An army composed of what’re normally B ranks wouldn’t make it in time, even if they never stopped to rest. I was intending to invest all my troops in the fight as well, but by the time we reached the battle, the Beast Kingdom would be massacred already, I’m sure…

But would that genocide be enough to make Clayman awaken?

Understood. Despite the lack of efficiency, he would be able to obtain a vast number of souls. Clayman’s chances of awakening are…78 percent. This probability would rise if he was able to obtain more souls shortly afterward.

That’s bad. We gotta stop him—if not for all those imperiled beastmen, then at least for my own ass. That being said, Eurazania’s people were on friendly terms with us, and trust is worth a lot more than money. Sometimes, compassion can help you as much as the other person. There’s no need to refrain from being fully involved.

“Benimaru, stop them.”

He grinned at my fairly reckless order. “You got it—or I should say, leave it to me!”

Nice to see he’s a man of integrity, too. Get him heated up, and he can’t help but drop the formal speech. He always treats me with so much respect in public, seeking to draw a line between personal and political life, but I wish he wouldn’t go through so much effort. I don’t want him openly sneering at me, so at least I don’t have to worry about that…not that public derision of me is a problem in this nation.

I suppose it’s kind of like if you get promoted beyond your former boss in your workplace, and it gets all awkward between you two. It’s just the way society works—deal with it. So I decided to deal with it and act the part of the boss.

“Great. We will now design a defense line for the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania. I want to hear suggestions for a way to win, with Benimaru taking the helm!”

My leaders all bowed at me.

“““Yes sir!”””

Even the Three Lycanthropeers joined them. I guess my dignity was more than intact.

Still, that Clayman’s even sneakier than I thought. Scheduling Walpurgis in the evening three days from now must’ve all been part of the plan. He’d stage his Eurazania genocide before any other demon lord could intervene, then gleefully report on it during the event.

It would take time to unite the scattered forces across the land; right now, any fighters in the Beast Kingdom would just be picked off, one by one. It’d be impossible to resist. And then you have all those powerless civilians being killed without a second thought…

Now that we’d decided to block that, the meeting hall was buzzing with ideas. Everyone wanted to assemble a force at once and head on over—but nobody verbally brought it up. Everyone here was deeply acquainted with the importance of starting with intel. I didn’t move immediately after declaring we’d defeat Clayman, precisely because I was awaiting Soei’s report.

Even now, we were having supplies gathered in the town’s main square and refreshing our soldiers’ equipment. Kaijin, Garm, and Dold were all crafting new weapons and armor, using their respective technical skills, and all our fighters were changing into them and preparing for the battle ahead.

No point in panicking. You had to know the enemy’s location, army formation, numbers, and mission. Running into the fray without at least that much won’t earn you any results to be proud of.

Now our deliberations were nearing their climax.

“So that’s about the war power we have on hand. If we can have them be there in time, we can win. The problem is transport, isn’t it? There’s no way to make it, so we need a way to buy time.”

“Why not send the goblin riders and Gabil’s force in first to stage a guerrilla resistance?” Hakuro suggested.

“No, it would mean nothing,” Benimaru calmly stated. “I’ve examined the geography of the Beast Kingdom, and much of it is either flat or features low hills. There are few natural elements to conceal oneself in. A surprise attack from the air would be effective, but a guerrilla force of a hundred or so simply wouldn’t be adequate.”

The best place to hide a force like this would be the fruit orchards lining rivers, but these were spread out across hilly areas with good drainage, so not as subtle as we’d want. The terrain wasn’t suitable for concealing large numbers of troops.

“Since when were you looking into our geography?” Sufia quietly groused. I was actually kind of wondering that myself. Benimaru probably did some research when I sent him to lead our first envoy team into the Beast Kingdom. I guess I really can rely on him to be thorough. Sufia didn’t seem genuinely offended, at least.

