

CHAPTER 2

THE INVITEES

You could try hiding it all you wanted, but it was doomed to spread. In short order, the rumors had reached the ears of leaders in the nations surrounding the Forest of Jura—

Hinata, the Saint, was defeated by Rimuru, the demon lord.

The news came across several routes, delivered with careful precision, ensuring it would reach the people it was intended for. It sounded so eminently plausible, and of course, someone was behind its spreading—but in another moment, the word had traveled so far that nobody would ever know who.

No matter how secret the Crusaders’ invasion was, there was no way to keep everyone in the dark forever. The reason was obvious: Tempest was now the center of attention, and to the nations that had relations with it, they had to be constantly vigilant about intelligence collection. The Crusaders’ deployment to Tempest was an open secret by this point, and that helped make this new rumor seem even more believable. And this news was interpreted in many different ways by many different people. Some feared the demon lord Rimuru. Some angrily dismissed Hinata as a feckless fraud. Others proceeded with caution, trying to decide how best to keep their homelands safe.

But along with these flowing rumors, news was also coming from official sources: Hinata, the Saint, and Rimuru, the demon lord, fought to a draw. The result of this: a truce between Lubelius and the Jura-Tempest Federation, along with the signing of a nonaggression treaty.

Things were getting complicated—and that wasn’t the only problem giving world leaders headaches. Those very same leaders were receiving invitations from Rimuru himself, the demon lord at the core of this crisis.

None of these nations were about to accept the Council of the West’s official announcement as the whole story. It would turn all common sense on its head—and alter the fabric of the world itself. Every leader could smell it in the air, and even if they lacked the whole story, they knew that the paladins had suffered no casualties. That told them everything they needed to make a decision.

And in the midst of all these wild, twisting motives, the Western Nations were about to experience earth-shattering change.

In a corner of the Dwarven Kingdom, the Armed Nation of Dwargon, a group of ministers and top officials had settled down into a meeting.

“Ah, now he’s done it.” The dignified voice of Gazel Dwargo, the Heroic King of the land of dwarves, rumbled through the chamber.

The kingdom’s dark agents, their network of spies, had been busy lately. Intelligence was flowing like a torrent, and their agents had to spend sleepless nights analyzing it all, deciphering recorded images and crafting dossiers from the finely mined details. Multiple copies of these reports were written out for the ministers, and with all the data involved, the number of pages in each one stacked upward and upward.

It was grueling work, but it was still better than the situation a few months ago, back when that slime Rimuru became a demon lord and immediately pivoted into a duel with Clayman. The dark agents, the agency behind them, and Gazel and his officials—they had all suffered terribly from a lack of sleep. Compared with those days, this was a walk in the park.

“Heh…heh-heh-heh. I find it hard to believe, but believe it I must. It would appear your sparring partner has defeated the Saint.”

“You are being disrespectful, Vaughn,” chided Dolph, the hardheaded captain of the Pegasus Knights. “This is a public meeting hall, not your personal chamber. Remember where you speak!”

Vaughn shrugged and gave him a languid nod before turning a more vengeful eye toward the ministers and coughing once.

“Do not berate him too much, Dolph,” King Gazel said. “I am as surprised by this as anyone. I am sure Vaughn couldn’t help but laugh.”

The assembled members had no choice but to accept this. The news had shocked them all. Now was no time to go on about Vaughn’s lack of decorum.

The reports in their hands laid out all the details behind recent events, and it was a roller coaster of a read from start to finish. Over a hundred Crusaders, the strongest force among humankind, had staged a clandestine violent assault on the nation of monsters. Even Henrietta’s dark agents, the pride of Gazel, had only picked up the news the other day—or really, only found out once battle began. And if the dark agents knew, there was no doubting every other nation’s secret service did. Tempest, after all, was crawling with spies. Rimuru seemed to be aware of them, but essentially left them be, perhaps to better advertise his moves. Once full-bore combat began, even the most amateur intelligence organization would know what was going on.

In the end, the Crusaders lost. The demon lord Rimuru had won—and without killing a single one of them. The dark agents sadly failed to witness the battle for themselves, but that was the report they gave.

“But Your Majesty,” Henrietta said, “I saw it happen myself…”

As she explained, she was around to see the fight eventually devolve into a one-on-one duel between Hinata and Rimuru. However, due to an onrush of out-of-control magicules, the dark agents were blocked from magically eavesdropping on the event.

“…We also detected a powerful aura surrounding the area, and we believe that was the cause of this.”

“So someone triggered a magicule storm powerful enough to block all monitoring magic?”

“It was not a magicule storm, Lady Jaine, so much as a clash of opposed energy waves triggering a jamming signal.”

“Hmm,” mused Jaine, the elderly arch-wizard of the kingdom. “So you didn’t see how this duel ended yourselves? Why are you so sure Hinata lost?”

Hinata, all-powerful head of the Crusaders, required no introduction to Jaine. She had personal insights into the Saint’s strength, and she found it hard to believe Hinata tasted defeat.

“I can only offer circumstantial evidence in my defense,” replied Henrietta. “But after centuries of refusing to side with monsters, the Western Holy Church has overturned its own doctrine. They’ve even sent us word about opening official connections with us, the dwarves. The nation of Lubelius is also moving to establish relations with Tempest. Word of this has been sent to governments worldwide, and we are now awaiting the official proclamation. These are drastic changes, and I believe they offer the clearest evidence yet that Hinata was defeated.”

“Mmmm. Certainly, if those human-supremacist blockheads so quickly changed their tune like that…I suppose it means something must have forced their hand. But… King Gazel, you know this means there’s a greater chance than ever that the demon lord Rimuru has grown more powerful than you, do you not?” Jaine seemed to find even asking the question painful.

Hinata, the Saint, and Gazel, the Master of the Sword, were an even match, whether Gazel wanted to admit it or not. If Hinata just lost, simple logic dictated that Rimuru now outclassed Gazel.

“Ridiculous!”

“How dare you insult His Majesty, Lady Jaine!”

The ministers howled at Jaine, but she refused to budge. As far as she was concerned, the truth was the truth. And Gazel agreed.

“That much growth in the space of a few months?” Vaughn casually asked. The question was greeted by a snort from the king. It’s no longer a matter of growth, my good man! he thought.

Even the last time they met, something about the demon lord Rimuru seemed strange. This wasn’t some gushing geyser of pure force in front of him—everything was calm. He couldn’t feel a thing. Gazel’s own power—the unique skill Tyrant, which let him see through everything, even other people’s thoughts—gave him no insight at all into the creature. It meant Rimuru was able to completely restrain his force. Maybe he didn’t know everything about the outcome of the duel, but Hinata surviving the ordeal was an achievement in itself.

“It is likely so,” he said, considering this. “The evolution into demon lord means his powers now rival mine. Him defeating Hinata wouldn’t be unusual at all.”

“B-but, Your Majesty! You, the hero of generations, on an even keel with a monster born but a few years ago…”

“I agree wholeheartedly. Surely my liege must be mistaken?”

“And even if it is so, wouldn’t that make the demon lord Rimuru far too dangerous?”

The ministers were uproarious once more. Gazel sighed to himself. If that was how the logic went, Rimuru was far from the only threat.

He looked down at his dossier. In it, the dark agents described how the officers under Rimuru fought against the Ten Great Saints—and according to their report, not one of the monsters fell. Each one scored a complete victory, some of them even overwhelming several Saints at once. It was amazing news, and if it could be believed, there was no denying that Tempest’s overall ability to wage war surpassed Dwargon’s.

The magically recorded video evidence from the battle was hazy at best, making it hard to discern much detail. That was a shame, given how these devices were the height of dwarven technology—but with the unstable magicules in the air, they failed to function properly. Only the visual images survived, the audio failed to be recorded, and the quality of this imagery made it impossible to analyze the subjects’ abilities. You could barely make out what was happening, as valuable an asset as this evidence was.

Still, Gazel could make out a few familiar figures in the images—the magic-born he had spoken with before.

They’ve grown stronger. Our full force may not be enough to defeat them now…

Some of the minsters were prattling on about the potential danger, others loudly disagreeing with them. They were both correct, most likely. Gazel tuned out the noise, pondering to himself. Maybe, he began to think, he should have wiped him out before he became this much of a threat.

…No. Rimuru was a monster with reason. He hoped for amicable relations with human countries. The town he built, the people he saved, the nations he’d connected with were all ample proof of that. If Rimuru was this unthinking brute who couldn’t empathize with people, humankind would be exposed to unprecedented threats right now.

But there’s no need to worry about that. Heh-heh-heh… He wouldn’t ever think about wiping out humankind. Not Rimuru!

Gazel was convinced of it. Rimuru killed the demon lord Clayman; he did not kill Hinata. That alone indicated to Gazel that Rimuru went out of his way to avoid antagonizing humankind. It was easy for him to drone out the minister’s concerns with laughter.

“Heh-heh-heh. No need to worry! I will remind you that Rimuru remains my erstwhile partner in the martial arts. It would also behoove you to remember that we have backed the nation of Tempest earlier than any other nation. From him, we have earned the most trust he has given anyone. Do you intend to do away with that trust and doubt his intentions?”

He glared at the ministers, using some of his majesty to cow them into submission. It did the trick, restoring them to civility.

“Y-yes… Think of it that way, and it would be foolish to abandon our trade with them…”

“Quite. The goods we take from them have immeasurable appeal. And we’ve even transferred recovery potion manufacturing to them.”

“Whether in the form of technology exchange or anything else, a relationship must be based on trust. Why is there any need for us to panic?”

“Yes, no need to worry at this point…”

They glanced at each other and smiled somewhat sheepishly. Gazel grinned at them.

To the Dwarven Kingdom, which valued fairness as a core tenet, being a demon lord was no reason for discrimination. All the ministers seemed to remember that now, and Gazel was glad to see it. Yes, Rimuru had obtained astonishing strength, but looking back at past events, there was no doubting his trustworthiness as a person. They were still building a friendly relationship—keeping that going was the obvious choice.

Besides, Rimuru said he was an otherworlder, bringing with him knowledge of other planets and the drive to bring it to life with his vast litany of skills. The fact that he was pushing all this development forward mainly to satisfy his own self-centered cravings for luxury was nothing short of fascinating.

Plus, his followers always carried out his orders with a smile, no matter how outlandish. Tempest and the Dwarven Kingdom were already connected with a highway, winding its way over mountains and through valleys and providing safe passage for anyone who used it. Rimuru’s monsters blazed that trail, and all it took was an idea and a simple word or two from him. Things that otherworlders of the past abandoned as being too costly or labor-intensive were no obstacle to Rimuru. He had the core strength needed to brute-force it all to life.

He had a drive, a drive backed by an army of loyal monsters. How envious I am, Gazel mused. No matter how difficult the problem, Rimuru could just offhandedly say “Figure it out! Good luck!” and his monsters would do their level best. They all assumed that was normal; none doubted him. Maybe it was that slime’s most fearsome asset of all—that genius-level ability to trick people into doing his bidding.

For better or for worse, this demon lord was an entertaining one.

And perhaps he’s been tricking me, too, this whole time…

But, Gazel reasoned, that was just fine. If Rimuru was pursuing the kind of world he saw as ideal, what would result from that? Gazel was keenly interested in finding out. He wanted to see it. It’d trigger a Temma War, a struggle between mortals and angels, and Rimuru knew that. But he’d probably just fight back. Tempest had a terrifying military force backing it up—perhaps terrifying enough to fend off a horde of angels. And Gazel was willing to cheer him on.

“The demon lord Rimuru and I may not be related by blood, but we are brothers,” he growled, his voice dominating the meeting hall. “As long as he does not lose his heart for humanity, let us provide him with as much support as we can—and let us welcome a new era and the budding of a new civilization. If anyone objects to this, let them speak now.”

That was, in effect, the king of the dwarves announcing his decision.

Vaughn, the admiral paladin on the force, smiled. “You’ve got me on your side, King Gazel. You’re the boss!”

“My lord,” stated the night assassin Henrietta, “I will always serve as your shadow and follow every whim of your heart.”

“Yes, do what you like. I am old, with little time left to live, but if my last few years may be happy ones, I will follow you as far as you may go, my lord.”

Jaine still looked pretty healthy, despite her words. This was just her way of saying that Gazel enjoyed her support no matter what happened.

Finally, Dolph, leader of the Pegasus Knights, sighed and shook his head.

“If that’s what you all have to say, I suppose I’ll have to clean up the mess that results. You’ll need someone to keep him in check, won’t you?”

That was his role, most of the time, and Dolph didn’t resent it.

The heroes of dwarfdom were in unison, and a new policy was forged. But while nobody would defy their supreme leader’s decision on the surface, some of the ministers were still of different minds. They would nonetheless offer their support, hiding their own intentions under the protective front of the administrators’ decisions.

There was just one reason for that: As part of a nation leading the world in technology, something about “budding new civilizations” struck a chord with them. Toiling away at their research, making only piecemeal advances, offered no hope of major developments. This demon lord, meanwhile, was pushing the envelope and demonstrating zero fear of anyone stopping him. Vester, their former colleague, reported as much to them, and some in the room had started to envy the freedom the man enjoyed.

“How dare Sir Vester just leave and join that band! Unforgivable!”

“Yes! Did you hear about the new barriers built on the highways to ward off monsters?”

“And the lighting, too. I hear of new communication devices under development as well.”

“Potions weren’t enough for him, were they? I can’t believe how jealous—er, how outraged I am!”

