

PROLOGUE

THE MAGIC-BORN’S RUSE

“Hoo dear, nearly bit it for good back there…”

Laplace was muttering to himself as he appeared before his master. He clearly had the injuries to back that assessment up.

“Tough, huh?” casually replied his lord, a boy with black hair and a powerful presence.

“Well, hang on there, lad,” Laplace whined. “Tough hardly even begins to describe what I had to wade through back there, yeah? Getting inside was painful enough, but getting out—oh, dear, who can say how many times I toed the line?”

“Oh, I think someone like you would work it out. Even if someone killed you, I’m not sure you’d even know how to die.”

“Oof. You’re a mean one, you know that?”

“So,” the boy aloofly continued as Laplace cried the best fake tears he could, “did you find out what lies behind the Western Holy Church?”

“…Um. I know this ain’t the kind of report I should be giving, but… Well, no. Nobody can. It’s bloody impossible, is what it is.”

This stone-faced admission didn’t faze the boy at all. He gave a soft smile, as if he expected that reply the whole time.

“Hmm. Ever the liar, aren’t you? You had to have uncovered a hint or two, at least?”

Laplace shrugged and sighed. “Sheesh. After all I went through for my info, I figured I could name my price with ya. But you just see right through me, don’tcha? There’s no beating ya.”

“Hee-hee-hee. Thanks for the compliment, but my prices remain firm, all right?”

“There’s no beating ya,” Laplace repeated.

“Oh, no need for complaints. I’ll pay your full asking price. And in fact, our demon lord friend’s consciousness has taken root for a while now. He’s done a wonderful job transferring over to his homunculus.”

The boy gave Laplace an amused smile as he rang a small bell to call for the woman stationed outside the door.

“Yes, sir?”

Into the room strode a beautiful woman—graceful, polite, the epitome of the classic executive secretary. Her skin was smooth, light in color, and her well-defined facial features suited the bun her blond hair was tied back in. She had blue eyes that shined like a pair of mystical lapis lazuli—but no matter how mesmerizing the light from them was, they still couldn’t hide a vague sense of evil lurking inside.

“Huh? Ah, you don’t mean…?”

The sight of the woman startled Laplace, but he could spot a familiar glint in her eyes. Then he erupted into laughter, realizing who she truly was.

“Well, what’s with that getup, huh? Didja make a gender swap while I didn’t notice? It looks good on you, I ain’t gonna lie, but it couldn’t be much more different from before, eh?”

“Enough from you,” countered the woman, ignoring Laplace’s bait. “It took me ten years to obtain a body I could freely move around in. I am not going to complain about minor grievances.”

“Polite” was no longer the way to describe her. She stood boldly, sporting an undefeatable grin. She gave Laplace a friendly pat on the shoulder before sitting down.

“So if you’re introducing me to this man, I suppose there’s not much need to keep the act going?”

“No,” replied the boy, “but I’d like you to maintain the facade in public, please. If it’s just between us, I suppose there’s no great need, no.”

“Oh? Well, if that’s what you want, boss, I’ll do it. Is it all right if I ask why?”

“Because you’re weak, Kazalim. Your powers still aren’t complete yet, are they? Just watch over Clayman until your full Curse Lord force is back with you.”

Kazalim, the woman posing as his secretary, gave this reply a sullen nod. She had the name of a very old demon lord—the one who attempted to punish a human named Leon for declaring himself a demon lord of some faraway backwater area and paid for it with his life. Once, he was head of the Moderate Jesters; now, she was a lord both Clayman and Laplace were attempting to resurrect.

Her overpowering strength was long gone. All that remained was a prim, graceful young woman. Just before she could be obliterated from existence, Kazalim experienced a rather unlikely series of coincidences that caused her to possess the body of this boy—and just the other day, they had finally managed to transfer her astral body into a replacement homunculus. The boy was her “boss” for now, the power from her glory days long gone. That was the way their pact worked, and Kazalim had no quarrel with it. Over the past ten years of dealing with this acquaintance, she had fully accepted her place in the power hierarchy.

