

CHAPTER 3

THE SAINT’S ANTICIPATION

On that day, the world knew true terror once more. Veldora, the Storm Dragon, was reborn.

It had been formally revealed by the Western Holy Church, not long after the Guild announced the most recent missive from the demon lords. They had gone from ten to eight, forming an Octagram, and this alone was enough to spread chaos worldwide. It wasn’t long before the kings of all nations were faced with vast, headache-inducing changes in the world situation—changes that would continue for days on end.

The Western Holy Church itself was experiencing unrest like none in recent memory.

Several days after Hinata Sakaguchi’s battle with Rimuru, contact with Archbishop Reyhiem was cut off as he accompanied his kingdom’s military deployment. He was required to submit regular reports, and if those reports were missing, something must have been going wrong with the Tempest invasion.

When informed of this, Hinata immediately decided that a personal visit to Tempest was in order. But just as she did, she received a divine missive to guard the cathedral instead. Veldora, the Storm Dragon, was the reason. Thus, despite expecting her Crusader forces to assemble before her shortly, she was prevented from deploying when she wanted to.

Exactly who this proved to benefit the most was a question worthy of debate. An unprepared Hinata challenging Veldora to a duel would surely result in defeat. If she was aware of the dragon’s presence, however, and could devise a lucid strategy for invading Tempest, that nation could very well be taken while Rimuru was still absent.

Tempest was Hinata’s ultimate goal, not Veldora, and with the powers she had on tap, she could have made simple work of it. The ball was in her court—but only if she gave due consideration to Veldora’s subsequent moves and Rimuru’s own reactions to them. Either way, though, both sides managed to avoid the worst for themselves.

It was a city enveloped in a calming light, a holy metropolis protected by a divine barrier.

This barrier had been the subject of research over many years, adjusted and perfected until it boasted the highest level of protection in the land. It prevented all outside enemies from invading, dutifully fulfilling that obligation for the past thousand years. It was, in a way, the personification of the prayers of everyone who lived inside it. It could even block out the sun itself, automatically adjusting the light levels inside the bubble as needed—brighter by day, dimmer by night. The temperature inside was kept at a near constant all year, producing cooler summers and warmer winters, while the compartmentalized farmlands inside could produce seasonal crops at almost any time.

It was a utopia, one whose residents never had to worry about starvation. Every child received a level of compulsory education, and every adult was provided with a job. Its society had achieved complete harmony, its paradise monitored by the law and order that ruled over it.

This was Lune, the Holy City, capital of the Holy Empire of Lubelius. The day after the last Walpurgis, Hinata was walking the path toward its main cathedral. The surrounding air was pleasantly warm, tempered by the solemnity of the atmosphere. This land was a bountiful one. No one starved; there were no beggars at the side of the streets. Everyone was provided a suitable role, carrying it out to the fullest. They all awoke to the same bells and slept at the same time. The more capable of the laborers assisted the less able. And all was managed in perfect harmony, guaranteeing the happiness of every citizen that lived and breathed inside.

It was an ideal, equal society, one granted under the name of their god, and the city spread out before her eyes was the completed, physical form of that ideal.

Hinata observed the faces of the people passing by. They were all smiles, each looking calm and serene. But something concerned her.

To her, this holy land was truly the ideal city. It was her lofty goal to make the Western Nations, and eventually the whole world, a peaceful, war-free society. She craved a land where the strong no longer had to prey upon the weak to survive. Reality, however, was all too bleak. The Kingdom of Englesia and the Holy Empire of Lubelius were far, far too different from each other. It made Hinata doubt herself every time. The freedom of Englesia, the harmony of Lubelius. Two nations that seemed to contradict each other in every way, from their political systems to their core principles.

And nothing made the difference as stark as the looks on the children in each land. She could hear some of them near the educational facilities built adjacent to the cathedral. A few of them, perhaps late for class, were running down the pathway toward the building, the faster ones pulling the arms of the laggards. It was a common sight, certainly not cause for alarm. But Hinata could spot the disparity present in the picture.

What was Englesia like? She recalled what she saw there. It was morning at the time when she spotted children smiling as they wriggled past the school gate just before the morning bell. Anyone caught dawdling before it was closed would no doubt face a lecture from their instructors shortly. Here, though, those who made it in time taunted the stragglers, beaming proudly. Now what would have happened if they tried running hand in hand, like in Lubelius? The answer was clear—they’d all wind up late, facing the headmaster’s wrath. She knew this was a silly yardstick to make comparisons with. The kids could avoid all this if they just woke up a few minutes earlier. But she couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Where was the difference? Were the faster kids bullies? No. They picked on the slower ones, but there wasn’t any air of superiority involved. Even the stragglers flashed embarrassed smiles back at them. Even with those stern headmaster lectures, they still seemed to be having fun with their lives. But what would happen over on Lubelius? All the children running to class wore the same expression. That calm, serene smile of satisfaction, just like the grown-ups. That total disinterest in competition or personal expression; all the same face.

A fully managed society can provide happiness, but it cannot provide freedom. They were all equals, carrying out their appointed tasks, the haves providing ample support to the have-nots. This land’s people fully completed it.

That was Hinata’s goal—creating an equal, conflict-free society. A world where no children would ever be abandoned by their parents, where everyone was allowed to live in happiness. It was an ideal, Hinata knew, not a realistic concept. But whenever she felt ready to give up on it entirely, the sheer idea of Lubelius presented itself to her. Competition bred conflict, and competition did not exist in this fully managed society. It was, in other words, Hinata’s ideals put to action.

The Holy Empire of Lubelius’s political system was fairly close to communism. With their “god” the head of state, they had established total equality among all members of society. This god was the Papacy, the organization that represented the Holy Emperor.

Communism’s greatest weakness was the unavoidable presence of a ruling class above everyone else. The government was forced to sing the praises of equality while actually maintaining a hierarchy in practice. If corruption began to rot the upper class, it was difficult for the masses to rectify that. It would lead to unequal distribution of goods, expanding the disparity.

Divinity was Lubelius’s solution to this problem. The Papacy was, by definition, a superior existence from the very beginning, so inequality among the people would theoretically not become an issue. The rulers, of course, handled matters like diplomacy with other states, but under their god, all were equal. It was a con, yes, but a con that had served as reality for the Holy Empire over a millennium of history. It had served as an ideal like none could before it, and there was a good reason for it…

…Luminus, the god ruling over all of this, was actually the demon lord Luminus Valentine.

Luminus Valentine, the absolute monarch, the flesh-and-blood demon lord, the Queen of Nightmares and ruler of night—and the only adversary Hinata had ever lost to.

In front of an absolute ruler, all people held equal value. To Luminus, this concept of a fully managed society was akin to a farmer taking care of his livestock. But this was exactly why the whole utopia worked at all.

As vampires, Luminus and her kin didn’t tear people apart to live off their flesh. All they needed was a little blood to ingest, using the life force inside it to sustain themselves. The higher the vampire’s rank, the less of this blood they needed as they lived their eternal lives.

It was said the blood of those they preyed upon tasted sweeter the happier the donor was. Compared with other nations, people had it pretty good here. If a donor gave up a lot of life force at once, that would be a problem, but Luminus placed strict prohibitions on that. Thus, order was fully kept in this nation, since the lower-level vampires had no way to defy the will of Luminus far above them. Everything was equal, far more so than the Western Nations could ever manage.

It was what made Hinata believe in the equality ever present in Luminism, using justice as her credo when she joined the Church. Now she was one of its most fervent missionaries, believing its core tenets to be absolute. As a paladin, tasked with providing equal salvation to the people, she wanted justice to prevail with anything she did.

Shizue Izawa, her teacher, was far too lax by comparison, and the structure devised by Yuuki Kagurazaka, the boy from the same land as her, was too fantastic a dream to be treated at all seriously. It simply handled issues as they arose, failing to offer any real preventative measures. Seeking to improve oneself was a laudable endeavor, and she had kind words for the Free Guild’s cooperative approach. But given its reliance on fees in exchange for work, equality seemed like a lost cause with them.

Thus, Hinata left the tutelage of her teacher. Shizue told Hinata to count on her if she ever lost her way, but that wasn’t going to happen. That would be depending on her too much. If she kept depending on Shizue, Hinata vaguely thought, it’d ruin her.

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The only thing she could rely upon in this world was her own power. Thus, Hinata sought the kind of power that nobody else could ever hope for.

She had a natural fear of carrying anything precious with her, lest she lose anything else. She didn’t deal with other people; power was her only desire. She had become a paladin a mere year after joining the Western Holy Church, then its corps captain less than two years later, building up what was lauded as the most powerful Crusader group in history with her own two hands.

But the higher she rose through Church ranks, the more she saw what it really was. And then she found what lay at the essence of Luminism. The Holy Emperor Lubelius was actually a vampire by the name of Louis. Even more shocking to her, this Louis was the elder twin brother of none other than the demon lord Roy Valentine. Conspiring with a demon lord to retain your power—nothing could have been more ridiculous, more contemptuous of its people.

It enraged Hinata when she learned of it—enough so that she went into the Inner Cloister alone to purge both Roy and Louis. The resulting battle left her with mortal wounds, forcing her to lie there and wait for her death. There she was, with her little sense of justice, her weak power, unable to save anyone. The “benevolence” of choosing whom to save, because you can’t save them all. It seemed so comical, so pointless to her.

Heh…heh-heh-heh… So much for me. The weak are always doomed to die weak. But at least I rid the world of one obstacle…

But even so…Hinata believed she didn’t make the wrong decision. She reduced the amount of evil in this world; she had nothing to be ashamed of. That, by itself, left her satisfied.

As her sight grew dim, Hinata could hear the sound of light footsteps. She thought it was her mind playing tricks on her, but then a clear, refreshing voice serenaded her.

“I could hear this racket in my own bedchamber. What are all of you doing?”

