

CHAPTER 2

ROLES TO UPHOLD

Shuna and Soei were the first to return to town the morning after Diablo’s report.

“I have returned safely!” Shuna proclaimed, rubbing her cheeks. She had apparently exhausted her magical force in battle, requiring several hours of recuperation before she could cast Spatial Motion. I could just use Dominate Space to pop myself over to where I wanted, but Shuna’s relative lack of magicule storage meant she could only tap so much magic per day. Soei could’ve used Shadow Motion himself, but he waited, thinking it gauche to return first despite being Shuna’s guard. Even now, several of his replications were patrolling Clayman’s main base—I guess nothing too dicey was happening right now.

“And where’s Hakuro?”

“I asked him to clean things up for me,” Shuna replied with a smile as Soei averted his eyes. So they threw all that work on him, huh? Hakuro, unable to use Spatial Motion, didn’t have much recourse if they left him alone. But I dunno, he always saw Shuna as kind of a beloved granddaughter anyway. Maybe he didn’t mind that treatment too much.

Currently, he was working with Geld to investigate Clayman’s castle, divvy up the war spoils, and command the prisoner-handling process. I gave him an internal word of thanks for handling all that boring follow-up for me. It must be a ton of work, but an amateur like me couldn’t offer much help. I think I’ll just keep mum unless asked.

Benimaru and the others made it home by that evening.

“Huh? What’s our chief general doing back here?” I asked.

“Hee-hee… With the war over, there is no reason for me to stay there forever. So I gave my command over to my talented officers, and we left the scene.”

He seemed remarkably invigorated. I guess this means Benimaru let the Three Lycanthropeers handle the rest. I could see the anguished faces of Alvis and his cohorts in my mind.

Those two, Benimaru and Shuna—guess they really are siblings, huh? They just pulled the exact same trick on their subordinates. I wish they would learn a little responsibility from someone like me—

Understood. I believe this to be the result of following your example, Master.

I didn’t ask you to “believe” anything! Besides, you know that has to be wrong. Did something go haywire in the circuits between morphing from the Great Sage to Raphael?

Negative. Such a phenomenon has not been detected.

Oh, sure. Deny it. I bet that part of its logic got extensively upgraded. Better let it slide—it’s not an argument I’d ever win anyway.

I decided to turn my attention back to Benimaru. “So is Gabil still at the battlefield?”

“He is, yes. He has kindled a friendship with one Middray, a priest in the service of Lady Milim, and they are tackling the post-battle cleanup together.”

“Ah. So Geld’s in Clayman’s castle, and Gabil is outside?”

Even Gabil’s lending a hand, huh? Between him and Geld, it was a relief to see all these people handling the practical side of warfare for me. I could really rely on ’em. War, after all, didn’t end after you won it. Things got even hairier afterward, especially given how we captured nearly all of Clayman’s forces alive. There were untold numbers of prisoners, on the field and in the castle, most of them capable of labor. We guaranteed them all their lives, so we’d have to step up and take care of them. At least they were magic-born, not human, so you didn’t have to worry that much about upkeep—although even they would get grumpy if you didn’t feed them.

Whether someone held a grudge against you after losing a battle or not, the victor was responsible for what happened afterward. Transporting all the POWs from the site at once was a major job. I didn’t want them revolting when our eyes weren’t on them, so we’d need guards on patrol at all times. Disarming a magic-born didn’t neutralize them much as a threat, either. This world had magic and skills. Thinking about it, no wonder the take-no-prisoners approach was preferred up to now, huh?

If only there was a surefire way to make them do our bidding…

“Oh, nothing to worry about there,” Benimaru said, that easygoing smile still on his face. “I brought them all together and simply, ah, coerced them to see things our way.”

“Um… Yes. Good.”

I instinctively nodded. No need to ask what exactly they talked about, I’m sure. Some of the prisoners must’ve been around to see Benimaru burn Charybdis to a crisp, and once word got around about that, I doubted too many of ’em would want to try their luck. Besides, the Three Lycanthropeers were there, and beastmen seemed like well-qualified candidates for prisoner management.

“So I guess we won’t see Gabil back here for a while?”

“Likely not. He can’t use Spatial Motion, so I suppose he will return with the Lycanthropeers.”

He’d fly back once things settled down, I imagined. But hang on—

“Wait, the Lycanthropeers are coming, too?”

Why them? They weren’t planning on bringing all the sheltered citizens and disarmed prisoners back here, were they?

“Well,” Benimaru replied, “remember how Lady Milim blew the Eurazanian capital to pieces? We were talking about housing them in our nation for the time being.”

As he put it, the beastmen were hardy enough that they could march all the way over here without complaint. Which wasn’t what I was asking about, but…okay?

“We really can’t take all of them, can we?”

It took ages to set up campsites for the twenty thousand we took in last time. Even worse, Geld and his team of high orc engineers, whom I’d usually rely on for jobs like this, were busy elsewhere. We had some extra land available—space we cleared for future development—but again, organizing camps would be a huge hassle.

“We discussed that with Geld and Alvis,” Benimaru explained. “We’ve decided to divide the prisoners into rough brigades. They’ll be sent to a variety of destinations, actually.”

Well, that’s a relief. And it sounded like they were pretty carefully screening each of them. If a prisoner had a village to return to, they were sent off by themselves. Only the beastmen seeking to learn a trade or skill would come to Tempest. Beastmen or magic-born with muscle, meanwhile, would stay on-site and serve under the command of Geld’s team, redeveloping the vacant land that used to be Eurazania.

With Carillon stepping down from his demon lord post and joining Milim’s side, Eurazania was now technically Milim territory. It was situated south of the Forest of Jura, spread out in the middle of a vast, fertile land, and plans were underway to construct a palace for Milim in the area. I had suggested to her that she ought to move her capital there, since they were building it from scratch anyway, and she instantly agreed to it. No further discussion. That’s so Milim.

Thinking about it, though, I realized Milim didn’t exactly have a…staff, per se. Middray and the rest of the Dragon Faithful were her servants, in a way, but—at least on paper—they merely worshiped Milim; they weren’t bound to her at all. Thus “relocating the capital” was an odd way to put it, since she didn’t really have a capital to start with, but I guess it doesn’t really matter.

Carillon and Frey both readily agreed with the idea, and so we plunged into the construction of a new city. Our funding was provided by Clayman’s hoard of gold, silver, and treasure; we had a ready group of POW laborers being organized and assigned work details; and Benimaru and Geld had things going so smoothly over there, I had nothing to be concerned about.

I was constantly amazed at their growth. Hey, Tamura! Remember me? Your boss, who had to explain everything to you fifty times and you still couldn’t do it right? Yeah, I have this entire horde of monsters who do better work than you!

The way Benimaru put it, we would be housing fewer people in Tempest proper than last time.

“So we won’t need to set up any new temporary housing?” I asked him.

“No, I think we should be fine. But it will not only be beastmen; we have magic-born prisoners as well. We had best make sure everyone is aware of that and exercises suitable caution.”

“I see,” Rigurd said with a nod. “Very well. I will explain matters to everyone.”

These guys are soooo reliable. I didn’t even need to order them around; they could make their own decisions. Wait… Couldn’t these guys get along without me by this point? The thought made me feel a tad isolated.

One evening, a few days after Benimaru’s return, Diablo entered my office carrying a box painted black.

“Our negotiations proceeded as planned, Sir Rimuru. This box contains proof of our peace agreement and one part of the reparations, totaling fifteen hundred stellar gold coins.”

Oops. Forgot about that. Today was peace-talks day, huh? He said I didn’t need to show up, so forgetting about it wasn’t a big deal, really…but I still felt a bit guilty. I felt like everyone else was working hard on this huge work project, and I was just sitting at my desk playing solitaire. Not that I was, but still. I didn’t want to be a lonely despot, after all.

Or that was how I consoled myself as Diablo presented the box to me.

“Ah, excellent. That’s more stellars than we expected, no?”

He had demanded the outrageous sum of ten thousand. As I found out later, nobody was sure whether ten thousand stellars were even in circulation worldwide. “We can only create one stellar gold coin per month,” King Gazel claimed when I asked. “Our kingdom did not begin minting them until a fairly long time after our founding, so I imagine they have some rarity value!” He had a point—there were hundreds of times more garden-variety gold coins flowing around.

And now I had fifteen hundred of them here. Over 10 percent of the entire world’s supply. It made my head swim. You could really see how strong Farmus was, being able to scrape this up.

“I guess Farmus really is a superpower, isn’t it? I’m impressed they collected so many.”

“Perhaps. But it seems the majority of this was seized from the personal coffers of King Edmaris himself.”

According to Diablo, most of these stellars were the personal property of the king, left in the vaults with no particular use to speak of. They had the backing of the Dwarven Kingdom, were worth loads of cash, and boasted artistic value as well, so they had been the property of the royal family for much of its long history.

“Luckily, King Edmaris’s thought process was as I had planned it. With no knights to protect his family, he reasoned, he was bound to lose it all once the nobles clashed with him anyway.”

So he cleaned out the royal vaults ahead of time. I see.

“…So does that mean we’re gonna have civil war soon?”

“No doubt, my lord,” a smiling Diablo replied. “The remaining balance exists in the form of an outstanding loan, but I doubt the new king will abide by that agreement for long.”

Taking the potential new king into consideration, Diablo had gone out of his way to have Edmaris’s younger brother Edward take the throne, instead of the young Edgar. This was done with Edmaris’s agreement; everyone involved felt it was the only way forward. Normally, the former king would be rewarded with a dukedom for his service to the country, but Edmaris turned this down, renouncing his post and becoming a viscount. In this role, he would be shortly moving to a small patch of rural land in the countryside—not far from Earl Nidol Migam’s own lands, near the Forest of Jura.

To everyone’s eyes, it looked like Edmaris had lost his lust for power. In which case…

Report. The Farmus forces who refuse to pay the remaining reparations will likely move to push all responsibility for this affair on Edmaris.

Yep. It was all going the way Diablo meant it to.

“Nidol’s domain of Migam is home to Yohm’s band, too. This way, they can come help out if anything happens, huh?”

“Indeed, my lord,” he replied, still smiling while Shion listened on behind me, scowling. Or maybe not listening. She probably tuned it out once she realized it was all way over her head. But I wasn’t talking about her.

Hmmm. Nidol’s land bordered Jura’s. By country standards, it was midsize, boasting its own Free Guild branch and a fairly decent population. If you were going to start a popular movement, it wasn’t a bad spot for it. That’s where Yohm was, and he was famous around those parts, hailed as a champion and broadly supported by his people.

“If the new king tried abandoning Edmaris, could Yohm stop him?”

