

CHAPTER 5

AFTER THE FESTIVAL

It was the final night of the festival, and to cap it all off, we held a massive banquet. Shuna and Mr. Yoshida worked on full overdrive, sparing no expense to provide the best dinner spread yet. We wanted to leave a good impression at all costs.

Here, I started noticing more nobles chatting and laughing with one another. They must’ve made friends over the past three days, and the mood overall was much more convivial than the first night.

Right now, I knew that Veldora, Ramiris, and Milim were enjoying a fun night in the labyrinth, alongside Carillon, Frey, and Middray, too. Treyni and the elves were working hard to keep them fed and entertained, and I was planning to join them later, dessert in tow.

Over in town, there were visiting merchants, adventurers, nearby farmers, and residents all enjoying good food and drink together. The bars and restaurants were opened up for free, letting people drink, sing, and carry on all they wanted. Here, too, people were letting their guards down. Monsters, humans—it didn’t seem to matter as the night wore on. There was music, along with singers following the beat and dancers moving to the rhythm.

In a way, it was painful to think that this moment was going to end. It seemed like such a waste, sort of. Starting tomorrow, everyone would be back at their old jobs. The thought depressed me—but, at the same time, made all the effort feel worth it. It was strange, and I didn’t think I was the only one experiencing it, but everyone still looked like they were having fun.

That, I suppose, is what happiness is. And watching all the happy scenes, I hoped that this peace could last for a long time to come.

And so the night wore on…

All too cruelly, the festival came to an end.

The highways had been full of people heading back home since morning. The security team, led by Rigur in place of Gobta, had been busy since before sunrise.

“I bet you wanted to sleep past noon the day after this festival, huh?”

“Ha-ha-ha! You can’t work security if you let the drink consume you, not the other way around!”

Rigur was serious about his job. No wonder he was Rigurd’s kid. If this was Gobta, I was sure he’d go right up to me and say, “Boy, don’tcha just want to sleep past noon the day after a festival?” I was in full agreement with that, so maybe I would’ve spoiled them a little along those lines, but silence is golden.

Unlike Gobta, after all, Rigur never complained about anything, briskly giving orders to his patrol. Thanks to that, our VIP visitors began their journeys home without major issues. The highways were wide enough, so as long as a wagon didn’t block the road, the waves of people shouldn’t stop. Some even planned to stay in town for a few more days, anticipating the rush back, so I didn’t think we’d have too many complaints.

Leaving the highways under Rigur’s management, I went back to my own work. Today, for starters, I had to pay out those gold coins. Over a hundred merchants were now seated in our main meeting hall, waiting for us. Rigurd and Mjöllmile were maintaining order and explaining matters for me, but it was about time I showed up as well. This was going to be a critical moment, and I knew I needed to nail it.

Arriving at the meeting hall, I could already hear people arguing from the outside.

“I told you, everybody is going to be paid today, so please stay calm and wait just a bit longer!”

“You think you can trick us like that?”

“I waited for you until the end of the festival. Hurry up and just pay me my due!”

“Whoa, whoa. I certainly understand your concerns, but can you show some deference to us, please?”

“Yes! Are you intending to drag our names through the mud for introducing you to our friend Mjöllmile?”

“No, sir, we’re not. All we want is for what’s owed to us to be rightfully paid…”

“And that’s why I’m telling you to be patient. This nation isn’t going anywhere, and they said they can pay everyone right now in anything besides Dwarven gold coins. Can you help us out a little and hold on until things are cleared up?”

“A likely story!”

“Yeah! Come on—pay up!”

It sounded like some of Mjöllmile’s merchant friends were trying to smooth things over with the tradesmen we owed money to. Maybe this was just how they operated as merchants, but I couldn’t have been happier to see it. It proved that Mjöllmile really was a good judge of character.

“All right, everyone, can we please take a few deep breaths? I, Meusé, representing the Kingdom of Ghastone, am here to tell you that not even a nation of monsters will default on their debts to any of you. Isn’t that right, Mjöllmile?”

That sounded like a big shot. A noble from the Kingdom of Ghastone, one of the commercially active nations ringing Englesia.

“Y-yes, Duke Meusé, you are exactly right! However—”

Hmm. A prince from Ghastone—not a superpower but still decently sized. Any noble with a title like that was no slouch.

“In that case, I do hope you will put to ease the minds of everyone here and provide payment, following the international regulations of the Council of the West.”

Duke Meusé was a powerful noble, but he was still acting like a gentleman in these negotiations. Mjöllmile was an important person in my government, but for now, he had no official title or noble name. He was still something of a guest, with some temporary power as my representative at times like this. Rigurd, one of my ministers, was also there, but the fact that this prince remembered Mjöllmile’s name and dealt with him personally… It was literally the royal treatment. I mean, a noble remembering a commoner’s name—oftentimes, even if they knew the name (which was frequently not the case), they’d pretend not to. That was how nobility worked, apparently, the way Mjöllmile described it to me, so I bet he’s the most surprised of all right now.

“P-please, Duke Meusé, just one moment. Our initial contract stipulated that payment via customary methods is acceptable. By ‘customary,’ of course…”

“Mjöllmile, I am not here to concern myself with such trifling matters. When working with merchants, and with nations as well, trust is the most important thing. And trust is something created by keeping one’s promises, is it not?”

“You are absolutely right, my prince, but—?!”

“Silence! These people engaged in business with you because they trusted your team. You have no intention of trampling over this trust, do you?”

“Of course not. But we have our own issues to deal with—”

“Heh-heh! I see, I see. So that’s how it is, Mjöllmile? Well, fortunately for you, I’ve got an idea for how to solve those issues. Would we be able to talk in private for a moment? You can take Sir Rigurd there with you.”

…Ah. So that settled it. It was exactly what Elmesia had warned me about. It was like when something I studied until I had it perfectly down showed up on the test—that feeling of total control. It was like I had that inside me.

I’m gonna ace this.

“Um, what do you mean?” Mjöllmile continued, making a grand act out of it. Like any veteran merchant, he was both cold-blooded and a born actor. He must’ve realized the same thing I did, but he didn’t let any of it show on his face. I could probably just leave things to him and this problem would be solved, but I didn’t want it that way.

It was time to take action. There was no point eavesdropping forever; I wanted to end this farce sooner rather than later.

Diablo opened the doors wide. “That will not be necessary,” I said as I walked through them. Behind me was Benimaru, followed by Shion and then Diablo, who quietly closed the door behind us.

“Did you wait long?” Benimaru asked, nodding at the merchants. “You’re being rather loud, you know.”

The merchants looked surprised to see me, my words turning them pale. They must’ve figured I’d stay away and let Rigurd and the others handle matters—but here I was with my staff. I didn’t think they knew what to do next.

“The demon lord Rimuru has entered the building,” Rigurd said, glaring at the merchants. “Bow your heads!”

A few of them stood up and hurriedly bowed. The majority stayed in their seats, giving me funny looks. It figured. If you’re a small-time tradesman, not educated in dealing with nobility, it’s hard to react instantly.

Duke Meusé himself was about to rise, so I spoke up to save him the trouble.

“No need for such formality, Rigurd,” I said with a smile as I looked around the meeting hall. Rigurd nodded and quietly stood aside.

Among the crowd, I saw not only merchants but a few journalists in disguise. I suppose they were going to report this far and wide if we disgraced ourselves as a country. Maybe I’d fall to my knees and tearfully admit that we couldn’t pay; maybe I’d violently force the merchants to clam up. Either way, they’d play up the details in scandalous fashion in their articles, no doubt.

But we were on to them. A journalist more loyal to our side snitched about this to Diablo. Thus, he had praised the media assembled—“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh, how laudable of you all”—but they looked dreadfully scared, their smiles frozen in place. I could tell they had a strong desire not to antagonize Diablo; something bad must’ve happened to them before. It sounded a bit threatening of him, but that was an issue between Diablo and the press, not me. It’d be clownish if I was to intervene.

“Well, well, the demon lord Rimuru. I hope you are doing well at the moment? I apologize that we have not come to know each other before now.”