Before her was a radiant young girl with silver hair. Her heterochromatic blue-and-red eyes shone eerily, coldly looking down on Hinata and the others on the floor. The aura floating around her was on another level, making Louis and Roy—whom she had just fought to the death and beyond—look like children.

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Hinata, face-to-face with death, was overwhelmed by her presence, this beauty beyond all human comprehension. This clear, transparent presence, so far away from her.

She had the dignity of the upper class, the air of someone used to ruling over others. Good and evil seemed like trifles when presented to her. And as if to prove that:

“And you two think you can die and leave me behind?”

The waves of force emanating from her revived Roy the demon lord and Louis the emperor, despite the lethal blows Hinata knew she’d landed. It was a supernatural power, one Hinata had no knowledge of.

It’s over… Everything I have done…

Despair filled her heart, as the flame of life began to flicker away—

“And you as well, human. You will not be allowed to die with that pride in your mind. What is justice? Justice is not about crushing evil. Who do you think you are, deciding whether I engage in evil or not? There is no such thing as a justice that can satisfy all forms of free will. It is arrogant to think you can do otherwise. Am I wrong?”

The words beat against Hinata’s eardrums as a warm light descended upon her, saving her life. There, as her wounds seemed to magically disappear, the girl spoke.

“You have one week. If you are powerful enough to defeat my closest confidants, you can certainly overcome the Seven Days Trial. Only then will I seriously deign to engage you.”

She took the trial. She completed it, Usurping the powers of those she studied under to obtain superhuman strength.

And then, wagering her life for the attempt…she lost to that young girl, Luminus Valentine, and capitulated to her.



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But even with that defeat, the sword refused to break. Instead, it grew more flexible, stronger—and with it, Hinata was reborn, as a divine sword, the right hand of divinity, the slayer of all travails.

To Hinata, the presence of Luminus was all that mattered. Luminus was the key to an equal, fair society, and losing her would mean the destruction of all order. Maintaining a utopia required constant effort and resolve, and along those lines, Hinata was a double-edged sword. If Luminus ever became the enemy of humanity, Hinata would have to slay her with her sword. It seemed impossible, but she was resolved to do it. That was why now, even today, she continued to put herself up to the trial.

Soon, Hinata had reached her destination. There, waiting for her, was Louis, the Holy Emperor who was now a kindred soul. He had unbelievable news for her.

“My brother died last night.”

Last night.

Hinata had chased off an unknown intruder in the cathedral that night. She was meant to meet with someone else, but after Luminus’s missive made her cancel all that, she changed her plans. That, fortunately, allowed her to end the night without dirtying the holy lands with anyone else’s blood. Or so she thought.

“You’re joking, right? Roy is a demon lord. He was at the Walpurgis Council.”

“I speak the truth, Hinata. Roy returned earlier than Lady Luminus, and the intruder you let escape ran into him first.”

“No. That intruder fled the moment he saw me. He was so fast that I wasn’t able to give chase, but…”

“Indeed, perhaps you thought it was just a diversion. Lady Luminus charged you with defending the holy lands, not with killing intruders. That is the job of our Imperial Guard, as worthless as they have just proven themselves.”

“The guard that I’m chief knight of. But Roy, being killed by someone on that level? Who’s the worthless one now?”

She laughed boldly, right in front of the Holy Emperor—Roy’s elder brother.

Luminus Valentine was the true demon lord, the twin brothers Louis and Roy her close confidants. Louis ruled the external world as its Holy Emperor, while Roy ruled behind the scenes as demon lord. Luminus, meanwhile, governed over everything as a god.

This was the world they had pursued. It was also why Luminus preferred a policy of insular government, locking herself inside the Inner Cloister and never revealing herself in public.

Roy, serving as her demon lord representative, had been more than powerful enough to sit alongside the other nine at the table. Simply being born a vampire made him the equivalent of a B, ranking-wise. His muscular strength, durability, reaction time, and everything else were several times better than what a human could muster, and his race gave him a multitude of excellent skills, including Steel Strength, Self-Regeneration, Shadow Motion, Paralysis, Charm, Coercion, Transform, and more. There were few vampires in the world, but even among the so-called high-level magic-born, they were a head above the crowd in fighting ability.

Louis and Roy were elder noblemen, both in the service of their leader Luminus since ancient times. Their powers were monumental, it went without saying, and Hinata was fully aware of that. Having fought them both once, she had no doubts. This only meant one thing: Whoever last night’s intruder was, they must’ve been unbelievably powerful.

“…But it doesn’t really matter, does it?” Hinata whispered. “As long as Lady Luminus is safe. Not that anyone need worry about her…”

Not even Hinata could fully gauge the depths of the demon lord Luminus. She was beyond all imagination, a supreme being that served as both an ideal goal to reach and a potential opponent sometime in the future. It would be impertinent for Hinata to even bother worrying about her.

Roy, meanwhile, was worth about as much as a pebble on the street. Not to offend Louis, but it didn’t really matter whether he was killed or not. He was weak, he died, and that was that. As far as Hinata was concerned, that was his own fault.

“It does matter. We let Roy exercise his violent streak as a threat to make people adhere to Luminism. With him dead, there is a chance people’s faith in our creed may dwindle. The evil dragon Veldora is alive once more, and yet, the Forest of Jura still remains stable as well.”

“You have a point…”

Hinata could guess why. It was that slime she let slip through her fingers. This, she had no excuse for. It was fully her mistake, and nobody was more aware of that than she was. It was her choice to let last night’s intruder go, but that slime, Rimuru, she wanted eradicated from the world for good. She couldn’t help but praise him.

I can hardly believe he managed to escape that place. I knew you were a careful one, Rimuru, but that was nothing I could have imagined…

“…I can’t speak about the dragon, but I imagine the forest is stable because of that slime, Rimuru, I let escape.”

“Mmmm. I conducted some of my own investigation, and it has been confirmed that the Kingdom of Farmus’s forces have been annihilated. Counting the time back from Veldora’s resurrection, it had to be the work of that Rimuru. Quite an adversary for you, wasn’t he?”

“I suppose the moment I saw him, encased in that Holy Field, was the best chance I had of defeating him.”

“You didn’t give him some discretion, perhaps, after he claimed to be from your realm?”

“Of course not. Lady Luminus’s aims are incompatible with that slime’s. I know where he’s coming from, and leaving him to his own devices would only wreck our plans. That’s why I chose to ignore what he had to say and instead tried to destroy his town…”

“So the angels will be moving soon enough.”

“They will. They’re safe for now, but if they keep developing the town at that pace, they absolutely will.”

“That would be distressing. We aren’t ready for them yet. I’d like to ensure that our victory in the next Temma War is absolute.”

“I know. We need to tear those angels limb from limb, and that’s why we can’t afford to speed up the timetable.”

Louis nodded.

Whenever the cities of the world developed past a certain level, the angels began to attack them. Why, nobody knew, but their actions followed a set recognizable pattern. When it happened, countless numbers of innocents died—and to combat them, Hinata had expanded her forces and devised a way to knock them completely out of the picture. Her proselytizing for Luminism was also a way to help people work together, making their harmonic cooperation a palpable force to work with. That, she believed, was the best way to follow the will of Luminus, her god.

Rimuru’s behavior was getting in the way of that—and now that she knew Rimuru was the cause of Shizue Izawa’s death, she had personal issues with him. There was no reason at all for her to cut him any slack. With him were his monsters—intelligent, rational, and understanding of humans. It pained her a little to involve them in this, but Luminus called them her enemy, and her will was the law.

Victory in the Temma War was of utmost priority, and to earn that, Hinata wouldn’t hesitate to do what must be done. She was cold, pragmatic, and above all a rationalist.

“But perhaps your failure will turn out well in the end.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Western Nations will likely band together to deal with the threat in the Forest of Jura. With Roy gone, what better foe to unite the human race against?”

“…Do you think so? I doubt it’ll go that easily.”

But did he have a point? Maybe, Hinata thought, it was a good thing after all. A stable Forest of Jura was what they wanted, and if they sought to live alongside humanity, that was all for the better. But if Rimuru really did massacre the Farmus force, he was clearly a threat they couldn’t afford to overlook.

Still…

“You know the Eastern merchants who brought me information. We were planning to meet last night as well. If it weren’t for Lady Luminus’s order, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“Oh? Rather good timing, then.”

“Almost too good, isn’t it? Those merchants were trying to use me. If you think about it, maybe keeping Rimuru alive and present was the right answer, not to make excuses.”

But the nail that sticks out gets hammered down. They may have survived the Farmus invasion, but the resurrected Storm Dragon was bound to attack Rimuru before long. Plus, Rimuru was calling himself a demon lord, apparently, which invited the rage of the other ten and earned him a ticket to last night’s Walpurgis.

“I would imagine so. Until we are fully ready, I’d prefer to use that land as a bulwark against the East…assuming Rimuru survived the Walpurgis Council.”

“Right. Do you think he’ll make it through?”

“Lady Luminus will return soon. We will know by then.”

“Having to tell her of Roy’s death is a depressing thought.”

“She’ll be in a bad state, I’m sure.”

“She was a lot kinder to him than I ever was…”

“Mmmm. I suppose I’m not very kind myself. My own brother is dead, but I don’t feel sad about it at all.”

Hinata just shrugged at Louis. They stopped talking, waiting for Luminus. Before very long, a herald arrived.

“Stand back! Lady Luminus has returned!”

In a flash, the cathedral became a hive of activity—and soon, Hinata and Louis were going to face a conversation they never expected to have.

Now they were at the Inner Cloister, a sacred mountain looming in the center of the Holy Empire of Lubelius. The Holy Church headquarters was at the foot of it; proceed straight through its grounds, and you’ll find the Holy Temple, which houses the cathedral that connects to the mountain’s entrance. Beyond it and up the path, the Inner Cloister loomed ahead.

