

CHAPTER 4

THE SECOND CONFRONTATION

The highway to the Dwarven Kingdom was complete, and we had a timetable in place for the road to Blumund—but I just kept getting busier and busier. We needed to establish a new highway to the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, and Milim and her people needed an entire city planned for them.

There was a ton to do, and in the process, we were also developing a massive festival and hatching a scheme to conquer the Kingdom of Farmus. I knew becoming a demon lord would put a bunch more stuff on my plate, but this was pushing my workload to the absolute limit.

And in the midst of all this, I received terrible news from Soka: Hinata Sakaguchi was on the warpath, and she was headed straight for me.

As Soka stood there, panting as he reported back to me, I brought a hand to my head. I was planning to inspect our forges today, but instead, I canceled that and headed to my office so he could fill me in on the details.

Apparently, he told me, she was traveling totally unaccompanied.

“Alone?”

“Yes,” he said, looking straight at me. “Nanso reported from his viewing post outside the Lubelius barrier that he didn’t see anyone leaving the holy city. Only Hinata, who you told us to keep an especially close eye out for, was seen in Englesia.”

Soei’s guidance had turned him into a master of espionage. If that’s what he said, it had to be true.

“Wait a moment!”

Then Toka, another guard under Soka’s command, jumped out from his shadow.

“We’ve detected new movements.”

“What happened?”

“Four paladins have appeared to join Hinata, Sir Soka!”

“Just four?”

“Yes sir, but all appear to be very powerful. They used some kind of magic to shake us off their tail almost immediately.”

Toka looked chagrined as he gave us the news. Hmm. What was that all about? Did she leave without telling anyone, and they came running after her? Seemed doubtful. Were they staggering their deployment in anticipation of being watched? No, they’d be a lot more careful if those were their tactics.

I couldn’t say, but I had to hand it to Hinata. Always one step ahead of me. Shrugging off anyone who’d drag her down and attempting to strike us with only the best people she had? Maybe she thought that anything less would just get in the way.

So…

“I guess Hinata wants to fight us, huh?”

I didn’t want to think about combat with her very much, but it’d all come down to the actions she chose to take. I doubt I’d lose to her that easily now, but I couldn’t trifle with her. I was hoping my message would open her mind to the thought of talking things over, but…

“That’s unclear. She was carrying this odd-looking sword, however, so I doubt she is coming on friendly terms.”

Hmm. She’s armed, huh? Well, being armed was a given in this world, and it’s not like she would’ve marched to a demon lord empty-handed. It’d be rash to assume this meant she was in a fighting mood.

“I don’t know… That’s not enough to make a decision.”

“The Crusaders were fully armed as well…”

“Oh, really? Like, full-on?”

“Yes! Full-on, sir!”

Hmm. Full-on. Well, with those paladins joining Hinata ready for battle, I had a feeling a fight was coming up. It disappointed me. I was no fan of combat here. The move indicated that we were a thorn in her side, and she wanted a way to deal with it. But what did she want after that? If we didn’t try to understand each other, then one side would have to be eliminated. It’d be a huge, life-and-death struggle.

If Hinata declined to talk to us, we’d have to force our will on her in any way possible. She refused to look at the matter from our perspective; she refused to lend an ear to our words. I can’t really call that the high road, in any real way. Didn’t Hinata get that? She had never really listened to me since we first met, but I didn’t think she was that close-minded.

Was her Luminism the cause of it? Maybe she didn’t see why a monster like me deserved to be listened to. I’m sure her faith served her well in many aspects; it was important to her, but I wasn’t so sure blind belief was in her best interest. Anyone living in modern-day Japan would feel that way, given all the blood that’s been spilled in the name of religion. It’s important to use your eyes and ears—and think with your own head. Otherwise you’re just shutting off your mind, right? It’s stupid.

Regardless, it was up to her to use the information she had at hand. What would she decide on? How would she act? That was all her problem. If Hinata decided to be hostile to us, I was ready for it.

Bad news always comes in waves.

I shook my head, trying to readjust my thoughts. “Oh well. I’ll gather my staff and work out a plan…”

With Hinata potentially attacking soon, we couldn’t afford to be idle. Even if there were only five of them, those guys were nothing to sniff at. Whenever a demon lord was defeated, it was almost always by a Hero and their handpicked companions. I hadn’t set out to become a demon lord myself, but now that I was, I wasn’t going to sit here and let myself be defeated. We needed to decide who’d tackle those four paladins while I engaged Hinata.

Then Diablo appeared, a rather somber look on his face. “Sir Rimuru, I have a report,” he said, having trouble getting the words out.

“What’s up? Do we have a problem?”

It had to be that. Diablo’s usual confidence was nowhere to be found.

“Yes, we do.”

“What is it?”

“Reyhiem is dead. I am unsure of the cause, but he was likely killed. He was in perfect health the last time I saw him, so it was either an accident or murder.” He paused, looking apologetically at me. “This was my fault, Sir Rimuru. After all your concern about him being silenced…”

I did say something offhand about that, didn’t I? I didn’t think it’d actually happen.

We had no idea what had taken place; it all happened inside the barrier that covered the Holy Empire of Lubelius. Given the situation, however, Diablo seemed pretty convinced that he was killed. Things were starting to seem far more serious.

“There are rumors spreading around Farmus’s neighboring nations,” he bitterly continued. “They speak of a demon scheming to kill the archbishop. Someone is using magical means to disseminate the news, and the Temple Knights have been deployed in response. Once they are finished preparing in a few days, I believe they will join the forces of King Edward…”

This was not at all part of Diablo’s plans. In fact, it could have a seriously adverse effect on them. And of course it’s all happening just as Hinata goes on the move. No doubt about it—

Understood. It is thought that everything is connected.

Yeah, even I can see that. Did Raphael think I was so hopeless that I wouldn’t, or what? Come on! Heh-heh… Raphael can be such a pain sometimes.

But this was the last thing I needed. The Holy Church hadn’t marked me a divine enemy yet, but that was probably just a matter of time now. And once the official decree was sent out, it’d be impossible to avoid all-out war. They aren’t gonna say “Oops, our mistake” and take that back.

So I ordered Soka to assemble my staff. All I wanted to think about was developing my nation. That no longer seemed possible.

It was time for an emergency meeting—all hands on deck, except for Geld.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t call for Geld as well, Sir Rimuru?”

“Yeah. He’s working hard on his project for me. This is a problem between Hinata and me. Whether it turns into a fight or not, we don’t need a huge army.”

This wasn’t some frantic border defense. It didn’t seem right to counter a team of five with our entire military. I mean, with the huge gaps between the weaker and stronger inhabitants of this world, numbers didn’t seem to even mean anything a lot of the time. The paladins coming our way would each be ranked an A or higher, so we’d need our main team on the front lines to fight back.

Besides, calling Geld and his entire team back here would be a logistical nightmare. I could use my transfer magic to bring them back, but it’d take too much time to get them were they needed to be. We would need someone to watch the prisoners, too; we couldn’t afford to be haphazard with that.

Accepting my reasoning, my staff sat there and listened to Soei relay the situation.

“All right. First, a party of five led by Hinata, captain of the Crusaders, is traveling toward Tempest. Her companions are all high-level Crusader troops, and they successfully eluded the attempts of Soka’s team to track them.”

Soei’s briefing sent murmurs across the audience. Soka and his men were all A level or so, too, and they still couldn’t keep up. That showed the kind of threat we were dealing with. They probably would’ve managed it if they were up in the air, but flying would make them too conspicuous. They were right not to push their luck, and thanks to the alert network we had built around town, Soei was already staying abreast of Hinata’s progress. Information is key to any strategy, as was making ample preparations so you didn’t have to freak out later.

I had to hand it to Soei, though. His intelligence-gathering skills were phenomenal. Hiring informants to feed him data, disguising his own Replications to send out on the field… I had taught him a bit about the ninjas from my world, and he’d plainly been developing that in his own style. I had called him my “shadow,” and it turned out he was an incredible fit for the job. Between that and the practical instruction I had Fuze give him, he was a professional spy by now. If everyone could take the weird Earth stuff I told them and leverage it to this extent, I’d never have anything to worry about.

Soei was training and educating Soka and the rest of his team, too, even using locals to gather information for him. By this point, he could handle all of that without me directing him to. Seeing him there, providing his briefing like it was his duty, made me feel proud.

“The Temple Knights in the Farmus area are being deployed to the border areas of its neighbors, effectively forming a ring around the nation. They are moving quickly, in small groups, and I believe they number over thirty thousand. Their mission is to destroy the demon, and they do not appear interested in meddling with the civil war itself. If this keeps up, however, we cannot expect much support for Sir Yohm from any of the powerful nobles in and around Farmus.”

Diablo grew notably paler. He had picked up on this same information, though, and it didn’t seem to surprise him. There was no doubting which “demon” was being referred to, and he was probably dying to know how word got out about him.

Thirty thousand, though… Funny how all these knights from the surrounding nations—a few hundred here, a few thousand there—could turn into such a big force. That couldn’t be ignored, and they could also be indefinitely supplied from the villages. If this turned into a war of attrition, Yohm’s side would have the disadvantage.

“…However, the kings of Farmus’s assorted neighbors are not following the Western Holy Church’s lead. None of them have mobilized their armies. It would seem the Church has its own internal factions as well, which complicates the chain of command in the area. It would be easier to grasp the situation if we had a better idea of their internals…”

Soei shook his head, a little ashamed at the information lacking in his report. Yeah, they’re kind of a mystery group, aren’t they? Even Yuuki claimed not to know much about them. Plus, the Temple Knights seemed to be lower on the totem pole than the Crusaders.

“We should have asked Reyhiem about this,” a dejected Diablo commented. He was always pretty self-sufficient, never bothering to ask for feedback from someone he saw as lower than him. That came back to bite him here.

“Exactly! This is your failure, Diablo. It’d be better for all of us if someone more experienced, like me, took command!”

Shion preyed upon the chance, of course. She must have hated seeing the “new guy” get a big job like that. And as ready as he usually was to fire back at her, Diablo remained silent this time. Ah well. Maybe I’ll ask her instead.

“…Actually, Shion, if I let you handle the Farmus invasion, what would you do?”

Maybe—I mean, it’s not impossible—maybe she actually had a decent strategy in mind.

“I would lead an army into the kingdom and kill everyone in the noble classes, Sir Rimuru!”

Maybe not.

“No! No, all right?! You dumbass!”

If we killed everyone in the ruling class, the power vacuum would lead to a complex, multisided civil war. Without someone to support, you’d have all kinds of would-be warlords vying for power. The best way to keep casualties to a minimum was to retain the current system, replace the figurehead up top, and slowly let the new one take hold. That was why I had the more intelligent Diablo handle this. Shion just wasn’t up to it.

“No…? All right.”

Even she must have realized how foolish it was. She fell silent, standing up straight behind me. I wish she hadn’t bothered to say it if she was aware of how stupid it’d make her look, but I wasn’t sure she really wanted Diablo’s job anyway. Or maybe this was her way of helping Diablo put this behind him.

Either way, Diablo was still my man for this.

“Look, Diablo, everybody makes mistakes. Not even I thought Reyhiem would get himself killed. Plus, is it really that big a deal you’ve been found out?”

“Wha? But, Sir Rimuru…? With all this talk about a demon on the loose, I could hardly…”

His concern mainly seemed to be about getting relieved of his position in this drive.