“We have a team of approximately four hundred beastmen who are geared for speed,” Alvis advised. “Bird types are rare among us—no more than a hundred. Sending them out in advance would be a death sentence.”

Simply being able to fly didn’t shield them from fatigue, after all. If they plus Gabil’s team couldn’t even reach two hundred, there was little point deploying them first. With the high visibility of the terrain, too, small squadrons couldn’t accomplish much.

So for our strategy, we would have to go back to basics. Plow everything into doing what we could, as accurately as possible. That’s it. We’d send messages out to the fighters across the land, gather up as many civilians as we could, and evacuate them out. Once they were in Tempest, the dryads’ protection should do a lot for their survival rate. We’d then have our speedier forces to use guerrilla tactics to aid in their escape. The slower armies would march as well, swallowing up the refugees as they prepared to face off against Clayman’s force.

That was the basic wrap-up. It was a battle against time and relied a fair bit on luck, but we didn’t have any better ideas. Thus, to prevent the worst, we decided that all of us should go out on the field to fight as well.

Our top leaders—Benimaru, Shuna, Soei, Shion, Geld, and Ranga—had all learned the Spatial Motion extra skill, giving them control over “transport gates” linking two locations together. Diablo was “born” with that ability, too, but he was with Yohm’s team at the moment. I could call him back if things got bad, but I wanted to handle this with us seven if possible, myself included. Each of us may’ve had the power of a whole army, but we couldn’t afford to push ourselves too far. Shuna, in particular, wasn’t too suited for on-the-ground combat; I wanted to have Gabil and Hakuro covering for her, if possible.

“Guess it’s the only way,” I reasoned. “If we can help earn our forces some time, I think we can pull this off with a minimum of casualties. Would’ve been nice if we could just bring ’em all over there with regular transport magic, but…”

I brought up that idea mainly so I could publicly shoot it down. Our problems would be solved if we had magic that could instantly transport an entire army from one point to another, but not even my Spatial Motion worked on ten thousand troops at once.

But:

Understood. Transportation magic allows for the transferal of materials at a low cost. It works by using a separate dimension to link two points together, but it is not effective for handling organic matter, due to heavy magicule irradiation. However, anyone protected by a Barrier would not be affected by the transport. Those are the fundamental rules of transportation magic.

Ummm… So that’s the difference between teleport and transport magic? It’s just that teleport costs more magicules to cast, since it includes spells to protect who you’re teleporting? Wait, so…

In other words, since magic-born and monsters have natural magicule resistance, anyone capable of erecting a Barrier over themselves can be transported successfully without issue. A full-transportation spell that included measures to protect the target would also be possible.

So if you’re strong enough not to die when exposed to a ton of magicules, you can go across this “separate dimension” or whatever. I guess that’s the way the Spatial Motion skill works. I should’ve noticed that. What’s more, if you can fully protect whoever you’re transporting, it’s no problem to send ’em over. I suppose that’s a sort of teleportation, really, but wouldn’t that just waste a lot of magical energy? Besides, trying to adapt that into a legion magic you could deploy on tens of thousands of troops is far beyond what I could do right now…

Understood. The spell has already been developed. I have also succeeded in pairing it with the extra skill Dominate Space to greatly reduce the magical force required.

Well, look at that! I can’t believe how much Raphael has grown, developing new skills and magic without me even having to ask. I mean, my skills must’ve evolved a huge amount when I awoke into demon lord form, but I still didn’t have a grasp of them all. They would’ve just been going to waste without Raphael. If I had to guess, this was Ability Adjust at work—but either way, I couldn’t ask for anything better. Right here, right now, it had just provided me the exact spell I wanted more than anything in the world. No complaints here!

“Sir Rimuru,” Shuna warned me, aware of the danger, “it’s too hazardous to attempt transport magic on an army…”

“Yeah, you’re right, Shuna. But just now, I’ve successfully developed a new spell!”

