

INTERLUDE

A PROBLEM ARISES

We were all in the meeting hall for a regular update, waiting for…well, Mjöllmile was the last straggler, wasn’t he? It was nine in the evening, right after dinner ended. The festival was still in full swing outside; we could hear flutes, drums, and laughing from afar. The official closing time was ten p.m., so this was fine; the lodgers in our nobles’ accommodations could shut the windows to cut off all the noise. We wanted to be sure noise complaints were never an issue with that building.

So as much as I wanted to tour the evening market, I wanted to get this meeting over with earlier than the late hour I’d kept everyone up until last night.

“Shuna, Shion, good work today. That performance was amazing. I was completely surprised.”

“Hee-hee! We’ve been practicing on the sly,” Shuna said with a grin. “I’ve always been a good singer, and I think I’m a rather good fit for that piano instrument. The two songs I played are all I know, though…”

If she could play that well after starting so recently, I’d say a “good fit” is an understatement. But indeed, if she had to squeeze practice time into the nooks and crannies of her busy schedule, I could see why she had to focus on a limited song pool.

The same went for Shion, too. She smiled at me.

“I kept my practice hidden alongside Lady Shuna as well. I wanted to surprise you, Sir Rimuru, and I think we succeeded!”

There was something beautifully dignified about her playing the violin. I honestly needed to give her some praise.

“Yeah, you looked great. You’re gonna keep it up, right?”

“Yes, of course! I’d like to get to the point where we can play all the songs you remembered, Sir Rimuru!”

“I’ll look forward to that. There’s a lot I’d like to hear from you!”

Shion’s never seemed more trustworthy to me than today. She could be a disappointment most of the time, but right now, she was shining.

I then moved on to Gabil.

“Gabil, your presentation was also received favorably. Yuuki was shocked by it, and King Gazel took quite an interest as well. They said that we perhaps revealed a little too much to the public, but I think that was fine.”

“Ha-ha! Thank you very much! A lot of it was Sir Vester’s doing, but I took the initiative to do the best job I could on it. And conducting those experiments did more than just satisfy my intellectual curiosity—it made me want to relate those feelings of mine to everyone else. Perhaps I went a bit overboard with it.”

“No, no, I’m not criticizing you. Your research surprised me as well, but the content was really interesting. I think our visitors were just as engaged, too. More than enough of a success.”

Gabil breathed a happy sigh of relief. He must’ve been pretty nervous.

“Tell Vester I said the same to him, all right?”

“Absolutely!”

Vester was likely drinking with Gazel as we spoke. The king might be a bit angry at him, but Vester would probably treat that as high praise. To him, Gazel was eternally worthy of his respect. During this festival, at least, they should be able to enjoy themselves without worrying about things like rank or position.

Diablo also updated me on arena goings-on.

“We have our six remaining seed slots filled, sir, but none of them would be a concern if I was part of the tournament. I watched the Hero in action as well, but…heh-heh-heh… Yes, he certainly has some fascinating tools to work with. Should I take care of him before problems arise?”

“I told you we weren’t doing that!”

“As you wish. I think any further briefing on the day’s events would spoil the fun for you tomorrow.”

Diablo didn’t see any issues. Counting Gobta and Geld, our eight tournament competitors were locked in—and if nothing concerned Diablo, I didn’t need to hear anything else. With the right seedings, we could see some pretty neat battles. I’ll take Diablo’s advice and wait for the fun tomorrow.

Soei spoke next, telling me that the kids spent the day enjoying the festival. They’d paid a visit to the tournament preliminaries, cheering on Masayuki, then purchased a large amount of food and souvenirs. Geez, Hinata… You sure that’s how a guardian should act? Hope the kids don’t all wreck their stomachs. Now I was a little worried about how things would work out tomorrow.

So we conversed some more while waiting for Mjöllmile. Barring any problems, we’d be done with this meeting in under half an hour—or so I assumed, but given the way Mjöllmile rushed into the hall, pale as a sheet, I had to dismiss this as optimistic.

“S-sorry to make you wait,” he stammered, and based on his body language, I could only assume something serious had come up. He was normally so unfazed, brazen even, but now he couldn’t hide his panic.

Shuna offered him some chilled tea, and I waited for him to catch his breath before speaking up.

“So what’s happening?”

