

CHAPTER 1

RECONCILIATION AND AGREEMENT

Things became much, much harder after all that. Getting everything settled was more exhausting for me than fighting Hinata—a fact I made sure remained a closely guarded secret.

What had happened? Well…

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Luminus, the single god worshipped by the Western Holy Church, was none other than the demon lord Valentine. Her real name was Luminus Valentine all along. She had been using a trusted confidant as a stand-in, giving him her name, Valentine, so he could fully play the part of demon lord in her stead. That, of course, was all in the past, now that Veldora had so breezily blown her cover at the last Walpurgis Council.

The Crusaders, the team of paladin knights led by Hinata, stood in opposition to the demon lord Valentine, which earned the Empire the support of the general public. The entire setup was wholly contrived, something Hinata knew all along—but whatever rational sense the arrangement made, why did she go along with it?

“It was out of my hands,” she said, sighing. “Lady Luminus defeated me when I tried to put a stop to things myself. Not that she was much interested in the people’s support in the first place…”

She must have sensed my skepticism. Reluctant or not, apparently Hinata was incapable of defying Luminus’s will. She did, however, extract a promise from her that no civilians would be harmed in the process. As long as she stuck to that, Hinata was willing to hold up her end of the bargain.

But as the man who was with her then explained, this ploy wasn’t Hinata’s doing in the first place.

“No, I was the one who came up with the plan. My brother Roy was all for it. Lady Luminus had little to do with it, and Hinata was so against it at first that she tried to take us all down. If anyone has an issue with it, they should complain to me, not her.”

This was Louis—the Holy Emperor, as he called himself.

“All right, so…um, Your Majesty? Mr. Emperor?”

He chuckled. “Just Louis is fine, my demon lord.” Even though the paladins were right in front of us, he apparently didn’t have much time for formality. Given how I was a demon lord just like his boss, Luminus, I suppose being casual with people like me came naturally.

Louis then embarked on a recap of recent events, loudly enough for the paladins to hear.

“So the Valentine I met at Walpurgis was your brother?”

“Indeed—my younger twin brother, to be more precise. Unfortunately, it seems he was killed by unknown assailants on the way home from the Council.”

“Huh? Killed?”

He didn’t look or sound too broken up about it, but this news was kind of a surprise. I mean, stand-in or not, that demon lord Valentine was clearly a powerful dude.

“Yes. Roy had a tendency to be overly confident; he must have left himself exposed. The Western Holy Church has many enemies. There are quite a few nations who see the Holy Emperor Lubelius as an eyesore. I imagine one of their assassins must have caught my brother unawares. It’s a great disappointment.”

Despite his lack of grief, Louis didn’t seem wholly unmoved by the loss. Louis was pretty strong, too; I could see that much. But if his demon lord–class brother was now dead, he must not have been too optimistic about his own future.

“I’d been enlisting Roy to work with the new recruits lately, for on-the-field training,” said Hinata. “One time, Saare actually managed to overpower him in battle, so he’d clearly been off his game—but we still need to watch out for whoever killed him. Not that any of that matters to you, I assume.”

She had a point. Roy had left hardly any impact on my life at all.

Now, at least, I had a handle on Louis, Valentine, and Luminus, as did the Crusaders listening in on us. This was all news to them, and they were all shocked into silence.

Now Hinata turned to her soldiers. “All right. You all heard us. It wasn’t my intention to deceive you, but I suppose that’s how this worked out, isn’t it?”

“L-Lady Hinata…”

She raised a hand to stop the question before it began. “I couldn’t tell any of you,” she coldly continued. “We needed to have as few people in on the plan as possible. If any of you revealed it, we would’ve been forced to execute you.”

Wow. Not mincing words, huh, Hinata?

“Heh… Heh-heh! Well, you won’t trick old Arnaud here. The god—or should I say, the demon lord Luminus—threatened you into doing this, didn’t she?”

This Arnaud guy was awfully brash. Hinata, however, swiftly shut him down. “No. I told you—our citizens are under the protection of Lady Luminus. That’s the truth. So I’ve chosen to carry out her will, as long as she remains friendly to humanity. You will not insult her around me, Arnaud.”

She shot her steely-eyed paladin a glare. I could see where this misunderstanding came from. No wonder Shizu had been concerned.

“Hey, now,” I said. “C’mon, Hinata, why don’t you try being a bit kinder? That’s not nearly enough explanation for them.”

“I’m sorry, does this involve you?”

Her glare was on me. Clearly, she wanted me to knock it off.

“I kind of think it does, doesn’t it? Because it’d be kind of annoying if you guys started infighting with each other here.”

“I don’t need your concern, thanks. Besides—”

“There is no need to worry,” Arnaud said, cutting her off. “You have fully earned our trust, Lady Hinata!”

“Arnaud is right,” his compatriot Renard echoed. “Good demon lord Rimuru, we are led by Lady Hinata, not Luminus. There is no disagreement that could possibly separate us.”

They might’ve all had their own thoughts about it, but none of that trumped the faith they had in Hinata. Having a trust-based relationship really is the most important thing, isn’t it?

“Well, all right,” I said, nodding.

“Besides, after watching that…” Arnaud pointed up, pausing. I knew what he was getting at. There, in the air above, Luminus and Veldora had just engaged in a battle that was nothing short of breathtaking—as much as I wished they hadn’t. I kept everyone on the ground safe through Uriel’s Absolute Defense skill, but they fought over such a large range, I couldn’t say if there’d be any outside casualties. Anyone who had seen Luminus’s ferocious attack would be just as flummoxed as Arnaud.

Frankly:

“Looking at that battle, I can understand how Lady Hinata was defeated.”

“No, she certainly doesn’t call herself a god for show. If she turned her back on humanity, there’d be nothing we could do about it…”

To the Crusaders, the sight of it was far more convincing than any speech I could have given them.

“Well,” Louis said, “there is no need to concern yourselves about that. Lady Luminus is a generous god. She has no interest in tormenting those under her divine protection. Why else has she proven to be so friendly toward the humans who do not try to defy her? Of course, no one here is allowed to divulge her true identity, but…”

Maintaining confidentiality about the whole demon lord thing was top priority to him. It was Veldora who blew her cover anyway, so I saw no reason not to cooperate with that effort. And the other paladins seemed convinced this was a valid thing to do—mainly because Hinata wanted it, as far as I could tell. They must have loved her a lot more than I thought.

So I didn’t think I had anything to worry about. Which was good. Because in my eyes, Hinata tended to be too terse, too blunt, too easily misunderstood for her own good—

“Were you thinking something rude about me again?”

“Huh? N-no, I wasn’t…”

Does she have ESP or something?! She’s got to be reading my mind…

Incorrect. No influence of that sort detected.

No, Raphael? Then maybe she just has the uncanniest sixth sense ever. Better watch what I’m thinking around her.

At that very moment, he came onto the scene—falling at terminal velocity from the sky, of course, and making a small crater on the ground. He stood right back up, though, none the worse for wear, and ran up to me. It was Veldora, obviously, and now he was sidling up behind me, using me as a shield as he glared up at the sky. Ahead of him, up above, I could see a beautiful silver-haired young woman, a mask of rage on her face as she floated in midair.

“R-Rimuru, give that pigheaded woman a piece of your mind! I’m giving her as generous an apology as I can, but she refuses to listen!”

Uh, yeah… Sure. But can you please stop bringing me into this? Seriously.

This time, at least, it was completely Veldora’s fault. Has it never not been, if you think about it? He hadn’t even been resurrected for that long, and already I felt like he’d been a huge thorn in my side.

I had been watching them, but the method Veldora chose for his apology only served to rile up Luminus. She was trying to put her sword away, and then he went off like “Kwah-ha-ha-ha! I had no bad intentions back then. Call it a youthful mistake and forgive me with your most generous of hearts!” That was easily enough to set her off.

“Bring that lizard here,” she ordered me, in a voice that’d make your hair stand on end, as she glared behind me at Veldora in all his haughtiness. Frankly, I didn’t want to get on Luminus’s bad side over something like this. I knew exactly how she felt. That was no apology at all. Veldora ought to be taught a lesson over this, I thought. So:

“All right.”

Without hesitation, I grabbed Veldora by the neck and presented him to Luminus.

“Gehh?! Rimuru! You’ve betrayed meeeee!!”

At a time like this, it’s important you get your message across. I needed to make sure everything was crystal clear to everyone about this, if I didn’t want Luminus to have any lingering resentments.

She gave me a surprised look, then let out a smile cold enough to freeze blood. “Yes. I am glad to see, Rimuru, that you possess great senses of perception. Unlike that lizard over there.”

“Oh, it’s nothing that great. But I know he’s been a real thorn in your side this time. If you agree to forgive him afterward, you can feel free to rake him over the coals as much as you like.”

Luminus grinned and nodded.

“Mmm. I will give that some thought.”

That seemed to smooth things over with Luminus well enough. Veldora was shouting things like “Wait! Does—does my opinion not matter at all?!” as she dragged him away, but neither she nor I was paying attention.

“Time to let off all the steam I’ve been building up… Embracing Drain!!”

“Gaaagghghhh!!”

It looked like Luminus was giving Veldora a hug, but there was certainly no sweet sentiment behind it. It was really more of a bear hug, despite the height difference.

You’d think that wouldn’t be enough to hurt Veldora much, but…

Understood. She is absorbing the magical energy from the target, while injecting it with signals of intense pain and discomfort. These signals likely install themselves into the “soul” of the individual until cut off, regardless of Cancel Pain possession.



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Um… So to a spiritual life-form like Veldora, this attack “hurts,” then? In a way, this seems a lot more effective than just destroying him. With the near-infinite stores of energy Veldora had, no amount of energy draining on Luminus’s part would kill him—but she could wear him out. Adding pain and discomfort to the mix would make for a punishment he’d not soon forget, I imagine.

Luminus kept going with that attack for a decent amount of time. Veldora started crying out, tear-filled eyes longingly staring at me, but I watched silently and offered no mercy. This was for Veldora’s sake… Or really, if sacrificing him was all it took to make Luminus feel better, I’d say I got a bargain. Call it a political transaction. Forgive me, Veldora.

“Well,” an expressionless Louis observed, “at least Lady Luminus seems to be enjoying herself. It’ll let her work through all her negative emotions as of late. I couldn’t be happier.”

“Yes,” Hinata said, nodding. “Given we don’t know who killed Roy, we don’t want any needless hostility right now. By the way, just to be sure, that guy over there… Is he…?”

She looked at Veldora, a tad unsure of herself. Oh, right. We hadn’t made introductions yet, huh?

“Yeah, that’s Veldora. Kinda hard to tell when he’s not in dragon form and all, but it’s definitely him. I think he’s kind of busy right now, but I’ll introduce you to each other later.”

“W-wait, Rimuru! N-n-now! Introduce us nowww—”

“Hmm? Still haven’t had enough, eh?”

“Worrrgghhhh!!”

Poor guy. It was his fault for trying to escape Luminus. I could tell she increased the voltage or whatever just now. Loose lips sink ships, and so on.

“…So this was the Storm Dragon who Lady Luminus feared so much? Certainly, the amount of sheer power is astounding, but…”

Hinata looked disappointed. Who could blame her? Right now, Veldora was little more than comic relief. No sort of draconic majesty whatsoever. It was hard to believe this was a Catastrophe-level monster straight out of a nightmare. The other paladins must’ve thought the same thing, because they couldn’t have looked more confused.

“I—I can’t believe it…”

“That? That’s the Storm Dragon we were told such terrifying tales about?”

“Surely you jest? I honestly feel a little sorry for him.”

I think the form he had taken was tricking a few of the paladins, to be honest. Plus, I’d based my own Replication on a younger Shizu. So similarly, if Veldora kept his mouth shut, he looked like a pretty handsome young man. If a guy like him was shouting for help with that desperate plea in his eyes, it’d move the hearts of untold numbers of women.

But don’t be fooled. Indulge him just a little, and he’ll walk all over you. I needed to teach him some firm discipline right away, or else we—well, really, I—would pay dearly for it later.

Report. The aura of Veldora the Storm Dragon, previously in danger of spontaneously combusting, has fallen back within the threshold of stability.

…What?! Wait a second. Did Raphael predict Luminus would do that, too? No way. That was a bit much for even me to swallow. It’d be impossible to read that far ahead. No need to give him that much credit—the fight with Hinata had followed Raphael’s plan so closely, though, I couldn’t help but feel that way.

I shook my head, banishing the thought.

“Right. I’d say it’s time to head out. I know we’ve had a few misunderstandings, but once things calm down, I’d like to discuss our future plans.”

With that, I guided the paladins back to town.