“Listen. When you make a mistake, it’s vital to think about how you can make up for it. Anyone can just throw it in and say ‘I quit’ if they mess up, all right? That’s the easy way out! And besides, the general public already knows Yohm is connected to me. You’re a demon, but you’re also a member of my staff. Who cares what people around Farmus are saying? What matters right now is who killed Reyhiem, right? If we can prove it wasn’t you, then we’re all good. You don’t have to dwell on it that much.”

I’m literally a demon lord. Of course I’m going to have a demon or two on my payroll.

“You’re right,” said Shuna. “And I doubt you wanted to replace him with Shion anyway.”

“You’re wrong, Lady Shuna! If it were me, I would turn the Kingdom of Farmus into a wasteland of…”

Shion’s voice trailed off as Shuna gave her a withering stare. Those eyes were just too sharp for her to deal with.

“…He wasn’t going to,” Shuna continued in her strong but stern voice. “I appreciate your encouragement, Shion, as clumsy as it might have been. We are all part of Sir Rimuru’s staff. We cannot allow small mistakes to plunge us into depression.”

“Lady Shuna, you are making too much of this demon’s meager talents. As first secretary, I was simply teaching this upstart about the gravity of my post!”

The sneer she gave him had a little bit of shame tossed in. Maybe that was meant as encouragement. A little hard to follow, but that’s Shion for you. Shuna picked up on it better than I did. Sometimes that dunderhead can be really smart.

“Well,” Benimaru said, “there you have it. The need for reinforcements will depend on our strategy. If worse comes to worst, we’ll bring Geld back, and I’ll take the front line.”

Numbers didn’t concern him very much. What did was how they were going to use their forces. There wasn’t a trace of doubt on his face; he looked like he was ready to take on every Temple Knight on the planet. I was glad I could trust him.

“So you want me to continue with the current plan…?”

“Of course, Diablo. I’m gonna have my hands full with Hinata, so it’s your job to handle the Farmus takeover. I’m the one who gave you permission to send Reyhiem out in the first place. I’m partially at fault, too. So I want you to see this to the end for me, all right? Or is it starting to look like that won’t be possible? In that case…”

“Oh, no, not at all! You were kind enough to give me this work, Sir Rimuru, and I hope you will let me take it to its conclusion.”

“Can you do it?”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Of course!”

“Good. I know you can make up for this.”

Diablo nodded, his ease and confidence returned. He ought to be fine now.

“Sir Rimuru,” Shuna said as she smiled at this, “I have a suggestion.”

“Oh? I don’t hear suggestions from you very much. If you want to say something, go right ahead.”

“Why don’t we try seeking the advice of Adalmann? He was part of the Holy Church, albeit several centuries ago.”

Adalmann?

Understood. Adalmann is the wight king who defended Clayman’s castle…

Ohhh! Right! The undead guy Shuna made friends with. I think he’s just a regular wight now, what with his power gone. He looked totally wowed when we met, going on about how much of a god I am or something; I guess he’s the type to go all-in on an idea once it creeps into his head. If he was part of the Church, maybe he knows something about its inner workings. Things must have changed between now and then, but there’s no harm asking.

“That’s a good idea. Let’s bring it up with him.”

At the moment, Adalmann was working with Gabil, handling research and security duties down in the Sealed Cave. I sent a Thought Communication Gabil’s way, ordering him to send Adalmann up at once. He was with us in seconds, using teleportation magic to whisk himself to our meeting. Even as a wight, he apparently could still cast the magic he learned during his living days, and it was pretty high-caliber stuff. In terms of magicules, he may only rank a B, but you couldn’t afford to downplay his strength too much. He’s intelligent and magically gifted enough—maybe I should give him some better work.

Of course, he was basically a walking skeleton, and his force of undead was weak against sunlight and incapable of speech. You could communicate with them, more or less, but work around town might be a little tough. Let’s think about that later, then.

Regardless, it was time to listen to him.

“…Being granted with the tremendous good fortune of an audience with you, my lord, is the greatest honor that—”

“Enough!”

He had been heaping praise upon me the entire time I was thinking about him. I was ignoring it, but it didn’t seem to be ending anytime soon, so I finally yelled at him to shut up. Pretty intense guy. Shion liked him (“You have potential, I see!”) and Diablo gave him an approving smile, but the rest of my staff were a little put off by the display.

“That’s good for now, Adalmann,” Shuna said. “We all know you are happy to see Sir Rimuru, but we are short on time right now, so please go on with your business.”

Thanks, Shuna. If it wasn’t for you, he might start openly praying to me next. With that kind of dogged faith, no wonder he was so strong. It kind of made sense.

So on to Adalmann…

It turns out that he was actually a Holy Church cardinal, one of the highest positions in the whole bureaucracy. Lubelius wasn’t a real powerhouse of a nation at the time—the Church wasn’t the juggernaut it is now—but we still learned a great deal from him.

First, he told us that the Holy Empire of Lubelius is a religious state with the god Luminus at the peak. The Holy Emperor was considered the official spokesperson for this god; her identity and appearance was unknown. The imperial throne may or may not be passed down from generation to generation, but Adalmann, at least, never saw that happen.

The nation’s day-to-day operations were handled by the Papacy, the main ruling authority. In Adalmann’s time, the entire Western Holy Church was merely a division of this Papacy. “The Church began strictly as a missionary group to spread the good word about Luminism,” he explained. “It had no standing army at all.”

However, due to the danger involved with their field work, the Papacy formed the Temple Knights, working out agreements with the world’s nations to build troop stations in their area of activity. They all welcomed the Knights (especially since the Papacy was paying the tab) and promised to cooperate with them. Protecting the Luminus faithful from monster threats also helped keep the general public safe, so their generosity was understandable.



As these relationships with foreign countries grew, there naturally began to be friction in certain areas. That created a need for the Master Rooks, a division that worked under the more direct control of the Holy Emperor. “I call it a division,” Adalmann said, “but in the beginning, it was a small handful of people. They all boasted tremendous strength and had the right to give orders to the Temple Knights. As a group, they pledged their loyalty strictly to Luminus and the Holy Emperor—even the most powerful consuls in the Papacy could no more than ‘request’ their services, not order them.”

These consuls were the politicians of Lubelius. If not even they could order this division around, they had to be powerful, indeed.

“By the way, my friend Alberto was invited to join this division once. He turned it down so he could serve as my aide in the Holy Church. The Holy Emperor rewarded him with the title of acolyte.”

His jawbone clacked up and down in a show of what I assumed was pride. Alberto was the death knight that gave Hakuro all that trouble, if I recall. He was now just a skeletal fighter, but between his sword skills and possessing a monster’s strength, he’d give anyone a run for their money.

“However, I understand that things are quite different around the group now.”

Oops. Adalmann still wasn’t done talking.

According to him, the biggest difference was the power the Church had acquired; their Crusader paladin corps gave them a much greater say in matters. Papal consuls were now largely picked from the Holy Church’s cardinals, putting them in a much safer position than before. The Seven Days Clergy had a lot to do with that.

When Adalmann was there, this Clergy also worked as consuls, enjoying powers second only to the Holy Emperor. They were ordered to rebuild and shore up the Church’s position, and the changes they enacted created the Church structure we know today.

This Seven Days Clergy sounded kind of fishy to me, though. It sounded like they were the ones who tried to run Adalmann and his friends out of the Church, and he was clearly still no fan of theirs.

Although the Crusaders performed few noteworthy feats under the Clergy’s direction, Hinata’s training had helped them grow into the strongest of knight corps. This was how Lubelius had acquired both the Master Rooks and the Crusaders for itself.

“You seem to know a lot about this, Adalmann. Weren’t you in Clayman’s domain by this point in time?”

Adalmann gave this question a clacking laugh. “The demon lord Clayman saw the Western Holy Church as his enemy. He feared its power to make war and gathered as much intelligence as he could about them. I was a leader in their bureaucracy, so even if he didn’t accept my feedback, he still provided me with the information he had.”

That made sense. Clayman’s near-obsessive wariness had unexpectedly helped us out.

“Please, my lord and savior Rimuru, be careful. Lubelius is home to a group of Enlightened known as the Ten Great Saints, a cabal that even Clayman was afraid of. I must advise you not to let your guard down.”

He also mentioned the Three Battlesages, a group within the Master Rooks that was also Enlightened class. This trio, along with six commander-level knights and Hinata, formed the Ten Great Saints. An Enlightened was a human with powers on the same level as a would-be demon lord, and if they had ten of those, no wonder they kept Clayman awake at night. It seemed pretty likely that Hinata’s four companions on her current journey came from this group. Bringing regular soldiers along would just guarantee their deaths; better to presume that the top brass would be knocking on our door. Plus, if the Temple Knights were being mobilized, it was safe to assume the Master Rooks were, too, along with the Three Battlesages.

“My lord, please allow me as a former Church cardinal to attempt to reason with this Hinata woman! I will gladly convince her to abandon her faith in the Church and turn it toward you instead—”

“Ah, wait, wait. I don’t need any of that, so you can go.”

I put a stop to Adalmann before things got any weirder. In a way, he was even worse than Hinata—once his mind’s made up, there’s no derailing it. Talking with someone like him rarely results in anything useful.

“I see… A wonderful idea.”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Ah yes, there is always that approach!”

And of course Shion and Diablo loved it.

“What are you two idiots talking about?! If we try to pull that crap on her, things are gonna get even more complicated!”

Talk about being cut from the same cloth. I was starting to wonder if they actually liked more than hated each other.

With Adalmann gone, it was time to return to the topic at hand. We had all the info we needed—now to devise some actual policies.

First, I wanted to have some kind of throwaway piece I could use to gauge my opponent’s power. Who would work for that…? I could sense Veldora eagerly staring at me. No, Veldora, not you. That’s too much.

“Veldora, you—”

“Ah! Finally, my turn in the spotlight? At your service!”

“No, Veldora. I want you to man our last line of defense.”

“Whaaaat?”

“Did you hear me? The last…line…of defense. Doesn’t that sound cool? You’re the only person I could imagine for the job.”

“Mm, of course, of course. I thought so as well!”

He nodded proudly. Great. Good thing I could corral him before he went berserk on me. Veldora would never lose in battle, but sending him out just wouldn’t be the right thing to do, I thought. I hadn’t given up all hope of talking things over with Hinata, so I couldn’t just whip Veldora out at first sight, or even as primary backup.

With Veldora placated, it was Benimaru who spoke next.

“First, I will announce my assignments for Sir Yohm’s reinforcements.”

Mm. Good. Benimaru was turning into quite the commander. He had gained a lot of experience in that previous battle, and unlike Shion, he wasn’t letting it get to his head any longer. Now he could correctly analyze the data at hand and determine the differences between the two sides. I was still the commander in chief, but by this point, he was better suited for the job than I was. I mean, hell, I didn’t really want that work anyway. Let’s hope that Benimaru can grow into the role.

With his loud, deep voice, Benimaru announced the assignments. The reinforcements would consist of one hundred goblin riders, led by Gobta; four thousand troops from Benimaru’s Green Numbers, along with a hundred members of Team Kurenai to lead them (the remaining two hundred Kurenai members would stay back to protect the town), and a hundred fighters from Gabil’s Team Hiryu. That was a force of 4,300 in total.