All our problems were cleared away. I felt bad for Clayman, kinda. He would’ve won if it wasn’t for my evolution.

“Ohhh…!”

“What on…?!”

“Just now?!”

Everyone gave me surprised looks. I nodded back at them. “The question is: Are you prepared for this? If we use this spell, we can send our entire army over there at once. But it’ll be the first time I’ve ever used it, and we haven’t tested its safety at all. There’s no time to experiment with it. But do you still trust me?”

I, at least, trusted Raphael. If Raphael says we can do it, then there’s no room for doubt. But what about everyone else? Do they trust me enough to stake their lives on this?

“No need to worry,” Benimaru said with a brazen smile. “I have given you my loyalty—and as your loyal retainer, I would gladly die if ordered to do so. I know all too well by now that you’d never give us a meaningless order.”

The rest of my leaders agreed—even Diablo, the new guy, was nodding with that eerie grin on his face.

The Lycanthropeers joined them. “You got my trust,” Sufia declared. “We can’t start getting suspicious of someone whose help we’re askin’ for.”

“He’s already saved me once. Our fighters know that, so I ain’t about to start whining now.”

“Oh dear, Phobio, you’re making it sound like I have no choice but to agree. But we’re the slowest force, and as long as we are, I’ll want to rely on Sir Rimuru’s power to help us out.” Alvis seemed a tad dubious still but not enough to turn us down.

I nodded at them all. “I hear you loud and clear! Time to turn the tables on Clayman’s schemes. It’s all up to you men and women now. Let me see some victory!”

“““Rahhh!!”””

I was starting to see some wild, ferocious smiles. If we can all make it in time, we’re sure to win. Plus, no matter how closely Clayman’s surveilling the highways, he’ll never notice our troops get transported in. It’s practically in the bag. No wonder everyone seemed so confident again.

So I left reworking our strategy to Benimaru. While he was doing that, Soei gave another report—that a group of one hundred “Dragon Faithful” had merged with Clayman’s force.

“One hundred? That much shouldn’t be a problem,” said Benimaru.

Did Benimaru know about this group already, or…?

“Soei,” I meekly asked, “what are these Dragon Faithful?”

“The name for those who worship the dragon—in other words, Lady Milim, the Dragon Princess.”

Oh, Milim’s people? I thought Milim said she didn’t have anyone working under her. So kind of like her fans, then? Her domain, which didn’t really have an official name, featured a population of under a hundred thousand, mostly people living off the land in harmony with nature. Maybe they were acting as bodyguards to Clayman’s force as they proceeded through their domain.

Soei didn’t have any more information yet, so we dropped the subject. For now, I ordered him to continue monitoring the Clayman army, as well as search for a suitable area to deploy our own forces.

That wrapped up how we’d handle the battle. Next came the Walpurgis Council Ramiris had warned me about. The Three Lycanthropeers were already gone, relaying our strategy to their troops and convincing them my transport magic would work.

Mjurran left as well, since Walpurgis was my problem, and she wouldn’t have any feedback for that. Her job was to assist Yohm.

This meant it was just the usual Tempest gang and me, which put me quite a bit at ease. There was no need to hold anything back for politeness’ sake now.

“If we only knew where Clayman was, I could just teleport right on over and put an end to this pronto, but…”

If his military was in motion, that meant his headquarters had to be more lightly guarded. My leaders and I could’ve zoomed right over and finished him off without having to worry about a counterattack. Of course, I couldn’t afford to laze out on this town’s defenses while I was away, either. Better keep that in mind.

“I apologize,” Soei said. “There is an area in the region surrounded by a thick fog of magicules. I found it too dangerous to proceed inside.”

No need for him to be sorry. He needed to be careful in everything he does, even with a Replication of himself. It’d be a lot worse if he screwed up and the enemy found out what we were up to. Clayman’s HQ ought to be beyond that cloud—this was already enough of a lead to go on.

“Should several of us explore the area while it is unguarded?” Benimaru suggested.