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Rigurd was waiting for us at the gate, panting. I had sent Soei on ahead to send the news, and he had just now run out to greet us. He didn’t need to do that—I was sure I gave him ample warning—but the guy just likes to run, I guess.

“On behalf of the city of Tempest,” he said with a friendly smile, “I welcome each and every one of you!”

Nice smile there. He must’ve learned it as part of his diplomatic efforts, and it put a professional service worker to shame. I appreciated it, especially given how we had our swords at the ready against these guys not long ago.

“We will prepare meals for all of you, so please let us know if there is anything you’d prefer not to have.”

I had to hand it to Rigurd’s zeal for study—making sure to check if anyone had any allergies or religious reasons to avoid certain foods. He must’ve been roping in adventurers and merchants while I wasn’t paying attention, learning about human culture and thought. Would anyone believe that this guy used to be a helpless goblin?

“Oh, um, there is no need to go out of your way for us…”

Hinata looked a bit awkward about this, preparing to turn the offer down, but we needed to talk about our future relations. It was already evening by now, so that talk would likely come the next day—and since they were here anyway, I couldn’t ignore a chance to advertise our city a little.

“Ah, don’t worry about it! We can talk in more detail tomorrow, so for today, let’s treat ourselves to a peacemaking party!”

“Oooh, a party! A fine idea. And with that will come fine drink, yes?”

Veldora, looking none the worse for wear after Luminus’s punishment, was naturally the first to react. He was in fine shape, after all, not that I had been concerned.

“Hmm… If this is a feast, I imagine I am invited as well?”

Whoa! Luminus, out of nowhere, was standing right next to me. And she was invited, of course, but were things really square with her and Veldora?

“Well, sure, but um… What do I call you? Lord Luminus?”

“Don’t be weird. Luminus is fine.”

I suppose it was. We were fellow Octagram members.

“All right. Luminus, then. And you’re safe calling me Rimuru, too. But about Veldora—”

“I will not forgive him. That much is certain. I’ve come here today to atone for what my servants have done. In deference to you, Rimuru, I will give the lizard his full punishment another day.”

Oooh. She’s just calling me straight Rimuru. I thought she’d act more high and mighty, but I guess she’s a lot more unaffected than that.

I was thinking about how I might just get along with her when Veldora started acting out again. And Luminus took the bait, of course.

“What?! I’ve had more than enough punishment!”

“Silence, you! I’ve already given you my concessions. Or if you’d prefer, we could settle this right here!”

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Very well! Allow me to show you the sheer scale of my might—”

They fought like cats and dogs. I wasn’t so sure they were enemies at all, really. Maybe the term frenemies was invented to describe this.

“Stop it, you idiot. No violent rages within city limits.”

I had to put my foot down. Otherwise, they’d be apt to tear the whole place down.

Luminus, at least, seemed to be happy, no doubt appreciating all the magicule energy she had sucked out of Veldora’s body. It seemed like she was letting bygones be bygones for now, so maybe it was best not to needlessly prod her. If she’s joining in the party, let’s give her the time of her life.

“So about this party— I wouldn’t expect the kind of first-class dining you’d get at Walpurgis, but are you okay with that?”

Luminus nodded, thankfully. “I did not attend the last one because I had a bad feeling about it…but that was not the only reason. My own team of cooks produce delicacies similar in quality to what you found over there. And eating is already optional for me; one simply gets bored of it over time. But you have rare and uncommon spirits here, no? Given how that lizard is already licking his lips, I must have a lot to look forward to.”

“Lady Luminus, do you not feel that is too careless of you?” an elderly servant of hers interjected.

I say elderly strictly in terms of outward appearance. He had extraordinarily good posture, and from the general aura he presented, I could tell this wasn’t some guy off the street. No, this servant was more comparable to Louis, standing adjacent.

Luminus gave this servant a dissatisfied look. “Why do you insist on opening your mouth constantly, Gunther? This is exactly why I didn’t want to take you.”

“Because it is my duty, my lady.”

“Well, enough of that. Rimuru seems like a sensible person to me. I’m not about to settle things with Veldora right here. There’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“But—”

“I said enough! You have no right to boss around a demon lord as old as I am! I bid you to go back ahead of me!”

Gunther gave a tired sigh to this show of force from his master. But he couldn’t defy her. After a few moments of thought, he carried out her orders.

“…I will return now, in that case.”

Luminus smiled. “Very good. Thank you, Gunther. You worry far too much. We have Louis and Hinata here.”

“I cannot help but worry about my princess,” he replied, looking at Louis. “I leave her in your hands, Louis.”

“Understood.”

Louis wasn’t too enthused about this, either. His expression didn’t change, but I could sense it anyway. Maybe Luminus was in the habit of using and abusing them both on a regular basis…or at least, that’s what the conversation suggested to me.

Regardless, Gunther vanished the moment he heard Louis’s reply. Once she was sure he was gone, Luminus brightened up.

“And now that I’ve swatted that bothersome gnat away, we have a party to enjoy!”

Thus, Hinata and everyone under her on hand was joining the feast—whether they wanted to or not. Nobody dared voice any disagreement—nobody was foolish enough to rile Luminus. That was how spectacular her fight with Veldora had been, really. It might’ve been a little light sparring from their perspective, but if any of the paladins got too close, it would’ve spelled disaster for them.

It’s a good thing I was around to stop them just now, or the fallout around town would’ve been catastrophic. Some of them had turned pale, contemplating what they had just narrowly avoided, while others hadn’t even realized the gravity of it all yet. Which—yeah—if you were a paladin, today’s myriad of events must’ve been mind-blowing. My battle with Hinata was superhuman enough as it was, but then we extinguished the Seven Days Clergy, and then they found out the god they worshipped all along was a demon lord… Then, to cap it off, the Veldora fight. It seemed to me that their faith in Hinata was the only thing that allowed them to keep it together, but this would take time for them to fully accept.

But hey, let’s all relax for today, okay?

Rigurd, perhaps picking up on this, clapped his hands a few times and began barking out orders, sending the townspeople around him scurrying in all directions. Some collected everyone’s horses; some approached the paladins to accept their weapons and armor; some gave out potions to the wounded. And I guess the paladins really did believe in Hinata, because once she handed her gear over, the rest all followed. Some were even trying out our recovery potion, acting shocked at the results.

I thought this was going to be harder, for some reason. But this was actually pretty chill.

“Now, it will be some time before the meal is ready, so why not take a bath first to take the grime off your bodies? We have rooms prepared for all of you, of course, so you may feel free to relax as well.”

The paladins didn’t seem to understand what any of that meant.

I knew the people of Englesia were in the habit of bathing regularly. I think the words used were all familiar to them. Hinata’s team members were using inns along the way, apparently, and they all definitely had baths. Perhaps they never imagined monsters wanting a dip now and then, too.

Well, prepare to be amazed, guys! The baths we got here will beat anything you’ll see in your capital, trust me. Really more of a hot spring, in fact, and I’ve got everything from a large pool-like room to private open-air baths. Just like a hot-spring-resort town back in Japan, I’ve got all kinds of different types to try out. It makes for killer advertising, and besides, it just feels good when you’re all tired out.

They’d also need some new clothes to change into, wouldn’t they? The simple gear under their armor was battered and torn, a hopeless mess after all the fighting they’d been through. A change of clothes should be good PR, too, I thought. Maybe some of the hemp-based jinbei shirt-and-shorts outfits we’d just developed? We had the more kimono-like yukata for the women, too—in a pretty broad color selection, even.

“Oh, don’t you worry,” Haruna told me with a grin. “Lady Shuna is already underway with preparations.”

I guess I had nothing to worry about. Let’s get going, then.

“All right, everyone. Please, enjoy our baths, the pride of our nation. The water is all pumped in from a natural spring, and I guarantee you’ll find it rejuvenating. Does absolute wonders for your skin, too.”

The salesman side of me was in full swing. Luminus swiftly took the bait.

“Ah, a bath? And good for the skin? Fascinating. I imagine you have saved your finest private bath chamber for me, yes?”

Um, private chamber?

And then I remembered. In the Dwarven Kingdom, as advanced as their tech was, personal steam baths were the common custom. They didn’t have bathhouses meant for use by great numbers of people at once. Englesia had public facilities like that, but Blumund didn’t. If the common people wanted to keep clean, after all, there were household magic spells for that, no water required. Every town had people who’d cast them on you for a nominal fee.

What all this meant was that, in this world, there’s no common, unified custom of drawing a bath and just soaking in it for a while. A private bath was a grand luxury, something that would only be possessed by the upper class—and even then only in nations with a large population of otherworlders. I kept forgetting that, given how my home nation installed baths even in one-bedroom apartments.

Luminus must’ve been anticipating some nobleman’s grandiose gilded chamber of delights, but I was gonna have to disappoint her. There was no telling how angry she’d be if I just guided her to our regular baths without explanation. I decided to address her misconceptions before anything else.

“No, um, we have baths that everyone can go in. Separated by gender, of course, but there’s also a mixed bath if that’s more of what you’re into…?”

I thought that would’ve been enough. But others reacted before her.

“…?!”

“What was that?!”

“Ah-haaa…”

Arnaud and the other male paladins had stars in their eyes. Heh-heh. Must’ve piqued their curiosity.

“Well, if you’re interested, right over there we have—”

I stopped midway. Hinata’s frigid stare was pointed right at me. She wasn’t falling for it.

“Lady Luminus, let’s go to a women’s bath. This will be my first hot spring visit in a while, so this is a very exciting opportunity.”

“Oh? Well, if you say so, Hinata, I will not stop you.”

I expected as much. But ah well. And here I was hoping I could join Hinata and Luminus for a… Wait, hang on. I shouldn’t give up yet, maybe. Arnaud and his cohorts looked profoundly disappointed, but it was a fool’s errand to expect the women to join the men in there. But what if it was just me?

“All right,” I said, giving the paladins a suitably sheepish look, “let me guide you to the women’s bath.”

I tried to walk away as casually as possible. But it wasn’t going to be that easy.

“Wait one moment. Why are you trying to take us there?”

“Why? You’re gonna need a guide, Hinata.”

No need to panic yet. Just keep calm. Make it seem natural.

“You don’t know the way there, do you? We have baths with different compositions of minerals and stuff. There’s even a sauna. I just thought it’d be prudent to explain how it all worked.”

I had once guided two of the Three Lycanthropeers through it all, I explained to them, after they’d expressed an interest. They loved it, so that was now the custom I took.

“So yeah, I thought I could give you a better picture of how great all this stuff is, you know?”

“Let me handle that, Sir Rimuru!”

I really didn’t need Shion’s support right now, thanks. Gotta take a firm stand.

“Oh, I dunno if I can rely on you alone, Shion.”

“What?!”

“But hey, come on! No need to be a stick in the mud. I’ll even join you in there.”

I tried to sound as chill as possible. Now my going around the women’s bath wouldn’t seem odd at all. Hee-hee-hee… Perfect. The perfect plan. Now I could join her in the—

“No, wait. You used to be a man, didn’t you? Why are you acting like it’s completely normal for you to join us in there?”

Erk.

She saw through it?!

I shouldn’t be able to sweat, but I swore I could still feel a cold sensation running down my back. Luminus joined Hinata’s skepticism, giving me a “Hmm?” and a focused look.

“Well, no, I mean…”

I was starting to panic, but before I could formulate a coherent thought:

“What is the matter with it? Sir Rimuru is Sir Rimuru!”

Shion, the one person I thought I couldn’t count on here, swooped in to back me up. That’s right! Keep it going! I tried to mentally encourage her, but—in the end—Shion was Shion, too.

“But you can guide us around, too, right?”

“Of course!”

“In that case, I’d like to ask you a favor, would you mind?”

“But…”

“Wouldn’t this be a good opportunity to prove to your leader that you can be relied upon?”

“Oh, I see!”

In distressingly short order, Hinata had cajoled Shion to join her side. Even worse, the two Lycanthropeers joining us chose that moment to speak up.

“Don’t worry, Shion. We’ll be there, too, so if you forget anything, we can help!”

“Quite so. We’ve become regulars at this point, so we know how it all works.”

“Sir Rimuru,” Shion replied, her mind made up, “please let me handle this!”

“Uh… Sure. Make me proud.”

Aw. And here I was hoping to get a look at Hinata’s lovely naked body…but at this point, giving up was the only option left. I had just lost the chance of a lifetime, and I had to face up to that, as much as it distressed me.

Pulling myself back together, I turned toward Benimaru.

“Pfft. Ah well. I’ll pay the men’s bath a visit for the first time in a while.”

That’s one thing I like to give myself credit for—my ability to mentally switch gears fast.