“He could, sir. And having Sir Yohm denounce that new king for his insincerity would no doubt lead to conflict.”

So Yohm siding with Edmaris would lead to a pretty natural clash of wills, then. Sounds about perfect. If the new king really did pay off his debt to us, it’d be hard to do much else against him. We’d have to brace ourselves for the long haul, aiming to take Farmus down bit by bit. But Diablo was thinking two steps ahead of me, manipulating the minds and wills of the people to gain his results. In that case, things could very likely start moving in a hurry.

There was no doubt that the new king would try to get Edmaris out of the picture pronto. If the government was able to capture him, our plans would be ruined. Of course, we could ignore that new king and just push on in anyway, but that’d come at the cost of whatever trust the international community has in us. Always have the moral upper hand. That’s how the human world worked.

“Well, keep a vigilant watch, all right? Can you manipulate the new king’s side without getting too many people killed?”

“If that’s what you seek, yes. Allow me, Diablo, to handle it.”

So reliable. He’s almost scarily smart. If I left it to him, he seemed ready to accomplish well near anything.

“Then do it. If you’re short on war funds, you can use these stellars if you want.”

I placed a thousand of the coins into my Stomach and pushed the remaining five hundred in his direction.

Fortunately for us, all our wounded were now fully recovered. Apart from paying personal visits to their beds, I wasn’t called upon to do much of anything for them. A thousand was almost too much reparation, and we had also thoroughly looted Clayman’s home base of its valuables, so financially we were doing pretty damn well, I thought. Much of our newfound fortune would be spent on future urban development, but we had enough breathing room to provide Yohm whatever he needed.

Despite my intentions, Diablo smiled and shook his head. “I deeply appreciate your concern, Sir Rimuru, but it will not be necessary. As laid out in my plan, if you can provide me with a suitable army, the rest will take care of itself. That, or if you grant me permission to wage battle myself—”

“Uh, no, that’s fine. I’ll give you all the troops you need, so instead of that, I need you to lay low as much as you can, all right?”

I had reason to cut him off. I knew how much of a freaky unknown Diablo was, so I definitely didn’t want to use him in the wrong place and expose myself like an idiot. Unleashing him against human armies would be far too one-sided—all it’d do was make people fear us. We’d be further away from a common understanding than ever, and I wanted us to have as amicable a relationship as possible. Besides, we had all the war power we needed. We had no enemies; not in public, at least. Even with Geld’s team tied up with engineering work, Benimaru and his army alone would be enough. Farmus, with the majority of its fighting force gone, was not a threat to us.

So I decided to just prepare reinforcements if necessary and use this stellar windfall to invest in the new nation Yohm was poised to build.

This was enough to convince Diablo. “Very well. I will remain firmly behind the scenes.”

“Right. You know, Shion, you could learn a thing or two from Diablo.”

“What?! When have I ever lost my head and failed to follow your will, Sir Rimuru?!”

I tried to throw a word of advice toward Shion like this now and again. She seriously never seemed to realize she did anything wrong. Yeesh. I guess that’d be a long-term project, gradually instilling in her mind that going berserk all the time wasn’t such a hot idea. It made me heave an internal sigh. Something told me it’d be a while before I could trust her with solo missions.

After finishing his report, Diablo brought up another question, as if it had just occurred to him.

“Sir Rimuru, the Western Holy Church has reportedly tried make contact with Reyhiem, one of my pawns. He has received a summons to visit their headquarters and explain the situation with the hostilities in Farmus. What do you think about that?”

Reyhiem? He was the archbishop of Farmus or whatever, right? Now he was just one of Diablo’s faithful dogs, but ignoring a Church summons sounded like a bad idea.

“Hmm… If we ignored them, would that lead to trouble?”

“It would. I think it best to allow him to testify to them, if only to see what the Church’s next move will be.”

“Yeah… I’m sure they’re hungry for info, what with there being just three survivors.”

Out of the former king, Edmaris, the court sorcerer, Razen, and Archbishop Reyhiem, it made sense that the Church would want to hear from Reyhiem first. He was the only real candidate out of the three.

“But wasn’t the Church monitoring Veldora? Because right now, it’s true that he’s revived again, but the timeline we’re giving is a bit off from the truth. If we lied to them, wouldn’t they see right through that?”

“You think so? Shall I have him speak the truth, then?”

I thought about this a moment.

The Church could very well be a monkey wrench in our future plans. Ideally, I’d want to engage them in a way that didn’t cause interference between us, but given their flat-out refusal to work with monsters, I didn’t like my chances. Not even the Dwarven Kingdom was on very good terms with the Church. The dwarves’ habit of treating monsters as equals violated their whole doctrine—but it hadn’t erupted into war yet. The two sides were simply ignoring each other.

Should that be what we aim for? I didn’t want to trample over a millennium or so of Church doctrine, but I didn’t want to unconditionally accept it, either. If they wanted all monsters to die, I wasn’t about to lie on my back and wait for the dagger. I had to respect them, and we had to be considerate of each other. If one of us said something the other couldn’t accept, it could lead to war, in the end. A deep understanding of each other would be a must, along with a prudent effort to keep away from any potential land mines in our talks.

Of course, that only applies if the other side plays along. Otherwise, we’d just be deluding ourselves into complacency. If the Church branded us a divine enemy, we’d have to resist that—and I wasn’t afraid to smash them to pieces, if it came to that.

For now, though…

“Hmm. How about I send them a message for the time being? We seized some magic-image-recording thingies from Clayman, right? I’d like to personally record a message with one of them. We can have Reyhiem take it over there and see how the Church reacts.”

“Very well.”

“Great! I will bring one over at once!”

Diablo sagely nodded as Shion ran off to fetch a crystal for me.

A few days had passed now, after Diablo reported that Reyhiem had commenced his journey to the Church, but we had yet to hear any response. The reaction from them was muddled confusion, and I could see why. Veldora was back, and there was a new demon lord in town (i.e., me). Figuring out how to deal with us wasn’t something they could make a snap decision on.

Well, if they didn’t react to me, I didn’t mind. For now, I was satisfied with sitting and waiting to see how things shook out.

The Three Lycanthropeers arrived a while later, along with a procession in the tens of thousands.

They didn’t take nearly as long as I thought. You gotta hand it to these beastmen and magic-born. Just in terms of their core strength, no human could compare with them. With magicules all over this world, they could run on magic when physically exhausted and with their own two feet when magically exhausted. Their marching speed was several times what an army on Earth could manage—and I’m talking about all of them, down to the average beastman on the street. They really were bred for battle.

I didn’t see Gabil among them. Presumably, he was in the rear somewhere, I thought, as Alvis and Sufia came up to greet me.

“Hmm? Isn’t Phobio here?”

“About that,” Sufia began. “Phobio stayed behind to tend to the magic-born we took prisoner.” He was sticking around while Geld was at Clayman’s palace, apparently, to ensure no revolts took place. In other words, they were pushing the boring work on him. Sorry about that, Phobio. But even if Benimaru had bullied him into that role, we did need someone on surveillance. We should appreciate him for working with us instead of pushing the responsibility on someone else.

We had, by this point, fully prepared to accept this crowd. I had worked with Kaijin and Kurobe, our manufacturing specialists, to work out how many people should be assigned to this or that department around town. These were all volunteers with a keen interest in technical work, but we could only accept so many, so we agreed to set up rotational shifts for the more popular work details.

It might be a good idea to build a technical school of some sort around here, I thought as we quietly handled all this work. Someplace where we can provide year-round instruction on what we were doing. It seemed smart to me.

At the very far end of the procession, I finally caught sight of Gabil. “I have returned, Sir Rimuru!” he bellowed from the skies, not looking at all the worse for wear.

“Hey, nice to see you! You put in a fine effort at the battle, I

hear.”

“No, no, I still have so much to learn. Sir Middray, under the service of Lady Milim, practically pummeled me beyond recognition!”

Ah yes, that dragonewt with the crazy strength. Benimaru mentioned him, too.

“Yeah, well, if he worships Milim, he’s gotta like fighting a lot, no doubt. You aren’t exactly a wimp—maybe you just aren’t used to your newly evolved powers yet. You got a while to go.”

I wasn’t sure if this comforted him at all, but I said it anyway. He didn’t look too chagrined, so I was sure he felt the same anyway.

“Ha! I, Gabil, am prepared to expend every effort to live up to your lofty expectations, Sir Rimuru!”

That statement, and that smile, were all the proof I needed.

After I said my hellos to the rest of his force, he suddenly remembered a sheet of paper that he took out from his pocket to show me.

“What’s this?”

“I received this from Lady Milim, my lord. She told me to give it to you.”

What could this be? Nothing good, I was sure. She mentioned stopping by again as we said our goodbyes after the Walpurgis Council. But sure enough, there was her childish scrawl, written haphazardly across the paper.

This is Milim! Next time I visit, I’ll be bringing along some guys who just can’t seem to leave me the heck alone. I want you to teach them everything there is to know about cooking. This is an urgent request, so I figured I’d ask my buddy Rimuru for help!!! Please please please!!!!!

The urgency certainly came through in the message. These hangers-on; was she talking about the Dragon Faithful?

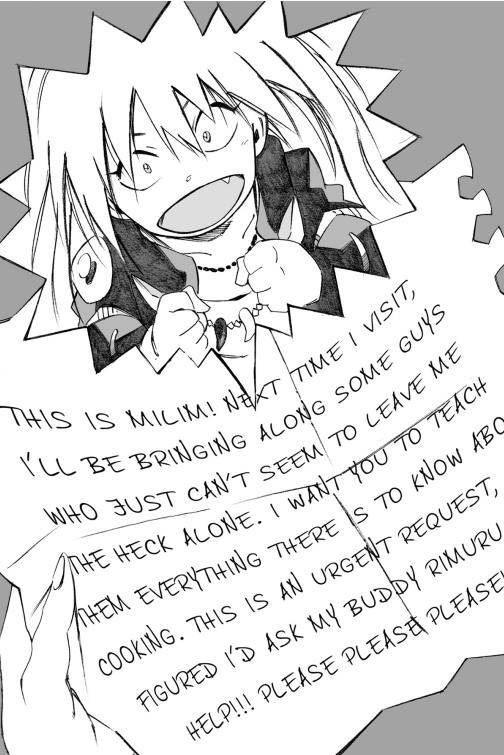
“Uh, did she tell you what this is about?”

“A little bit. I met a member of the Dragon Faithful named Sir Hermes while I was there, and he was kind enough to discuss his following’s internal workings with me.”

The way Gabil described him, Hermes seemed to have a pretty good head on his shoulders. Not battle-obsessed like Middray at all; more of a free spirit, one who had traveled to the Dwarven Kingdom and Western Nations.

