

CHAPTER 1

DEMONS AND SCHEMES

Once we settled on the name Octagram for ourselves, Mizeri and Raine, the green- and blue-haired maids in Guy Crimson’s service, prepared an extravagant meal for us all. They were decked out in dark-red maid’s outfits, and their kitchen skills, it turned out, were second to none.

As Ramiris told me, the original purpose of the Walpurgis Council was to let demon lords hang out and swap information. As a vestige of this, perhaps, the space we were in featured a separate room…a sort of casual lounge, you could say. Attendance wasn’t mandatory, and all the demon lords did their own thing—some left immediately after the meeting ended, some stuck around long enough for dinner, and others whiled away the time by chatting in the lounge.

Me, I went for the food. You don’t get a chance like this every day, and honestly, considering how much more overpowered Guy was compared with the rest of us, I wanted to see what his diet was like. The resulting meal was more exquisitely delightful than I ever could’ve imagined. Each dish was an astounding new discovery, the best of its type in the whole world, and as I lingered over each one in reverie:

Report. Component analysis complete. It is now possible to re-create the recipes black tiger stew, grilled sage rooster, golden peach sherbet, and roast earthensleep dragon steak.

I stole all the recipes. Is that mean of me? It seemed kind of unfair, not that I really understood what made them work. Steal makes it sound illegal or something. This was just intelligence gathering. These recipes called for meat from monsters rated A or higher, which you don’t exactly see walking into town every day. But once I had the right ingredients, I think I would know how to prepare them now.

The feast was rounded out with a bountiful selection of fresh fruit. Six of us were at the table, by the way—me, Guy, Milim, Ramiris, Deeno, and Daggrull. Valentine and Leon had left long ago.

I took a moment to admonish Milim for tricking me as she gorged herself. She was still playing dumb, but I needed to give her a taste of reality. Meanwhile, I had Carillon and Frey promise me that we’d all discuss the future at a later time. Once we cleaned up after the war, I figured I’d be consulted about the upcoming city-rebuild work. This was going to be a brand-new nation, one with Milim at its head, and I intended to approach those discussions so they benefited me as much as possible.

Ramiris was still bugging me about moving to my hometown. I refused her point-blank, of course, but she wasn’t giving up. You could see it in her eyes. I figured Treyni would be nice enough to pacify her a bit for me, but I had the sneaking suspicion that Treyni loved spoiling Ramiris more than anything else. It seemed that was practically what she lived for, so I reminded myself not to expect much as I resolved to keep an eye on them.

Daggrull and Veldora seemed to be hitting it off pretty well, and Guy and Deeno were engaged in friendly conversation. I decided to offer all of them some of Tempest’s world-famous brandy, distilled from our own wine. Part of my branding efforts, you might say. Spreading the word about how useful a nation we were would oil the gears for diplomacy later. That much is true whether you’re dealing with a demon lord or your next-door neighbor.

“Not bad.”

“Well, well, look at this…”

“Hack! Cough, cough cough! Man, that’s got some bite…”

It was maybe a bit too much alcohol for Deeno to handle, but Guy and Daggrull enjoyed it. So would you please not drink all of it first, Veldora? I had a pretty decent stockpile left in my Stomach, but I didn’t store it in there just so Veldora could guzzle it all. And Milim immediately grabbed at the brandy, too, of course. I didn’t let her have any. You know she’d be an angry drunk. And considering how she tricked me, I had to put my foot down on this.

“And it’s fine for me, mmmmmm?”

Ramiris, meanwhile, was already preciously cradling her glass, three sheets to the wind in the blink of an eye. I let the frantic Beretta and Treyni deal with her. This was actually good for me. If she stayed sober and undistracted tonight, there’s every chance she would’ve tried following me back to Tempest.

So things were in full swing before long at this feast, and I decided to take my leave before Ramiris woke up from her stupor. It was quite an ending to the Walpurgis Council—not at all what I expected, but I’m glad my worrying was all for naught in the end.

It had been, to say the least, an eventful twenty-four hours. Walpurgis began at the stroke of midnight; by the time we wrapped it up, it was already early afternoon the next day.

In a flash, I was back at Tempest. The trip over there was one thing, but with Dominate Space, the journey back was a snap. And unlike before, my nation hadn’t fallen apart in my absence—spirits were high, everything worked fine, and I was tremendously relieved. All our forces had kept their high alert going, just as I ordered. They were all more refined now, contributing to safety on the streets more than ever. I had overlooked nothing. The town’s security system, modeled after the police I was familiar with on Earth, seemed to be a decent success.

As I observed all this, a thought struck my mind. You know, this country’s defenses alone could take out a nation or two all by themselves, couldn’t they? Nearly every solder left on defense duty was the equivalent of a B rank, after all. Your garden-variety magical or paranormal beast wouldn’t dare lurk nearby.

Overall, the rule of law and order had really taken hold around here. But that made me worry about monsters coming out of the city, potentially causing havoc somewhere else. It might be better, I thought, to check up on that. So I dragged Veldora and Shion back to town, riding on the back of Ranga.

The moment I entered the city, the local residents and patrolling soldiers immediately took a knee at the side of the road, forming a path for me to follow. It was all so expertly choreographed. I had no idea when they learned how to do it. What’s up with that? I thought—only to find Diablo approaching me from the other end of the path. He gave me a sincere smile, one brimming with joy, as he exchanged glances with Rigurd.

“Welcome back, Sir Rimuru!”

“It fills us with joy to hear of your induction into the Octagram! I am so glad to see you back here safely!”

I appreciated that from Rigurd and Diablo, yes, but…seriously, what’s going on here? And how did you guys know I was crowned a demon lord? That had to be the first time anyone used the term Octagram in this world, too. I should know—I thought of it myself. The questions just kept piling up. Wasn’t Diablo supposed to be out conquering the Kingdom of Farmus right now? Why was he here roping the entire town into doing this little dance number for me?

Starting to feel a little ashamed about all this, I finally decided to ask. “It’s simple, Sir Rimuru,” the smiling Diablo replied. “We had asked Lord Veldora to keep us updated.”

I squinted at Veldora. He immediately averted his eyes. Dude. Come on, man. I don’t know what he’s guilty of yet, but he’s guilty of something.

After I put the screws to him a little, Veldora quickly revealed the truth. It turns out that he agreed to play Tempest informant in exchange for three dessert dishes at the next meal—and he held up his end of the bargain, telling Diablo about everything that happened in the Council.

Now it made sense—why they knew about me being a demon lord and about the Octagram name we had adopted. Maybe I should go so far as to praise Diablo for his data-gathering skills. Even if a person was smart enough to consider paying off someone as powerful as Veldora, only a select few would dare attempt it. Of course, Veldora deserves a lot of credit for actually agreeing with that nonsense, but still, I like this kind of proactive behavior. If all parties involved were pleased, I saw no need to harp on it.

Still…

“Veldora, do you even need to eat?”

“Wh-what kind of nonsense is that, Rimuru?! It’s not a matter of needing to eat or not. I eat because I want to. You hardly need to eat, either, do you?”

Gah!

He had a point. I don’t have much of a leg to stand on here. Shuna’s cooking had improved by leaps and bounds lately, and we had a variety of desserts on offer these days. We managed to perfectly re-create the cream puffs I found in that Englesian café, and we were even inventing things like custard pudding now. The larger array of alcoholic beverages available also contributed to the invention of new taste-tempting treats.

I was having Yoshida, the café owner, help with this, developing new recipes and so forth; he readily agreed, happy to gain access to the drinks we made. “Now,” he gleefully said, “I think I can make a lot of things I couldn’t before.” We already had a few test dishes laid out for our dinner tables; Veldora had tried a few of them during the celebration right after I resurrected him, and the results looked like they honestly shocked the guy.

You sure you should be so easily plied with food like that, Veldora? And all it took to make Milim putty in my hands was just a bit of honey… You know, maybe I could conquer the world with a well-stocked kitchen instead of all these military forces.

As I thought about this, Shion and Diablo were exchanging a few words with each other.

“You did serve as Sir Rimuru’s guardian, did you not?”

“Of course I did! And thanks to that, now we all know you aren’t needed as long as I am around. But what about the task Sir Rimuru gave you?”

“Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh… All is well. I intend to brief Sir Rimuru about it personally.”

Their smiles didn’t even reach their eyes; the rivalry was still as intense as ever, I could see. If I left them to their own devices, they’d be at it all day.

“Guys, can you knock that off?”

“Yes.” Rigurd nodded. “I am sure Sir Rimuru is tired. I believe Haruna has a meal prepared for all of you. We can talk once you are suitably refreshed.”

Thanks, Rigurd. I’m loving this new air of authority you’re giving out.

So I had him lead me through town.

Everyone we passed by was all smiles, ready to go into full-on party mode at the drop of a hat, but Benimaru and his team still weren’t back from their mission. The full celebration could wait until later. For now, I could rest in the knowledge that one thorny problem, at least, was solved.

Thus, I decided to sink into my hot-spring bath, enjoy the food Haruna prepared for me, give myself a mental recharge, and then listen to Diablo’s report. The battle with Clayman ended in total victory for me, and that just left the establishment of Yohm’s new kingdom and our future wrangling with the Western Holy Church to deal with. There would be new negotiations to consider shortly—with the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania, with the Winged Nation of Fulbrosia, with the Dragon Faithful who worshiped Milim—but those all looked bound to end on friendly terms, so there was no need to fret much about them now.

“So,” I asked Diablo as I enjoyed some post-dinner tea, “what have you been up to? I asked you to destroy the Kingdom of Farmus and install Yohm as its new king. If you abandoned that job and came back here, should I assume that to mean you need more resources?”

I was back in slime form for the first time in a while, relaxing in Shion’s lap as I enjoyed the roundness of her breasts over my head. I think that made my question sound even more serene than I intended. If Diablo needed help, I figured someone like Soei could provide it. We had some leeway again for a change; no need to make Diablo fend for himself.

Shion was laughing above me, going on about something like “Oh, I would say being your tea fetcher is the ideal job for Diablo, my lord. Allow me to conquer that kingdom instead!” and so on, but I ignored her. I just couldn’t see her as up to the task. It was probably her way of lending Diablo a helping hand, but I wasn’t listening—and as it turned out, it wasn’t necessary.