This was the holiest and most forbidden place in all of Lubelius, even more so than the Holy Emperor’s official chambers.

Relaxing there was the demon lord Valentine—or rather, Luminus—as she recounted the previous night’s events, clearly peeved.

“So that’s all of it. That annoying dragon simply insists on getting in my way at every possible moment!”

Hinata’s first reporting of Roy’s death only added to her anger. “Such a stupid child,” she murmured in reply, betraying no emotion whatsoever as she entered the Inner Cloister, just as regal as always. She seemed coolheaded enough as she described the Walpurgis Council, but when she reached the point where Veldora revealed her true identity, her well-defined, beautiful features reddened with anger. It was overpowering to her audience as she let out all her pent-up emotion.

“And look at Roy, too! I could’ve revived him as long as I was within sight of him, but noooo…”

“My brother is happy, Lady Luminus. That is all that needs to be considered—”

“Silence! This sounds like I practically led Roy by the hand to his death!”

“No, my lady. It is my brother Roy’s fault for failing to live up to your expectations.”

“But…”

If any one factor was involved, it was bad luck. Everyone in the Cloister knew it wasn’t their fault.

“I apologize,” Hinata said. “I let that intruder go, and Roy…”

“So be it,” replied Luminus, face tightened as she looked at her and Louis. “You merely followed my orders. I am the one who deserves the blame. But we don’t have the time to mourn for him now. The dragon is revived, and we have a new demon lord in Rimuru. That is the undeniable truth, and we must decide how to handle it.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“I understand.”

Hinata and Louis nodded. This question would decide the entire direction the Holy Empire would go in the future.

“I would like to defeat Veldora for you,” Hinata offered.

“Hinata,” Luminus coldly replied, “you have grown stronger, yes, much stronger than when you fought me. You are well past the Seven Days and on your way to equaling my level. But even if you can defeat the demon lord Rimuru, you will never defeat Veldora.”

“She is right, Hinata. That is how fearsome a presence the dragon is. A true Catastrophe.”

Louis, who was there for that dragon’s previous rampages, agreed readily with Luminus.

“He is that powerful? But didn’t the Hero seal him away?”

If a human did it once before, Hinata reasoned, it could always happen again. Luminus and Louis immediately brushed it off.

“Look, Hinata. That dragon is a form of natural energy in itself. Perhaps you could use magic to quell a raging gale, yes, but that dragon has its own free will. It cannot be cut with a sword or affected by magic. When he flies into a rage, the shock waves will ravage the earth, far more so than any of our puny magic.”

The thought seemed to genuinely dismay Luminus. Louis nodded in agreement, his face pale as if he had just recalled an ugly memory.

“It was truly a nightmare,” he said. “Ah, that ever so beautiful Nightrose Castle, turned into an unrecognizable pile of ashes…”

“Don’t remind me of it, Louis. That castle was the culmination of vampire knowledge and science, and now it exists only in our memories. There is no use in craving what we cannot have.”

“Quite true.”

The exchange taught Hinata just how dangerous this Veldora was. But…if it comes to it, she quietly swore to herself, I will kill him.

Then she realized something else. The whole reason the Inner Cloister was atop this holy mountain. It was to prepare for a potential Veldora attack, wasn’t it? So she could constantly observe the skies and stop him before he arrives. Nightgarden, the main city in the Holy Empire, was located entirely underground for that reason as well—to prevent dragon invasions, to keep the casualties to a minimum in a fight. That was how wary Luminus was of this Storm Dragon.

“Hinata, please restrain yourself. I do not wish to lose you, too.”

And if Luminus put it that strongly to her, she had no option but to nod back.

Now, her mishandling of that encounter with Rimuru was sticking in her throat like a sewing needle. Labeling him a monster and ignoring his attempts at conversation were both mistakes. Not in terms of what her faith taught her, or so she wanted to think, but still, her actions had led directly to this current situation. If that was what the Eastern merchants had wanted, then Hinata had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

How distasteful. Giving me that information when they knew exactly how I would react. Or perhaps they have an informant of their own?

It was hard for her to believe, but Hinata could imagine someone in the Church working with those merchants. They may know all about their preparations for the angels by now—and maybe that was why they pointed her in Rimuru’s direction, to take him out for them. A mole in the Church had to be something for consideration—but for now, such a thought had to be left to simmer. There were other problems to deal with.

“Very well. But…what will we do about Rimuru now, as demon lord?”

“We have no choice but to let him be. The Church has yet to declare him a divine enemy yet, fortunately.”

“No, but…”

“Is there a problem?”

“…There is. I fear the city and highways the monsters are building could cause the angels to invade more quickly.”

“Ah yes, there was that. Having those little insects flitting around is annoying enough, although making the demon lord Rimuru and the Storm Dragon Veldora our enemies would be much worse. But if they attract more attention for us, they’ll become the angels’ main target, I imagine. Either way, not much point thinking about it now.”

To Luminus, the angels were all but worthless. Hinata, understanding that, voiced her agreement.

Beyond that, there was another problem:

“There is also the fact that their town… It turns the concept of monsters being humanity’s common enemy, one of Luminism’s core tenets, on its head.”

The question made Luminus visibly scowl. She mulled it over a moment. This was no longer an easily quashed threat, but if they let their religious tenets be defanged like this, they would lose their validity—and their appeal to the masses. The faith they had spent the last thousand years building would be lost, and that could not be allowed to pass.

“Perhaps,” Louis suggested, “he could serve as a useful accomplice for us? As an evil demon lord?”

It was a thought he had shared with Hinata earlier—let Rimuru serve as a propaganda heel, much like how Roy acted as demon lord. But as Hinata expected, Luminus was less than enthusiastic.

“That could not happen. Rimuru, this new demon lord… He just wants to have fun living in his own little nation. That’s all. He’s going right up to our faces and declaring that he’ll give the humans all the protection they want. Because he needs their help. He said it himself. ‘Anyone who gets in the way of that, whether a person or a demon lord or the Holy Church, is my enemy.’”

She let out a forlorn sigh.

“If only he wasn’t mingling with the human race all the time, Louis, that would be such a good idea,” she said with frustration.

And Hinata realized, once and for all, that Rimuru wasn’t lying. He really was a transfer from another world. But it was too late to act on that.

She was fully aware that she had acted on incorrect assumptions, fueled by her lack of interest in listening to others. It was a bad habit, and it just blew up in her face big-time. At least nobody seemed to know that the god Luminus was the same person as the demon lord Valentine yet. If worse came to worst, only her own life would be forfeit.

“For now, then, all we can do is sit and watch.”

“You’re right. Simply hold ourselves as we always do. No brash moves. The more excuses we make, the more we may entangle ourselves. Our only responsibility is giving our faithful across the world the truth—Veldora, the Storm Dragon, is back.”

“And what about Rimuru?”

As Hinata brooded, Luminus and Louis were already deciding on their future policies.

“Yes… Well, Rimuru seems the sort of leader open to political exchange. We could deceive the Western Nations easily enough. Are you fine with that, Hinata?”

It was a question, but Luminus meant it as predecided policy.

“…I am.”

“Would he bear a grudge against you?”

“…A little. I did try to kill him.”

“Ah yes, you did. But Rimuru is not stupid enough to hold that against us to the point of becoming enemies.”

Such was the will of Luminus—a leader who didn’t even mind if Rimuru knew her true colors. But Hinata was unconvinced.

“…I will keep that in mind,” Hinata said, attempting to hide her real thoughts as she left.

A little over a month passed. Hinata spent it tirelessly at work. Her paladins were busy building a line of defense against Veldora, while the Imperial Guard was out gathering intelligence for her. Those merchants from the East, once a vital part of this spy network, could no longer be trusted, and so she decided to rely only on info she could personally gather herself.

Now it was time for the empire’s monthly conference between both major groups of the Papacy—the Crusaders, the paladins under Hinata’s direct control, and the Master Rooks, the Imperial Guard forces serving the Holy Emperor. They were both the pride of Lubelius, with Hinata Sakaguchi standing at the very peak.

She served as the conference speaker—Hinata, chief knight of the Master Rooks and captain of the Crusaders, not to mention the strongest knight in the nation. A high seat was prepared for her; all the other attendees’ chairs were situated in a semicircle around her.

To her right were six people representing the Crusaders. First was Vice Captain Renard Jester, known as the Noble of Light, a paladin with a soft, plaintive expression. Next to him was Arnaud Bauman of Air, the man lauded as second strongest only to Hinata. He stood head and shoulders above the rest of the troop leaders, serving as a sort of assault-team specialist for the Crusaders.

Following Arnaud were four other commanding officers: Bacchus of Earth, a large brooding man gifted at smashing his magic-infused Holy Mace into his foes; Litus of Water, a beautiful healer and elementalist who employed the holy spirit Undine on the battlefield; Garde of Fire, a tall knight and conjurer who wielded his flaming Red Spear; and Fritz of Wind, a magical fighter as talented in wind magic as with his twin swords. He was a tactical trickster, a rarity among the high-minded Crusaders he served alongside. Fritz never wore his uniform up to the prescribed code of perfection, but no one admired and respected Hinata as much as he.

Each of these commanders led a team of twenty or so paladins, while Arnaud served as their overall leader. The five seated here were the best among the hundred and ten or so paladins, and there was no doubting their talents.

Contrasting with them, on Hinata’s left side, were the Master Rooks, a much more ragtag assemblage in a motley variety of uniforms and armor. They numbered a mere thirty-three but still formed their own division, for each one was a powerhouse in battle—rooks, as the Holy Emperor proudly called them. They all ranked at least an A on the charts, and a few of them were even champion level, a Calamity on the threat scale.

A few were particularly notable. There was “Blue Sky” Saare, who looked like an innocent boy but was older than anyone else in the room. He was the chief knight of the Imperial Guard before Hinata took the role.