“Isn’t Clayman holding Walpurgis shortly?” Shuna coldly countered. “I fear we may miss him entirely.”

“True, true,” added Hakuro as Benimaru winced. “It would reflect quite poorly on us if we underestimated the enemy force and tasted defeat. We need Sir Benimaru to keep our forces together.”

“All right. Any other suggestions?”

Shion’s hand shot up.

“Yes?”

“Why don’t we storm that Walpurgis thing and slash up both Clayman and any other demon lords who have a problem with us?”

Her eyes were gleaming as she said it. It was my fault for letting that idiot talk in the first place. I could feel the veins throbbing around my temples, but I held it all back. This wasn’t the first time I had to deal with something like this.

“Shion, how are you going to ‘slash them up’? Can you give me something more realistic to work with?”

Clayman solo was one thing, but picking a fight with yet more demon lords would never work. We needed to handle them one at a time, something Shion would have to learn sooner rather than later.

My scolding made her visibly depressed. Eesh. Let’s try to soften the blow a bit. I may not act it all the time, but I like being kind to her.

“But crashing their Council might be a good idea.”

Her face rose, full of expectant joy. She was never willing to let a bit of praise go unnoticed.

“Listen, Ramiris. You have experience with them. Do you think I could join in this thing, too?”

“Uweh?! You want to participate, Rimuru?”

“No, I just wanted to ask. Clayman’s gonna be there, so I thought it would be interesting if I paid a visit as well.”

If I’m being targeted, showing up somewhere Clayman didn’t expect me ought to rock him a little bit. Resorting to violence during a Council might not be too apropos, but I could consider my options once I’m there.

“Hmm… I think it’s probably okay. But you can only have two attendants along with you!”

Any more than that would lead to trouble that all the demon lords preferred to avoid. Once, one of the newer demon lords brought along a hundred or so warriors to the Council as a show of force. This stoked the ire of another demon lord whose nation had just been razed and was looking for someone—anyone—to serve as a little stress relief. That newer lord wound up killed, along with all the magic-born for dessert. Ever since, it was forbidden for relatively powerless magic-born to participate, and only two guests per demon lord were allowed.

In other words, Walpurgis Councils had ended in violence before. Which meant it wouldn’t be, you know, unprecedented if I did it. Maybe I should seriously consider trying to rile Clayman into a fight over there.

“Well, what do you think, guys? Think it’d be fun to join in?”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh. A wonderful suggestion. I would be happy to join you at—”

“Diablo, you fool! I will be by his side, and I refuse to allow anyone else!”

There they go. Shion and Diablo, back at it again. Bringing those two along would be suicide, so I crossed them off the list from the start…

“…But either way,” Diablo said, “if we go into battle with the demon lords, as long as we can defeat them, all is well. What need do we have for a demon lord besides yourself, Sir Rimuru?”

Shion briskly nodded her total agreement. “Exactly! I had thought you were an idiot, but for a new recruit, you seem to have much potential! You stated exactly what I was trying to say!”

Are they friends, or foes, or what? Whatever they were, I used to think Shion was the only one who didn’t think. But no, they both agreed that killing all the other demon lords was a fine idea.

Why’d it turn out like this? Looking around the room, I could see a few other people nodding their agreement. A few were more conservative, but a lot of them seemed more interested in spilling blood than securing a victory. The flock of war hawks in my leadership seemed to be growing. But that was just way too reckless. Better hit the brakes on this conversation.

“Whoa, whoa. No need to go crazy. We haven’t decided on anything yet. Besides, Diablo, I put you in charge of Farmus, so I’m not bringing you along either way.”

“Ah, true. I understand.”

Diablo seemed to think of conquering Farmus as a children’s pastime. I liked that confidence, but hopefully it didn’t cause him to miss something and mess up the whole thing. His emotions appeared mixed to me—disappointed but glad to be assigned work.

