

INTERLUDE

A PRIVATE CHAT

The kingdom of Seltrozzo was a small realm, nestled along the northern coastline between Englesia and Farmus. It was currently providing the stage for a clandestine meeting that would change history forever.

“So how did it go?”

“Just as we figured. Our cover’s still intact.”

“Heh-heh-heh… That witch may have a sharp mind, but maybe she’s nothing too scary after all.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Strength-wise, there’s no downplaying it. She’s the best in the West.”

“Indeed. Ill-advised artifice is powerless against brute force. I would recommend all of you to never forget that.”

Here, in a large, firelit room in a realm kept cool all year by the blowing sea breeze, the Five Elders had gathered. Their dress was ornate—some crafted with Tempestian silk, still a rarity to obtain. It was inlaid with anti-magic Artifacts, providing a full defense against any unexpected strikes. It spoke volumes about the group’s financial backing.

The room had, of course, been fully sealed off from the outside world, reinforced and designed to withstand magic up to the nuclear level. They even had stout, A-ranked knights standing guard in the middle. All of them were seated in a row, and with them was Glenda, the wild beauty with the spiky red hair—the Raging Sea, one of the Ten Great Saints and Three Battlesages. Her main source of employment came from these Five Elders, the Council’s powerbrokers.

One of them, clad in a loose white outfit, had eyes as sharp as a hawk, his presence dominating the room…were it not for the charming, doll-like little girl seated on his lap. She was maybe not quite ten years old, her hair a silky blond, her lips a light shade of pink. At first glance, it looked like an old man babysitting his granddaughter, as much as the sight clashed against its surroundings. But nobody brought it up. They let the man do what he wanted, as if this was a given—for that man was Granville Rozzo himself, head of the Rozzo family and mediator of the Five Elders.

The Rozzos of the Western Nations were a family of rulers. Seltrozzo was their exclusively owned domain, and family members could be found among royalty in Farmus and Englesia as well. The establishment of the Council of the West was largely the result of their tireless efforts, and while Council seats were theoretically selected by its member nations, most were taken by those under the patronage of the Rozzos. Their power extended far beyond their diminutive borders, outclassing entire nations on the international stage. They could safely be called the de facto rulers of the Western Nations. It was even their funding that let Yuuki Kagurazaka establish the Free Guild.

Granville was their leader, and nobody here was going to criticize the leader’s behavior. He gave the girl on his lap a reassuring pat on the head as he solemnly spoke.

“Very good.” A thin smile came to his lips. “But Sir Damrada, I fear your lies have been uncovered, haven’t they?”

This was in reference to Glenda’s report that Hinata had discovered she was being taken advantage of. The question was addressed to Damrada, dressed all in black and covering his face with a broad, umbrellalike hat. He, too, held himself like high nobility, although his clothing was rare in these parts. He was not from the Western Nations.

“Heh-heh-heh… I don’t see a problem with that. We may have lost Hinata Sakaguchi’s trust, but we earned a great deal in return—your trust, my good man Granville.”

“Ha. You say that, even though the East has come here to spread division in the West and make money off the ensuing weapon sales. Then the Empire will wait until we’re exhausted to take action, yes? Trust hardly comes into it.”

“Well, well, well. I should have expected such fine insightfulness from you, my good man.”

“Are you denying it?”

“No point in doing so, is there?”

“Heh. How kind of you to say. But back to the main issue.”

“Yes.”

“We both agree that Hinata needs to be eliminated, am I right?”

“Of course. It goes without saying that Veldora, the Storm Dragon, was the Empire’s greatest impediment to its western expansion. Now they say he has been tamed by the demon lord Rimuru. Whether that is true or not, it is safe to say now that the dragon can be negotiated with. That opens an opportunity for us. The next issue is the threat of the Western Holy Church. They are the glue that holds all these nations together, and with that, the Empire’s full strength would not be enough to seize the West.”

“Oh? So we hardly merit notice from you?”

“I don’t mean that at all. All five of you are intelligent and understanding of your interests. After the Empire takes over the West, I hope we can continue to work together to control its economy.”

“Work together? Are you asking us to lead the Empire directly to our doors? Don’t make me laugh.”

“Heh-heh-heh. The Empire is a powerful thing, you know. It will be difficult but not impossible. Are you opposing us?”

“Such insolence from a mere weapons merchant!”

It was Glenda who finally took verbal offense to this. She took out an unfamiliar weapon—a pistol—from her clothing and pointed it at the merchant.

Damrada was unfazed—and not because he was unaware of what that weapon could do.

“Heh-heh-heh… A pistol?” He sounded less than impressed. “I’m surprised to see them here, in the West.”

“Oh, you know what this thing is? It doesn’t seem to bother you too much.”

“Of course I know it. Do you think the West is the only place one can find otherworlders? And remember, I deal in weapons. It is my job to be familiar with every type of weapon out there. The one you are pointing at me is common in my lands. They are being manufactured in great quantities.”



