PROLOGUE

A STATUS REPORT

“You are quite a spiteful man, Granville. I came very close to dying, I’ll have you know.”

“Don’t be absurd. You fled before you could even get involved, didn’t you?”

“I had no choice. Did my protégé deliver the news to you?”

“More or less, yes…”

“That demon was more of a monster than I ever imagined. The Empire’s regular forces would hardly stand a chance. We would need the most powerful army I know, the Imperial Guard, to defeat him. But enough about that…”

Damrada and Granville were seated facing each other, each sizing up their partner as they calmly chatted. In Damrada’s eyes, their plan had failed. Thus, he felt it prudent to keep his distance from the Rozzo family until the heat died down a little. If their scheme had worked, that would have given them an advantage in the negotiations, but if not, he was likely to face demands he found singularly unreasonable. Right now, he simply wanted to cut his losses and move on.

But things had changed. On his way to Tempest, he had received a magical call, reporting the news to him:

“Hinata is defeated. She and the demon lord Rimuru have agreed to terms.”

Damrada had pictured this happening. But it was still the worst possible outcome imaginable. Hinata’s survival made it harder to do business in the nations where the Western Holy Church held sway. If she had made peace with Rimuru, it was unlikely anyone could rile that demon lord up once again to kill her. Damrada and Granville joined forces on this scheme because they both stood to gain from it, but it was now safe to say the whole thing failed miserably.

…Although, depending on how you view this, you could call it fortuitous…

Their strategy had failed, but to Damrada, this was at best a glancing blow. It meant losing part of their foundation in the Western Nations, but there were other trade routes. Cerberus was a group as enormous as it was shadowy, operating several different trade organizations as fronts for its activities. Furthermore, Damrada had no personal interest in whether Hinata lived or died. Granville’s failure was therefore not all that irritating to him. And thanks to that, Damrada was currently trying to work out his and Granville’s future relationship to his advantage. After a hasty change of plans, Damrada had come to meet with Granville once again.

“But what about you, Granville? Were you all bark and no bite? Not only did you fail to take care of Hinata, her connection to Rimuru is even stronger than before…”

Blind to his own involvement in their failed strategy, Damrada moved to criticize Granville instead. But Granville himself was likely expecting as much.

“Yes,” Granville replied. “I must admit to that. There will be no rebalancing the scales now. Farmus, for all its history, has fallen, and I imagine a new nation will replace it. It is exactly what Rimuru wanted, and it means your project is in shambles.”

He didn’t hesitate to agree with Damrada and went on to expound on his own theory before getting right to the point.

Damrada, well aware of the current situation, chose to respond with silence.

“So what will you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Rimuru seems to want the Forest of Jura to become the financial center of the world. We of the Rozzos will not stand for that.”

“Mmm…”

Damrada coldly calculated how to respond. He had no intention of deliberately getting on the Rozzos’ wrong side. As far as he was concerned, if they could both just put this state of affairs behind them, all was well. And Granville, to his credit, seemed to be of the same mind, going ahead of Damrada and turning his eyes toward the future.

“So what would quarreling with each other accomplish? Now that a fight between the demon lord and Saint Hinata is unlikely to happen, any further public activity would be ill-advised. The same is true for your side, too, is it not?”

Granville seemed to be reading his mind. “Heh-heh. I see there is no outwitting you, my good man. No, there is no point trying to assign blame for this failure. The Five Elders have been more than kind to us up to now, and I know this remains the case. We may not have been able to profit off a potential war, but so be it. As long as we remain alive, other opportunities will come.”

“Well said, Sir Damrada. I do appreciate how quickly you understand me. Let us continue to work together to block this new economic threat before it begins!”

It went without saying that Damrada’s mission was to protect his interests in the Western Nations. Maribel, Granville’s treasure, had predicted that this nation in the Forest of Jura would potentially become a financial juggernaut. If it did, that would inevitably weaken the Rozzo family’s influence on the world.

Granville would never allow cracks to open on the system of rule his ancestors spent thousands of years building up. That was why he wanted to interfere with Rimuru, to crush his ambitions—but without his status as part of the Seven Days Clergy, he could no longer use the name of the god Luminus to his advantage. Thus, no matter what it took, he needed support from Cerberus. The other Five Elders—Granville’s descendants and comrades—supported him on that, applying pressure to the Council of the West and ensuring that the postwar cleanup over on Farmus took as long as possible. They couldn’t stop that country from crowning a new king, but they could do whatever it took to delay the inevitable.

The Rozzo family still had a few aces up their sleeve, but it was too premature to use them. Better to take advantage of Cerberus instead, Granville thought.