He was the perfect prince, giving me an elegant bow. My presence threw him for only a moment; he regained his composure soon after. A gentle, relaxed expression was on his face as he greeted me for the rest of the group.

“Duke Meusé from the Kingdom of Ghastone? What brings you here? I’m not sure we had any pressing business with you?”

I smiled back, beginning with the line I’d prepared in advance. I wasn’t the type to wither in front of royalty, and here, too, I managed to smoothly handle the occasion. Advance prep and review are so important.

“Well, you see, there are some tradesmen here doing business with this nation for the first time at your festival, and they have come to me claiming their valid rights have been neglected. It is the job of the nobility to protect their citizens, and while I regret my rude directness, I have come to mediate on this issue.”

So brazen. You could just tell he was completely blackhearted. I’m not far behind him, but since I’m a slime, I’m fetchingly translucent compared to him.

“I see, I see. But that’s strange. Mjöllmile over there told me that our budget is ample enough. If people are still waiting for payment, then why is that?”

“Ah, well, these people only accept payment in Dwarven gold coins…”

Mjöllmile was just meant for the stage. He took my question meekly, attempting to explain the issue—only to have Duke Meusé interrupt him.

“Isn’t that to be expected, Mjöllmile? A legitimate merchant from Blumund such as yourself should be fully cognizant of international commercial law, I would believe! Unlike the slipshod members of the Free Guild, the only currency these people trust is Dwarven gold.”

Duke Meusé was on the merchants’ side, not raising his voice a bit as he pleaded their case, making certain he remained a benevolent third party. I was sure he was waiting for the moment when he could intervene with me and make Tempest owe him a favor.

For now, on the surface, he was acting tremendously fair. But all he was really doing was pushing his own rules on us. I glanced at Diablo. He read my signal and nodded back, smiling. We were all set to go.

“Ah. Yes, I see. I had heard that members of the international media were here, so I was wondering what the issue was, but it was something that trivial?”

“That is why, Sir Rimuru, if you would be able to leave this matter to myself…”

Now Benimaru spoke up. His imposing presence visibly unnerved some of the merchants. They must’ve thought I was going to threaten them into doing my bidding, like their plan called for.

“Not so fast, Benimaru. Based on what I hear, I can understand the concerns of these merchants.”

The audience looked a tad surprised that I held Benimaru back. Or dissatisfied, maybe. Things were going well, and then I had to rain on the parade.

“But, Sir Rimuru, I can’t help but wonder… They may not be Dwarven coins, but we do have ancient gold coins. If they will not accept those, I think we could provide them with the equivalent value of our Tempest-made goods. Why are they not content with that?”

“I agree with you, but I’m sure the merchants have their reasons.”

I gauged Duke Meusé’s response as Benimaru and I bantered. He seemed to be waiting for a chance to speak up, unite the merchants, and entrap me.

“Then how about this? Perhaps you could place your trust in our nation and, as Benimaru suggested, accept IOUs or goods in equivalent value?”

Mjöllmile, seeking to end this quickly, got the ball rolling. If the other side agreed to this, then perfect—we had an amicable agreement in hand. But if not—if I was standing here at the negotiation table and they were willing to make me look foolish—then I was prepared for that.

“I—I don’t believe a word of it!”

“Y-yeah!”

“This is a nation of monsters, and that is exactly why we seek payment in reliable, trustworthy Dwarven gold coins. I hope you will find it in your heart to understand that and, please, be generous in your—”

The merchants here ran the gamut, from complete neophytes to veterans familiar with manners around nobility. But either way, their responses were all one-sided, not taking me into consideration at all.

Ah, I thought. It’s too bad.

Meusé thought the time had come.

He was worried the merchants might grow hesitant when faced with the demon lord’s coercive ways, but so far they were following his instructions, just as he planned.

And if you think about it, it made sense. Meusé was a prince in Ghastone. He was young, just thirty-five years of age, but he had ties to the powerful Rozzo family. This made him one of the rulers of the Western Nations, part of just a small handful of upper-class nobility. Practically speaking, only a very few people could afford to turn their backs on his orders.

This plan came in the form of an order to him from the eldest member of the Rozzo family. Meusé was asked to make the demon lord Rimuru owe him a favor and gain his trust—and if he succeeded, he was promised a promotion to the Five Elders.

Yes. The Five Elders—the very peak of the entire world. Meusé was elated—and at the same time, he swore to tap every power at his command to execute this order, no matter what it took.

Thus he promised a lucrative future to the self-interested merchants he made contact with. He brought in newspaper writers from around the world to ensure his own safety. And now he was personally facing the demon lord, the lone job he couldn’t leave to anyone else.

This Rimuru had made his presence known only a short time ago, but he had already killed Clayman, renowned for his cold cruelty, and declared himself a new demon lord. A fearsome one, said to be connected to the Storm Dragon that laid waste to an army of twenty thousand. Meeting him in person terrified Meusé, but when placed on the scales with the glory he could earn, it was easy to bottle up his fears.

Meusé himself knew exactly what he wanted. That’s why he was being used like this, although he hadn’t noticed. It was exactly the way Elmesia El-Ru Thalion pictured it.

Seeing the demon lord and his personal staff in person honestly came as a surprise to Meusé. He was planning to talk Mjöllmile into a corner and ask him to bring the demon lord over. But while this wasn’t quite in the script, it did save him some time. They had reporters in the audience, and there were many more in the hall below this one.

Everything was set up. Once the merchants rejected the demon lord’s offers, Meusé’s plan was all but complete. After that, he just had to assuage the merchants and start running this room. That’s all it would take to make Rimuru start to thank him.

A calm smile emerged on his face as he began to speak, already convinced of his success.

“How about this, Sir Rimuru? If you are in something of a financial bind, then perhaps you could discuss matters with me personally? Indeed, fate may have brought us together here for a reason. If I could be of service to—”

It was just as I predicted—and a pretty shoddy acting job, too. Duke Meusé was making the request. My officials, standing behind me, looked on coldly at him. Noticing their gazes, the duke appeared a tad flustered. Maybe he felt something wasn’t going to plan—but it was too late for him.

Time to serve things up.

“I appreciate the offer, but it will not be needed. Come in.”

Following my order, Geld lumbered into the hall, carrying a large tray loaded high into the air with gold coins.

“Wha—?!”

“No…”

“Is all of that…?”

The crowd stirred.

The moment he laid eyes on the coins, the color of Duke Meusé’s face visibly changed. He must have realized that his plan of action had failed.

“You were seeking payment, right?” Rigurd declared. “Very well. Here it is—all in Dwarven gold coins.”

You could hear a pin drop in the hall.

“Wa… Please wait. Wait just a moment, Sir Rimuru?!”

Duke Meusé looked pretty panicked. It’s a bit too late for that, isn’t it?

“Yes?” I coldly asked.

“Are…are these all Dwarven gold coins?” he asked, face contorting. “Counterfeit currency is a clear violation!”

Hmm… Is that really something you should be accusing me of? Because that really sounds pathetic, Meusé.

“Rather a rude thing to say to Sir Rimuru,” Diablo said, stepping forward. Benimaru was looking angry as well, and I was starting to get bad vibes from Shion behind me.

“I… My pardons. But is this really…?”

“If you doubt them,” I said with a smile to the withering prince, “feel free to have them appraised.”

“In that case, if you’ll excuse me, I will use my trusty magic tools to examine them.”

It’d normally be unthinkable to interrupt a conversation between Duke Meusé and me, but… Ah well. No point quibbling over little details. This merchant who just spoke up must’ve been a protégé of the duke, a colluder of sorts. No doubt these events disturbed him so much, he forgot his manners. He was a faker, not the real thing—not that I’m much of a “real” king myself yet, of course. But let’s move on.

“Sir Rimuru, these reporters told me they wanted to write an article about these negotiations. What should we do?”

Shuna, after receiving my Thought Communication, spoke to me from behind the closed door, just as we had rehearsed. The journalists had gathered outside the room at Diablo’s behest—and when I gave the signal, they’d burst inside to serve as witnesses.