“No, Sir Rimuru,” he said as he refilled my cup, “no resources will be necessary. Everything is proceeding smoothly and according to plan.”

Drinking tea in slime form was a bit tricky, so I simply decided to lie back and enjoy the aroma as I prepared to receive his report. Ahhh, bliss. A bliss that abruptly ended with the next thing he said.

“First, I restored all of them to their original condition. Reducing them to inert slabs of meat was proving rather, ah, inconvenient.”

Slabs of what?! What’s he talking about? Shion shivered a little, picking up on my confusion. Wait, was that her interrogation method…? Hoo boy. Better shut my imagination off before things get too dangerous. I had paid a visit to the interrogation room exactly once, warning her not to “go too far” with the three prisoners we held in there, but…well. I honestly didn’t care if Shion killed them, back at that time, so I didn’t push the issue too much. Bit late to regret that now, I suppose.

Things were already looking dicey here, but I kept up a brave face, hiding my turmoil as I encouraged Diablo to continue.

The first thing Diablo did, as he dutifully explained to Rimuru, was restore Church archbishop Reyhiem and palace sorcerer Razen to health.

This was conducted on the way to Farmus, in two wagons surrounded by a team of mounted guards. Diablo was seated with the three prisoners in one of the wagons—well, “with” wasn’t exactly right, because although the wagon could comfortably house six passengers, Diablo was the only visible figure inside it. The other three had been packed inside boxes on the floor. As, well, living slabs of meat.

What Shion had done was render them into a form almost too hideous to describe, something far removed from anything recognizably human. She had done so in tiny incremental steps to ensure nobody died, slowly and repeatedly exposing their musculature to the outside air, delicately scraping the meat off their bones. To put it less delicately, Shion was using those three to help her learn how to filet human beings alive—while ensuring the subjects felt no physical pain at all. This was Master Chef, Shion’s unique skill, which pushed them all right up to the brink of death, only to revive them with healing potion so she could start her research over from the beginning.

The sight and sensation of having that repeated over and over, seeing their bodies be disassembled and reassembled—all painlessly—broke all three of them for good. You could see it in their anguished expressions—when you could make out their faces at all, what with all the other exposed guts and viscera in the way.

Returning them to Farmus like this, all of them could tell, was a bad idea. So Diablo began to put together a solution, if rather reluctantly. “What a pain,” he groused. “The laws governing their continued existence have been so twisted and warped that healing magic hardly works on them at all.” But the experience also opened his eyes to the power of arts and other unique skills, something that goes beyond mere magic. Even with his all-but-complete knowledge of magic and its rules in this world, he had found a new surprise to play with. It delighted him.

Thus, in that wagon trundling its way to Farmus, Diablo successfully banished the remains of Shion’s force as it was applied to the three prisoners. Reyhiem was first to be revived, followed by Razen. Diablo had no particular order in mind for this, but when it came time to tackle King Edmaris of Farmus, he stopped.

“Oh, thank you, thank you…!”

It was Reyhiem who found his voice first.

“But enough about us,” Razen added. “My king… Please, bring my king back to what he was…”

Diablo rewarded this blind loyalty with a restive glance…and laughed.

“Ee-hee-hee-hee-hee… You, asking favors of me? You understand that the payment for this is dear, very dear?”

There was kindness to his smile—but not a shred of warmth to his eyes.

“Ah… N-no, I…”

Razen turned pale with fear and regret—

—and then he remembered. Diablo, sitting calm and composed in front of him, was not a demon to trifle with. An Arch Demon—or really, nothing even as approachable as that. An Arch Demon would be a threat, enough of one to perhaps spell doom for any smaller nation it pays a visit to. That’s how they earned their Special A rating, qualifying for Calamity status. Their magical force made any half-hearted effort at a magic barrier bend to their will. The fierceness of their aura could blow the defensive fortifications of an entire city away in a single onrush. All that, plus magical spells that crushed anything they encountered. Any adventurer who didn’t rank at least an A themselves had no chance of handling an Arch Demon—simply standing in front of one would be forfeiting their lives. Even Razen would hesitate to confront one.

But that didn’t even compare with Diablo. There didn’t seem to be any aura coming from him at all; he looked merely human. Only his eyes were unique. One glance, and they were unforgettable, like golden moons in the dead of night with slashes of crimson red down the middle. It was alarmingly eerie, but otherwise, he was no different from anyone else—meaning he could simply walk right through any fortifications a city might use to block a lesser demon’s approach.

If humans had any advantage over demons, it was in knowledge and wariness. Monsters could be intelligent as well, but the smarter they were, the more they wanted to show it off—usually in the form of their aura, which they used as a sort of magicule-driven calling card. That was what made barriers sensitive to such energy surges so effective against them. But what about a monster that hid its aura? A Calamity that just appears, in the middle of the street? Razen didn’t even want to imagine that scenario.

A demon smashing through a magic barrier, while regrettable, could at least be anticipated. It’d buy you time to shore up your forces and launch a counterattack. But if that demon could ignore the barrier entirely…anyone could see that it was no laughing matter. Any monster like that would be arch-demon-level or higher. That was Diablo, one of the first Primal Demons.

But there was something even scarier than that. That was the fact that Diablo, this ancient and fearsome demon, was in servitude to another master. The master of all those monsters, with the strikingly beautiful golden eyes and silver-blue hair—shining so bright that you could almost see through him. Fleeting, but possessing power beyond anyone’s recognition. Someone worthy of being called a demon lord.

His mind was filled with sheer terror as he watched this lord massacre an army of twenty thousand, but when they met later, he felt a different emotion. When Razen was being taken away as a prisoner of war, the way this demon lord regarded him… It was like glancing at a pebble on the road. The moment those golden eyes spotted him, Razen was practically intoxicated. Gone was the pain racking his body, the fear of imminent death. And then he understood. There are things in this world that were never meant to be touched. A voice from the heavens booming “Don’t go overboard.” It must have warned Razen then. Don’t count on your chances. Taking on a being who counts a Primal Demon among his servants—no wonder your nation has fallen. To a demon lord like that, destroying Farmus single-handed would be too simple.

Razen remembered it all. Ignoring the lurching and jolting of the wagon, he got out of his seat and kneeled before Diablo.

“Of course I understand. And I hope I can…er, that you will allow me to join you as even your lowliest servant! I swear that my body, and my soul, is yours to utilize. So please, please offer some pity to King Edmaris…”

He was staking all his loyalty on this request. Diablo greeted it with a placid nod.

“Very well. I suppose even someone like you is considered relatively powerful by human standards. I am sure you have your uses. Besides, I had no intention of killing him unless Sir Rimuru ordered me to. I will be glad to free him for you. But…”

However, if the monarch wanted to go back to the way he remembered himself, he would have to work for it. He would need to be shown to the kingdom’s nobility, in the horrifying form he was in now, to show to the world the foolishness of bending a bow against the Rimuru Diablo was so devoted to. Razen waited nervously for Diablo to continue, while Reyhiem was too terrified by the oppressive atmosphere to move an inch.

“But I will let this go just one time. Depending on your future behavior, not only your king’s life, but the very breath of existence that blows over the land of Farmus may be snuffed out.”

He meant it literally. Diablo’s will—meaning, Rimuru’s will—was to be followed, or else. Razen, and Reyhiem, and even King Edmaris in his exposed, twisted, boxed-up form all knew the intent behind the statement. All three were fools, but they were not idiots. Whether they liked it or not, they understood Diablo wouldn’t hesitate to act on that threat. The only way they could remain alive, it was clear now, was to give Diablo their full support.

“Of course, sir! Give us any order you seek! We will cooperate to the best of our ability!”

Reyhiem threw his head close to the floor in a humiliating kowtow, a mental hair’s breadth away from licking Diablo’s boots.

“You have our loyalty, my lord!”

And Razen had already made up his mind. Whether the king was safe mattered little by now. The only thing that had kept Farmus, and its royal lineage, safe for this long was Razen’s pride in his job. Even Edmaris, in all his anguish and desperation, could see that. Now, Razen had forsaken him—and thus, forsaken Farmus.

But the king knew it was the best choice available. Defying the demon lord meant the destruction of the nation. King Edmaris had two choices left: pledge his allegiance to the demons or attempt a resistance and be cut down immediately. And the good king was not foolish enough to make the wrong decision at a time like this. Thus, for his last official act as leader of the Kingdom of Farmus, he made the right move.

“As the final king of Farmus,” he declared, with some reluctance but still loudly and clearly, “I promise I will provide any support you require, Sir Diablo.”

Diablo had pledges from all three of them. At that moment, behind the scenes, his Tempter skill was doing its work, ensuring that each one would be in his servitude.

“Don’t worry,” the demon gently whispered with a smile. “Do what I say, and I will make sure you do not suffer for it.”

The land of Farmus was in a state of mass confusion that day. Their lord, King Edmaris, had returned in a shocking state of affairs.

There, in the royal castle’s audience chambers, the collected nobility of the nation gasped in horror. There, atop the throne, a box had been reverently laid upon the cushion. Inside was…a cube of meat, a nauseating mixture of geometry and biology with the king’s face buried in the center. It was alive, its eyes a tad glassy as it stared out of the box, but fully conscious nonetheless.

“Shogo! What madness is this? Why is His Majesty in such a miserable state?!”

“Hear! Hear! And what of the other two? What happened to our royal armies?”

“And what of Folgen?! What is our knight captain doing?! How could this ever have happened with Sir Razen overseeing matters?!”

Panic spread as the noblemen began to shout over one another, fervently trying to mask their fear. Razen, taking the form of Shogo, could hardly blame them.

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Several days after losing regular magical contact, the people remaining in the kingdom were on pins and needles. Their proud, overwhelming force of twenty thousand couldn’t have been defeated, but there was no telling what sort of unexpected events may have transpired. There was no way to be sure if their king was safe, even—more than enough to fill any mind with suspicious doubt.