Being in the Dragon Faithful, as he explained to Gabil, meant a life of frugality. “He claimed that the food they present to Lady Milim isn’t cooked or prepared in any way whatsoever. Perhaps they share some tastes with us. I’ve never enjoyed a fish that wasn’t best when it was eaten raw, you know.”

I’m not so sure you guys have that much in common, Gabil. Lizardmen’s digestive systems were probably just built that way. But they knew about preparing food, or at least smoking it, and they had a few non-fish staples they enjoyed as well. The Dragon Faithful, meanwhile, didn’t seem like they had heard of the concept of cooking at all. I doubt they were eating raw meat all day, but whatever preparation they did seemed strictly for the purposes of avoiding contamination and nothing more.



“Uh…okay? I thought dragonewts had the same sense of taste as humans.”

“We do, sir, we do! Thanks to my glorious evolution, I have gained the most wondrous, expert set of taste buds. All the bland meals of my lizardman past pale in comparison to the vast cornucopia of delights I can now sample!”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. So when you eat a good meal, you know how you kinda want to eat it again later on?”

Gabil nodded sagely, growing increasingly excited. “Yes… Yes, now I see your point! This is Sir Hermes’s way of eliminating that Dragon Faithful tradition once and for all, is it not?”

Probably, yeah. Tradition or not, I could read Milim’s mind easily enough. If they worshiped her as a god, though, why were they deliberately ignoring her will? That’s kind of, um, blasphemous, isn’t it? And why can’t Milim just chat about this with them herself? Maybe, in her own unique way, she didn’t want to rock the boat with them. She knew they were only acting out of virtuous intentions, so she put up with that treatment without complaint.

“In that case, we’ll need to give them all the royal treatment, won’t we?”

“Oh, absolutely! A splendid idea, I think!”

We’d need to keep it casual, nonchalant, making sure we didn’t act all high and mighty. Then they could naturally observe, and learn, what made Milim happy. It sounded like a tougher mission than I first thought. Better assemble my team and discuss this later on.

So I instructed Gabil to return to his research in the cave. Vester was putting in a full effort down there at the moment, but we still didn’t have a large enough team. Losing Gabil’s crew must have been a major blow to their progress.

“Right. I shall be off, then!”

“Yep. We will also consider your reward at our next conference, so I’d like to have you in attendance.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Pride filled Gabil’s face as he flew off. He must’ve just remembered that I appointed him to Tempest leadership earlier.

A month had passed since Walpurgis, and with all the new people, things were running at a fever pitch around town. In the midst of it, Geld finally Spatial Motioned back. It was the first time I had seen him in a while, and he looked pretty beat-up.

“I…it’s good to see you again, Geld.”

He heaved a sigh at my pensive greeting. “I have to say, Sir Rimuru, I look up to you more than ever now.”

“Whoa! Where’d that come from?”

There was no doubting the respect in his voice as he turned his weary eyes to me. I hadn’t done anything of note recently, so I had no idea what he was talking about. What happened to him in the space of a few weeks?

“Well…”

The story Geld had for me was a classic tale of incompetence among new hires. He had organized the prisoners into groups, deploying them to this or that allied force. That much went well. After that, he commended these troops in the midst of their surveying and land-clearing work…but certain problems quickly made themselves known.

High orcs had no problem using Thought Communication to chat with one another, working as a team even in silence, but we’d need a different plan with the mix of magic-born involved here. Verbal instructions couldn’t be understood—and besides, a lot of the main staff, Geld included, weren’t that great at making themselves clear. It’s one thing to be capable of something, but quite another to explain it clearly and lucidly to others. Lots of artisans like him faced the same problem.

This meant that as ruthlessly efficient as Geld and his team were, things fell apart when anyone else got involved. The results were boundlessly frustrating to him. The magic-born weren’t great fans of being ordered around, either, so even if you carefully showed them what to do in person, many of them weren’t interested in meekly copying your actions. Those that were, as Geld put it, still weren’t up to his grade of quality. I could see that. More people didn’t always mean better work. Put together a crowd of idiots, and all you had was a mob on your hands. That was why education was so important.

“Show them, convince them, let them try, and praise them—only then will a man be moved.”

That’s a quote from Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy during World War II, and it’s something that I think anyone in a leadership position needs to take to heart. It expertly encapsulates the difficulties of leading and instructing people, and it also shows that people find real pride and meaning in their work only when recognized by others.

Listening to Geld’s grumbling reminded me of the more painful moments of my office job, in my previous life. Work staff who never listened to you, people down the ladder who tried hiding their mistakes, bosses who attempted to push the blame on someone else. It wasn’t wine and roses for me back then, either. A lot of good memories, too, but get me started on the bad ones, and I could go all night.

And whenever I had it really rough:

“All right, Geld! Let’s have a drink!”

I slapped him on the shoulder. Rewarding the staff for hard work was part of any boss’s job, and one way to do that was to let them vent their grievances and work out everything in their system. I needed to pay special attention to Geld, given how much responsibility he felt for his work—and so we drank the night away, while Geld aired out all his pains and concerns and I carefully listened.

I planned to assemble the leadership for a conference the next morning—but before that, I called Hakuro over for a private chat, contacting him via Thought Communication the previous night. I traveled to his quarters at sunrise.

“Sir Rimuru,” he greeted me, almost choked with emotion, “coming over personally to see me…” He didn’t look as tired as Geld.

“Sorry to put you through all this grueling work.”

“Oh, not at all, not at all. We’ve sifted through the prisoners now, so my job is almost done. I have to say, though, Geld has it far worse. I finished transferring leadership over last night, so there’s no need for me to go back over there, at least.”

“Geld… Yeah, sounds like he had it tough. After I contacted you yesterday, he and I drank for a while, and it sounds like he’s got a lot on his mind, you know? Like, up to now he’s been able to just shut off his brain and focus on his work, but directing prisoners on the job site was a huge challenge for him.”

“Indeed. He would have it easier if he was willing to compromise on matters, but he was always far too serious-minded for that.”

As Hakuro explained, it would’ve been easy to use force to corral this motley band of magic-born, coercing them into following commands. But if you do that, you can’t expect a top-quality job to result from it. You’d have to settle here and there, and as an artisan, those results wouldn’t be enough to satisfy Geld.

“I have something else to report to you, Sir Rimuru…”

But to Hakuro, that was Geld’s problem. He turned back toward me.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Clayman, as you know, ruled over what was called the Puppet Nation of Dhistav, a land where the majority of people are in the slave class. These are entirely dark elves, no other species, and well over a thousand of them were tasked with maintaining and managing the castle grounds alone.”

“Right. So?”

“Well…as they described it to me, Dhistav used to be home to a kingdom of elves…”

Elves? The denizens of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion descended from elves, too, didn’t they? Is there a common ancestor here? Maybe not—we’re talking pretty well out of the way, geography-wise.

“…and remarkably enough, some elven ruins remain in the land. The dark elves described themselves as keepers of their graves.”

“Oh?”

Grave tenders? Over what sort of graves? Elves had life expectancies of who knows how long, besides.

“So you’re saying there are these well-guarded, untouched ruins from an ancient kingdom just lying around?”

This was big news to me. Ruins like these were dotted all over the world, often raided by the hunter-gatherer adventurers who made treasure hunting their line of work. Most of them didn’t have a very good time at it. Only a precious few ruins had been discovered at all, and those that were had already been picked clean a while ago. But if there was a brand-new cache of ruins to explore and exploit…

“Hakuro, I’m classifying this discovery a state secret. Don’t tell anyone about this for the time being—not until I go there and survey things for myself.”

“Yes, my lord,” he said quietly, nodding. He must’ve understood how vital this could potentially be.

If I had to guess, Clayman derived much of his riches from the things discovered in these sites. He had to. That would explain all the Artifacts and magic items Geld told me they recovered. But does that mean we should just…you know, take them over?

I decided to hold off on judgment for now. The secret seemed to be safe with the dark elves; word wouldn’t get out unless we wanted it to. This was demon lord territory, forbidden lands that no adventurers dared to approach. Better to go slowly on these ancient ruins—trying to overextend ourselves to all of them at once was too likely to backfire.

Everyone was now seated at our main meeting hall. I surveyed them all from my specially made slime seat.

“Um, right. Hello, everyone. As some of you already know, I have been promoted to demon lord!”

“““Congratulations!!”””

They all shouted their tidings to me, happy and excited whether they knew or not. I was just as happy. I had safely weathered a major storm.

“It was a long journey, indeed, yes,” Rigurd observed, “but we have finally made it.” Uh, Rigurd, it hasn’t even been two years since we met, right?

Rigur, meanwhile, was crying like a baby. “Truly astounding! Seeing our leader become a demon lord fills me with so much emotion…”

Shion sneered at the crowd like this was all inevitably going to happen. “It is the start of a new era for Sir Rimuru!”

Though, really, it was an emotional time for me, too. The only problem left was essentially the Western Holy Church. If I could handle them, it’d be easy street on the way to creating the ideal environment I’m looking for.

Brimming with confidence, I continued my briefing, going over what we decided on at Walpurgis.

“Ah, right. I didn’t mention this, but it’s been decided that I’m the official ruler of the entire Forest of Jura region. I don’t think this really changes much, since it’s already been that way for a while. It just means that, you know, if someone invades the forest—not that they would—we’d be fighting back under my own name. Also, should we formally declare our rights to this territory, do you think? Or are we safe just leaving it be for now?”

As I spoke, the looks on my leadership grew more nervous. Some of them appeared downright terrified. What? Did I say something bad?

“Um… The whole forest? Truly?”

“Uh, yeah?” I replied to Rigurd.

“Are you serious?” Benimaru gasped. “Including everything on the other side of the river?”

“Errr, probably?”

He was referring to the Great Ameld River that flowed across the forest, dividing it in two. The other side bordered lands under the influence of the Eastern Empire, a place we still had little to no connection with.

“Is that a problem?” I asked.

“Not a problem for us,” Benimaru replied after some thought, “but I don’t believe the area past the river counts as the dryads’ domain. So far, Sir Rimuru, you are recognized as overseer only of the lands that the dryads themselves have built up. To the denizens beyond the river, the advent of a new demon lord would likely prove to be quite a headache.”

He smiled the whole time—savoring the thought of mowing down any rebellious factions over there, no doubt. That was…um…no. Bad idea.

“If you asked me,” Kaijin rebutted, “this is an astounding development. The demon lords have formally agreed that you have rights to all the forest’s natural resources, if I’m understanding this correctly. This includes anything that anybody takes from it, over on the other side. That’s big news, pal!”