“Well, they have impeccable timing, don’t they?” Benimaru replied. “If we are going to appraise the coins, then let the press be in attendance as well.”

Then, as planned, the reporters entered the meeting hall.

“They… They’re real!!” the shocked merchant/colluder bellowed. Of course they were.

“Indeed,” one of the reporters said with a knowing look, “and these are some impressive gold coins at that. Some of these date back to quite a long time ago. They may not have been circulated before now.”

Those were probably the ones Elmesia had traded to me. I was sure she must have tons of them squirreled away somewhere. And with the reporters attesting to their value, the merchant could do nothing else. Even if he wanted to try swapping real ones out for fakes, the media was practically breathing down his neck—and if he did try that, then Soei, watching on from the shadows, wouldn’t let that go unaddressed.

“So is everything settled, then? I believe our merchants were concerned about their payments, so go ahead and settle our accounts for me, if you could.”

“Yes, my lord!” Rigurd and Mjöllmile said, answering my rather stuffy-sounding command. Producing a sheaf of documents and receipts, they began the payment process. It all went smoothly, under the watchful eye of the reporters.

“And you’re the last one, then.”

Now we were all done. Our last piece of business for the Founder’s Festival was settled.

“Ha… Ha-ha-ha… Impressive, Sir Rimuru. I have no idea how you managed to assemble such a fortune in Dwarven gold…”

Duke Meusé looked dreadfully stiff now. In front of him were all those piles of coins, shining even after we paid them out. The merchants looked a tad confused themselves, unsure what to do now that things were off script.

In the midst of this, the merchant I’d called the “colluder” spoke up.

“Well, as far as we’re concerned, as long as you respect international law, we have nothing to complain about. We hope to continue doing business with you in the future—”

“Um, we’ll pass on that, thanks,” I replied.

The merchants stared at me, eyes wide open. So, for that matter, did my staff.

“Wh-what do you…?”

“Our business with you is complete,” I said, as if stating the obvious. “There’s not going to be any more.”

My staff was now shocked. Only Diablo looked on with a smile. I suppose he was the only one who guessed what was on my mind here. That’s too bad.

“I-I’m not sure I understand…”

“What is the meaning of this? If you pay us, we can trust in you anytime…?”

“Are you looking down on us simple tradesmen? You know that nations can hardly trade with each other without traveling peddlers?!”

The truth was beginning to set in, I suppose, as the merchants started shouting.

“Don’t…you think…you are being quite rude to Sir Rimuru, the king of our nation?”

Shion burned with a quiet anger as she spoke. The merchants fell silent, no doubt sensing the danger. I figured I’d take advantage of the silence to finish things off.

“You know, I’m not into this cat-and-mouse stuff, so I’m just gonna come out and say it. You guys were the ones going on about how you couldn’t ‘trust’ our nation, weren’t you? Well, trust is a two-way street. It requires both sides to believe in each other. I don’t think it involves one side meekly accepting everything the other says to it. Mjöllmile asked you all multiple times to trust in us, didn’t he?”

“Th-that…”

“But…”

“I mean, I understand what you’re thinking here. We’re monsters, and you know we want to trade with the Western Nations, but you’re not sure if we can truly abide by human rules—that kind of thing.”

“Y-yes, exactly! And that is why—”

“But, you know, that’s why we suggested a compromise with bartering goods or using ancient coins. And you kicked all of that to the curb.”

“…!!”

“Ngh…”

Mjöllmile had practically thrown out his back bowing so much, trying to negotiate with them. But all the merchants here had laughed in his face. I wasn’t about to forgive that.

“You guys only want to do business with people you can trust. And you know what? So do we. We only want to do business with people we can trust. Therefore, I refuse to allow any of you to conduct work in our nation. I won’t ban you from entering, but don’t expect permission to conduct commercial activities anymore.”

It took this declaration for the merchants to realize just how serious this was. We had a new market here, one that lots of people expected would balloon in size, and there was no place for them in it.

The statement made Duke Meusé turn white. If he didn’t know yet that he had failed, he did now. “I—I refuse to allow such tyranny!” he shouted, unable to hold it in. “These people were only asking for their justified rights under international law—”

Did he see being unable to trade with us as a problem? I certainly had plans to make this into a giant new economic union, one bigger than all the Western Nations combined. That was probably why he wanted to join the bandwagon early and make friends with me—but if he could read us that far, he really shouldn’t have taken this approach. I never show mercy to my enemies.

“Their rights, huh? I think you may have the wrong idea, so if you’ll let me correct you real quick, our nation is not part of the Council of the West yet. I’d like to join them sometime, but if I can’t, then so be it. I’m not gonna mind.”

“Wha…?!”

“I mean, we’ve already decided this land’s going to be the center of a vast new economic bloc. Why? Because I want it to be.”

“Wh-what kind of nonsense are you…?! Such arrogance, strictly on your own volition—”

“It’s not arrogance. We’re all working together as a team toward the same goal, and we’re bound to see results from it. All I’m doing is helping out.”

I was trying to make it sound all cool, but really, I was prioritizing the stuff I wanted to make happen first, I suppose. I wasn’t sure I could deny claims of being arrogant, but I still had to lash back.

“And I want to be on equal terms with the Council of the West, too. But, you know, if they try to keep us down, then forget it. I’m not gonna force a relationship; we can just work through the Free Guild instead. Do you understand me?”

Besides, if we really needed to, we could sign individual pacts with each nation in the west, like we did with Blumund and the Dwarven Kingdom. There was no need to hurry things along. Just polish up our nation, make ourselves more valuable, and in time, we were bound to have a country that people would trust in. As far as I was concerned, that way of thinking was set in stone.

“All… All right. In that case, I will be glad to serve as an intermediary with the Council. I think we have had some regrettable misunderstandings, but I hope I can be of aid to you, Sir Rimuru.”

Duke Meusé is certainly a hard worker. Ah well. If he had retreated earlier, I wouldn’t have needed to say all that stuff, but noooo.

“Mm, I don’t think I can ask for your help, Sir Meusé. You’ve kind of lost your footing here already, you see?”

“Um?”

Duke Meusé froze, unable to parse what I’d just told him. Well, all right. It’s settled anyway. I didn’t want to say it myself, but at this point, explaining everything start to finish was probably the kindest approach.

“Once all the reporters here go back to their home nations, they’re going to write articles. Articles about this struggle related to merchant payments behind the scenes of the Founder’s Festival we held. They’re going to make the truth clear, and I’m sure all the stories are gonna be very entertaining.”

“………”

Duke Meusé’s mind must’ve been racing. It was telling him what would come next, and the results made him look sicker and sicker. See, this was exactly why I didn’t want to say it.

“Here, we have merchants who rejected our requests and demanded payment only in Dwarven gold coins. Then we have this upper-crust member of nobility who comes swooping in to unite them, even though he’s not personally involved at all. If someone read that newspaper article, what would they think?”

“I, um, that…”

Of course, that was all Diablo’s doing. He had assembled the reporters, revealing the information in detail. That alone would prove we were justified as a nation, and most people would sense a conspiracy among the merchant ranks. I agreed with them. Information means something only if it’s used correctly. Instead of fabricating the facts and trying to spread them around, it’s always better to start with the facts and just hand them out.

It was my discussions with Gazel and Elmesia that helped me come up with this strategy, though. Diablo even personally thanked them, talking about how he “still had a great deal to learn” and all. I thought they both helped us a lot this time, and I wanted to more amply repay them sometime soon.

“So there will be no need for you. Mjöllmile, who you so thoroughly disrespected, has my full and utmost support—enough so that I trust all my nation’s finances to him. He’s been far more help to me than you have, for one.”

“Ah…?!”

Duke Meusé’s face twisted in humiliation as the merchants began to look desperate. Meanwhile, the reporters were having much more fun than they expected when they first filed in. Some of them were rapidly taking down notes of the event—one they didn’t mind recording, since they didn’t take any of the fallout. A few even had expensive magic items for recording images of our negotiations. This was definitely gonna spread wide. The prince may have called the press over to save his own hide, but it wound up having quite the opposite effect.