In the midst of this, Razen had taken Archbishop Reyhiem back home, using a Warp Portal to transport the both of them back to the castle’s warp chamber. A passing sentry had noticed their limp forms on the floor early in the morning that day. It threw the palace guards into a panic as they scrambled to identify them—Shogo Taguchi, the otherworlder, and Reyhiem, archbishop and His Majesty’s close confidant. The guards helped the latter up, still confused about all this, before noticing the box the boy took great pains to keep safe in his hands.

One of them looked inside, unprepared for the sight. He was an upper officer in the royal guard, known for courage and coolness under fire, but not even he could refrain from screaming in horror. There were strings of some unidentifiable organic matter connecting haphazardly from one section to the other, emitting a rotting stench—a twisted sight, like plucking all the organs out of a body and gluing them back together at random. The sole ruler of the Kingdom of Farmus had been reduced to a sickening creature, and no one could criticize that royal guard for so rudely screaming his head off at him. Attracted by the noise, others went to look for themselves and reacted the same way; the attendants and ministers were all thrown into utter chaos at the transformation of their lord.

Some screamed and sobbed. Some found themselves emptying their stomachs on the spot in fear. Some fainted entirely. None of them could believe this was their king. But this was reality. When they finally dared to come close enough, it was confirmed for good—this truly was Edmaris before them.

“What are you doing?!” one of the ministers shouted. “We must help His Majesty!”

That was the catalyst. At once, everyone sprang into action. The sorcerers who stayed behind in the palace tested out every spell at their disposal. The high-level priests of the Western Holy Church were summoned, each attempting their own healing magic. Faced with this object of primal fear, they tried desperately to restore the king to normal, faces straining at the sickening sight, attempting to keep their wits as they continued their work.

But nothing worked. No matter what they tried, they couldn’t save their king.

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Now Shogo had regained consciousness. He was immediately called in for questioning.

Razen felt a slight sense of sympathy there, faced with his former comrades. His fealty was squarely with Diablo, and he wouldn’t hesitate to betray them now. They would all face their fates alone, based on their own decisions—but Razen felt just a hint of pity for them. All of this was on Diablo’s orders, including his feigned unconsciousness. Everything was going to plan.

As Diablo’s servant, Razen had received a briefing on what his new master intended to do with this kingdom. He fully understood what needed to be done to achieve those aims. In a word, this land was to become the demon lord’s plaything. The moment Farmus was selected as a game board with everyone here as pawns, the history of the country as an ongoing concern came to an end.

But this was not necessarily bad news for its people. When told of the demon lord’s plans, Razen felt a broad sense of hope. Already in his mind’s eye, he could see the land of Farmus growing more prosperous than ever before. If achieving this goal meant toppling the current system in place, then so be it.

“Calm yourselves! This is Razen inside this body. I have taken His Majesty back to safety, with the kind assistance of a champion to our cause.”

“What? You’re not Shogo?”

“What happened to…? Ah. Yes, now I see.”

“Imagine, Sir Razen inside that impudent snit Shogo’s body! This will take some getting used to.”

Despite the initial confusion, the people in the chamber were convinced. Razen was, after all, a great magician.

“But you fled the battle? Does that mean our forces…Farmus’s forces have been defeated?!”

“What happened after that? You didn’t simply march back to the castle because you couldn’t eradicate the monsters, did you?”

The noblemen’s questions grew to a torrent. They were the leaders of the nation, although many of them secretly (or not so secretly) schemed to use this war as a cover for the profits they intended to make off it. Defeat, and the financial losses that entailed, were unthinkable notions.

“Silence, all of you! We must let Sir Razen say his piece!”

It was the Marquis of Muller who finally calmed the crowd. That, too, was part of the plan. Diablo had made contact with him the previous night via a connection to Fuze, guild master for the kingdom of Blumund. Things were all proceeding just as Diablo had pictured them.

Razen began by explaining how the king would be saved. A native champion named Yohm had apparently negotiated with the lord of the monsters, procuring some of their restorative potion that he would soon bring back to Farmus. Word had already been sent to the gate guards, ready to receive Yohm’s party at any moment.

He then moved on to what exactly happened to the Farmus forces. He did not get very far into the tale before the chamber erupted into shouting once more. All it took were three magic words: Veldora was reborn.

“That—that can’t be…”

“That evil dragon’s found new life in the monsters’ land…?”

“No… I thought Veldora had been eternally banished!”

“There is no time to waste. We must report this to the Holy Church and have them dispatch a Crusader group at once!”

“It’s all over! If Sir Razen speaks the truth, we have no means of resistance. The remaining forces in Farmus hardly number enough to put up a new defense!”

“He’s right! Bring our knights back here immediately!”

“Indeed. If our magical link with them is cut off, we must send a messenger for General Folgen!”

“There’s no time for such nonsense! We must flee this land before this knowledge reaches the general public, or we may lose any chance to do so!”

Chaos and terror reigned. Some professed the need to strike back; others saw fit to abandon the people outright and go into exile. Muller silenced them all with a thundering roar.

“Enough of this! Whether our knights are alive or not, the situation remains the same. Panic will accomplish nothing for us, Sir Hytta. Where do you intend to flee to? That Storm Dragon is a Catastrophe for us all.”

The noblemen regained their composure. Calmness returned for a moment, only to be shattered as Razen continued, explaining what had transpired in that faraway land—the sad (and entirely made-up) tragedy of how the entire Farmus force had disappeared without a trace, following Veldora’s revival.

The tale made all the present nobility fall silent. Nobody said anything. It was entirely preposterous, so difficult to believe, for everyone. Soon, they began asking Razen questions, attempting to come to grips with the situation.

“S-Sir Razen, is all of that true? We have no idea where any of them are?”

“Indeed. The battle between our forces and the monsters resurrected the sleeping dragon in his domain.”

“That, that couldn’t possibly be! The Western Holy Church declared him to be sealed away forever! Are you saying that was a lie?”

“No. They were right—Veldora had been extinguished from this world. But the seeds of the dragon species can never be fully removed. They are simply reborn elsewhere. It surprised all of us, though, seeing this rebirth take place so close to us and in such a short time.”

“Then what happened to the survivors, Sir Razen?”

“Yes! Is General Folgen still alive? How many forces can we still account for?”

Razen solemnly shook his head. They had all died, thanks to an enraged Rimuru—such was the truth. But he had direct orders from Diablo to describe the fates of every fighter as unknown.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“As I said, I do not know where they are. The knights and monsters that were fighting on that land disappeared once Veldora revived himself. We were all that remained—”

“Ridiculous!”

“Just to be sure, you literally mean they disappeared? Not scattered across the land following a rout?”

“Our supply teams would have been stationed behind the front lines. Surely they must be safe, at least?”

Razen fell silent, eyes closed. Seeing this forced everyone to trust him at his word. The knights were all gone. One of the ministers fell to the ground, erupting in tears. He was the one who asked about the supply teams, in no small part because his son had been sent out on one of them, his first battle experience. Keeping him away from the front had meant pulling all the strings he could, but the effort had been wasted. He had only agreed to his deployment because this was supposed to be a raid, a journey to seize the monsters’ assets and kill with abandon. And now this. The despair came so unexpectedly, it made him cry almost instantly.

But even that tragedy was just one in a multitude. Approximately twenty thousand people were missing in action. It was a cataclysmic loss like none the nation had ever seen—and as “missing” as they officially were, nobody expected them home anytime soon. They were as good as dead.

And now all of them had connected that cataclysm in their minds with the revival of Veldora. They had all been sacrificed in order to breathe life into the dragon. To Veldora himself, that was nothing more than a hateful lie, but it was exactly what Rimuru and his advisers wanted. Diablo had just made masterful use of Razen to manipulate the thoughts and minds of the Farmus nobility.

Then, as if on cue, footsteps rang out from outside the throne room. Yohm and his team had arrived—with Mjurran as his chief adviser, Gruecith, his main bodyguard, and the sorcerer Rommel, his personal secretary. Taking up the rear was Diablo himself, dressed in his finest butler-style clothing but oozing a very non-butler-like arrogance from every pore. This chamber was not the sort of place someone as low-born as an adventurer could easily step into, but Razen had arranged for a guide to lead them in.

“Sorry I took so long,” said Yohm to Razen, “but I think I finally got the big guy to see things our way.”

He tried to hold his head high as a statesman, but his street-bred speech habits proved less simple to fix. Turning him into nobility was not going to happen overnight. His attitude alone made the other nobles question him.

“Who on earth are you?! Do you have any idea of your rudeness, commoner?!”

Despite being informed that Yohm’s party was here to heal the king, one of the ministers saw fit to chew him out. He was aware of Yohm the champion, yes. Yohm’s likeness had been passed around, so the minister knew exactly to whom he was speaking. There was no mistaking his Exo-Armor, either—but none of that mattered to him. This was the royal castle, and the rules of the common streets didn’t apply here. Yohm’s casual tongue was unacceptable.

This unnerved Razen. He turned a wary eye toward Diablo, gauging whether this tirade offended him or not. If the nobility was not fully prepared for this, Razen would have to shoulder the blame. He could understand the minister’s anger—it was a perfectly normal reaction to have, as he saw it—but now wasn’t the time for this. He regretted not being more thorough in his guidance.

“Lord Carlos,” he intervened, “please wait a moment. This group is the very one that saved us. They are the only ones who hold the key to rescuing His Majesty!”

“What? They saved you, Sir Razen?”

“As the so-called defender of our kingdom, Sir Razen, that hardly sounds like you. What is the meaning of this?”

Despite the noblemen’s misgivings, Razen was still the most powerful wizard in Farmus. There was no doubting his powers, and his track record in defending the kingdom from outside threats spread across hundreds of years. His words were not to be taken lightly, and so the nobility sheathed their swords for now. If anything, though, this response was merely a bluff in the face of the mortal danger this nation faced. If Razen had been saved, perhaps there was a way all of them could be, too.

As Razen opened his mouth to answer the question, another voice joined the conversation.

“Allow me to answer that.”

It was Reyhiem, the archbishop. He had pretended to be himself just revived this moment to come to Razen’s assistance. Relieved, Razen gave him a nod, then turned to Diablo, noticing his expectant smile.