“…That is all. This will mean fewer troops guarding the town, but we have lycanthropes among our fighters now, as well as Sir Veldora, so I don’t anticipate that being a problem. Any feedback?”

“Whoa! Uh, me?!”

“Is there a problem with that, Gobta?”

“Nnnn…no.”

Benimaru’s eyes were enough to clamp Gobta’s mouth shut. Doofus.

“Hakuro will be the supreme commander of this force, but don’t worry. If anything happens, I will use Spatial Motion to back you up at once. Just keep in mind that there’s a good chance I will be fighting Hinata Sakaguchi myself. This might make it impossible to contact me, so try to follow Hakuro’s orders as closely as possible!”

“Understood, sir,” said Hakuro.

“It shall be this battle, this very battle, where my name will shine!” cried Gabil.

“Yeah, yeah, all right…,” murmured Gobta.

Hakuro and Gabil were raring to go. Gobta frankly worried me a little, but he had a knack for working through crises, so he ought to be fine, I think. Maybe.

“Hmm. I still worry, though. Ranga, are you awake?”

I addressed Ranga, currently sleeping in my shadow. He spent almost all his time in there lately, in part to guard me, but his magicule energy had been expanding in the weirdest way. He probably needed more exercise.

“Will I be deployed, Master?”

“Yep. I need to get you running around now and then, you know? Follow Gobta and keep him safe!”

“I shall! A little wake-up exercise would be very kind to me.”

Weird. I was getting the strangest feeling that unleashing this guy was gonna be seriously bad news. For our foes anyway.

“Oooh, yeah, if Ranga’s joining me, I’ll be totally fine!”

Now Gobta was showing some more enthusiasm. Looking out for number one, aren’t you?

“Ranga, don’t take any reckless risks. And try not to kill your opponents, all right?”

“It shall be done! Lady Shion has taught me how to restrain myself!”

“Um, great…”

Now I was really worried. I thought he was just spending all day sleeping in my shadow, but he was doing that, too? Having Shion as his teacher filled me with anxiety, but hopefully it’d work out fine. We’ve got potions, I guess.

Benimaru offered no objection, although his eyes indicated he thought I was spoiling Gobta. Thus, with a delighted howl, Ranga curled up next to Gobta. Let’s just hope anyone who crosses him lives to tell the tale. I almost wanted to wish my opponents luck.

We had our force assignments. Now we had to discuss the reinforcements Farmus’s new king was receiving.

“So, Diablo, tell me how you intend to proceed.”

“Thank you, sir. I was expecting reinforcements, but thirty thousand is well beyond my projections. My original plan assumed a force of approximately ten thousand fighting for Edward.”

His new plans began with having Edmaris send a letter to the new king once he began moving these troops around, asking him to explain his actions. Edward was no doubt planning to shift responsibility for the reparations to Edmaris, and I wanted to keep that from happening. The new king would no doubt say that any agreement Edmaris signed was null and void. That wouldn’t pass muster with the Council if Farmus was part of it—it barely did with us, in fact.

No, his plan likely involved executing Edmaris and reneging on his promises to us. We’d then be angered enough to stage a military operation, and then the Western Nations would join together to resist us—that kind of thing. To prevent that, Edmaris had been rescued by Yohm’s squad. He was lying low in Migam at the moment, which was just what we planned. Yohm had a force of about five thousand over there, and the original plan called for us to teleport 4,300 more to Migam for him. That’s not a huge difference, but the psychological effect—the terror of having a brand-new army appear out of nowhere behind the first one—would turn the tables during battle.

But now that Edward had started assembling reinforcements, we couldn’t use that. If we waited for him to get his whole force together, we’d be faced with a four-against-one disadvantage in numbers. The sooner we acted, the better.

“It seems to me,” concluded Diablo, “that Edward is waiting for reinforcements he can use to strike Edmaris’s domain.”

The plan at this point had been to defeat Edward in one decisive battle or another, then have Edmaris endorse the champion Yohm as king instead of reclaiming the throne.

“Currently, Edward has access to a force of twenty thousand,” Soei commented. “Give him three more weeks, and the full force of forty thousand will be assembled. That’s more than enough to take Migam, as weak as its rear guard currently is.”

So the longer we wait, the worse things will get. But if we go all out right now, it’s going to be full-on, blood-soaked war. Farmus had already lost twenty thousand troops; a dragged-out war would cause untold damage.

So what then…?

“…This is just the worst. We could always just give up on this, you know. If I forgive the remaining debt they owe us, we can avoid war that way, right? That’ll eliminate the whole pretense for fighting us in the first place.”

“We can’t! If we do that, Sir Rimuru, you will look like a big pushover!”

“I wouldn’t want that, no, but we’ve already profited from this big-time. Wouldn’t it be easier if we just stepped on the brakes and waited until after we’ve handled Hinata to deal with it?”

As far as I was concerned, we were paid more money than I ever expected to see from them. Cutting our losses now would still put us way ahead, and I felt that waging a war on two fronts would be too risky by comparison. Shion did have a point, though. Demon lords have a vested interest in being feared.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh… Abandoning this plan would be unthinkable. Sir Rimuru, you are willing to let me handle this, yes?”

“Yeah, but I don’t want people to keep dying on my watch, whether they’re involved with it or not…”

“That will not be a problem. If that is your will, sir, then it is my duty to abide by it. It will be a simple task for me.”

I was seriously considering calling the whole thing off, but Diablo hadn’t given up at all.

“What are you intending to do?”

“I will find the culprit,” he quietly replied. “The evildoer who tried to pin the crime on me.”

Wow. He’s pretty angry.

“‘Destroy the demon,’ they say?” He gave me a little grin. “Well, if they want me eradicated, I will gladly serve as their opponent. Somewhere, among this thirty thousand, there could be someone involved with the culprit. I will give them a gentle interrogation.”

Uh-oh. There wasn’t a shred of gentleness about that. And Diablo sounded like he was ready to take on thirty thousand Temple Knights by himself. Better rein him in a little bit—

“I see,” Benimaru said as I stewed over this. “If you came out to engage them, we’d have nothing to worry about. But don’t kill any innocents, all right?”

“There is no need to remind me. I will never defy Sir Rimuru’s will.”

“Fair enough. In that case, Hakuro, can you suppress the new king’s soldiers without killing any of them?”

“It shouldn’t be a problem. It would be easier to stage a surprise attack to end things quickly, but that would provide no training for us.”

“True. Gabil, we’re going to need a great deal of potion.”

“Certainly! I will be sure it is ready.”

Huh? Um, hello? I was being left in the dust.

Shion smiled at me. “Looks like the Farmus invasion is in good hands, Sir Rimuru.”

“Uh, yeah… Yeah. Good luck, guys…”

““Yes, my lord!”” they all replied.

With that, the conversation was over. Couldn’t argue with that.

I didn’t like how that was handled very much, but either way, our discussions shifted over to the next issue—who would handle Hinata and her party.

“So about the party of five,” Benimaru said, looking at me. All right. Time to take the initiative on this one! …But just as I was about to speak, Soei suddenly stood up.

“Sir Rimuru,” he said in a strained voice, “we have an emergency. The Crusaders have begun to move…”

The room fell into a panic…or at least, I did.

“Is something up with Hinata’s team?”

“No. Hokuso, monitoring Englesia, reported to me that he sighted a hundred mounted knights departing at this very moment…”

“What?!”

“They are half a day behind Hinata, but at this rate, they will catch up with them before long. They are headed in the same direction, at least, so it seems fair to assume they are coming our way.”

Hinata was moving along at a regular, unhurried pace, although her four paladins had used magic to catch up at full speed before slowing back down. There had reportedly been some dispute among the group when they rendezvoused, but they remained together, a team of five bound for our city. They were still in Englesian lands, headed toward Blumund, but only at a relatively slow speed. If those hundred knights wanted to catch up with them, they could—however, instead of using the highway or another commonly used route, they were reportedly more likely to abandon their horses and take the old path into the forest instead.

“So they aren’t trying to meet up with Hinata?”

“Their motives are unclear. It will take no less than two weeks for Hinata to arrive, and the knights behind her are likely going to take about the same time.”

Soei, who was as confused about this as I was, ordered his force to tail them. We would just have to wait for further reports. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, huh? Except I had the impression we hadn’t left the frying pan at all. I really didn’t like this, but no point whining about it. Things were rapidly changing.

My staff began to debate among themselves. I listened in, thinking over my options.

There were five Enlightened to deal with, Hinata included, plus a hundred paladins doing who knows what. This hundred was far more of a threat to us than the twenty thousand members of Farmus’s military—hell, Hinata alone was way worse. That’s just the way things worked in this world. Strength in numbers meant nothing against strength brought to loony extremes. No matter how many nameless Mohawk-wearing punks you lined up in a row, they weren’t going to beat the Fist of the North Star.

I wasn’t planning to go out there alone. That seemed kind of suicidal to me. So…what?

“Why not just kill them all instead of fretting about it?”

I probably don’t need to say who suggested that. Life’s so easy if you never use your brain at all, isn’t it? Just focus on the results; don’t think about whether you can or can’t do something. Of course, that’s probably how she earned that freaky unique skill of hers, but still…

“This would be exactly the kind of thing we could call upon Geld for,” Hakuro noted.

“Ah, he has his own tasks to deal with,” reasoned Benimaru. “We must handle this ourselves, unless there is truly no other recourse.”

I hated to hear that, but they had a point. Should I really be so stubborn about keeping Geld out of this? I mean, we’re only talking a hundred or so people. There was no point deploying a massive force against it; it was already clearly something only our strongest people could deal with.

If I was going to handle Hinata, someone else needed to keep the other four down for me. It’d be great if Hinata agreed to my one-on-one offer, but taking on five people at once by myself was way too risky.

Understood. It will not be a problem. The sole concern is the subject Hinata Sakaguchi.

Um, that’s kind of the problem here, man! Are you feeling all right? You’re starting to seem a lot less reliable than the Great Sage was.

…

The whole reason I was stewing over this was because I didn’t want to have anybody killed. If I went with massive numbers to tire out the paladins, victory was assured, but it’d result in tons of casualties. We had all kept ourselves alive and well up to now; it’d be ridiculous to stop that streak now.

But…this was Hinata we were dealing with. She’s seriously bad news. I focused squarely on running away the last time we tussled, but if I had truly tried to fight her, I almost certainly would have been dead. Even though she wasn’t even giving her full effort.

Right now, I was the only one of us who could give Hinata any kind of challenge, and if it was a one-on-one duel, I didn’t think I’d lose. If she was paired with her paladins, though, I couldn’t be so sure. Striding in with too much confidence could get me killed. Those hundred other paladins were another issue, too; how should we handle those? If she just wanted to talk with me, she wouldn’t have taken this many people with her. And given how she was going out of her way to avoid notice, you’d have to be silly not to be alarmed.

“Wait!” Veldora suddenly belted out. “I know! How about I just happen to test out my dragon’s breath when they arrive? We’ll simply pretend it was a misfire and I wasn’t aware anybody was near me!”

“Can you shut up one second? You’re the final defense line, and I mean the really, really final one, all right?”

I swear. He was like a bratty kid sometimes. If Hinata did want to talk, and we pulled a stunt like that, it’d blow the whole thing. There was no telling how much damage that breath would cause, either. It was too scary to think of. It’d be happier for everyone, us included, if he stepped away from the battle. His plan did make sense if we were in this to kill, but I had to know for sure what our opponents wanted first. We couldn’t leave them to their own devices, though, because a few paladins were all it’d take to build another Holy Field over me. They had to be watched but not killed.