“Fair enough. My power is incomplete. I let that demon lord Leon defeat me, and I lost my body in the most unsightly of fashions. I know my soul’s settled in this homunculus, but it’s so fragile, I’d tear it apart if I unleashed my full force. I can’t really call this a complete resurrection…”

“Ah, is that the issue with ya? Well, if our president is callin’ this guy boss, then I guess you’re my boss, too. Sure ain’t just another client by this point, no! So hopefully you don’t mind if I clear the air with you guys a bit.”

“You never change,” the boy said. “After all this time, and after you helped us revive our fallen president, you still don’t trust me?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Nah, nah, that’s a different story. But I gotta laugh at how you look now, sir. You’re this crazy beautiful woman now!”

“…Am I? What do my looks matter?”

“Nah, I mean, the dichotomy between your speech and your looks… It’s funny, that’s all.”

“I know that, you… Or ‘I am aware of that,’ perhaps? If I am going to keep up the charade, I had best sound more like the lady I am.”

“Uh, that’s what you’re concerned about? Because, I mean… Ba-ha-ha-ha!”

“Silence,” Kazalim spat at the guffawing Laplace. “I’ll have you know this body wasn’t my choice. The boss here provided a homunculus modified with special technology from the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion.”

“Yeah, I sure did. And that didn’t come cheap, either. We needed a vessel without any soul at all, or else they’d get all mixed up, and the transplant probably wouldn’t have worked.” The boy sneered. “For that matter, if you had fled into anyone besides me, Kazalim, you’d probably be too tangled up to split off at all, I don’t think. All right? So I really don’t want to hear any complaints about how you look.”

“I appreciate it, boss,” said Kazalim.

The boy still didn’t seem pleased, not until Laplace offered his own thanks.

“Sure. So can we move this along? I know it’s great we’re all back together again, but I want to get down to business. Tell me what you’ve found, Laplace.”

The smile disappeared from Kazalim’s face as she turned her eyes toward Laplace. He nodded, taking a more serious demeanor.

“Yeah, you kept yer promise and made my dream come true. I better show you a little sincerity, too, eh? So I infiltrated the Western Holy Church to find out what’s behind it, but I tell you, I just don’t have any idea.”

He then began to describe his findings.

Laplace’s mission was to find out what made the Holy Church tick. It remained an independent religion, headquartered in the Holy Empire of Lubelius, but much of its internal workings remained a mystery. It positioned itself as an advocate for justice and for the weak, enjoying tremendous influence on the Western Nations—a very inconvenient truth for the boy. That was why he employed Laplace from the fixer team of the Moderate Jesters to find who they really were—and exploit any potential weaknesses for later.

The boy was fairly convinced there was another side to them. If the Western Holy Church was really an advocate for truth, he’d have to undertake whatever scheme it took to rip them away from that pedestal, but that was strictly a last resort. Now simply wasn’t the time for it. The Church, after all, enjoyed the services of Hinata Sakaguchi, head of the Western Nation’s crusaders and the most powerful paladin the world knew.

“So,” Laplace continued, “thanks to Hinata’s absence, I managed to make it into the Church all right, but there was nothin’ suspicious about anything I saw inside. So I headed over to Lubelius’s holy lands—to be exact, the Inner Cloister, at the peak of their holiest mountain.”

He began to gesture excitedly as he spoke. It was there, after all, where he saw the fearsome truth.

“And the most amazing thing, you know… The entire land was just filled with this kind of sacred presence!”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” the boy asked. “It’s a holy land.”

“What’re you, stupid?” Kazalim added. “Did someone erase your brain since last we met?”

“No, no, listen to me! And you’re falling back in to non-lady mode again, President.”

“I don’t need your— I mean, don’t worry about little old me! Just keep going.”

So Laplace kept going, a little resentful at this treatment.

………

……

…

A little ways from Western Holy Church headquarters was the religion’s Holy Temple. This was where the Papacy was located, the political arm of the Church that worked at the behest of the Holy Emperor, spokesperson for the heavens.