“Yes? How was Sir Razen rescued, then?”

“I trust he has already told you about the Storm Dragon’s reawakening,” Reyhiem began. “The battlefield was intense, vehicles from both sides smashing against one another. Our side outnumbered theirs, but the monsters had the geographical advantage. It was a much harder battle than any of us expected, and there were many casualties on both sides.”

His voice echoed across the otherwise silent chamber as he continued, keeping a close eye on Diablo to gauge his response. The chaos on the battlefield was what revived Veldora, and when he emerged on the scene, both human and monster were sacrificed en masse.

“It was all Sir Reyhiem and I could do to keep His Majesty protected,” Razen said as he nodded. He was careful to emphasize that there was nothing he could’ve done to save them.

“Exactly, exactly. We were situated in the rear of the main force, watching in despair as the tragedy unfolded before us. Before the Storm Dragon, dooming our legions to death and crushing everything in his path, we all said our final prayers. But then, one rose up to stand between us and this merchant of death.”

Razen shot Diablo a glance, to which Diablo gave a self-satisfied nod back. It was just the signal he and Reyhiem wanted.

“It was none other than Sir Rimuru, the master of the monsters.”

“Indeed, it was. Sir Reyhiem and I were both prepared to die, but Sir Rimuru convinced Lord Veldora to calm his rage.”

“Convinced? He actually spoke with the monster?!”

“It would be suicide to stand before the likes of Veldora. Being exposed to all those magicules would kill most creatures.”

“How did he do it?”

The nobility was understandably surprised. If Veldora could be reasoned with, perhaps there was a way to keep him from laying waste upon the land. They looked toward Razen and Reyhiem with hopeful expressions. There was every chance that Veldora would spare Farmus, but it would be foolish to idly hope for that to transpire. But what was to be done, then? Nobody had an answer for that. Now that they knew a force of twenty thousand, including the king’s personal knight corps, had been literally erased from existence, nobody was reckless enough to suggest confronting the dragon. If they could negotiate with this threat, that was the best solution for everyone.

“You are all aware, I assume, that Sir Rimuru is also the overseer of the Forest of Jura?”

“Or so he claims, at least,” groused a minister. Diablo greeted this with a scowl that immediately filled Razen with alarm.

“It is no mere claim, Minister,” he said. “I have personally witnessed the town the monsters built, and truly, it is more than worthy of serving as the capital of any kingdom. But we can discuss that later. Regardless, Sir Rimuru has the dryads, the guardians of Jura, working alongside him.”

As he put it to the nobility, Rimuru used the dryads as a kind of interpreter for his talks with Veldora. That made it all the more convincing. The dryads were well-known for having the power to guard the lands where Veldora slept. They were classified as A rank by the Free Guild’s reckoning, and in terms of the danger they posed, Special A wasn’t out of the question. If they were serving this monster Rimuru, his powers must be at least as extensive as that. Nobody in the room had a problem picturing it. They were all high-level nobility, and none of them were lazy with their intelligence gathering.

“I see…”

“So making him our foe was a mistake…?”

The ministers recalled how eager they were to invade the monster lands. They hated to face this reality, but it was a headache they all had to deal with now.

“This is ominous,” one of them muttered. “If it was possible to negotiate with this dragon, then antagonizing our sole potential inroad was a grave error, indeed…”

The rest of them went visibly paler. There was no way they could ask Rimuru to intervene on their part. At worst, he might even send Veldora over to Farmus to teach them all a lesson.

Then Yohm, summarily ignored up to now, walked to the center of the chamber. Ensuring all eyes were upon him, he began to speak, his voice calm.

“Um, yeah, so listen, you guys don’t have to worry about that. When I killed that orc lord, I was working with Rimuru the whole time. He’s actually a pretty openhearted guy usually, you know? In fact, he’s got a pretty keen interest in working alongside humanity—”

“Oh-ho!” Lord Carlos interrupted him, exercising every bit of his regal pretension. “Then let this man stand in for us and tell him of our demands. We will give you our demands at a later time, so please retire to another room and wait for us.”

Class is an onerous thing. Whether a champion of the people or not, Yohm was still a commoner, not even deemed worthy of a knighthood. Many in the room made no secret about how much they looked down upon him. Lord Carlos was an earl, among the most powerful in the Farmus bureaucracy, and the greatest example of how full of themselves the nobility often proved to be. This attitude would not normally be a problem in this chamber, but—again—now was not the time. Already, some of the other nobles were rolling their eyes at Carlos.

“Whoa, whoa, wait a sec. I said he’s usually openhearted, but not right now, you know what I mean? You all probably know why.”

“What?”

“You declared war on Rimuru’s nation, right? Bad idea, my friend. Rimuru lost some of his pals in that battle. He, um— He’s pretty pissed off.”

“What nonsense is this, commoner?! It is not your place to question the actions of our nation! If you are on speaking terms with Rimuru, that is all we require. It is a champion’s duty to intervene for us. You must do something!”

Lord Carlos was acting as haughty as ever, totally ignoring Yohm’s pleadings. Yohm had trouble hiding his disgust. I swear, these nobles, he thought, taking pains to look undisturbed as he continued.

“Look, can you just listen to me for one moment? From the way I heard it, you didn’t send any envoys, you didn’t declare war or anything; you just took some otherworlders and let ’em go to town, huh? I went out to mediate with you guys, but when I heard all that, lemme tell ya, I was shocked. But look, I’m a Farmus man. Born and raised. I don’t wanna see my homeland get wrecked, so I tried finding a way to calm Rimuru down. Razen over there asked me to.”

If the nobility continued to act as despotic as they were, it was no exaggeration to say Farmus’s days were numbered. Sensing Diablo behind him, Yohm could physically feel the doom over them all.

Catching sight of Diablo taught Yohm all about what true evil was. It made him realize what a bunch of small-time bandits he and his group really were. Real evil doesn’t bother to try buttering up the men in charge. They bow down to no one, staying constantly true to their will.

Diablo was on good behavior right now only because he was faithfully following Rimuru’s orders. Him acting up right now would have adverse effects on Yohm’s future as the new king. Overly punishing the nobles would leave the real problem unaddressed, and if he simply killed them all to shut them up, it’d tarnish the new government’s reputation. The most ideal way to handle them was to wait until some of the more rebellious ones made their presences known. That was why Diablo stayed silent, keenly observing them all.

If, on the other hand, the nobility decided to incur his wrath, all that flew out the window. If Diablo decided none of them were worth keeping alive, that would be the end for them, right there. Mjurran and Gruecith, serving as advisers to Diablo, were in agreement on that. Only a very few high-level magic-born could hope to corral someone as powerful as Razen. Diablo was one of them, and if Diablo wanted to take action, Farmus in its current weakened state could do nothing to resist him.

This was much of the reason why Yohm’s party was far more nervous about how this meeting in the throne room would go than any of the nobles were.

Razen felt just the same way as Yohm. It was clear that Diablo thought little of human life, and he had none of the hang-ups about noble titles and commoners the rest of them had. They were all equally worthless to him—his treatment of King Edmaris made that blindingly obvious.

If they started flinging insults at Rimuru, master of the monsters, they had no idea how Diablo might react. Lord Carlos, hopefully, would be the only target of his rage. If he wasn’t, then all intelligent life might be banished from Farmus entirely.

Razen knew that, and that knowledge made him frantic. Assuaging the panic running inside his head, he tried his best to back up Yohm.

“Lord Carlos, that is quite enough from you!”

“What? You take the side of this scruffy commoner, Sir Razen?!”

“I said, that is quite enough!” he found himself shouting. “I will not have you intrude until you understand the situation!”

It was rare for Razen to raise his voice in court. It cowed the nobility into silence, waiting to see what would happen next.

“Listen to me, all of you,” he said, mentally recalling the script he was given. “Sir Yohm is telling us the truth. Shogo and his otherworlder compatriots were defeated by the monster army’s generals. When our forces tried to overrun our enemies, the Storm Dragon blocked us, sealing our fates. The survivors consist of Sir Reyhiem, His Majesty, and me—us three only. We were held captive, and it was the good word of Sir Yohm that earned us our release.”

He continued with the tale, and no one else dared to cast doubt upon it. Soon Reyhiem and Yohm were contributing information, supported by Muller and the Earl of Hellman. Together, they all pleaded their case before the biggest and brightest figures of Farmus politics.

“…So you say that His Majesty was subjected to a curse on the battlefield that put him in his present state?”

“Our lord has offered peace…and the master of the monsters is willing to listen…?”

“Are you saying Farmus, our homeland, has yielded to monsters?”

“Have we any other choice? Surely you don’t intend to suggest we continue the battle. We would have the Storm Dragon to answer to.”

“No, I…”

The otherworlders, their aces in the hole, had been dispatched by Rimuru’s top officials. Veldora was on the move. The Jura-Tempest Federation, an organization they once derided as a rabble of slavering beasts, was—from a military perspective, at least—leaps and bounds ahead of Farmus. Attempting to stage a frontal attack against this foe would be the height of folly. Everyone in the chamber had the same thought—in admitting defeat, the king made the only decision available to him.

Soon, the group had come to a consensus.

“Well, if we have an offer being made to us, why not accept it, everyone?”

The majority nodded their agreement to Muller’s suggestion. There were some contrarians among them, no doubt, but none of them voiced their concerns. Nobody seemed to contest the fact that this war could no longer continue.

It was now settled. The Kingdom of Farmus would enter negotiations with Tempest. And with that decided, Diablo finally took his cue.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh… A wise decision,” he said as he began to saunter toward the center. “In that case, as promised, I will release your king back to you.”

“Who are you?!”

“Pardon me,” Diablo proudly stated. “My name is Diablo, faithful servant to my leader, the great and powerful Rimuru.”

The assembled nobility had little idea how to address this man. Diablo seemed so natural among them that they had trouble speaking up. Only Razen demonstrated any fear of him, for only Razen knew what that name meant. The mere fact the name existed at all; that struck terror into him. Some things, he thought as he enviously looked at the audience and sighed, are better off not being known at all.