It was starting to become clear where the ministers’ hearts and minds truly were. Gazel snickered, then cleared his throat—a signal for everyone to stay quiet. The ministers’ eyes focused on him.

“Our conclusion is clear. Our nation must trust in the demon lord Rimuru and walk forward in unison with him! Let us receive the fruits of their labor, keeping the technology they develop for ourselves. Thus, if they ever are defeated by the heavenly army, that technology will never be lost! Such is the will of the Armed Nation of Dwargon!”

Nobody was ever going to complain about that. King Gazel always prioritized his own nation above all else. The ministers bowed their heads at once, expressing their agreement.

“Heh-heh-heh… Not letting go of the goods, huh? I appreciate how you aren’t couching it in rosy vocabulary, at least.”

Vaughn was speaking—or muttering, really—for most of the people in the hall.

It wasn’t long before the conference ended, with the final item on the itinerary—the acceptance of Lubelius’ request—treated almost as an afterthought. Now the bureaucracy would go to work, drafting up new treaties with both Lubelius and Tempest. It wouldn’t happen overnight, but the three of them, plus the rest of the Western Nations, would all need to prepare together for the Temma War. There was no way of telling yet whether this was the right move, but at the very least, Gazel was content.

Once things settled down a bit, one minister raised his hand.

“Your Majesty, a word?”

Gazel, preparing to leave the chamber, settled back in his seat and eyed him.

“My liege, we have received a letter of invitation from Sir Rigurd. It seems that Sir Rimuru is holding an event to officially mark his debut as demon lord…and he seeks your attendance.”

“His debut? What could that be about?”

The minister was just as in the dark as Gazel. He blinked helplessly a couple times, giving the other ministers enough time to raise yet another hue and cry.

“Just a front, I’m sure. He no doubt bids you to be present so he can boast to the world about how friendly we are with him.”

“I think that boat has long left port, good sir.”

“Ah! Wait, I have heard of this! Vester sent word that the monster nation wishes to hold a grand festival to shore up its public image. He himself is serving as an adviser to their administration, and they are preparing quite a number of festivities for the occasion.”

Vaughn gauged the ministers, a thoughtful look in his eyes. “How interesting! I do recall how wonderful their accommodations were. I was allowed to bask in a hot spring, the food was excellent, and the conduct of their servants impeccable. I knew Vester was training them, but plainly he did his job well. And I can imagine how grandiose these ‘festivities’ might be!”

He certainly sounded enthusiastic about it to Gazel. If the king turned down the invite, Vaughn seemed likely to go in his stead.

Heh-heh-heh… That sly fox. I don’t know what’s motivating him, but he just doesn’t know how to settle down and lie back, does he?

Gazel thought the demon lord’s aim was to gain the confidence of the Western Nations, but this new act seemed to defy explanation. That’s what made it so interesting to him. He found it difficult to stifle the laughter coming up his throat. Maintaining decorum around his ministers was such a stress at times.

Curse you… Setting just the sort of trap that would torment me the most… Relentless!

The irrational anger was enough to kill Gazel’s urge to laugh.

“What is your bidding, my liege?” a minister ventured to ask the silent king. “Sir Rigurd sends word that, while attending may pose some difficulty for you, if you are able to grace them with your presence, they will provide you treatment truly befitting a king. Similar invitations have apparently been sent to leaders around the world, and there are only a limited number of seats available. He also warned us to reply as quickly as possible, as Tempest will be crowded on the dates of the event.”

It sounded polite enough, but it was no way to talk to the ruler of a great, powerful nation. The minister knew as much, fearing how his lord would respond as he spoke. But it was nothing that fazed Gazel—if anything, it perplexed him that anyone thought it would. His Tyrant skill made it easy for him to read the minds of his ministers, so he smiled a bit as he attempted to correct them.

“Let us accept the invitation, then. I look forward to touring Tempest anew.”

“My liege! No matter how friendly Sir Rimuru is with you, I seriously question the validity of this event. We do not know what manner of entertainment there might be, but surely they could prepare a seat for you any time they wanted!”

“Indeed. And they did not specify how long the invite list was, but do they think the world’s great leaders have all the time in the world on their hands? No, they will not accept such a sudden request so readily.”

“And Your Majesty personally traveling to the event presents some serious issues, if I may say so!”

The ministers weren’t in the wrong. But Gazel paid them no mind.

“I am not so sure about your concerns. If anything, this move shows supreme confidence on his part. You see, my minsters, you only know of him from the time he traveled to our gates. Now, as a demon lord, he is another creature entirely. This is the Rimuru so confidently holding this event, and it will no doubt be quite a fascinating one. Besides, I am sure many of us would like to explore the internal workings of Tempest, now that it has become a great military power. If they are sending out invitations, I have no doubts that many will be accepted. Just as Vaughn said, the lodging provided is superb, and if they want to establish a guest list sooner rather than later, it must surely be so they can provide the best service possible to their visitors.”

“Very true,” Vaughn agreed. “He certainly did strike a bolder image as demon lord. Very few people indeed could get away with treating Sir Rimuru like a fool nowadays. And I can’t help but wonder what sort of festival the monsters would want to hold. Whether representing our kingdom or not, I most certainly wish to participate.”

Vaughn had intended to be a part of this from the moment he heard of it, perhaps expecting to ask Vester for an invitation. Gazel certainly didn’t want him to have all the fun. He knew full well the ministers would be dead set against their king’s attendance, though, so he searched for a method to make them see things his way.

“Besides, I am Rimuru’s partner in battle—and as such, I must guide him to ensure he is not being ridiculed by his own people. I must make it known to his neighbors that we of Dwargon are the first nation to make friends with Tempest.”

Some of the ministers began to understand Gazel’s true intentions.

“Ah… Y-yes, yes! We have the closest ties of all to Sir Rimuru, and we should be sure other nations are aware of it.”

“Agreed. I understand that those scoundrels in Thalion are attempting to butter him up, now that he is a demon lord.”

“Now would be a good time to show His Majesty in close consort with Sir Rimuru. It would do wonders to keep our rivals in check.”

So far so good, thought Gazel. He opened his mouth a little, preparing to conclude this debate, when:

“I fail to see why we are even discussing this. We know full well that if we defy His Majesty, he will simply slip past our borders again. Instead of that, I feel it far safer for Dwargon to provide its full support to its leader.”

This was the chief elder of Dwargon’s senate chiding the ministers, a man who rarely participated in public debate. The time Gazel employed a body double to escape the kingdom undercover still grated at him, apparently.

Oh, brother. Well, at least I can join in the festivities now…

This wasn’t exactly the way Gazel meant to gain support, but it was good enough. It kind of put him off a little, but he was willing to accept it.

Now, the Dwarven Kingdom was 100 percent committed to the Tempest invite, no matter how bewildered the ministers were by it, and with that, more and more people in the hall began expressing their desire to join in.

Before long, Gazel had quite another problem: How am I ever going to pare down the list of attendants joining me?

On the grounds of the royal palace of Thalion was a large, impressively beautiful garden, expansive enough to house a variety of plants and creatures rare to find in the wild. This park was personally funded by the emperor, who enjoyed a vast fortune thanks to the many streams of revenue she enjoyed. A very small percentage of that income was all it took to keep this masterpiece of natural beauty going. And not just the garden—nothing in and around the palace was funded by tax revenue. That was how impossibly rich the head of the Sorcerous Dynasty was.

Two people were currently relaxing within these gardens. One was Archduke Erald Grimwald, father of the adventurer Elen and one of the nation’s most powerful officials. Facing him was the only person in Thalion who wielded more authority than he—Emperor Elmesia El-Ru Thalion herself.

On paper, the emperor was of ambiguous gender with beautiful features that were only vaguely feminine—at least, that was the act she put on. In truth, Elmesia was female through and through.

Her age, however, was unknown. She was among the most pure-blooded of elves, meaning her elven qualities were stronger than most; she simply didn’t age. That made her a living witness to history, and asking how many years she had lived was a taboo. She looked elegant and noble, but she still hadn’t lost her youth—in fact, her compact frame could cause one to mistake her for a child. Her jade-green eyes were sharp and intelligent, and her vibrant skin was like a fresh coating of snow. Her long silver hair shone as it flowed down her head, brushing past the light redness of her cheeks, and her unique, pointed ears poked out from underneath.



In short, she was the epitome of harmony in motion—a high elf, one of the most supreme beings in the land.

The archduke found himself smitten for a moment at this beauty but quickly regained his senses. His wife and daughter would be furious with him if he didn’t. Clearing his throat, he turned to the exquisite wood-carved seat Elmesia was sitting on.

“Your Excellency, the nation of monsters I have reported to you about has sent me an invitation.”

Erald took a letter out from his pocket, presenting it to her. He had already checked it for traps or hidden poisons, and he knew what it read, but he did not say it out loud; he was fully aware of how the emperor disliked people telling her things before she could see them for herself.

But he had his concerns. I truly never expected that slime would ever be recognized as a demon lord. But even if he has…why would he call someone like me to this coronation of sorts?

The letter Erald presented to the emperor was, in fact, addressed to him. There was no need to show it to Elmesia. But as the letter put it: Please reply if able to attend, providing the number of participants you wish to bring. He interpreted this to mean he could bring as many plus-ones as he felt like. But who should join him? That was the rub. Some bodyguards would be a must, but the archduke could hardly show up alone. Many of the nobles he had previously reported his travels to expressed keen interests in visiting for themselves.

With Tempest becoming a new trade partner, courtly circles across the Sorcerous Dynasty were alive with talk of this new land. And the fascination was hardly exclusive to the nobility. When the emperor received the initial report of Erald’s audience with the demon lord Rimuru, her eyes had been cold and focused as she gave her response:

“…Hmm. So you went off to this fabulous land all by yourself? Well, weren’t you fortunate, Erald. I imagine it was quite the exciting experience. And why did you leave me behind, hmm? Even naming yourself my representative and establishing ties with them, no less? If our business with them was that important, I would have liked to involve myself with it, wouldn’t you agree?”

She had a point. But Erald came to Tempest on the pretense of rescuing his daughter, and what he found was a literal nation of monsters. He may have transferred his spirit into the body of a homunculus, but there was no telling what could have befallen him. There was no way he could have guaranteed Elmesia’s safety if he took her there.

But the emperor gave him no quarter. “If that is the charming sort of slime you met, I wish I could have seen him for myself. And meeting with a demon lord so soon after his birth? Why, I’ve lived for many, many years, and not even I have been graced with that opportunity. And look at you, hogging it for yourself! Does the term abandonment mean anything to you? Imagine, being treated this way by my own people. What a pitiful leader I am…”

She had continued in this vein for a bit longer before wrapping it up like so:

“I’ve never been so envious—um, so offended in my life, I don’t think. You, taking in all this excite—ahhh, risking all this danger and going off by yourself. It is scandalous!”

Elmesia’s rebuke was really more whining than scolding. Most of her vassals only knew her unreadable mask and assumed the heart beneath was just as icy; she only showed this side of her personality to Archduke Erald and one other, although Erald took the brunt of it. If only they knew what’s actually underneath, he always thought.

However, thanks to the emperor’s pouting, the budget for this effort had been frozen, their plans to share technology with Tempest delayed for the time being. Erald wanted to soothe her hurt feelings about it all so they could get the ball rolling on the tech swap again. If he decided to join the festivities solo without informing Elmesia, he’d most certainly be inviting her rage upon him. By that point, he feared, the frozen budget would be the least of his worries.

This demon lord coronation was, in its own way, a show of force. It was devised to display Rimuru’s strength as demon lord to the nations around him. They would be holding a festival in conjunction, along with assorted unspecified but large-scale entertainment. There was no way the eternally bored Elmesia would pass up an opportunity to attend such an exciting-sounding event. Erald knew she’d sniff it out, then interrogate him about not reporting it to her. The potential consequences for her wrath were beyond imagination.

Thus, Erald opted to hide nothing and just show her the letter.

Now she lifted her head, fresh from reading it. Erald sat up straight in his seat.

“So what do you intend to do with this?” Elmesia asked.

“Do what, Your Excellency?”

He was buying time, but Erald knew what Elmesia meant. He knew, but he couldn’t say it himself. If the emperor was going to join the festivities, this was now an official state visit, and that took the entire administration to prepare for. It was too significant a thing for Erald to suggest from his own lips. He wanted to be sure anything that came from this meeting was, first and foremost, the emperor’s idea.

“Mmm, playing dumb, are we? Do you know, Erald, of the sweet pastries we procured from that man Yoshida’s bakery? They’re far tastier than they used to be, aren’t they? Could you venture a guess as to why?”

Erald fell silent. This change of subject was unexpected.

“Or are you saying a strategic genius such as yourself is oblivious to the goings-on in the streets? What a disappointment.”

“I apologize, Your Excellency. By Yoshida, you refer to the baker who runs the establishment in Englesia you enjoy so much? I believe the kingdom provides for his personal safety as an otherworlder, despite his lack of fighting skill. I was unaware that his work was distributed to Thalion, but how is that related to Sir Rimuru’s invitation?”

If you didn’t know something, better to be honest and ask. Maybe you can’t get away from that if you’re dealing with a stranger, but Erald was intimately familiar with the emperor—she even let him look at her unobscured face, a right granted to a tiny handful of people in Thalion.

“You truly claim not to know, then? Ellwyn brought some samples back several years ago as a souvenir. I suppose she didn’t see fit to give you any.”