“Okay, who wants to scrub my back? Nothing like letting water from deep in the mountains take the sweat and fatigue away.”

“Allow me, sir…”

Benimaru and the gang loved the hot spring we’d all built together. Going in as a group now and then wasn’t such a bad thing.

“Kwah-ha-ha! Will you do my back then, Rimuru?”

“Why do I have to do something like that?!”

I had no interest in dealing with Veldora. Brushing him off, I took the lead as we all headed over.

The majority of paladins were male, nearly a hundred in all, but that was no problem for my main bathhouse facility. If there was just one room, that would fill it up, but we had several, allowing them all to bathe at once. I could tell some of them were nervous—it must’ve been exciting for them. I’d love to give ’em a bit of a shock.

As I walked on, thinking this over, I ran into Shuna.

“I’ve prepared the clothing—but why are you together with the gentlemen, Sir Rimuru?”

The question was casual enough, but her eyes weren’t smiling. It gave me pause.

“Oh, I just thought I’d join them in the baths.”

Shuna gave me a cute little grin. Uh-oh. Doesn’t that mean she’s incredibly angry?

“How do you mean?” she asked, sizing us up before squaring her gaze upon Benimaru and Soei. “I’m sorry, Sir Rimuru has an errand to handle, so I’m afraid he cannot join you. Also, Benimaru and Soei, I would like to speak with you later.”

“Er, um—”

“…”

The two fell silent under Shuna’s pressure. I wasn’t sure what this was about, but they must’ve felt it wise to avoid stoking her rage any further.

Me, meanwhile? I was being assigned to the bath in my detached house. How could it be? What set off Shuna like that? I had no idea, even as Shuna pointed me straight back home.

After wrapping up a quick bath, I decided to check on how our prep work was going.

We’d be using the banquet hall for the festivities. With all the events we’d been hosting lately, I had this hall hastily built for us; it had only just been completed. Basically, it looked like a circular domed stadium, about the size of a gymnasium inside. Internally, it was wide open, the floor lined with tatami mats. It was meant to serve as an evacuation site in case of emergency, so it could hold a fair number of people. We had a lot of space to work with, so we used steel frame to construct a building of a decent size and sturdiness, but over time, this was going to change to magisteel. Our nation, and all the powerful magic-born living in it, had a lot of natural advantages like that.

As I thought about this, food began to be delivered on serving trays, on a set of intricate-looking bowls like you’d see in a fancy restaurant. I had shown them how to knead clay into bowls like that, but then the children started imitating me, and nowadays you saw a lot of really impressive pieces. For colors, they made dyes out of herbal extracts or mixed weird ores into the clay, resulting in some dazzling work at times. The children’s output was being used in the homes of families across town.

It’s important to experiment with a lot of things, right? You never know what’s going to stick. The trays themselves were intricately detailed as well, made by Dold using processed wood from other projects. The kids started imitating that, too, and these days, handicraft sessions were part of regular recreation in Tempest.

Looking at it this way, from hot springs to the containers the food came in, my personal tastes were starting to show their presence everywhere. Compared with those first few days of chewing on grass, life had become unbelievably better for me. The food itself was really enjoyable now, too. I guess it’s easier to strive for something if you really feel like it’ll benefit you personally.

The main dish on tonight’s menu was tempura. Excellent. I mean, progressing this far was seriously moving to me. It looked perfect; it tasted amazing. All the work of Shuna in the galley. Definitely not Shion, it went without saying. Whether Shion had the Master Chef skill or not, one look at her attempts at cuisine and you knew she couldn’t be trusted with the responsibilities of a kitchen.

This tempura had also come about after I showed my memories to Shuna and we developed each component, piece by piece. And that wasn’t all. Fried chicken, hamburger, steak, croquettes, fried shrimp—I loved it all, and it went without saying that Milim did, too.

For someone like me, not that well versed in cooking, trying to explain the difference between fried shrimp and tempura was quite a challenge. In simple terms, all you’re doing is taking shrimp, coating it with batter, and frying it in oil—but the batter makes all the difference in texture and taste, you know? Frying can be done in a bunch of different ways, too, and trying to re-create that based on my (hazy) memories of look, and feel, and taste, proved fiendishly difficult. It took work, and now, thanks to Shuna’s efforts, it had come all the way here.

Englesia had a lot of good food to enjoy, but nothing I’d describe as Japanese. Guy Crimson had prepared a Western-style full-course meal for me, but I just didn’t see a lot of Asian influence in this world’s cuisine. One reason for that: Few of the Western Nations bordered an ocean, so seafood wasn’t in plentiful supply. Attempting to preserve the freshness of ingredients with magic, it was explained to me, took a massive investment that few were willing to make. Thus, even if you had otherworlders who ran kitchens back in Japan, they couldn’t do much without the right raw materials.

That made me recall the Japanese otherworlder, Yoshida, who ran that bakery and cake shop I liked in Englesia. He lamented how he used to enjoy making “drunken” cakes with gin, bourbon, and so on, but just couldn’t find anything like that in this world. I remember how excited he got after I told him I’d throw some his way.

Thinking about that made me realize just how blessed I was over here. Just because you have a recipe doesn’t mean you’ll pull it off flawlessly on the first try, after all. And with Japanese cuisine in particular, tracking down ingredients was a challenge. I’d do things like go to the sea and capture a bunch of different fish species to try to find an equivalent to make bonito flakes from. Having a skill like Spatial Motion made it possible to transport goods in as fresh a condition as possible, which greatly expanded what was available to us. (I wanted to build a transport network that wasn’t so dependent on magic skills, but that was a topic for the future.)

Cuisine, after all, is culture itself. If a nation doesn’t have a vibrant, expansive food culture, then if you ask me, what’s the point? Out of the three basic needs—food, clothing, and shelter—food was number one by far to me, although your mileage may vary.

This was why I was expending (some would say wasting) a lot of energy developing new dishes. Wheat-based grain was easier than I surmised at first. I saw loaves of white bread in the Englesian capital; if you were well-off enough to afford it, it seemed like a daily staple. Studying the production process for that got us bread in Tempest in relatively short order.

Right now, the main issue to tackle was white rice. We still hadn’t engineered something up to snuff taste-wise. Compared with what one saw in Japan, painstakingly curated and improved since ancient times, the quality just wasn’t there. That was expected; I wasn’t anticipating a sudden breakthrough for this one. Raising plants with magic, at least, sped up the harvests quite a bit, although research was still at a halt right now due to the winter season. For the moment, we just had a few experimental rice plants growing indoors, managed by researchers. Real results seemed like they’d be a while to come.

I actually did have a solution for this, though. When I asked Raphael about a potential answer, it gave it to me right off—basically, use Shion’s Master Chef skill to alter the resulting rice. Tinkering the final plant rather than the initial seeds, after all, made improving the quality quite a bit easier. But was that really the right thing to do? It wasn’t like anyone else could copy this method, and it seemed kind of ethically suspect to me…but given how much I relied on just that method to fine-tune our alcoholic drinks, I was in no position to moralize. Put my conscience and my appetite on the scales, and the latter’s gonna win every time.

Since we couldn’t ask Shion to alter every harvest for us, our research continued. But I did have her engineer a small supply of lovely white rice, though. Just a bit. Mainly for my personal consumption. Shion was more than glad to help, so I gave the bag to Shuna and had her steam it up for special occasions. Occasions like this one. I was entertaining a demon lord. Let’s live a little.

If I wanted to make our relationship a good one, I had to demonstrate how useful my nation could be. The carrot and the stick. When someone you don’t like treats you well for a change, your impression of them goes up much higher than it does with someone you’re already on good terms with. Imagine the ex–juvenile delinquent who volunteers to help out kids for charity—that kind of thing.

Maybe a little show like that could turn Luminus and crew to my side. I wasn’t sure the paladins would be that gullible, but appealing to people’s stomachs is a pretty classic—and effective—strategy to take. It was a tad underhanded, but it was also a great excuse to turn this evening’s feast into an extravaganza. And sure, the white rice might disagree with their palates—that particular element of our cuisine is more for me as a Japanese person—but I bet Hinata would appreciate it. It sure wowed me after going without it for a while.

Plus, who doesn’t like tempura? Nobody, that’s who. It was already a hit with the adventurers and merchants; Benimaru, in particular, was actually a huge fan. Clearly, there were no obstacles to its acceptance in this world.

As I reflected on this, the serving trays were all put in place. Now we just had to wait for the paladins to get out of the bath.

The place settings were lined up in the shape of the letter C, with three seats at the center—me in the middle, Veldora and Luminus on either side. It gave me a view of everyone at the banquet, with the paladins and our city’s officials facing each other along the arc. This had the nuance of an informal gathering, so I wanted to be sure people could all see one another.

Soon, the paladins were ushered into the banquet hall. They had just come out from the bath, wearing the yukata and jinbei prepared for them. It must’ve been a novel experience, but they looked comfortable for the most part. You’d be hard-pressed to find something even more relaxing to wear around the house, after all—kind of like lounging around in sweats all day.

They all seemed a bit on edge as they were guided inside. The lack of tables and chairs must have thrown them, not to mention the custom of taking off their footwear before going up on the tatami floor. The goblinas guiding them along were in their element, however, demonstrating some pretty surprising elegance. Vester must’ve been teaching them well. I could tell some of the paladins weren’t sure what to make of them.

Luminus sat down first, the picture of high society as she settled next to me. Louis was next, a practical mirror image of the former demon lord Roy and every bit as dignified as his papal rank suggested. Third was Hinata, who (after sitting down) looked at me, determined.

“I have to apologize for all the trouble we’ve given you. What happened today, as well as the last time we met, was thanks to my own poor judgment. It wasn’t an order from Lady Luminus, and my paladins are not responsible for it. I don’t know if you can find it in yourself to forgive me, but—”

“Whoa, stop right there!”

I had to stop her before she started kowtowing to me on the tatami. Our first encounter? Yeah, that was all her fault. But our most recent rumble was all a misunderstanding, the Seven Days guys pulling the strings behind it, and Luminus had already taken care of them. And with Diablo wrapping things up over in Farmus as well, I saw no reason to keep dragging out the issue.

That’s why I stepped up to interrupt her. But then I made an astonishing new discovery. I… I thought I could see it—the smoothly undulating twin peaks, unfolding underneath her partially opened yukata!! Slightly flushed after the bath and so supremely captivating!

I hadn’t deliberately tried for that, but man, talk about good timing! Was this Raphael at work?

Understood. That is not the case.

That reply sounded a little cold to me, but it didn’t matter. Oh, man. I was starting to feel…adventurous. Now would normally be when I began sporting wood, but that thing was long gone. Ah well. A man never leaves his sense of adventure behind! Good thing I don’t get nosebleeds in this body, either.

A yukata, though, huh? Wow. Talk about packing a punch. A woman, fresh from the bath, in a yukata. There’s just no beating that. And if that woman was as beautiful as Hinata, the fearsome synergy that results…

…Well, she got me. I gave in. Defeated. I’d forgive her for anything she’d done. In fact, I already had.



“Sir Rimuru, where are you looking?”

Shuna had paused her serving, looking at me with a smile. It was strange. Her voice sounded so gentle, but something about it seemed as frozen as ice.

“No, no, nowhere! But, Hinata… If that misunderstanding’s all cleared up, then we’re all good, I promise! If you could just drop your prejudices against monsters, then all the better!”

Hinata appeared lost for a moment at my forced change of subject, but then wordlessly nodded.

I knew I was asking a lot, really. A monster, in essence, was kind of like a violent offender with a gun in his hand. If you believe one without question and innocent people get killed later, you have to recognize that you set yourself up for failure. Maybe we could speak to each other, and maybe that didn’t mean we could really understand…but this town could make it work. People were believing me and trying to play nice with humans—even after Shion and Team Reborn had been killed by human hands.

“I mean, I know you won’t trust me that easily or anything. You never know what the other side’s really thinking, and I guess some monsters can be a lot slyer and more conniving than others. If you’re a defender of humanity, you can’t afford to be tricked all the time.”

“…True. Conversation is the first step to a common understanding, but it can lead to some dangerous transactions. You run the risk of making commitments that bind you, heart and soul.”

“Yeah, I bet. But if you can at least not declare that all monsters are evil, we’re totally fine with that. And if you got a monster you’re iffy about, we’ll take ’em in. If human society can’t accept ’em, they’ll be fine here.”

That was about the best compromise I could give. Any monsters deemed suspect could easily be taken into Tempest. Here in town, at least, we could be sure they wouldn’t cause any trouble…assuming we could reason with the guy anyway.