Others, however, regarded Diablo with suspicion. These were the king’s own royal guard, stationed by their lord’s side and keeping an eye on this interloper’s every move. Finally, when he was just about to reach the throne, they stepped in his way—only to be completely ignored, as Diablo continued tracing a path to the gruesome box atop the seat.

The guard was now visibly angered but nonetheless frozen in place. Even if they wanted to speak, none of them could. By the Free Guild’s reckoning, each knight in this guard rated an A-minus—not quite a full A but certainly above a B. One could even call them the strongest of Farmus’s remaining force, left behind in the castle to keep the rest of the administration well guarded. They numbered a hundred strong, there in the chamber, and none of them could move an inch.

It wasn’t anything Diablo actively did to them. It was simple terror. Their well-honed survival instincts told every one of them how much of a danger Diablo was.

“Very good,” he said as he greeted the sight with a smile. “No need for anyone to die needlessly, am I right?”

So he continued until he stopped at the box that contained what was left of King Edmaris. Calmly, he took a Full Potion out of a pocket and poured it straight into the container—and without anyone noticing, he simultaneously undid the binding curse placed by Shion on its contents. The resulting transformation was dramatic. The moment medicine made contact with flesh, the king was back, in the robust shape everyone recalled. Diablo’s scheme was a roaring success. This king, whose malady had been thought of as incurable by the men assembled, was back to normal in an instant. The attending doctors and sorcerers all yelped in surprise.

“What, what is that potion…?”

“It is a Full Potion,” he gently replied. “A specially refined creation of my homeland, the most potent of all restorative treatments. We export it only to nations on friendly terms with us.”

This introduction was a key part of the plan. The potion, after all, was Tempest’s main economic weapon.

Full Potions were only rarely found worldwide, usually dug up from the ruins of ancient magical empires. One sip could perform miracles up to, and including, the regeneration of missing limbs. Only a Revival Elixir—an agent that provided nothing short of resurrection—could outclass it. The recipe for it had been lost over time, although rumor had it the dwarves were frantically trying to re-create it. If it was being actively manufactured, people the world over would seek it.

Diablo had previously heard, from Gabil and others, about how eager Rimuru was to advertise this wonder drug. Unlike Shion, he was an enthusiastic pupil, learning everything there was to know about Tempest in short order. Thus, despite the grimness of the situation, he didn’t waste the opportunity to show off a little. That attention to detail made him stand out among Rimuru’s staff. It was, in a way, a rather extreme example of Diablo’s refusal to compromise on anything he did—one reason why antagonizing him was extremely ill-advised.

Razen and Reyhiem, he knew, were scared that he might massacre everyone in the castle. But nothing could be further from his mind. Doing that would wipe out Rimuru’s trust in him. He had been tasked with making Yohm king of this realm, and Diablo wasn’t stupid enough to risk that. In his mind, he had a cunning plan—the classic carrot and stick. Careful applications of both would allow him to manipulate the minds of the ministers and noblemen gathered here. He would make them consider it wiser to acquiesce than defy him. And if any one of them was foolish enough to make the wrong decision, he would cleanse the kingdom of their presence. That was the gist of it.

The king was back in human form, much to the astonishment of his slack-jawed audience. To the casual observer, it looked every bit like the Full Potion alone had healed him.

“How do you feel?” Diablo asked.

Edmaris, a tad pale in the face but otherwise none the worse for wear, nodded back.

“Ah… Y-yes… Thank you. You saved me.”

This weak reply was half honest feelings, half scripted act. Edmaris was doing Diablo’s bidding. Tempter, Diablo’s unique skill, was in the same family as Rimuru’s own Merciless, allowing him complete control over anyone whose spirit he had sufficiently broken. Under its influence, if King Edmaris ever attempted to defy Diablo’s will, Diablo would immediately be informed of it.

As the king put on the clothing hurriedly provided by an attendant and breathed a sigh of relief, Diablo motioned at him with his eyes. He nodded back.

“Now, my liege, I have a message from Sir Rimuru, my own lord,” said Diablo.

“I will be glad to hear it, messenger from the monster realm.”

This was the first time the king of Farmus acknowledged Tempest as a sovereign nation. It was also a signal to everyone in the room. From this point forward, as far as King Edmaris was concerned, Tempest would be recognized as an orderly negotiating partner—which in turn meant Diablo was the official representative of the other side of the war.

It was as significant a gesture as Edmaris could muster, in an effort not to get on Diablo’s wrong side, and thanks to that, any noblemen fostering ideas of revolt were silenced for good. Of course, nobody had any will to continue the war at this point. This declaration was less for Diablo’s sake and more in hopes of protecting the king’s own countrymen.

“Allow me to give you his statement. One week from now, my lord wishes to hold peace talks between the representatives of both nations here, in this land. Before we sign the peace treaty, you are asked to agree to the following conditions provided by us…”

Diablo took out several pieces of parchment paper.

“You have the right to make your choices about these stipulations…”

After an ominous opening, the document laid out its terms—ostensibly written by Rimuru, but in reality, written by Diablo. Its contents were, to be frank, revolting.

The first article provided was for the king to abdicate and the nation to pay war reparations. The second was for the nation to surrender to Tempest and become a vassal state. The third wasn’t even a choice—it simply stated that, if the first two choices were not replied to in the affirmative, the war would continue.

These conditions may not have seemed like they altered the current situation very much. But they did. With Tempest now recognized as a state, Farmus’s footing after starting a war without so much as a formal declaration was shaky at best. None of its neighbors would want any part of it, and the Western Holy Church would doubtlessly have their hands full with Veldora. Nobody in the room imagined that any local power would go out of their way to help Farmus.

It was, in other words, blackmail. A threat to raze the land, avoidable only by swallowing a litany of intolerable rules.

Diablo read all the conditions out loud, his haughty voice reaching every corner of the room, the glee evident on his face as he enjoyed the nobility’s reactions. When he was finished, he could hear one of the ministers whisper “Ridiculous” in a half wail. This he ignored as he turned toward King Edmaris and bowed.

“…That is all. Please have a response ready for us in a week’s time.”

“W-wait a moment! That is far too little time for us to work with! At least provide us a month to—”

“Silence. I have a short temper.”

“But—but, sir, this is not a matter we can decide upon in the royal parliament. We must summon the regional barons and stage a vote with the entire assembly—”

“I said ‘Silence.’ Your logistical issues matter little to me. And I will also suggest not to attempt any juvenile tricks with us. These deadline-extending excuses shall not be tolerated. If there is no reply after a week, we will take that to mean you wish to continue hostilities. I ask you to provide your full consideration of this matter.”

And with that one-sided caution, Diablo turned his back on the king and his court. He could hear someone loudly calling him a tyrant, but it didn’t bother him. He simply left Yohm and his men behind and walked out alone, his work apparently done for the day.

After he was gone, King Edmaris officially called for a session of the royal parliament, with all nobility required to be present. This was set for three days from now—just barely enough time to bring them all together even with the aid of magic, but such were the stakes. If Diablo’s deadline was one week, the nation had to take action. Time was of the essence. The appeal had to be made to them all.

At once, the king’s attendants sprang into action. The room echoed with the clamor of activity as they began to prepare for the meeting as Edmaris watched, exhausted.

“Do all of you understand the situation?” he asked his closest ministers feebly. “Before the nobles arrive, we will need to decide on a direction. I will offer my views tomorrow, at another location, and I would like to hear from all of you as well.”

There was no doubt that Farmus was hurtling headlong toward its doom. Now was no time for infighting within the bureaucracy. The parliament was going to be a wild, confused meeting, that much was certain—which made it all the more important that everyone was on the same page beforehand.

That, the king thought as he silently firmed up his resolve, and so we can keep the casualties as low as possible.

The next day, the king and his group reconvened in another meeting room. These were all trusted confidants, the only exceptions being the Marquis of Muller, most powerful among the court’s neutral elements, and his associate, the Earl of Hellman.

Edmaris began by summarizing the events that led here once more, his audience silently listening on. Razen and Reyhiem had already covered this territory, but the horrifying truth of it all still crashed upon the ministers like a tidal wave.

“My liege,” Muller asked, “is all of this true? I mean, about Veldora being revived?”

The king nodded. “It is just the way Razen and Reyhiem put it yesterday. But the sole problem I face right now is which conditions must be accepted, out of the three offered. That, and I also wish to deliberate over how to handle future events.”

As he implied, nothing should be left on the table in this discussion, and soon, opinions were flying in all directions.

“The Forest of Jura that Veldora protects is a forbidden land. Not even the Eastern Empire has tried to lay hands upon it. It would be a fool’s errand to tackle it on our own.”

“Too true, too true! There is no path to victory for us. Any further belligerent activity would spell the end of our nation!”

“Indeed. The question, then, is how to approach conditions one and two…”

“I refuse to let us be colonized! How could we let the monsters rule over us when our own positions haven’t even been guaranteed?”

“That’s not necessarily true. I doubt we will see any further wars, for one.”

“Ridiculous! The landholding barons of the kingdom will hardly allow such nonsense.”

“It will mean civil war!”

“Which, I suppose, is what the monsters want to see.”

“And what of the king abdicating? And the reparations? Have you seen what they are asking for? It will collapse our finances.”

“Ten thousand stellars… The equivalent of one million gold coins. A good fifth of our annual tax revenue.”

“Outlandish…”

“But think about it. Is that not preferable to the end of our kingdom?”

“That it is. They are honorable enough, at least, not to demand every coin in our coffers.”

“So there is nothing to be done but accept their terms…?”

“I see no other way out, no.”

King Edmaris listened on in silence as his ministers and nobles deliberated, keeping his thoughts to himself.

Beautiful… As sweet as a young girl, but such an overwhelming presence in person. This Rimuru, lord of the monsters—he is a fearsome demon lord, indeed. Merely thinking about him makes terror erupt from the bottom of my soul.

There was no way the king could ever put his own majesty above him any longer. The fear in his heart made the thought of defying him unthinkable. He had been rendered helpless, a cube in a box, forced to devour his own limbs. He never wanted to experience that again, and now he had to convince the ministers to see things his way.