It’s like he was reading my mind. He was right. It didn’t strike me as anything big at first, but it had the potential to explode. As Kaijin explained to me, people had been harvesting the forest’s resources on the sly for a while now. The dryads were willing to let it slide to some extent, but given the general state of lawlessness past the Great Ameld, it was common for people to take wood or produce or whatnot from Jura to the Dwarven Kingdom, making a living off the sales. There was no regional authority to seek permission from, nothing stopping them—but now, if they wanted to do that or live in the forest, they needed my approval, and they’d have to march over here to get it.

“Um… Oh crap, does this mean we’re gonna get more people here?”

“I think it does,” Shuna said, a serene smile on her face. “Now that you’re an approved demon lord, anyone who fails to come here and pledge allegiance to you could be legally branded a rebel.”

Her opinion had to be shared by much of Tempest, I figured. But why require permission after who knows how many years of living here? That sounded like needless bureaucracy.

“Well, why worry about that now? I mean, if they’re already residents of the forest…”

“No, no,” countered Rigurd, “a demon lord is, in a way, a projection of pure power. It is something to be proud of. To a goblin, you understand, a high-level magic-born is something of a divine presence.”

“Exactly,” Gabil added. “Some of these uncontacted residents may seek the protection of the demon lord; others may go on with their lives without recognizing your authority. They have the right to make that decision for themselves. But even among the lizardmen I used to be with, the protection of a demon lord would have been a literal gift from the gods. Defying one was unthinkable; ignoring one, the height of folly. Compared with the risk of angering the local demon lord, it would be wholly typical for them to come and greet you instead.”

And as Shuna put it, failing to acknowledge me could even put you under suspicion. If you got attacked for it, you had no right to complain. Not that I’d want that, though. And besides, what if you’re a monster who’s never heard of me before? How would you even know?

“At the very least,” Gabil said, “the lizardmen are coming to see you, I assure you. My father has already been told of your ascension!”

Wait. When did they decide to do that?

“You mean Abil? He’s coming?”

“He is! He told Lady Shion about it as well. Ah, he is counting the days before he can see you in all your demonic glory for himself!”

This was starting to sound big. Really big. The lizardmen were one of the larger-size races in the whole Forest of Jura. If they took the pilgrimage to see me as a given, I assumed that went without saying for any species weaker than them. And I’m sure the process would be pretty casual for anyone familiar with me, but if not, they might be showing up on my doorstep trembling with fear. I’d just look like the latest local despot to them; they might freak out over making one false step and being annihilated or whatever. Maybe there’s something we could do to make this whole process a lot more…chill?

Still, though…

“Ha-ha! I’m sure Sir Rimuru would expect nothing less!”

I peered down at the triumphant-looking Shion. If she knew Gabil’s father was going to show up, why didn’t she bother telling me? And I really didn’t appreciate that grin on her face. She didn’t care about this visitor at all. I swear, she looks like the perfect executive secretary on the outside, but if you want her to actually do the job, forget it.

Ugh. Just leave her be. I mean, I’m glad she enjoyed hearing praise for me (even more than I did), but I knew she’d take any criticism from me the wrong way, so…

To sum up, once word got around about my demon lord-dom, I’d have a parade of visitors beating a path to this town, most monsters preferring to request my protection instead of risk my wrath. We’d have a hell of a lot of visitors to deal with soon, in other words.

We would have to conduct a cross-forest survey shortly, seeking out the intelligent races. This wouldn’t be a problem in areas where I was already the acknowledged leader, but anywhere else would be an uphill climb.

But if we were gonna be busy with that anyway…

“Hey, I was just thinking—we gotta spread the word around the forest about my ascension anyway, right? So why don’t we turn it into some really big ad campaign and use it to unveil this town to the whole world? It’d be easier to make everyone come over here than go reach out to all of them, I think.”

“…How do you mean?” a confused-looking Rigurd asked me, so I went into some more detail on the idea I just came up with.

Really, it wasn’t anything difficult. This town, the capital of Tempest, was starting to become more well-known among the monsters in Jura. Koby, and the kobold merchant caravans he led, were doing a great job spreading the rumors wherever they went. At least a few people must’ve been interested in visiting, and I was just thinking now was a good time to expand our population a little. The beastmen hanging out here would complete their education and return home soon enough; we’d need to make up for those losses, and if we were gonna keep up the teaching effort, then the more students, the merrier. Our food situation was steadily improving, and we definitely had the room for more people.

If anything, we were starting to face a shortage of workers. There were all these ideas, all these projects to explore, but not enough people to throw at them. A big, lavish unveiling could be just the thing to attract more of them. They’d come to pledge their fealty or whatever, they’d learn about the town along the way, and at least some of them would consider a permanent move.

Two birds with one stone. In fact…

“Plus… You know, we’ve all been on pins and needles the past little while. Why don’t we kick back a little bit? Let’s hold a big festival to start this off!”

We’d set up a specific time for the meet and greets with me, and we’d stage a city-wide festival around these to fete them with. That way, I wouldn’t have to spread the meetings out over weeks and weeks. There’d be a huge feast, too—I still had Milim’s request filed in the back of my mind. It’d be a chance for all of us to take a breather, show off what we’ve done, and get everything wrapped up in one fell swoop.

“A festival…?”

“Wonderful! Truly a wonderful idea!”

“Let’s do it! It will be a magnificent event!”

My associates were up for it, at least. The town was getting experienced with this, what with the monthly feasts we already held for ourselves, and our developments in the realm of food and drink were growing more complex and large-scale by the day. Expanding on that, and allowing everyone to join in, sounded like a lot of fun.

“This will kind of be my public debut as well, so let’s make it the biggest one we can!”

“““Yes, my lord!”””

There were no objections. The budget? Ah, no need to worry about that. Rigurd would figure out something. We were flush for the moment, and a little indulgence wouldn’t put a dent in that.

Things proceeded quickly after that; I guess those words held a lot of sway with people. Suggestions and feedback filled the hall, much to my silent surprise, and before I knew it, we were extending invitations to dignitaries the entire world over. Was this a little hasty? Monsters were one thing, but were we okay inviting human heads of state as well?

We had a hot spring. We had ample accommodations, including a state guest house worthy of handling the highest of nobility. Haruna and her crew had already impressed super-celebrities like Archduke Erald and King Gazel. I think we ought to be fine. Even if it took shuffling the dates and locations around, or at least stepping up our security, this could be a great chance for the world’s leaders to get to know me.

The overseer of all these people (i.e., me) had just officially become a demon lord. I could see why people wanted to celebrate that. I used to be Japanese, and Japanese people love their festivals. I figured I needed to really go all out with this and teach everyone what a real party is about—that and show them what a friendly demon lord I was.

With a promise to hammer out the festival details later, I concluded my report. We followed this up with reports from the rest of my main staff. I had a grip on everything, but not everyone on the team knew what everyone else was up to—and maybe I’d learn something new myself.

Diablo, in particular, had a completely different view of the world from me. It was like he didn’t know what common sense was. Small trifles to me could be huge, world-changing matters to him, it felt like, and if something like that came up, it’d be difficult for me to handle that alone. That was why I set up these regular info-sharing reports.

Rigurd kicked off his briefing by stating that our merchant partners had begun returning to town. Our numbers were trending upward again, likely because Fuze was spreading the word that things were safe now.

Beyond that, none of the other nations were making any particularly noteworthy moves. My ascension seemed to alarm many of them, but for now, they were likely waiting to see how Blumund and the Dwarven Kingdom would respond.

We also had word that Elmesia El-Ru Thalion, Her Excellency the Emperor of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, had expressed a personal desire to open formal relations with Tempest. I could practically hear her whisper “so build a highway linking us already” underneath those words, but there’s no doubting what a useful support they’d be to us. Her statement, propagated by magic to all world leaders, had apparently led to much consternation.

“It can be said,” Rigurd happily closed, “that all our relations are fulfilling their sworn duty and working hard on our behalf across the world!”

Next came Soei. I had left him to investigate a lot of things, so I figured he’d have the floor for a while.

This included the preliminary setup for the highway between here and Thalion, the advance surveying and so on before we put shovel to dirt. I had already worked out the general route from my bird’s-eye view over the forest, so Soei was sent out to check for nearby monster villages or other construction obstacles.

This was something I had him do for the roads to Dwargon and Blumund as well; it was pretty important work. You didn’t want to omit that stuff, unless you wanted trouble later. So far, the monsters impacted by the roads had been cooperative with us, so there were no major problems to speak of, but you never knew when we’d have to eminent domain someone out of their ancestral homes or whatnot.

Very few of them would defy my will, me being demon lord and all, but I didn’t want to act that much like a tyrant, so I had to be careful. It’d be easy to just push them away by force, but I wanted to avoid that if I could. Coexistence was my creed, and that applied equally to humans and monsters. Hopefully I wouldn’t run into any issues this time, either.

I wasn’t in this to demand anything from the monsters I ruled over. Anyone who wanted my protection got it, but otherwise, I didn’t want to interfere—well, unless they lived right in the middle of my projected road. But I wanted to avoid pointless conflict, so if they were willing to negotiate, so was I. I’d be happy to make all the moving arrangements for anyone displaced, should I need to. After all, any village near this road was bound to become a resting stop, a lively place filled with inns and taverns and travelers going to and fro.

It wasn’t all going to be smooth sailing, but it’d make for a better life for the natives. That’s how it worked for the previous two highways, and hopefully it would once more.

“I did not find any hostile monsters present on or near the projected route,” Soei began. “When I explained Sir Rimuru’s plans to them, they all provided their ready agreement to me.”

Ah, good. I’m glad he made it clear we weren’t kicking anyone out of their homes.

“That’s great. In that case, make sure you wrap up the surveying and other work by the time Geld’s free again.”

The rough on-site investigation work was already complete. If we didn’t find any more safety concerns after this, it’d be time to send our engineers over.

“Well, one moment. I did discover one issue. The Forest of Jura is in your jurisdiction, Sir Rimuru, but the Khusha Mountains lie on one of its borders. The area is filled with high peaks and treacherous canyons, and at the higher altitudes, there is said to be settlements populated by a long-nosed tribe known as the tengu. That is information from the local populace, so I found it difficult to dismiss entirely.”

In the lands southwest of Rimuru, the capital and central city of Tempest, there was a mountain range that spread out across the shores of Lake Sisu. These were the Khushas, an area that high orcs had migrated to in the past; a southern branch of this range was also home to the former demon lord Frey’s castle. It was noted for its beautiful, extended rows of towering peaks, many of which were treacherous and all but untouched by living creatures.

The current plan called for a highway to be built right up to the border with Thalion. There was a midsize town there situated between the mountains that would serve as the terminus. We wouldn’t need to go through the Khushas themselves. So what was Soei worried about?