“She what?!”

The revelation that his own daughter declined to save any for him hurt harder than expected. Elmesia was clearly gratified to see this.

“All right. Seeing your expression is all I need. Let me tell you, then. Yoshida, it seems, has found a new source for his ingredients. It’s allowed him to greatly expand the diversity of his wares, and the quality of his work has improved to match. In addition, in exchange for some monetary support, he’s been willing to send a supply of his goods to us.”

Erald was well aware of Kaoru Yoshida. Like his fellow otherworlders, he’d been the subject of much investigation and eventually pinpointed in the capital city of Englesia where he was running a café and sweet shop. He was said to lack any special skills, although that was unconfirmed. His talents as a pastry chef, however, were undoubtedly top-of-the-line, enough so that he counted the grand master of the Free Guild as a grateful client. There were even rumors of Hinata, the Saint, sneaking in after closing hours to avoid attracting a crowd.

Thus, Erald already knew him as a successful tradesman, but Elmesia wasn’t done speaking yet.

“So you know I invited Yoshida here once. Ellwyn, you see, brought along the most tremendous cake I’ve ever had. I was hoping I could have him become the empire’s official dessert specialist. But he turned me down. No matter how much money I stacked on the table, Yoshida refused to come here…”

The way she put it, Yoshida wasn’t the kind of man who was moved by money. Instead, she made do with having a small selection of “souvenirs” purchased for her. Your Excellency, what are you doing?!! Erald resisted shouting the thought out loud. But she still wasn’t done.

“Recently, Yoshida apparently sent word that he’d be closing soon. I’m not sure if he’s moving or opening up another location… But losing my dessert supply during his hiatus would be a nigh unbearable blow, wouldn’t it?”

“Not especially, no.”

“Hmm. That’s what you have to say to me? Ellwyn is quite fond of that bakery, you know. If their wares remained easily obtainable, I’m sure she’d be glad to ferry my orders back here.”

“Wh-what?!”

“Oh, yes. She already comes back here for our regular tea parties.”

This was monumental news. Erald thought his daughter hadn’t come near Thalion for years. Elmesia’s revelation was a heavy blow. He already knew the two bodyguards assigned to her weren’t exactly the most reliable agents out there, but he hadn’t heard a word of this from the other observers he had hired to watch over her. He resolved to rake them over the coals about this later, but for now, he had to press Elmesia for more.

“This is grave news, is it not?!”

“Oh, yes, it is! But I’ve used some of my authority—and funds—to obtain some rather interesting information.”

“What is it?”

“Well, of all the places, it turns out that this baker is seriously considering a move to the nation you visited, Tempest. So tell me, what were you doing over there?”

This actually jogged Erald’s memory a bit. Every meal he had at Tempest was a delight; his daughter Elen practically wept tears of joy at first sight of their dessert selection. He even recalled her jumping up and down: “Ah, Shuna’s perfectly re-created that new recipe!” and the like.

“Ahhh… Was that what she meant?!” Erald cried as the pieces fell into place.

Elmesia sighed. “Are you sure you still have all your marbles, Archduke?”

Erald wasn’t so sure any longer. “I—I am sorry,” he apologized, and he was entirely sincere.

Now he saw what the empress was displeased about. She suspected that Erald was hoarding all the sweets for himself—something he never would’ve done, even if it was for his daughter’s sake.

“Nothing is ever too good for your daughter, after all…”

Now, at least, Erald’s name had been cleared. Instead, Elmesia was now busy yelling at him about being totally oblivious to everything. Erald dutifully accepted it.

“But, Your Excellency, how will we respond to Sir Rimuru?”

Elmesia gave her companion a satisfied grin. “Yes…well…”

She was acting all stately about it but didn’t seem too interested in giving an answer. It irked Erald, but he wasn’t foolish enough to offer his own words. As stated, the emperor visiting a foreign land was a national-level project. If Erald brought up the idea first, he could see himself being shouted down by criticism. People would get in his way; it’d turn into a big mess.

The Sorcerous Dynasty was established by the emperor Elmesia, its sorcerous sovereign, and the thirteen royal families and other rulers under her gave her their total loyalty. In general, each family was responsible for governing their own fiefdoms, while the imperial court ran on the taxes they provided. None of the royal families had their own standing armies; all of that was concentrated on the empire side. The emperor was Thalion’s commander in chief, responsible for arbitrating across fiefdoms and nations. Erald was born into one of these thirteen families; his mother, Ellis Grimwald, was the matriarch who ran it. This Ellis was also the grandmother of Elmesia herself—the only other person in Erald’s life he was forced to submit to.

Erald’s elder brother, the father of Elmesia, had been killed in battle with monsters. It was an event that happened both before Thalion’s founding and well before Erald was even born. It made Elmesia his niece, even though she had lived far longer than him—another reason he owed her at least some respect.

What about the other royal families besides Ellis’s? They were, to say the least, often very peculiar. Some holed up in their domains, refusing to take any part in imperial administration, while others took advantage of their posts to actively participate in internal politics. Elmesia never made any policy statements herself, so a number of local nobles struggled to gain power for themselves instead. As archduke, one of Erald’s tasks was to keep an eye on people.

That was why he had to be careful here. If this was just a pleasure trip, that was one thing, but many people would fault him for organizing a journey to a literal monster den. It could give them an excuse to strip him of his position. He personally doubted it, but some of the nobles might have even been scheming to eliminate the emperor from the picture entirely. To keep that from happening, he knew he had to be thoroughly prepared.

“Aw, you worry too much, Erald.”

“Y-Your Excellency?!”

“No matter what those little fish think, none could ever exact revenge against me.”

Elmesia was changed now. She looked, and felt, like a ruler—an emperor with absolute power, one who never allowed rebellion even once in her life. As long-lived as she was, all the great kings and leaders of the world—even Erald himself—looked like nothing but a street gang formed of children.

Erald tensed up and nervously swallowed. He could speak frankly with her thanks to sharing a bloodline, but technically speaking, she was far, far above him. He was lauded as a champion of the people himself, but Elmesia was on a whole other level. It was impossible not to be nervous around her.

“That demon lord… His name was Rimuru, yes?” she said. “We cannot let our guard down.”

“…How do you mean?”

She was stating the obvious. He was strong, obviously, and you couldn’t discount the leadership he showed guiding his monsters. And there was never a demon lord who tried to build cooperative relationships with the nations around them before. But Elmesia wasn’t one to verbalize such an obvious point—hence why Erald asked for clarification.

“Hee-hee… This Rimuru; he rather easily accepted our request to build a highway to Thalion, didn’t he?”

“Yes. He asked for rights to things like tolls and customs fees, but he accepted the full construction job on his end.”

“And there’s the issue. Those rights could grant him an absolute fortune. Can’t you see that looking at me, Erald?”

She was back to her usual casual self. Erald knew what she meant.

“Ah, those revenue sources?”

Erald, too, realized early on that Rimuru was aiming for exactly that. That was why he thought carefully before giving him those rights. But now Elmesia was giving him a supercilious chuckle.

“You have a lot to learn, still. Long-lived species like ourselves can plan matters so we profit in the long term. You do realize that, do you not?”

“Of course. I made my decision after judging the passage fees the demon lord Rimuru could charge versus the money it would take for us to build the highway.”

By his calculations, any tolls they’d pay would be far cheaper. Attempting to build a paved path through the Forest of Jura, as monster-laden as it was, would require countless years and a massive budget. The Khusha Mountains at the forest’s border were ruled by the organized, warlike tengu. Working with them would be a slog—and once you were done with them, there were hundreds of other monsters and magical beasts to deal with. Even discounting them, the complex geography posed a major problem. It’d require tunnels dug through mountains, bridges strung across canyons, and workers who’d need round-the-clock protection the entire way. It’d be a century-long project, and while that wasn’t out of the question for an empire with Thalion’s resources, it was doubtful they’d ever see a return on their investment.

With all that in mind, Rimuru’s offer was music to Erald’s ears.

“How naive of you,” Elmesia said, shattering Erald’s confidence. “Certainly, crafting a highway in the forest is a daunting task. It has never been tried before because there was no benefit to it.”

She began guiding Erald through the issues involved.

Just as he thought, there would be no profit from the project. It was rife with challenges, and there was no point to having a road through the forest anyway. But that was in the past. Before, the highway would’ve had to go all the way to the Dwarven Kingdom—now, all it had to do was reach Tempest, the new nation in the middle of the woods. Also, there was now a purpose to the highway—trade. Working with the dwarves could have improved Thalion’s technology, but there were too many obstacles in the way to achieve that. Now, with Tempest on the scene, things had changed.

“The southern demon lord domains are ruled by Milim, alongside Carillon, the Beast Master, and Frey, the Sky Queen. With all the military might they boast, they are set to become dazzlingly prosperous. Beyond that, we have the Western Nations to the northwest and the Armed Nation of Dwargon to the north. This new nation, Tempest, is nestled right between them, is it not?”

“…It is, yes.”

Erald felt he understood what Elmesia was driving at. He still didn’t see how that meant he had erred. Things change over time, after all. That land had no value up to now, but as Elmesia pointed out, it now had boundless potential. Situated at a key location between multiple forces, it was bound to become a meeting point for all their cultures…and it was destined to grow rapidly. That was what the demon lord Rimuru wanted, and this was why Erald—deftly realizing this ahead of the crowd—wanted to firm up relations with him. But building a road to this new nation, as he knew full well, was a high-cost, high-risk endeavor.

“I decided that instead of embarking on a project that would require military support to back it up, it was better to secure profits through payment of their usage fees.”

He was confident he did the right thing. But the response failed to wipe the smile off Elmesia’s face.

“You aren’t incorrect. We haven’t sustained any losses, and normally, I would congratulate you on a job well done. Buuuut, he is just as long-lived as us. A demon lord, remember? And if you sign an agreement with no binding time limit, you need to think much more carefully about it than that. I give you eight points out of ten.”

“…?!”

“What we should have done is lend a hand in the construction effort. We should have selected personnel and built our own teams to handle the roadwork. They, meanwhile, could have focused solely on security. If we gave them at least a token effort at cooperation, that would have made our fee negotiations much easier.”

“…!!”

From now until the end of time, the demon lord Rimuru would hold all rights to the highway. And given their lack of cooperation at the beginning, these conditions would be frustratingly difficult to overturn. This was a demon lord—any attempts to coerce him with force would be the height of folly. Elmesia was right, and Erald, with his single-minded focus on profits, was wrong.

“This is why I always accuse you of being stubborn, Erald. You may be smart enough to notice when the tides are changing, but you can’t hold on to your preconceptions like this.”

Erald was forced to admit it: She was right. The construction work would be dangerous, but if he had considered that compromise option, the costs wouldn’t have been too high to consider. And bringing in people from Thalion could have led to the sharing of technical expertise, which would allow the empire to take in Tempestian know-how for itself.

…What have I done? I failed to read that far into it…

He could practically see Rimuru gloating in front of his face. But it was far too late to linger on the issue.

“So about my response to this invitation…”

Elmesia’s face grew sterner. Erald sat up, nodding at her.

“Between the sweets shop and the highway, it’s clear Rimuru is well versed in human customs. There’s no doubting his status as a former otherworlder, but now he possesses the power and authority to utilize his knowledge and experience fully. Demon lord or not, he is truly extraordinary. Grand Master Yuuki Kagurazaka and Captain Hinata Sakaguchi, both disciples of the Hero Shizue Izawa, may hold considerable clout in the Western Nations, but neither is a match for Rimuru. If we want to be on good terms with him going forward, we can’t afford not to attend this. We never had a choice from the beginning.”

That was the emperor Elmesia’s decision. Erald had no reason to disagree, although he still had his anxieties.

“I understand, Your Excellency. I will ensure no one impedes your participation. However, there is no guaranteeing your safety in that land. We must choose our attendees carefully.”

They knew Rimuru had engaged in armed conflict with the Crusaders not long ago. The battle, which ended overwhelmingly in Rimuru’s favor, reportedly featured far fewer casualties than what the world saw in Farmus’s invasion. It showed how confident the monsters were in this fight, although some criticized the demon lord for going easy on his foes. For someone who knew the inside truth, it was enough to make you swear off attacking Tempest forever, but there were plenty of clueless people out there looking to test their strength. This wouldn’t discourage them, and Erald was concerned Tempest would see more conflict going forward, not less.

It’s doubtful any of it will affect Rimuru himself, but law and order may fall apart in the forest soon. We can defend ourselves, but taking our sole emperor there?

Elmesia’s decision was final, and it was his job to accept it. It’d involve a lot of hard work, but he needed to be sure they were ready for anything.

“Fine. Then let us deploy some empire-affiliated forces. I’d like you to choose several from the Magus to guard me.”

The Magus were a group of high-ranking military officers called the Knights of Purity and vested with the full authority of the emperor. They acted as her mediators, and their ranks were open only to those who could trace their bloodline far back into nobility. The Magus were hailed as the strongest force in Thalion…and yes, Erald was part of them. Now the emperor was asking him to deploy a group who was kept a strictly guarded secret from other nations. It was a job he approached with dead seriousness.

“…Very well. I will send out the word at once.”

The visit to foreign lands was set in stone, with word quickly being reported across the empire. Soon, Archduke Erald would find it fiendishly difficult to get a decent night’s sleep.

In the headquarters of a trading company in the Kingdom of Blumund, Gard Mjöllmile was starting to wonder if this constant stream of visitors would ever end.