In his mind flashed images of defeat and the assorted types of torture he had endured—and in between, the monster’s town, far more orderly than he had guessed. The birth of a new demon lord and the resurrection of the Storm Dragon. It was all the truth, and Edmaris knew it meant bitter defeat for him. Stained by greed, he had made a terrible error. If he had approached on friendlier terms, perhaps they could’ve worked together in a far different situation. But the time for that was gone.

No further errors would be allowed.

Diablo advised him that he was free to respond to these three conditions any way he wanted. In other words, his reply didn’t much matter. Diablo’s goals would be met either way. Instead, the king reasoned, his duty was simply to keep the fallout to a minimum—and that was the approach he took as he gathered his thoughts.

The choice for number three was a given. Further war would mean annihilation, from the king to the lowliest citizen. The second question was more worthy of debate, since it meant the people’s lives and livelihoods would be guaranteed. The glimpses he enjoyed of the monster town’s skyline were still fresh on his mind. He had even seen adventurers among them, smiling and laughing with their monster friends.

Perhaps it is not so bad a fate after all…

Edmaris enjoyed the fantasy for a moment but quickly dispelled it from his mind. It could never happen. Nobody would trust in a monster; not unless they saw that city for themselves. I laughed it off as the ravings of a madman myself…

The nobility had a duty to keep their people safe. If they opted for unconditional surrender and life as a vassal state, it could overturn the entire nation. The neighboring kingdoms would resist, no doubt, and it was doubtful the resolution would pass parliament. A king had the right to force his will upon his subjects, of course, but the assassination attempts would no doubt come along shortly after.

So far, question one offered the most obvious decision. Abdication meant that Edmaris would step down, handing the crown over to someone else, and be made to swear never to wage war again. There was a demand for reparations, yes, and while there was no legal basis for that, it was difficult for him to turn it down. It would lead to a much faster, and cheaper, peace than continuing this war would.

There was no guarantee that the monsters wouldn’t pile on more demands later. But with these two in particular, he could tell they had a solid aim in mind.

Diablo had extensively interviewed King Edmaris, and as he did, he made it clear that Yohm would become king of a newly established nation. Edmaris had three children—two girls and one boy, the youngest. His daughters were married off to noble families abroad, which left his ten-year-old son the only viable heir. If the king abdicated now, there was every chance of a bloody power struggle. The king even had an idea of who would aim for his throne—that would be Edward, his half brother and head of the nobility faction in this palace.

Reading that far in, Edmaris could tell what Diablo wanted. He sought to take advantage of this potential power struggle and make the royalists and nobility fight against one another. In fact, this was bound to happen no matter what decision he made. Whatever he chose, Diablo could easily factor it into his own plans.

The king sighed to himself.

…So it just doesn’t matter?

And if it didn’t, if the results were the same regardless…

“All right, everyone. Allow me to state my views.”

Just when the debate was starting to die down, King Edmaris began to speak.

“The nation of monsters calls itself the Jura-Tempest Federation. It is a gathering of assorted species of monsters, all bound together by an overseer by the name of Rimuru. I do not feel it is such a bad thing to join them in this federation…”

“You seek to become a vassal state?”

“No, not like that. I am merely stating my belief that their nation is governed in a surprisingly peaceful manner.”

He stopped for a moment, allowing the audience to gauge just how resolute his expression was.

“This war was a mistake. It was not for the sake of our people, but of my own greed. That is why the heavens saw fit to forsake me. The price of that made Veldora rise from the dead and spread the seeds of disaster across Farmus. If I had followed the Marquis of Muller and the Earl of Hellman’s advice, none of this would have happened…”

“My liege, please, none of this is…”

“We are unworthy of your great modesty, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you,” the king said, nodding in heartfelt appreciation. “There is no longer a second chance for us. None. Thanks to Sir Rimuru, lord of the monsters, I stand here before you now. There is no ‘next time.’ One more incorrect decision, and the flames of war will descend not just upon me, but upon all our people. My pride and honor no longer matter. All I want to do, at the very least, is ensure my people are not engulfed by those flames. What can we do to steer things in a better direction? What will make our people happier? That is what I want us all to consider!”

The ministers froze in surprise. Their cold, calculating king, always putting his own profit ahead of everything else, admitting to his mistakes and calling upon his advisers to come up with a better idea. Their shock was understandable. They all looked wide-eyed at their king, reflecting upon their own thoughts. The selfishness within them, as they used pride or whatnot as an excuse to protect their own assets, was now all too obvious to them.

Every last one of them stood up, then kneeled before their king.

“My liege,” Muller said on their behalf, “we apologize. We were all foolish. We must seek out a better path…for our nation and for our people!”

The rest of them shouted out their Hear! Hear!s as their heads touched the floor.

The talks continued well into the ensuing night, as Yohm and his team were invited to participate as advisers.

“I believe I did a fairly good job of shaking them up,” Diablo reported, smiling.

Whoa! Wait a sec! There’s so much I could comment on there, I hardly knew where to begin. But I suppose the biggest issue was:

“You showed them that thing?”

“I did, sir. I thought it the best way to instill fear in their minds.”

Wow. He showed it to them. That…meat cube. Shion acted awfully proud about it, not that I did anything to encourage her. No crap they’re scared, man! If this was before my slime reincarnation, I totally would’ve been blowing chunks. That’s the kind of impact that thing had.

Like, this is totally demon lord territory I’m stepping into now, isn’t it? I tried to keep a clean image, and now that’s being replaced with something downright terrifying. What’s done is done, I guess, but still. Mixing the terror with the relief seems like an easy way to earn their trust in us, at least, even if it is an approach the yakuza would use.

I hopped off Shion’s lap. Some tea, in human form, sounded good. I needed to relax and switch gears a bit.

“With regards to the peace talks, my lord, I have requested ten thousand stellar gold coins in reparations.”

Bpph!!

I spat out all the tea in my mouth. Ten thousand stellars? I mean, yeah, I did ask him to use reparations as a wedge to drive between the king and nobility, but that figure’s beyond unreasonable. It deviated so far from reality that I wasn’t sure the neighboring countries would see it as fair at all. Bartering was still the preferred method of trade in this world—currency was the norm in population centers like Blumund or Englesia, but over in the farming villages, people could go their whole lives without seeing anything more valuable than a silver coin. In other words, money had a lot more value here than I originally gave it credit for.

One copper coin was about ten cents, one silver coin about ten dollars, and one gold coin about a thousand. That was the general understanding I worked with, but even that only applied in the big cities. In real life, the differences were even starker. For example, your average laborer in the city earned six silver coins a day, 150 per month—around $1,500. In the villages, meanwhile, you wouldn’t even make a hundred silvers a year. That’s less than a thousand to live off. The economic disparity in this place is nuts.

Of course, there weren’t as many diversions to blow your income on. You probably weren’t throwing your money around all that much. Really, coinage didn’t hold much purpose at all for a lot of people. To put it one way, disparity or not, your living circumstances didn’t change that much from social class to social class. And if you consider the lack of any international financial organization dictating the terms of the economy, maybe it was healthier this way anyway.

This meant, perhaps, that right now was our best shot at building an economic superpower. Diablo’s a smart guy. When he heard me talking about multiple races sharing one another’s prosperity earlier, he immediately connected that to economic domination. We needed a distribution network, one capable of bringing products from low- to high-demand areas, and coinage was a must for that. Taking control of the flow of money would let us essentially dictate the world economy.

There were many local currencies used by the world’s nations, but in practice, the coin of the Dwarven Kingdom was the main one in use. It would be easy to build a world economic sphere reliant upon a single currency. I could imagine that being on Diablo’s mind as he made his moves.

Getting back on topic, despite my initial impression, it turns out that money in this world was treated more like one copper = $1, one silver = $100, and one gold = $10,000. Ten thousand stellar gold coins, then, meant we were asking for war reparations to the tune of $10 billion. This wasn’t Japan. There wasn’t as much stuff all over the place, no great need for a national budget to be that massive. Thinking along those lines, the figure we asked for was astronomical.

“Don’t you think that’s going way too far?”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh… No, it is not a problem. I gave them three choices, but there is only one real answer. Question three hardly deserves debate, and neither does question two. The only real decision to make is on question one, and it is from there that their negotiations will begin, I suppose.” He then added with a laugh, “As much as I’d like them to go my way on question three, however…”

He was right. There was only one real choice. Would they try to talk us down on the price? Nah, they weren’t that dumb. They might ask for payments spread out every ten years, perhaps, if they couldn’t cover it now.

“I have no intention of offering a discount,” advised Diablo. “Farmus will be forced to give in to our demands. However, I doubt it will ever come to pass anyway. If that amount of coinage leaves their markets, the effects on their economy would be staggering.”

Yeah, I’ll bet. I knew Diablo was doing this on purpose.

“I suppose what they’ll decide to do is force the obligation on some third party.”

Oh?

Here was what Diablo pictured. Basically, they’d make a deposit, then pay off the balance with something else. That way, even if the owner of that something else refused to back it up with coin, that was no longer any of the kingdom’s business. They’d be off the hook, and if we complained about it, they can turn us away and claim they lived up to their end of the bargain. The approach would only work if you were dealing with a very stupid adversary, but if we fell for it, there could be trouble.

“What would we do then?”

“It is all factored into the plan. I am sure we can recover at least a thousand stellars, and that would wrap up the first part of the operation.”

Huh? Hang on.

“How do you know we can earn that much?”

“Oh, that? Simple.”

To sum up, it was because Farmus simply didn’t have much immediate use for the stellars. That actually made sense, if you think about it. With one coin worth six or seven figures, trying to make change for them must’ve been a huge pain in the ass. It was nothing more than a hoard unless you were engineering some huge deals, and they’d likely figure—in Diablo’s estimation—that coughing up a decent number wouldn’t affect them all that much, day-to-day.

Gold coins were what drove the national budget most of the time, so the stellars were more like securities, inaccessible under normal circumstances. In a world without banks, you couldn’t generate interest off them. So maybe they wouldn’t put up much of a fight about them after all.