Then there was “Giant Boulder” Grigori, Saare’s right-hand man, whose Impervious skill granted him astonishing physical resilience. His muscles were his weapon, and they were harder than most types of metal, making him an impregnable fortress of a man.

Last but not least was “Raging Sea” Glenda, who was newer to the fold than Hinata but had made a serious name for herself in recent years. Notable for her spiky red hair, she was a wild woman, an ex-mercenary whose fighting skills were still veiled in mystery. Only Rama, the person who had ceded his post to Glenda after she defeated him, knew about her full strengths. This trio was known as the Three Battlesages, and they sat together opposite the six paladins.

The nine were all literal superhumans, far beyond the framework one would think the human body could provide. They all were certified Saints, a sort of complement to a demon lord, and with Hinata, they were collectively known simply as the Ten Great Saints.

Whenever a person engaged in grueling training in one subject or another, they would occasionally evolve into a higher form of existence upon completing such a trial. Accomplishing this made them Enlightened, greatly extending their life span and transforming their physical bodies into something like a half-spiritual life-form. They were released from flesh and blood, in other words, and thus the amount of energy Enlightened individuals could work with was enormous. Their brute and magical strength was powered up to levels beyond compare, letting them be the equivalent of potential demon lords.

They were the guardians of humanity, the servants of divinity who evolved the correct way—even if this was only by the standards of certain people.

They all sat there quietly, awaiting Hinata’s arrival. Several paladins were stationed behind each commanding officer, the rest of the two divisions remaining on their feet in their assorted gear.

Soon, the heavy door creaked open.

“Sorry to keep you. Let us begin.”

With that, the meeting commenced.

Behind Hinata, shaded by some bamboo blinds, the Holy Emperor Louis was taking in the joint conference at his seat. But just as proceedings were set to begin, Saare immediately threw them into disorder.

“Whoa, whoa, where do you get off being late? Not only did you fail to keep Veldora from waking up, you even let a new demon lord be born. And you’re the fool representing us? If this is a joke, I’m not laughing.”

Even though Hinata was the acknowledged leader, not all her soldiers were particularly enthusiastic about the orders they carried out. Saare, having lost his position as their leader, was the head of the anti-Hinata faction.

Over the past month, both divisions had been sent off worldwide by Hinata on a wealth of missions, bringing back assorted intelligence and confirming that the rash of recent cataclysmic events were all connected. The ascension of Rimuru, the Storm Dragon’s revival, the Walpurgis Council, and the recent turbulence in the Kingdom of Farmus—all these happenings had their origin in Hinata reaching out to Rimuru, and Saare wasn’t shy about implying as much.

“You are being rude, Sir Saare,” a bemused Renard coldly stated.

Arnaud nodded to his fellow paladin. “He’s right, boy. If you have an issue with our captain, I’d be happy to work it out with you.”

“Oh,” Grigori fired back from his seat next to Saare, “you fancy-pants knights wanna start a fight with us? Awfully pretentious of you, considering you only act that way around opponents polite enough to lose on purpose!”

“What?”

“You seem interested in a quick death.”

The meeting had grown almost immediately intense. Hinata took the opportunity to cool it down.

“Enough foolishness. Now’s not the time for allies to be squabbling with each other. Saare, if you’d like to take my place up here, you’re welcome to my seat anytime. I’ll need to test you out first, though, keep in mind.”

That was enough to bring silence back to the room. Her words went beyond mere frustration and well into the realm of murderous intent—if they kept carrying on, she was fully prepared to start slashing away. The audience was smart enough to pick up on that. It was rare for her to show that much emotion, forcing even Saare to admit that any more prodding would be dangerous.

Instead, he just glared at her in frustration. “Pfft! I’ll keep that in mind.”

He had already lost to her once—a battle he never should have botched. In his eyes, Hinata was the clear underdog, but the results proved the opposite. The memory of that day kept him from making any unwise moves. Until she could probe and reveal the secrets of Hinata’s strength, he knew victory would never be his. So he did her bidding for now, uninterested in waging a war he couldn’t win.

With Saare calmed down, the joint mission finally began.

“Reporting,” said Litus, freshly returned from field work around the Forest of Jura. “The forest was a perfect picture of peace. Despite Veldora’s resurrection, I spotted groups of merchants entering and exiting the area.”

The caravans from Blumund were streaming into the Tempest capital of Rimuru on a near-constant basis. The nation’s trademark healing potions were hot sellers, but merchants were also standing in line for rare goods like silk fabric and weapons made from monster-derived components.

“How is that working? Are they engaging in trade with the demon lord?”

“We should think about Veldora first. The records say he is extremely belligerent, causing a swath of destruction wherever he goes, but I haven’t seen any sign of that yet.”

Hinata raised a hand to wave the questions off. “Let us hear the report to the end.”

“Very well. I spoke with the merchants, and they said the kingdom of Blumund had declared full and open relations with Tempest. This includes a security guarantee, and Blumund’s citizens are allowed to come and go as they please. The highway connecting them to Tempest was also kept in neat and clean order; even the animal droppings are briskly disposed of. There was no sign of monsters nearby, and overall, I believe this security agreement is legitimate and active.”

“Did you travel down this highway?”

“Yes. I wanted to see it for myself, so I disguised myself as a traveler. There are peacekeeping sentry posts at regular intervals along the road. When I reached town, I found it to be far more advanced than I expected. The concentration of magicules in the air was understandably higher than normal, but it was still below levels that would affect average people. It gave me the impression that Rimuru, true to his word, really does seek amicable relations with humankind.”

“…I see. And what about Veldora?”

“Well, yes, about that…”

“What is it?”

“…I was unable to confirm his presence. Entry into the Sealed Cave was forbidden, and I failed to find any other spots the dragon might be lurking in.”

“Hmm.”

Hinata gave a placid nod to Litus as she finished her report.

“If we can’t confirm Veldora’s existence,” Fritz asked, “could the news of his revival be a mistake—?”

Hinata shot him a look to silence him. “Luminus’s divine missives are never wrong. At least we are surer of Rimuru’s activity now. Let us move on.”

She kept the meeting going, having each attendee report on what they saw and heard, ensuring everyone had all available information at hand before they began to debate.

“So things were tranquil from start to finish during my time in Englesia. If their rivals at Farmus were to fall, I believe they would take the opportunity to expand upon their current power.”

The briefings continued. Master Rooks members had free rein to visit the Western Nations, as well the right to give orders to the Temple Knights stationed within their borders. They outranked even the local Temple captains, after all, and while they customarily acted only on orders from Lubelius (for the sake of maintaining a simple chain of command), the Master Rooks could command them directly in emergency cases. This allowed them to operate practically above the law in the west, obtaining even some classified information with ease.

This was one difference between them and the paladins. The latter enjoyed similar unfettered travel access to foreign countries, but they were barred from giving orders to the Temple Knights. The organizations were two different entities, although some Temple Knights later moved on to become paladins. It was up to Hinata to utilize the pluses and minuses of both groups, deploying them where they would help the most.

Saare’s turn came at the very end.

“Listening to all these reports,” he said, “I think I’m starting to see what Hinata is trying to find out. My turn’s next, and I’m guessing my report’s supposed to be the clincher, huh?”

“That’s right. I gave that job to you because it’s the most important one. I’d appreciate it if you got on with it.”

“Ah-ha. Well, the current news from Farmus… King Edmaris has abdicated the throne, and on the surface, it appears that the transfer of power has taken place peacefully. But Edward, the new king, is busy assembling an army of talented mercenaries, and in response, the nobility is starting to get frantic, too. It looked to me like the signs of a looming civil war.”

Despite reports of Rimuru’s ascension being all over the news in the Western Nations, Blumund’s trade with Tempest was giving that whole nation a shot in the arm. Meanwhile, things couldn’t be more chaotic in Farmus. The nobles were working in a hundred different directions, many of them trying to shore up their military might in a hurry. Some had even made inroads with the Western Holy Church and the elders that led the Council. It wouldn’t be long before the swords came out. The impact on the people was already enormous—prices rising, distribution falling behind. Losing twenty thousand troops had even led to a government-mandated conscription. Amateur soldiers wouldn’t be much help in battle, but Farmus was so cornered that they had no other choice.

It all pointed in the same direction: civil war. The surrounding small kingdoms had no consensus on how to respond to this, but all of them were on high alert against Farmus, smelling the tension in the air and fortifying their borders to ensure they didn’t get involved. They all expected the fateful day to come before long.

“…That alone, of course, isn’t enough information to make a conclusion on whether the demon lord Rimuru is involved with this.”

“True. So?”

“So I went down the list of everyone King Edward made contact with. Important Council leaders; Free Guild management; some merchants from the East; even our own soldiers. He’s been busy.”

“Is he trying to shore up his military?”

“Bingo. That’s exactly it, Hinata.”

“Well, it’s settled, then. This new king has no interest in paying war reparations of any kind. No demon lord would let that slap in the face go unchallenged, and I doubt Rimuru is foolish enough not to expect that from him.”

“Hmm. So do you think this is all part of our new demon lord’s plans?”

“Yeah.” Hinata nodded.

It’s almost funny how all the pieces are falling into place. Based on what we can infer from this, it all seems to be gearing toward some kind of predestined conclusion… Someone’s definitely pulling the strings from the sidelines.

The more she heard, the more convinced she became. Who was it? There could be just one answer—Clayman, that swindler who skulked around the Western Nations for years, was gone, and the only one who could even begin to imitate him was Rimuru, this new member of the cast.

I don’t like this. You can’t let your guard down around him. He’s intelligent enough to lay out these thoroughly prepared strategies. Maybe he really was Japanese once…

Looking back, as she calmly reevaluated Rimuru, this was all caused by her believing those Eastern merchants in the first place. They had built a relationship of trust over several years, and she completely fell for the line she was given. It was a fatal mistake, and she regretted it—and the worst part was that most of the intelligence the merchants gave her was accurate. Only when the topic turned to Rimuru did the truth start to bend a bit. These little lies that were impossible to independently confirm, and Hinata had let them trick her. If she had believed Rimuru, back when the two of them were at the same location, maybe things would have developed differently. But, she reasoned, she couldn’t dwell on the past.