The Five Elders couldn’t hide their surprise at Damrada’s disinterested explanation.

“What? In great quantities?”

“You Eastern traders are shrewd, indeed…”

“Truly, there is no telling the strength of the Imperial forces. It may be no match for monsters, but against a person, this weapon is all but unstoppable.”

Damrada was not a man who lied. What he did do was take advantage of the way he was interpreted, leading people to misunderstand his words. Anyone who dealt with him was advised to be on their guard, and if you dissected his sentences, it was clear to see the malice dripping off them. Here, Damrada was giving them a warning—better to work with the Empire, not oppose it.

“But you’re right. We are understanding of our interests. And as you say, it is best to put our heads down and work together for now.” Granville’s solemn voice restored order among the elders.

“Are you sure about this, Sir Granville?”

“Enough, Glenda. Our goals were the same from the beginning. Now is not the time for hostilities.”

Glenda did not challenge him further. Granville’s decisions were final. And Damrada had a lot to listen to, in terms of what it meant to everyone involved. He was the powerful leader of a weapons trading firm, much like the Rozzos, who earned political rule through their financial power. If the situation was different, they would be in more direct competition with each other. But not now.

“Heh-heh-heh… Well said, my good man. That may not always be the case, but for now, we are comrades.”

“Indeed. Farmus and Englesia achieve balance by retaining their own powers, and I do not wish to tilt the scales. It is unclear what motivation Rimuru has for toppling Farmus, but I do not want that land to be ruled by a demon lord.”

“I can understand that, yes. It pains us, as well, to lose the trade route through Farmus from the Dwarven Kingdom. The demon lord Clayman was a valuable trading partner to us, and I cannot say I appreciate Rimuru defeating him. I will be glad to work with you. So…”

He paused.

“So you want us to handle Hinata?” offered Granville. “No need to worry there. We set a trap for her, and she’s already stepped in it. Now all we have to do is rile Rimuru into taking care of her for us.”

“Yep,” added Glenda. “No doubt about it. Hinata saw Rimuru’s message, and it sent her marching right to Tempest. Now we just have to turn that demon lord’s anger toward her.”

“I am glad to hear that. But why are you so intent on eliminating Hinata? I would think a Saint like her would be more useful alive than dead.”

Damrada turned toward Granville, attempting to decipher his feelings on the subject. Granville laughed him off.

“Heh. It’s simple. That woman is too strong. It is no exaggeration to call her the strongest knight in the West. The magic-born Razen, Grand Master Yuuki, “Lightspeed” Masayuki—she stands above even those champions. You understand that, and that’s why you’re trying to use us, no? Am I wrong, Sir Damrada?”

“Heh…heh-heh. Yes, she is truly frightening. Too much to handle, you would say? And that is why you want to take this piece off the board. It makes sense.”

The two of them exchanged a nod. As alike as they were, one nod could communicate much between them. Thus, without any further discussion on the topic, the group moved on to determine their work assignments.

Damrada promised to eliminate the demon maneuvering behind the scenes in Farmus. He ordered Glenda to set the Temple Knights stationed in the nations surrounding Farmus to action, also promising to work with the new king, Edward, and chase down the Rimuru-aligned faction supporting Edmaris. Then he would spread rumors that Hinata was traveling to Tempest to defeat Rimuru, pinning him down and making it impossible for him to send reinforcements to other lands. As long as they could take care of that demon calling the shots, it would be easy to make Yohm and his band disappear. And by that time, Rimuru would have no choice but to defeat that troublemaker Hinata.

“But what if Hinata Sakaguchi actually defeats him?”

“That could be helpful to us as well. But don’t worry. Rimuru is not like the other demon lords. He is a dangerous element, one we will have to take care of sooner or later, but with Veldora on his side, killing him would be ill-advised. We have other plans in motion.”

“Heh-heh-heh… I will leave that in your talented hands, then.”

“Certainly. Just don’t mess up how you deal with that demon, all right?”

“I need no reminders,” Damrada said. “I am sure the Western Holy Church has demon experts on their side as well, but the East has a much more extensive organization for that. Not even an Arch Demon will be a problem for it.”

“Very good.”

“In that case, I had best be going.”

Granville nodded as Damrada gave a small bow and left the room.

Only the Rozzos and their bodyguards remained. Once they were sure Damrada was gone, Glenda let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Malice! That is all that merchant gives us. Treating us like children… It drives me crazy!”

Granville gave a cold look at the door. “Heh… Don’t be that way, Glenda. Even with that attitude, we’ve been treated with the greatest of respect.”

“But, Sir Granville…”

“Glenda,” he calmly chided, “you don’t know who those people really are. Hinata knew them well enough, yes? Merchants of death, peddling weapons behind the scenes. She let that slide because they were useful to her out in the open, but if she knew their true nature, she would never associate with them.”