“What’s the big deal about that?”

“The tengu are said to be friendly, but at their core, they are a warmongering race. Even the demon lord Frey avoided direct conflict with them. I would suggest seeking her advice about this…”

Technically speaking, Soei advised me, the Khusha Mountains were outside the Forest of Jura and thus not our territory. It wasn’t Frey’s, either, making it independent, unclaimed land. I could’ve just used my demon lord powers to beat them into submission, but maybe it’d be better to zip over and explain matters to avoid future trouble. In their eyes, they might see me as a greedy demon lord trying to expand his territory.

Soei sounded disappointed at having to leave the decision about this to me, but I actually thought better of him for it. I was so proud of him for not forcing the issue and trying to work with the tengu himself. He was careful like that, and that made him endlessly helpful for missions like these.

“All right. So should I go and—?”

“Ah, one moment. If that’s the issue, let me head over.”

Just as I hoped to get this wrapped up quickly, Benimaru stopped me. Whenever he casually volunteered for something like this, it always alarmed me a bit—but he was right. I left the matter to him.

“You’ve seemed rather friendly with Lady Alvis as of late, my brother. I would hope you are not volunteering merely for the chance of a tryst with her?” Shuna commented.

Huh? Benimaru and Alvis were that into each other?!

“What does she mean, Benimaru?”

If Shuna was telling the truth, this was serious.

“You misunderstand her, Sir Rimuru. Shuna, enough of your nonsense.”

He acted unperturbed enough. It didn’t seem like he was lying to me. But let’s face it. Benimaru was a good catch for any woman able to capture his attention. Anyone could see that.

“Don’t worry, Sir Rimuru. Whether Benimaru is here or not, you will always have me!”

Oh, great, more of Shion’s nonsense.

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Heh! Falling for Alvis’s trap and ready to abandon our nation, are you?” Shion continued. “Well, go! Do whatever you like!”

“Shion, how on earth are you interpreting things that way?”

I could see veins throbbing on Benimaru’s head. I mean, yeah, I was kind of jealous of him, too—two years, and I still didn’t have a girlfriend to speak of—but I didn’t think he was gonna go elope or whatever. Shion’s imagination was a fearsome thing, indeed.

“Yeah, I really doubt that, Shion.”

“You heard him, Shion. Sir Rimuru, you do trust in me, yes?”

“It’s not a matter of trust by now. You’re one of my closest partners.”

There wasn’t a cell in my body that questioned Benimaru. He couldn’t be less like my old coworker Tamura, except in how they’d both found a steady date before I ever did. But I could deal with that later.

This whole conversation was getting ridiculous. “Right. If we keep talking about this, Shion’s imagination is gonna run wild on her. Benimaru, I’m assigning this job to you!”

“Yes, my lord,” he replied with a fatigued nod. Yeesh.

Still, Benimaru was the right man to serve as my proxy here. He was second in command only to me, and I doubted he would underestimate any adversaries he came across. I wasn’t expecting hidden mountain settlements on the Thalion border, but considering the future, it was better to work everything out with them sooner or later—and Benimaru’s better than me at that stuff.

There was one thing I had yet to hear about.

“Can you tell me anything about the changes in our monster ecosystem, Soei?”

I had asked him to investigate trends among the monsters in town and along our highways. A lot of residents were practically brimming with magicules; the air was pretty dense with them by now, which was exactly how you got mystic beasts—they’d spontaneously manifest from pools of the stuff, and the more that were created, the more likely at least one would be harmful to us. Beasts like these necessitated a constant patrol around the forest. They were a threat to humans even at D rank or below, so we needed to be hypervigilant with those guys. If one ranked B or so showed up, that required immediate attention.

Rigur, as head of our security department, was the main man in charge of handling them. His team was experienced now, and even the newer ones could provide able service after several weeks of training. They patrolled the highways, ensuring the merchant wagons could ply their trade in peace, and they did a good job at it—for now, no problems had been reported. But they couldn’t cover the entire forest, so there was no telling where a new, and powerful, creature might be lurking.

Soei had informed me that it wasn’t worth worrying about much, which was puzzling. What did he mean by that? Like, we could live safely alongside them? If they didn’t harm us or the travelers, then sure, I could accept that. Any monsters intelligent enough to be negotiated with were free to live out their lives, but you just never knew when a new menace, like the A-minus-ranked knight spider Gobta tangled with, might rear its ugly head and start defending its territory.

That’s why I was concerned with the forest outside of the highways and other areas we had populated. Those places, it seemed to me, were more likely to house these potential threats. Soei had his Replications looking into this for me, so I was pretty sure he at least had an inkling by now.

“I did not discover anything particularly problematic,” Soei coolly replied to me. “If I had to name one, it would be the saber grizzly I chanced upon in the forest’s northwestern reaches, but I safely dispatched it.”

Hmm. Nothing problematic?

Report. A saber grizzly is equivalent to an A-minus rank, similar to the knight spider.

What?!

“Whoa, that’s, um, that’s nothing a normal adventurer could take on!”

I couldn’t hide my shock. He made it sound so commonplace that I didn’t pick up on it at first. No merchant would be able to travel in areas with freaks like those nearby. They’d be a danger even to Gobta and his patrol teams.

“Uh,” Gobta grunted, picking up on my concern, “is that for real, Soei? ’Cause I don’t really wanna deploy anyone new and untested to places where they are. It’d be dangerous.”

“I wouldn’t worry. You spoil them too much anyway, don’t you?”

“Heyyy! Wait a minute! Maybe you wouldn’t worry, but to us, if we let our guards down, we’re goners!”

“Then go to Hakuro,” Soei blithely replied as Gobta kept whining. “Just have him train you harder. You’ll be fine.”

Hakuro nodded at this like it was plainly obvious. I felt kind of bad for Gobta, although his reaction piqued my interest. He himself didn’t seem too scared of a saber grizzly. The magicules coming off him seemed to be higher than before; he was probably on the higher end of the B rank by now. But there’s a pretty big jump between B and A, I figured…

Hey, Raphael, I’m not misreading Gobta’s power, am I?

Understood. When Unified with a starwolf, the resulting growth in fighting level cannot be measured in numbers.

Ah. All right. Yeah, I think that Unification was an A-minus. And with Gobta head of the goblin riders, maybe a saber grizzly wouldn’t be a big issue for him. And didn’t he mention successfully defending himself against an attack by one of the Clayman squad leaders? Between Hakuro’s training and his own experience, he must have been improving, in his own way. He didn’t look any different, but maybe Gobta’s a force to be reckoned with?

I smiled a bit as I reflected on this. “Now, now, I think Gobta’s got a good point. Just because you can handle it doesn’t mean the whole world can, Soei.”

That was meant to defend Gobta a bit, but I also wanted to remind Soei not to try solving all his problems alone. If the more powerful among us use themselves as a yardstick, that’ll bring a world of pain upon anyone who can’t live up to that. It’d also make things more inefficient for the powerful themselves, burdening them further and ultimately leading to their ruin. I spent a few moments explaining this to the team, mixing in a few real-world examples.

“…I understand. I did not think carefully enough.”

Everyone is different. Soka and the rest of Soei’s team were talented enough to satisfy his harsh demands, but it took a special group of people to do that. I appreciated his apology, but I hoped he kept that fact in mind somewhere. The same could be said of Benimaru and Hakuro; I wanted them to be a bit more broad-minded in how they raised the new generation. Geld and Gabil, on the other hand, thought a great deal more about the people under them, so I had less concern about them. Hopefully everyone could learn from them. It’d make for better relationships all around.

Meanwhile…

“Although I should say that training Gobta and the rest is a great thing. You gotta make sure they’re prepared for the unexpected!”

Hakuro gave a sly grin as Gobta hung his head low. Sure, not everyone advances at the same rate or to the same degree, but training itself is never a bad thing. It’s just like going to school—it’s bound to help you later on.

Convinced that Gobta was on the right track, I went back to the main topic.

Just as I feared, we were starting to see new, and dangerous, monsters born in the forest. Our patrol teams had potions on them if worse came to worst, and the starwolves were astonishingly fast on their feet, so I’m sure they could flee easily enough. But I can’t expect our upcoming visitors to act the same way.

“If we have all these magicules pooling together, that’s going to create more unusual monsters to deal with. It’ll be too late for us if they kill someone. We need a plan of action.”

We could try stricter patrols, but that wouldn’t address the root of the problem. We’d have to keep that up forever, stressing all of us out. Unless we identified and removed whatever was creating these dense clouds of magic, I’d have to keep worrying about this for all time.

So now what…?

As I pondered over this, a helpful voice called out from an unexpected place.

“In that case, why don’t we place anti-magic barriers over the highways?”

It was Vester. Kaijin immediately stood up to reply.

“And you know, pal, we just finished up the perfect device for that.” He grinned at me. “A fully automatic, barrier-producing magic generator!”

I knew he had been working on a few things in secret. But really? An automatic magic generator?

Apparently, this was a device that automatically kept any magic spell going, as long as you told it which one. A major innovation, it sounded like, kind of an advanced version of the inscription magic–driven tools he had invented before. I guess Kaijin and Vester, chagrined at how useless they were during the whole barrier crisis we had, stepped up to try developing this. These guys are amazing. Making a working model in such a short time… What are they, geniuses?

Turns out, though, this wasn’t just a couple of dudes working in a garage. Gabil was pitching in during his spare time, as well as Kurobe (who wasn’t with us at the moment). Even Shuna was helping out. In a way, we had some of the world’s greatest magic wielders coming together for this project. It was kind of epic.

Kaijin had long been devoting his days to research, leaving forge duties to Kurobe. I’m sure it wasn’t just research, what with his duties as head of Tempest’s production department, but still.

As he explained to me, the automatic magic generator utilized the magicules naturally floating in the air. He figured we had tons of those around us right now, and that there had to be a way to harness those—hence the idea. The Prison Field covering the town worked by purifying the inner space of its magicules, absorbing them. In much the same way, monsters took in magicules from the air and produced magic crystals from them. They had researched these natural processes, analyzing how they worked.

Another thing, one I had already mentioned, was that this nation was unnaturally full of magicules. We were all projecting pretty heavy auras even when we tried to hold them back. Even in a regular cave, the density could be enormous in areas, enough to give birth to a whole gaggle of B-plus creatures. It was all just too weird for this country. Kaijin and his team had tried to figure out what to do about this for a while, it seemed.

“So if we use this automatic magic generator, we can create anti-magic barriers?”

“We sure can,” Vester confidently stated. “And that’s not the only thing!”

They were both grinning ear to ear now. I could hardly believe these two used to be at each other’s throats. But anyway.

“What other use is there? I thought the barriers were the point.”