It wasn’t until he entered this Temple that Laplace began to feel something was off. Within its chambers, he could detect a faint amount of magic that applied itself to his nervous system. It was a very ingenious spell, one he noticed only because it was automatically blocked by Falsifier, his unique skill.

There’s a surprise, ain’t it? Must mean somebody here can wield spiritual magic as strong as mine…

Laplace braced himself as he walked toward the cathedral.

He already had some knowledge of the enemy’s organizational structure—and from what he could see, the relationship between the Church and Lubelius was very tangled indeed.

The Church was built to worship Luminus, the one and only god in the world (as they defined it). Lubelius was the same way, which meant one could say they were allies when it came to religious issues. In terms of the balance of power, however, the Church held nearly all the cards.

The reason? Simple: Hinata. The Church had its knights deployed at points across the Western Nations, providing an effective bulwark to protect the weak—and it was Hinata Sakaguchi who built them, and by extension the Church, into the powerful group it was today. Technically speaking, the Church worked under the patronage of Lubelius, charged exclusively with spreading the good word about Luminism. Now that their mission had extended out into “doing good” for the weak at large, the relationship was no longer as simple as that.

More than anything, though, the real problem lay with the knights Hinata herself had trained. Even Laplace couldn’t help but fear them a little, for their allegiance was not at all with Lubelius but solely with the one god, Luminus—and with Hinata, who devoted herself fully to Luminism. That was what enabled the Western Holy Church to exist independently from Lubelius.

And this brought up another problem—Lubelius’s war power resided in more than just its crusaders. Even the Holy Emperor kept an official Lubelian force, the Imperial Guard that answered to nothing but the Papacy below it, and this was another group to be reckoned with. Founded on the ideal that everyone is equal under the name of Luminus, it was a motley collection of soldiers in assorted clothing and equipment. The qualifications for joining were straightforward—be a devoted follower of Luminism and be at least an A-ranked fighter. Thanks to these clear but fiendishly difficult requirements, the Imperial Guard was small and exclusive, packed with the best of the best in warriors and magicians, along with their servants. This force was underestimated at one’s own peril.

Hinata was listed as head knight in this Guard as well, and the Papacy listed Cardinal Nicolaus Speltus, a dedicated admirer of Hinata, as its chief counsel. Hinata could almost claim the whole of the Church for herself, and this was the main reason why. She had control over both wings of the Holy Emperor’s main force and yet was exempt from having to swear her allegiance to that leader. It was thanks to this inscrutable woman, Hinata, that relations between the Holy Church and Holy Empire were as twisted as they had become.

And simply recalling all this advance knowledge he had procured made Laplace sigh in frustration.

What a crazy lady…

The cathedral was full of spiritual force, more than enough to call forth the greatest of holy spirits. To a magic-born like Laplace, this spiritual presence was supremely difficult to deal with. It dulled his senses, making him want to flee the site as quickly as possible.

He took a moment to gather himself before deciding which way to go. Heading toward the peak of this holy mount would reportedly lead him to the Inner Cloister, where one could communicate with Luminus. His senses were telling him there was something to be found here in the cathedral as well.

“So, ah, now what…?”

He wavered, but for only a moment. Then he strode out of the cathedral and straight for the Cloister. Spend too much time in this building, and Hinata could come back at any moment. Now, while she was gone, was his best chance to find a hint as to what Luminus, the central doctrine of the Western Holy Church, really was.

I’ll just hop on up, he thought as he traversed the mountain path, and take a quick li’l peek around.

It was his choice—and it was a mistake. No, it wasn’t fruitless; he certainly learned much from the experience. But to Laplace, the danger that resulted proved far beyond his comfort level.

Proceeding up the stone steps, Laplace finally reached the shrine at the peak of the mountain. This was notably smaller than the cathedral down below, but in terms of grandeur, the two were incomparable. This small structure was, in the true meaning of the term, the god’s domain.