Paladins were positioned as the guardians of humankind, protected by the elemental spirits. In this world, monster-based mayhem was no laughing matter. It was a daily threat to one’s life. The paladins Hinata trained grew up knowing that fear, as they patrolled the villages and frontier towns they offered their free protection to. Many people owed their lives to them. The Crusaders held a special place in the hearts of those survivors, along with Luminism. Their strength was top-shelf, each one ranking an A or above, and we’d take serious casualties in a frontal assault.

But that wasn’t the problem. Killing these knights, these fighters with the hopes and prayers and anticipation of the weak and helpless heaped upon their shoulders, would undoubtedly be the source of untold headaches to come.

If it wasn’t for Luminism’s stance that monsters were the common enemy of humanity, maybe we could’ve talked this out. I hadn’t abandoned that hope, but I couldn’t be too confident that this attempt would work out any better than the last one. To them, we were simply evil, and they didn’t negotiate with evil. And I could understand their thoughts. Some of them must have survived their own villages being destroyed, their parents being killed. Being tricked by the wrong adversary meant the loss of life—not just theirs, but those of everyone who needed protection behind them.

Even now, there were wild monsters causing havoc everywhere. Their numbers had gone down in the lands around Tempest, but in other realms, they were still appearing from the woods and going berserk. If we wiped out the paladins, who would keep the countryside safe then? If you think about it that way, I wasn’t so sure we should just wipe all these guys out.

If Hinata had just opened up and talked to me last time, there wouldn’t even be this whole misunderstanding. Sadly, though, she didn’t. Because I’m a monster. She was stubborn like that—stubborn enough that, even after that message I sent, she brought a whole force along with her.

Concern. Some factors seem unnatural about that. There is likely a high possibility this paladin activity goes against Hinata Sakaguchi’s desire.

Huh? So there is room to talk, then?

If I put my foot down and declared her an enemy, there were a million and one ways I could defeat her. But as long as I didn’t know what they were up to, it was all but impossible to figure out our best move. There were a few reasons for that, but if I had to pick one, I guess it just comes down to the fact that I didn’t want to kill Hinata. Shizue was worried for her, too, and now that I had taken on her will, I didn’t want to resort to violence.

Ugh! And this was all because of how headstrong she was. So annoying.

Either way, though, if talks failed, we wouldn’t avoid a fight. If that was how it turned out, we were at a disadvantage, really. We were dealing with an anti-monster expert, nobody we could afford to trifle with, and I was certain that I wanted to avoid casualties on either side.

We would need to assume the worst in our approach, no matter what they did. If talking didn’t work, I wanted it to be a duel between Hinata and me. That was exactly what my message said, so that shouldn’t be a problem. They might be considering a more full-on battle, but if they were, they were gonna do it on my turf.

If we could spring a trap or something on them, that could buy time enough for me to defeat Hinata. It was a pain to think about, but it had to be done.

“All right. I’ve got it sorted out. We need to consider the future here, and along those lines, I want to do our best to avoid killing any of the paladins as well.”

That was the direction I wanted to go with—assuming talks failed, of course—and it ignited some more debate among my staff. It’d be a terrible waste if we took casualties of our own in an effort to avoid hurting them. We had to work out the best possible approach, and the surest way was for me to beat Hinata and break the paladins’ morale. As a result, our primary focus was earning as much time for me as possible.

“So why don’t we just slash ’em all up and silence them that way?”

“…”

“I was joking,” Shion said with a cough. Is she really all right? The way she acts alarms me almost as much as Veldora.

“Basically,” she continued, “you want to maintain the battle, without killing any paladins, and without losing anyone on our side. In the meantime, you will defeat the enemy’s leader. Am I right, Sir Rimuru?”

“Yeah. That’s what it is. I’m glad you get it.”

Oh, so she did follow me. I was seriously worried for her sanity for a moment there. And if she got it, I was sure the rest of my staff did. But just when I breathed a sigh of relief, Shion confidently beamed at me.

“In that case, I have an idea!”

Uh-oh. I began to feel anxious, for reasons I couldn’t put into words.

“…What is it?”

“There just happens to be exactly one hundred members in Team Reborn, the group I lead. They would certainly be up to the challenge. I’d like them to engage the paladins!”

She looked defiantly at me.

“What are you, crazy?! Team Reborn’s only about a C-ranked threat level! They’re not gonna be up to the challenge—no!”

I wanted to know where Shion’s confidence came from. They may have matched numbers-wise, but in terms of strength, it was like night and day.

“…There are some issues with that suggestion, yes, but I think it would be an effective idea.”

Surprisingly, it was Benimaru who defended her. Everyone in Team Reborn had the extra skill Complete Memory, which made them hard to kill with regular attacks. It was unlikely, he said, that our foes would break out their worst, most soul-crushing attacks on the first salvo against a weaker force. As he put it, their weakness “would put the paladins off their guard, giving us a hole to plunge through. If buying time is what we’re looking for, they might actually be well suited for that.”

He was starting to convince me. If the paladins didn’t have any way of directly attacking the souls of their foes, Team Reborn would even be at an advantage. It could make things a lot easier than if we sent any other force their way.

“Benimaru is right!” Shion bellowed. “And also, Sir Rimuru, I have been carefully training them all. They have successfully acquired Cancel Pain, of course, and they also resist poison, paralysis, and sleep. When it comes to tenacity, at least, they won’t lose out to anybody. Hakuro said so himself.”

Hakuro was nodding at her. It must’ve been the truth, but I thought I’d check to be sure.

“How did they acquire those resistances, by the way?”

“Well…”

Her reply surprised me. Apparently, she asked Kurobe to make them all weapons that inflicted their targets with status ailments, then had them use those weapons while training against each other, building up their natural immunity. They were largely immortal, so they’d never go easy on their sparring partners, and it was so hard to knock them out entirely that battles tended to last forever with them. In the simulated fights they carried out, it was more a matter of “whoever’s left standing is the winner.”

“And if Team Reborn is in danger, Sir Rimuru, I can send Team Kurenai in to help them out. Are you up for that, Gobwa?”

Benimaru was talking to the large, attractive-looking ogre guarding the door for us. She came over to me, kneeled, and bowed her head to us both. This Gobwa was the squad leader of Kurenai, apparently. She must’ve been a goblin at the time I gave that name to her, but you’d never believe it now—at this point, she was an elite officer, dressed in a striking scarlet-red uniform.

“Sir!” she said, puffing out her chest. “I have been training our squad just as hard as Lady Shion has. Please allow us to serve your needs on the field, Sir Rimuru!”

Her eyes were sharp, giving her a strong presence. She was also an A rank, maybe higher, which made her at least as strong as Soka. I guess Benimaru’s been raising some real talents of his own.

“They may not be an even match for the paladins,” Benimaru said, “but my fighters are talented, indeed. Two of them could engage one of the paladins long enough to allow Team Reborn time to escape.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! My team can neutralize the paladins all by themselves!”

They started bickering. Both of them were certainly ready for a fight, at least. Maybe it’d be worth leaving this job to them.

“All right. Shion, I accept your offer. Gobwa, you handle the rest.”

“Y-yes sir! Gladly!”

Gobwa’s cheeks reddened as she replied. It must’ve been exciting for her, which was fine by me. It’d be more ideal if I didn’t need to use them at all, but regardless.

“Remember, Shion, don’t send them out until we’re sure that the talks are a nonstarter, all right?”

“That’s fine! But if our foes make any suspicious moves…”

Yeah, that’d be a different story. I forgot about the need to interfere with them in advance, lest they toss a Holy Field our way.

“If they try anything funny, don’t be afraid to hold back then. Check with me via Thought Communication first, then take action!”

“Roger that,” Shion replied, giving a satisfied nod as Benimaru ordered Gobwa back to the door.

So we now had Team Reborn assigned to delay the Crusaders and Team Kurenai providing emergency backup, about three hundred people against a hundred paladins. I was happy with that. Now we just had the question of who would handle the four saint-class paladins accompanying Hinata.

First off, who among us was powerful enough to handle them? By my estimation, the group included Veldora, Ranga, Benimaru, Shion, Soei, Geld, Gabil, Diablo, and me. Hakuro had the sword skills to keep up as well, although his magical strength wasn’t quite up to everyone else’s level. Shuna… I wasn’t sure. A magical fight was one thing, but against a close-range expert, I didn’t like her chances. The Ten Great Saints were reportedly on a level with a pre-ascended demon lord or Orc Disaster; that’d be a lot to ask from Shuna.

So counting Hakuro, ten people. I was handling Hinata. Veldora was out of the question—I didn’t want him going out of control on me, so he could focus on town defense. I mean, for all we knew, there could be yet another enemy force on the move that we hadn’t noticed yet. We needed our defense to be as solid as possible. Geld, meanwhile, I didn’t want to bother if I could help it.

I wanted to have Diablo, Ranga, Hakuro, and Gabil focus on Farmus, not this fight. Which left:

“So the only people I have free are Benimaru, Shion, and Soei, huh?”

Ideally, I’d like one fighter per adversary, but I was short one body. So now what?

“I will join the battle, of course,” Benimaru said. This was exactly why he let Hakuro lead Yohm’s reinforcements. I couldn’t have him miss this one.

“I will stay as well,” Soei added. “My Replications can handle my intelligence duties well enough, and Soka and the others are proving fairly useful by this point.”

“Me too!” shouted Shion. “As your secretary, Sir Rimuru, I will forever remain by your side—”

Report. If there is an Enlightened-level fighter among the hundred paladins, attempting to buy time with them may prove impossible. It would be safer to devote some of your war power to them as well.

Ohhh. Yeah, there’s always that concern, too. Thanks for the actual useful feedback! I knew I could rely on Raphael.

“Hang on, Shion. There’s something I want to ask Soei first. Do you know if there are any Enlightened among the paladin force, separate from Hinata?”

Soei closed his eyes for a few moments. “My apologies,” he replied. “All of them are at least an A rank, but none particularly stood out from the pack in my perception.”

With monsters, it was pretty easy to figure out, what with the way they let their aura hang out all casually. The stronger they were, the more you could feel it from them. But with (for example) Hinata, she didn’t feel different from any other human being. I couldn’t pick her out at all, which was what made her strength so surprising. Ah well. We’d find out quick enough in battle

anyway.

“Just in case, I want Shion to monitor the group of paladins. We’ll have her command both the Reborn and Kurenai groups. Is that all right, Benimaru?”

“If that is your decision, it is not a problem at all, Sir Rimuru. Soei and I can each engage two of Hinata’s companions.”

Talk about confidence. To Soei, this all seemed perfectly natural.

“One moment, Sir Rimuru,” said Rigurd. “Perhaps this would be a good opportunity for me to join in? I am content with arranging our political system around town, but even I want to smash some heads sometimes!”

“In that case, I, too, am available,” added Shuna with a smile. Look, you aren’t suited for close-quarters combat, all right? It’s gonna be too dangerous for you.

“And so am I. I don’t want Gobta to hog the spotlight forever!”

Now Rigur was throwing his hat in the ring. He and Rigurd were both past the A rank, but neither was anywhere near demon lord status. It would be throwing their lives away.

“Hang on, hang on. I think this is a little too dangerous for you all.”

“But we don’t have anyone else, do we?”