As a merchant who held sway over a litany of commercial ventures, Mjöllmile had a knack for accurately judging people with a single glance. Some people came to him purely in search of money; others arrived seeking new business ventures. Occasionally, he’d see nobles who’d fallen on hard times, approaching him with all manner of fishy-sounding offers. He was sick of dealing with them all, but sometimes he’d actually see people with real, concrete money-making ventures for him. That was why he refused to leave this job to someone else.

These facts were on his mind as he shooed away yet another charlatan and asked the next client to come in. This was a well-dressed man, but Mjöllmile wasn’t fooled. The fabric of his clothing was of decent quality, but the style was outdated. He couldn’t afford a custom outfit in the latest fashion, so he was making do with last year’s model. No, this man wouldn’t be worth his time. He was one of those hard-luck nobles, and he had already approached Mjöllmile once before, attempting to palm off random junk as pricey antiques he’d let him have for a song.

Doubtlessly, he was here on another get-rich-quick scheme—but still, he was of noble blood. Mjöllmile had checked into him enough to know that for a fact, so he couldn’t just show him the door on sight. That sort of behavior could lead to lèse-majesté, and then he’d have to worry less about his financial ledgers and more about his life. It made the job tricky for him, to say the least.

Ah, here we go again. The two of us, trying to outfox each other…

So Mjöllmile heard him out—and just as he thought, the story made him wish he’d hidden under the table. This man (the Viscount Cazac was his name) was seeking a financial investment so he could use slaves to open a shop for him. The merchant saw, to be brutally frank, no chance that it would ever succeed. Employing attractive female slaves wouldn’t be nearly enough to make the business work. Cazac needed to thoroughly analyze the market, his client base, and his potential location, not to mention employee costs.

Telling him all this, of course, was like explaining calculus to a pig.

“Huhhh? Why can’t you decide on a location for me? And you speak of employee costs? Now what sort of fool pays their slaves?!”

The viscount wasn’t interested in hearing any of Mjöllmile’s objections. “Payment” wasn’t exactly what he meant, only that slaves need food like anyone else. And clothing, and a place to sleep. Not to mention the up-front costs for them would be far from trivial. If you wanted a slave attractive enough to catch the eye of most people, the money you’d need to expend on the search could buy you a decent house. It’d be a far more effective use of funding to just hire part-time staff, much like Mjöllmile did with the public-fronting stores he ran in Englesia.

As he saw it, all beauties age over time, and thus it was too difficult to make back your investment on forced labor in situations like that. If you were aiming for quick profits running a sexually themed establishment, you needed to be even more careful laying the foundations, or else your place would become a hive of disease—which, again, would make both Cazac and Mjöllmile criminals.

The merchant sighed to himself. There was no way in this lifetime that he’d ever accept such a hazardous proposal.

“Yes, indeed, my good viscount, you have a discerning eye. I must take my hat off to your wisdom. However, regarding the slaves you mention, I fear it may be difficult to procure them at this time, would it not? Human trafficking is banned in this kingdom, and even if you turn to the illegal trade, I fear you may not find the quality you are looking for, you see.”

He tried his best to make his rejection sound as inoffensive as possible. It didn’t work.

“Ah…well, about that. I actually have an in. I’ll tell you about it, too, if you’re willing to invest. But you know, I have to keep this discreet… All I’ll say for now is that there’s a certain elf in the picture.”

The way Cazac never missed an opportunity to put on airs rankled Mjöllmile, but he had the willpower to retain his composure. A master merchant like him could never physically reveal his disdain for his customers. Anyone who did was below third-rate in this trade and incapable of ever pinning down a large-scale deal.

But this elf-slave talk piqued Mjöllmile’s interest. If he was telling the truth, that was beyond a luxury commodity. But even before that, Mjöllmile was a man with some influence in the underground, running a not-so-legal outfit and not afraid to engage in some dirty work now and again, albeit no more than he knew he could get away with. That was why he instructed his staff in this outfit to never stray past that one, final line in their work, even though he knew he’d get off scot-free as their boss either way.

Mjöllmile knew full well just how dangerous elven slaves were.

An elf? Only serious organized crime would get mixed up in that!

Elves were exceptionally long-lived. Many boasted mesmerizing beauty. They were intelligent, and most of them were well versed in magic. If an elf had been enslaved, it must have taken some extremely underhanded means. Enslaving an elven citizen of the kingdom was impossible— So did they find one hiding in the forest, or…?

Mjöllmile had an idea what this could be. He had heard about monster hunts, where rich people seeking exotic pets hired hunters to capture monsters in the forest. But if a demi-human had been snared by one of these hunters—and an elf, no less—quite a few nations would never let that go by without comment. The Dwarven Kingdom would immediately look into it, and the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion was even ruled by an elf. If word of this got out, it’d be a huge controversy. This wasn’t a small-time pickpocket or fraud; it was the kind of thing that could trigger an international standoff.

If he was dealing with a noble with no qualms about sticking his hand into the fire like this… There had to be something backing him up. Something huge, fearsome, and not afraid to kill for profit. Mjöllmile’s nose told him that getting involved would be dangerous.

His mind raced, thinking of a good excuse to turn down Cazac’s offer. He came up with nothing. But just as he was at his wit’s end:

“Yooooo! Mollie! Doing well?”

Someone opened the door and stepped right into their meeting, a beautiful young girl (or boy?) with golden eyes and silver hair that had a tinge of blue.

“Who are you, and how dare you interrupt my important business meeting?!”

As Cazac bellowed at the boy, Mjöllmile realized who the intruder was, stunned. There was no way he could forget that face, the face of the champion who’d saved his life—the demon lord Rimuru himself. He knew this was the leader of that nation of monsters, and hearing he had become a demon lord shocked him to the core. But he really did it. He was part of the Octagram, recognized by his fellow demon lords—and for some reason, he seemed to take a liking to Mjöllmile.

They’d often meet up, occasionally working together on potential new business ventures. Recovery potion sales, for example. Mjöllmile was still the exclusive vendor around here, and he was now earning stable profits from his work. Just as things settled down with that, Rimuru approached him about developing a new type of food, “ramen,” brought in from his own world. This was already on sale in a handful of restaurants, and the feedback was encouraging so far.

Now, more recently, Rimuru had had him taste test something called a “burger,” talking about building a “chain” of restaurants specializing in their production and sale. Mjöllmile had agreed to test the concept, and right now he was busy assembling and educating a staff, as well as finding a location and outfitting it with everything needed. He had wanted to report back to Rimuru about his progress, but his demon lord duties kept him fiendishly busy. It had been about a month since they last spoke.

“Well, well! If it isn’t Rimuru! I thought you said you were too caught up in this or that crisis to come visit?”

Mjöllmile, surprised at this sudden appearance, couldn’t help but ask. After all, Rimuru had a thundering horde of Crusaders to deal with at the moment. He even advised the merchant to avoid Tempest for a while, as it’d be too dangerous for him. Fuze, guild master for the Kingdom of Blumund, was still cursing himself over his failure to stop Hinata, the Saint. So why was the lord himself here? All these thoughts immediately pushed Viscount Cazac out of Mjöllmile’s mind.

“Stop! Please, stop! The master is seeing another visitor!”

He could hear the voice of one of his servants, someone too new to know who Rimuru was. Upon catching sight of him, the servant stopped in his tracks and just stared at him, slack-jawed. It was a rather pathetic sight to see—but Mjöllmile couldn’t blame him, since he himself might be doing the same if he didn’t stop himself. It was fine if they were talking or scheming over something, but when Rimuru was his normal self, he was just so touchingly attractive, a completely different person.

“Rimuru, you said?”

Mjöllmile ignored Cazac. Rimuru, finally noticing him, gave him an awkward look.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t know you were busy. I’ll be waiting over at your manor, all right? See ya!”

The sound of Rimuru’s voice brought Mjöllmile abruptly back to consciousness. He began to feel honest pity for Cazac, the viscount who told a demon lord “How dare you” to his face.

If Rimuru wasn’t so easygoing, I doubt the viscount would be breathing right now…

What you don’t know can’t hurt you, as they say, although Mjöllmile wondered if he should make an exception at the moment.

But Cazac spoke up again, his voice raised. “Look, you little boy…or girl? What are you, Mjöllmile’s mistress or the like? Do you realize you’ve both interrupted my meeting and listened in on confidential information? Do you understand the consequences of your indiscretion, hmm?”

Oh, by the gods, what is he saying…?

Mjöllmile, seeing Cazac eye Rimuru up and down with lecherous intent, could feel his heart stop.

“Oh, I apologize about that, sir. Nobody stopped me from barging in, so… Sorry.”

Rimuru was cheerfully apologetic. But Cazac was too high-handed to forgive him.

“Hmm… You know, I like your face. Look, you could use a little instruction on how the world works, I’d say. How would you like me to look after you?”

Great. And now this.

Why do I have to deal with these utter fools, day in, day out…?

Mjöllmile was beyond exasperated and well into the realm of anger. Life seemed too ridiculous to be worth it at the moment. He could handle the scorn of bush-league nobility. But treating Rimuru, a man he owed a life debt to, like some harlot was unforgivable. Cazac’s behavior had crossed the line and then some.

Yes, picking a fight with a noble would put Mjöllmile at a disadvantage, in the eyes of the law—but did that mean he should just sit there and take it? No. He was willing to be modest with rabble like this because it’d be a pain for him otherwise, but open hostility deserved to be treated in kind.

The merchant steeled himself.

“Cazac, you are being rude to the individual who saved my life. Why does some viscount think he can get away with riling me?”

“Wh-what?!”

“There will be no more business between us. I don’t want to see you in here begging me for anything again!”

“H-how dare you! A merchant, rebelling against nobility… Mjöllmile, have you gone mad?!”

“Hmph! Anyone willing to work with criminal groups and trigger cross-border crises is nothing but trouble to me. You’re liable to bring those kind to this city, too. Better to stamp out that pestilence before it can happen, I’d say.”

“M-Mjöllmile! After all the favors I’ve done for you… I’ll make sure you regret this!!”

With that, Cazac stormed out of the office, spotting the servants who had come in to see what the racket was about and figuring now was a good time to leave.

“Pfft. This child, thinking he rules the world…”

“Uh, Mollie? You sure you’re okay with riling that guy?”

Rimuru, meanwhile, was as breezy as always. He really is like nothing on this world, Mjöllmile thought as he relaxed. It’s just as I thought when I heard of his ascension. He never changes…

He then dismissed all the other potential clients in his waiting room. In this world, there were certain opportunities you couldn’t afford to miss. He wasn’t foolish enough to misread the truly important things. He was a capable merchant, and he understood the importance of finding diamonds in the rough. But he also knew that some things were vital enough to abandon everything else for.

And really, he couldn’t find it in himself to make Rimuru wait any longer. Not because Rimuru was a preferred, profit-making customer of his. He knew Rimuru helped him out in his time of greatest need, and he thus felt an obligation to never betray him. To him, there was no such thing as a job more important than dealing with Rimuru.

Has he come up with another scheme? he thought, growing excited as he instructed his staff to handle all other pressing matters for him. But in just a few moments, Mjöllmile’s frustrating days of listening to endless strings of confident men and swindlers would come to an end, marking the start of a new chapter in his life.

Mjöllmile guided me over to his manor. When his butler caught sight of us, he almost fell over himself bowing to greet me. I’d been here several times before, so he must have recognized me. I keep telling him he doesn’t have to do that, but ah well. Mjöllmile, meanwhile, paid it no mind, smiling ear to ear as he gave instructions to his servants. I imagine he’d provide the same tea and snacks he always did.

“Um, sorry,” I said. “I guess I kind of interrupted your work?”

Mjöllmile chuckled. “No, no, Rimuru. I had wanted to cut ties with that dunderhead for a while now. He kept barging into my office with all these outrageous schemes, using his noble title to bully me around…”

He winced, then explained the whole story to me. So that freaky-looking dude back there was nobility? I could fully extinguish my aura at this point, so I didn’t need a mask or anything when traveling to human towns. I broke the thing when I ascended anyway, but I still kept it in my pocket, unrepaired, for the memories.

That’s why the guy must’ve thought I was female, but I wasn’t about to be upset about that. I knew how to read a situation and go with it, unlike Veldora and Shion, and I went easy on him because he acted pretty high-born. That was the right decision, I guess—but if Mjöllmile wanted him out of his life anyway, maybe I shouldn’t have bothered.

“But what if the nobles start getting hostile with you? Wouldn’t that make life difficult?”

“It would, but that man, Cazac, is nothing but a parasite. Today he came in saying he wanted to deal in slaves. An elven one, even…”

“Elven?!” I fired back, surprised. I saw a bunch of elves in that Dwarven Kingdom nightclub. Elen had some elven blood in her, too. They were treated as demi-human, not monsters, and slavery was likely outlawed around here.

“Uh, Mollie”—I had taken to calling him that; Mjöllmile was a mouthful—“Mollie, wouldn’t that be a…?”

“A crime? Yes, very much so. He was asking me to be an accomplice to a crime. And I’ll admit, I’m not exactly clean as a whistle, but not even I am brazen enough to enslave an elf.”

“Ah. What’d happen if people found out?”

“Good question. Cazac has his viscount title to fall back on. Blumund’s a small kingdom, but that means the noble class isn’t that extensive. Even someone like him has a fair amount of clout.”