“I’m deeply sorry, sir, but we have a serious problem. Here’s the thing: We’re out of money.”

It seemed that the tradesmen were all hounding him for payment at the same time, and he had spent the past little while trying to deal with them. Out of money? You’re kidding me. We had all kinds of lavish fixtures from Diablo’s manor, not to mention all his gold and silver, and besides, Diablo had taken 1,500 stellars in restitution from Farmus. If we dipped into that, we could hold a hundred more festivals like this and still have money left over.

“About that,” he replied when I brought this up with him. “It’s not an issue of budget, Sir Rimuru. It’s that we can’t convert Clayman’s assets into money—it’s not in the commonly used currency of the world. Gold coins from ancient kingdoms have great artistic value, and I know they’re circulated around the Eastern Empire, but…”

But while they might be used over there, they weren’t recognized as legal tender. The tradesmen could always have them converted, but this apparently wasn’t to their liking. They wanted real gold coinage, as minted in the Dwarven Kingdom.

“So I paid them in regular gold coins at first, but partway through, I realized something had gone wrong. But by then, it was too late…”

Once our own vault was exhausted of common Dwarven gold coins, Mjöllmile dipped into his own fortune to handle payments. But even that was limited, so he consulted with some of his closer merchant friends to figure out what was going on. What they revealed was astonishing—according to them, the new, unfamiliar tradesmen these shopkeepers had started working with demanded payment only in the common currency.

In international trade, it was considered reasonable to make pure barter trades, one side’s goods canceling out the cost of the other side’s. They could also enact IOUs, contracts to handle payment later instead of exchanging cash on-site. Payment would be needed sometime, just not right at that moment—one common custom to cover monetary losses in this world, where the concept of charging interest was still in its infancy.

However, our nation hadn’t built the trust to back up that custom yet. If our partners demanded cash, our only option was to pay them in cash.

Mjöllmile understood this well enough. That was why he so carefully managed our budget for this festival, meticulously selecting the merchants he worked with. He was apparently counting on more large-scale trade with a smaller number of partners, which would allow him to break down the stellars in our vault and use the resulting gold coins to pay out his other debts. Even if that didn’t materialize, he had known the main sellers at the festival for years, and—not that it was an excuse, but—he figured they’d be willing to work with him a little more. He thought IOUs or payment in ancient gold pieces would be accepted—but the tradesmen working under the merchants balked at it, and that put even Mjöllmile’s closest merchant friends in a bind.

“I see,” Diablo said, nodding. “Something tells me this is being engineered by someone.”

“And I agree. I never expected someone to meddle with us like this…”

So Mjöllmile thought this was deliberate, too? But who would do that…?

“I am sorry, Sir Mjöllmile,” Rigurd rumbled. “Putting you through all this without even realizing it…”

Rigurd, too, was busy handling our foreign visitors. If he felt responsible for it, it’s because he realized this was a bigger problem than just one man. No, it was no mistake on Mjöllmile’s part.

“So someone’s trying to ruin our reputation, then?”

“I would imagine so. The international rules set by the Council of the West stipulate that payments must be made with gold coins minted in the Dwarven Kingdom. Different rules apply in different nations, but under the Western Nations’ laws, the tradesmen are making a perfectly valid claim…”

If these people were part of the Free Guild, we could get that organization involved. They received favorable treatment in customs-related matters, and our nation had a fairly good rep with them. But these were merchants from nations affiliated with the Council, and while they came from different countries, they had to work by international rules—on the surface, at least. Us saying “well, we go by these rules” wouldn’t be very readily accepted.

But even before that—what if all these tradesmen were colluding to cause problems? If so, taking a my-way-or-the-highway approach would be even worse. It could be just what they wanted.

“If we force our rules on them, would that cause a backlash with the Council?”

“It’d be another matter if we were already part of the Council, but if we’re thinking about joining it in the future, this would not paint us in a good light, no.”

Normally, payment in ancient coinage wasn’t a problem. But if someone wanted to mess up our reputation, what then? It almost felt like someone was testing us, seeing if we intended to follow international rules.

“Did someone from the Council do this?”

“I don’t know who it is, but it’s someone high up, yes. Someone with the ability to build connections with merchants far and wide and plant them among the tradesmen supplying us. Because pulling something like this, you’d need to resign yourself to enduring some losses. That takes guts, and it tells me this is about more than just tarnishing our reputation.”