“All right. I don’t think our thoughts are going to change if I snap my fingers, but I will prohibit my ranks from condemning all monsters as evil. Is that all right with you, Lady Luminus?”

“I care not for such trivial matters. But if it leads citizens to doubt their faith in me, I will not stand for that.”

“Very well. I will observe that as our first priority.”

Luminus seemed convinced. Given how the Holy Empire of Lubelius was wholly built around the people’s faith in the god Luminus, any cracks in that faith could affect the entire foundation of that belief. That religion holds great sway over the Western Nations. I could understand Hinata’s caution.

If anything, though, I feel like Luminus underestimated the influence she had on people. She goes on about how she “will not stand” for things, but then she acts like she’s above it all and none of it matters. Maybe being bandied around as a supreme being wasn’t Luminus’s intention at all. I could just have been overthinking it, but it seemed like Louis was the de facto head of government, and Hinata did pretty much all her errands for her. Even all this drama was perpetrated by the Seven Days.

But… Really, though? An old demon lord who’s ruled in the shadows for so long was really just a lazy girl palming off responsibility on others? No way, no how. She reminded me of the style I was aiming for with Tempest—“Let the king reign, not govern”—so I couldn’t help thinking about it.

Now Hinata’s eyes were turned toward my officials. “I must thank all of you as well. I promise I will not treat you as hostile enemies simply for being monsters.”

She bowed her head deeply, and the other paladins hurriedly followed her lead, shouting “We’re sorry!” together.

“Please, think nothing of it,” Rigurd said. “Were it not for Sir Rimuru’s orders, we would have considered humans our foes as well.”

In other words, my orders had changed their minds. For a goblin who’s just trying his best to stay alive, I’m sure anyone who doesn’t look like you is an enemy.

“I am just glad you aren’t against us,” said Benimaru with a bold grin. “I saw your battle against Sir Rimuru, and I doubt even I could have defeated you.”

The fact that his attention was devoted to combat was certainly very Benimaru-like. Soei nodded his solemn agreement next to him.

The world of monsters has always had a broad “survival of the fittest” streak to it; if you’re deemed the enemy and killed for it, it’s your own fault for being weaker. That’s how Soei’s mind worked, and he had no particular grudge against the paladins.

Shion, meanwhile, was dubious. Hinata’s apology must have confused her.

“Here, Shion, you forgive her, too. I understand your pain and anger, but it’s not like every human being on earth is evil. You have some bad guys and some good guys. That’s all there is to it. And monsters are the same way; you have to get a closer look if you want to really know anything. Plus, humans are capable of overcoming their mistakes. And not just them, either, right? Us too. What’s important is what’s in your soul, isn’t it?”

Instead of dividing all living things into humans and monsters, it was more important to see how they lived, what existed in their souls. I wanted Shion to understand that, but my pleas seemed to just unnerve her even more. Humans, I suppose, really were evil to her. I just didn’t want her to think they were all that way. She was following my orders for now, but there’s no telling when her frustrations would explode. I couldn’t have that. Instead of just following my orders, I wanted her to move and act on her own free will.

But perhaps I was too worried. In a single moment, Shion threw away all her hesitation. She never was one for thinking about matters too deeply.

“All right!” she blurted out. “Just like you, Sir Rimuru, I will judge good and bad people based on their souls!”

She beamed, as if unshouldering some heavy burden. Maybe she had just climbed over some kind of tall barrier in her mind. It’s not like I could see anyone’s souls, exactly, but if that won over Shion, then great.

Team Reborn didn’t seem to have any issues, either. There was no apparent bad blood with the paladins, and like Shion, I think they had it in them to judge people on their own merits. Nice of them. I sure was proud.

So then it was settled. I accepted the apology and let the mistakes fall into the past. The borderline between forgivable and unforgivable was always tricky to discern, but we had made up well enough this time. If you can speak the same language as the other side, it’s always possible for both of you to accept each other’s feelings.

But enough of this gloomy stuff. All this food we prepared wouldn’t be nearly as good cold—and considering Veldora’s lack of a role so far, keeping him waiting any longer would just piss him off and make my life a hassle.

He wasn’t supposed to require food at all, I didn’t think, but from the moment of his resurrection, he had been demanding it for some reason. His love for cakes and such was already common knowledge, but he whined at me a lot about other types of cuisine as well. I knew he was revved up about the feast we had for tonight. Let’s get him involved.

But before that, a toast. I made one up on the spot to get things started.

“Well, here’s to the battles we’ve all fought—and all the ones to come. Cheers!”

A nice, cold mug, straight from the hot bath. No better moment in your life. And I was prepared, of course—we had all the treasured liquor my nation had to offer, and there would be no holding back. No mistake about it.

Wine was the staple drink in Englesia, I had learned. Beer existed, but it just wasn’t very good. It lacked carbonation and the aroma from the bubbles, and being served at room temperature did it no favors, either. My nation had conquered all those problems—don’t let anyone tell you I didn’t have a passion for food. After all this research, day and night, our selection of offerings was now far more robust than it was when I first visited the Dwarven Kingdom. Sheesh—it’s almost like I say something, and they immediately begin development on it. Was this because I was a demon lord now? Actually, I guess it was kind of always this way…

…Well, regardless, my beloved monsters were doing their very best for me, and as a result, my diet was now no different from when I lived in Japan. The food in Tempest is seriously good, trust me. I figured the paladins would be blown away, and I was right.

We kicked things off by having a group of women, all well versed in holding banquets like this, pour drinks for everyone. The first mouthful was a surprise to them, I could tell, but the moment they tucked into their food, they paused and looked at the others around them to gauge their responses. The taste must have astonished them. I grinned to myself, relieved.

Tempura was the main dish, but we also offered seafood—some freshly prepared sashimi. We had found something close to soybeans, so we even had some ersatz soy sauce to go with it—another fruit of Shuna’s labor. It wasn’t a perfect match flavor-wise, but you wouldn’t notice unless you knew the real thing. To someone trying it for the first time, this was what it was supposed to be. Soy sauce came in all kinds of varieties anyway, so maybe there was something like this produced by some local outfit in Japan, for all I knew. Either way, I was more than satisfied.

Preparing sashimi had become a specialty of Hakuro’s. He wasn’t with us tonight, but a number of chefs had been training under him. That whole process—developing the next generation of kitchen staff—was going pretty well, too. You could see them improve as time passed, their offerings growing more diverse and mouthwatering by the day.

It was an entirely Japanese-style meal, but nearly everyone in the hall seemed to enjoy it. Hinata, in particular, looked like she was having a life-changing moment, putting her inexperienced paladins to shame as she expertly used her chopsticks to eat. Then she turned to me, likely noticing my attention on her.

“Don’t you think this is going too far?”

“Too far how?!”

I wasn’t expecting this complaint. It kind of annoyed me, so I fired back. This triggered a rant that must have been building for a long time.

“We stopped at a tavern on the way here that had ramen and gyoza dumplings. You offer free fresh water on the highway. This is supposed to be a remote forest, and yet you’ve built these enormous bathhouses. And now this! How did you even find fresh sashimi in the middle of a huge forest? And going out of your way to find these wild plants for tempura… Don’t you find that crazy at all?!”

I had definitely broken her cool facade. Man. Wasn’t expecting that.

“Well, um, I wanted to eat it, so—”

“What?”

“I… I mean, I wanted to eat it, so I tried remaking it for myself. And the sashimi… You know, we’re on good terms with the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania, and they’ve got a coastline, so I had some fish brought over. We don’t really have the logistics for refrigerated transport yet, though, so that kind of thing’s still skill-dependent. But what’s the harm in splurging a little bit?”

“Skill-dependent?”

I gave her a reassuring nod.

The skill in question was Gourmet, a unique one possessed by Geld that granted him a Stomach to pass items between high orcs. Food couldn’t be ferried around with teleportation magic, but skills didn’t have any such restrictions. Of course, we still only brought enough over to cover this banquet; the high orcs were too busy with construction projects across the forest to handle every passing fancy of mine. A few of them taking some R & R in town had offered their personal support for the project, but my reliance on individual skills for the job was a weak point I intended to address in the future.

Hinata listened to my defense, looking a bit exasperated. “…Right.” She sighed, resigned. “With a skill, you could transport that stuff without altering it at all…and you have a lot of people in this nation who can handle the job. I just can’t believe you’re using all this for yourself, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.”

That sounded a bit rude to me, but ah well. I suppose I had answered Hinata’s question, but I didn’t really see what her problem was with it. If something’s available to use, why not use it?

“Well,” interrupted Luminus, “what is the harm in it, Hinata? No matter the story behind it, there is no doubting how delicious this all is. I, for one, am very impressed.”

She had a cup in her hand and looked to be well on her way, alcohol-wise, as she scarfed down another piece of tempura. She was grabbing them with her fingers but still somehow managed to look elegant doing it. Which was fine. If you weren’t offending anyone, you could eat any way you liked. You can’t force chopsticks on someone who has never seen them before.

And speaking of which, that was actually kind of a thorny problem. Benimaru and the other ogres could work with chopsticks just fine, and the monsters of Tempest had largely learned by watching us. This wasn’t the case for the merchants and adventurers who came from foreign lands. I was contemplating inviting nobility from across the world to build ourselves into a travel hot spot, so I wanted to be sure chopsticks remained an optional selection for them.

Along those lines, Luminus was proving an interesting research subject. You could use a knife and fork, a pair of chopsticks, or your fingers, and while hot food required chopsticks, she otherwise had no qualms about eating with her hands. Different types of food were eaten in different ways, after all, and there was no reason to put our visitors off by insisting on some “foreign” way of eating. Maybe it’s best to just say “Hey, we can eat this way, too,” then wait as the habit gradually takes hold.

“Do you like our offerings?” I asked Luminus.

“I do. Very much. The food is extraordinary—and the drink as well.”

The observation made me realize that Luminus was downing the alcohol at an alarming speed. Milim was pretty strong, but Luminus was a powerhouse, knocking back any cup offered alongside her tempura.

“Glad to hear. But try to go easy, okay? Too much isn’t good for you.”

“Fool. I am impervious to all poisons—alcohol is no danger to me. In fact, at the moment, I am trying my hardest to lessen the effect of Cancel Poison so I can get drunk off this!”

I suppose my warning was pointless. But “weakening” Cancel Poison?

“Y-you can do something like that?”

“Of course. Stop playing dumb.”

She must’ve thought I was kidding, but I insisted she teach me how that worked.

…

Oops. Sounds like Raphael is in a huff about something. Ignoring it, I followed Luminus’s instructions and attempted to shrink down my own resistances. The moment I did, I could feel the intoxication sneaking into my mind. Yes! Yes! This is what drunkenness feels like!

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! You couldn’t even do that, Rimuru? I mastered that much eons ago!”

Veldora seemed proud of himself. I didn’t know where he practiced it, but he was now in a marvelous state of inebriation.

“Right!” I shouted. “Another round!”

“Yes. Let me join you.”

“Silly boys.” Luminus sniffed. “But if you two insist, I suppose I will have a refill as well.”

Now things were heating up. I could almost hear Shuna rolling her eyes as she said “Oh, Sir Rimuru…,” but she still grinned and poured out the drink. We were all much less formal now.

All the adult beverages we made locally were on offer, along with fresh water and as many ice cubes as you wanted. There was juice and tea available for the nondrinkers, too. Haruna was keeping Veldora’s cup full, while Louis did the same for Luminus. There was a drinking contest brewing between Benimaru, Shion, and Soei, as well as among the Lycanthropeers and between Arnaud and his fellow top paladin officers. Those paladins were pretty snooty at first, but once their commanding officer Arnaud began sampling all the wares on hand, they loosened up considerably. Some were now amicably chatting with Rigurd and the rest, and a few of them asked the waitstaff for more food.

One demonstrated interest in trying some of the food the monsters on hand were enjoying. Fritz was his name, I think, a Crusader commander alongside Arnaud and one of the Ten Great Saints. Nicer guy than I thought at first blush, I guess. Expressing an interest in what other people are eating is the first step toward understanding them. It was a nice sight to see.

But that was… I thought for a moment. The drink was starting to make it tough. He’s talking about that black rice, isn’t he?

This “black rice” was made using a type of plant raised on magicule water—the highly magical water found inside the Sealed Cave. I suggested trying that out as an experiment, and it resulted in rice that looked like an octopus squirted ink all over it. For someone like me, who enjoyed his rice hot, white, and fluffy, it looked absolutely gross—but it tasted good. Really good, in fact. It was also packed with nutrients, surprisingly, so we called the crop blackspell rice and moved into full production of it.