He was a viscount? No wonder he kept insulting me like that. That would put him above the Baron of Veryard, Fuze’s friend, and I can see why it’d be so much trouble for Mjöllmile.

“You sure you’re okay, then?”

“Bahhh! They call me the King of the Dark City, you know. Don’t worry about me. I’ve got enough strength to look out for myself!”

The King of the Dark City? Did Blumund even have a city like that? Maybe he was referring to the poorer districts of this nation, but even that was heaven compared with the kind of place Yohm grew up in. When it came to law and order, Blumund was on the relatively decent side. I’d take his word for it, though.

“Uh, you really ought to be more careful than that. I’ve got a big job I want your help with.”

That’s right. I had been in talks with him about all kinds of matters. If he picked a fight with some noble punk and it got out of hand, that’d be trouble for me.

“Wah-ha-ha! It’s fine, it’s fine. When it comes to good fortune, you’ll find none better than ol’ Mjöllmile here! Look at the relationship I’ve built with you, for starters!”

There’s just no fazing him, is there? That’s what I like about him. But I couldn’t afford to wait until after something happened. Maybe I should bring on a bodyguard or two for him, I thought as I watched him laugh it off.

“So, Rimuru, what brings you here today?”

I recalled what we had to talk about.

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We were planning to hold a grand festival, attended by the monsters of the Forest of Jura and all the world leaders from the human realms. We called it the Tempest Founder’s Festival, and we had already picked the dates for it.

With things patched up between Hinata and me, all my anxieties were gone. The date of Yohm’s coronation as king had also been decided, and we had sent word to all the neighboring countries to help that plan along. Rigurd and his team were busy writing up invitations to the leaders we wanted there, but they weren’t the only ones in full work mode. News of the nationwide festival had riled up enthusiasm across all my domain’s monsters, and each of my administration’s departments was formulating plans to wow them during the event.

Look at Shuna, for example. She intended to launch an entire lineup of new dishes to impress our guests, as well as open Tempest’s first café, offering a variety of colorful cakes. Yoshida, whose café in Englesia was now a favorite of mine, was assisting in the effort—he had once turned down every offer I sent him, but the moment he set eyes on Shuna, I could see him start to get fidgety.

“Be… Before I opened this café, I enjoyed the support of a great number of people. I’d be happy to help you, too, but I can’t really leave here…”

“I hope you will reconsider,” Shuna said with a polite and elegant bow, one hand over the other. It was a little show-off-y but powerful enough to shake the heart of any man. I figured it’d work well enough, but:

“Mmh… Flirting won’t work on me, you know. If you want to convince me, do it in the kitchen! If you can wow me with your culinary skills, I would be glad to consider it.”

Thanks to Yoshida, this was now a cooking battle. Nothing worth worrying about for Shuna, though; anyone could recognize her cuisine was first-rate.

“Shuna, give him everything you’ve got! Make this cocky baker beg for mercy with something spectacular!”

“Yes, my lord!”

“Whoa, who’s being cocky now?!”

I ignored Yoshida’s complaining; Shuna was ready to go. Yoshida’s own skills had lit a fire under her.

With the café kitchen left to her, Shuna began cooking up the dish nearest and dearest to her heart—tamagoyaki, a rolled-up scrambled egg. Simple, yes, but one’s ability to execute it perfectly was the ultimate way to test a chef’s acumen. Yoshida eyed the results placed on a dish, then nervously swallowed before silently stabbing it with a fork and bringing it to his mouth.

“It… It’s amazing!”

A one-hit KO.

“Thank you very much,” said Shuna, smiling—and that smile was the final blow. Yoshida finally gave in, roundly defeated in heart and taste buds.

“Pfft. Well, you got me! But this is a special favor, all right?”

It was funny, watching this burly middle-aged guy act all shy around Shuna. He was practically falling over himself for this fetching young woman with light-pink hair. I think he was smitten from the very start, actually, but better not to say that. If he wanted to play it cool, it’d be mean to stop him.

So Shuna and Yoshida were now a pair in the kitchen. I had no doubts they and their work would be a star attraction at the festival.

Next, we had Gabil. The dragonewt was working with Vester to build a presentation devoted to the history of healing potions. They intended to keep the core fundamentals of their research a trade secret, but they wanted to use this pavilion to recruit new people interested in joining their team. They had enough staff for now, they said, but just wanted to find potential hires with the kind of passion they wanted.

Garm (eldest of the three dwarven brothers) and Kurobe planned to show off their own wares at the event. Their pavilion would be alongside Gabil and Vester’s, and already they were talking about competing to see who attracted the larger crowds. Glad to see they were using this festival to have a little fun.

Kaijin was also set to return the night before the bash. I told Geld to take a break during the event, so construction should be largely complete before then. I informed my staff that our prisoners of war deserved a little celebration as well; they’d be enjoying a feast over in their own facility. A few people would have to work during the holiday, but we made sure to accommodate their schedules so they could trade off days and not be stuck on duty the whole time. The festival would continue for about a week, so I wanted everyone to get in on the excitement.

Come to think of it, Shion was planning something, too. She was very confident about it (“Hee-hee-hee, I hope you’re looking forward to it, Sir Rimuru”), so I was half-excited, half–scared shitless. That…and Veldora was alarming me with his suggestions again. Better do something about that before he starts freaking people out…

Looking at all these people, I figured I should probably pitch in somehow—which brings us to the involvement of my old friend Gard Mjöllmile.

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A manor servant brought me some tea. I had come here many times before, so he was used to me and provided a couple of the cookies I liked. Taking a sip of the drink, I grinned. It was just as tasty as always, helping put my mind in a better place. Time to move on to negotiations, then.

“Anyway, Mollie, I’ve got another job for you. Don’t worry; it’s an easy one this time, I promise.”

“Oh, another bright idea of yours? You always bring such fascinating projects to the table, but they certainly require a lot of…start-up work, to say the least.”

He grinned at me. Despite his complaint, it was clear he was interested in what I had to offer him.

My project to bring fast food to this world—burgers, the whole bit—was still underway. I had handed my outline of what needed to be done to Mjöllmile, and he was in the midst of executing it. The plan had been on the back burner for a while, what with Hinata marching on me and everything, but I wanted to come over and see how it was going, as well as talk about putting up a satellite location in Tempest in time for our festival.

“Hee-hee! Oh, don’t be a stick in the mud, Mollie. You know our recent project? Before we launch in Blumund and Englesia, I’d like you to maybe open up a test location in my nation first.”

“Oh? You know, I actually appreciate that offer a great deal, because I was just thinking about where we should train our staff. But if you’re proposing that, have you worked out your differences with the Crusaders?”



He looked a bit concerned. I must have left him too long without updates. Although I didn’t intend for it to turn into a fight, we had certain Luminism doctrine issues to deal with. If we were going to continue dealing with the Western Nations, we couldn’t afford to ignore the Holy Church issues. Now, however, that was all taken care of. We had nothing left to worry about.

“Hee-hee-hee… Yeah, I ‘worked them out,’ all right. Hinata and I made amends peacefully, and I also worked things out with Lu…”

“Lu?”

“Lu… Loose ends! We managed to set a few ground rules and tie up any loose ends, that’s all. Everything’s peachy keen now!”

“Ahhh, I see! And here I thought the Western Holy Church was a much more intimidating group to work with. Glad to see they’re more reasonable than that. Maybe I was too worried for my own good!”

Mjöllmile gave me a relieved smile. I politely smiled back, sweating on the inside about the mistake I just barely avoided making. If I had followed through there and said Luminus’s name, there’d be hell to pay—which I could deal with, but what if she decided to rub out Mjöllmile as well? I was inviting both Luminus and Hinata and her Crusaders to the Founder’s Festival, so I’d better not shoot my mouth off before then—not that I knew whether the demon lord would deign to grace my little event with her presence. She’d probably be like “Why would I ever let myself be seen among the rabble?” or something. I’m sure she’d be an incredibly demanding visitor if she showed, so I honestly didn’t mind if she declined. Though, maybe I ought to encourage her to attend…? I don’t know.

“In that case,” Mjöllmile happily exclaimed as I thought about this, “let me show you the results of our training so far!”

There was no point wondering about whether she’d come. I needed to consider my own program for now.

“Oh, has it been going well?”

“Nothing less than perfect! We’ve trained them to the point that everyone can perform their tasks on the same level.”

“Ah, I knew you wouldn’t let me down, Mjöllmile!”

We grinned at each other. It sounded like making our debut at the fest wouldn’t be an issue.

“So can we put up a storefront offering burgers, hot dogs, fries, and the drink lineup we talked about?”

“That we can. And I think we can attract customers with those beef skewers dipped in the ‘secret sauce’ you talked about. Pairing them with a rice bowl will definitely improve our bottom line.”

“It’s been getting good reviews?”

Mjöllmile briskly nodded. “It’s become a low-key staff favorite, that’s for sure.”

Making yakitori skewers out of cowdeer and chiducken seemed to satisfy people.

“Great! Let’s add that to the menu, too. Do we have enough employees to work with?”

“Well, for the moment, I’m thinking we could launch with upward of twenty locations. But starting that big would take a fair amount of money. We’d need backup personnel, which I’m training right now—that’s a necessary expense, the way I see it. So along those lines, if we can deploy more gradually, say five locations at a time, that’ll put us well within budget.”

That’s Mjöllmile for you. He fully understood my proposal, and already he was working out any staff issues involved. In that case:

“All right. Well, sorry to trouble you for this, but can you bring over around five of your best employees?”

“Five? What did you want from them?”

“Well, I’ve got this friend of mine. His name’s Veldora.”

“V-Veldora?!”

“Yeah, and he’s, like, super–worked up about opening a hibachi booth at the fest.”

“Er, is he…?”

Mjöllmile seemed to be growing visibly paler as I explained. It worried me, but I soldiered on.

“So you know, it’d be way too dangerous to leave him running that by himself, right?”

“I—I would say so, yes…”

I beamed at him. “So that’s why I want five of your best staffers to help him!”

Mjöllmile, watching me gleefully dump all the responsibility on him, turned his eyes toward the ceiling. “Would you be able to guarantee the…er, safety of this staff?”

“Of course! Whenever they have any problems, they can come right to me. If Veldora starts getting all uppity, I’ll put ’im in his place.”

“I trust you will, yes, but… Um, we are talking about the Veldora, yes? The Storm Dragon?”

I suppose we were. Guess Mjöllmile knew the name, didn’t he?

“Is that bad?”

“Ahhh… Bad may not be the correct term. I just wonder if the crew will be, too, well, petrified to get any work done…”

Hmm. I should’ve known. Yeah, if you haven’t met Veldora, you must think he’s crazy scary, huh? Catastrophe-class, and all that.

“Well…maybe that’s not a good idea, huh?”

“No, perhaps not… If he could at least assume another name for himself, temporarily, our staff could work for him unawares…”

Aha!

“Yes! Brilliant, Mollie! Let’s give him another name so nobody knows who he is!”

“Huh? You—you can do that?!”

“Sure. If he whines about it, I’ll just tell him he can’t do the hibachi thing at all. Right, let’s do that. And I’ll pay a special bonus to the five people you pick for me, so let them know I’m counting on ’em, okay?”

Whether Mjöllmile was keeping up with me or not, I considered this problem as good as solved. Veldora was being as selfish as always, but we were entertaining world celebrities here. Embarrassment would be the least of our worries if he gave all our guests food poisoning or whatever, so I couldn’t rest easy until I knew there were people who could watch over and direct him. I didn’t want to dismiss him out of hand, but I was too nervous to let him off the leash completely, so it’s a lucky thing Mjöllmile had the staff trained like I asked him.

He looked like he wanted to tell me something, but probably nothing important. The ball was in his court now.

Rimuru looked supremely happy with himself at resolving this issue. Mjöllmile, meanwhile, felt like someone had just thrown a lit bomb into his lap.

L-Lord Veldora?! I knew the seal had been undone, but he wants me to deal with him?!

This was a major headache in the making, for sure.

Rimuru was talking sense at first. Building a stand for the festival would be a good training opportunity. But if they were babysitting Veldora as well, that was another story. Mjöllmile wondered what the hell he had just gotten himself into, but as he observed the smiling, carefree Rimuru in front of him, he decided to take the “Ah well” approach. Ever since Rimuru saved him, he had tried to live life with no regrets. He might’ve been conniving and obsessed with money, but he was nothing if not brave.

“But a festival, though, eh? If we’re talking a large-scale event, I imagine you must have people jumping up and down to join in. A good opportunity for a merchant like myself, hmm?”

He had reason to think so. Many people, merchants and adventurers in particular, were now filing in and out of Tempest. It was starting to get heavily advertised; Mjöllmile was sure they were attracting curious travelers from the nearby towns and villages. That was exactly the kind of situation a merchant stood to profit from.

“Oh, you’re interested?” Rimuru took a sip from his tea, apparently picking up on Mjöllmile’s muttering. “You know, to tell the truth, I’m still wavering on a few things with this festival. I know you’ve helped us decide on some of our attractions already, but I’m still trying to think of a big, flashy centerpiece for the event.”

“A centerpiece?”

“Yeah. Basically, my plan is to turn our town into a kind of health resort. We’ve got our hot-spring infrastructure in place, along with lodging and guest houses suitable for royalty…but I feel like we’re still lacking in entertainment.”

“I see,” Mjöllmile replied, figuring it wouldn’t hurt to hear him out.