Mjöllmile wasn’t from a large country, but he was still well versed in the underground economy. If he said this was someone “high up,” someone we couldn’t trace, it had to be seriously bad news.

“So we can’t force our own rules on them?” Shion asked.

I nodded. “Right. You’ve gotten pretty clever, Shion. If we do force our rules on them, there’s a chance the Western Nations won’t count us as allies. And since we want to play nice with humans, we have to avoid that at all costs.”

“But wasn’t it your plan to build an economic bloc with Thalion, Blumund, Dwargon, Farmus—er, Farminus, and the demon lord Milim’s domain? If Tempest is located in the middle of that, wouldn’t ignoring us lead to even greater losses for them?”

Whoa! Is this really Shion?! Because I’m honestly surprised. She fully understood my thoughts so much, I genuinely wondered if this was a body double of some sort. Her sharp analysis was right on the mark.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… You truly are worthy of being head secretary, Lady Shion. You are correct.”

“Aren’t I? So why would they try meddling with us? If they can’t ignore us, wouldn’t it be better to try building trust with us?”

For once, Shion wasn’t spouting off random junk. She really got the gist of this. Astounding. Plus, that was exactly the question on my mind.

“People can be very strange creatures,” Diablo replied. “They all must work together to survive, and yet they can’t resist building class systems among themselves. And if two groups of them live next to each other, they continually squabble until one proves itself superior to the other. The weak and pitiful fear nothing more than losing their own vital interests. And in this case…”

“Hmph,” Benimaru grunted. “Are you saying that the Council’s worried that our economic alliance puts them in jeopardy?”

“Exactly.”

Diablo’s explanation was certainly easy to grasp.

Benimaru’s question assured me of it, and the rest of my staff seemed convinced. A few of them were already getting worked up over it. “Comical,” a smiling Diablo stated. “These foolish rulers, incapable of understanding their position, refusing to accept Sir Rimuru’s kindness… They should all crumble to the ground.”

It was a little extreme, I thought, but Shion still nodded. “Hee-hee! So the vice secretary agrees?”

I was glad to see them cooperating, and I was really starting to see Shion in a new light, although I suppose at her core she wasn’t much different.

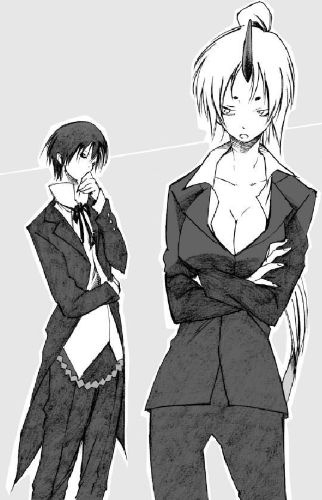
“That’s not gonna happen.”

They both gave me disappointed looks. They’re so predictably alike with stuff like this.

“Either way,” Soei said, “we cannot let this go unaddressed. Would you like me to thoroughly investigate these tradesmen’s past employers?”

We’d probably need to. It might just turn up something. But that’d have to wait until after the festival. For now, it was likely best to avoid rash action, just so we could handle anything that came our way. Once we overcame the problem at hand, then we could figure out who was behind it.

“That’s important, yes, but hold off for now. Mjöllmile, when is payment due for these people? Can you hold them off until then?”



First, I wanted to show them we’d stick to Council rules. If we couldn’t avoid breaking them, we’d deal with matters then. It wasn’t like this would turn into war or threaten anyone’s lives. I didn’t think it was too urgent.

“Yes, well, they’re all enjoying the festival as well, so they are willing to wait until the day after it closes. My own friends have been talking with them, but that’s as far as they were willing to compromise with us…”

The day after it closes—so three days away. We had two days to work with, essentially.

“And said friends are also helping me raise money at the moment. They’re able to exchange ancient coins for Dwarven ones, at something of a loss to us, but as for whether they can come up with cash funds quickly enough, that’s an open question…”

Sounds tough. I bet it was. Just taking it over here by wagon would be difficult enough. One of my staff could use Spatial Motion to hurry up the process, but scrambling around the world in search of gold pieces that may not even exist seemed ineffective to me. Besides, for all I knew (though I doubted it), maybe our foe was trying to lure my main advisers out of town. Again, rash moves were ill-advised.