“Isn’t that dangerous, though?” Shuna asked. There we go. That’s the kind of opinion I wanted to hear.

“It is,” replied Geld. “Besides, even if we don’t join the Council, wouldn’t it be more effective to seize Clayman’s headquarters while he is away?”

He was absolutely right. It was better to proceed with a battle we could win without exposing ourselves to danger. Geld was as much a hawk as any of them, but he wasn’t that impulsive. I was glad to hear that from him—but I had my reasons to contemplate attending Walpurgis, too. Something concerned me about it.

“No,” Benimaru said, “what Sir Rimuru is most concerned about is what move the demon lord Milim will make. It is hard to imagine Lady Milim betraying us, but we cannot deny the possibility that Clayman is controlling her. Perhaps she has her own motivations, but at the very least, we are sure she has defeated Lord Carillon. I think it is not a bad idea to pursue the truth of that matter at the Council.”

“Exactly,” agreed Soei. “I wonder why Lady Milim signed on to convene the event. Perhaps she has some kind of plot in mind?”

Great to see they were of the same mind—sharing both my ideas and the issues they presented.

“Yeah, it’d be crazy to think that Milim would just do whatever Clayman wants. I mean, Milim is so self-centered!”

Are you really one to talk, Ramiris? Maybe not, but I couldn’t help but agree with her.

“I find it impossible to believe that Lady Milim betrayed us,” Shion concluded. “I have no evidence to back it up, but that’s absolutely how I feel!”

Right. No evidence. And I didn’t think she stabbed me in the back, either, really. Raphael complained about a lack of data to work with, but even I thought that scenario unlikely, unless there was some vast change in the state of things. I’ve decided to believe in Milim—but that doesn’t mean I’m letting her do whatever she wants.

“I agree with all of you. Milim hasn’t betrayed us—which means something else must’ve happened to her. Like Ramiris suggested, I think it’s a good idea to consider Clayman the culprit—or at least the cause of this. That’s why I’d like to take up Benimaru’s suggestion. I’m thinking about joining the Walpurgis Council and seeing what I can find out in there…”

Something definitely must’ve happened. At the very worst, Milim might attack us the moment Walpurgis ended. That was the real cause of my anxieties, the reason why I couldn’t let her be. Clayman alone, I could handle. Him plus Milim, I really wanted to avoid. Well, at least I’ve steered this in the right direction, and we won’t resort to violence as our first—

“Right? Right, right! Looks like Detective Ramiris had the right hunch the whole time. So how about we just kick Clayman’s butt?”

Oops. Maybe not. Not as long as Ramiris was here.

“Besides, what the heck is with all you guys? You have this, like, treasure trove of powerful magic-born at your beck and call, Rimuru! If you had this many, what’s the big deal about just handing Beretta over to me for good, huh?!”

She was getting carried away. The strength she saw in us was giving her a swelled head—and she still hadn’t given up on Beretta. Which, as I noted, Beretta has a say in, too, so her selfishness isn’t gonna get her anywhere.

But she had her allies in the meeting hall.

“I see. She makes a very good point. Right—perhaps I could come over and do a little killing?”

“Whoa, chill out, Shion! And Benimaru and Soei, I see you guys packing up to leave town! You’re not going anywhere yet!”

Here we go again. Just when I was ready to RSVP for Walpurgis.

I needed Benimaru and Soei to fight Clayman’s forces. We’d be carrying out these plans at the same time, so I had to select the two attendants joining me carefully.

Who should it be…? I could physically feel the pressure from behind my back. It was from Shion, of course. She might go nuts if I didn’t take her. It was getting harder for Benimaru to keep her calm, so maybe I should babysit her instead. Besides, Clayman’s schemes almost killed Shion—they did kill her, in fact. She might have a chance to take revenge for that, which was another reason to take her along.

All right. She’s in.