“Ah, one moment on that…”

But Damrada wasn’t ready to agree with him. The Rozzos, and the Five Elders they controlled, were excellent business partners; he truly had no intention of doing away with their relationship. But thinking this meant Damrada was their lapdog would be a mistake. He was a merchant, motivated by money, and he had a flexible mind. Cerberus had grown fabulously rich thanks to the exclusive control it held over trade between the East and West, yes, but the arrival of a new customer to work with was nothing that hurt Cerberus. The Five Elders’s loss of influence over the Western Nations was no business of theirs.

“…I truly do desire to maintain friendly relations with you and your family. However, I’m afraid I cannot readily agree to your suggestion. After all, our organization has no reason to be hostile to Rimuru.”

“How dare you…!”

“Heh-heh-heh… As you yourself said, now that Hinata knows me, any further activity in the Western Nations is out of the picture. Instead, I will return home and provide you with someone else.”

The message Damrada gave was clear. If Granville had eliminated Hinata as promised, he could be more active right now…but that hadn’t happened.

“…”

“For now, we will continue our transactions as before. As for this incident, I suggest that we should just forgive and forget.”

Damrada stood up. Granville had misread him, and he could no longer force the point. The Cerberus group had an iron grip on the Eastern Empire’s underground. Angering Damrada, one of their bosses, enough to sever their relations for good was too much of a loss for the Rozzos to bear right now.

“…Very well. We will handle it ourselves, then, so I do hope you will at least refrain from interfering in the matter.”

“That much goes without saying,” Damrada replied with a smile. “Look back at our previous dealings. You are safe trusting us.”

With a polite bow, he left the room.

From start to finish, Damrada had been sincere in everything he said. On the surface, he was the very picture of an honest merchant. But if Hinata had been killed as planned, he would have reached out to Rimuru long ago, pitting the Rozzos against the demon lord and profiting off the eventual clash. But an impartial observer never would have suspected any of that. People called him Damrada the Gold for a reason.

But Granville was a sly old dog himself. He had a (mostly) accurate grip on Damrada’s motivations. Yes, he was unlikely to interfere—but he didn’t say anything about not courting Rimuru. He had told no lies, which was the minimum anyone would want to see from a merchant, but Granville was the leader of a family who ruled over much of the world’s business. Damrada’s attitude wasn’t something he was willing to abide.

“…I detest him so much,” Granville whispered, now alone in the room. “He thinks he can take advantage of me? Once this matter is done with, you’re next.”

The humiliation in his eyes darkened into surging rage…

“…And that was how things worked out with the Five Elders,” Damrada reported to the boy sitting comfortably in a chair.

“Ah. Well, I’m glad matters have been settled with the Rozzos the way you wanted them to. Now we can continue to use them as a point of contact for negotiation.”

Damrada was the height of arrogance while dealing with the Rozzos. With this boy, he was far more self-deprecating. It was to be expected. After all, this boy—broadly nodding his approval at Damrada’s report—was both his master and the leader of the Cerberus group.

“Quite true. But curse those rats! Pushing a monster like that on me without even informing me about it…”

“Ha-ha-ha! That must’ve been quite an adventure. But at least you were able to step back at the right time.”

“Heh. Yes, that was quite a stroke of luck. His name was…Diablo, if I recall. A fearsome demon, one who might even be the equal of Blanc over in the Empire. Rimuru himself is far from the only threat.”

“Yeah… I got a feeling Rimuru’s gonna grow stronger before we can get ourselves fully back in order.”

“I agree. That demon lord has the uncanniest luck working for him. He’s assembled quite a number of magic-born, and he’s even tamed the Storm Dragon himself…”

“To tell the truth, I think a frontal assault would be a pretty bad idea.”

“I…wouldn’t go so far as to call it unwinnable. But no, I doubt Cerberus would survive when the dust settles.”

“Well, no point fretting about it. We’ve got time to work with. We can think about it.”

“That we can. Things will remain rather chaotic for a while to come. Joining in the fray could burn us badly.”

“Mm-hmm. I used Hinata to get back at ’em a little, but that sure didn’t work out, huh? It’s too dangerous to make any other moves. Better to lay low for a while.”

The boy smiled, not seeming to care too much. Damrada thought things over as he returned the smile. Then, he seemed to remember something.

“Still,” he glumly stated, “I have to say, the Five Elders were all bark and no bite. Going on about how they would destroy Hinata—and look how that worked out, huh? With both surviving, I’m sure they’ll work out their misunderstandings. That could end the whole rift between Tempest and the Holy Church before too long.”

“I thought that would happen,” the boy replied with a chuckle. “Rimuru is too generous to humankind. I didn’t think he had it in him to kill Hinata. I was kind of hoping that generosity would spell his downfall, sooner or later…but perhaps he wasn’t that generous.”