“With us involved,” Benimaru said, “that will be more than enough.”

“Perhaps,” countered Rigurd. “I know your team is powerful, but it would be best not to underestimate our foes, wouldn’t it? Allow Rigur and me to take this responsibility…”

The debate was starting to heat up. All this worrying might be for naught if a fight didn’t break out in the end, but I wanted to tackle this with as much confidence as possible. If we were going to pull out all the stops with this, maybe we should call back Geld after all, just for that one day.

I was pondering this as I tuned out the endless debate my staff was having when there was a loud noise on the other side of the door.

“I told you,” I could hear Gobwa say, “we are in the middle of a meeting—”

“Yes, and we want to be part of it!”

“Stop being so belligerent, Sufia. Come on, lady, all we want is to repay a favor we owe him, okay?”

It was Sufia and Alvis, two of the Three Lycanthropeers. The door was finally opened to them.

“Hey. Sorry to barge in. I saw that bony dude runnin’ around just now, but what’s up with that? We wanna join in, too, Sir Rimuru.”

“Demon Lord Rimuru, please forgive our sudden visit. Sufia is being rude as usual, but we truly to seek to support you. Please, allow us the chance to repay the favor you gave to us.”

The two of them were in front of me, kneeling. Well, not directly in front of me, since Gobwa was still trying to drag them out by the ear. Benimaru raised a hand to stop her, finally allowing them to approach—but now it was Diablo standing between them and me. Benimaru seemed to trust them as well, but either way, a few people here were kind of antsy about them being close to me. Diablo, in particular, eyed them with open suspicion. If I ordered him to, I’m sure he would’ve chopped off their heads in an instant.

Sufia and Alvis contrasted starkly with each other, but on this point, they were two beastmen of the same mind. They pushed their way in here, knowing it would offend, and asked me to let them help out. The cold treatment from some of my staff was something they seemed to expect.

“Benimaru, Diablo, both of you, step back.”

“Understood.”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru.”

As they returned to their seats, I had chairs set up for Sufia and Alvis. After a few moments to ensure everyone had calmed down, I continued.

“So you want to help us?”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru. We are dealing with some of the Ten Great Saints here, right? It seems you need someone to stop them in their tracks, and we want to be the people who do that for you.”

“Yes! Combat’s pretty much the only thing I can do, y’know. We’ll never be able to repay our debt to you otherwise. Please, use us freely!”

I thought about this. Force-wise, this was not a problem. But if either of them got hurt, how would I ever explain it to the (ex-)demon lord Carillon?

“Are you sure you can volunteer for that without Carillon’s consent?”

“Of course! Lord Carillon is always quite tolerant of things like that.”

“And our lord seemed concerned about repaying his debt to you as well, Sir Rimuru. If we don’t step up here, I am sure he would lecture us about it.”

Hmm… Frankly, I appreciated this offer a lot. Having these two around would put my mind at ease quite a bit for the battle.

“I agree,” Benimaru added. “I believe we can trust them.”

“When I’m gone,” Shion asked, “will you be able to eliminate anyone getting in Sir Rimuru’s way?”

“Absolutely,” Sufia casually replied. Those two did seem to get along pretty well with each other—and I wasn’t hearing any no votes.

“Can you do it?”

“You can count on us!”

“Thank you for your kind words!”

I hated to rain on Rigurd’s parade when he was all revved up like this, but I needed someone to lead the people in town. When it came to fighting, I didn’t have complete confidence in him, either. But with Sufia and Alvis on our side, we couldn’t be much better prepared for Hinata and her forces.

It was hard to call what we had cobbled together a “strategy,” but either way, we had something to work with. Now my staff was discussing the details with one another, checking to make sure there weren’t any holes in our plan.

I closed my eyes and tried to guess at Hinata’s behavior again. Raphael’s calculations told me this approach was the most likely way to avoid casualties. You could say that I had nothing to worry about, but I was still hung up on a couple of issues.

One, this whole thing would be so much more in the bag if I either gave up on conquering Farmus or called Geld back here. I was going through with this anyway for reasons I suppose you could call purely egotistical. That was why I had to aim for a complete, flawless victory.

If Hinata agreed to talk, then fine. If not, we’d duel it out, one-on-one. We were fully prepared for that scenario, albeit with one considerable pitfall: What if I lost? Then everything would be meaningless. Raphael seemed to have little doubt about my victory, but if I blew it, that would tank this entire operation. Could I really trust Raphael’s calculations? I had a suspicion that Raphael tended to err on the side of overconfidence, and it wouldn’t be the first time, either. It believed too much in me—it wasn’t overrating my chances, was it?

I couldn’t banish that thought…but I had to do this. That’s how it’s always been, and that’s how it always will be. Whether I fully believe in myself or not, all my friends certainly do. I just have to stop wavering and press on.

“I’m going to say this one more time. If, at any point in this battle, it looks like we’ll have trouble keeping ourselves afloat, I want you to immediately focus on annihilating the enemy. The lives of our allies have to take first priority. You need to understand that all this means nothing if any of you get yourselves killed. I expect everyone to make it through this alive, just as we always do. Dismissed!”

“““Yes sir!!”””

If we were too reluctant to pick off a paladin, and it got one of our friends killed, it’d make all of us look silly. I wanted to be sure everyone was fully aware of that. Seeing them all voice their agreement, I reciprocated with a satisfied nod.

Now to wait and see what Hinata tried.

The journey to Tempest was proceeding along well for Hinata.

A quick trip through the transport gate was all it took to go from Lubelius to Englesia, but from there, she had to do it the normal way—and without any replacement horses, so frequent rest breaks were a must. She was used to marches like this, so she kept her own gear to a bare minimum. One horse and a sleeping bag, which she kept filled with emergency rations, a pot, and so forth.

The trails weren’t blocked by snow or anything, but the seasonal weather still precluded her from making this trip with haste.

She had rendezvoused with four of her paladin subordinates soon after departing. It had been a surprise at first, hearing hoofbeats from behind and spotting four familiar faces—Arnaud, Bacchus, Litus, and Fritz, her paladin commanders. Renard, the vice captain, was holding the fort while Hinata was gone, and since having all the commanders away from Lubelius at once was not an option, they drew lots and picked Garde to stay behind.

“…What are you doing?” she had asked them.

“We would ask you the same question, Lady Hinata. Attempting to get a head start on us?”

“A head start on what? I am merely going there to talk.”

“Oh, come now. You know, you sound less than convincing given how clearly you are equipped to wage war.”

“Yes! And we have no interest in standing atop your sacrifices. Our glory comes only when we serve under you.”

“Indeed. And besides, that message didn’t insist upon you traveling alone, did it?”

Hinata rolled her eyes and sighed. “I know, I know. But this is a demon lord, all right? I’m the one who riled him up. This is my problem. You have neither any responsibility nor any involvement in it. Return to our homeland at once.”

But Arnaud and the others ignored the order. She was eventually forced to say “Whatever” and allow them to join her.

The road this band of five chose was maintained, but it had seen better days. Inns were sparse along the way, and at this time of year, no-vacancy signs were a frequent sight. They would be forced to camp out, and even though they weren’t running into monsters, camping out in the cold of winter with nothing but emergency rations took its toll on Hinata and her companions.

By the time they reached Blumund ten days later, they had exhausted a worrying amount of their strength. They decided the time was ripe for a night indoors, for a change.

“This town has certainly changed,” Arnaud said after the five of them each rented their own room and assembled down at the dining hall.

Hinata felt the same way. Litus had said as much in her report, but seeing it with her own eyes made the difference exceedingly obvious.

After changing and resting up a bit, they decided to go explore town. The markets were packed with people, despite the winter weather, and all sorts of strange and unfamiliar merchandise was available. The backward country atmosphere Hinata felt the last time a mission brought her here was now considerably weaker.

“And did you see the people? So much more variety to the clothing around here now. Some of them had the kind of fancy outfits you normally only see in Englesia.”

“Yeah, and those weapons and armor… I think some of it is monster-derived. Real high-quality stuff circulating.”

Arnaud and Bacchus had trouble believing their eyes. Hinata could see why. It wasn’t up to the standards they enjoyed as paladins, but everything they saw was almost too upscale for a small country like this. And all the merchant stalls! In a world where many shops closed for the winter season, the sheer number they saw was an extreme rarity. If they were open, that must have meant customers were around—and that must mean that, even in winter, this little backwater town was entertaining large numbers of merchants and adventurers.

“Is this Tempest’s influence at hand?” Fritz asked, gauging Hinata’s response as he did. All this development must have come after trade relations were opened up with Tempest. That was the only reason he could think of. It also meant that large numbers of people in this town were not only ignoring the teachings of Luminism, but actively flouting them.

“All this prosperity,” whispered Litus, clearly shocked, “by doing business with a demon lord?”

Hinata, deep down, had to agree with her. This wasn’t normal. For him, though; for someone like Rimuru who came from the same land as her, maybe this wasn’t so strange at all.

For example, the menu on the wall of this dining room.

“Have you decided?” an attractive waitress asked them.

Hinata was ready for her.

“I’ll have the ramen, please.”

“The ramen! That’s been gaining an audience lately. It comes in miso, shoyu, and tonkotsu flavors, each available in a lighter or thicker broth. Do you have a preference?”

Six types in all. This wasn’t some misunderstanding. Ramen, here, definitely meant the meal she was familiar with.

“Tonkotsu, please, on the thick side. And one side of gyoza and rice to go with that.”

“Excellent! You certainly know your food, ma’am, if this is your first time here. And you guys?”

Her companions watched in awe as she ordered without hesitation.

“Um… The same.”

“M-me too…”

“Yeah.”

“And I, as well.”

None of them knew what any of it was, so they just followed their captain’s lead.

“Lady Hinata, could you tell us what this…ramen is?”

“You do know, right?”

“Yeah. It… Well, it might be a tad difficult for you guys to eat.”

“““What?!”””

Tension raced across the table.

“Don’t worry. I only think it will take some practice before you can eat it correctly.”

Hinata was just worried about the chopsticks. Did Arnaud and her other compatriots know how to use them? Did anyone in Lubelius, for that matter? Her friends, meanwhile, were now scared Hinata had made them order something on the level of monkey brains.

After a short wait, the bowls came out. It was ramen, no doubt—a nostalgic sight for Hinata, a totally unfamiliar one for the rest of the table.

Brushing her hair back with one hand to keep from dunking it in the soup, Hinata picked up a pair of disposable chopsticks, snapping them apart.

They’re even the kind you break… Is this what they’re focusing on?

Could Tempest really popularize chopsticks so quickly that they were already spreading to their neighbor countries? It unnerved her a bit, but the steaming ramen in front of her diverted her attention.

She put her hands together in a small prayer before picking up a renge ramen spoon off the stack and sampling the soup. It was definitely tonkotsu pork broth, on the thicker side. She had no idea where they got the dashi soup stock from, but it perfectly re-created the heavy, flavorful taste she remembered.

Then she picked up some noodles, brought them to her mouth…and half spat them back out.

“Are you all right?!”

Arnaud stood up. “Was it poisoned, Lady Hinata?!”

“Quiet. Just calm down and eat.”

Hinata picked up some noodles again—this time, placing them on her spoon and blowing on them a bit first. She wasn’t used to food served at this temperature. It was almost cutesy of her, especially given her usual frigid demeanor, but she was too focused on the noodles in her mouth to care.