I wavered a bit on the second choice before settling on Ranga. I thought about having him stand by in my shadow, but that’d put us in trouble if a Holy Field or other special barrier was thrown over us. I could feel him perking his ears up toward me. Let’s go with him. He’d make a great bodyguard.

So that was the two. They both knew Spatial Motion, so it’d also be easy for them to flee if it came to that. If I tried deploying the new barrier I devised based on Holy Field, I was pretty sure that’d get us out of there safe, at worst. That was something we could rely on as we joined the Council, at least.

But what if Milim really was being controlled? In that case, it was likely that our town was next on the list for destruction. I had to do everything I could to prevent that. I had no interest in seeing this town be scarred again.

“All right. I’m gonna join in. I’m taking Shion and Ranga with me. Ramiris, can you send word that I’ll be at the Council?”

“Sure thing!” she casually replied, before immediately opening up some kind of special demon lord–only line and informing the others about my presence. It was powered by this ridiculously complex-looking spell, using spatial interference to allow for synchronous communication. I looked at it, curious about how it worked—and then I heard loud, haughty laughter coming my way.

“Gwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! So! Finally thirsty for some action, are you? No need to hold back now, Rimuru! Why don’t you and I come along together? I will tag along with you! Those demon lords aren’t worth fearing for a single moment!”

Come to think of it, I had totally forgotten I had this guy, too. I appreciated his confidence, but Veldora wouldn’t work, no.

“Well, hear me out, Veldora. I want you to stay here in town so you can defend it.”

“What?!” He looked genuinely shocked. “I said I will tag along with you. With me, you will stand taller than all the demon lords combined!”

Hey, defending this town’s really important work, too. Like, the most important work. We’d have all available forces tackling Clayman’s armies. That just left a few of Rigur’s security platoons and Shion’s team. Defending the town only worked with Veldora’s presence. With him around, even if the Western Holy Church stopped by to attack, we’d have nothing to worry about.

I tried explaining all this to him.

“…So you see? You need to hold down the fort.”

“Mmgh…”

He seemed less than convinced. Right. Maybe I should give him the real reason. But just as I was about to open my mouth, Ramiris started shouting again.

“Hey! Rimuru! I just got off the line! They said it was okay, but aren’t you being really mean to Master Veldora? He could just be one of my guests, then. That’d make me feel a lot safer, too!”

That seemed reasonable, at first glance. But I could tell Ramiris just wanted Beretta and Veldora by her side so she could look supercool around her colleagues. Veldora probably thought along the same lines, too.

“…Hmm? No, I wasn’t interested in coming so I could serve as your guardian, no.”

“Uwehh?! Oh, you’re so cold, wise teacher!”

What’s with that teacher stuff? Ramiris and Veldora had become manga buddies in record time, I guess. They definitely got along, but in terms of the power balance between them, I’d say this was all Ramiris trying to curry Veldora’s favor.

…Well, fine. The most important thing was that my presence at Walpurgis had been recognized. That was helpful for me, although it probably had more to do with how the other demon lords didn’t want to venture near human lands just to deal with me.

“We’re actually planning to start spreading rumors about you, Veldora. We discussed that at the summit earlier, but you knew that, right?”

Having him be Ramiris’s attendant was an idea. Personally, though, I wanted the other lords to think he wasn’t coming, since it’d put them off guard for me.

“Mm. Yes. Of course.”

Nope. Sounds like he wasn’t paying attention. He was way too enthralled in his manga to notice any of our proceedings. In that case, it’d be easy to trick him.

“Well, it’s like this: If I brought you along, it’d probably make Clayman think, like, ‘Oh, that Rimuru, he’s a wimp just bringing Veldora along as a ringer.’”

“What?! Curse that Clayman! I’ll make him pay for that!” Shion cried.

“Heh. That insect doesn’t know what he’s waded into,” added Diablo. “Perhaps I should come over and kill him after all.”

“Shion, Diablo, calm down already,” Benimaru chided, looking a little angered himself. “That was just an example.”