Now, it was divine in its silence, putting pressure upon Laplace’s mind. But even amid that solemnity, he could detect the familiar feel of magic.

…The heck? Magic, in this supposedly holiest of places? That’s weird. Don’t like that too much, no…

He could tell that Hinata, the most formidable obstacle in his way, was not here. If the magic belonged to someone else, that someone couldn’t be ignored, but—in Laplace’s mind—it was no threat to him, either.

But was that the right appraisal to make? Now Laplace, deep down in his heart, wasn’t so sure. Come on, man. You know you’re completely hiding your presence here. Everything’s perfect. If some ruffian shows up, just run.

Bracing himself, Laplace reactivated his Stealth Mode and attempted to slip into the shrine. Then he rolled right back out, barely maintaining his balance, stymied by the vision of a beam of light piercing straight through his body.

“You insect, you mere cockroach, dirtying the throne of your god!!”

All of a sudden, the shrine was filled with an overwhelming presence, dressed in luxuriant garb that covered a chiseled, muscular figure. His short, curly blond hair shined brightly, exhibiting the full force of his will. This was a ruler—an absolute ruler—and what Laplace couldn’t help but notice first about him were the two large fangs jutting out from his lips.

“A-a vampire…?!”

“Silence, insect. I will judge you myself. Consider it an honor to die here!”

The next moment, beams of crimson light danced across the peak. His path of escape cut off, Laplace stood there helplessly as his body was torn to shreds.

………

……

…

Laplace took a moment to quiver as he retold the story.

“I tell you, it was downright scary. I thought that was it for me!”

“Um, yeah,” the boy replied, “but why wasn’t it?”

Kazalim merely smiled. “Like I told you. He doesn’t know how to die.”

“Oh, stop phrasing it that way. Anyone should have an escape plan and a decent amount of security backup during an op like that, y’know? But I’m telling you, I’ve just been dragged across the coals lately. Wish I could have something to brag about for a change!”

“Yeah, yeah. You know you’re a covert operative. If you’re fixin’ to be the hero in shining armor, maybe look for another line of work?”

“He’s right,” the boy agreed. “Laplace, the key to your job is completing your missions. How…gallant you look doing it hardly matters, does it?”

“No, true enough. It’s just, if I keep this up, I’m gonna start getting used to being a loser…”

“What’s the problem with that?”

“He said it. As long as you survive and win in the end, we have nothing to complain about.” Kazalim hardened her expression. “So what happened?”

Laplace nodded at her. “Right. There’s the rub. If this guy can overwhelm me that much, there’s no mistakin’ that he’s one strong dude. The question is, who is he? What’s a magic-born of that caliber doin’ in this supposedly high holy place? That’s the key to all this, and it could be enough to shake the very foundation of the Western Holy Church, huh?”

“A magic-born, huh…? And a high-level one, a vampire, conspiring with the Church…”



The boy nodded his agreement, unable to hide his surprise at this unexpected development.

“Whoever he is,” commented Kazalim, “he is dangerous. A man capable of defeating Laplace, to the best of my knowledge, would have to be far more than merely magic-born.”

“Yeah. I’m with ya there.”

“What do you mean?” the boy asked.

“Well, not to brag, but I’m not exactly a wimp, y’know? Even with the dryad I faced down before, if I seriously duked it out, I woulda won, y’know? I just fled ’cause I was on their home turf in the forest, and I didn’t want ’em callin’ for reinforcements on me. No real point going all out to try to kill ’er, either. But this foe was on another level, I tell you. It didn’t feel like some sub-demon lord to me—it felt like a full one, through ’n’ through. Someone like me, all I could do was run.”

Dryads were extremely powerful foes in forest lands, intrinsically capable of instant teleportation through the trees. The Plant Whisper skill let them “share” any and all information with others of their species, sending friends over to help their brethren anytime it was needed. This made them enough of a threat that Laplace opted to run away the last time he saw one, even though he could likely conquer one in a duel.

This guy, however, was different. “That was a monster,” Laplace declared. “Stronger than me, no doubt about it.”