“I think the Five Elders were aiming to conspire with Rimuru so they could keep a lid on the Storm Dragon.”

“Well, if that was all it took, we wouldn’t have any problems right now. I had you keep close tabs on them precisely because I figured they’d screw it up.”

“Ah, I see. But that saved me in the end. If you hadn’t contacted me, sir, I would’ve had to duel Hinata herself in front of Rimuru.”

Perhaps, with some more luck, he wouldn’t have blown his cover. But he wasn’t optimistic about his chances fighting Hinata. He deeply appreciated the boy’s advance warning about the danger… Although, of course, the danger only came about because of the boy’s orders. If Hinata hadn’t been fed false information, Damrada never would’ve been revealed at all.

Still, this was nothing that troubled Damrada deeply. The orders of the boy who led Cerberus took precedence over everything else. His mission, after all, was no less than to conquer the entire world—a goal Damrada shared. He adored the boy. With him, he felt, this childlike dream of world domination could really happen. That was why he never questioned any of the orders he received.

“If I had lost you,” the boy casually said, “my plan would’ve been sabotaged beyond repair.”

“Well,” Damrada replied with a bold grin, “at least I managed to escape for you.”

One did not become the leader of Cerberus solely through business acumen. It took real talent to make the powers that be in the underground bow to you.

The boy, perhaps knowing this, let a devilish grin creep onto his face. “Ha-ha-ha! But don’t go all out or anything, all right? Because that’s the absolute last resort. So let’s just sit and watch a bit. I look forward to seeing how this struggle plays out—especially since there’s no real power involved.”

Going all out, as he put it, meant calling upon every asset Cerberus had on hand. That required bringing the two underbosses not in the room, people directly below the boy himself, into the fold. There would be nothing “covert” about the results. It could lead to a full-blown war that involved all the Western Nations.

Damrada nodded at the boy, knowing that wasn’t what he wanted. “In that case,” he said, “it might be best for me to return to my native land.”

“Yeah, probably. You said she didn’t see your face, but this is Hinata we’re talking about. She’s probably got her sights on you, and that makes open activity difficult. No, better to have someone else step up. Although…”

Damrada knew what the boy was getting at. Cerberus had three underbosses—Damrada and two others—and one of those two was a problem.

“Let’s not ask Vega to fill in for you, huh?”

“Very well,” a convinced Damrada replied. “In that case, Misha, then?”

“Yeah. Let’s go with that.”

The bosses were nicknamed the Gold, the Lover, and the Power, the three symbols of a man’s greed. Misha, the Lover, was someone you never wanted to let your guard down around, but she at least listened to reason. Vega, the Power, was a handful. He was a living, breathing personification of violence, as his name suggested. Damrada could do nothing to sway his mind; he only listened to direct orders from the boy, who knew that well enough and didn’t want Damrada to deal with him.

“That sounds good, sir. So how should we wind down the slave trade I had been working on here?”

“…Oh, right, there was that, wasn’t there? The Orthrus Slave Market always was a pain to deal with. Let’s shut it down. I never liked slavery anyway.”

“Mmm. I have no objections, but are we just going to release all the rare monsters we circulate around Misha’s Echidna Club?”

“No, anything designated confidential should be treated the same as always. We still have a link to the Rozzo family; we might as well use it.”

“Very well. I’ll leave the rest in your capable hands,” said Damrada before he took his leave.

The boy closed his eyes, gleefully moving the mental chess pieces around in his brain. Then he heard the tapping of footsteps. His lips curled into a smile as he spoke to the woman behind him, a secretary.

“You were listening, weren’t you, Kazalim?”

“I sure was, Boss. Why are you intent on dismantling Orthrus now?”

This was Kazalim, a trusted confidant and adviser to the boy.

“It’s simple. I thought I’d let him play the good guy on this.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“Do I really need to say the other one? That slime controls the entire Forest of Jura, from one end to the other. If we go monster hunting in there, we’d get crushed. So why don’t we dissolve Orthrus now while it’d be to our advantage?”

“Yeah… I suppose. We just need to protect our core assets, huh? Like a lizard that’s lost its tail.”

“Right? So can I leave the arrangements to you?”

“‘Let him play the good guy’… Oh, him, you mean? You come up with the most interesting ideas sometimes, Boss. All right. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks, Kazalim.”

“Of course. Also, not to change the subject, but can you call me Kagali?”

The boy turned toward Kazalim, eyebrows raised. “Oh, you’re finally going through with it?”

“Uh-huh. With Clayman dead, it’s time to step up. Until I have my revenge against Leon, I’m putting the demon lord Kazalim name on ice.”

“Sure thing. In that case, get to work, Kagali.”

“Yes sir.”

They gave each other a glance and grinned—opening the curtain on a new age of chaos.