Well played, Diablo. I was willing to meet them in the middle and ask for somewhere between a hundred and three hundred stellars. About $1 million per victim on our end, plus a little consideration for the roofs and stuff we had to repair. That was the minimum I was comfortable with, so if Diablo thought he could extract a thousand, then I had no problem with going to the bargaining table. A cool billion was still more than enough for anything I could imagine.

Diablo, meanwhile, wasn’t content with just that. He was also formulating a plan to trigger civil war inside Farmus. Scary guy.

“What more do you really need from them if we’re already recouping our losses?”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh. King Edmaris may be freed, but he is now my willing puppet. He is under the thrall of my Tempter skill, so I can will him to do anything I want, to some extent. In other words…”

With Tempter activated, Diablo had life-and-death power over the king. He couldn’t fully take over his consciousness or anything, but Diablo had the right to “will” him dead at any moment. As long as he kept following his orders, all was well, but if he showed any signs of rebellion, Diablo would immediately spot them. He could kill the guy right then and there, and if he understood that, a betrayal just wasn’t going to happen. Controlling people with terror is a pretty scary skill, huh? Everything’s fine if you don’t cross Diablo, but still.

Anyway, that’s how Diablo was observing King Edmaris’s behavior. As he hoped for, the king primarily deliberated over question one and seemed ready to abandon the throne. He had asked Muller and Hellman to call upon Edmaris to take responsibility for this crisis, but that no longer seemed to be necessary.

I guess Diablo had been building relationships with the royalists in the castle, too—something that deviated from the original plan a little but actually worked out for the better, as he explained it. When Edmaris abdicates, the foundation of power he built goes with him—and with that, it becomes easier to pin the blame for everything on him. “With the Royal Knight Corps dead by your hand,” Diablo told me, “there is no one left to protect the royal family. Right now, antagonizing the nobility spells death for Edmaris. He’ll have to answer their every need—at least, on the surface.”

Nobody was around to speak for the king. The nobles wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of that—which goes into the third party Diablo mentioned. War would be the only thing to come from that. The nobility wanted to make King Edmaris into a sacrifice, and the king was racking his brain for ways to fight back.

So…what next, then? The royalists didn’t have an army; they were bound to be pummeled. How can we avoid that?

Understood. The best approach would be to bring in Yohm’s force and retain a cooperative relationship. This would allow for…

Oh. Right. Yohm’s connected with me. Edmaris knows I want him to become king, and if he makes concrete moves toward that…

Maybe an immediate handover of the crown wasn’t too realistic, but if we could frame it as Yohm saving the king’s life, perhaps it could look like a ruined royal family passing the torch on to another generation.

“So the king’s going to take Yohm, and us, as his allies?”

Diablo beamed. “Yes. A very wise assertion.”

Oh, I was right?

Having us as an ally would give Edmaris a force that made his Royal Knight Corps look like a bunch of kids. The nobility, carried away and assuming they had an easy win, would be slaughtered at the hands of Yohm the champion.

“So should we give Yohm more resources?”

“We should. Razen, who is also under my command, has been instructed to contact us when the time comes, so I hope I can count on you for that.”

That’s Diablo for you. He’s got all his men at work so he can kick back and relax. He was taking the motto Be prepared to its most elegant extremes.

Razen, though, huh? This super-great guy, the protector of the kingdom and all that? Guess that didn’t matter to Diablo. But no point dwelling on that.

“So can Yohm beat them, though? What if some other pretender to the throne forms an alliance with the neighboring kingdoms?”

“I am having Sir Fuze and King Gazel pressure their governments not to intervene. I think that is a possibility we can safely ignore. If it does come to pass, however, I will enter the battle myself, so don’t worry.”

All I could do was nod at his supreme confidence. Diablo’s totally intent on staying behind the scenes, isn’t he? Crazy to think he’s basically letting all these other people take down an entire kingdom for him. Raphael was also telling me the chances of an alliance were dim, so I had no complaints.

I gave the kneeling Diablo a pat on the shoulder.

“All right. I’ll leave that to you, then. Let me know if anything happens.”

“Yes, my lord! I assure you that everything is in good hands!”

So now I had been briefed on the general outline. Just when I was checking up on the little details, Haruna came in with a new dessert—something to accompany the tea, as she put it.

“Oh, is this the green-tea custard?”

“It is, Sir Rimuru. I may not be up to Lady Shuna’s quality yet, but I do believe I’ve improved!”

With a soft smile, Haruna set the plates on the table. Veldora, who had been reading manga without bothering to join the conversation, picked that moment to join me there, as if he’d earned the right.

“Hohh? Some for me, then?”

“Of course, Sir Veldora.”

He gave a gregarious nod and reached out for a plate of the eggy treat.

“Sir Veldora,” Diablo said as he offered his own plate to him, “here is your promised portion.”

“Gwaaaaah-ha-ha-ha! You are a man of your word, Diablo!”

Talk about a cheap bribe.

“You don’t want any, Diablo?” I asked, figuring Haruna could always scare up another one, but Diablo bowed politely in response. “I paid my portion in exchange for the information I received. There is no need to be concerned for me.”

What a gentleman. A man of his word, indeed. Although I didn’t see why custard was worth making such a big deal about. But if that was what Diablo preferred, more power to him.

“Oh? Well, all right. Still,” I said, changing the subject, “it’s funny how you came back right in the middle of Walpurgis. We must’ve passed right by each other.”

He was gone when I left at midnight, after all. I figured we couldn’t have missed each other by much. But:

“Oh, no, my lord. After I was done threatening King Edmaris and his court, I traveled across the Farmus countryside to investigate its financial situation. I wanted to make sure I hadn’t overlooked anything in my plans, but then Sir Veldora ordered me back here.”

That sounded, um, important. Veldora rose to his feet, almost knocking over his chair.

“I, er, I have an errand to attend to.”

“Hold it right there, Veldora.”

I rose quickly, grabbing him by the shoulder.

“W-wait! I can explain!”

“No, you can’t! Stop getting in the way of people’s work!”

I confiscated the custard from Veldora’s overeager hands, ordering Haruna to exempt him from dessert privileges for a while. He could cry about it all he wanted, but I couldn’t let this pass. I swear, you can never let your guard down around the guy. Maybe it was fortuitous in the end, what with Veldora stopping by Walpurgis and lending a hand, but that didn’t matter. If I let this slide, who knew what nonsense could arise next time.

It’s a good thing the capable Diablo was around to handle matters, but what if Veldora had bothered one of my other friends with his self-centered requests? It made me shudder. The Storm Dragon giving out orders would mess up the whole chain of command I had going. That’s why I made damn sure he checked with me next time before trying anything like that.



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Fortunately, Diablo had no other pressing business in Farmus, apart from the peace talks five days from now. He had delegated his authority to others for the rest of the work, so for now he was fine serving me. “As your butler,” he said, “I couldn’t think of abandoning your side.” That made Shion wince, but I had to hand it to him.

So about those peace talks.

“Oh, you think I oughtta attend, too?”

“No sir, I can handle things well enough alone.”

I always found it reassuring during high-stakes meetings to have my boss in attendance, but to a born achiever like Diablo, it wasn’t necessary. In fact, as he put it, my presence at the palace would crush the nobles’ “will to fight”—I didn’t know exactly what he meant by that, but I was sure things were safe in his hands.

For now, at least, I felt assured that the whole Farmus invasion thing could be filed into a cabinet in the recesses of my mind.

And then, everything went exactly as Diablo pictured it.

All the nation’s nobles gathered at the palace to hold a session of parliament. This one was far more intense than the last, and the king and his ministers looked deeply troubled. Even the members of the anti-royalist contingent were visibly distressed, adding to the electricity in the air.

“We are here today,” the king began, “to discuss our campaign to dispatch Tempest. I regret to inform you that the Storm Dragon wiped out our forces on the battlefield. The only survivors were Razen, Reyhiem, and myself. We were defeated.”

The explosive report sent shock waves across the meeting hall. The brutal state of affairs in Farmus, as explained by the king, was unbelievable enough, but what he had to say next subjected him to withering criticism from the nobles. Which was to be expected. He was, after all, declaring that he would accept the monsters’ conditions and offer them war reparations…to the tune of ten thousand stellars.

“That’s madness! One stellar is a hundred gold coins. We’re going to gift them a million gold?!”

“Why would we ever pay such a ransom to a horde of monsters? I refuse to let this happen on my watch!”

“And even if we emptied the national treasury, would we even be able to cobble together that much cash?!”

Given the role of stellar gold coins as a sort of physical bond certificate traded among nations, most realms rarely had even a hundred on hand. The land of Farmus was large, indeed, but maybe they could scare up a thousand if they wanted to. If this was to be paid in regular gold-coin currency, the logistics behind the delivery gave the nobility understandable pause. If this was a nation they had formal relations with, the debt could be paid with a broad assortment of goods, but those were terms they couldn’t offer to a brand-new nation, much less one run by monsters. Either way, it was sure to be a major blow on Farmus’s economy.

Diablo knew that ten thousand stellars was an impossible request. Of course the nobles would complain about it. To them, who hadn’t set foot near the battlefield, they could never truly understand the threat. There wasn’t enough awareness among them that the future of their nation was at stake.

It therefore did not take long before their complaints morphed into a drive to continue the war.

“Indeed, surrendering to their forces would be absurd. We have no guarantee that our adversaries would honor their promises and keep their hands off our people.”

“Our only option is to resist to the bitter end. I would gladly stake my pride to say that our forces could easily defeat a dragon that has only just awoken!”

“With Veldora as our opponent, the Western Holy Church will not stand by idly. I imagine the beautiful, talented Hinata will take action.”

“Ah yes, the captain of the Crusaders? She is a vixen, a cold and calculating one, but we can always count on her at times like this.”

“The Holy Church is known across the land for being Veldora’s mortal enemy!”

“Don’t forget about the Hero.”

“Ah yes, ‘Lightspeed’ Masayuki of Englesia!”

“Exactly. The strongest Hero of them all, a man who slew his foes before they even knew what happened to them. I’m certain he will show Veldora in short order that Lightspeed is no mere nickname!”

“Yes! That’s the spirit! We’ll clear those monsters away in the blink of an eye!”