The atmosphere in the room grew heavy.

“A demon lord, huh…? What do you think, Kazalim?”

Kazalim snorted. “I told you. He is dangerous. As far as I am aware, only one man could match that description.”

“Oh? Who’s that?”

“…The demon lord Valentine. One of the old guard, a man on par with myself during my glory years.”

“For real? ’Cause if he’s a match for you, I see I was totally right to flee. Lucky thing I trusted my instincts.”

Laplace shrugged. He had taken pains to break in when Hinata was away, only to stumble right up to a demon lord. The irony of it made him wince.

“…Hmm. A demon lord within the Church, huh? D’you think this Valentine’s actually the Holy Emperor, then?”

“Ooh, I dunno about that! You think a demon lord would raise a finger to protect humanity? President, what kind of guy was Valentine when you knew ’im?”

Kazalim closed her eyes and searched through her memories, tapping a graceful finger against her forehead as she recalled the vivid images of the past.

“This body may not show it,” she said, “but I’ve lived through three of the Great Wars that occur every five hundred years. Three of them. You can call me one of the old guard as well, but by the time I joined that club, there were already six demon lords ahead of me…”

As she put it, the demon lord Valentine had attained the title before Kazalim herself. His force was massive, more than worthy of the term vampire and the connotations of immortality weaved into it. To Kazalim, who had evolved from an elf (similarly known for longevity) to a walking dead, the thought of a vampire, the symbol of eternal life, also serving as a demon lord gave her pause.

“…To tell you the truth, Valentine and I have dueled to the death a few different times. It never reached a definitive conclusion, though. Once you reach our level, you can lay waste to an entire landscape without hurting yourselves at all. So instead, we adopted the tradition of talking over things and deciding by majority vote…and that led to the Walpurgis system. The fact that it takes three votes to convene one is a throwback to when there were still only seven demon lords in existence. Guess nobody cared enough to change it.”

She let out an elegant, ladylike chuckle. The juxtaposition between this and her other, masculine mannerisms was starting to unnerve the other two people in the room, not that she noticed. Then her face turned stony once more.

“And that’s why I feel safe in telling you this. That man, Valentine; he sees humans and demi-humans as nothing more than chattel. Even if the entire world was turned on its end, the idea of him serving as guardian is simply impossible.”

Laplace nodded his agreement as the boy thought over Kazalim’s assessment.

“All right. So maybe they forced some kind of agreement?”

“Are you listening to me, Laplace? Promises and agreements only work between two parties with equal force behind them.”

“Yeah…”

He didn’t seem too married to the idea himself.

“Plus,” the boy said, “I find it hard to believe that someone as closed-minded as Hinata would team up with a demon lord. I wonder if what Laplace ran into wasn’t a demon lord at all, but some magic-born whose name we are not aware of yet?”

“No,” Kazalim replied, “I do think that was Valentine. Those dancing beams of crimson light? That’s the giveaway. Valentine also goes by the name of Bloody Lord, and he can take blood and vaporize it into beams of magicules known as Bloodrays.”

As she put it, a Bloodray was a type of spread-fire particle cannon. By converting his own blood into magical particles, he was capable of firing it off in concentrated rays of force. The amount of magical power that process required meant it had to be a demon lord working it.

“So you’re saying that Laplace ran into the demon lord Valentine, and that Valentine would never willingly cooperate with human kingdoms. Wouldn’t that lend more credence to the theory that the Holy Emperor is Valentine?”

“Yeah,” muttered Laplace, “that would explain matters. I’d sincerely wonder how he managed to pull the wool over Hinata’s eyes, though.”

“Well,” Kazalim stated, “I suppose it remains the most convincing explanation we have. I do have my doubts and concerns about that… But the important thing is, we now know for a fact that Valentine, a demon lord, was lurking inside a domain that only the Holy Emperor has access to.”

“And you’re sure it’s him?” the boy pressed.