“You can take care of the rest.”

“I would be happy to, Sir Rimuru.”

I patted the shoulder of the deferential Mjöllmile, whispering, “Thanks, Mollie,” as I passed by and out of the room with my staff. It sort of felt like he smiled back at me, but I didn’t see it on his face—his calculating eyes were back on Duke Meusé, then on the merchants around the room. I don’t think anyone would mind if I made him our chief financial manager.

On the other side of the door, I could hear him speak: “Now, since all our business has been settled, if I could ask everyone to accept their payments…” His way of putting a final period on these events, I suppose.

Chasing the duke out of town was gratifying, but we still had many problems to deal with. Thus, it was time for our customary review meeting.

We were back in the usual meeting hall, not the fancier one for the festival’s receptions and banquets. It was the night after the festival wrapped up, but a few guests were still around for this conference—Gazel, Elmesia, Yohm and his gang, Fuze, and even Yuuki, Hinata, and Masayuki. They were joined by a few other rare invitees, all here on my invitation, and the rest of my staff were all on hand as well, making it a packed house. Milim and the demon-lord crowd were not invited—if I had too many people here, we’d lose cohesion. We had a lot to talk about this time, so the itinerary was already pretty full.



One concern of mine, though, was Veldora. He was holed up in a corner of the room, pouting, and I was sure he was gonna say something—probably whining about how no challengers showed up. Hoping against hope that he wouldn’t derail this thing, I got the meeting started.

“Umm, first off, thanks to everyone for your help!”

That was our signal to begin.

The first person to speak was Benimaru, surprisingly enough.

“That was quite a shock, however, Sir Rimuru—you penalizing the merchants that way as well. I was not expecting that.”

The rest of my cabinet nodded in agreement. I guess the majority figured it was water under the bridge once the coins were paid. Seeing how harsh I was must’ve surprised them more than I thought.

“Indeed,” Rigurd said. “I did not expect such draconian measures myself.”

Hearing this must have piqued Gazel’s curiosity. “What? How did you handle them, Rimuru?”

I explained the whole story to the audience. When I was done, Gazel rolled his eyes at me.

“That was certainly…drastic.”

But he didn’t get angry, at least, demonstrating he understood my view of things, if only a little.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee! I think he did the right thing. If someone nips you, you nip them back. He was only thinking about what’s coming ahead, wasn’t he?”

Ahhh, there was no outfoxing Elmesia. Her intuition, and her knack for deciphering my mind, was almost scary.

“What’s coming ahead, Sir Rimuru?” Benimaru asked.

I shrugged. “Well, it’s just like I said to all of them. I have no intention of sitting downwind from the Council of the West forever. If possible, though, I’d like to build a friendship where we’re all on equal footing.”

“Yes, we’re aware of that. That is why we were prepared for a patient process, up to that point.”

I nodded back at Rigurd. “Right. So listen: That duke, Meusé, was just an errand boy, like Lady Elmesia said. I rejected him, and I followed their rules while I did it. If they want to continue this, their only choice is to send someone higher up on the food chain.”

“I suppose so, yes…”

“…So you think we will have another chance to negotiate with them soon?”

“Yep. And that round will come after the terrible mistake they committed today. I think we’ll kick off our next round of talks with just as much of an upper hand.”

“I see…”

“I think the other side doesn’t want to make it look like they’re clearly our enemy. That’s why they wanted to put a dog collar on me, like we just saw them try—and now that they failed, they’re gonna have to face up and admit we can be an equal partner. And with that…”

“Either they wage economic warfare against us or they go back to the table. And neither side is really prepared for the former. Each one, after all, has a fully functional economic bloc even if the other side doesn’t exist.”

Gazel was right. And in this case, once our negotiations ended next time, that would be it—and we’d have an overwhelming advantage.

“And if that’s how things turn out, then we can start working independently with each member of the Western Nations, regardless of what the Council’s laws or whatever say. It’s not war so much as an economic invasion, I suppose.”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… And you can leave that to me, Sir Rimuru. In fact, I could present you with all the Western Nations on a tray in short order!”

I’m not asking for that, Diablo. In fact, it’s not what I want at all. He was freaking me out again.

“Look, if you do that, it’s just gonna leave me with more garbage to deal with, all right?!”

No. Definitely no.

“M-my pardons, sir.”

“Ugh, you little brownnoser. Enough butting in and go fetch some more tea for Sir Rimuru!”

Shion landed a follow-up blow to the dejected Diablo. I wasn’t much a fan of her act, either, but let’s ignore that for now.

“Admittedly, I do think we could execute Diablo’s idea, if given ample time. But—for now, at least—there’s no point in doing that. I could think about it if there’s a bunch of conflict going on, but it’d involve a lot of pain on our part. If we’re just trying to build friendly relations, I don’t want to go through that much trouble for it.”

That seemed to convince everyone. We had our hands full just trying to improve our own country. Our first priority right now, above everything else, was to establish a firm economic bloc for ourselves.

“Yes,” Elmesia said, “your opponent will have no choice but to negotiate. But I have to sympathize with them a little. It’s rather hard to extract good conditions from a partner for whom economic sanctions and military threats mean next to nothing.”

The same could easily be said for Thalion, I think…but she was right. It’s safe to say that our rivals’ options were restricted at best.

“I see,” Geld replied. “That makes sense to me. So why go down so hard on the individual merchants?”

Maybe he felt I was being vindictive. It wasn’t like all of them were in collusion with Duke Meusé—and those who were might’ve been forced into it out of obligation or the like. Revoking their Tempest business licenses was the biggest surprise to my peers.

But I had a reason, of course. I smiled and tried to explain, but before I could open my mouth, Mjöllmile—his smile even bigger than mine—intervened.

“Heh-heh-heh… The reason is simple, everyone. Just like Emperor Elmesia said, if someone nips at us, we have to nip them back.”

“How do you mean, Mjöllmile?”

“Nip them back?”

“I-I’m not sure that’s enough explanation…”

Benimaru, Rigurd, and Geld were still in the dark. Diablo was not, but he just poured out his tea instead of commenting—maybe he was still a bit bent out of shape about before. Pretty weak-minded for a demon, isn’t he?

“Sir Rimuru asked me to take care of the remaining details for him. What he meant by that was to make those stranded merchants obligated to us and turn them into forces for ourselves.”

Wow, Mjöllmile. I figured my message would get across to him, but he perfectly understood my intentions the whole time. I was going to fill him in afterward for safety’s sake, but it looked like I wouldn’t need to.

“If you want someone to do your bidding, it’s far easier to have them owe you a favor, rather than browbeating or scaring them into it. It’s also successful quite a bit more often.”

Those were Elmesia’s words, and all I did was put them into action. There might have been a little scaring and browbeating added to the mix, but I don’t think I made any mistakes.

“Ah yes. Well played, Sir Rimuru.”

“Indeed, that makes sense to me, too.”

“So, Sir Mjöllmile, did you succeed in winning them over to our side?”

“Heh-heh… Without fail, indeed. I told them I would intervene in their cases, and now they’re all indebted to us. Thanks to that bit of threatening from Sir Rimuru, things went much easier than I expected!”

Mjöllmile grinned as he spoke, making him look a tad villainous. I was glad he was successful, but he was making me out like a mob boss or something. I wasn’t too fond of that, but ah well.

Regardless, everyone seemed to understand my reasoning now, so we moved on to the next topic.

The next topic…or really, the main topic, I should say.

“So as we’ve described to you, Mollie here has taken care of the merchants for us. It’s a problem that’s given me a headache for several days, and now that it’s behind us, I’d like us to share some thoughts on how we feel about the Founder’s Festival. Any feedback you have to offer is fine, so let’s get talking!”

The moment I finished speaking, Gazel cleared his throat. “Rimuru, as the king of a nation allied to you, there’s something I want to say. I think we talked a little bit last night about you going out of control, but what I saw during the festival disturbed me. What was the meaning of that?”

“Um, what?”

I had no idea what he meant, but judging by the grumpy look on his face, I had done something bad again. What it was, I really had no clue. Maybe my outburst against the merchants? It didn’t seem that way.