It was now a staple of Tempestian cuisine, but I was pretty sure there was some kind of issue with it I was forgetting—

“Whoa!” I shouted, alarmed all the way back to sobriety. “That stuff’s poisonous to humans!”

Unfortunately, I was too late. Fritz already had some in his mouth. And his first reaction:

“Why, this… This is restoring my magical force!”

“Um, do you feel all right? Not sick or anything?”

A weaker being taking in large quantities of magic could have hazardous health effects. This blackspell rice was packed with magicules, which meant it was toxic to those with less-than-robust constitutions. Of course, it could also be a medicine in the right dosage—and like I said, potentially a dietary staple. Nobody in Tempest would have an issue with it, but I still hadn’t tested out what it did to humans. Finding test subjects wasn’t exactly easy.

Fritz’s reaction, however, was unexpected to me. I assumed it’d be harmful to Homo sapiens, but maybe it’s beneficial to you if you have enough magical force?

Understood. The subject Fritz’s magic power–recovery effect has been confirmed. Those with resistance to magicules seem to be able to convert them into energy.

Ah, I see. Maybe eating this now, after exhausting his magic in that huge fight, made it all the more effective.

The other paladins, seeing this, immediately clamored for tastes of their own. Having a few pints in you could be a dangerous thing sometimes; none were afraid of the side effects. So I agreed.

Hinata gave the blackspell rice a funny look, likely reacting the same way I did at first. But without further complaint, she sipped from the bowl of chazuke, consisting of the black rice with some tea poured on top of it. I also offered it in rice-ball form for those who wanted something a little heartier. Both selections were huge hits, and a second round was carried out to the party in very short order. Considering that I busted out my personal stash of white rice for this event, it was funny to see the blackspell rice be the toast of the night instead—but hey, if you aren’t conditioned to be turned off by the color like I was, it must’ve been much more acceptable.

So now I knew what this new breed of rice could do, and between that and all the other food and drink, I thought we were making a pretty good impression. I was starting to see monsters and paladins chatting with each other, taking advantage of the opportunity presented to them. Shion was even engaged in an impromptu arm-wrestling tournament with three of the paladins—dominating them, by the looks of it, but her opponents were all smiles regardless. I liked the trends I saw. Alcohol played no small role in it, perhaps, but if this became the natural flow of things, it wouldn’t be long before we’re all on friendly terms.

Good things to eat, enjoyable days to spend—that was my goal, and I wasn’t afraid to strive for it. If I have any job here, I suppose, it’s to make sure this sight doesn’t go extinct. It gave me new resolve.

Then:

“What are you doing, Rimuru?! Drink up, drink up! Let me fill your cup!”

“Yes, yes! You have the demon lord Luminus accompanying you! Let us enjoy this evening as much as we can!”

“Wh-whoa,” I said, “chill out, Veldora. Also, aren’t you a vampire, Luminus? Why are you eating and getting drunk and—?”

“Silence, you fool! Once you grow powerful enough, even a vampire can gain sustenance enough from regular food. Now hurry up and empty your mug!”

That wasn’t what I was getting at, but she was in no mood to listen. So there I was, two drunken louts on both sides of me, feeling that newfound resolve disappear from my mind.

“Guys! Hey!”

Before I could stop them, they were taking shots from the sake we brewed from the blackspell rice. “Slow it down, you two,” I thought I heard Hinata curtly whispering at them—she had a faint smile, though, so maybe the booze was giving me auditory hallucinations. She was kind of cute, actually, when she smiled—not that I was gonna tell her.

Morning came. God, my head hurt.

Understood. Of course it does. This is the backlash after deliberately weakening your resistances.

Thanks for the feedback, man. Raphael sounded a bit peeved, but I was sure I was imagining it. Nobody’s skills get mad at them.

I shook the mental cobwebs away. Today we had an important meeting to conduct—one that could decide how Tempest and the Holy Empire of Lubelius dealt with each other going forward.

I was now seated in our usual meeting hall, soldiering through my headache.

Honestly speaking, if things had turned out differently, we might’ve been fighting both Lubelius and the Western Nations affiliated with it. The Papacy had given the Temple Knights stationed in Farmus permission to act, and if worse came to worse, the casualties on our side would’ve been eye-popping. If you thought about it like that, we couldn’t afford to be too chill here.

On the other hand, though, I was done punishing Farmus. Not a single one of the Temple Knights who conspired against us was breathing today. We had a duty to govern over there, so I wasn’t exactly an impartial observer…but Hinata had already apologized to me, and the masterminds who schemed against us were already gone. If we could build friendly relations, we were golden. There wasn’t much point asking for reparations—we already had plenty of that from Clayman’s and Farmus’s coffers, and Farmus was physically far enough away from us that annexing it or making it into some kinda colony was too much of a pain. If the other side had admitted fault, money honestly wasn’t as important to me as working to build relations.

In time, Luminus and her people entered the hall.

Tempest was represented here by me, Shion, Rigurd, and Benimaru, along with Rugurd, Regurd, and Rogurd, the government ministers of justice, legislation, and administration, respectively. Veldora was there, too, but safely ignorable. He had some manga to read, and I doubted he’d even bother to pay attention.

From Lubelius, meanwhile, we had Luminus, Louis, Hinata, and the five top paladin officials. I had them all make their formal introductions. There was Vice Captain Renard, the Noble of Light. There was Arnaud of Air, the strongest of the force after Hinata, and under him was Bacchus of Earth, Litus of Water, and Fritz of Wind. I had us all seated facing one another, and with that, the proceedings began.

I wanted to start with a brainstorm session to see what each side’s takes were on this situation. Along those lines, I created a list of issues affecting all of us and passed them out to everyone to kick things off. This was just to ensure we were all on the same page; I didn’t want to turn this conference into a blame game, so if we disagreed on how we saw matters, I wanted it fixed as soon as possible, and so did Hinata.

Our respective stances were about what I figured.

To us, of course, the whole story began with Farmus’s invasion of our land. Our view of this hadn’t changed; all we did was respond to moves made by the other side.

On the Church’s end, Hinata told us that problems actually began before Farmus’s request to them. Essentially, acknowledging the existence of a nation of monsters went against the teachings of Luminism, a pressing issue that threatened to cast doubt on the faith of its believers. Leaving this unaddressed could trigger internal revolt and weaken the foothold the Western Holy Church had on the region. That’s why they had to destroy the monster nation, and that was why they needed a just cause, a good reason to conquer us.

“That was the situation when we received the request from Archbishop Reyhiem, who was in Farmus at the time,” Hinata explained. “Cardinal Nicolaus gave his approval, and I had no objections to it—and besides, I still wanted to get back at you.”

She intended, in other words, to take advantage of Farmus’s greed and seize the opportunity to annihilate us and gain revenge.

“Was that about Shizu?”

“Yes, it was. I suppose I was just being used, though, looking back. I don’t know who is operating behind the scenes, but there are definitely Eastern merchants involved.”

“Merchants? I knew it. Clayman had a merchant or two he was particularly close to as well. Given how well armed Geld and his orcish army was, I assumed they were connected to one nation or another. I guess it was the East, then.”

I nodded, convinced. Judging by the account books I had Shuna look into, Clayman was dealing in a vast amount of merchandise—mainly goods from the Empire, originally crafted in the Dwarven Kingdom. That wasn’t suspicious, since the Empire and kingdom had regular trade with each other—but there were no records at all of the middlemen involved in this. Shuna was thorough in her work, but she couldn’t find any of them, even after we asked the assorted officials we took prisoner. Clayman was careful, no doubt drumming it into his force that no evidence should ever be left behind. We found absolutely nothing on the Moderate Jesters, either, the group closely affiliated with him.

Still, we could make educated guesses about who was involved. In Clayman’s castle, we found a collection of artwork, rare magic items, and other such goods, brought in from around the world. The weapons and armor we discovered, however, were chiefly hand-me-downs from the Empire. They had teleportation magic, so they could’ve procured weapons from anywhere they wanted, but they got almost all of it in from the East. That suggested close connections, and while the evidence was circumstantial, it was still persuasive.

That and their food supply. Clayman’s bases across the land held enormous stashes of fruit, bread, dairy, and luxury goods like alcohol. Being organic, they couldn’t be teleported; physical transport was a must with them. Clayman’s domain, the Puppet Nation of Dhistav, apparently used slave labor for most of its agricultural output, but not everything we found in these stores was domestically produced—according to Shuna, some of it had to be imported from beyond their borders. The only real candidate for this was the Eastern Empire, adjacent to Dhistav. Milim’s domain, after all, was self-sufficient to the point that she barely even considered international trade—hell, she and the ex–demon lord Carillon didn’t even have currency to exchange.

So I had my suspicions that Clayman was linked to people from the Eastern Empire.

“That’s right,” Hinata said. “They told me you killed Shizu, and you happened to be stationed in Englesia. That’s why I took the initiative to kill you.”

“Yeah. You couldn’t have picked a worse time, either. Even now, it still pisses me off when I think about it.”

Hinata shivered a bit. Arnaud and the other paladins looked similarly cowed.

“Enough coercion, you upstart brat. I can feel the Lord’s Ambition coming from you.”

Whoops! As Luminus just pointed out, a bit of my aura was leaking out. I was pretty good at keeping it perfectly under my control, but I guess it gets kind of loose whenever I’m angry.

“So,” I began after apologizing, “it’s pretty clear an Eastern merchant or merchants is behind this. Do we know any names?”

“I know one. He called himself Dahm, but I’m sure that’s an alias.”

An alias? Probably so. But the name didn’t really matter. What did matter was narrowing the culprit down to the Empire’s merchant class.

“So this merchant was connected to Clayman, and I’m willing to bet he and his people are the guys who set Farmus’s King Edmaris on us, too.”

“No, there’s no doubting that. Reyhiem made that much clear enough in our questioning.”

I nodded. “Okay, so it’s clear Clayman was controlling Farmus from behind the curtain. Not in a cooperative kind of way, either. It seems more coercive to me.”

“And you think the Eastern merchants were his boots on the ground?” Benimaru asked.

“And I suppose I was just another cog in the machine,” whispered Hinata.

I could sense her anger. The question was: Who drew up the plans?

“Well, based on how these merchants were involved with every step of this, I’m sure this was more than just a convenient business relationship. Clayman was trying to ascend to ‘true’ demon lord level. Farmus was trying to take our land for its own expansionist purposes. And someone, we don’t know who, was engineering it all.”

“Someone, huh? The one Clayman mentioned?”

I nodded at Luminus.

“What do you mean?”

Benimaru and the others already knew about this, but the humans in the room didn’t. Realizing this, I gave them a quick recap.

“Well, it looks like Clayman was doing the bidding of someone else himself.”

“Yes,” Luminus added, “and he refused to divulge this someone’s identity until the very end. Impressive for someone as small-minded as him.”

“Oh…”

“Could this someone be the Seven Days, then?”

The idea came to me suddenly, and when I gave it voice, it felt even more plausible. But Luminus shot me a dirty look.

“What? Are you accusing the Seven Days of taking action unbeknownst to me?”

She might have wiped them off the planet by her own hand, but I guess she didn’t like people second-guessing her staff. That was fair. I was about to apologize when her associate Louis spoke up.

“Hmm… I cannot fully deny that possibility, no.”

“Now you’re spouting that nonsense, Louis?”

Her ire had turned on Louis, though he appeared unbothered.

“Lady Luminus, please, listen to me. The Seven Days Clergy craved your affection. I’m sure you sensed that?”

“How do you mean?”

“I am talking about the Love Energy, the energizing kiss you give in a special ceremony. The last time you did that for them, it was over a hundred years ago. At one point, it was a weekly rite, but the intervals between them grew longer and longer over time. Did you not notice?”

Luminus gave Louis an unpleasant look. “Aha. Yes, my eternal youth tends to make me forget, but they all were human. Without my energy, they may not die, but they would certainly grow old.”

“Exactly. That was why they worked so fervently to ensure no other ‘favorites’ besides them ever appeared.”

As Louis frankly put it, the Seven Days were once a very special presence in Luminus’s life. But as humans, they couldn’t live forever. This Love Energy rite must’ve been how they overcame that.

“…I subsequently imagine that they must have tried to curry favor with you. It wouldn’t be strange at all to imagine them working with the Eastern merchants to secretly entice Clayman into action. They weren’t about to let Clayman get a leg up on them—especially Gren, the Sunday Priest.”

It was just a passing thought, but it kind of surprised me how well these puzzle pieces fit together. Scary stuff. I’m shocked at the sheer well of knowledge flowing out from me.

…

Raphael sounded like it wanted to say something, but I’m sure I was just imagining things. Maybe it was just envious of my genius, or maybe it thought I’d stolen its thunder because I didn’t ask any questions of it.