“I’m fully convinced. Laplace’s description matches my own memory, and from what I know about him, Valentine would never willfully serve under someone else…”

“Yeah, there ain’t that many magic-born who could whip me, I don’t think. But if I’m dealin’ with the likes of this, well, I dunno how much more reconnaissance I’m capable of here.”

“Well,” the boy said, apparently convinced, “this is still pretty useful intelligence. Expertly done, Laplace.”

His face shined now, revealing traces of the joy he felt now that he had a tool powerful enough to potentially take down the Holy Church. There was a powerful demon lord among his enemy’s forces, but that didn’t seem to concern him at all. He was too busy thinking about what to do next with this intel to care. For him, formulating his next plan of action came as easily as figuring out the next epic prank to pull off on the kids next door.

“So that’s all the info I have for ya. But speakin’ of demon lords, what’s Clayman up to these days?”

The boy scowled at Laplace’s apparently unwelcome question, pulling his dark, shiny hair back with one hand. “Well,” he complained, “that wound up being a total failure.”

“Failure?”

“Yeah. Everything went fine up until we had Rimuru, that slime you mentioned, fight against Hinata. Then it all fell apart, pretty much…”

The boy briefed the others on how things unfolded. First, Clayman won over the demon lord Milim, thanks to the Orb of Domination the boy provided him. Once he did, they needed to test her out, to see just how deep the orb had put Milim in their thrall.

“So we tried to find a decent opponent to test her strength on. But instead of demon lords that we didn’t have much intel or even a location on, we picked Carillon, since he seemed to be the least intelligent out of them all.”

“Along the way,” Kazalim continued, “we thought we could have her destroy the capital of the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania. The city would’ve been packed with former enslaved humans, souls to harvest so I can become a true demon lord once more…”

He and the boy exchanged glances and sighed.

“We figured those souls would energize Clayman, too. Two birds with one stone.”

“But then Milim went out of control and declared war on the guy…”

And thanks to that, Carillon and the other targets had a weeklong head start to prepare for the battle—more than enough time to evacuate the capital.

“You know,” the boy reflected, “looking back at it, I guess it’s pretty hard to enthrall a demon lord with a magical item like that. You have to apply all these conditions to it, or else it’ll get all messed up.”

“I hope you would trust me more than that. They don’t call me the Curse Lord for show, I’ll have you know. That Orb of Domination was a perfectly crafted Artifact, one of my best pieces of work. It was Clayman who ruined everything.”

“Ah, no point dredging that up any longer. Anyway, we couldn’t collect any souls in the Beast Kingdom, so we decided to check things out in Farmus next.”

“Farmus? That kingdom?”

“Right. Thanks to that summoning ritual they invented, Farmus had a ton of otherworlders living there. I figured now was as good a time as any to pare down their forces a little. So I used a few back channels to give them intelligence on Tempest and whet the appetites of their greedy king and his advisers.”

“You wouldn’t believe how quickly they bit, either.”

That idea grew from Laplace’s previous report, back when their operation to make an orc lord into a malleable demon lord ran into setbacks. The idea was to whip Farmus up into enough of a frenzy to make them declare war on the Jura-Tempest Federation. With all the high-level magic-born in their ranks, Tempest surely had what it took to take out at least a few of Farmus’s otherworlders before going down for the count.

What’s more, Rimuru, lord of the monsters, was traveling abroad on his own business, and Clayman’s own minions had infiltrated Tempest lands. The boy had planned to use Rimuru as bait for Hinata; as far as he was concerned, this plan offered the best of both worlds.

“But then, well, nothing went according to plan. I mean, that slime Rimuru actually fled Hinata with his life intact. You can’t let your guard down around him for a moment. Kind of like you, Laplace.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

“And as if that wasn’t bad enough…”

“By my prediction,” Kazalim continued, “that still wouldn’t be have been enough to keep Farmus from winning the war. If the monsters’ lord joined the battle, that would be another matter, but honestly speaking, it didn’t matter who won. We’d just work with the victors. The purpose of the war was to generate dead people—more souls to harvest. Then we could finally awaken our beloved Clayman to his true self. And then…”

And then it all fell apart. The entire Farmus force was wiped off the face of the earth by a single slime.