As the excited Rimuru then explained, Tempest already boasted a healthy amount of high-end accommodation. Mjöllmile had stayed in it before, so he knew that much. The rooms on offer ran the gamut, providing a selection of things to enjoy—a nice meal with a fine view of the gardens, an open-air hot spring to relax in, and so on. In the smaller nations of the world, it’d be hard for even the nobility to maintain their own private baths. That went double if there wasn’t any water service, forcing you to physically dump water in a tub and heat it up manually.

To Mjöllmile, who took that for granted, a facility with a hot spring you could enjoy any time you liked was nothing short of mind-blowing…but apparently Rimuru wasn’t satisfied with just that.

“I understand all that,” he said, “but if you already have good food and relaxing spaces, how much more of a resort do you need?”

Rimuru shook his head. “You aren’t thinking big enough, Mjöllmile. Me, I think that won’t be enough on its own. I’d like some kind of project that everyone can have a little more fun with. Like, for example…”

What Rimuru then laid out for him was a complete recreational tourism strategy for the Forest of Jura. They’d provide travelers with day-long walking tours deep into the forest, accompanied by a guide/bodyguard. They’d hold fishing tournaments at the nearby canyons, hunting tours amid untouched natural reserves, and so on and so on. All the needed equipment would be available to rent for anyone interested.

“That does sound exciting. It’d certainly attract the kind of nobility with all the time in the world on their hands—and for those with more active work lives, it’d be a fine way to relax.”

“Right, you see? That’s what I’m hoping for, but I’m just wondering if there’s something we can get everybody in on, you know?”

One of Rimuru’s aims with the Founder’s Festival, it seemed, was to encourage repeat visitors to Tempest. He was coming up with all kinds of things to keep travelers engaged and interested in the area. Mjöllmile was both amazed and exasperated. How many years ahead was he even thinking?

“Well, why not use Englesia as an example to imitate? The theater is quite popular over in their capital, I hear. They hold operas and stage plays nearly every day of the year there. You also see fighting tournaments held live at the arena…”

“Oooh! Oh, yes! Where the Hero Masayuki is, right? Isn’t he really popular?”

“He certainly is. Lightspeed Masayuki, as they call him. He’s dominated the tournaments for years. I’m actually rather a fan of his.”

“You are?!”

Even a hardened merchant like Mjöllmile had his sports allegiances. He began giving an in-depth explanation of the tournament system to Rimuru, failing to notice how he began to yawn almost instantly.

“…So really, nobody’s seen a man’s sword flash that way before. Hence the name Lightspeed, as you see. Occasionally, they hold to-the-death battles with captured monsters, but the Hero’s fighting companions are pretty strong themselves. I’ve been in the audience for some real white-knuckle matches myself. And if you had a spectacle like that… Ah, but I’m sorry. I’ve been talking for far too long. But come to think of it, isn’t your staff pretty strong, too, Rimuru? Who’s the strongest out of—?”

“Whoa! Stop right there! I can’t let you go on, Mjöllmile.”

It was obvious Mjöllmile’s interest would shift over to Benimaru and the rest of Rimuru’s officers, sooner or later. He had met Rigurd and the others several times, and to him, their muscles couldn’t have been just for show. Between them and all the other powerful magic-born he saw around town, he couldn’t help but wonder who was champion among them all. Now seemed like a good time to ask, but Rimuru’s reaction was chilly.

“Listen,” Rimuru said, voice lowered. “Between you and me, if you start talking like that around them, it’s gonna cause some serious disputes, you know? There’s this paladin named Arnaud, and he actually asked the same question back when we were all negotiating earlier. It led to the most insipid argument you ever saw—they were all trying to rank themselves on some impossible-to-understand scale, and it was starting to get pretty heated before I stepped in. I was lucky enough that only part of my staff was there, but seriously, better avoid topics like that. It’s a real powder keg with those guys.”

The one official who’d likely pitch the biggest fit of all about the question wasn’t there, Rimuru said, so he’d managed to talk everyone down from their fervor. He’d been trying to avoid such delicate questions ever since. If his main staff ever got into a real fight with one another, it could affect everything he’d striven to build for his town, and he couldn’t afford to risk that.

“I… I see. My pardons, then.”

“That’s okay. Just be careful around them. But I do like your point of view here…”

Rimuru didn’t seem overly concerned about the issue, unlike Mjöllmile. I’d say he’s a little skewed, too, he thought as he waited for Rimuru to continue.

“There is one vacant section of town. Perhaps we could turn it into an opera house, huh? Maybe that’d encourage people to become playwrights, and that’d lead to some new forms of entertainment. And an arena, huh…?”

He looked at Mjöllmile, and the merchant could almost see the gears turning behind his smile. Great, he thought. He’s got some grandiose plan in mind again. Why does he always have to look like that? He’s good-looking enough as long as he keeps his mouth shut…

“Mollie!”

He shuddered. The moment had come. “Y-yes?”

“You know a lot about battle tournaments, right?” Rimuru stood up and then sat next to Mjöllmile, voice as ingratiating as possible as he practically whispered in his ear. “How ’bout we hold one, then? Can you arrange that for me?”

“N-now, wait just a minute! That’s a lot to put on my plate out of—”

“We can build the arena for you. For now, I just need you to handle the ‘show’ aspect!”

Mjöllmile’s objections fell on deaf ears. There was no point resisting him any longer.

“There’s just no beating you, is there, Rimuru? Every single time. All right. I promise I’ll do my best for you!”

He showed a bit of a smile now. Honestly, Mjöllmile didn’t hate this. In fact, being assigned such a vital mission was like music to his ears. What did he need to put on a show like that? He’d have to both research it and put his thoughts into action. Never in his dreams did he ever think he’d be entrusted with such a large-scale event.

Well, I’m in deep now! I… I’ll never get this chance again!

He didn’t even care if he messed this up. Based on all the business partners he ever had, he knew this man, Rimuru, wasn’t the type to get angry over one failure or the other. He brought ideas into fruition fast, and he could be trusted—the most important thing to any merchant. If he said he’d build an arena, he’d build an arena—as unbelievable as it was to Mjöllmile, he could give his monsters any orders he wanted, and they’d be able to pull it off for him.

He may not look it too often, but Rimuru’s a demon lord. As long as his plans are sound, it’d be simple for him to assemble everything he needed. And now he’s relying on me…

“Good to hear,” Rimuru replied blithely as Mjöllmile’s emotions ran wild. “And I know we’re trying to get lots of world leaders, but make sure regular people can join in the fun, too, okay? You can’t make a profit if it’s not open to the general public, after all. I saw that in Englesia.”

“The general public?”

“Yeah. I’m going to build a coliseum capable of holding fifty thousand people or so. Like I said, there’s some vacant space to work with. If we build that fast-food stand we were talking about nearby, that ought to goose our profits, won’t it? We could have people go around selling food, and besides, the more foot traffic passing by, the more customers we’ll get, right? What do you think, Mollie?”

Rimuru was picturing entertainment for the masses—and taking the masses’ money. A fifty-thousand-seat coliseum would compare to Englesia’s pretty favorably—in fact, it’d be five times that arena’s size. It showed how serious Rimuru was about this.

“You see, we can have some standing-room sections that we’ll let people into at no charge. Meanwhile, we can direct rich people to the reserved seats and charge them appropriately. And then we’ll have royal boxes for the nobility with more money than sense. We’ll also need seats for special guests and invitees and things. I’d like you to figure out the ratios we need for all these seat types, if we want to make as much money as possible.”

Once again, he was leaving it all to Mjöllmile with a smile. Not even Englesia’s arena allowed the farmer and citizen classes to watch arena events for free. Mjöllmile could see the logic to it.

“I see… I thought fifty thousand was too high a number to aim for, but if that’s what you’re picturing…”

“Right. It’s important that we attract people’s interest with this stuff. And if we pack the standing-room sections, won’t that make a reserved seat look more attractive if you can afford it?”

“I bet it would. Better to reserve a spot instead of vying for space you don’t know will be available. That’ll naturally make the seats more valuable.”

This was a completely different approach from the arena in Englesia’s capital, which was chiefly a diversion for the upper classes. The aim here was to build buzz and pack as many people in as possible. It sounded deeply compelling to Mjöllmile. If admission was free, farmers and field laborers would come over to see the show when work didn’t occupy them—and when they spread the word about what they saw, that’d attract the middle classes from neighboring nations.

Besides, having tens of thousands of visitors would no doubt fill up the inns along the highways to Tempest—it’d be kind of neat to build the “fast food” establishments Rimuru described at stops along the way. When they arrived, of course, they’d need somewhere to stay. And if it could help advertise their food, their lodging, their baths, and so on, the arena wouldn’t even need to make a profit. The business all these fans would bring to town could more than make up for it.

“I gotta hand it to you, Rimuru. You had this all planned out from the start, didn’t you…?”

“Huh?! Um, yeah, kind of? Of course, yes!”

“You have enough hotel rooms for it, I think. The issue becomes how to attract guests on a regular basis. We’ll need to think about boosting our profit margins later, but spreading the word comes first, I think. And that’s what you’re counting on me to help with?”

“Y-yeah. Pretty much.”

“I see, I see. You want me to come up with the kind of entertainment that’ll bring people back again and again. Something that’ll make them contemplate another visit, even if this particular battle tournament turns a loss. If we do that, you’ll consider this a success?”

“…That’s exactly what I’m saying. I’m impressed you understand me so well, Mollie. You’re the only man I can trust with this job!”

This job—find ways to attract people to Tempest, using a battle tournament as bait—excited Mjöllmile to the core. And really, Rimuru had all but worked it out by himself before throwing it in his lap. He had to resist the urge to shout out loud with excitement.

“Heh…heh-heh… This is just too much…”

“Hey, it’s best to leave things like this to a professional, right? Don’t tell me you don’t feel up to it, Mollie?”

“Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! How harsh of you. I never realized you had such a mean streak, Rimuru.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Right you are! But this is a piece of cake for you, isn’t it?”

They both laughed loudly at each other—then exchanged sly glances.

“You realize how much money is going to change hands here, hmm? I’m sure you do.”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh… Not to worry. You have Mjöllmile on your side, and accounting is my middle name. Just watch—I’m going to give you exactly the results you want!”

“I’m sure you will. Counting on you is the smartest thing I’ve ever done.”

Rimuru was right. This tournament would take a lot of money. He honestly scared Mjöllmile sometimes. He began to wonder just how far ahead he was thinking. The thought gave him vague fears, even as his mind filled with wild dreams.

“Now, along those lines, I think I’ve stumbled upon a new way we can use your healing potions. That medicine can heal you as long as you are not killed instantly, yes? That means our competitors can fight with no small level of intensity, I assume. Plus, if a fighter is injured in one match and appears good as new in the next one, that would certainly make for some good advertising.”

“Wha?!”

“Oh, did you not think that far?”

“N-no, um, I did. It’s just that, you know, I wanted to see if your thoughts were any different from mine.”

“Ah, I see! Yes, I’m sure you’ve already considered that much, Rimuru, heh-heh-heh… But I’m not done yet!”

Mjöllmile began to lay out idea after idea for him. This turned into a volley of brainstorming and compliments on the ideas. One concept was advertising the healing potion at the tournament, then selling it on-site to adventurers. Another involved weapon and armor rentals and sales.

“Even Kurobe’s failures at the forge are pretty off the charts when it comes to raw power. We can’t sell those to just anyone, but he has a workshop full of apprentices these days. Offering their stuff shouldn’t be an issue.”

They decided to give it a shot.

Another idea thrown around was state-run betting operations. This also existed in Englesia, where even simple pick ’em bets were netting huge amounts of revenue at the arena. They could do the same thing pitting warriors against captured monsters—which had its risks, of course, but Rimuru had a small army of powerful fighters at this point, so it wasn’t nearly the hazard Mjöllmile pictured. Maybe they could even offer training courses for beginner adventurers, reserving part of the arena’s space as a dojo of sorts. The lessons would be paid, of course, but they’d come with qualified instructors to guide newbies through the basics.

The ideas came rolling one after the other from Mjöllmile. As long as Rimuru was providing his full support, he felt like he’d never run out of them. He couldn’t stop thinking about how huge his role was, dreaming up possibilities and being responsible for making them happen. It was a bit daunting, but far more than that, exciting.

“I’ll do it,” he said with a shiver. “I’ll do it all for you! My merchant’s soul is telling me we’re going to make a massive pile of money on this!”

“Excellent! I love that confidence of yours, Mollie! And I know you got what it takes to give me the kind of revenue I want!”

Rimuru’s praise embarrassed Mjöllmile a bit. But he wasn’t done yet.

“Also, um, if you’re interested, of course, if this whole tournament turns out well, you wanna come live in my town? I could make a trade department for you—or maybe a PR firm or general financial office. It doesn’t matter what we call it, actually, but I could let you run it all. I got a pretty big population to govern these days, and once the tournament’s over, I think it’s high time we reorganize our administration. I’m sure everyone will agree to it, as long as you can pull this off. What d’you think?”

Rimuru sounded like he didn’t doubt Mjöllmile at all. It made his heart dance. The question “What d’you think?” plucked his heartstrings like a master harpist, and the melodies echoed over and over through his mind like a concert hall.

He gave him a strong nod. “…There’s just no beating you, Rimuru. Or should I start calling you Sir Rimuru? I promise you, Sir Rimuru, I’ll do whatever it takes to succeed and join your team!”