Good body. Good taste. The savory broth had soaked into the noodles well. It was excellent. She never thought she’d taste this again, but it was a perfect re-creation.

Silently, Hinata concentrated on her meal, Arnaud and the others carefully watching her every move. Soon, they tried imitating her.

“…Agh! Hot!”

“Mmmm! Wow, what is this?!”

“The soup’s great, too!”

“Incredible! I’ve never eaten anything like this before…”

They were struggling mightily with their chopsticks as they challenged themselves to the ramen, but their reactions were like nothing Hinata expected. To them, whose diets revolved around the staples of hard bread, salty soup, and fresh salads, this ramen opened up an entire new universe of taste. It was a revolution for their taste buds.

And look at this rice! This rice they ordered simply because Hinata did. It was a perfect accompaniment to the ramen, growing sweeter in the mouth the more you chewed on it and filling your stomach in the most satisfying way. And the gyoza… Oh, the gyoza! The contents spread across your mouth when you bit into them, the aroma wafting all the way up your sinuses. It was a symphony of flavor, played by a large variety of ingredients and performing in exquisite harmony with the rice.

“This is so good!” Arnaud half shouted. “I can’t believe this!”

Compared with the portable rations of the last ten days, this was heaven. It wasn’t long before a single gyoza dumpling remained. Fritz’s chopsticks began to drift toward it…only to be deflected away by Hinata’s with a dry tssh! sound.

“That’s my prey, Fritz. I wanted to save it for last. No stealing.”

Fritz felt a shiver go down his spine. She was playing for keeps.

“S-sorry, Lady Hinata. It was just so good, I couldn’t help myself…”

“You could always order another plate,” an appalled Hinata replied—and right on cue, her four companions began shouting for the waitress. But then, tragedy struck.

“Oh, I’m sorry, guys, but that was the last of our supply for the day.” The waitress delivered the devastating news. “You know, this ramen is actually a new offering from us. We only started serving it last week…and just between you and me, I heard it got its start as a fervent request from the demon lord for his dinner. There’s a merchant named Sir Mjöllmile who’s one of the bigger names around this town, you see, and he purchased this ramen directly from the demon lord himself. Can you believe that? It’s not selling that well yet—it’s pricey, and there’s kind of a learning curve—but once you try it, you just can’t get enough!”

Considering this was “just between you and me,” the waitress was loud enough to be clearly heard across the entire dining hall. The act fascinated Hinata; no doubt she was instructed to advertise it to her regulars like that. Building a faithful base of repeat customers would allow them to create more of it in bulk, establishing it as a full-fledged product. She could spot a few people in the hall curiously eyeing her table. Watching her consume that bowl so expertly probably made them want to try it themselves.

She took in the last of the soup as they chatted.

“Thanks. That was very good.”

Hinata paid for the meal and stood up. Her companions, seeing this, scrambled to slurp up the remainder of their soup.

“No rush. I’m just going back to my room. Also, here’s a word of advice: If you drink all the soup, too, you’ll gain weight.”

Litus was the only one who stopped eating.

“Huh? But… You did…?”

“I’m naturally skinny.”

And with that warning, she left. She could feel Litus’s hateful gaze pointed at her, but she was too happy and sleepy to turn back around.



“Let’s go.”

The group was back on the road the next morning, fully rested and recharged. They would need it, because navigating the treacherous roads into the Forest of Jura took a lot of willpower.

Hinata was all smiles as she set off with them, but it wasn’t long before that enthusiasm evaporated.

“What’s all this about?”

“This is so easy, it almost bores me.”

“Yeah, and just look at this highway! It’s as neatly paved as the streets of the Englesian capital. This is crazy!”

The surprise around the party was understandable. The road was paved in stone, not a single puddle of water to be found. It was even lightly banked around the turns, and gutters had been dug on both sides. The winter weather hadn’t frozen the path at all, ensuring the easiest possible journey.

“I don’t even think there are any monsters nearby. There weren’t too many out in the open forest, either…”

Litus, who had staged a short expedition into the unexplored woods, couldn’t help but be astonished. She was right—the barrier deployed over the entire highway was a shock to see in action. Magical devices had been installed every six or so miles to power it, preventing any nearby monsters from wandering the roads. This made the journey vastly safer, and they saw more passing merchants traveling down the road as they pressed on. Those merchants must’ve been responsible for breathing so much life into Blumund right now.

“If they’ve devoted this much time and effort to constructing a road like this, I wonder what we should expect to find in the monsters’ homeland up ahead.”

Nobody responded to Arnaud. He was just stating what everyone else was thinking—and they all wanted an answer just as badly.

“That merchant said you could take this highway mounted easily enough. He was right.”

“Yeah. I thought our horses would be a bother in the forest, but I suppose we had nothing to worry about.”

Hinata had heard reports about the large-scale construction project Rimuru was carrying out in the forest. Seeing it for herself, however, made it hard to hide her surprise. The Forest of Jura, so forbidding to humans for so many years, was now as accessible as a city park.

So the party proceeded along for a while, until they spotted a group of hobgoblins riding wolves up ahead.

“Did they notice us?!”

“Hold it,” Hinata calmly said. “I don’t think so.”

She was right. They could hear laughing. It sounded like the hobgoblins were merely chatting among themselves. It was a straight path ahead, so they had noticed Hinata’s party, but they just waved and approached in a friendly manner.

“Hello! We haven’t seen you before. You don’t appear to be merchants—are you adventurers, then?”

“More or less, yes.”

“Ah, very good! I wish you good luck on your mission. Now, I’m sure you’ll be just fine, but there are a few things I need to warn you about.”

The hobgoblin changed his tone, then outlined the rules all travelers needed to follow on the highway:

No garbage dumping.

No fighting on the highway.

Use the drinking fountains located every six miles on the highway when camping overnight.

For added safety, take advantage of the patrol stations located every twelve miles on the highway.

If you have the money for it, inns are located every twenty-five miles.

If you see anyone in trouble, report it to the nearest patrol station.

…and so on.

“Also, you’ll see a glowing stone tablet every six miles, but please don’t touch them. Breaking them will lead to severe penalties.”

It was those glowing stones that kept the barriers running, he explained. They were these little glowing spots among the flagstones forming the road, which also helped travelers find their way in dark nights.

All in all, the rules went into so much detail that the party could hardly believe they were enacted and enforced by monsters.

“All right. Thanks for letting us know.”

“Oh, it’s fine! You’ll see people like us patrolling the highway, so let any of us know if you run into trouble.”

With that, the hobgoblin security detail darted down the road, leaving a dumbfounded Hinata behind.

“Um, Lady Hinata…”

“Hold it. Can you remain silent for a little while? I need to think about something.”

Arnaud and the others obeyed. The party traveled in silence for the next hour until they stumbled across a drinking fountain—on the exact mile marker the hobgoblin said they’d find it at. These markers, located at every mile along the highway, began at zero on the western entrance to Rimuru (the capital) and counted upward from there. Each one provided quick guidance on how much farther the nearest water, patrol station, and inn was.

Hinata, recognizing these from the trips she had taken on Japan’s expressways, immediately saw the value of these markers in a pinch. If you needed help and weren’t sure whether to keep going or double back, these provided instant guidance on what to do. It spoke volumes about how much this highway’s designers cared about traveler safety.

It’s worth noting, by the way, that “miles” did not originally exist as a unit of measurement on this world, but Rimuru ignored that and simply used a system he was already familiar with. The inns were spaced every 25 miles based on the assumption that the average person could walk a little over three miles in an hour and manage that for eight hours a day easily enough. Merchant wagons went about as quickly as a grown person on foot, so as long as you weren’t in too much of a hurry, it was easy to organize a trip that gave you an inn to rest in every night.

Clearly, someone had devoted a lot of thought into designing this. There was no doubting it now. Rimuru obviously craved interaction with the human race.

The journey beyond Blumund went far more comfortably than the one before it. The drinking fountain the party found themselves at was just that—a clean source of drinking water, available to anyone for free. It was almost a dizzying sight to them. Seeing the very modern-day planet-Earth concept of free water applied to a forest as hazardous as this one made most of the party wonder what Rimuru could possibly have been thinking.

These fountains were paired with cooking pits and cleared-out grassy areas for those putting up tents nearby, complete with benches made of sawed logs and roofed areas to get out from the rain. It was a campsite, just like any one you’d find off your local highway.

Between this and everything else, the Forest of Jura—once seen as a forbidden holy sanctuary by the rest of the planet—was now calm and accessible enough for just about anyone. This forest that was supposed to be crawling with all kinds of horrid monsters; the kind of place where if you were an adventurer ranked B or lower, one false move could spell death.

This wasn’t the domain of human beings. It was an Eden for monsters. And developing it to the point that it was open to anybody… Hinata hadn’t even entertained the concept. It wasn’t a matter of whether it was possible or not—it was just beyond her imagination, and probably that of fellow otherworlder Yuuki Kagurazaka, too. All that effort they had expended protecting humanity from the threat of monsters, and he made it look this simple?

You’ve got to be kidding me, Hinata thought grudgingly to herself. Now at least I understand what Yuuki mentioned to me.

She recalled a meeting with Yuuki at one of her favorite cafés in Englesia. They regularly met to exchange intelligence, and this time, the topic of Rimuru came up. Apparently, Yuuki said, Rimuru was earnestly serious about creating and developing a nation of monsters—and not only that, but he was sending out feelers toward the Western Nations, in hopes of getting friendlier with them. And that new brandy cake they were enjoying at the café? Readily available for purchase from Rimuru, who had invested in producing a wide variety of fine liquors.

“He’s like nobody else out there,” Yuuki had laughed as Hinata took little bites out of her slice, savoring each one. “It’s like he does it all and makes it look easy, you know? And he’s got insight way further into the future than I do. I think that’s why he’s putting so much effort into bringing little treats like that cake into this world.”

He warned her that hostilities with him would be ill-advised—which in turn suggested the Free Guild was siding with him. She let that slide without comment at the time. But now:

…He was right, she thought as she watched some merchants gratefully taking advantage of the fountain near her. There’s no way he’d focus on these little things unless he really could “do it all.”

Two hours after leaving the fountain, they sighted an inn, the last of seven built along this highway. Hinata’s party decided to spend the night here, and before long, they were situated in the dining hall.

“All right,” she said once they were seated. “I want to hear your feedback. What do you think of what we saw today?”

Arnaud, representing the rest of them, spoke first. “If I…may be honest with you, Lady Hinata?”

“Go ahead. That’s what I want to hear.”

“Judging by this highway alone, I think the demon lord Rimuru must be an incredibly gifted leader. The sense of security his patrolmen give this road must attract all kinds of travelers. I can’t see much of a future for the businesses lining the route through Farmus.”

“Indeed,” rumbled Bacchus, “monsters are not the only threat out there. You have bandits targeting merchants; you have illness; you have the potential for injury; you might break an axle and be stranded. Such things happen often, and having more people up and down the highway can do much to keep people from worrying.”

“True,” replied Litus. “If you’re someplace where you can expect help if you need it, that really puts your mind at ease.”

“And you can save money,” Fritz added, “because you no longer have to hire a personal guard detail. That alone… It’s big.”

The praise for Rimuru was glowing all around.

“He seems to be more devoted to his rule than a lot of the barons you see out there. His title might be demon lord, but if that’s what he is, he’s a damn benevolent one.”