Wait! Weren’t there gold bars among the goods we’d imported from the Beast Kingdom? Could we use those to manufacture fake coins? My Analyze and Assess–driven copies would be exactly like the real things, right? Nobody could ever tell them apart, even with the Dwarven Kingdom’s technology!

Understood. This is not possible. Dwarven coins are inscribed with a magical serial number that would make counterfeits easily identified.

…Oh.

I took a gold coin from my Stomach and looked at it for a moment. Raphael was right—there was a number inscribed on it. I could make an exact copy well enough, but two coins with the same number would be enough proof that at least one was a fake. Besides, um, wasn’t counterfeiting punishable by death in most countries way back when? No wonder this world used magic and technology to regulate their coinage. I suppose they’d have to, to sustain a de facto universal currency like this.

“So we can’t make our own coinage, and we likely can’t buy enough in time…”

Everyone nodded at me.

“Well, even if it means taking a loss, can we pay them with pure gold, via the bars we have?”

Wouldn’t the merchants be glad for that, at least?

“I imagine the more intelligent merchants would take that offer, but I have to say no to that!”

Mjöllmile was having nothing of it. I asked him why. It seemed like a good idea to me, at least.

“It’s because then they’ll see what kind of footing we’re on. Every time we negotiate with a nation afterward, they’ll look back at how we dealt with this matter, and they’ll see that if we’re presented with an impossible quandary, we’ll try to force a solution even if it means taking losses. And once we gain that reputation, people will deliberately give us unfair offers. They won’t see us as an equal trading partner. You can be sure they’ll serenade us with their flowery words all day, but…”

Mjöllmile smiled a bit. But he was right. Show weakness to a merchant, and they’d fleece you dry. He sure would, I knew.

“Regardless, I’ll try my best to assemble the coinage we need in the scant two days ahead. Fortunately, our visitors have been very generous to us so far. We might just be able to go on the offensive at the end of this!”

“Thank you.”

For now, at least, there was no clear solution. Our only real choice was to remain defiant. We couldn’t do anything too bold, and if it came to it, we’d just have to force our rules on them. Nothing told us we had to respect every single law people put upon us. This is Tempest, and we’ve got our own way of doing things. I mean, sure, if we could respect everybody’s regulations, that was the best thing—but either way, we couldn’t let those tradesmen go home empty-handed. We’d force the issue, but we’d do it fairly. Even if they didn’t like ancient coinage, or IOUs, or payment in barter, I didn’t think they had any right to complain.

“Well, no point worrying too much about this. This is our nation, and if worse comes to worst, we’ll make them follow our rules. So don’t overthink it and just do what you can!”

“You got it.”

Mjöllmile brightened a bit, apparently relieved. I don’t know what the Council will say to us, but let’s be optimistic—by then, we’ll know who this enemy is, at least. Or maybe not an enemy, really, so much as someone feeling us out. It was too early to call them an “enemy.”

“Right. Meeting adjourned! Good job, everyone!”

And with that, this evening’s progress report was a wrap.

Procrastinating on our problems created some annoying issues for me, I felt, but it wouldn’t do to fret about them too much. It looked like Mollie was really getting eaten up over it, so I figured I’d shoulder some of the load for him.

“Wanna head out for a little while, Mollie? And you guys, too.”

None of the men in the room was going to say no. A few of them, like Benimaru, were already in their yukata and ready to have some fun.

“Ah, but I need to start raising money—”

“Oh, quit worrying about that for now! If it’s not there, it’s not there. If you get so worked up that it knocks you out, that’d be an even bigger problem for us!”

Mjöllmile snickered. “Ah, I could never say no to you. Well, all right! I, Mjöllmile, am ready to take your offer!”

So I managed to drag Mjöllmile with me to the festival for a late-night run. That ought to help him mentally recharge—from the heart, too. “Don’t party too much, Sir Rimuru,” I could hear Shuna say as we set off. “And you, too, my brother…”

Oh, and by the way, I saw a silver-haired girl have a verbal argument with the proprietor of a certain takoyaki stall that had come up in conversation earlier. But let sleeping dogs lie. I’ve said that many times before, but if you stick to that rule, you really do avoid a lot of danger and trouble in your life.

Thus I gracefully let them carry on and had my fill of everything the night had to offer.