Then she noticed something about Saare’s report that interested her.

“Saare, you said Edward made contact with merchants as well? What did they tell him?”

“Mm? Why do you care about the merchants? The demon lord painted a picture for us to fall for, and that’s that, right? I think what we need to talk about is our future direction. What steps should we be taking right now?”

“We do need that, but I still want to know. Tell me.”

“Pfft. I thought money was the only thing those merchants ever talked about.”

“Not so. They just have an instinctive habit of turning the conversation toward whatever will make them money. One of them got me, too, so you all need to watch yourselves. So what did you learn from them?”

“Huh. That’s pretty impressive, if they managed to use a woman as calculating as yourself. Hmm… I can’t really think of anything in particular they said. Oh, hang on… There’s a commercial zone in the area you covered, right, Glenda? Merchants from the East and West intermingle in there. Did you hear anything interesting?”

Saare may not have liked Hinata much, but he was still loyal to his mission. He knew and acknowledged her talents—the leadership that helped her craft the Crusaders out of a ragtag bunch of knights. She was merciless against the monsters; she put everything on the line to keep people safe. Somewhere in his heart, he appreciated that. That was why he followed all of Hinata’s orders to the letter, never hiding anything he learned from her. He may have had a few ideas on how to seize his position back from her, but he had no intention of dragging her down. He believed in the meritocracy, and for better or worse, he was earnest in everything he did. Hinata knew that as well.

Glenda, meanwhile…

“Well, as far as I know, there wasn’t anything suspicious going on.”

…had no problems telling barefaced lies. As a mercenary, she was well versed in navigating the underworld, experiencing untold amounts of mortal danger. Something about the tension in the air smelled like good money to her. Faith was one thing; making a profit was another. That was how Glenda worked, and while people saw her as a devout Luminist, that wasn’t the whole truth. What Glenda really wanted was the power that Luminism had across the world. Sometimes it was money, sometimes intelligence, sometimes war power; but Glenda needed it all. Her current position gave her open access, and she never, ever wanted to lose it.

This was why she was hiding things from Hinata, including a meeting with merchants from the East in the very commercial zone Saare mentioned. She had also made secret inroads with one of the Council elders. She paid them money, and in exchange, they would spread false rumors around for her. Not now, but when the time was right for her.

For the time being, she couldn’t afford to have Hinata questioning her motives. Hinata was cold, unforgiving, and merciless to her enemies. She never left herself open to attack at any moment. But at the same time, she was open-minded, almost soft on her allies—or, to be more exact, Luminists. To her, fellow followers in her chosen faith were like family. That was extensively clear to Glenda. That softness let Hinata forgive Saare’s back talk; that softness made her fail to notice the people trying to betray her. And soon, Glenda thought, that softness was going to cost her the position she had worked so hard to achieve.

“If you’re that interested, though, I could give it a more thorough look through, Captain.”

“Will you? Thanks. Just don’t let the merchants fool you, all right? Don’t let your guard down.”

“Sure thing. I got a few connections, so I should be able to get some details.”

Glenda had the bad habit of making promises to Hinata without giving them much real thought. She had no idea her ready agreement let Hinata read fairly deeply into her mind.

Taking a moment to carefully observe Glenda, Hinata sighed to herself.

She must really think I’m that stupid. Perhaps she’s under the mistaken impression that I’m soft on my people?

If that was true, she thought, then it really was a pity.

Glenda had one thing wrong—Hinata wasn’t one to think of her companions as that important. She considered them pawns to play for the sake of Luminus, and that was why she treated them so preciously. They all belonged to Luminus, and she wasn’t allowed to waste them.

The Crusaders she had raised to serve as her arms and legs had absolute faith in her; they were basically Hinata’s personal militia, and she trusted in that faith. The knights of the Imperial Guard, on the other hand, often engaged in intolerably selfish activity. She let it slide only because they, too, had faith in Luminus.

Saare was the epitome of that, mouthing off at Hinata and trying to rebel any way he could. But both she and Saare knew this was just a front. He was a whiner, but he always followed orders—which, in a way, made him a breeze to handle. Plus the fact that Saare didn’t know who Luminus was. Not just him, either. Nobody besides Hinata was aware that the god Luminus was an actual person.

…I almost feel bad for them. They have no idea, just as I didn’t…

Glenda had real ambitions. She had looks, talent, and an abundance of confidence. She must really believe she has what it takes to topple me, Hinata thought. She might even be trying to curry favor with Louis, the Holy Emperor, for the cause. She didn’t know he was a vampire, so it was only natural that she’d try buttering him up for the sake of pushing Hinata away.

Well, she’s free to do what she wants…but…

But if she was betraying the cause, that was another matter.

Hinata never voiced a word of complaint about what the divisions she oversaw did—as long as they never crossed her or Luminus. But with a suspected traitor in their midst, Glenda’s behavior was turning problematic. Hinata didn’t intend to hold a purge right this moment—for all she knew, someone might be taking advantage of her—but she needed to be on her guard.

…I’m starting to see a breakdown in discipline. Maybe it’s time to teach them a lesson and set them back in line.

The thought depressed Hinata. But there were more urgent issues. She mentally switched gears and spoke.

“All right. Everyone has given their reports. I trust that everyone understands the current situation now.”

“Yes,” his assistant Renard said. “The resurrection of the Storm Dragon has had less of an impact than expected, the only casualties so far being the deployed Farmus military. However, since this is likely a cover story spread by Rimuru, the real number could be zero.”

“If that’s how it is,” added Saare, “I want to hear from Archbishop Reyhiem, who survived it. We know Veldora’s back, and I’m intensely curious about what happened on the battlefield.”

“I thought so, too. I’ve already called for him. He should be here soon…”

Hinata had already contacted Cardinal Nicolaus, directing him to bring Reyhiem to her. He was there for the defeat and probably saw Rimuru with his own eyes. Besides, given the several days’ worth of apparent time between the advent of Veldora and Farmus’s defeat, the rumors going around the neighboring states about Veldora destroying all those forces were pretty unlikely. As a survivor, Reyhiem’s testimony should be extremely useful. He was supposed to arrive this morning but was apparently behind schedule.

“I look forward to it. I can’t wait to hear what he has to say.”

“Maybe he knows something about Veldora, too.”

“There were rumors of the demon lord Rimuru negotiating with Veldora and calming his rage,” Arnaud added, “but I’m not sure what to make of that one, either. He’s revived, yes, and he’s been lying low so far, yes. With that in mind, it seems rather plausible.”

Everyone nodded at this. Silently, they had all concluded that the Storm Dragon and the demon lord were involved with each other. In that case, Hinata saw no reason to hide what Luminus already told her.

“…Yes. That much is true. I can say to you now that among the missives I received from our lord Luminus, there was one about how Rimuru is controlling the Storm Dragon. As a result,” she said, “we must not lay hands on the demon lord Rimuru at the moment. Please bear that in mind.”

“Y-you mean…?”

Hinata stood up. “I’ll be blunt,” she said in her most authoritative voice. “In this instance, we must remain undercover. None of our dealings with this demon lord must come out to the public.”

This was, in essence, an order for everyone to keep their hands off Rimuru. It surprised them all.

“What?! You want us to simply ignore all the theatrics he’s pulling over in Farmus?!”

“Demon lords are untouchable as a rule, yes, but only in the public eye, if you recall. They’re no match for any of the Ten Great Saints!”

Saare had a point. Humanity wasn’t totally helpless against the S-class threat of the demon lords. They had built up enough force to fight back with, if necessary, and those were the Enlightened classes, the Ten Great Saints being among them. Arnaud, Renard, and Grigori could each defeat a Special A-ranked foe, Hinata thought, and even among the Ten Great Saints, Saare was outclassed only by Hinata in force. Against a demon lord, Saare wouldn’t be that much of an underdog. You almost never saw storybook-style one-on-one duels in real life anyway, but if it turned out that way, she figured it’d be a close battle. If it was Clayman, that Western Nations sneak, the odds were even in Saare’s favor.

However, that only applied to the would-be demon lords, those strong enough for the role but not yet ascendant. Against a real demon lord, none of the Ten Great Saints had a chance in the end. To Hinata, who knew Luminus intimately, that much was obvious.

And Rimuru, too…

Farmus, and other nations its size, were home to extensive systems that summoned large crowds of otherworlders and raised them to be fighters. Many criticized it as a violation of human rights, but when faced with the common threat of human-destroying monsters, real needs tended to get in the way of noble intentions. Their numbers included Razen, the royal sorcerer who reincarnated himself all the way to magic-born status, and the late commander of the Farmus Royal Knight Corps, Folgen. That mammoth amount of force was directed straight at the demon lord Rimuru, and they lost. Between that and Luminus telling Hinata the tale of how Rimuru killed Clayman instantly, nobody—Ten Great Saints or not—held a candle to him. Not unless they evolved further, in the real meaning of the term, and became true Saints. Like Hinata had.

Right now, if all ten took on Rimuru at once, everyone except Hinata would lose. She didn’t want to see them waste their lives on the effort. Plus…

“You know, though… We have both this demon lord and the Storm Dragon to deal with now. There is no doubting that any wrong move might lead to further chaos.”

As Renard calmly pointed out, Veldora was cooperating with Tempest. Lubelius could plunge all its forces into Tempest, and there was still no telling who would win.

“But we cannot allow the demon lords to do whatever they please in the domain of humans!”

Grigori’s shouting brought the heated debate back to silence. It was, in a way, a summary of what every attendee was thinking to themselves. All eyes turned to Hinata. She remained calm, unaffected, as she looked back at them.

“The missives of Luminus are absolute. We are not allowed to defy them.”