“It’s hard to believe, but it’s the truth,” the boy grumbled.

“In all the many times I’ve used my unique skill Schemer to formulate a plan,” the clearly angry Kazalim added, “I’ve never seen it go quite this far awry.”

“H-hang on a second! Just one slime? You pullin’ my leg? Did Farmus get caught that off guard, man?”

“I told you, you wouldn’t believe how quickly they bit. With a snap of the fingers, they had a force of twenty thousand knights and magicians on the ground. And just like that, they were all gone. We couldn’t confirm any survivors at all.”

“Whaa?! That’s ridiculous…”

The unlikeliness of it all had even Laplace at a loss for words.

“Oh, it hasn’t even begun to be ridiculous. Clayman surveyed the battlefield after it was over, and according to his report, there were absolutely no corpses left to be found. That could only mean a monster was summoned, or created, using the bodies as an offering.”

“If I cast Creation: Golem with that number of corpses,” Kazalim said, “I couldn’t even begin to guess what kind of monster would result. And not just corpses—the corpses of strong, well-trained fighters, in a battlefield laden with anguish and despair. The perfect casting environment! I would expect a sub-demon lord to result from it, at the very least.”

“Sounds like it. Although it’s the fact we couldn’t retrieve those souls that’s the worst of all. Clayman said there wasn’t a single one left floating around. So once again, we’ve failed to awaken him to the next level.”

The boy sighed in regret. He began to wonder whether conducting all these plans in parallel was coming back to bite him. He had focused on efficiency, only to put too many things into action at once—and once one tactic came undone, it affected everything else. Maybe, he thought, I was too greedy myself.

“So you’re sayin’ that this slime Rimuru sucked up all those souls for ’imself?”

“Is that some kind of joke, Laplace? No magic-born could do that! Not unless he is the seed of a demon lord.”

Kazalim was right. Even the most seasoned of wizards would have a hard time gathering twenty thousand souls and keeping them all under their control. Recklessly attempting that would cause the souls’ latent energies to unravel, quickly falling out of control. And even if it worked—

“Ha-ha-ha! No, I know what you mean, Laplace,” the boy said. “If he did snatch up twenty thousand souls, then he’ll have turned into one hell of a monster by now, eh? Was that what you were thinking?”

“Pretty much, yeah. Just a passing thought, really. Better not overthink it.”

Laplace’s mere suggestion caused them both to laugh at him. The concept was simply beyond comprehension.

Not even Kazalim knew the exact conditions required for making a potential demon lord into a “true” demon lord, although she could at least guess that it required a tremendous number of souls. They were currently limited to having Clayman experiment to see what results they got. Clayman had tried to experiment on the orc lord, of course, and everybody in the room knew how that turned out. And given that knowledge, the idea of something like a slime appearing out of nowhere and becoming a “true” demon lord was beyond even Kazalim’s imagination.

Laplace, of course, was absolutely correct, even if none of them knew it at the time. He began to wonder what kind of odyssey Clayman had been on while he was running for dear life from Valentine.

“So, ah, what’s Clayman up to right now?”

“Awaiting further orders,” said the boy. “At this point, we can’t do anything bolder than what we’re doing now. Luckily, Milim kept her end of the promise—she waited a week, and then she turned the Beast Kingdom into a field of ash. So we’re pulling back for now, to reconsider our strategy.”

“Oh? So things haven’t been a total failure, then?”

“Underestimate me at your peril, Laplace. I may have lost most of my force, but trickery remains my core asset.”

“It sure is. If everything went awry, even I would blow my top a little about that! So maybe things have been delayed a bit, but we did weaken the kingdom of Farmus tremendously. That pretty much puts the Western Nations in order, so it’ll be simple to seize them all.”

“And once that happens,” reflected Kazalim, “the Forest of Jura should provide a fine breakwater against the Eastern Empire.”