“Yeah. There’s a lot we could learn from him. Including a few things our leaders in Lubelius would be advised to implement.”

“I’m just glad the divine-enemy declaration never came down.”

“Now we’ll just have to see if he’s willing to accept your apology, Lady Hinata.”

Hinata nodded her agreement. “I’ll have to be as heartfelt with it as I can. If he still wants to duel with me, I’ll have to accept, but…”

But she had her doubts. Why would he seek a duel at this point? Whether he forgave Hinata or not, she didn’t see why it called for another fight to settle. Rimuru just didn’t seem to be the kind of person to show off his newfound demon lord power like this.

Even with those doubts in her mind, Hinata’s journey continued apace. They took advantage of an inn on the seventh day as well, and this one was already as ornate and luxuriant as any you’d find in Englesia. There was even a vast public bath, the perfect place to soak after a long journey.

What’s more, these inns always had at least a few people recruited from Blumund working for them. Trading money for services was still kind of a novel thing for the monster staff, apparently, so her party often saw a human employee providing on-the-job guidance. It was, in a way, an ideal cross-species relationship, and it was more than enough to make Hinata see the need to reconsider Luminism’s teachings.

They would arrive at Rimuru, the capital, the next day—and with that, an encounter with the demon lord himself.

I hope we can work this out with words instead of swords…

She knew it was a selfish thought, but Hinata really meant it…even as a vast web of intermingled bad intentions schemed to prevent it.

Hinata, still trundling along, was due in this evening, according to the latest report from Soei’s team. She had spent two weeks on this journey, making zero use of teleportation or other magical means to speed things up.

“Thank you. It’s so vital to have this sort of intelligence early on. Keep it up.”

“This is nothing,” Soei said, quietly accepting my praise. “We will redouble our efforts.”

He’s literally a shadow. I mean it. And when someone as handsome as he is pulls that off, you can’t be jealous of that. He looked great.

I should note, however, that when he gave me an urgent report from the inn Hinata first stayed at, he suggested poisoning her to “take her out of the picture sooner than later.” I gave him a few not-so-nice words about that idea. It still felt to me that Hinata was here to talk, not fight, as much as we still needed to remain on guard. Something about the way she stayed at every inn along the way, totally unhurried, seemed almost too bold to me.

“Could this be a diversion?” Benimaru suggested. A diversion? Was she deliberately drawing attention while that separate force launched a surprise attack? It was possible, I guess. This was Hinata we were dealing with. As coldhearted as she was, I’m sure no method of securing victory was below her.

“What are the hundred other paladins doing?”

“They continue to lie low along the old path, sir. If we hadn’t spotted them just when they departed, I’m not sure we would have noticed them at all.”

These guys, meanwhile, were in full-on military mode. Hinata was looking more and more like a lure. Either way, though, we couldn’t relax. Shion already had her force deployed; if these paladins made any moves, things would start happening quickly after that.

“Given Hinata’s strength, her serving as a lure wouldn’t be strange at all. I’m the only one who can handle her—even now, Benimaru, you’d probably be in over your head. If I had to guess, I’m willing to bet she thinks she can beat all of us together.”

“Heh. That’s quite a lot of confidence, believing such nonsense even after she knows you. I could only call it foolish,” Soei said with a thin smile, although to me, that assertion was the foolish talk.

But who knows? She would only know me from before my ascension, but I knew just how capable she was. Looking back, it was blatantly clear how easy she was going on me back then.

“We better not let the paladins fan out, then,” noted Benimaru. “If they build a Holy Field, that will put us at a huge disadvantage.”

Soei nodded at him. “True. If so, we will need to contact Shion out on the field and try to have her eliminate them as soon as possible…”

He paused mid-thought and then told me the one thing I didn’t want to hear:

“Sir Rimuru, we’re detecting movement. They have attempted to fan out and cover the four cardinal directions around town, but Shion has intercepted them. Battle is reportedly underway.”

So Hinata chose to fight. Ah well. If she wants to be my enemy, I’ve got a plan for that.

Putting the inn behind them, Hinata and her companions prepared for the day’s journey ahead. They would likely reach the capital of Rimuru that evening, and the tension was written on everyone’s faces.

“Well, here we are. I don’t know if we’ll actually see him today, but be prepared, all right? Even if this does end in a fight, I don’t want you laying a hand on him.”

“But—”

“That’s an order. There’s no further point to being hostile toward the demon lord. I’ll go in, I’ll take full responsibility for all this, and then we’ll talk things over—”

Before she could wax poetic about her desire for peace, she was interrupted. An emergency message had just been magically sent to her.

(…nally, we connected to… You hear us, Lady Hi…? The Three Battlesages…en route to…)

It faded in and out, but the urgency and the identity of its sender—Cardinal Nicolaus Speltus—were both obvious. Something must have been jamming it.

Hinata tried to send a message back—(What is it? What happened?)—but she could sense the transmission dissipating into the air before it got far.

(Beware the Seven Days…)

And with that final message, Nicolaus’s presence disappeared. Something must have happened, Hinata realized.

Was he trying to send a message to me over and over before he finally succeeded? Maybe whatever happened, happened well before now. But the Three Battlesages are joining in…? Wait, were they part of the chaos in Farmus?!

The blood drained from Hinata’s face as she crafted another magical transmission, this one pointed at Holy Emperor Louis.

(What is it? That’s a rather poorly formed spell you used. Has something gotten you flustered?)

The emperor sounded serene as usual. That was a relief to Hinata.

(Yes. No time to explain. I’m just going to ask this right out: Did you order the Three Battlesages deployed?)

(What? I did nothing of the sort. Did they?)

(Yeah, I didn’t think you suddenly took an interest in human nations. I was on orders from Luminus to keep them on standby, and they’re not the sort of people to work on their own volition. Something’s going on.)

Louis’s main interests in life were Luminus and the city of Nightgarden. This was why Hinata called the actual shots around Lubelius. The Battlesages weren’t afraid to voice their discontent, but Hinata’s orders were always followed. It was hard for her to imagine them choosing now, of all times, to defy her.

So yes, something must have happened. Or someone was feeding the Battlesages a line.

Seven Days…?

She was now sure about the bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. Immediately, she resolved to return home. A little transport magic would help make up for lost time. She really wanted to be fully refreshed and ready for the potential battle against Rimuru, but now was no time to whine about that.

But the clock was already against her.

(Yeah, it looks like it. I’ll need to—)

An audible thunk of dull pain ran across her head as her link with Louis was cut off. Some kind of force field covered the area around her, blocking the casting of magic. As it did, she could sense a large battle unfolding not far away, making the very air shimmer.

“Wha…?! Is that…Renard?!”

Arnaud, watching over Hinata, quickly expressed his surprise at these sudden events.

“Let’s go!”

Things were moving fast—and not in a good direction. She hadn’t even encountered Rimuru yet, and the situation was rapidly deteriorating. Unease filled her mind as she ran at full speed for the battlefield.

Hearing that Hinata was making contact with someone, I chose to block her signal. Once I did, she reportedly began running for the battlefield at full tilt. That would nip in the bud whatever she was scheming.

Now, though, it was certain.

“That was Hinata’s doing, huh?”

“It would appear so,” replied Benimaru. The way she immediately changed tactics once she knew we were on to her… Shrewd as always.”

“Well, let’s follow the plan. Hinata and I are gonna work this out, just the two of us.”

“Roger that! I will let no one interfere.”

“Yeah. Keep the paladins at bay. Let’s move!”

“““Yes sir!”””

With a quick, reassuring nod to Benimaru, I turned into my human form.

“Good luck to you!”

Shuna waved as we all set off—Benimaru, Soei, Alvis, Sufia, and me. Bracing myself, I cast Dominate Space and popped over to Shion’s location before Hinata could reach it. I appreciated her holding her own out there, but against a pack of Crusaders, Team Reborn would face an uphill climb…

…or so I assumed; and sometimes, I assume wrong.

I had no idea what was going on. I thought I was going out of my head. How did this happen?! The sight before me made me completely lose my sense of speech.

What was I seeing? Well, it was Shion, arms folded in front of her, issuing orders to Team Reborn. That much was fine—part of the plan. It was the way they fought that was the problem. In a good way, it was completely unexpected.

“What in the…?! Our attacks don’t work on them!”

“These aren’t undead! What is the meaning of this?!”

The paladins sounded just as shocked. The one who asked that particular question would never receive an answer, as a Reborn member took him down with a quick dagger strike. The Reborn had used his own body as a feint to land the attack, making the most incredible use of his immortality.

But I knew it couldn’t last. The paladins would regroup soon, and then it’d be a one-sided match…or so I thought.

Again, my predictions were turned on their head. Less than three minutes later, our foes were almost at the breaking point.

As I thought, the paladins did rally, successfully closing the distance between them and Team Reborn without a challenge. Given the difference in core strength, they must’ve figured being immortal wouldn’t be enough to make them unbeatable. So they attempted to pin them down instead—but it didn’t work. Slash ’em up all you want; the Reborn guys immediately heal, something the paladins couldn’t manage. As soon as they fell, they were quickly bound up by the Team Kurenai members on standby, ensuring they were out of the fight.

“Hee-hee-hee!” said one of the Reborn, a small child, as she half taunted one of the captured paladins. “Y’know what? This knife has this superstrong sleep medicine rubbed all over it! The moment we land a strike on you, we win!”

I wasn’t a huge fan of her spoiling the whole trick, but ah well. She’s just a kid.

Report. The subject Gobwe is older in years than the subject Gobta.

Dude. Really? Man, I have the worst trouble telling these monsters apart. I know Gobta’s evolved way past from when I first saw him, but looks-wise, it was that exact same dopey face. So should I expect some kind of breathtaking transformation from him in the future?

Either way, seeing this tiny girl lecture a paladin before my eyes almost made me chuckle a bit. This wasn’t an uphill battle at all. If anything, for Team Reborn right now, it was a pretty steep downhill one. Unless the paladins were careful enough to bring an antidote along or had a natural skill to resist poison, there was no resisting this sneak attack. It’d only work once, of course, but damn, was it effective.

Still, it was rapidly coming to an end. There were yet more paladins in the group, and they weren’t going to let up now. Trickery like this wouldn’t work so easily against such overwhelming force—and now that they’d seen how the trick worked, we couldn’t expect an encore performance. The only reason Team Reborn could land those little nicks and cuts was because the paladins let their guards down after ripping them to shreds, after all.

Still, those nicks and cuts had successfully knocked half of the enemy out of the battle, and that was more than praiseworthy. Talk about overachieving. Now to return to the original plan, which called for a protracted battle of attrition as the paladins— No, I was being proven wrong again.

Shion gave the figures in front of her a signal with her chin. It was targeted at Gobzo and Gobwa, who looked at each other, then Shion, incredulously.

“You wish for us to join in?”

“Aren’t you going to join?!” Gobzo asked. “’Cuz if it’s just us, I don’t think it’ll be easy to beat those guys!”

“No,” Gobwa explained, “I think it’s all right if we don’t win, as long as we can buy some time…”

“Huhhh?! I thought we were ordered to win at all costs!”

Gobwa, standing guard by the meeting-hall door, knew what we had discussed in there. Gobzo didn’t and was totally floored by the news. Something wasn’t adding up here, was it?

“Um,” Gobwa asked Shion, sensing Gobzo’s disquiet, “during our strategy meeting, we were supposed to be on standby, weren’t we…?”