“Their true nature?”

“Yes. They are part of an underground organization known as Cerberus—and Damrada the Gold is one of their leaders.”

The rest of the elders nodded in agreement. They knew who they were dealing with, which was why all five were in attendance. Glenda could understand their concern.

“Huh. I’ve heard of that group… How they rule the underworld in the East, and so on. No, challenging them wouldn’t be a great idea, huh? I look forward to seeing what they’re capable of.”

She flashed a wild grin as Granville nodded at her and stroked the blond hair of the girl on his lap.

“Heh-heh-heh… This may not go so easily for you, Damrada. The demon you are dealing with is no mere Arch Demon.”

There was real mirth to his laugh. His research showed that the demon was so strong that not even the magic-born Razen would be a problem for him. It was a good chance to test out the skills of Damrada’s group, but they needed to consider what to do if he was defeated.

“If it comes to that, I could step up…”

“Hmm. I imagine he won’t be a problem for you, but just in case, I’d like to get the other Battlesages involved as well.”

“Yes. Good point,” another elder said.

“The demon lord Rimuru needs to be weakened in any way possible. A demon that dangerous must be addressed at once.”

“And even if we fail at that, we need to do whatever it takes to ensure the victory of Farmus’s royal force.”

“Yes,” said Granville. “That demon cannot make any grandiose moves. If he throws his power around on the public stage, it will be harder for him to keep other nations from talking. The more dangerous the threat, the more terrified politicians you’ll find screaming for his head. You know what your job is, right, Glenda? I want you to use Cerberus to check that demon’s movements.”

If Damrada and his men could kill the demon, then great. If they couldn’t for some reason, he was helpless anyway, surrounded by hostile royalist forces. It’d be easy for Glenda and the ex-Battlesage Rama to rub him out personally, but as long as they could keep the demon from taking action, mission accomplished. Yohm’s force could never take on the federated forces of Farmus’s new king.

To achieve this, Granville saw fit to take every possible precaution and bring Saare and Grigori, the other two Battlesages, into the mix. Their formation needed to be rock-solid.

“You got it,” Glenda said with a proud grin. “Glenda Attley is on the job.”

Having a family name despite not being nobility was unique in these lands. It was because Glenda was not from here at all—she was an otherworlder summoned on the sly by Seltrozzo, or really, the Rozzo family itself. She was an ex-mercenary who learned military tactics during a stint in the foreign legion of an undisclosed nation, and her skills, honed by her worldwide travels, were exemplary. She wielded the unique skill Sniper, which let her handle all types of guns and projectile arms with ease, and she was also a gifted combat fighter and assassin, using a knife as her weapon of choice.

She was a born predator, one whose faithfulness to Granville was etched into her soul when she was summoned. In her eyes, even Hinata, Lubelian survivor of ten years of warfare, was a mere child. Glenda had a war-torn upbringing in her world, and a planet where a woman can be top of the heap just by gaining a little power at age sixteen or seventeen was a paradise compared with the hell she went through. But that, sadly, was based on the assumption that this world was fair to all its people. It wasn’t, in reality. That was why people prayed to gods, after all; it was in the teachings of Luminism. But even after attaining a position in the Three Battlesages, she had forgotten about that.

“Right. In that case, I will have Blood Shadow stir Saare and Grigori into action. Make sure you do your part as well.”

Blood Shadow was the Rozzo family’s darker side, a group of battle-hardened fighters who were open to any type of work given to them. It was familiar to many otherworlders, Glenda included, bound by contract to fight for the sake of the Rozzos.

Glenda nodded. “You’re going to use them? All right. All for the sake of the family…and my freedom.”

“Mmmm. You may go.”

With Granville’s order, Glenda left the room, a fire burning in her eyes.

The fire in the hearth burned a shade of red, crackling to life as it grew brighter.

“Is all of this good for you, Maribel?”

“Yes. Very much so, Grandfather. Deploying this group will prevent both of them from taking action. Rimuru will be too busy dealing with Hinata to help Farmus, once the Western Nations intervene to put an end to the civil war—in the name of Edward, of course. Then he’ll be indebted to you, won’t he?”

“That’s exactly right, Maribel. And I refuse to allow anyone to mess with the sandbox we rule over!”

Were it not for the demon lord’s shadow cast over the Farmus conflict, he could have given support to both sides and turned the fight into a stalemate—but that had the potential of gifting Englesia too much power. A single force dominating over the land was not the will of the Rozzos; instead, Granville maneuvered to retain an ideal balance.

“For the Rozzos,” the blond, lovable Maribel said, “the world!”

“““For the Rozzos,””” everyone else shouted back, “““the world!”””

This was the center of the world—a world that the Rozzos sought to bring completely under their rule. And under the cover of the Council of the West, this desire was beginning to take real shape. To grow steadily—and grow large.