“Come on! Is she telling us to let Farmus be razed to the ground?”

“No, Litus. That nation’s main problem is the upcoming civil war. Its people, not its nobility, must be protected. You need to pay close attention to the area, ensuring none of the sparks affect the people of Farmus or its neighbors.”

“Meaning?”

“We may see some changes in heads of state, but interfering with that would be meddling in internal affairs. That’s the excuse they always used whenever we tried putting an end to their otherworlder summoning projects, as I’m sure you remember. It’s worked before for them, and they all but assume it’ll work again.”

Hinata even let out a smile as she coldly laid out the facts.

“In that case,” Grigori asked, “should we just sit here and tolerate whatever Rimuru cares to do?”

“Yes. We should. The demon lord has declared his disinterest in hostilities with the human race, and there is no further reason for us to be hostile in return. Archbishop Reyhiem of Farmus was part of the invasion team, and I myself attempted to defeat Rimuru. We have both failed. And now that he likely sees us both as enemies, I’m not sure there is another option for us besides keeping quiet.”

“But those are the mistakes of the Western Holy Church—and of yourself! It is not the mistake of Lubelius!” Grigori bellowed.

Hinata stood strong, her smile turning frigid. “Exactly. And that is why you need to stay hands-off. If worse comes to worst, I will declare that it was the arbitrary decision of the Western Holy Church to act against him… In other words, me.”

“Wha?!”

“Lady Hinata!!”

The paladins voiced their objections as Hinata addressed the Master Rooks. Even Saare found himself unable to answer.

“Calm down. I doubt he wants to wage war with us as well.”

The statement offered no comfort.

“C’mon, Hinata, you really trust him that much?” Saare asked.

“I know this sounds unlikely from someone who tried to kill him earlier, but yes, I think we can trust him. He told me himself that he’s also an otherworlder. I ignored it at the time, but it seemed he was trying to avoid conflict with me.”

“An otherworlder?! So he was reincarnated as a magic-born, like the demon lord Leon?”

“No. According to what he said, he died on his home planet and was resurrected as a slime on this one.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“You should know how much I dislike jokes, Saare.”

“Pfft. But I’ve never heard that pattern before. There are cases of people being reborn, yeah, but that’s just a matter of retaining your memories from your previous life. But crossing worlds while doing it…? Maybe, but…”

“I haven’t heard of it,” Renard said, consulting his own memories.

“But what are even the chances of being reincarnated as a slime?” Arnaud asked. “I mean, what if that happened to you, Litus?”

Litus’s well-defined face twisted into a grimace. “I wouldn’t want to imagine it. If I can’t even speak the language, how could I explain to people what I’m thinking? Given the literacy rates around the world, I’m not sure I could even convince people that I’m not a dumb animal. Slimes aren’t supposed to talk.”

No speech, no arms or legs. Even if you shared a language, you wouldn’t be able to use it. Thinking about it, Litus even began to pity Rimuru a little.

“Yeah.”

“True…”

“I had dismissed his talking as the ravings of a monster,” Hinata said, “but I think he was probably telling the truth the whole time. At this point, I do feel I was a bit needlessly rough on him.”

If Rimuru wasn’t lying—if he was trying his hardest to be honest with her—Hinata realized now that he probably hated her guts for not making even a perfunctory effort to communicate.

“Well, who can blame you?” Saare reasoned. “He’s a monster.”

“Yes,” Renard said, “and our faith forbids contact with them.”

Both of them likely would’ve done the same thing Hinata did in that situation. Their faith did not deal in gray areas. Lending an ear to a monster was unthinkable, and if Hinata did do that, it would lead to serious questions.

“Plus, I was told that Rimuru was the one who killed my master…”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve talked about it before. Those Eastern merchants were using me. They told me that the monsters were transforming into people to eat their way into other nations—forming their own country and tricking the ones around them. They also said Rimuru, the named monster leading them, killed my master. I immediately resolved to kill him.”

Saare dejectedly shook his head. “And you let him get away. Maybe that’s not such a bad thing now, huh…?”

He was right. By this point, it was clear this tip Hinata picked up from the merchants had given her nothing but trouble. She knew it, and she also knew that no matter how her encounter with Rimuru ended, she’d still be dealing with tons of fallout.

“I tell you, though, he has a natural talent for fleeing. And now he’s a demon lord. He’s undoubtedly evolved, so taking him on again couldn’t be a good idea.”

No one objected. The missive was given; there was no use trying to argue this on religious grounds. They would have to make an attempt at reconciliation.

“So what are you going to do?” Renard asked.

“I can’t do anything,” Hinata calmly replied.

If this was a human being, she would readily risk her life to fight him. But if the demon lord Rimuru wants to build relations with other countries, Hinata was ready to silently accept that. She had no intention of turning her back on the will of Luminus. If Rimuru’s actions start diverging from his words, on the other hand, that’s another matter.

“Then what if Rimuru sees you as his enemy?”

“Yeah, you did try to kill him. Now that he’s got a bunch more power, maybe he’ll try to get back atcha, huh? I wouldn’t blame the guy.”

Hinata brushed off the concern. “I told you—I’ll just say it was all my own selfish decision. But before we engage in any hostilities, I want to try going over and talking with him. If need be, I’ll give him an apology, too.”

She made it sound so casual, the way she put it, but nobody in the joint meeting could let this pass.

“That’s crazy!”

“It’s incredibly dangerous!”

“The demon lord might set a trap to kill you when he has the chance, Lady Hinata!”

“Yes! And even if he doesn’t, what if all his legions of monsters descend upon you?”

“Calm down. I’m not saying I’ll simply waltz over there tomorrow. I need to make sure I correctly understand Rimuru’s mind-set first…”

But as she attempted to simmer things down in the room, Hinata personally didn’t expect much of a problem. The reports all painted Rimuru as a pretty softhearted person. In her brief experiences with him, she saw nothing that made her question this. If they could both speak frankly with each other… It was a selfish hope, she knew, but it seemed worth pursuing.

It was hope, however, that could never be fulfilled. Among the tangled desires of so many players, all at the mercy of their own motives, things were now moving in a worse direction than even Hinata anticipated.

There was a knock on the conference-room door. “Come in,” Hinata curtly replied, assuming it was finally Reyhiem. The guards on the other side obliged, opening the heavy door, and inside strode exactly the man she expected—Cardinal Nicolaus, one of her most trusted of friends, and a nervous-looking Archbishop Reyhiem behind him.

That much had all been scheduled in advance. But it was the group filing in behind them that made Hinata’s eyebrows arch upward. The Seven Days Clergy was here.

(Good to see you again, Hinata.)

(Are you in good health?)

(What are you looking so surprised for?)

Hinata couldn’t hide her astonishment. “Why are all of you here…?” she unconsciously whispered. The normally staid cardinal was looking nervous himself, and Reyhiem was white as a sheet.

“Who are these guys, Hinata?” Saare asked.

“S-silence, Saare!” Nicolaus hurriedly replied. “You are in the presence of the Seven Days!”

Nicolaus sat up straight, startled. “…The Seven Days? The ones of legend?”

“Exactly,” Hinata admitted—and when she did, everyone in the room stood up and saluted.

The members of the Seven Days Clergy were all wise and well trained, surpassing the realm of Enlightened and charged with training the next generation of Heroes. Their existence was the stuff of legend, shrouded in mystery, and they never went out in public, content with being discussed in the context of fairy tales. Not even the paladins knew about them—only a few directly interacted with them, including Hinata and Nicolaus. One had to be at the very top of the Western Holy Church to be introduced to them.

This was the group that administered the Seven Days Trial undertaken by Hinata, a test to help determine the next Heroes and champions of humanity. This responsibility made the Clergy a vital part of the Church.

But Hinata hated them. They were top-level advisers to the Church, ordered by Luminus to oversee the organization and educate its staff. However, before Hinata took up her post, the Crusaders were an organization in name only. To her, it was sheer negligence.

Looking back, I should’ve stripped them of their powers when I had the chance.

Hinata’s unique skill Usurper worked in two ways. One, called Seize, took away its target’s skills; the other, called Copy, let her learn them for herself. During her Trial, she thought of the Clergy as legendary contributors to the Luminist cause, so she naturally exercised Copy to learn from their powers and improve herself. One could call her an apprentice to the Clergy along those lines…but the Seven Days were not having it. They shunned Hinata for daring to rise above them, interfering with her in any way they could find.

This was a crafty group, one that had lurked in the darkness of the Church and called the shots for an untold amount of time. But there was nothing productive in their actions. And once she took the Trial and realized that, Hinata immediately judged them to be useless relics, took their skills, and left. Now she was using what she learned to train Arnaud and the rest of the division commanders.

I wonder if that’s why Luminus had me take the Seven Days Trial in the first place…

If she did, she had to hand it to Luminus. Such incredible wisdom. To her, the Clergy had plainly abandoned their mission to train the next generation, instead focusing on covering their own backs. But if Luminus let them dodder on, there must have been a reason for it. That was why she never defied them. Not in public.

Once everyone was seated again, Hinata addressed the group.

“So may I ask what brings you here today?”

(Hee-hee-hee! No need for alarm.)

(No, no. Archbishop Reyhiem here has brought back some information about the demon lord Rimuru, has he not?)

(We were simply interested in hearing about it ourselves.)

The voices echoed around in her mind. The Seven Days Clergy used Thought Communication to answer her. She sized them up again.

There were three of them present—not the entire contingent—and in her judgment, these were the most corrupt ones out of the entire group.

Among them was Arze, the Tuesday Priest who governed fire. His force was like a disposable lighter compared with Shizue Izawa’s. He had nothing to teach, and Hinata didn’t even need Usurper to complete his trial—but for some reason, he must’ve assumed she was incapable of Seizing his skills. That made him look down at her constantly, which rankled her.