Yeah. They were. I thought something was weird about it. Good to hear my mind isn’t playing tricks on me. But Shion wasn’t having it. “What are you fools talking about?!” she roared. “We have victory within reach; can’t you see that?! Securing victory against a stronger foe is how you can climb over the wall to the next level! You’re being given a golden opportunity! You should thank me for this!”

I…wasn’t sure if I agreed with these statements. Victory was within reach, but our foes were stronger? A bit contradictory, isn’t it? But Gobwa was convinced, a twinkle appearing in her eyes as she smiled defiantly.

“Yes. Yes, you’re right. Allow Team Kurenai to seize this opportunity!”

Gobzo, meanwhile…

“Uh, ummm… Isn’t that, like, ignoring orders or something?”

It took a lot of guts to ask Shion that question, but Shion immediately shot him down. “You’re still here?! Either you do what you’re told, or you’ll become the test subject for my latest kitchen delights. Is that the decision you wanna make?!”

The threat was all too real to Gobzo. Whether he was convinced by her arguments or not, he dove straight into battle.

…I can’t say he was wrong. But it was weird. The way the other two framed it, this was now all Gobzo’s fault. Gobwa, as befitting one of Benimaru’s fighters, was always ready for a scrap, which made it easier to convince her. Gobzo, despite his slack-jawed look, was a far more honest, upright person. Unfortunately, that often drove him to say things he was better off not saying, which always blew up in his face. Maybe he had it coming sometimes, but if he did, he never realized it. Still, he seemed pretty content overall, so I opted not to intervene.

“…Are you sure this is all right, Benimaru?”

Benimaru shrugged back. “No, but playing it by ear is sometimes a necessity in battle. Shion, in particular, has a keen instinct for this. She gives orders like that because she senses victory, I think.”

True. I had gone for a more passive approach, asking them to buy time because I thought they couldn’t win—but if we could neutralize this threat with no casualties, no need to go easy.

I turned my attention toward the battlefield.

Things were really starting to ramp up. Team Reborn was taking on the remaining fifty paladins, two team members per opponent with one Team Kurenai fighter providing backup. In a full-on battle, Kurenai fell behind the paladins in strength, but not by an insurmountable gap. The paladins were ranked A, but the lower end of A, while Team Kurenai was about as close to A as you could get without crossing the line. With the right support, it could actually turn into a decent fight.

Plus, Kurenai had backup on-site, substituting in if one of their team fell or was growing exhausted. We had all the potion we needed, so the cycle could keep going semi-perpetually.

“What a powerhouse they are,” marveled Alvis. “Imagine, another force of that caliber serving your nation?” Her eyes were not pointed toward Kurenai, but Reborn—battle hardy (immortal, you could say) and ready to fight for as long as it took.

“Yeah,” Sufia replied with a nod, “they’re trouble. Not even decapitation can stop ’em. I bet they’d give us a workout.”

They had high praise for Team Reborn, and even I was fairly surprised. The paladins, meanwhile, had no backup support. If this keeps up, we might even have a chance at this.

“Yeah, I wasn’t really planning for this, but…”

I vaguely nodded back at them.

Shion, meanwhile, licked her lips as she appreciatively watched the battle unfold. I caught a glimpse of the wet sheen on the tip of her tongue. She turned toward me, sensing our presence, and gave us a broad grin. It was hard to imagine it, really, given the mask of terror she gave Gobzo a second ago.

“The plan is working, Sir Rimuru!”

“What are you, nuts? This wasn’t the plan at all!”

“Your praise is such an honor, my lord!”

“I wasn’t praising you…”

“Now, I must go!”

With that, she planted her feet on the ground and took off like a bullet, leaving me in the dust.

“Uh, go where…?”

She was like the wind, using her extended senses to weave effortlessly through the twisty trees. The elemental spirits infused her body as she zoomed headlong through the forest.

Upon reaching a clearing, Hinata encountered five high-level magic-born. They had spotted her coming, but their eyes were focused on a much more faraway sight. Following their lead, Hinata spotted her people, the noble paladins, facing what could soon become a bitter defeat.

She painfully sighed, holding in her emotions. The defeat didn’t anger her. What did was the way this whole thing broke down into hostilities so quickly. With battle underway, negotiation could no longer be hoped for. Whatever kind of internal subterfuge was going on with Hinata’s side, that wasn’t Rimuru’s problem.

Rimuru, meanwhile, just stood there, watching the battle as calmly as Hinata. Both of them were quietly thinking to themselves, gauging the forces of their opponent.

On Rimuru’s side were four powerful magic-born, plus a woman in a suit emitting an eerie aura. The two women in front appeared to be lycanthropes, former servants of Carillon, judging by the reports. It seemed likely they were part of the famed Three Lycanthropeers, of the former Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance; their mere appearance drove run-of-the-mill magic-born away from them.

But the other two figures lined up with them were no pushovers, either. On one side of the lycanthropes, there was a dashing figure with red hair and two black horns. On the other was a young blue-haired one with a single white horn.

“The Three Lycanthropeers?” Arnaud promptly whispered to Hinata when he caught up to her. “And are those ogres… No, ogre mages?”

Hinata kept her eyes on them. “No. They’re oni.”

“Oni?”

“I’ve heard of them. Monsters whose magical powers put them on the level of regional gods. Some pagan religions even worship them as deities, I read.”

“Yeah. They’re part of the evolution ladder up from ogres, but only a very few of them ever reach that level. But here they are, right in front of us. Consider each one to be a Special A-ranked threat.”

This was demon lord territory, and they were uninvited guests. Arnaud and the others were all too aware of that. Hinata, meanwhile, was worried that even Special A might be selling them short a little. That red-haired one, in particular, seemed to have more force than a would-be demon lord. If they ever came to blows, she would want Arnaud and at least two other commanders on her side—but they had four magic-born, and there were only four Crusader officers to go around. That couldn’t be a coincidence; Rimuru must have arranged the numbers that way.

And then there was the demon lord himself. His presence was overwhelming, nothing like their previous encounter.

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

The words flashed back into Hinata’s mind.

Yeah… Yeah. You wanted a duel with me, didn’t you? Because you didn’t want any distractions?

If that’s what it came to, she at least wanted him to take her life and spare her soldiers. No— She wanted him to win, and win overwhelmingly, then accept her apology.

In secret, without telling a soul, she prepared herself.

She noticed the female magic-born in the suit begin to move, letting out a concussive wave of force as she flew toward the faraway Renard. Rimuru was there, watching her go—and when he was done, ever so slowly, his eyes turned toward Hinata.

Their eyes met.

Oh, brother. I mean, seriously, oh, brother. But everything was still within what we predicted. No issues so far.

So I turned around. Hinata was standing there, looking cool, collected, not even out of breath. She must’ve been watching the battle, just like I was. Her gaze met mine. We just stood there a few moments, staring at each other. I finally spoke first.

“Well, Hinata, now you’ve done it. I imagine you don’t need to be reminded, but this is my territory. The moment you staged military action within our borders, that was enough to make me assume you’re hostile. I’m a nice guy, but not nice enough to allow you to strike at us first, you know?”

…Which, well, if we got into a “who shot first” argument, then the truth was murkier. But that doesn’t matter! We were guaranteed to lose if they launched a Holy Field, so of course I was gonna send Shion out ahead. If Hinata started whining at me about that, she was barking up the wrong tree.

“Yes,” Hinata calmly replied, “that much I can tell. I have no idea why Renard disobeyed orders, either.”

Talk about shameless.

“Oh, sure. You killed Reyhiem so you could pin the blame on us, didn’t you? And now Farmus’s new king has all the momentum in the world behind him.”

“Killed Reyhiem…?”

“Yeah. Archbishop Reyhiem. You called him back there, remember? All I did was give him that message for you. Nothing else.”

For just a moment, Hinata looked thoroughly confused, but beyond that, her expression was a mask of indifference. Her cold eyes drilled into me, sizing me up. She may have been beautiful, but that only added further polish to that numbing look.

“Oh… I see,” she whispered.

“You did get the message, right?”

“Yes. I did.”

“And this is your answer?”

“Well…not exactly, but you wouldn’t believe me if I said that, would you?”

Not exactly how?

“Oh, I could. But before that, you have to order them to cease hostilities and return home.”

I pointed at the pair locked in combat with Shion. She looked where I was pointing, then softly shook her head.

“I don’t know if I can. I think it’s going to be over before I step in.”

Good point. That was…Renard, right? He was the strongest dude on the field, and Shion wasn’t holding back against him. And someone else, too—not quite as strong as Renard, but still up there. I assumed they were both among the Ten Great Saints, but Shion was taking them both on, letting her inner monster shine. Geez. If that’s how thick it’s gotten, we don’t have much choice except to let them duke it out till they’re done.

It peeved me a little to accept Hinata’s excuse, but I didn’t think she’d be able to satisfy my conditions.

“What are you talking about?!” one of the younger knights shouted with resentment before I could speak. “If Lady Hinata calls our forces back, what will happen to her? You’re the one who called her here; how do we know you won’t do anything to her?!”

Sounds like they had no intention of talking this out from the beginning…

“Silence,” Benimaru replied. “The only people with permission to speak here are Sir Rimuru and Hinata Sakaguchi. You were not called here. Know your place.”

“What?”

The knight was unfazed. The next instant, a flash of swords erupted in front of Benimaru. One of them, belonging to the knight called Arnaud, was breezily deflected away by a casual swipe from Benimaru’s blade.

“Not a killer blow, was it? A smart choice. If you were intent upon killing me, you’d be on the ground right now.”

“I didn’t want to get in the way of Lady Hinata’s negotiations. I was just prodding you a bit, although I wasn’t expecting you to react. I don’t want you to have the wrong idea.”

“The only one with the wrong idea is you.”

“Heh-heh. How about we continue this conversation away from the action?”

“Very well.”

Arnaud gave him a smile, although I could see a vein throbbing over his temple. He can dish out the trash talk, I thought as they walked off, but he certainly couldn’t take it. Out of the four members of Hinata’s entourage, that Arnaud guy was undoubtedly the strongest. That was why Benimaru chose to take action. Perfect. I was certain Arnaud would occupy him well enough without any murder involved, just like I liked it.

Hinata just watched them go, rolling her eyes instead of trying to stop him. She must have noticed that Arnaud was no match for Benimaru, but she let him go anyway.

“All right,” Alvis said, “you all could use some entertainment, too, no? I would be glad to occupy your time for a while, so we don’t get in Sir Rimuru’s way.”

“Yeah,” added Sufia, “I’ve always wanted to test out the might of the Ten Great Saints!”

They set off. Maybe this was their motivation all along; I don’t know. Sufia was kind of a war maniac like that.

“Let me join you.”

“Very well… I’ll take you on.”

The four tramped off. All that remained was Soei and the lone female paladin.

“Shall we?”

“I suppose so,” she said, no doubt reading the atmosphere on the field.

This, um, wasn’t exactly what I had planned. I mean, they didn’t have to physically march off like that. Except for Benimaru, those three pairs acted more like they were pairing off for dates than fighting. You don’t have to exchange blows, guys. Sheesh.

Besides, I’m fighting a woman myself. The most beautiful one, no less. Not that I’m getting much enjoyment out of it.

…All joking aside, we were now left fully alone. I suppose this was inevitable.

It was time for my rematch with Hinata.