“Do you think,” an exasperated Hinata asked, “the Seven Days thought I was a thorn in their side because of that?”

“Sounds like it. They probably intended to help Clayman ascend, then have you get killed fighting him. They could never have defeated you, after all, so I don’t think they had much other choice.”

It wasn’t a totally far-out concept. Step one, have Clayman defeat Hinata. Step two, either kill off Clayman somehow or operate him like a puppet. I couldn’t say what they wanted to do with him, but Clayman’s faith in them was genuine—if they could get Hinata out of the picture, Clayman would do anything the Seven Days wanted. Meanwhile, they’d have Farmus wipe us out and firm up the foundations Luminism worked with, naturally making sure everyone got to share in the resulting profits. A nation as big as Farmus mobilizing would mean big money for Eastern armor and weapon dealers. Plus, more than anything else, the Seven Days would be back on Luminus’s good side.

I didn’t want to jump to conclusions too early, but the possibility of all this seemed worthy of consideration to me.

“So you think they pitted me against you in hopes I’d be defeated?” Hinata asked, interested in Louis’s theory. “Between that and protecting the tenets of Luminism, I suppose it’d be two birds with one stone.”

This gave me another idea.

“But are we really sure the Seven Days were behind that?”

“There’s no doubting it,” replied Renard, seated next to Hinata. “It was the Clergy who introduced us to those merchants in the first place.”

That certainly cast more suspicion on them. Having such a heroic band make the introduction, nobody would ever doubt their intentions—which would make it easier for the Clergy to reach their goals. I’m not sure they’d thought it out all the way like that when I fought Hinata for the first time, but the second? They definitely wanted me to kill her. Those conniving bastards. It scared me a bit, but they were all gone anyway, so it was water under the bridge.

“…But hang on. There were seven people in the Clergy, right? Isn’t one of them still left?”

Hinata seemed pretty at ease as far as the Clergy were concerned, but thinking about it, this wasn’t over yet at all. Whoever the final survivor was had to be up to their ears in this. It unnerved me, but Hinata just flashed me a cold smile.

“Ha-ha! Nothing to worry about there. Nicolaus contacted me from his sanctum to say the final one had also been eradicated. It happened after they discovered that the crystal ball you sent had been tampered with. That was enough evidence to execute him.”

The thin smile that accompanied her words would be enough to make anyone feel threatened. The sight of this beautiful woman talking about such sinister conspiracies was probably one reason it was easy to get the wrong idea about her. But anyway.

“Okay, but who was this last guy?”

I hated to think it, but it wasn’t Gren, right? The Sunday Priest fabled to be stronger than even Clayman? Because if so, it meant I’d need to keep a careful eye out for this Nicolaus guy, too.

“I was told it was Gren, the Sunday Priest and chief of the Clergy. He almost never took the initiative on anything by himself, so it made sense he was the last one left.”

Luminus’s ears perked up. “Oh? Old Granville was defeated? Nicolaus… That cardinal was infatuated with you, wasn’t he? How did he do it?”

“It wasn’t the most heroic approach,” Louis replied, “but he had a Disintegration spell set up in advance, and it was enough of a surprise move to do him in.”

“Ahhhh… Granville must have aged terribly, if he fell for a trap like that.”

She sounded sad about it, but my mind was on other matters. Unfortunately, it seemed that I would need to add a new entry to my mental list of people to watch out for. It might’ve been a surprise move, but I couldn’t let my guard down. Disintegration was lethal against most people. Cardinal Nicolaus… Let’s remember that name.

“By the way, Lady Luminus, by Granville, do you mean Gren?”

Hinata had a thoughtful expression. The name Granville must have rung a bell.

“That I do,” Luminus replied. “His real name is Granville. He was known as the Hero of Light in his glory days. He even fought me once.”

For a god, Luminus acted so oddly innocent at times. I might’ve been imagining it, but sometimes it felt like she was trying to act all high and mighty and not quite succeeding all the time. Was all this, you know…an act?

Then I felt it: her eyes, dead upon me.

Yep, I was just imagining things! So much for that suspicion.

“Did he…? I-I’m sure it couldn’t be, but…”

Hinata seemed to have an idea in mind, but she must not have been fully sure about it, because she went no further.

“He was pretty strong in the past,” she instead recalled. “Up to my level, in fact.”

“You could say that,” answered Luminus. “Anyone who calls themselves a Hero usually finds themselves bound by fate soon enough. Perhaps he resented me, somewhere deep in his heart.”

Perhaps, indeed. Just like Milim told me, Heroes and demon lords often intertwined. Granville was defeated by the demon lord Luminus, opting to swear his allegiance to her instead. Deep down, though, he might’ve had mixed feelings about her—feelings he couldn’t escape from, even after becoming a living legend who brought many champions in their own right into the world. But at this point, it was all just guesswork.

“Well,” I said, “that’s a relief, at least. It means that everyone who picked a fight with us—Clayman, Farmus, the Seven Days Clergy—they’ve all met their end.”

Benimaru and my other officials nodded their agreement. “All’s well that ends well,” Rigurd eagerly commented with a smile.

“You said it,” I replied, returning the smile as I felt the tension escape the hall. “We had to deal with a lot of dangerous foes, but at this point, most of the problems are safely behind us. But I sure don’t want anyone controlling me behind the scenes. If we hadn’t noticed these merchants scheming in the shadows, I honestly would’ve started to suspect Yuuki.”

Yuuki was pretty suspicious. When it came to humans in Englesia with deep ties to Hinata, Yuuki was the prime candidate. I felt bad about it, but I couldn’t take him off the list.

“Yuuki?” Renard asked. “Yuuki Kagurazaka, the guild master?”

“Yeah,” I answered with a nod.

Thinking about it impartially, it made sense. He was the prime suspect at the time. But Yuuki had no reason to have Hinata and me fight each other. If there was no motive, it was pretty hard to picture him as the culprit.

…

On the other hand, maybe someone was deftly scheming to frame Yuuki. The Eastern merchants could pull that off well enough, I thought—they’d proven more than capable of carrying out multiple operations remotely at the same time. If the Clergy were the main bad guys, the merchants would have a motive to take the heat off them a little. It made sense.

But:

“Yuuki, a suspect? Can’t say that’s out of the question, no.”

Right when I had convinced myself, Hinata threw me with that observation.

“Whoa, you’re doubting someone from your own homeland?”

“Hmm? I’m only considering every possibility. For that matter, it may be a bit early to assume the real mastermind is gone. The Moderate Jester that killed Roy is still on the loose, and those Eastern merchants still have deep roots all over the Western Nations.”

It felt like she was splashing cold water on me. She was right. It was too early to breathe easy. I braced myself anew.

“Yeah… I guess you’re right. It’s not over yet. We can’t afford to be too optimistic.”

“No, we can’t. We’d better inform everyone about this.”

Benimaru nodded, while the paladins facing him looked similarly convinced.

“As Hinata said,” I continued, “it’s very likely that the person or persons behind all this is still around. I know I said the Clergy might be the main bad guys, but that was just a passing idea more than anything. It’s no good to throw blame around without any conclusive evidence. Let’s keep a close eye on this as we go forward.”

Everyone murmured their agreement at this conclusion. No, it was a bad idea to cast judgment without merit. I was fairly confident in my supposition, but Raphael didn’t offer its agreement. It didn’t disagree, either, though, so I think the possibility was there; I just didn’t have the evidence to be sure. For now, I’d have to trust in Raphael—and with the paladins happy with this conclusion, I thought it best to leave it at that.

That wrapped up our recap of past events. We knew we had to investigate the possibility of another mastermind out there, but that could wait for later. Today, we were here to figure out how we needed to work together to bury the hatchet for good.

It was at this moment that Shuna brought in coffee and snacks for us. It seemed that scones and French fries were on today’s menu. I had to hand it to her; she demonstrated impeccable timing. I immediately tackled my plate as the paladins sat there figuring out what to do.

“Oooh, snacks? I’ll take a double portion.”

And of course, Veldora chose this moment to finally delve into the conversation.

“Very well,” replied Shuna, well used to this act.

“Mmm, this is good.”

Hinata was sampling her plate as well, which was enough to set the paladins to action. After our previous talk, we all needed to kick back and relax a bit like this.

A few minutes later, I suddenly spoke up.

“All right. So about our future relations…”

“Ah, before that,” Hinata interrupted, “I want to make one thing very clear to all of us. Should I assume you’ve accepted our apology for all these events?”

“Sure. I want us to become friends as nations going forward. I don’t intend to drag that problem along any further.”

This wasn’t my sole decision. I came to it after discussing matters with Benimaru and my other officials. There was no need to fight any longer, and all our misunderstandings were now worked out, so I felt it was time to make a deal.

But Luminus wasn’t convinced.

“Absolutely not. I hate owing anything to anyone. This entire incident was clearly our fault, and I wish to compensate for it in some way. We can strike a deal after that is done.”

She gave Veldora a hateful glare. Basically, I suppose, she didn’t want Veldora to feel like he could ask her for something later.

“Yes,” replied Hinata, “and if that is Lady Luminus’s will, then I must say that it troubles me to put you through such pain and not make up for it. I want to show you as much as possible that I am being sincere.”

Okay, sure, that’s great, but what kind of compensation are we talking about? Because if Luminus—well, Lubelius as a nation, really—if they were willing to acknowledge us as a nation, then I was good to go. Combine that with an oath of non-hostility, and what more could I ask for?

“Hmm… Well, how about you formally recognize our nation, and we open up diplomatic relations?”

Luminus casually nodded. “Fair enough. Although, I won’t expect us to be fast friends. And I will need to settle the score with that lizard sooner or later.”

Pretty much all of Luminus’s smoldering anger was pointed right at Veldora. If it really, really came to it, I was willing to offer him as a sacrifice. If that was enough to usher in a century-long era of peace, it was a dead simple decision to make.

“Wait a moment, Rimuru,” I heard the dragon ask. “I hope you are not picturing anything…cruel for me.”

“Just your imagination, Veldora. As long you act smart and mature, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“No, I know what you’re thinking when you talk down to me like that. It usually means you’re up to no good!”

Tch. He’s getting sharp. But not as sharp as me.

“Now, now… Here, I’ll give you my scone, so play nice with Luminus, all right?”

“What? Well, in that case, I will do my level best. Although if I ever truly willed it, it’d be child’s play to make Luminus recognize my vast strengths! Kwaaaaah-ha-ha-ha!”

You see? Dealing with him is so simple. Luminus audibly sighed, but it looked like she would remain true to her word.

“Don’t get cocky with me, you! For now, though, let us call a truce. I will open international relations with you for a period of one hundred years. I think that would serve amply well as an apology?”

Well, that came more easily than expected. Like, really? We’re good? Benimaru, Rigurd, and the rest of my team looked just as shocked—to say nothing of Hinata. I doubt anyone expected this.

“So,” ventured Hinata, “you’re willing to open diplomacy with Tempest, if not necessarily go all the way with a nonintervention treaty?”

“Quit pestering me about this. I’ve said what I meant!”

With that, she reached for a second scone, content to let someone else work out the details.

“I suppose,” Louis dryly stated, “we will have to carry out her will—”

“Diplomatic relations? Are you sure?”

Renard, however, seemed unconvinced. He appeared ready to bring up an issue but not quite sure if he should go through it. He gave Hinata a quick glance, receiving a nod in return.

“What’s the issue?” chimed in Fritz. “If Sir Rimuru and his nation were truly evil, we would have been wiped off the map long ago.”

“True,” Arnaud said. “I can trust in Sir Rimuru, yes. We need to cast off our prejudices against monsters.”

“I agree with them,” added Litus. “Sir Soei was such a gentleman to us.”

Even the notably taciturn Bacchus was nodding. Renard, hearing them all, hesitated for a moment. As vice captain of the Crusaders, he couldn’t give his ready agreement just yet. If anything, this choir of support only firmed his resolve.

“Yes, but there remains one problem. How will we explain this in the framework of our faith’s teachings? Because depending on our approach, the Western Holy Church may face an onslaught of criticism, and I can’t allow that to happen.”

Their faith—a faith that refused to accept the existence of monsters. Yeah, if they accepted me now, it’d be like, hey, what about all the teachings from the past X number of centuries? I thought we were close to solving all our problems, but I suppose it never comes that easy.

But as I worried over this, Luminus dropped another bombshell.

“Don’t be silly. Those teachings are nothing I established. I don’t see why failing to protect them qualifies as betraying me. Those were meant to be guiding principles for those lost in their lives. Really, they’re only a bunch of rules thought up by the leaders at the time.”