“You aren’t aware of it yourself, then? See, this is exactly why I can’t take my eyes off you for a moment! Vester, you said that projector was developed by you and Sir Gabil, correct? And was it also you who came up with the technology to transmit images from remote locations?”

“Ah, er, Your Majesty, that…”

Vester looked like a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Did he get so wrapped up in research that he forgot to report back to Gazel? Probably so. “Careless as ever,” I heard Kaijin say under his breath.

“My lord,” Gabil said, “that is incorrect. Sir Vester and I did develop that technology, yes, but the idea of incorporating the demon lord Clayman’s magical image-recording items in the projector was none other than Sir Rimuru’s!”

Oh, thanks, Gabil. Did he really think it was smart to blab about that? I winced as Vester looked like he wanted to crawl into a hole.

“…I thought so,” Gazel replied, looking tired. “I truly wish you could’ve given me some advance notice before you revealed that thing.”

We only saw it as a useful, and vital, invention for entertainment purposes, but to the assembled royalty and nobility from the Western Nations who witnessed it, the reaction was quite different. “Why, this technology has so many potential uses,” Gazel ruefully continued. “I hardly even know where to begin with it. But trust me, not a soul in the audience failed to understand how valuable it was.”

Really? Because to me, it was just—like—hey, check out the tournament fights on this big, easy-to-view screen. Everyone dug it, it was good, and that’s that. But to the world leaders on hand, it was a pretty heavy dose of culture shock.

“Something like that could change the way wars are waged,” Gazel’s friend Vaughn chimed in, Dolph nodding in agreement.

It was all too easy, it turned out, to think of military purposes for it. Giving orders to armies from a safe location, for example, would provide a huge advantage. Generals could send in assault teams to conduct enemy recon and channel their findings over to the main force, all without exposing themselves to any danger. Compared to person-to-person magical communications, this provided far more information far more quickly. Everyone was provided with the same visual and audio data, vastly improving the accuracy of orders.

Thus, this thing that we casually revealed to them was actually a revolutionary technology, one that had the potential to completely revamp civilization as this world knew it. I made it because I thought it’d be kinda nice to have, but it was really a Pandora’s box of ideas.

“I wish you told me earlier,” I blurted out.

“I wish you told me earlier!” Gazel bellowed back.

Now I regretted it—but hey, that’s what this meeting was for. Things don’t go the way you want them to all the time.

“Well, um, it should be said that running that projector requires a lot of magicules, so it doesn’t work unless the user’s pretty powerful magically. The range and quantity of data also depend on the user, so I don’t think this is gonna spread that fast, you know?”

I tried to deflect the issue as best I could. That issue was actually being addressed with the development of a new magicule-gathering system, but something told me I shouldn’t mention that right now. I’d break the news to Gazel in private later.

For now, the Dwarven king sighed. “Regardless, please try not to present such militarily useful technology without a moment’s thought again, could you? Why, I think you may be the only person in the world who’d think of developing this for entertainment purposes.”

I thought that wrapped up the topic, but then Elmesia spoke up.

“Yes, if you have any other inventions like that, I’d be happy to buy them, you know. I believe the world you come from has what’s known as a ‘patent’ system? I would gladly compensate you for the rights to this technology, if you would give us priority in harnessing them.”

“You know, Ellie, I think Thalion could do a lot with Tempest’s bath and toilet infrastructure!”

“I know, Elen. Our negotiations with Mr. Yoshida have paid off as well, so I hope to see you pay more visits to my manor in the future, all right?”

“Oh, of course!”

Before I could reply, Elen broke into the conversation. She was seated adjacent to Elmesia, and the way they carried on, they seemed like two loving sisters more than anything. I knew they were related by blood and all, but Elen was acting shockingly familiar with the emperor of a dynasty. Meanwhile Erald, her father, was already going pale and shouting “Elen?!” in a high-pitched voice.

“Y-Your Excellency! I know Elen is my daughter, but please refrain from spoiling her, if you would! And, Elen, you will not call Her Majesty ‘Ellie’!”

“Erald certainly can be loud, hmm?”

“Oh, I know! Dad’s always exaggerating like that!”

Man. These two girls put together may be downright dangerous. I felt bad for Erald. It was really shocking, how perfectly in sync Elen and Elmesia were. They probably were close friends, not just acting that way. Given the high fives they occasionally gave each other, the class system hardly seemed to exist at all with them. Elmesia El-Ru Thalion, Her Excellency the Emperor of Thalion, a figure who not even national leaders from the Western Nations could gain an audience with, seemed like a much different woman here. The royal knight guard behind her looked just as surprised.

“Members of the Magus! What you are seeing here is a state secret. Do not divulge it to anyone else!”

Erald saw fit to give that order, but I wasn’t sure how much it’d be followed.

“And so,” Elmesia continued, paying him little mind, “I would like you to send engineers from Tempest to our nation. This is an official request, of course, so I will gladly pay you for the guidance they will offer.”

“You want us to send manpower your way?”

“That’s right. If you want to keep your core technology a secret, you could always just send us whatever complete tools or resources we may need instead.”

“Hmm… So we’d need a way to export the parts we make here over to Thalion.”

We needed to tackle a few issues before I could grant Elmesia’s request. The pipes used in our kitchens, toilets, and bathrooms were manufactured using technology from Kaijin and the other dwarves; I wasn’t sure if Thalion’s engineers could re-create it, and teaching them from scratch would take too long. Instead, it’d be much easier to just manufacture the needed parts here and send them over to Thalion.

“And while you’re at it, perhaps you could transport them via that ‘train’ system you were talking about? I can provide the funding, so I hope you can begin developing that at once…”

It was like she was reading my mind. Gazel had a mind-reading skill or two, I knew, but was that the case for Elmesia as well? It didn’t seem that way to me, but I’d better keep my guard up. Regardless, though, her offer was worth considering.

“We haven’t gotten around to developing an actual train yet, no. If some of your ‘sorcerous science’ experts might be able to help with that, I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course they can! Erald?”

“Y-yes, Your Excellency! I will send word out promptly.”

Erald was still undauntingly faithful to Elmesia. He seemed more like a useful servant to her than a high-ranking noble. Gazel looked at him, his eyes piteous—the Dwarven king told me not even he could boss Elmesia around, so Erald’s behavior must’ve given him something to think about.

Thus Elmesia, Emperor of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, was interested in teaming up with us. We’d no doubt sign a technology-sharing agreement and begin tandem research before too long. With Thalion’s sorcerous science and Dwargon’s pioneering work in elemental engineering, linking these distant lands together might not be a dream after all. The “overcomers” Luminus planned to send our way might be able to help out, too—I’d need to see what they were like first, but maybe they’d provide some useful input.

“This is a great thing to hear, Lady Elmesia. It ought to vastly accelerate development. We may just see ‘magitrains’ become practical for regular use sooner than we think.”

“Oh? You call those ‘magitrains’?”

“Yeah. My basic idea is to develop ‘spirit cores,’ or spirit magic–driven power reactors, then install them into a sorcerous science-based control system. Sounds perfect, right?”

“Ha! You make it sound so easy.”

“How fascinating! Very fascinating indeed. I hope we can see it sooner rather than later.”

Gazel must’ve thought I was far too optimistic, but his smiling face told me he was sure I’d manage it. Seeing him like that, I don’t think he was really one to talk about “going out of control” on projects like this… Elmesia, meanwhile, looked like a girl who found a new toy, her expression astoundingly bright. It left quite an impression, much unlike the depressed-looking Erald by her. This definitely would accelerate development, for sure.

“All right. In that case, we’ll start by laying down rails to Thalion first. We can do that alongside our highway construction, so that’ll save us some time.”

If we were leading the project, it’d be easy to make sure it was all unified under the same standards. Completing the rail network first shouldn’t be an issue, I thought, but:

“Wait! Sir Benimaru suggested the concept of a ‘tunnel’ to me at our meeting. Will you be needing one of those in the future?”

The question came from Momiji, an unexpected participant. If she was asking whether tunnels would be necessary, was she saying Thalion was open to us blasting one into their mountains?