There wasn’t a moment’s hesitation. How could there ever be? This man has counted on me so far, he thought. I can’t let myself mess this up!

As advanced as he was in age, Mjöllmile was now captive to the burning fires of excitement and hope and dreams in his heart. He could barely stay seated. He wished he could bottle this feeling up in a jar and keep it nearby forever.

“You don’t have to exaggerate.” Rimuru laughed, but the more they got into details, the more Mjöllmile felt like he was going to jump out of his skin. Pulling this event off, and becoming Rimuru’s trusted associate, was his new ambition in life, and he was ready to fight tooth and nail to make it happen.

Once Rimuru left, Mjöllmile called over his retainers and servants.

“What did Sir Rimuru want from you, Sir Mjöllmile?” asked Bydd, the former C-level adventurer who was now the merchant’s personal bodyguard.

“Bydd,” Mjöllmile replied with an elated nod, “things are about to get very busy.”

“Oh, did he give you another impossible task? I like all the ideas he has, but I wish he understood how much he puts you through the wringer, huh?”

He laughed, but he didn’t really mean it. Just like Mjöllmile, Bydd owed Rimuru his life. He was one of the demon lord’s greatest fans, and while he described it as a wringer, Bydd probably enjoyed the wringing more than anyone else.

Mjöllmile chuckled back at him. “Bydd, this is gonna be nothing like you’ve ever seen before. Everything I’ve done up to now was like selling pencils on the street corner compared with what’s coming. I’ll be wagering my destiny on this one.”

He already looked like a mob boss, but Mjöllmile’s smile only added to his foreboding presence. His retainers were used to it, but none could hide their surprise upon hearing this declaration.

“What d’you mean by that, Boss?” his chief butler asked. His boss gave him a quick recap—running a battle tournament alongside the Founder’s Festival, together with a test run of their upcoming fast-food concept. The festival itself would be a show of force for the newly ascended Rimuru, an effort all of Tempest was pitching in for, and the scope of it was likely beyond even Mjöllmile’s imagination. His excitement at receiving such a vital assignment was plain as he explained to the staff.

“Thus, I’ve decided,” he concluded, “that I want to become part of Rimuru’s team. No matter what, I have to make sure this is a huge success!”

His servants began to chatter among themselves. Mjöllmile, it seemed, had no intention of returning to Blumund. It caused quite a stir.

“Heh-heh… You ain’t planning on going alone, are you, Sir Mjöllmile? Maybe I’m just some punk off the street, but I’m still your bodyguard. The gang I got under me practically worships Sir Rimuru. Take me along with ya!”

“You wouldn’t be able to guard so much as a flea over there.”

“Aw, come on!”

“But if you would like to assist me in other ways, I suppose I could bring you alone.”

“Sure thing, Boss! I’ll do anything for you! I ain’t exactly intelligent, but I got street smarts, you know.”

Bydd likely did, given his swindler past, although it left Mjöllmile less than convinced.

“Bahhh, all right. The more the merrier, I suppose! And I bet that gang of yours could provide at least a little security, if they know they’ll get a meal out of it. Let’s take ’em along. Now,” he continued, turning toward his retainers, “what about you? You’re free to continue using this manor if you like.”

“Let us join you, sir!” they said in near unison. There was no hesitation among them; after all, Mjöllmile had trained them. Nothing was keeping them in this nation.

It was decided…and now, the real work began. As a full-fledged citizen of Blumund and member of the Free Guild, Mjöllmile had the freedom to travel to other nations. But as a man who believed in fast action once he made a decision, he felt a duty to the business he had remaining in town. There was no need for anxiety about the future.

“You,” he said, pointing out one of his most talented employees. “You’ve proven yourself qualified enough. D’you think you could run things here for me?”

“S-Sir?! This is so sudden…”

“Well, I mean… I appreciate that you’d like to join me, but think about it. We’ll be starting completely from scratch in Sir Rimuru’s domain. I’m planning to be a big success and win over his trust, but I don’t want you to run that gauntlet, too.”

This was a cover story. In truth, he didn’t want to sell this manor and lose his base of operations in Blumund. Ideally, a few of his people would remain here, keeping the lights on whenever his work brought him back.

The leader he picked, a man named Bach, was brought here by his father, a relative of Mjöllmile’s who’d asked him to train his son in the business. He proved quick-witted enough to live up to his end of the bargain; however, Bach’s family had faced difficulty after his father’s business failed, leaving him with nowhere to return to, so Mjöllmile decided to formally hire him as head clerk. At the moment, that family was living off Bach’s income, and Mjöllmile felt too guilty about having him go off on this risky venture. He had no complaint about his work; no doubt the business would work fine under his watchful eye.

“B-Boss… I couldn’t be happier to receive this offer from you. But I hoped that we could perhaps join you…”

Bach, no doubt, was too young to readily accept this. He was reluctant to go fully independent yet; perhaps he thought he still had things to prove to Mjöllmile. It was cute of him, but Mjöllmile didn’t like it. If Bach wanted to stand out on his own, he had to be let out in the wild sooner or later. This was a golden opportunity.

“Bach, I am not your father. I’m offering you a position running this business, but I’m not giving it to you. Listen: Even after I leave here, you better not do anything that puts this business on the rocks, all right? In fact, once you’re able, I’d like to see you buy this outfit out from under me! So make it a big success and bring your parents back here someday, all right?”

He gave him an affectionate smile and patted him on the shoulder. It was a tender moment, even if he still intended to work out a contract with Bach and keep a piece of the proceeds. He was a merchant, occasionally a hard taskmaster, but never a philanthropist. Besides, he reasoned, if he can’t even pay me for my share of the business, he’d never have what it takes to succeed in the first place.

“Thank you,” Bach said, choking up a bit, “thank you… I promise you that I’ll make a man out of myself and repay this favor!”

“I hope you do,” replied Mjöllmile, smiling ear to ear.

Now he went to work, choosing who to bring and who to keep behind.

“If you ever have any problems,” he advised Bach, “tell me about them, and I’ll help. But I believe in all of you. I know you’ll do just fine. Don’t disappoint me!”

The group remaining in Blumund all nodded at him. Mjöllmile had trained them thoroughly; none of them would fall out of line. Even if they were dealing with high nobility, he was sure they’d never do anything ill-advised.

“You’ve taught them all well. Rest assured they will not let you down!” Bach said in return.

“Well said. Also, while I’m sure you’re aware of this…”

“Do not worry, sir. I promise we will maintain the sales markets you’ve built up here. If you ever need access to them, we’ll give you first priority.”

“Good. I hope you will!”

Just in case, Mjöllmile wanted to be sure he got first dibs on any goods he might need. He always kept an eye on every facet of the situation, and Bach was in perfect sync with his thoughts.

He’s still a little green, but he’s starting to look the part, at least…

Now he was sure Bach wouldn’t let him down.

The last of his affairs were now squared away, and it was time for Mjöllmile to make the journey to Tempest with his retainers in tow.

Leaving Mjöllmile’s house, I breathed a sigh of relief. So glad he said yes to that. He seemed ready to take the invite, too, so I should be expecting him shortly.

One thing I couldn’t say about my monsters is that any of them were good on financial matters. I was having Shuna handle the account books for us, but she couldn’t do that forever. A village is one thing, but a full-fledged nation is another; Shuna would be in over her head. Lilina in the management department and Vester from the Dwarven Kingdom were helping, but I’m not sure even that would be enough.

That’s why Mjöllmile came to mind. His brain revolved around money in ways few people ever experienced, he had connections with nobility, and he was running businesses in multiple countries. It seemed a waste for him to remain a merchant forever; I was sure he’d be a great help to me. Besides, we had a good working relationship. If he could handle finances for us, maybe he’d allow me a little more spending money to work with. I had been running a few side hustles with him before, but now I could picture that extra income ballooning.

I mean, our treasury’s pretty well-endowed, you know? But taking money out of it for myself, despite not paying any salary to my staff, seemed kind of low. Everyone always said “Oh, it’s all yours, Sir Rimuru,” but that just made me all the more reluctant. It felt wrong, and I wanted that money to help with expanding our nation.

Still, I needed some of it. I wanted to take people like Gobta out at night every now and then, even if I didn’t have much interest in it. Veldora was whining at me about that, too, and you know how you go through cash pretty quick at nightclubs…not that I had much interest, that is. (No, really.)

But while it was a drop in the bucket for our treasury, if it was my personal money, I’m sure Gobta and Veldora would burn through it like it was nothing. Plus, Shuna usually provides me with money, but if I tell her where I’m going, she snaps that wallet shut, and I can’t really tell her it’s “my” money then, so…

This was why I was running a few side jobs for extra spending cash. And with my future expansion, I had a feeling money wouldn’t be a worry for much longer.

That battle tournament was a pretty neat idea, too. Mjöllmile is such a talented guy. I wasn’t sure how he would take it, but he demonstrated some real enthusiasm as we brainstormed the plan. It barely took him a moment to suggest running a tournament to attract visitors, then take advantage of the crowds to sell potions and equipment. He’s got a forward-looking eye and a knack for great ideas, that’s for sure.

Once I get back, I’ll need to get ourselves an arena to work with. Geld was busy with urban-planning work over in the Beast Kingdom, and Mildo was supporting him. Without our two main building specialists, I’d have to oversee the operation. But that’s fine. After running all these construction projects, one after the other, we were starting to build a well-trained staff, enough so that I was mostly giving orders and not doing much else. I knew about this craftsman named Gobkyuu, who worked under the tutelage of Mildo, and he was involved with town architecture enough that I thought an impressive circular arena would be in his wheelhouse.

The job would normally take a decade or so, I’d imagine, but if you run the job with monster muscle, I thought we could cut that down a lot…like, down to maybe the two months or so we had until the festival. Even I had to admit that was far too little time to get everything done, so for now, I at least wanted the central fighting stage to be completed.

But how would we design it?

Understood. From my master’s memories, I have found the Colosseum of Rome. Building blueprints using it as a base… Completed.

Well, that was easy. I had some paper on hand, so I drew up the plans, adding my own style to it. This alone would normally take several months—surveying the site, calculating soil strength, that kind of thing. You could often spend a whole year on that kind of preliminary stuff. And here I was, drawing up blueprints that’d normally take several days at a computer on our equivalent of a cocktail napkin… Raphael’s support helped a lot even with detailed work like this. It honestly felt unfair to me, but I had no plans to give it up, so…

Now I had my plans. Next I’d have to discuss them with Gobkyuu— But before that, while I was here in Blumund, I may as well stop at the Free Guild. I could forward the plans over to Gobkyuu in the meantime; once I was free, I could assemble a team of craftsmen on-site to get down to business.

“Ranga, you there?”

“Here, my master!”

He popped his head out from my shadow. With things settled over in Farmus, everyone except Diablo was back home, with Ranga lurking in my shadow like it was his personal den. I gave him the arena blueprints I had just whipped up.

“Take these to a craftsman in town named Gobkyuu. And can you tell him we’ll meet up at the west gate once I’m free?”

“Very well. But are you not returning, Sir Rimuru?”

“No. I wanna see Fuze first, while I’m here.”

“Will you not need a bodyguard?”

He looked a bit nervous, tail down. But I wasn’t concerned. I am a demon lord, and I had Absolute Defense activated. If I ran into an attack that could penetrate that barrier, I wouldn’t be safe anywhere in this world.

“I’ll be fine! We’ll just chat a bit, and then I’ll head back. But I should be concerned about Mjöllmile, huh? He’s gotten kind of tangled up with this one bottom-feeder noble, and there’s no telling what the fallout from that is gonna be like.”

“Ah, that vulgar man from before? Would you like me to snuff him out?”

Please, no. Doing that in a foreign city is how you trigger a diplomatic crisis.

“You know, I think you’ve been hanging out with Shion too long. You’re getting too aggressive for your own good. I think you need to learn some more common sense.”

“I—I do?!”

Ranga looked shocked. He must not have realized it.

“Look, are you really sticking to what I told you back at the last fight? You weren’t going too far, were you?”

“I—I would never do that, my master!”

He looked uncertain, and I was starting to get suspicious. Gobta and Gabil, I recalled, would only say things like “Oh, uh, he was fine!” and “Y-yes, having Sir Ranga at our side was a tremendous boon!” when I asked for a report. It sounded fishy, but I never followed up on it. It just seemed like an invitation for further headaches, and I was leaving that to Diablo anyway. If he had no complaint, I just assumed all was well.

Maybe I was just kicking the issue down the road…but ah well. If there really was a problem, I would’ve heard about it. Better trust in Ranga for now and make sure Shion doesn’t poison his mind any further.

I patted Ranga on the neck. “Um, Ranga, buddy? Seriously, don’t do anything crazy, okay?”

“I wouldn’t dare,” he replied, solemnly nodding.

“Good. Now go relay that message, okay? And if anyone’s free on our security team, I’d like them to guard Mjöllmile for me. Check on that, could you?”

“Yes, Master!”

He disappeared back into my shadow.

So now Mjöllmile was under guard, albeit behind the scenes so he didn’t pick up on it. I didn’t know who would come to guard him, but there weren’t that many people on the security staff I’d trust with solo duty. The new guys were out of the question, so it’d have to be at least a seasoned sergeant-class officer. Here, sergeant refers to a sort of team leader, the head of the groups of five that the force usually operated in. They were usually around a B rank in adventurer parlance, more than qualified enough for bodyguard duty.