This came as a shock to all the paladins in the room, Hinata included. “What?!” she shouted. “I’ve never heard that before…”

“Ah yes,” Louis blandly replied, “I suppose you might not have. The original texts defining the faith are open to anyone who might want to browse, but the first written drafts they’re based on have been lost long ago. If you read through those, then you’ll see how those tenets were crafted.”

As he put it, the doctrines of Luminism were put in place to protect those who worshipped Luminus. She, Louis, and other high-level vampires were one thing, but the lower ones lived off human blood, and the blood of those who lived happy, contented lives was apparently more attractive to them. In the bad old days when monsters ran roughshod over the world, the human race had its hands full just surviving, which meant the poor quality of their blood created its fair share of problems among the vampire community. In response, Luminus took advantage of a move she had planned to switch gears and offer her protective hand to the humans. (This “move” was caused by Veldora, apparently, but I opted against asking for details. It’d just be stirring up a hornet’s nest.)

“Protecting the defenseless allows them to lead happy lives. By ‘spicing up’ their lives with fearsome demon lords, followed by the relief of being protected from them, we ensure they can savor as much happiness as possible. The citizens of Lubelius are kept safe under the name of their god.”

Humans, to put it in a rough way, were kind of like livestock to them. Vampires lived off their blood—but as it was described to me, they needed rather small quantities, enough that the human “victim” wouldn’t even notice. There were far more humans than vampires out there, so it made sense. A little blood donation now and then ensured a life free from existential threats. A real win-win situation.

“So did they write the holy scriptures of Luminism to help keep needless slaughter by the monsters at a minimum?”

“That’s right,” Louis said to Hinata. “Precisely.”

“To me, the most important thing is the faith itself,” added Luminus. “All of you here—you can cast your holy magic thanks to the faith you have in me, correct? That is how the arrangement works—it is an absolute law. It is my family’s duty to protect my people, and to me, the rest matters little.”

So to sum up, the faith’s refusal to accept monsters stemmed from a need to grab the hearts of the people and bring them into the faith. No, maybe that tenet doesn’t need to be so strictly enforced. Bending too much along those lines would cause chaos in the Western Holy Church, but there was no need to go that far. Basically—the way I was reading this—if the people here could find a reason to accept us, the rest of the kingdom would fall in line.

It sounded like we had an agreement, then. But Renard’s frown said he still wasn’t convinced.

“I understand, then, that our doctrine is not based on the will of our god, Lady Luminus. But practically speaking, that is the exact doctrine all of us have spent our lives following. I fear that simply doing away with it would create issues…”

He had a point. Completely ignoring everything built up to now would lead to a huge backlash from the faithful, not to mention the current Church organization. Even if Luminus herself came out in public to appeal to the masses, there was no saying if anyone would believe it was her—and there was no way Luminus would do anything that proactive anyway. There was every chance of rifts forming between the paladins assembled here and the more hardcore factions of the Church.

“But we have to do it,” Hinata solemnly said to the troubled-looking Renard. “I was hoping we could keep silent on this until things settle down, but we have a force of a hundred paladins here, and I’m sure the other nations are aware of us. Plus, those journalists were there to see a Battlesage be defeated, weren’t they?”

Her gaze went from Renard to me. She was right. Diablo said he had defeated a man named Saare, one of the Three Battlesages. Another one was on the scene but apparently fled in rapid order. If the press saw all that, it could ruin this force’s reputation as protector of humanity. If rumors started spreading that the paladins were defeated, it could lead to all kinds of needless confusion. Diablo said it was possible to coerce the media, if need be, but… Ugghhh, what a pain.

“Okay, well, how about we just say Hinata and I dueled to a draw? Then we signed a truce after discovering the Seven Days Clergy’s scheme. People already know I’m a slime for the most part, but if we spread the word that I’m an otherworlder, you think that would be a bit more convincing?”

“I do appreciate that proposal,” Hinata said, “but are you fine with that? Wouldn’t a demon lord fighting me to a draw affect your reputation?”

My reputation? Do I have much of one, really? I feel like I’ve done nothing but get yelled at by Shuna lately. Whenever problems come up, I toss them right into Rigurd’s lap. For the most part, my main responsibility in town lately has been joining Gobta on his assorted jaunts. I didn’t think a draw or two is gonna trash my rep that much.

“I don’t see the problem. I mean, hell, you can say I lost for all I care.”

Who won, and who lost, didn’t really matter, I thought. But everyone on Hinata’s side stared at me in shock.

“Um, look, in all of history, there’s only been a tiny handful of times when a human defeated a demon lord, you know? If you just say ‘Oops, I lost’ like that, that really will wreck the balance of power around here. It’d create trouble for you.”

“She—she’s right!” bellowed Renard. “You are still just a fledgling demon lord. Let another force push you around right now, and that could invite interlopers aiming for your head!”

I suppose they are worrying for my sake, but… I dunno…

“Benimaru, can you think of any rival forces who might try to interfere with us at this point?”

“None, sir. If anyone was foolish enough to try, I would twist their heads off with my bare hands.”

Glad to hear.

Diablo seemed to be doing well over in the Western Nations. Rescuing the journalists’ lives let him proceed with his plan, even if it had involved a bit of extra force. It wouldn’t be long, he said, before reports would go around about Yohm being crowned the new king—and the smaller nations surrounding Farmus would pitch in to support this.

Assuming all went to plan, the only individual nation who could possibly try to tangle with us was Englesia. With Luminus giving us a hundred-year truce, the Western Nations were as good as ours, really. The same was true of the demon lords. Me killing Clayman was one stellar performance. If we spread rumors that I lost despite looking perfectly healthy to everyone, I’m not sure people would believe them. If anything, they might grow more careful dealing with me, fearing a trap or something.

“You sound pretty confident,” Hinata said. “Well, in that case, I don’t have any objection. If anything, I’ll be glad to take advantage of it.”

“Yeah! Let’s take this opportunity to announce to the world that the Tempestians aren’t evil at all!”

“Very true. Everyone here’s so nice to us! It’s so hard to believe they were all goblins and orcs not long ago.”

“There had been some internal debate over whether demi-humans counted as monsters or not…but nowadays, I think that’s far too narrow a view to take. It’s just prejudice talking.”

“You said it. Demi-humans are a formidable foe against humans, but dwarves, at least, are certainly human. If we started calling them monsters, then it’d be impossible to tell spirits apart from monsters, either.”

Ogres and lizardmen had normally been treated as demi-humans up to now, too, but thanks to their hostility against humankind, they had been branded as monsters. Oni and dragonewts—the next evolution up from each respective race—were treated not as monsters, but as local gods. All that really mattered, in the end, was whether you were friend or foe to humankind—and that meant it was hard to interpret Luminist doctrine as a carte-blanche condemnation of all monsters.

“Well,” I said, “we have formal relations with the Dwarven Kingdom. Why don’t we mix King Gazel into this and sign a hundred-year friendship treaty? If we can get him to guarantee that we won’t attack people, that ought to change a few minds, right?”

Hinata thoughtfully nodded, reaching her own conclusions in her mind. “Yes… If we can just build a little trust, that would make it easier to convince people. Plus, with things as they are, it’s probably about time to purge all the people who were poisoned by the Clergy.”

The Western Holy Church was hardly a monolith. No large organization is. And with Hinata putting it in such cold, blunt terms, all opposition was silenced. I guess she wanted to use this chance to lay all the guilt on the Seven Days Clergy—kind of dirty, I thought, but that was a Lubelius issue. Certainly nothing I had a right to comment on. We then began to work out some of the smaller details.

For our future interactions, it was agreed that Arnaud and Bacchus would stay here in Tempest. They’d go back home to prepare first, then return with a few civil bureaucrats in tow. I was planning to build a Luminist church in town in the meantime for their use, and I didn’t see it taking any longer than a couple weeks. Maybe we’d start to see some Luminists around here once we were done.

I was honestly a little anxious about allowing full freedom of religion, but…ahhh, I’m sure we’d figure it out. Monsters, frankly, are atheists. There was no such thing as a single god that was widely recognized by everyone across the world. My conventional wisdom from my own planet didn’t apply, really. There was religion, yes, but it was usually more like paying your respects to the local deity than anything very fervent—and these deities could quite literally help you out if you prayed to them, because, like, they were right there. The Dragon Faithful’s relationship with Milim is a prime example.

Along those lines, Luminism was really nothing more than the biggest player in an extremely crowded arena full of religions like that. The Crusaders served as Luminus’s servants, protecting the weak and earning new adherents to the faith. So if you look at it that way, I could see a church in Tempest as a kind of center for Western Holy Church–style support of the vulnerable. You gotta help out your neighbor and all that, although I doubt they could offer much help to us. It’d at least mean we could fight alongside paladins if some kind of threat appeared.

There was no real reason not to take this opportunity. We’d keep close tabs on the local church, of course, but I figured we could grant them a certain amount of freedom. That was the common ground we found.

That was the end of the tough stuff. We had a deal with Luminus, more or less, and we had managed to get Lubelius to recognize us as a legitimate nation. That was more than enough compensation—now, if we could just keep interacting and getting along, it’d be perfect. I’d like to use our century-long time limit to build a deeper understanding of each other, and that meant we’d be interacting regularly with the Crusaders.

The first effort along those lines involved providing skills and tech to each other. The battle earlier had smashed up a lot of the paladins’ weapons, so they needed someone to repair them. We offered our skills in response, but that was kind of a front—what we really wanted to do was see what their weapons were capable of.

This allowed us access to one of those strange light-based suits of armor I saw. As Raphael put it, it provided the wielder’s magical force to a spiritual life-form, letting them manifest it into a physical object. The one gifted to us had been overused and broken, so we traded it for a new Garm-produced armor set. The paladins, still feeling a bit indebted to us, gladly let us have it as part of their general apology, and while I expected Hinata to whine about it, she was actually fine.

I decided to reciprocate by giving her a sword I had made.

The sword Hinata used is called Moonlight. Luminus gave it to her herself, and it housed untold amounts of power—too much, really. I asked her, and she called it a Legend-class weapon, beyond even the Unique level that I thought was the highest.

Kaijin and Kurobe taught me that magisteel can evolve over many years, allowing well-worn, first-class weapons and armor to continue honing and polishing themselves. This evolution can provide a massive boost out of thin air, something proven by the way ancient weapons found in ruins sometimes boasted out-of-this-world abilities that modern technology couldn’t replicate. This was the so-called Legend class, and apparently they were usually kept away from general access.

It was Kurobe and Garm’s goal to craft equipment along these lines. They stared at Hinata’s Moonlight, transfixed by it. I hope they’re up to the task.

The thing about a sword this all-powerful is that you can really only use it when absolutely needed. If you decided to whip it out on the street in the afternoon, you could raze the entire city block to rubble before you realized what was happening. It’d be like carrying a machine gun instead of a pistol for self-defense—just not the kind of thing you’d go bandying around every day.

It was the equivalent of a pistol that I thought about gifting her, and she liked it much more than I anticipated. It was a new version of the broken rapier I had consumed earlier, analyzed and improved for her. It was in the Unique class feature-wise, and I’m sure it felt the same way in her hand. I even re-created the unique ability it had to always kill its target on the seventh attack.

They also gave me a broken longsword—the Dragonbuster is what they called it. It was even more feeble than I thought, and I wasn’t really sure you could slay someone like Veldora with it. I also inquired about her Holy Spirit Armor, but she sadly replied that she couldn’t show that to me. It was an original, one-of-a-kind piece made just for Hinata, and I really wanted to analyze it, but…

Report. It has already been analyzed and assessed from the information gathered during battle.

…Whuh?!

M-man, does anything ever get by Raphael? Should I start calling it Professor or what?

…

Oops, got on its bad side again. Better just give it my thanks and move on.

I really had no idea, though. This is a huge feat. I can’t get enough of that guy. According to it, we could take the assessment from some inferior spirit armor, then combine it with Hinata’s battle data to re-create Holy Spirit Armor. This belonged to the holy element, but you could also tinker with the fundamentals of it to turn it into a demonic piece.

Sorry, Hinata. I guess this Holy Spirit Armor’s a national secret, but a quick bit of Analyze and Assess and it’s mine. I would need to think about who to grant it to, though. It seemed kind of difficult to use. Now, though, our battle gear would be more polished than ever before.

Between this, that, and the other thing, we were now even with each other. It was evening, and with the day’s work behind us, I figured the paladins would hit the trail soon, but I thought I’d at least be polite and offer them one more meal.

“Hey, uh, it’s getting late, Hinata, so why don’t you and Luminus save your departure for tomorrow?”