The nobles were growing restless, bragging about all the impossible things they would accomplish. The objective, to them, was theirs for the taking—they just wanted someone else to take it for them. The royalist ministers watching began to feel terribly awkward—it reminded them too much of when the king first broke the news to them. Some visibly reddened as they sighed in despair, while others silently reflected on what their leader must have felt back then.

King Edmaris, to his credit, understood what was running through the minds of the nobles he had assembled. The war hawks were doggedly interested in preserving their own interests and no one else’s. They didn’t care about Farmus itself, nor the lives or property of the people who dwelled in it. Their supreme, serene confidence stemmed from the fact that they had no intention of really fighting for it.

The king knew it would turn out like this. The landed nobility here had yet to grasp the reality of it all. They had tasted none of the terror; they had no interest in facing the brunt of this menace. They just wanted to stay holed up in a safe place and make someone else duke it out. If it ended in defeat, they would all refuse to be held responsible for it, no doubt.

And maybe they could’ve gotten away with coasting like that before. Farmus was large, its land giving it several decisive advantages over its neighbors. But that wasn’t going to work now. Putting the screws to nearby nations wouldn’t accomplish anything—and besides, their foe was a catastrophe-class monster who laid waste to an entire army single-handed.

The nobles’ rage continued, most of them shouting for the king to shoulder the blame. The royal family should pay the reparations out of their own pockets; the monsters’ demands must be refused; Farmus must prepare itself for total war.

In a way, they weren’t mistaken, but they were missing a vital point. Farmus had already lost most of its internal ability to fight—something that, perhaps, they were refusing to believe. When this was pointed out to them, some turned white with horror, while others brazenly challenged any affront. Just as King Edmaris feared, the nobility refused to work as a coherent group.

As the parliament grew more chaotic, Edward, the king’s half brother and leader of the anti-royalist nobility sect, chose that moment to speak.

“My brother… Your Majesty! Even if you abandon the throne, you cannot avoid your responsibility! Is a king as proud as yourself truly admitting defeat so easily?”

“…Edward, listen to me. We are pitted against Veldora, the Storm Dragon. My pride, compared with his tyranny, is a mere pile of ashes! You will never see me willing to face such terror again in my life. Or if it is such a matter of pride to you, will you take up the fight? I will not stop you! But I do believe that it will result in nothing but more blood on your hands.”

“No, I… My liege, if everything you are claiming is the truth, are you not attempting to flee the nation by yourself?”

“There is no place to flee to, you simpleton! That is exactly why I intend to pay the money and abdicate the throne.”

Just as he aimed to pursue the king’s responsibility, Edward found himself stunned into silence by his brother’s uncharacteristic vigor.

“If I do not abdicate,” the king continued, lowering his voice, “then Farmus will become either a colony or a state at war. Are you all right with that? It will mark the end of this nation.”

“Ngh… But simply surrendering to this monster force…”

Edward’s voice slowed, his mind still refusing to accept the facts. He was interrupted by the timid voice of Lord Hellman, speaking up just as the meeting hall grew quiet.

“May I have a moment? I received these documents in the morning today. Its content is so vital to this question that I wish to share it with all of you now…”

He had on him a declaration from the kingdom of Blumund. In it, the nation reaffirmed its support for the land of Tempest and criticized Farmus’s failed campaign. It was, in short, an attack on Farmus.

“Where does such a tiny kingdom get the nerve?!”

“As if they would have said anything if we won. They think they can enjoy the last laugh, don’t they?”

The bad news for the fuming nobles didn’t end there. The minister of trade then reported receiving a similar announcement from the Dwarven Kingdom earlier. This made even the most hardcore of the war hawks demur, their words growing weaker by the moment.

“Blumund may not be a concern, but if the Armed Nation takes action, that bodes very poorly for us. Do you think King Gazel will maintain his neutrality?”

“The issue,” the earl reasoned, “is less that and more the power of his words. As a vital trade partner, it would be bad for us to anger their king.”

A gloomy silence fell over the meeting hall—only to be broken by a pale-faced soldier barging into the room at a full gallop.

“Sir! We’ve just received an emergency report from the Guild!”

Despite the fact that a top-level legislative meeting was being held, none of the guards stopped him. That was thanks to the authority allowed by the Top-Secret Vital Emergency Transmission dossier in his hand. The prominent label made even the most contrarian of the nobles fall silent. This level of secrecy was authorized only for Special S-grade dangers; the Free Guild had a deal with the world’s governments where impeding its delivery was a crime as serious as treason.

“Give it to us,” King Edmaris flatly stated. With a shaky hand, the soldier extracted a sheet of paper from the envelope and slowly read.

“The monster Rimuru, who has named himself overseer of the Forest of Jura, has reportedly declared himself to be a demon lord!”

“What?!”

“That…!”

“It is in fact good news, no? Our nation is saved!”

“Yes, the other demon lords will not take kindly to this. This Rimuru fellow has sorely overreached. He will learn the terror a true demon lord brings to the world shortly.”

“And if all goes well, perhaps the other demon lords will defeat Veldora alongside him!”

Cheers erupted from the nobility the moment the messenger paused to take a breath. What the soldier had to say next quickly restored the silence.

“…We have word that, resisting this declaration, the demon lord Clayman challenged Rimuru—er, the demon lord Rimuru—to a duel and lost his life in the process!”

Gasps filled the room.

“…Haaah?”

“Impossible…”

“Where is Carillon, the Beast Master? What happened to Frey, the Sky Queen? Are they simply letting this upstart take over the Forest of Jura?!”

The shock was real. Now their foe was a full-fledged demon lord. But as the nobility questioned what the demon lords adjacent to Jura were doing, the soldier finished reading the missive.

“…Regarding Carillon and Frey, they have reportedly renounced their seats as demon lords and agreed to affiliate themselves with the demon lord Milim. The group is in the midst of restructuring itself, its eight current members naming themselves…the Octagram!”

The anti-royalists fell completely silent. They knew, now, that their adversary Rimuru was part of this new Octagram. Even the royalists, tipped off to this news in advance, looked tense and nervous. No matter how many times they heard it, the report was so difficult to believe that it drove them to silence as well.

It seemed the source for this report was the demon lords themselves, who all signed a directive disseminated to the Guild. There was no questioning its veracity. The demon lords were all so powerful, there was no need for them to resort to tricking the human race to fulfill their needs.

With a slow, solemn voice, King Edmaris spoke.

“Did you hear that, everyone? Veldora is a threat, but this monster Rimuru is another one entirely. A monster beyond all imagination, one who apparently made short work of the demon lord Clayman. Have we had enough debate yet? I have already made up my mind. I will abdicate the throne. It was foolish of me to proclaim this was for our nation’s sake, when I had barely any clue about the foe we prodded. It was my mistake, driven by pure greed. If only I had taken another approach, perhaps they could have been good neighbors to us.”

By the king’s reasoning, his departure could help build a new relationship. None of the nobles listening to him voiced any disagreement. Now they understood. The only way forward was to do what King Edmaris said.

“Thus, I will leave my post as king…and I wish to nominate Edward as my successor.”

“My brother…!”

“What?!”

“Not Prince Edgar?!”

The hall was thrown into chaos once more.

It was a given that Edmaris would give the throne to the sole prince of the nation. That was why Edward was working so hard to make his presence known. He knew Edmaris, his elder brother, had to go, and the opportunity was like a dream to him—even if Prince Edgar was awarded the throne, it was still a golden chance to state his case for next time. The prince was only ten years old, but as long as the king’s brother was still alive, he would not have another regent ruling in his stead. If (Edward thought) he could plant the seeds of uncertainty and doubt in the nobility’s minds, he could make them think that he was the only viable choice for the throne, at least until Edgar reached adulthood.

Now, that had all been taken care of for him. He smiled in front of the throne.

“We face difficult times ahead,” muttered Edmaris bitterly. “Edgar is still too young. He will have trouble overcoming any of it.”

Reactions were varied, but a healthy contingent was already convinced. The Marquis of Muller spoke first: “I believe that is the best solution, my liege.”

Edward internally gloated at this. If he had the head of the neutral faction’s endorsement, there was no overturning this decision. And once he had the throne, this crisis could be deftly handled—such was his conviction. They could find one way or another to delay the payments, buying time to get their neighbors involved and go on the offensive. As the anti-royalist nobles proposed to him earlier, they could even form a cross-humanity alliance of sorts, bringing paladins and Heroes together to fight for the entire world.

And maybe none of that would be needed at all. A new king meant a new administration, and there was no reason why that government needed to follow the old one’s agreements. They could declare the debt null and void, and that would be it. If Tempest complained about it, they could just keep pinning the blame on Edmaris, the ex-king.

It was a simple thing, but it was enough to convince Edward. Heh-heh-heh… This nation will reach new heights of prosperity under my rule. He smiled broadly, basking in the glow of his newfound power—never realizing that this, too, was all part of the script.

The session proceeded more smoothly from there. Problems were brought up; adjustments were made down to the last detail. By the end of the day, they had a final outline that was approved by unanimous vote for use in the peace talks.

Said talks came all too quickly—as did the signing.

Several days later, the great nation of Farmus, with all its proud history, had signed an armistice and a peace treaty with the Jura-Tempest Federation. On the surface, Farmus had recognized Tempest as a nation, and while formal relations were a ways away, they could no longer flout international law when dealing with them. At the same time, Tempest was not a member of the Council of the West, the Western Nations’ primary legislative body, so even if Farmus did stage another invasion, there was little anyone could do to legally stop them.

Tempest had attained nation status only in the most basic of definitions. But this treaty proved, once and for all, that this new country called Tempest could defend itself. It was led by the demon lord Rimuru, who boasted the Storm Dragon as a key ally, and in just over two years, he had laid claim to the entire Forest of Jura. Whatever he was, he was a nonhuman brilliant beyond any human measure. Considering that, no nation dared to open hostilities with Tempest. Compared with the potential profits waiting to be reaped, the projected losses were just too great. It could even knock out the attacking country entirely.

From that day forward, Rimuru began to be treated as an impenetrable leader, a disaster-class demon lord—and thus, without major difficulty, the first part of his plan was completed…

…exactly as Diablo had pictured it.