“If possible, I would like to open one in the future. Our first order of business is building a rail nexus in Blumund. From there, we’ll go through the Kingdom of Farminus and connect to the western entrance into Dwargon. Meanwhile, we plan to lay track south of Blumund as well, eventually winding up in Thalion. If we try to go through the Western Nations, we’d get tied up acquiring land-use rights and such. In other words, if we detour the track around the mountains, it’ll lead to huge losses. At the same time, though, we don’t want to force you into anything you don’t want to do.”

“I understand. I will trust in you, Sir Rimuru. If you can guarantee that it will not affect our mountains, I am willing to give you permission to build this ‘tunnel.’”

“For real?!”

“Yes. Um, for real. But as a personal request, I hope you will enlist Sir Benimaru to overlook this…”

Momiji’s cheeks reddened as she spoke. I didn’t need her to finish the thought.

“Benimaru!”

“W-wait a second! Are you trying to sell me off, Sir Rimuru?”

“Don’t make it sound like that. Geld’s in the middle of a big job, too, you know. We’ll need someone good at leading people, and you’re the best guy we have!”

Geld nodded at me. Benimaru, meanwhile, looked like I was driving him up the wall.

“I’m afraid it’s just not possible. I don’t know anything about construction!”

No, I bet not.

“Ah yes… Yes, it may not be possible, huh…?”

And here I thought I could sacrifice Benimaru and get this whole thing wrapped up fast. Things never quite work out like that, I suppose. I didn’t want Benimaru out of town for that long anyway, so this idea was a stretch from the start.

“Well, sorry, but Benimaru’s my right-hand man here. Perhaps he could join me during my regular visits to inspect our progress, but…”

“Oh, that’s fine, too. As long as he will visit our homelands when you do.”

Momiji was all smiles. And judging by Hakuro’s triumphant chuckle, I suppose that compromise was acceptable from the start.

“Are you giving in yet, Benimaru?”

“I am not, but if you need a bodyguard during your inspections, I will accept that position.”

He shrugged. That was as much as he was willing to give. But it still made Momiji happy, and I wasn’t going to force any more out of him. The rest, you could say, is up to them. I’d just reap the profits.

“So, Lady Momiji…”

“Just ‘Momiji’ is fine, Sir Rimuru.”

Hakuro nodded at me as well, not minding the informality.

“In that case, Momiji, I’d like to conduct some surveying work to see if a tunnel is possible. Is that all right with you?”

“Yes. Feel free to carefully inspect the range for any potential issues.”

And if we didn’t find any, that meant we could start digging. With the tengu rapidly softening their stance against us, it looked like construction would go far more smoothly than I thought. Good. Next time I’m over, I’ll be sure to say hello to Kaede, Momiji’s mother—and I’ll make sure Hakuro is with us.

“So, Lady Elmesia, if we have your permission to perform similar surveying and excavation work within Thalion’s borders?”

“You may have any permission you like. Erald, please make the arrangements.”

Elmesia so readily passed off responsibility to other people—truly, a living ideal for me to follow.

“Yes, Your Excellency. Sir Rimuru, I will prepare the necessary permits. However, when construction work begins within Thalion, I request that workers from our nation be brought in for the project.”

Erald was looking more bedraggled by the minute. Working under such a free-spirited emperor would turn anyone into a gifted servant. But he never forgot to add his own conditions, making sure each of his bullet points was fulfilled. If we handled all construction, that might make things harder for him, I suppose—but I had no objection, so I accepted the offer. And with a promise to help out if we ran into trouble along the way, we wrapped up the conversation.

This had started as a review meeting, but now we were rapidly deciding on a variety of important issues. That’s because, thanks to the political leaders in the hall, we were cutting through an astonishing amount of bureaucratic red tape all at once. Though, really, it was mostly Elmesia’s doing.

In the midst of this, Yohm, who had been silent so far, spoke up.

“Hey, pal—er, Sir Rimuru. I got a question, but is now okay to ask it?”

Simply offering one’s opinion in this room packed with the world’s biggest names took a lot of courage. Yohm must’ve been maturing as he grew into his new role.

“What’s up, Sir Yohm?”

“Well, I’d prefer to explain it myself, but I’m not too well versed in this stuff, so I’d like my lady here to go over it instead. That okay?”

By which he means Mjurran? Because Yohm doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy who’d take in concubines. My mind was put at ease when Mjurran stood up.

“Sorry I haven’t been around lately, Sir Rimuru.”

“Me neither, um, Lady Mjurran. Glad you’re well.”

“After everything you’ve done for me, Sir Rimuru, you hardly need to add ‘Lady’ to my name.”

Um, actually, I do, don’t I? I knew everyone there, Elmesia especially, had been talking really informally all evening, but I didn’t think this was something she’d want to get used to. But it was a bit too late for that, I suppose. Let’s hear her out, then tackle that subject later.

“Okay, Mjurran, what’s your question?”

“Right. This is related to the highway from Blumund to Dwargon running through our nation, as you discussed earlier. Should we consider this a part of the Monster-and-Man Cooperative Alliance you’ve mentioned before?”

Monster-and-Man…Cooperative…Alliance?

I liked the sound of that.

“You can treat it that way, yes. And I think I like that name for it, too. It encapsulates the ideal we’re aiming for really well.”

Monster and man working together for each other’s benefit. The term monster covered a diverse spectrum, of course, including some species better termed demi-humans. But regardless, that was the exact ideal I had in mind.

In the center of this alliance was our nation, Tempest. To the east, the Armed Nation of Dwargon. To the west, the Kingdom of Blumund. To the south, Milim’s domain. This alone was a vast alliance of monsters, and to that we could add the human side, centered around Blumund and including Farminus up north and Thalion down south—an expansive amount of human-controlled land. Plus, Blumund was our interface to the Western Nations and the people who lived there. If these diverse lands could join hands and form a true team, then I thought the Monster-and-Man Cooperative Alliance was a fine name for it.

“Thank you very much. Now, my question. In order to realize this ideal, our nation is willing to cooperate with you as much as we possibly can. Luckily, Diablo has coerced…um, I mean convinced our noble ranks to join our side, and they are now very submissive—er, cooperative with us, so I think they will listen to anything we tell them. Thus, as one of the first steps our fledgling nation takes, we are thinking of launching a new national-level project to help support you.”

Basically, her question was what kind of project they should launch.

“Well, it’d involve agriculture, I guess, like you’ve been talking about.”

“Everything is going well there. We’re having our people grow the designated crops without issue.”

“Um, so what else…?”

Was there something else? Everything I thought to ask her about was already taken care of. Diablo’s work cowing the noble ranks into submission was complete, and Yohm enjoyed overwhelming support among the people. The role of the military in his government was clearly defined, and the entire nation was now united.

The old Farmus was gone, and the new Farminus had taken root in its place. I thought that tying up the loose ends from that was job one, but as Mjurran explained, that was already finished. The citizens had by now been notified that agriculture would be the nation’s focus for the next little while, too.

I was impressed. Diablo may’ve set everything up, but Mjurran, taking over from him, had a greater talent for this than I thought.

“Okay, well, can you bring together anyone who’s still out of work for me?”

“Certainly, Sir Rimuru. We were hoping that we could help with the rail-laying work for you as well. This transportation network will be a lifeline for moving around the crops we produce, won’t it?”

“Yeah, I imagine so. You’ll probably be producing a lot more than we’d be able to consume internally, besides. I think it’s important for a nation to bring food to anywhere it’s needed before it rots.”

Back in the Farmus era, when the government had traded on the sly with the Dwarven Kingdom, the products involved were crafts, weapons, and other durable goods that didn’t deteriorate over time. Responsibility for their transport was assigned to the merchants; the nation collected customs taxes as essentially free income for no work on their part. That would change now. The nation would need to boost its trust, guaranteeing goods alongside the merchants. It was the start of a new era, one where Farminus provided guaranteed logistics for trade.

“I look forward to the day when these ‘magitrains’ run across the grasslands of our nation. I think they will transform our merchant class and how they conduct their business. We have much to learn if we want to contribute.”