It was kind of silly. Luminus could go home with Spatial Motion anytime she liked, and I’m sure Hinata had a Warp Portal set up somewhere in Lubelius. The same was true of all the paladins, each one an A-grade fighter; I’m sure the journey home was no great effort to them. I imagined they’d just say “Sorry, but our work’s done here, nice knowing ya” and be on their way.

“Sorry, but—”

Yep. There it is.

“—if you insist on it, would you be willing to host us this evening?”

“Ah yes, I did like that hot spring of yours, and the food was simply excellent. What fun will we have tonight?”

Huh? Huhhhh?

I suppose neither Hinata nor Luminus was in any hurry to go anywhere. The paladins saw this, of course, and now they’d all need quarters for another night, too. They were all smiles now, chatting over what could be on the menu tonight. I wanted to ask if the Crusaders were really a bunch of freeloaders like this all along, but it was too late to whine about it. If they expect that much from us, let’s give them the time of their lives.

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“Okay, today’s banquet will feature sukiyaki, a big bowl of beef simmered in vegetable broth!”

“““Yeaahhhhh!!”””

“…”

I wasn’t sure what this feeling in me was. The paladins and my staff, mortal enemies until the previous day, were now salivating over the hearty meal they’d share shortly. They were happy, no doubt about that… But part of me wondered if this was really the right thing for them. I guess there were no rules about religious figures giving up meat or whatever in this world—it was hard enough to keep yourself fed at times without inventing restrictions for yourself.

So we decided to treat them to the cowdeer and chiducken we had started to raise, pairing their meat with some fresh-picked veggies. Tossing all that into a pot of boiling broth would be perfect, and Shuna knew exactly how to pull it off. First, she used chiducken bones to make a soup stock, using the meat on them for sashimi purposes. Then, for the main course, she butchered up some marbled cowdeer, making for some downright decadent hot pot. After that, all she had to do was remove the poison from the chiducken eggs and pass them around to everyone. There was no way this wouldn’t taste awesome.

“Okay, here’s to our future friendship. Cheers!”

“““Cheers!!”””

We also had more fresh-cooked rice, the big hit of the previous day’s feast. Ignore the black color, of course. My beloved white rice would just go to waste on these guys. Hinata was staring longingly at my personal rice bowl last night, though, so I gave her a serving—from one otherworlder to another. When it comes to rice, plain white is where it’s at, although I’m no stranger to assorted seasonings, too. I was also getting some rice in from Blumund that I had them test out for me, but it still needed some improvement. It was a wholly different beast from the white rice before me.

“White rice, though… Don’t you find this almost selfish, in a way?”

I wasn’t sure what Hinata was complaining about. Her voice was even shaking a little. What was she, jealous?

“Well, if you don’t like it, I’ll be glad to take it away—”

“I’m not talking about that,” she snapped back, protecting her bowl with her life. Geez, don’t get too worked up about this crap. Not that I’d say that to her. “I just mean… Being able to so perfectly re-create food from that other world? It’s more exasperating than surprising, in a way. I can’t believe you’ve created such a life of luxury for yourself, in the space of just two years. Just casually achieving all these things none of us ever would’ve hoped to manage…”

“Hey, praise me all you want. I’m here all night.”

“Don’t be stupid. I mean, I heard stories about you from Yuuki, but I took them all with a grain of salt. He was just relaying the reports he heard from his spies, after all. But this…” She shrugged. “I don’t think I’d ever believe it if I wasn’t seeing it with my own eyes.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. I was nowhere near the finish line.

“Well, I’m far from done yet. Transport’s still super-slow, and it takes forever to transmit information from one place to the other. With magic, though, it was straightforward enough to improve our food and living conditions, more or less.”

“More or less…? That’s how you describe re-creating all this delicious food? You realize it makes you sound like you’re ridiculing all our hard work and sweat up to now?!”

I managed to set her off again. But really, if I was satisfied with this, then I’d never develop things any further. I’m a king, pretty much, and a king needs to be at least a little greedy. Not “king” so much as demon lord, but same difference.

“Well, I mean, we’re pretty good in the forest food-wise, you know? The real issue is the culture. There’s just way too little entertainment. I want to build the foundation for things like…you know, manga. Like what Veldora’s reading.”

“Entertainment? Do you realize how harsh a world this is? A world where the majority of people have to fight tooth and nail to see another day?”

“Yeah, I know. And that’s why we’re gonna make sure monsters and things are no longer a threat. I mean, I’m just gonna come out and say this ’cause there’s no point hiding it, but we’re trying to install Yohm as king, build a new kingdom from his domain, and use that to draw the Western Nations into our sphere of influence.”

“Just what exactly are you planning? I’d like to know more details.”

Does she? Well, let’s tell her.

“I’m thinking about a lot, actually. For starters…”

I pecked at the hot pot as I explained my vision of the future to her.

Our current project involved getting the human world to recognize us, and this was already halfway done, with the leaders of many nations aware of who I was. I’d received reports of apparent spies going in and out of Tempest, so I’d taken a few measures to show them how harmless we were. The merchants and adventurers were spreading rumors of their own, and before long, even the common people would know we could coexist with them. It’d take time for that to really take root, yes, but we were on the path. No need to hurry it along.

After that came our road infrastructure. This was also well underway, as we had worked to build safe, efficient trade routes across our territory. Highways to Blumund and the Dwarven Kingdom were now open, and plans were in progress for a new road linking us to the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion. There were no paved roads to Eurazania at the moment, so I thought we could tackle that afterward.

Running in parallel with all this was experimentation with communication methods. I didn’t know how radios and stuff worked, so I had to give up on that. Raphael could tell me if I asked, but I didn’t have the brainpower to help everyone else understand it. Kaijin and the three dwarven brothers might, maybe, but I didn’t want to rely on them for everything. Thus, I decided to leave that issue to the next generation and build schools to provide education for our children. These were simple one-room affairs for now, but I was having them learn basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. Before long, I intended to bring in some humans to provide more in-depth instruction.

But getting back to the subject, the communication crystals that served the world now could only be used by the magically inclined. They were magical items themselves, which meant they were vulnerable to theft. That was hardly a theoretical problem, and more to the point, if you needed to send out an emergency message, you’d never know if a wizard was nearby to help.

We needed a system that anyone could use and where theft wasn’t an issue. It seemed beyond all probability, but it was actually pretty within reach. My idea involved the use of Sticky Steel Thread and magisteel. I tried the first out with Soei, but my transmission skills over the thread were honestly pretty astounding. Since it worked with magicules, you could get your voice and thoughts across with remarkable clarity.

Magisteel was packed with those same magicules as well, so I thought it could work largely the same way—and after some experimentation, it did. What we could do is work magisteel into wires about a half an inch thick, run them through the dimension used by Shadow Motion, and connect the world’s cities together with it. That alone wouldn’t accomplish anything, but attaching this network to the device Vester and his team were developing could convert waves of passing thought into real-life sights and sounds. This device required no magical force to use, so I wanted to get it running as soon as it was complete. In the meantime, we needed to gather the requisite amount of magisteel and get ready.

With the amount of monsters we had in this nation, regular iron ore kept in storage would transform itself into magic ore. This could then be processed into magisteel wire, with Shadow Motion practitioners doing the wiring work. Nothing would really serve as physical obstacles to this network, so installation wouldn’t be that terribly difficult. Once we really had the ball rolling, I also had plans to expand the network from the cities to the smaller villages. Now all we had to do was develop the necessary receivers.

Really, as someone who had lived in a data-driven society, communication speed was seriously important to me.

“What do you think? That’ll be super-useful when it’s done, won’t it?”

I couldn’t help but sound a little full of myself in front of Hinata.

Once this network was complete, it was time to start transmitting entertainment and nurturing a nascent culture. There were so many dreams I had and a mountain of things left to do—and if I wanted to get any of it done, I had to provide safe and comfortable lives for my people.

Somewhere along the line, the meeting hall had grown quiet. The paladins were frozen in place, perhaps enraptured by my speech. My own officials, meanwhile, were practically smoldering with anticipation; listening to me inspired them more than ever before.

Then Hinata rolled her eyes. “Look,” she muttered. “That kind of information is normally kept confidential by governments, did you know that? I mean, matters related to communications, in particular… You just don’t go telling that to outsiders. Not that I’m complaining, but…”

Hmm. If you phrased it like that, then okay, maybe that was a mistake. Maybe I got carried away and said a little too much. Must have been the alcohol talking.

But even considering the possibility was a mistake. The moment I thought Uh-oh, did I screw up? Raphael jumped to conclusions.

Report. Resetting Cancel Ailments. This resistance cannot be adjusted for the time being.

Wh-what?!

But it was already too late. Even worse, a “reset” wasn’t something you could do all the time. Whether I wanted it or not, the poison was being cleansed from my body. But booze isn’t poison! I thought to no avail. My skills were just merciless.

Of course, I suppose this happened because I still had a pounding headache from getting wildly drunk the day before. I cut a little too loose for my own good, and that was the cause of it. Maybe I’d be more tight-lipped toward Hinata if I wasn’t inebriated. Let’s just call it my just deserts and move on.

I glanced at Hinata, just in time to see the jolly man next to her—Fritz, was it?—steal a piece of top-grade beef from her plate. Looks like I’m not the only guy in this room who played with alcohol a little too much.

“Now, now, what’s the big deal, Lady Hinata? That just shows how much he trusts us! Oh hey, and if you aren’t eating that, I’ll take the rest!”

I think he was a top officer in this force. He certainly robbed Hinata’s plate with lightning-fast dexterity, at least. Still, it must have taken a few drinky-drinks to decide it was worth the risk.

The moment Fritz tossed the morsel into his mouth, I could see a vein throb in the vicinity of Hinata’s temple. Her natural paleness made it all the more visible, although it would’ve been impossible to miss no matter what color her skin was.

“Fritz… Were you looking to die today?”

“Um…? Lady Hinata, you’re looking so…serious…”

Now Fritz’s mind was perfectly clear, as he shot to his feet and attempted to run for it. But he couldn’t escape Hinata, who promptly landed a chop on his jaw that instantly sent him to the floor with a concussion.

Let this be a lesson on how to enjoy a drink responsibly.

The next day:

“Back to our conversation yesterday, you realize that if you draw too much attention with all of that, the angels are going to attack you, right?”

Hinata blurted it out just before leaving, as if she had just thought of it. It wasn’t really the kind of thing you could bring up at the drunken, festive feast we had last night, but since we weren’t going to be strangers any longer, I suppose she thought it important to mention.

Erald and Gazel mentioned those guys to me before—the angelic army. Each one of these “angels” or whatever, according to Hinata, was a B-plus threat, and they had a force that numbered a million strong, all ready to swarm me. It was quite a bit beyond what I pictured, and that was just the infantry—there were captains and commanders above them, with a full chain of command between. The generals in their force—yes, there were generals—had even tangled with demon lords, if you went far enough back in history. Their ability in battle was a question mark, but if they were a good match for a demon lord, they must’ve been pretty strong.

The angels targeted monsters and cities with advanced civilizations. Not even the Western Holy Church saw them as allies of humankind—which made sense, given that their god, Luminus, was actually a demon lord.

“To me,” Luminus told me, “they are little more than annoying flies. I would love to do away with them all, but then everyone would know my identity…and that lizard’s already betrayed me to the paladins, as you know.”

The paladins, by the way, had sworn to keep this revelation a secret. Hopefully, they’d be a bit more accommodating with one another—and me—in the future.

“Yeah, I’ve heard about these angels. If they are out to poke at me, I’m ready to fight back.”

I had no intention of holding back, no. That angel force was free to think and do whatever they wanted, but if they thought they could force their will upon us, fending them off would be my only choice.

Hinata chuckled at me. “I thought you would say that. We might even be fighting on the same side, when the time comes.”

“That you may, and that we may,” Luminus said. “I have no intention of watching my city be destroyed a second time—not by those flies and not by that lizard. Rimuru, unless you enjoy having me as an enemy, I would recommend giving your lizard a strict education.”

This has been a very useful meeting, I thought as they departed. I think we could build a pretty friendly relationship with Hinata and her forces, to say nothing of Luminus. The battle between us, Lubelius, and part of the Western Nations was over, and I’d say every side walked away happy from it.

Before long, and with next to no warning, Lubelius would give the Dwarven Kingdom more than tacit approval and officially recognize the nation as a land of humans it could potentially become allies with. They also formally announced diplomatic relations with the Jura-Tempest Federation, a nation of monsters—one that included a nonaggression pact, albeit one with a time limit.

Now, in one fell swoop, both demi-humans and monsters had been granted acceptance by human minds. It was time to explore how to build our relations from there.