“Heh-heh-heh… Get this, pal! This generator includes a mechanism that collects and gathers magicules from the atmosphere. We can use this to lower the density of magicules in the air!”

Whoa! Really? I had to restrain myself from shouting with glee. That’s exactly the solution we were looking for!

“It definitely is, Sir Rimuru,” Vester said. “But it’s not without its drawbacks. It requires a certain magicule density to work; otherwise, it is too inefficient.”

“Not that we have to worry about that around this town, huh, pal?”

I nodded my agreement. It wasn’t a problem worth considering.

“So basically, these devices will suck magicules from the air and automatically create barriers for us?”

“They could, yes, but eventually they’ll run out of local fuel and fizzle out. That’s why we’ve set it up so you can refill their magical energy stores.”

As Kaijin put it, the area around Tempest had more magicules than it knew what to do with, but the closer you got to the Western Nations, the sparser they became. It’d be a problem if the barriers disappeared without anyone noticing it, so the devices were set up to generate magic based on its previously loaded stores as well.

What was the fuel source? The crystals made from magicules collected from the air—in other words, magic crystals. Normally, these crystals would be too inefficient an energy source to use for fuel as is. Unlike the magic stones crafted with secret Free Guild technology, magic crystals were neither uniform nor stable. Converting them into magic energy would cause a good 90 percent of their magicules to dissipate into the atmosphere.

Magic stones were better, and thanks to the Great Sage, we had a fully optimized conversion spell driven by inscription magic. It didn’t require any magic stones at all, as long as the potential output exceeded the energy needed for recovery. The technology we developed back before we could just buy all the magic stones we wanted was still paying off big-time today.

Now, they reported, they could generate the magic with a minimum of loss, providing the desired effects even with the 10 percent of a magic crystal normally available for use. What’s more, the “wasted” 90 percent wasn’t gone forever—it just went back into the air, ready to be used again. As long as the required density was there, it was virtually a perpetual motion machine.

And we could use these things in other ways. For example, how about creating a whole bunch of magic crystals, sending them to the Free Guild, and having them converted into magic stones? Then we could operate these things even more efficiently. The most important use, however, was paring down the magicule density around us. Less density meant few monsters and magic beasts to worry about; fewer great hordes of creatures stomping around. The number of unique monsters that might pose trouble for Gobta’s team could potentially be reduced to near zero.

Truly, a wonderful invention. A perfect match for one of our nation’s most unique quirks. I could envision a future where we couldn’t live without it.

“You know,” Kaijin cheerfully stated, “I think we’ve also found a lead in extracting the energy needed to convert them into magic stones. For that, though, we’re gonna need some dedicated equipment. It’s gonna be too hard with what we have now, so that’s why we looked for a way to use magic crystals as is.”

First, they found a way to make crystals from the magicules in the air; then they developed that tech further; and then they theoretically learned how to make them into magic stones. But while the stones I purchased in Englesia helped them out a lot, they led Kaijin and Vester to the conclusion that producing our own was an uphill climb. I think I remember hearing that the process required a dedicated factory filled with large-scale equipment. It was complicated, high-level work, and while they had the theory worked out, applying it was a different matter.

Well, nothing worth going crazy about. If we could use magic crystals anyway, there was no need for haste. Besides, using those crystals for fuel proved to be a lot easier than expected, they told me. All they had to do was rewrite the formula for the relevant inscription magic, and boom, they had a working magic circle.

“And what’s more,” Vester excitedly continued, “these automatic generators can cast magic besides just barriers!”

Impressively, they could handle quite a few more spells, although there were restrictions. Just place the relevant magical inscription on a magisteel disk, pop it in the device, and you could conjure up all kinds of things—a bit like a record player, except it ran on magic crystals instead of a power outlet. I remember telling them about media playback devices like that, but I had no idea they’d leverage that knowledge into something magical like this.

If they could miniaturize it down to CD-player level, maybe we could even make them portable. Or how about the opposite, creating larger models for tactical-level magic deployment? The possibilities seemed endless. For the time being, though, the generator was a rectangle a bit over three feet long on each side and half as deep. Kinda big. Heavy, too—enough that it took some serious muscle to lift. If we could keep them stocked with magic crystals, though, there wouldn’t be any need to physically move it at all.

Vester’s proposal was to nestle these devices within the heavy stones we used to pave the highways, setting each one to maintain a magical barrier. They could carefully measure out the life span of each one, having the daily patrol teams replace the crystals to keep the barriers going—although no replacement was needed if the local magicule density held up. As long as nothing was amiss, the devices could just be checked up on regularly and otherwise left alone.

It seemed like a pretty smart plan to me—easy to use and adaptable to a wide variety of functions. By their calculations, one generator every six-ish miles along the highway would guarantee a safe refuge across the whole area. We had patrol stations every twelve miles along the roads, so it wouldn’t add much to a patrolman’s daily duties.

“So what about the magic inscriptions?”

“Heh-heh-heh… Dold’s already got the prototype done. We’ll have Kurobe work out the manufacturing process for the generators, so at this point, pal, we’re just waiting for the word go.”

“My team has largely completed the education I’ve been giving them, so we’re holding fewer classes at the moment. I have some free time to work with, and I would love to take this job on, if possible!”

Vester’s eyes were burning with anticipation. Research wasn’t enough for him—he wanted to see these devices humming along for himself. And so did I. It looked like they could solve our magicule problem while improving highway safety. I saw no reason not to add this to our highway planning.

“Okay, Vester. I want you to begin tomorrow!”

“Leave it to me, sir!”

He smiled, elated. Glad I could rely on him. I intended to have the high orcs left in town help with the installation. The devices were ponderously heavy to a human being, but just a bit of a lift for a monster. It’d be far more efficient that way.

I figured that adjusting the ranges of each barrier to match the path of the highway might be the biggest challenge remaining. Vester laughed that concern away, but before he could go into detail, the friendly atmosphere was shattered.

“Gwaaaaaah-ha-ha-ha! Once you complete that network, I can release as much mystical energy as my heart desires!”

“No you can’t, dumbass! You’ll kill half the populace if you do!!”

I couldn’t help but yell at him for that. I really didn’t need Veldora’s crap right now. Vester’s smile turned into an alarmed, pale frown.

“I wouldn’t advise it, no,” a disturbed Benimaru replied. “We might be able to handle it, but the rest of the city? I doubt it.”

“Indeed,” added Shuna, “even if we moved Sir Veldora off-site, the force of the blast would likely affect us in one way or the other.”

Yeah, no duh. Even the sealed-off magicules leaking out made it impossible for most people to be near him. If he started shooting out his mystical force willy-nilly, we’d be awash in corpses.

“Aww, but…I’ve been holding it in for so long… It’s wearing me out…”

“Deal with it,” I snapped back.

“…But why doesn’t holding yours in bother you at all, Rimuru?”

Huh? Well, why d’you think?

“Me? I just shove it all in my Stomach.”

Ever since Rigurd suggested it, I had been bottling up my mystical force and pushing it into my Stomach. By this point, it was an instant transfer, preventing any of it from leaking out at all. Ascending to demon lord status boosted my magicule stores a fair bit, but it also upgraded Predator to Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony, which vastly expanded my Stomach storage. Thanks to that, I had no desire to unleash my mystical force at all.

“You must remember,” Diablo advised me, “that perfectly blocking one’s mystic force is intensely difficult. Even Sir Benimaru and his family are allowing a tiny amount to leak out.”

“Yes,” Veldora said, nodding meekly. “You are an observant demon, Diablo. Come on! Tell Rimuru more about how hard this is for me!”

Diablo then explained how the demon races are particularly gifted in the handling of magic and mystical forces. That gave them perfect control over such powers, but even from that perspective, Diablo was giving Veldora an A for effort. With all the energy stored inside him, Diablo reasoned, keeping it under control was a Herculean act.

“Is that true, Veldora?”

“Yes! Yes, it is! I’ve been holding it in ever since you taught me how to, and I want to go blow it up somewhere!”

This, uh, might be kind of a big deal. He wasn’t set to pop right this instant, but if we didn’t take action, we might have a disaster on our hands. If he busted all of that out without warning, we’d have acres and acres of wasteland—and with all these freaky powerful monsters and creatures dying en masse as a result, that could lead to the creation of another Charybdis. Talk about your Catastrophes. Whether he meant it or not, Veldora was seen as a mortal danger to the world for pretty solid reasons.

“All right. I’ll think about that, so hold it in for a while longer, okay?”

“Very well. I can manage that well enough, still. But try to be quick about it!”

Good. Still, does it always have to be like this? I solve that magicule-density problem, and an even bigger one immediately replaces it? I let out a soft sigh. You just never know what life’s gonna throw at you.

Soei had finished his briefing, and before long, so had my other main leaders. But just before I was ready to adjourn:

“Could I have the floor a moment, Sir Rimuru?” Geld raised his hand, looking concerned.

“What’s up, Geld? If you’ve got something to say, go right ahead.”

He didn’t seem that troubled last night. It probably had to do with the magic-born prisoners, the source of all his recent stress. I wanted to help him if I could, but…

“I was hoping,” he began, “to tell my fellow orcs about your ascension to demon lord. Would you mind if I traveled to the villages of my countrymen, practicing my Spatial Motion as I did? Things appear to be calm across the land now, so I may perhaps find other comrades interested in serving you.”

Come to think of it, he’s been so hard at work here in town that I don’t think he’s had the time to visit the high orc villages. I had been hearing about improvements he made to our food situation, but beyond that, I honestly hadn’t been giving him much attention. He deserved this, I thought. But:

“Geld, if you find anyone willing to join us, I’d like you to send them to this town first.”

“…Why is that, sir?”

“Well, I appreciate your interest in adding to your own forces, but I think it’s important they complete their education here beforehand.”

That was my backstory. High orcs like Geld could use Thought Communication to instantly get up to speed on work duties. That was a massive advantage to them and one of the reasons Geld was such a major contributor to our cause.

“But we could begin work at once… Between building these highways, constructing Lady Milim’s castle, and everything else, you need labor that can move as quickly and fluidly as your own arms and legs…”

Which, by Geld’s logic, meant the more high orcs around, the better.

“No. We have all those prisoners to work with, don’t we? So you go lead them and build them up for me.”

“But…”

“Geld, I know what you’re thinking. Your suggestion would be the most efficient way, I won’t deny that. But I want you to aim higher.”

“Higher?”

“Yes. There’s no doubting that Thought Communication is an incredibly useful thing. It cuts down on mistakes, and there’s no reason to deliberately shut it off. But if we give preferential treatment only to races who can use that, what happens to the prisoners? Are we just gonna have them mopping floors and doing other menial tasks?”