I could personally keep tabs on Mjöllmile’s whereabouts once he was in my town, but in the meantime, if something happened to him over here, I’d find out immediately. Thus, I felt safe in saying hello to Fuze for a little bit.

So I headed into the Free Guild’s headquarters in Blumund. Last time I was here, I made more of a splash than I meant to, so I was worried about a repeat—but despite a few threatening glares, I made it to the reception counter without a peep. I was wearing that mask the previous time, wasn’t I? Maybe nobody recognized me. But hey, if they wouldn’t let me see Fuze, I could just leave an invitation letter for him and head back home.

“Hey-yo, I’m Rimuru, but can you take me to see Guild Master Fuze? Oh, here’s my ID.”

I burped the card out of my Stomach and handed it to the woman at the counter. “That little girl’s an adventurer?!” I heard someone exclaim behind me, but no matter. I was used to it.

The lady remembered me, at least. “Ah yes, Rimuru! It’s good to see you here again. How have you been?”

“Mm? Oh, great, great! You’re looking quite well, yourself…”

“I sure am! And I see you’ve passed the examination over at HQ and made it to B-plus, huh? Well done! You have my respect!”

“Oh yeah, I did, didn’t I? I really wanted to score an A, but I got kind of busy, so…”

…Or really, it was too much of a pain in the ass to bother. Being ranked B or higher gave you a lot of perks, but it also came with more responsibilities. B-plus was enough drudgery to deal with, so I figured I could earn my promotion only when I really needed to. Not like it was a salaried position or anything. Like a volunteer fireman, I’d be tapped for duty whenever certain kinds of danger came along. In exchange, I got easier admission into foreign countries, as well as free food and boarding at Guild branches. I appreciated the perks, sure, but I didn’t really like being forced to do anything.

But why rain on people’s parade?

“Oh, I’m sure you’d pass with flying colors, Rimuru! I’ll be cheering you on!”

“You think? Well, thank you! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha…”

I sure can’t resist a young lady looking at me with those sparkling eyes, no… At least, not until she drops a bomb on me.

“By the way, Rimuru, it must be annoying to share a name with a demon lord, isn’t it? If you like, you could take advantage of our Renaming System to change your name in the Guild archives, if you find it’s causing you trouble. That’ll let you conduct Guild activity in areas where your face isn’t well-known yet, albeit at one rank grade below your current one. What do you think?”

Oh, crap, I forgot! Here I am, a demon lord, and I went and put that same damn name on all my paperwork! And now that Rimuru Tempest, the Newbie in the Octagram, was a household name around the world, I guess being Rimuru the adventurer would present a few issues. Time to retire from the Guild, maybe? If I really needed to work as an adventurer, I guess I could consider that Renaming System. It’d be starting at the B rank, but that’s good enough for me. Pretty helpful system, there.

“Thanks for telling me about that! I’ll keep that in mind. Now, do you think I might be able to see the guild master?”

“Right away. And yes, feel free to ask anytime!”

It took a little conversation, but she let me right in. I could hear shouts of “Are you kidding me?!” and “Who the hell is that girl?!” among the rabble behind me, as well as commentary from a few people who must’ve seen me here last time.

“Oh, no way! I never knew she was so cute?!”

“Unbelievable… That’s the face of a person who swatted down a Lesser Demon like a mosquito…?”

“And she had the same name as that demon lord, huh?”

“You think it might actually be him?”

“Ha! What are you, stupid?”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Yeah, yeah…”

Sounds like more rumors would be spreading soon. Although, maybe I had less to worry about than I thought. Sharing a name didn’t seem to arouse too much undue suspicion. Maybe the name Rimuru wasn’t that uncommon after all.

So I breezed into Fuze’s office. The first thing he did upon seeing me was bring a hand to his temple. I ignored it.

“Hellooooo! I’m back to pay a visit! Something up? Why the long face?”

“Well, things were pretty slow for a while, until this demon lord came out from nowhere…”

“Whoa, really? Sounds like bad news. You sure you should be chilling out in here?”

“I’m talking about the demon lord here in front of me. So what is it this time…?”

“Oh? Well, you better feed that demon lord some tea, shouldn’t you? I think he’d enjoy a little bit of cake, too.”

“Cake?! You think I can pull that kind of luxury out from under my hat?! I swear, why’s a demon lord like you just gallivanting around without a care in the world?”

Fuze poured out some tea as he complained. He was diligent like that. I thanked him and took the cup, sipping from it before we got down to business.

“So I’m sorry about everything that happened, Sir Rimuru. I tried putting pressure on the Western Holy Church, but it didn’t work too well, and then the Crusaders got deployed…”

“Nah, I doubt you could’ve done anything to stop them. There was this band called the Seven Days Clergy masterminding the whole thing.”

“Wha?!”

“Yeah, that’s probably why Hinata never listened to me when I tried pleading my case.”

“The Seven Days…? That legion of great heroes, tasked with protecting humankind…?”

“Apparently, yeah. They snared her, too, but…all’s well that ends well. We worked out all the misunderstandings, I think. But there was one casualty, unfortunately—a commander named Garde is missing in action.”

“Garde of Fire…,” Fuze muttered with a frown. “He’s one of the Ten Great Saints, the protectors of humankind. Quite gifted with a spear and flame-based spirit magic, albeit not as gifted as Shizu was…”

I didn’t know Garde personally, apart from how he was after the Clergy got to him. I couldn’t say anything about his personality, but apparently he was a well-known name, at least. Someone as well-connected as Fuze would certainly know him. I described him as “missing,” but “killed,” I suppose, was much more likely. Hopefully he’s in a better place now. I felt bad for him.

Moving on, I gave Fuze a recap of recent events—including the Walpurgis Council, since I knew he was concerned about that. There were now eight demon lords united under the name of the Octagram, and I covered all of that, along with my conflict with Hinata and the fall of Seven Days. I made sure, of course, to blur the true identity of Luminus—I had a reputation for blabbing when I shouldn’t, but I wasn’t dumb enough to let that vital a secret out.

“I see… You know, no matter how much we tried to make contact with them, they always just flatly denied us. The Church’s Blumund branch was a nonstarter, so I sent someone over to their headquarters, and they still said we couldn’t meet with anyone at the level of minister or above… I had no idea the Clergy was behind all this.”

“Yeah, Hinata said the same thing. The only thing uniting them, as she put it, was Lu—um, the god Luminus. Their faith, you know; that was the real thing.”

“Humans are inherently weak, after all. They cling to the gods—and their strength.”

“Would you include yourself in that, Fuze?”

“Ha-ha! No, not me. When my strength fails me, I’m prepared to call it a life, so to speak. I’d hope for a miracle, of course, but I can’t pray to a ‘god’ I’ve never even met before.”

Sounded like Fuze leaned toward atheism. Of course, this was a world where a real-life monster with superhuman powers could get worshipped as a god by the locals. They, at least, you could meet up with and see for yourself. That must’ve made them seem more reliable. Even Luminus only offered protection to the people she knew, at first, and she didn’t figure in Fuze’s life at all. He just relied on himself instead—a little self-serving but certainly easier to come to grips with.

“Yeah, well, I can certainly understand why people want to pray to a higher power. But in life, you get what you’re dealt, you know? Anyway, regardless of what Luminus may or may not bless us with, the Church and I are even now, and that’s all I need.”

Knowing Luminus personally taught me just how meaningless praying to her was—but not much point saying that. Sometimes prayer really can give a person strength. It wasn’t for me to comment on.

Fuze smiled. “Very true. It’s a load off my shoulders as well.”

I got the feeling he was depressed about failing to stop the Church after I asked him to put the screws to them a bit. I just appreciated him looking out for me.

We chatted for a while more over past events before I stood up, recalling something.

“Anyway, I better get going soon, but I want you to take this.”

I removed an envelope from my pocket and handed it to Fuze. It contained an invitation to the Founder’s Festival I was planning; we had gotten so caught up in conversation I had almost forgot about it. This was why I came here today, after all.

“What’s that?”

“Well, I’m gonna be holding my demon lord coronation soon, and I figured it’d be a good opportunity to advertise my town to the world. We’re calling it the Founder’s Festival, and the way I picture it, it’s gonna be a huge blast. We’re sending invites to all the royalty and nobility in the region, and I’d love for you to attend, too.”

“Huhhh?! Wait a minute, Sir Rimuru. What would inviting someone like me accomplish—?”

“No, no, it’s no big deal! I have an invite here for the king of Blumund, too. Can you make sure he gets it?”

“Well, couldn’t you give it to him directly—hmm? Maybe not, eh…?”

“Nah. I gave the dwarven king and Archduke Erald their invites personally, but I don’t have many contacts in the other nations.” I smiled. “I’ve met your king once, but I don’t think a demon lord would be invited to his throne room, would he?”

“It’s distressing enough for a demon lord to be in Blumund at all.” Fuze snickered back. “But thank you for this. I’ll be sure this reaches the king.”

My errand was now done, and I was about to depart but was stopped at the door. “Oh, right! I needed to mention that the grand master was concerned about you. Negotiating with the Western Holy Church was a huge headache for him, so I’ll be sure to say you’ve worked things out.”

Yuuki was worried? A lot had happened since we last met. I was starting to miss him.

“Ah yeah. I must have put a lot on his plate.”

“Oh, not really. The Guild has no interest in making an enemy out of the Church, after all. If you were able to settle your differences without a fight, we couldn’t ask for anything more.”

That was nice to hear. But I still felt like I owed the Guild something.

“I know! I think I’ll invite Yuuki, too. You think he’d mind?”

“Hmm, hard to say. Not that I can speak for him, but he is a busy man. I’m not sure if he can make the time for it or not.”

“Well, I can give him an escort to and from the event, so I’m sure he can attend at least one day, you know? If not, I can stop by to see him sometime soon. So give him this for me…”

As Fuze watched, I wrote out a letter to him and included it in the envelope with the invites. Fuze winced at me a little as he accepted it.

“Sir Rimuru, where did you get that paper from…? Actually, on second thought, don’t tell me. Can’t you magically send it to him yourself? I’ll do it, but…”

He looked tired. Maybe I was asking one too many casual favors.

“Ha-ha-ha! Sorry about that. Thanks.”

“Sure thing, Sir Rimuru.”

“Oh, and Milim’s coming, too.”

I felt it best to be just as casual with that bombshell as he took the envelope.

“Milim? Oh no…”

“Okay, see you there!”

With a smile, I half ran out from the office while he shouted after me: “Wait! You don’t mean that Milim, do you? Heeeeey!!”

Let’s just pretend I didn’t hear.

As I escaped from the Guild building, a man leaped out from behind a corner at me, taking a respectful knee.

“I, Gob’emon, am here at your summons, Sir Rimuru!”

This man was one of the hobgoblins I named. Pretty ambitious guy. I think Rigur told me he and Gobta were fighting for the vice captain spot back when he was running our village forces. He had the strength to back that drive, of course…

“Hmm? Hey, weren’t you a lieutenant? You went to another unit after Gobta started captaining the goblin riders, didn’t you?”

A lieutenant, in Tempest’s armies, was an officer who could be assigned a unit to lead if needed. They didn’t necessarily have one to lead, which meant that captains were naturally above them, but it was still a much higher rank than the sergeants leading teams of five to ten people.

“Yes, my lord. I was never one to serve below others, you see, so I thought I would work as an individual for now. Someday soon, I’d like to assemble my own direct command and lead a unit myself.”

Hmm. Sounds like he’s got some real backbone. He gave up his chance at vice captain of the goblin riders because he didn’t want to serve under Gobta, after all, so he must’ve had some pretty high aspirations.

“Do you? Well, keep up the good work. Now listen, Mjöllmile’s someone very important to me. I need you to keep him safe—without letting him notice, if possible. I think you could learn a lot from the way he sways people’s minds. His financial acumen’s enough to move the folks around him, but it’s not just that. Think of it as a case study while you’re guarding him.”

“Yes sir! I will keep that in mind as I execute my duty!”

Gob’emon was up for it. The way Benimaru described him, he tended to rely too much on his own abilities, downplaying the strengths of the people below or alongside him. That’s one reason he failed to reach captain, despite being much more physically gifted than Gobta. If he could learn to be more of a team player, that captain’s job could be his before long. I hoped he could grow into the rank.

“If you can carry this out and learn something from it, report back to me afterward. I’ll give you this katana of mine as a reward.”

Kurobe had contacted me earlier to report that my personal sword was complete. I wouldn’t need this one any longer. It was just a temporary weapon, but it was synced up with my aura well enough that I liked the results I got from it. I brought it in for maintenance after the Hinata battle, but Kurobe was pretty impressed by what he saw. I figured it was a nice enough carrot to dangle.

Gob’emon’s eyes opened wide with excitement. “Y-you will?!”

“Sure. I think you’re gifted enough to make use of this. But stay diligent, all right? Prove to me you deserve it.”

“Yes sir! I will live up to your expectations!”

He immediately went into Mjöllmile guard-duty mode. That was almost too sly of me, offering that sword to him, but hopefully I got my point across. You had to earn the trust of your subordinates. Like how people used to think about obligation and duty, if you didn’t look out for and provide service to each other, it would wreck the whole master-servant relationship. I know I’m not exactly a stellar example of the ideal boss, but still, I hoped Gob’emon would answer my call in his own way.

I had now distributed all my invitations. Now we just had to prep for the big day. It needed to be a festival like none before. As I thought over everything we needed for it, I could already feel my heart racing.