“Yep. They’ll run far faster than wagons—a journey that takes a week now will be run in less than three hours. And that’s with carrying over a hundred times more goods at once, I imagine.”

“““What?!”””

Gazel and Elmesia didn’t seem surprised, perhaps assuming this kind of leap. Everyone else was stunned—it was just so unexpected. Yuuki, Hinata, and Masayuki, meanwhile, all cracked smiles for other reasons.

“So yeah, I’ll want to purchase the land we need now and plan our rail lines out to be as straight as possible, for efficiency’s sake. Geld’s staff, and the beastmen studying here in town, should be mastering surveying before long. I’m thinking of leaving that work to them and just performing the final checks when they’re done. Mjurran, I can put all the workers you can give us under their command. Divide them up into teams, led by whoever’s literate out of them.”

“Very well. This is getting a little exciting.”

Mjurran sounded up for it. She seemed ready to offer her support from the very start, so things would go pretty smoothly with Farminus, I felt.

The next person to raise a hand was Fuze. He smiled at me.

“With all the leaders here, I haven’t had a chance to introduce myself yet. Hello.”

He had attended the full festival, including the prelaunch banquet, but all the celebrities I was hanging with apparently made him too timid to speak up. I had noticed him, actually, but sadly, the timing never quite worked out. He’d looked like he was enjoying the show, though, so I’d resolved—and then promptly forgot—to chat with him later.

“Ahhh, sorry about that. I meant to say hello, but…”

“No, no, it’s fine, Sir Rimuru. You looked busy regardless. But anyway, today I have a friend who wants to speak about the very topic we’ve been discussing.”

He then introduced the Baron of Veryard, a man I knew well, to the audience. I remember how much of a hard worker he was, one I trifled with at my own risk.

“My name is Veryard, and I appreciate being granted the permission to attend. Thank you, Sir Rimuru, and thank you in advance to everyone else I am speaking to.”

He stood handsomely upright, then gave the hall an elegant bow. It was an impressive performance. One could hardly believe he was a rank-and-file noble from a small nation.

“Now, on behalf of my lord, His Majesty King Doram of Blumund, I wish to ask a question.”

Veryard took a moment to survey the audience. The king himself was in attendance, along with his wife, the queen. They barely even registered. I hardly knew they were in here. I had told King Doram that we’d plan an official conference shortly, but I suppose we didn’t need to any longer. This was kind of functioning as one. He was all smiles, an affable old man in appearance, and I wasn’t sure if that was a good look for him right here.

In his place, Veryard began to speak.

“I was informed by Fuze that Sir Rimuru would be speaking about matters related to our homeland of Blumund’s future place in the world. I have also heard from King Doram that he plans to make Blumund into a hub for commerce and distribution. I have been thinking about what that might look like, but listening to everything discussed today, I now have a much clearer picture. It appears, Sir Rimuru, that you envision Blumund as a sort of clearinghouse for logistics. Now, the ‘magitrains’ you speak of will no doubt vastly change the norms of this field. If a hub in this new logistical network is built in our nation, I am sure we will see goods from every corner of the land gather within our borders. Naturally, we will need someone to oversee all these goods, as well as people to oversee what each nation is lacking and make the necessary arrangements to address that deficiency. Sir Rimuru, do you wish for us to perform these roles?”

That’s Veryard for you. A lot sharper than Fuze, to be sure. And he put exactly what I was thinking about into words.

“Yes, that’s right, but can you manage that? Because I’m sure it goes without saying that if all you can provide is space for this, that’s fine, too. In that case, we’d promise to pay you a percentage tax every year for use of the land, but…?”

“Oh, nothing of it. Staying out of this business and lazily living off the profits is something our citizens would never be satisfied with. Certainly, we are willing to offer education and prepare for the times to come!”

Man. How many years into the future was this guy looking? I had the good Professor Raphael watching over me, but this guy was using his own brain to keep up with all of this? That went beyond just being visionary; it was like his mind was more sharply refined than anybody else’s in the room.

But he was right. Blumund was about to experience a paradigm shift that would make it reconsider its value system for just about everything. The same would be true for other nations, but for Blumund, I’d imagine the results would be dramatic. Veryard could see this, and he just declared that he was preparing for it.

What a guy this is. He had already bested me in one round of negotiations. Just as I thought, I definitely had to stay alert around him. I swear, I’m really glad he’s not my enemy right now.

“In that case, by all means. I’d like you to examine what sort of goods will be imported and exported from each nation and build ways to transport products to places that need them. For a nation so gifted in gathering and manipulating information, you’ll be uniquely qualified, I’m sure.”

“Ah, there’s no pulling the wool over your eyes, Sir Rimuru. Very well. I promise you that I will bring this issue home and deliberate over it in further detail.”

Like you’re one to talk, I thought as I nodded.

I was trying to hold a Founder’s Festival review meeting here, but now it’d turned into a huge political war of nerves. But it was worth it, because I no longer had to negotiate with Blumund. I was expecting to take more time navigating all manner of tricky issues, but Baron Veryard helped spring me from all of that. Was that a good or bad thing? I wasn’t immediately sure, but if we were at this point, might as well throw all my weight into supporting it.

With that, I promptly began to agonize over what I would ask Veryard for first.

So we had talked on end about thorny issues related to running our nations, but now it was really time to focus on the festival. I mentally changed gears, preparing to listen to everyone’s feedback.

“All right, does anyone else have anything to add…?”

Someone shot to their feet, as if waiting for the signal. It was Veldora. I dreaded this moment so much, I thought about pretending I didn’t notice him, but…

“Rimuru, what is the meaning of this?”

What’s the meaning of what?

“How do you mean?”

“The labyrinth! You know what I mean. I was anticipating so much, and nobody even attempted to tackle the hundredth floor!!”

After all that lecturing I gave him, he still wasn’t the least bit apologetic, was he? He just. Doesn’t. Listen.

Already, he was going on about the lines he memorized for the fateful encounter and so forth. I wanted to snap back at him about how little I cared, but I didn’t. If I did, that’s when he’d start really throwing his weight around.

“Well, yes, I have my thoughts about that as well.”

“Do you? How reassuring to hear. So what are you going to do about it?”

What? I dunno. At the very least, we’d have to start dividing adventurer groups by strength levels.

“We’ll need to work on it, that’s for sure. Because the challengers who came in were all decent, at least. Intermediate or better, you know?”

“Decent…?”

“That’s kind of rude…”

“But I’m not sure I can deny that…”

Kabal’s party gloomily sighed at me. Considering how devoted they were to robbing my treasure chests blind, I hoped they would forgive at least a little sass.

“Nah, nah. Me, all I had to do was walk a little bit, and we were on Floor 10. The next thing I knew, my companions beat the boss for me…”

I think Masayuki meant to comfort them with that, but it just came off as self-aggrandizing. Then again, Elen didn’t seem too despondent about the experience, so maybe it wasn’t a big issue. I figured I could leave them be.

“…So I wouldn’t count on anyone knocking on your door for a while to come.”

Of course, for Veldora, he might not ever get any visitors, but…

“What?! Then what did Ramiris and Milim and I work so hard for?!”

He really should’ve included me in that list, but ah well.

“Hey, don’t worry. In terms of worldwide advertising, yesterday’s unveiling was a big success.”

“Oh?”

“Can you give us the details, Mollie?”

Mjöllmile stood up, brimming with confidence as he addressed Veldora.

“The footage we revealed from inside the labyrinth drummed up interest from multiple nations. I think Rare items appearing from the treasure chests generated a great deal of attention.”

“And that was my doing.”

Ummm… Actually, Veldora may have done something right, maybe…?

“If my guess is correct, the nobles in the audience will likely be sending the adventurers on their payroll into the labyrinth before long!”

As he explained it, the noble classes often hired adventurers or stout mercenaries to serve as bodyguards. Now that they saw the treasures potentially available in the labyrinth, they’d likely send those people over to collect the booty, earning the rights to whatever they picked up in exchange for supporting them. Even adventurers without wealthy patrons would likely take multiple trips in, searching for fortune and glory. As Gaiye so eminently showed us, Rare weaponry and armor really were that hard to pick up otherwise.