“We…”

The suggestion seemed to help Geld reach the same conclusion I had. Going forward, we clearly needed more workers. That’s why we had to train those prisoners now, while things weren’t too rushed. That’s the iron rule of business—work when you have to; train when you don’t.

Plus, if I let Geld practice favoritism with his own species, that could lead to all kinds of discrimination I really didn’t need around here. I was aiming for a paradise enjoyed by a diverse number of races, so there was no way I could allow that stuff. We were at a vital turning point in a number of ways.

“Also, Geld, you’re definitely a talented commander. I think if I put you in charge of this diverse group of magic-born, that’ll polish your skills even further.”

“I…?!”

“Our construction schedule is full, certainly, but there’s no need to panic. Just use the experience you’ve built and lead them with your own words. And…”

I took out a sheet of paper and handed it to Geld.

“This is…!”

“I want to leave this construction job to you. That’s just the foundational blueprint, but I firmly believe you’re up to the task. Are you up for it?”

“Sir Rimuru…”

This blueprint was for a gigantic structure, one I had been crafting here and there in my spare time. I showed it to Milim and the rest, too—Frey was impressed with how high it went, while Carillon rumbled his approval of the sheer majesty of the thing. Milim, meanwhile, simply loved it. This meant that all the guests who’d stay here would have no problem with it…although, this was an investment in the future, provided de facto free of charge to them, so I didn’t want to hear any complaints anyway.

The building was inspired by what I saw in Englesia and my drive not to lose out to them. I was picturing a skyscraper at first but changed my plans after I thought something more original and suitable for this world was in order. That was what I was leaving in Geld’s able arms.

Not that we’d be hands-off, of course—Geld needed some follow-up from me, lest the weight of the job crush him. My eyes turned to Kaijin; he smiled back. Smart of him to pick up on a slime’s gaze. But maybe I should’ve held this meeting in human form; not everyone can notice that so easily in my regular shape.

“Leave it to us, pal. I’ll give Geld all the backup he needs, and I’ll take Mildo along, too, so you can have him handle your little city planning project, huh?”

“What about your current work?”

“Ah, that’ll be no problem. Our research has settled down a bit, and we’re educatin’ the next generation. I think I’m safe leaving town for a while.”

Good. My small concerns were being whisked away by bigger issues—ones I was far more excited to tackle. No way Geld would mess this up.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. Let me see you handle this and grow even stronger than before. I’ll be happy to talk things over if you have any problems, though, so don’t get too worked up about it, okay?”

“B-but…!” Geld looked frozen, his back nailed straight up. “With a job as large as this one, what if I fail at it…?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! Even if you do, that’s still gonna be vital experience for you. Nobody’s gonna die doing this, and it’s not like it’ll cost any more than a typical city if it goes haywire on us, right? We can always earn it back.”

He was serious-minded, he always put in a full effort, and he always took responsibility for his actions. That was why I had to say that. It’d have the opposite effect on someone lazier and less motivated than him, but it was just the advice Geld needed right now.

“Yeah! He’s right! I mean, look at me! Last time—”

“Last time you did what, Gobta? Mind coming to my office later to tell me in detail?”

“Gehh! Was this whole thing a trap for me?!”

Ugh. Gobta always wants to show off like that. At least he helped Geld loosen up a little.

“Heh… Heh-heh-heh-heh. Thank you, Sir Rimuru. I suppose I was so afraid of failure that I let the little details overwhelm me. Please, allow me to take this on and live up to your expectations!”

“Good to hear. You’ve got the job!”

It was good to hear. Geld gave me a refreshed smile, his mind clear of concern.

“Why does he get all the attention?” a clearly jealous Shion asked.

“It’s the right person for the right place,” I replied. “You have your own work, don’t you?”

“Ah yes. Cooking!”

No, you idiot!

“Mmmm… Well, we all have a few things on our plates, but in your case, I wouldn’t say cooking is one of them.”

I tried to be as indirect as possible. If she had one single job, I suppose it’d be protecting me and this town. I mean, she had her own good points, too. We’re all good and bad at different things. No need to freak out about it.

“But look, Shion,” Benimaru said, getting ready to end the conversation, “you have an almost unfair amount of strength, enough to even beat me depending on the circumstances. So when I’m gone, please keep Sir Rimuru safe and sound, all right?”

Our reporting was just about done. I could have wrapped things up there, but while we had the chance, I figured we’d listen to an update from Diablo about his own work.

“Very well,” he said with a respectful bow as he began.

His update on worldwide trends and how they influenced us was the same as Rigurd and Soei’s. He must have picked up on the same info, but a little confirmation was always nice. It’d all tie in with establishing Yohm’s claim to the throne eventually.

He also told us about Yohm, the man who would be king. He had no education on how to act like a noble, much less king, so there was no way he could negotiate directly with all those high-borns. Instead, Edmaris, the former king, had joined Diablo’s cause and was in the midst of providing a crash course to the guy. Sounded good to me. With Diablo watching, I doubted the former king would try any funny stuff. Depending on how things worked out, it might be pretty neat to befriend Edmaris and take advantage of him. That would probably help Yohm out as well.

So as I listened to Diablo brief the rest of the room, I made a mental note to go see this man Edmaris for myself sometime.

The new king, to no one’s surprise, was lurking around behind the scenes.

“It’ll be a while before he makes any moves, though, right?”

At least several months, I figured, before he could regroup his forces and take real action. But Diablo disagreed—or at least had an answer well beyond my own imagination.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh… I would like to have this done sooner rather than later, so I am taking measures that will encourage him to hurry it up.”

“Huh?” He was smiling at me again. “Do we need to prepare for something?”

“No problems there. I have let Sir Benimaru organize the forces we will deploy when the time is right.”

“Yes,” Benimaru casually replied, “we are all set to go there. One force that will mingle with the general public and make its presence known, and one force operating in the shadows. Both are ready for action. The selection process was quite a pain, actually. Nearly everyone volunteered for this mission.”

They all seemed so informal about it, like they were figuring out what time to meet at the park for a picnic. It’s a little more important than that, I thought…

“However,” Diablo said as his smile faded, “there is a… I wouldn’t call it a problem, but something that does concern me slightly. I didn’t report it since it was not worth reporting at the time, but Reyhiem has yet to return.”

Ohhh, right. I thought I was forgetting something. I sent a rather pointed message to Hinata, and I still hadn’t received a reply.

“That’s the archbishop we let travel to the Holy Church to report to them, right? Did he not make it or something?”

“No, he had reached the Englesian capital accompanied by my agents, crystal ball in hand. There is a preset transport gate there that leads directly to the Church headquarters in the Holy Empire of Lubelius, so he should have arrived safely.”

The road from Farmus to Englesia was a two-week journey by wagon, hugging the coastline the whole way. Adding Lubelius to the trip would tack on another three weeks or so—but this world has magic. Between the two nations was a pair of transport gates, special magical pathways. Go through one and traverse the alternate dimension inside, and you can travel from one end to the other in an instant. Only a small handful of elites even knew about these gates, but Reyhiem, as an archbishop for a large nation, would likely be one of them. No doubt he had access, too; once he entered Englesia, he reportedly made a beeline for the capital.

He had absolutely used the gate there. The greater demon Diablo summoned to tail him said so himself. The city had a barrier over it, so a greater demon breaking in could cause a furor, so he simply watched Reyhiem go inside the gate and reported it back to Diablo.

“And he hasn’t left the capital since?”

“No. We’ve kept the city under watch, so we should be briefed once he does emerge from it…”

…but that hadn’t happened yet. Reyhiem must be stuck in the Church. I began to fear the worst.

“Did they kill him to shut him up, maybe?”

“I have not detected any such thing as of yet. My Tempter skill can seize the soul of anyone it has thrall over the moment they die.”

If there was no soul to harvest, he must still be alive. I was starting to get a little scared of Tempter, but never mind that.

I imagined Reyhiem would’ve been safe in Lubelius’s capital, what with the Temple Knights undoubtedly guarding him. But he still wasn’t back. The Church’s inquiry could’ve just been taking a while; maybe this wasn’t cause for alarm yet, but it did bother me a little. But hey, if he’s alive, then fine. As long as they didn’t kill him and blame us for it, it’s all good.

“So we still don’t really know what the Western Holy Church is up to?”

“No sir. They may try to interfere with my plans, but at the moment, it is difficult to say. I will be sure to remain on high alert and deal with whatever we discover.”

“Good. A little daunting, though. There’s too little intelligence to read the situation very well.”

If we had enough info, I could’ve just left it all to Raphael, besides.

“My apologies, my lord,” Soei stated, looking frustrated. “Attempting to infiltrate Lubelius is, sadly, a dangerous proposition…”

“Oh, no, no, you’re fine! Pushing yourself too hard never accomplishes anything!”

If we were going to sneak into the nerve center of the Holy Church, sworn enemy of monsters, Soei himself would be our only candidate. Even then, if Hinata was there, I’d be sorely anxious for him. Soka and the others wouldn’t have a chance; they’d be discovered and executed in short order. I had strict orders in place not to go overboard with this kind of thing.

Still, though…

“You think we’re gonna be enemies now?”

The message I recorded painted a picture of—in so many words—putting the whole ruckus from before firmly behind us. I taunted them a tiny bit, too, but hey, I needed to have a little fun, right? …Or not? Maybe that was a bad idea, but it was out of my hands now. No undo button to press.

The overall message was friendly, though, so I was pretty sure that’s how they’d take it. Hinata was intelligent enough to make the right decision, I believed. If she opted to live alongside us without hostility, that’d be the most ideal thing.

For now, outside of the Octagram, the Church was the biggest threat out there. The Eastern Empire seemed kinda fishy, too, but they were unlikely to take action for now. If the Western Holy Church could do the same for us, Diablo’s plans were all but accomplished already.

“That is a thorny question,” Benimaru said. “Personally, I would prefer to have this dispute firmly settled, rather than leave any grudges behind.”

I appreciated his feedback, but if we were defeated, it was all over, so let’s keep it peaceful, okay?

Shuna gave me a thoughtful look. “You know, Sir Rimuru, we were attacked while you were fighting the Saint Hinata. These attacks were undoubtedly timed, and someone needed to plan that out in advance. Plus, Clayman himself hinted at the presence of someone behind the scenes…”

She helped me recall someone I really shouldn’t be forgetting about. The big man upstairs.

“‘Him,’ huh?”

“Yes,” said Hakuro, bitterly nodding. “And now that we know this someone exists and is trying to entrap us, we will need to consider his upcoming moves as well. Now is no time to let our guards down.”

“No,” Shuna said, nodding with the crowd, “no time to let anyone escape our attention.”

“Yeah… And if that guy’s involved, Hinata might take action, too.”