Man, it’s so easy to tick those two guys off.

“Yeah, like Benimaru said, that’s just what I’m picturing him saying. So I mean, if we bring Veldora to the Council, people will be so wary of us that it’d mess up the whole point of us being there, right?”

Veldora blinked. “Hohh? Ah, I see.”

Shion beamed, though I wasn’t sure she had thought about my words at all. “A fine idea! Well said, Sir Rimuru!”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Still, he will pay for making light of you. I’d love to make him atone with my own two hands, but perhaps I should let Shion do the honors?”

“So you’ll throw the enemy off their guard in order to make your negotiations easier?”

Benimaru, at least, had the right idea.

“But shouldn’t we be avoiding danger as much as possible?” asked Shuna. She had a point, and Geld and Gabil nodded their agreement.

“If the enemy is going to be wary of us anyway,” added Hakuro, “would it not be best to focus more on our own safety?”

Soei gave this a silent nod of his own.

I could understand everyone’s worries, sure. But I could cover for that.

“It’s all right. I can actually call for Veldora anytime I want with the Summon Storm Dragon skill. That doesn’t count as an attendant, right? So if things go bad, I can ask for his help then. Until that happens, if it does, I want him protecting this town.”

I smiled triumphantly at the audience, asking them to defy me.

My leadership seemed impressed, at least, as did Veldora: “Gwaaaaahhhh-ha-ha-ha! I see! I’ll be the great hero who swoops in to the rescue at the last moment!”

Great. If you’re fine with that, so am I.

“Isn’t that kinda unfair…?”

“Don’t be stupid, Ramiris. I was hoping you’d call it smart.”

Ramiris may not have liked it much, but Veldora was already murmuring his agreement. Just one more push…

“Besides, that gives you one more slot to fill for Walpurgis, doesn’t it?”

This visibly excited her, as it did the rest of my government.

“Oh, that totally makes sense, Rimuru! So who’re you gonna match me with?”

I guess she had no complaints. Really, I think all she wanted was a chance to show off to the other demon lords. But at least she was on my side.

Now for that last one. I could feel all the unpicked holding their breath, but sadly for them, I needed someone strong in that position. Benimaru would’ve been great, but he’d kinda be handling a war in my absence, so I went with someone else:

“Sorry to disappoint you all, but I’d like Haku—”

“A moment, please!”

I was stopped by the woman standing behind Ramiris—Treyni.

“Sir Rimuru, I hope you will give me this assignment!”

“Oh, Treyni! Just look at you!”

Ramiris was already tearfully accepting the offer. Well, so be it.

“All right. I’ll let you go along, Treyni.”

Now we had our member assignments for the Walpurgis Council. Me, with Shion and Ranga as my attendants, and Ramiris, with Beretta and Treyni under her. Then, if we needed it, Veldora was a quick summon away.

Lucky thing, indeed, that I was accepted.

Me and Leon Cromwell also kind of had some issues to tackle, but I’d settle with just meeting him in person this time. I had Shizu’s request to fulfill, and I didn’t want to ignore that forever, but my target right now was Clayman. I hadn’t forgotten about the orc lord chaos or about Mjurran.

But most of all, I was concerned about Milim. One slipup, and I might be forced to fight her next. I was prepared to face down Clayman, but the idea of a life-and-death struggle with Milim made me singularly unenthusiastic. It’d be great if I could get all that worked out at Walpurgis. If not, I’ll think of something then.

Clayman, you’ve made an enemy out of me. And I’m not lenient enough to easily forgive someone I’ve identified as such. You better be ready for me. And if you lay a hand on any of my people, you can expect to pay for everything you dish out.

Dahh… Now I’m starting to adopt Shion’s way of thinking. Still, I couldn’t help but feel a little happy about it. The time for fretting in darkened rooms was over. Now we had a clear, concrete goal to reach out to.