“Ah, I see, President. Negotiate with whichever side wins. Ain’t no need to destroy the monster nation at all, huh?”

That, in a way, was the true worth of the demon lord Kazalim’s Schemer ability. No matter how things turned out, she had a knack for concocting plans where her side wound up on top. Recalling that, Laplace was relieved to see Kazalim was still herself after all.

“Plus,” the boy continued, “with Milim defeating Carillon, we’ve proven that the Orb of Domination is an effective tool against this caliber of enemy. That’s all the force we’ll need to show. Beyond that, all we need to do is see how the other demon lords fall into place.”

“Precisely. That’s why I ordered Clayman to refrain from taking further action. The Eastern Empire’s going to do something either way—and with that comes our opportunity to recover some souls for ourselves.”

“Uh-huh. And as long as the eyes of the Western Holy Church are on the monster nation, it’s more convenient for us to keep that federation around anyway.”

Laplace could see the logic in this. No need for panic. Just keep your eyes on the Church and avoid conflict with any of the other forces.

“So for now, at least, we’re targetin’ the Church?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Not that it’ll be easy,” cautioned Kazalim. “We have to consider the possibility of Hinata and Valentine working as a team. Needlessly prodding them would be dangerous.”

As she and the boy saw it, as long as the Western Nations were in their hands, the monster nation didn’t have to be considered an obstacle. Plus, considering the mistakes they made, they now thought it wiser to fully gauge the enemy forces, avoiding a dual-pronged operation for the time being. For now, they were gunning for the Western Holy Church—and the Holy Empire of Lubelius behind it. Those two would be struck first—carefully this time, making sure none of their activities were noticed on the surface. In that scenario, the monster nation was actually helpful to them. As long as they kept fanning the flames of Church doctrine, it’d be child’s play to keep the eyes of Hinata and her force squarely upon Tempest.

“The Church can hardly afford to ignore the presence of the magic-born Rimuru, either. With Farmus thoroughly defeated, I doubt the other nations will be so willing to take on the mantle of waging holy war. They’ll need to perform some kind of action to reaffirm their authority.”

“Yeah.” The boy grinned. “If we can parry them and keep both sides engaged, they might even destroy each other. All we have to do is wait for an opportunity to weaken the both of them.”

They were talking about a magic-born capable of single-handedly sweeping a force of twenty thousand into the afterlife. Without Hinata on the scene, taking him on was patently impossible. So they would wait for the right moment and come up with the perfect scheme for it—and the way it sounded to Laplace, they already had a pretty solid idea what they’d do. Neither sounded irresolute at all about it.

“But the problem, Laplace, is that your report was a little…unexpected,” said the boy.

“Very much so,” agreed Kazalim, also a tad indignant. “Valentine being involved in this… Assuming he truly is involved with anything at all. I find it hard to believe Hinata would ever cooperate with him, judging by her personality.”

It was clear from the way they phrased it that conquering the Western Holy Church would be far easier without Valentine around. It made Laplace feel awkward, despite it being no fault of his.

“Well,” he attempted, “we don’t know about that yet. But if you’d just want to lure the demon lord out into public so he wouldn’t get in the way of our investigations, we could pull that off, couldn’t we?”

“Mm? What do you mean, Laplace?”

“I mean, why not just ask Clayman to convene Walpurgis? Frey’s bound to join us on that, and her along with Milim gives us the three signatories we need, yeah?”

Convening the Walpurgis Council would bring all the demon lords together.

The boy smiled a bit. “…I see. That would drag Valentine out of his holy domain, I think.”

“Well, well! Your eyes are sharper than I thought, Laplace. If we can just find the right timing to keep Hinata away from the mountain as well, your inquiry should advance by leaps and bounds.”

“Huh? You want me going back there?!”

“Why wouldn’t we?”

“Yes, why wouldn’t we?”

Oh, brother, Laplace thought. But the boy and Kazalim weren’t interested in his feedback. They had the outline of a plan, and now it was time to work out the details.