The other two present, Dena, the Monday Priest, and Vena, the Friday Priest—Hinata couldn’t guess at their motives. Helping Arze out, probably.

What a chore. Luminus ordered me to make this as quick and painless as possible, too…

Hinata grew nervous. Rimuru already had a poor impression of her. If she let this Clergy get in her way here, she might never be able to reconcile with him—but as long as she didn’t have a bead on their goals, she had to focus on Reyhiem. She turned off her mind as she lent him an ear.

“I was foolish,” Reyhiem began. “We challenged a foe that was fearsome, far too fearsome for any of us. He is a demon lord, beyond a shadow of a doubt. Through our own foolishness, we have engineered the birth of a new demon lord!”

His memories of the event put him into a frenzy, his eyes bloodshot and his voice raised to a near scream. He continued, recounting the events that led to this birth—his misguided deeds, all laid bare without omission. It wasn’t on someone’s orders; he was being driven by the compulsion that he simply had to do it. He needed absolution for his sins, if he ever hoped to be free from his pain and forgiven by his god.

As he told the story, the paladins began to murmur among themselves. The sheer force of this adversary, beyond all common sense, made it hard for them to contain their composure. Neither an anti-magic barrier nor a long-range, magic-specific defensive wall was enough to stop these monsters—not even a holy barrier could mount any defense against those flashes of light.

But Hinata stayed resolute. Based on Reyhiem’s testimony, she surmised it was an attack involving concentrated sunlight. And as if to back up that theory, the Seven Days Clergy began to provide their own commentary.

(Hmm. Perhaps this is sunlight magic, the kind Sir Gren was always so gifted at.)

(Light-bending magic? Wouldn’t an anti-magic barrier shut that down?)

(And Gren’s didn’t have that much force to it.)

Gren, the Sunday Priest, was head of the Clergy, his magic commanding light. One of his spells concentrated sunlight in a similar way, and while the Clergy was on the wrong track with their theories, if they and Hinata had the same impression of this, Hinata assumed she was right.

Idiots. It’s not directly bending the sunlight with magic; it’s reflecting the light off something else to focus it into a beam. Otherwise, a barrier could’ve easily blocked it. Were water and wind elementals cooperating with him, then? But that would take a lot of complex calculation…

But she had nothing to fear. Once she knew the trick behind it, it was easy to counter. Just put up a protective film to diffuse the heat and scatter dust in the air to refract the light, and the threat was neutralized. If sunlight was the only thing it harnessed, the attack was full of holes to exploit. To Hinata, the attack was worthless.

As far as I can tell, he was using his scientific knowledge from the other world for that attack. No wonder people here couldn’t deal with it. They couldn’t even understand it. Using it to poke holes in their magical defense was smart, though. Not a stone unturned…

It took a lot of computing power to engineer that attack, as well as multiple ongoing spells at once. That was a serious threat, but now that Hinata knew what it really was, it didn’t seem that fearsome any longer. But Hinata was making her conclusions too quickly. Reyhiem wasn’t done talking. There was more… The main course, in fact.

“One moment. That mystery attack was a dreadful thing. Sir Folgen was helplessly killed; Sir Razen could do nothing against it. Nearly ten thousand of our finest knights were felled by it, I think. But…”

He paused here, nervously swallowing, sweat running down his head, trying his best to hold back the terror.

“…The real horror came after that. The next moment, the battlefield went completely quiet.

“Some were unconscious, fatally hurt; others were wounded and screaming on the ground; still more were healthy but wandering around, scared out of their wits. The cacophony they all created together set the battlefield to a frenzy. And yet…the very next moment,” Reyhiem said, “all the noise was gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I said, Lady Hinata. At that moment, the surviving members of that twenty-thousand-strong force died. Only three remained alive: Sir Razen; Edmaris, the king of Farmus; and me. Seeing it made me lose my sanity. I was so stricken with fear that I fainted.”

At Reyhiem’s tale, a similar silence fell over the holy cathedral. A single monster killed a force of twenty thousand in an instant. The truth of that could hardly be commented on in words. And amid the solemn tension, everyone was recalling the same legend in their mind—the tale of a single person laying waste to an entire city and becoming a demon lord.

Then Hinata recalled something Luminus herself told her.

The precursor to the Western Holy Church was launched a good dozen centuries ago—likely longer, but that is as far back as the records exist. Its people, however, had first moved here two millennia ago, driven away after Veldora destroyed their kingdom. The dragon’s strength and immortality put them beyond hope; trying to engage it would only add to the dead.

To the vampires that called this place home, Veldora prancing around and destroying humanity would lead to food shortages. The purest of high-quality vitality could only be obtained from human beings, and while Luminus and her family were safe, this was a matter of life or death to the lower-level vampires. Thus, Luminus was forced to come up with their current co-op approach to protecting humanity. She rescued them, really, and now they worshiped her as a god.

And it was all the fault of Veldora on the rampage. He was worse than any natural disaster, a threat impossible to prepare for—a Catastrophe. That classified him as Special S on the scale, something humanity just couldn’t deal with…but he wasn’t the only large-scale destroyer of worlds. The only creatures in the Special S rank right now were the four dragons known to exist. But that’s only the public story. In mythology, meanwhile, there were records of two demon lords exacting a similar campaign of death and madness. These were Guy Crimson, Lord of Darkness, and Milim Nava, the Destroyer. Demon lords all got an S rank, but there was disparity in these rankings. Some creatures, like these two, could be rated Special S behind the scenes—and as Luminus explained, it happened when a potential demon lord was awakened by engineering massive destruction, taking in the souls of the resulting dead. Evolution beyond imagination would result.

The term demon lord technically referred to the true ones who underwent this evolution, and even then, it could take place across several levels. It left some demon lords as powerful as dragons, and Luminus wondered if Guy and Milim had evolved beyond that. Even Luminus, as a true demon lord, had no chance against them. “If I fought Milim,” she told Hinata, “maybe I could outwit her. Maybe it’d be a good fight, if it came to that. But I’d never win in the end.” And what about Guy? “Ha! It vexes me terribly, but it would be hopeless. He’s in his own world.”

Someone as self-confident as Luminus, whose powers Hinata couldn’t even begin to fathom, describing Guy’s force as belonging to another dimension. It made Hinata think—about Guy, and about Milim, who actually faced off against him once. It was hard to imagine.

That’s what the Special S ranking was for. If all of humankind banded together, maybe they could deal with such a monster—but even that was wishful thinking, because it assumed the presence of a Hero in the human ranks. There was no Hero right now, and thus no chance.

Plus, the current lineup of demon lords—the Octagram—was on its own level of danger, Rimuru included. Luminus believed Rimuru was still in the midst of awakening, and Reyhiem’s words were more than enough to back that up.

Soon the others began to recall the story of the true demon lords, those fearsome presences. They were not revealed to the public lest panic resulted, but they were real, and they were threats.

When the first dragon lost its power, it showed no signs of regenerating itself for some reason. Out of the other three, one had been sealed away until just recently, but now he was back and supporting Rimuru—a demon lord who massacred a force of twenty thousand by himself. This was comparable to what those other two demon lords did long ago. The structural destruction wasn’t there, maybe, but the number of souls he obtained had to be staggering.

A heavy silence filled the room. It was clear nobody wanted to admit that a demon lord, in the real meaning of the term, had been born. There was an overwhelming difference between a potential demon lord and a true one, and everybody in the room understood that.

Finally, it was Hinata who quietly broke the silence.

“I see. So we should assume the demon lord Rimuru has been awakened…”

The words cut like a sharp knife through the silence, lighting a fire under those who could no longer tolerate the stillness.

“I suppose we should. Now what? If we leave him be, he’ll become a threat beyond anything we can handle, won’t he?”

“Calm down. Rimuru is a former human. If he seeks to live alongside humanity, there shouldn’t be any need to fight him.”

“Right. We need to see how he reacts.”

“But we know for a fact that he mowed down twenty thousand knights without hesitation! He is clearly a threat. Are you sure we should simply believe him…?”

That final comment from Renard summed up everyone’s thoughts. That’s how many wars begin—the mind playing tricks, stirring fear of a potential opponent. That was true enough even among the human race; if the adversary was a demon lord, it was going to be hard to trust him. It wouldn’t be an issue if that adversary could be hunted down at any moment, but Rimuru was growing more powerful at a rapid pace. To the paladins guarding humanity, and the knights serving as the Holy Emperor’s blade, they needed to entertain the idea of tackling him before he grew truly impossible to handle.

But Hinata stuck to her guns. “Silence, everyone,” she firmly stated. “The missive is absolute.”

Nothing anyone could say would change her mind. As captain of the Crusaders and chief knight of the Imperial Guard, she guided the hearts and minds of the Holy Empire of Lubelius. She had to be a model for every citizen, a firm leader for those who served under her. Her mind would change only if it did so within the will of Luminus. That was what made her so unwaveringly resolute.

And with that, the joint session would end, everyone returning to their intelligence-gathering duties. Or so it should have—but evil has a way of appearing from the most unexpected of crevices.

(Ah, Reyhiem, did you have any other messages for us?)

Just as Hinata was going to end the meeting, the Seven Days Clergy finally spoke up. It seemed to jog Reyhiem’s mind, as he took a crystal ball out of his pocket and reverently handed it to Hinata.

“I—I actually do have this. It’s said to be a message from Demon Lord Rimuru to you, Lady Hinata…”

“A message?”

She accepted it, eyeing it with suspicion. A message from Rimuru was likely something she couldn’t afford to ignore.

This crystal ball, provided by Reyhiem at the prodding of the Clergy, was a highly valuable magic item. It allowed anyone to record moving picture images, making it a useful way to transmit messages. It also saw use in international negotiations, seen as a more trustworthy piece of evidence than a written letter.

Regardless of where Rimuru managed to procure one of these, Hinata immediately tried playing it back. Given all the dignitaries on-site, it could be a great chance for everyone to see what Rimuru looked like.