But something didn’t seem right to me. You know that feeling? The suspicion you’re overlooking something? And then it struck me all at once—this thing eating at me.

“…Say, what if Hinata didn’t attack me on her own volition? What if she was asked by someone or ordered to?”

“How do you mean?”

“Given the timing,” Shuna asked as she traced my line of thought, “isn’t it clear Hinata is connected to this other person?”

That only strengthened my suspicion.

“Well, honestly, I really don’t think Hinata was taking orders from someone, but what do you think? Even if she was connected to that someone, d’you think she’d take orders from him?”

“““?!”””

I heard a couple gasps from the audience.

That woman didn’t bother listening to a word I said. Why would she listen to a request, or especially an order, from anyone else?

“Good point, pal,” Kaijin replied. “She’s captain of the Crusaders; who would she ever take orders from? The only one she’d ever listen to is the god Luminus herself. I mean, everybody knows that not even the Church leader can corral her; am I right?”

If Hinata answered to nothing but divinity, that put her at the top of the Church ladder. That eliminated the “operating on orders” idea.

“Yeah, you see? She sure didn’t listen to me at all. I really can’t imagine her taking orders.”

Which meant, if you looked at it the other way, if we could convince Hinata fighting was a bad idea, we didn’t have to clash with the Church at all.

“Orders from no one, huh?” mused Benimaru.

“So,” added Shuna, “the attack timing was just a coincidence?”

“Or something the Church took very keen advantage of,” Diablo muttered—a very demon-like theory, but it made sense. I couldn’t imagine Hinata being taken advantage of, but it was still a possibility.

“Perhaps Diablo is right, and someone was inspiring Hinata to do what she did. The mystery mastermind may be involved, too. But…”

“But you doubt said mastermind was in a position to order her around?”

“Exactly,” I said, nodding at Diablo.

Benimaru closed his eyes, considering my suggestion. “So this mastermind drove Farmus to action, manipulated Clayman, and tried to destroy our nation. But he didn’t have that kind of free control over Hinata, then…?”

“Does that mean, Sir Rimuru, you don’t expect any moves from the Western Holy Church at this time?”

“That’s the thing, Diablo…”

I couldn’t answer his question.

From her point of view, it should’ve been clear to Hinata that we, and the Church, should avoid being enemies. I clearly stated that in my message to her—I didn’t want to oppose them at all, and since we had a disaster-class threat in me and a catastrophe-class one in Veldora, Hinata couldn’t be stupid enough to take on Tempest. Just look at the stakes; she would accomplish nothing. Even if she won, all she’d earn from it was more fame, and that wouldn’t nearly make up for the massive losses the Church would face. It just wasn’t sane to wage war if you had nothing to gain from it. Hinata didn’t like listening to people, but she had to see that, at least.

But I still had my concerns. There was this certain annoying dragon thing next to me mumbling “Luminus… This god’s name was Luminus? I feel like I’ve heard that before” and so on, which kept interrupting my train of thought, but I still had my concerns.

“Hinata told me that we were a ‘bother’ to her. That’s because the teachings of the Holy Church—of Luminism—dictate that life alongside monsters is impossible. But that might not be the whole story…”

Why did Hinata call us a bother? Because Luminism refused to acknowledge us. But if that was the only reason, it just didn’t seem rational of her—or to put it another way, it wasn’t like Hinata at all. There had to be something else. And while this is the exact opposite of what I just said, what if there was some mastermind behind it all? Someone besides Hinata, who also sees us as a bother to their plans? What would that someone want?

Report. There is an increased possibility that multiple motives are at place. All these events are interconnected. However, it is estimated that they are not all occurring by the will of a single entity.

Um, meaning…?

Understood. Considering the nations, people, factions, and other factors involved, several goals can be categorized. These goals may seem to match one another at first glance, but several contradictions are present as well. It would be unnatural to unify everything under the banner of a single mastermind.

So it’s not just one mastermind. That’s the core of it, and hearing it that way, it made sense.

Clayman was being controlled by another part of the cabal, then? Ah yes. That did make sense, if you thought about it. They simply worked together for a common goal; Clayman wasn’t following any specific orders or anything. Maybe they were just giving each other little suggestions or shoves in the right direction. In fact, Hinata might not have been involved with him at all.

It did seem more natural to assume more than one player was running around. Plus, if these factions changed, some players may no longer want to put up a fight. That’s how international politics worked; it wasn’t something that operated on passing emotions.

So…

To Clayman, we were nothing but a bother—but at the same time, he tried to take advantage of us. He would’ve loved it if Hinata and I knocked each other out.

To Farmus, I, as overseer of Tempest, was a bother. They didn’t want to destroy us; they wanted us to fall under their rule. They hoped Hinata would take me out and would’ve loved it if she had.

So where does Hinata’s heart lie? In terms of being a Luminism adherent, she wasn’t about to ignore a monster nation.

These were the three frames of mind that drove the whole situation—and in the end, I fled from Hinata, Farmus retreated, and Clayman died. Which brings us to now.

The situation that attracted these masterminds in the first place had changed. Clayman was gone, and the “person” behind him must’ve been busy reconstructing what little fighting force he had left.

Would this guy still want to directly fight me?

Understood. The possibility of taking such action is likely low. If the mastermind’s powers exceeded Clayman’s, he would have become involved well ahead of when he did. Even if he was preserving his own powers this entire time, involvement would mean little by now, after such a grave strategic defeat.

So there’s no reason to come after me. Not like this guy in the shadows would decide to go reveal himself now, long after the fact. Whether he wanted to make a comeback or not, he knew a frontal assault on me definitely wasn’t the way to do it.

What about the other factions?

King Edmaris was off the throne, his ambitions crushed. The new king was doing…something, and there were those among the administration who certainly wished us harm. We were a bother to them, no doubt, and there was a good chance they hadn’t given up on taking us out of the picture. But Diablo was watching them. If they were trying to become a new mastermind, they were sure taking their time with it. I doubted they were a threat, although you couldn’t declare them down for the count. Maybe someone among them was hiding a darker, more sinister aspect. This is why dealing with human beings is such a pain sometimes.

The Western Holy Church was being completely opaque. Judging by Reyhiem’s missing-in-action status, things must’ve been pretty chaotic in there. Was Hinata struggling to cope with this, too? If she didn’t have a clear and present reason to oppose us, there wasn’t much reason to take action. But what if she does take action? It’d mean something was forcing her hand.

Report. It must not be forgotten that there is a high possibility of multiple people working in the background.

Yeah. Good point. And if there were, whether Hinata wanted it or not, things could keep on moving forward. Guess optimism right now wasn’t such a good idea.

“Perhaps, because there are multiple interests at stake here, we should work on the assumption that it is not solely Hinata’s decision to make?”

Diablo must’ve arrived at largely the same conclusion I had.

“Well said, Diablo. I was just about to say that myself.”

It was Raphael who saved my ass, of course, but no need to reveal that much. Maybe Diablo’s a hell of a lot smarter than I thought? I was using Mind Accelerate to rev up my brain a million times ahead of normal, and Diablo had arrived at the same conclusion at roughly the same time. Without Raphael, I’d be eating his dust.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh… In that case, we had best keep a close eye on the Western Holy Church’s meddling this time, as well.”

He pretty much was already, I knew, so maybe the warning I was about to make didn’t really matter. Still, the rest of my team deserved to hear it.

“We might just be making a big mistake, though.”

“How so?” Benimaru asked. The rest of my cabinet was watching me closely, too. I definitely needed us all on the same page here.

“Like Diablo just said, there might be more than one ‘man upstairs.’ Chances are that the current status quo is the result of multiple interests working on the same playing field. This time, too, different players are after different goals, so we shouldn’t assume our opposition is all gonna act the same way, you know?”

My team nodded their approval. If that explanation was enough to get my point across, they’re pretty damn quick on the uptake, too. Except for Gobta, given how he was napping at the moment. That was almost a relief to see. He’s still getting punished later, though.

“And you think these multiple interests are linked with the one Clayman spoke of?”

“I don’t know, Benimaru. But we can’t decide on anything yet. Working on unfounded assumptions when there’s not enough data is dangerous, I think.”

I shrugged. Being in my slime state, it just looked like a few ripples pulsing across my body.

“That’d make sense, though,” Kaijin added, convinced. “Like, if Hinata was moving based on obligations, not necessarily orders.”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh… In that case, I will investigate further. It was the merchants who provided Edmaris and his ministers with their information, but thinking about it, that should have raised my suspicions.”

That struck a chord.

“Hang on. The merchants…?”

“Is something bothering you, Sir Rimuru?”

“Well, I mean, Farmus invaded us to boost their coffers. War has a way of moving money around, and you always have people trying to profit off it. Maybe some of the merchants are working behind the scenes to get a piece of that action?”

“I see…”

That was another point we’d overlooked. Our enemies might not be vast nations with huge armies at their control. Ultimately, both now and in the distant past, it was greed that led to animosity between peoples. And as long as money could be exchanged for power, the merchants needed to be monitored as well.

I leaped off my seat, taking human form and surveying the audience. Then I began to hand out orders.

“Shuna, examine the account books we recovered from Clayman’s castle and see which merchants were frequent visitors.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Diablo, pin down some of Farmus’s civil servants and figure out which merchants they have the closest ties with.”

“At once, my master.”

“Benimaru, I want you to double-check your selections for the force we’re sending as Yohm’s reinforcements. They’ll need to be prepared for anything.”

“Not a problem.”

“Rigurd, I’m leaving you in charge of town. We’re going to hold a festival for the ages, so get the place prepared for it.”

“No need to tell me twice!”

“Geld, don’t worry about any of what we just talked about. Just focus on your own work. If we get in serious trouble, we’ll come to you then, so just trust me for the time being, okay?”

“Of course. Nobody in this realm would ever distrust you.”

“Hakuro, you assist Benimaru. Gabil, work with Rigurd. Rigur, shake down our entire security system. We need to be prepared for all the races we’ll be hosting soon!”

“On it!”

“Yes sir!”

“All set!”

“And, Shion, um… You be my guard! Yeah, that!”

“Absolutely!”

Clearly, I was on a roll. I gave Ranga a pat on the head as I smiled, satisfied. This should work; everyone can handle their own business now.

“And what of myself?”

“Oh yeah, uh, Veldora, stay out of everyone’s way.”

“It shall be done!”

I doubted it. Him, I’ll need to keep a personal eye on. Oh, and…

“Gobta, I know you’re tired out, but come see me in my office.”

“Gahh!”

Seeing my smile first thing after I shook him awake must’ve spooked him a little.

Ah well. Even after becoming a demon lord, these meetings never seemed to change very much.