But that wasn’t the end of it.

The image showed a beautiful girl, but it wasn’t a girl. It was the demon lord himself. His face, reminiscent of Hinata’s teacher, Shizue Izawa, looked at the viewer coldly, without emotion. The sense of presence he had came across at full force through the video image.

Hinata blinked at it. What a surprise. Like a different person from a few months ago… Her eyes met with Rimuru’s in the image. Was that a coincidence, or…? She began to realize just how nervous she was. Rimuru, a fellow countryman. A softhearted demon lord. Maybe her sentimentality was making her underestimate this threat. Logically, she knew that. And as if to back up that suspicion…

“I’ll take you on. You and me, in a one-on-one duel.”

That was the entire message. So incredibly simple; no room for misunderstanding. Everyone viewing it took home the same message: Rimuru is enraged. He killed Clayman for getting in his way, and Hinata’s up next.

For a change, even Nicolaus looked perturbed. “Wh-what should we do, Lady Hinata?” But before she could answer:

“Lady Hinata, your orders! I will gladly lead a force to crush this demon lord’s ambitions!”

Arnaud, ever the hot-blooded military man, pushed the issue. The debate was now in full swing again.

“Come on,” chided Saare, giving Arnaud an astonished look. “You’re a master swordsman, sure, but don’t you think your brain could use some work?”

“…What?”

“Didn’t Hinata just spend the past half hour saying ‘hands off’? We touch him, and the other demon lords aren’t gonna take that sitting down. Plus, if he’s a fully awakened demon lord, it’d be even more ill-advised to prod him. I think we should just chill out and accept our opponent’s request.”

“He’s right, Arnaud,” Litus said, nodding in agreement. “If we have Veldora to deal with as well, we have no chance of winning. Victory would only come with losses that would be impossible to take. If the adversary seeks a duel, better for all of us if we have Hinata accept it.”

A full clash of forces would result in what had to be staggering casualties with no guarantee of victory. Having the most powerful knight in the Holy Empire take the lead instead seemed far more palatable. If anything, the idea filled Saare and Litus with optimism. There was no doubting Hinata’s victory now.

Hinata, meanwhile, weighed her options.

Arnaud’s offer of a full battle force was out of the question. Getting her nation involved would escalate into the total war that Litus feared, likely dragging in the other Western Nations and developing into a world war. The masses they swore to protect in crises like these would turn into a severe disadvantage; it would go against the desires of Luminus. Veldora, too, was a menace. In terms of keeping losses to a minimum, Rimuru’s offer of a duel couldn’t have come at a better time.

But:

How should I take this…?

It gave Hinata pause. Looking back, she was extremely lucky she hadn’t invaded Tempest without fully grasping the situation there. She had Luminus’s great wisdom to thank for that. If their opponent had ascended to true demon lord-hood, things like the number of soldiers on the field no longer held meaning. No matter how tenacious they were, unless they met a fairly lofty bar, they were useless. The disaster that befell Farmus was proof enough of that.

But…no. When Rimuru fought Farmus, that must have been before he ascended. It was their defeat that generated the “necessary” number of souls for the job. He had wiped out twenty thousand without even being awakened.

What a monster, truly…

Reflecting on her battle with Rimuru, she didn’t think he was capable of something like that. Perhaps he had been restraining himself—but now, he wanted her dead, no doubt.

But if he hated her, why go through the trouble of challenging her to a duel for revenge? It seemed unnatural. If he felt Hinata and the Western Holy Church were a thorn in his side, it was a strange time to act on that impulse. If he was foolish enough not to see that, he wouldn’t be going through all this undercover skullduggery against Farmus.

Perhaps there was some other reason.

It’s unnatural of him, yes. Has something changed? Did the ascension to demon lord come at the cost of his humanity?!

Acquiring that much power at once would crush any human being’s soul. She saw for herself how much trouble Shizue had containing Ifrit’s berserk force. It’d easily drive anyone mad—especially if he was now a true demon lord.

…But maybe not. He’d have no reason to ally himself with the human nations, then.

Luminus told her that Rimuru swore to keep humanity safe. If his human heart was a thing of the past, his declaration to build his own city no longer made sense. There wasn’t enough information to work with, Hinata thought. Her Measurer skill wasn’t producing any answers. It seemed like the truth was still hidden somewhere.

Besides, this whole crystal ball gambit was weird in itself. It could store many hours of footage if necessary, but his message was only a few seconds long. She couldn’t shake the impression that some ulterior meaning was lurking behind it.

Plus:

The Tuesday Priest just let on that he knew Rimuru had something for me. Why?

Reyhiem had filed his report. He hadn’t said a word about Rimuru’s message. But Arze had asked him “Did you have any other messages for us?” and Hinata had picked up on his unnatural choice of words. The seeds of doubt were beginning to bud in her mind, although she swallowed them up and refused to let them sprout upon her face. Instead, she simply continued measuring her position, letting no stone go unturned.

Unfortunately, there was just too little data to work with. She could try crunching the numbers and guiding herself to a solution like she always did, but it wasn’t leading her anywhere this time.

“Ah well,” she concluded with a sigh. “If he’s calling me out, I suppose I’ll have to go explain matters to him in person.”

If Rimuru wanted it, she wasn’t that hesitant about a duel. But was there really no chance to talk things out? She wanted to be fully sure of that first. If she could meet with him, she’d have her answer. It seemed smarter than just fretting to herself.

Either way, if this is what it’s come to, it’s up to me to settle it.

“It is too dangerous!” Nicolaus frantically protested. “There is no need for you to come out yourself! Not with the barefaced malice he clearly has for you!”

It wasn’t enough to make Hinata change her mind. “We’ll never know that for sure unless we work out his intentions, will we? Plus, there is my apology to think about. Isn’t it wiser to meet with him once and try talking matters over?”

She had hoped this would put an end to the debate. But once again, as if waiting for the right moment, the Seven Days Clergy spoke up.

(Heh-heh-heh. That is your decision? Very well!)

(May the protection of the god Luminus safeguard you.)

(The demon lord Rimuru is a threat, yes.)

(But even if your talks turn sour, there is no need for concern.)

(You certainly have what it takes to defeat him.)

(But, Hinata, you are forgetting something.)

(Indeed. The presence of that dragon.)

(I fear not even you could defeat such a menace!)

(Do not overestimate your strength, Hinata.)

(No attack would ever faze that dragon.)

(But take heart, Hinata.)

(We will leave you with this.)

(It is called the Dragonbuster!)

Ugh. Can they be any more shameless about it? All I said was I’d talk with him, but they’re already pushing me into trading blows. And their goal is to have me take care of Veldora, right? Or is it…?

The Seven Days Clergy was a band of ex-humans enjoying Luminus’s personal approval. Their faith was strictly for her. Hinata could understand if they wanted her to eliminate a dragon Luminus was so clearly concerned about…but she already knew that wasn’t the only motivation. They were afraid. Afraid that Luminus’s affections would turn away from them and toward a new prodigy. That was why they were so unenthusiastic about training the younger generation. Why they actively schemed to eliminate anyone in their way.

Those fools. They mean nothing but harm for Luminus…

But Hinata did nothing to defy them. That was Luminus’s decision, and Hinata was in no position to take action. Instead, she retained her calm.

“I will gladly accept it,” she intoned as she took the Dragonbuster from Vena, the Friday Priest. He and his co-conspirators gave her satisfied nods.

(I hope things go well for you.)

(If worse comes to worst, that sword shall protect you.)

(And if the effort ends in failure, the responsibility will fall on your shoulders.)

And with that, the Clergy took their leave.

“Lady Hinata…”

The paladins attempted to plead their case. She waved them off, turning a quick glance toward Louis behind the curtain.

“All right. You have your assignments. This joint session is hereby adjourned.”

The Three Battlesages sat there, tongues silenced despite whatever they had to say to her. The paladins meekly accepted it, respecting their leader’s choices.

Hinata awoke from a light sleep.

All that self-absorbed reflection on her memories must have made her fall asleep. She could detect the aroma of coffee as her consciousness began to focus. Nicolaus, ever so gallantly ingratiating himself with her, could be seen preparing breakfast in the adjacent room.

“Ah, are you awake?”

This was Cardinal Nicolaus Speltus—a man who, Hinata felt, was best described as unusual. He was a trusted adviser of the Holy Emperor, the supreme leader of Lubelius, which put him at the very peak of power in the land. But when dealing with Hinata, he was as steadfast and loving as a puppy.

“Come, breakfast is served. Would you like to eat?”

It was almost comical. Hard to imagine someone like him preparing breakfast for another person. To anyone else who knew him, Nicolaus was a devil in a Saint’s mask.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Nicolaus happily nodded back.

It was the first meal Hinata could honestly say she enjoyed in a while. Her work had barely given her time to sleep as of late—but now it was coming to an end.

“…Are you leaving?”



“Yeah. That’s my job.”

“But it was I who ordered Reyhiem to come here…”

“And I’m the one who let you do so without comment. You don’t need to concern yourself about it.”

“Is there any way to convince you…ah, not to?”

“Enough already. Stop worrying. It’s not guaranteed to be a fight yet.”

…And if it was, it wasn’t guaranteed to be a defeat. Hinata still had a trick up her sleeve—not some silly Dragonbuster, but something much loftier, nobler. Besides, Luminus had personally told her to restrain herself.

She had zero intention of dying. If it came to blows, whether Rimuru was ascended or not, she believed he was still a defeatable target—for now. There was nothing to worry about. She wasn’t 100 percent sure of victory, but she had a lot of experience with taking on targets bigger than her. Plus, she even had more than one ace up her sleeve. It was such a lovely morning. It didn’t need to be marred with such gloomy talk.

“It’ll work out fine, Nicolaus. Like it always does. You don’t need to worry about a thing.”

She smiled—a small, gentle smile. The first one with no careful calculation behind it in a while.