We wouldn’t mention it here, by the way, but Mjöllmile had an even more vicious scheme in mind—bringing on shills who’d “score big” in the labyrinth for him, like a crooked lottery, to stoke everyone’s gambling instincts. Having them obtain flashy items that everyone could see as valuable would no doubt drum up a competitive spirit among the adventurers. Between that and other little tricks, we were planning ways to get adventurers and nobles alike addicted to this thing.

And Mjöllmile had even more plans in store.

“That’s not all, either. I am considering instituting a bounty system as well. If we announce that anyone who conquers the Dungeon down to the hundredth floor will win a vast sum of money, I believe many nobles will bring adventurers over and support their quest to win it all.”

He grinned. Dangle a vast fortune in front of nobility, he suggested, and they’re all too greedy to resist. Talented adventurers would quickly find patrons to hire them, no doubt, using their wealthy bosses’ funds to shore up their equipment and tackle the labyrinth in better shape.

It’d be like athletes taking sponsorships, actually, wouldn’t it? And if their adventurers performed well, that’d paint their patrons in a better light and maybe earn them more money elsewhere. That’d offer more than enough reason for them to step up, Mjöllmile thought—and the noble sponsors could kick back in the city, too, enjoying all the entertainment while their “team” hacked away.

It could be fun, too, to broadcast labyrinth runs to the coliseum seats. Between this, that, or the other thing, we’d likely be able to attract large audiences.

“Sponsors,” though, huh…? Hearing that concept from Mjöllmile really impressed me. I always knew he was talented, but I didn’t think he had this much insight into the future. There’s no doubting that sponsors would love adventurers in their stable landing a huge item or scoring an impressive boss defeat. There’s no telling what he’d think of next.

Now, just one more thing.

After a great deal of discussion, Mjöllmile and I had something we wanted to work on with the Free Guild. My financial partner had everyone in the hall enthralled; even Veldora had shut up. Realizing this was his chance, he spoke up.

“Now, while we have Grand Master Yuuki Kagurazaka here, I have a request, or an offer, to present to you.”

“An offer? What’s that?”

“As I said, we are planning to offer bounty prizes in the labyrinth—and that’s something we would like the Free Guild to manage.”

“Why is that?”

“Mainly for the advertising effect, you see. With all the Guild locations out there, you’ll be able to spread the word quickly worldwide.”

“Yeah. That’s certainly true. But what else?”

“Well, in addition, I wanted to use Guild membership cards to manage the challengers.”

“Ah. Wow. Yeah, that’s quite an idea…”

Yuuki sighed, either amazed or exasperated.

We had thrown around the idea of issuing “Labyrinth Cards” to challengers, but this actually required a lot of work. This way, we could reduce running expenses and give some of the workload to the Free Guild’s staff. In a way, it was Mjöllmile’s quest to palm off responsibility for it on someone else.

“But this offers certain advantages to the Free Guild as well.”

“Oh?”

“You see, the monsters in the Forest of Jura are managed by the orders of Sir Rimuru. That management will be expanding to the edges of the forest’s expansive borders in the future…”

“…Ah. And when it does, there’ll be less monster-hunting work to be had?”

“Precisely. But that won’t be a problem, because the labyrinth will be home to a vast number of monsters in time. Hunting them down provides magic crystals, as well as pelts, fangs, claws, and other components, all on a regular basis…”

“…!!”

“And wouldn’t that boost the Guild’s profits as well?”

Defeating monsters let you obtain parts and ingredients from them. Selling them to the Guild earns adventurers income. When the Guild sells them to shops and so on, they earn the resulting profit margin. And meanwhile, we’d leave adventurer management to the Free Guild and collect taxes from them.

Going forward, there was likely gonna be a lot of out-of-work adventurers going around. This labyrinth can help create new outlets, and new jobs, for them to take advantage of. Nobody loses, I thought.

But how would Yuuki respond?

“I’m sure Rimuru gave you a few suggestions about this, didn’t he? Well…Mjöllmile, was it? I’d like to think about this idea, but it’s likely that we’ll accept it and establish a new location in town here. Would you be able to provide a building for it?”

“Of course. Once you know who you’ll assign here, we can work out all the details later.”

“Man, there’s just no beating you, Rimuru…”

Yuuki grinned at me. Mjöllmile and I had our deal.

I turned back toward Veldora.

“Did you hear that? Once that’s accepted, we’re gonna have a ton more adventurers going in.”

“Mm-hmm…”

“And a year may be asking too much, but in two or three years, I think we’ll see some pretty formidable challengers.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Well, it’s simple logic. They’ll be polishing their skills in a labyrinth where there’s almost no chance of dying. It’d be weird if they didn’t get stronger.”

“Ah yes. Well said, Rimuru. I look forward to this!”

To someone as long-lived as Veldora, two or three years went by in a flash, I imagined. He was smiling now, chatting about how exciting this could be. Right. If that placated him for now, then we were good.

As I gloated internally, Hinata raised her hand.

“May I have the floor?”

“Yes?”

I didn’t think she’d complain to me at this point, but I still tensed up anyway. Once I decided I had a hard time with someone, it was difficult to shake that image from my mind, I guess.

“I have a request…or a suggestion.”

The way she put that wasn’t exactly encouraging. Mjöllmile’s eyes were averted, sweat running down his head.

“…I’m listening.”

“Thank you. If you’ll excuse me—”

Hinata’s concern was for labyrinth users failing to conduct adequate safety measures during outside work. If they grew used to not dying inside there, she feared, they might wind up unprepared when they’re in the “real” world. This had occurred to me as well, but I concluded it was just a “play at your own risk” thing and that was that. Having Hinata point it out left me tongue-tied.

“Hmm… Well, apart from warning people, I didn’t think I could do very much…”

“It’s an issue that could affect people’s lives, you know. You can’t just let it go unaddressed.”

“Um, yeah, but…?”

“No.”

“Y-yeah, but, Hinata?”

Before I could plead with her, Hinata offered a suggestion of her own.

“…But if you accept the suggestion I’m about to make, I’ll be fine with what you’re doing here.”

“All right. I’ll listen. What is it?”

I tried to be reserved with her. I shouldn’t have worried.

“Ha-ha-ha! You are such a… Never mind. You don’t have to tense up like that. This could be useful to both of us.”

“Huh?”

“Challenging this labyrinth is a fine idea. It’ll help improve your core skills, and I think you can learn how to effectively dispatch assorted monsters better this way. But I’m concerned that it’ll reduce people’s awareness of the potential lethality involved. So I’d like to send over a Priest or two from the Western Holy Church.”

“A Priest?! No! Have you lost your mind, Chief Paladin Hinata?!”

It wasn’t me shouting but Fuze. A lot of other people were surprised as well, so I asked why. It turns out a Priest, in Church parlance, was a kind of magic user, a religious healer. I think I had actually heard about them before—they were a rarity, in fact, one of the few individuals in the Church hierarchy able to harness “holy magic,” which the organization kept a guarded secret. Those ranked a bishop or higher could apparently perform “divine miracles,” including the replacement of lost body parts.

“I am quite serious. Yes, their abilities are classified, but they, too, need to learn and grow. No matter how much genius-level talent they have, only a very few manage to master the divine miracle of Resurrection. At this rate, we risk losing skills and lore that have been passed down for ages. Times of war are one thing, but it can be frustratingly difficult keeping this knowledge alive during peace.”

So basically, raising the dead as a skill was dying out because there were fewer dead to raise? Maybe it wasn’t exactly that, but I understood what Hinata meant well enough. Her idea was to use my Dungeon to help improve her people’s holy magic.

It was heaven-sent, exactly what we needed here. Even if they never learned Resurrection, having Priests with high-level healing spells around would help keep people safer during work outside the labyrinth. If I wanted to fully learn the “secret skills of faith and favor” Luminus turned me on to, seeing and analyzing a Priest’s skills in action would be a good shortcut as well. I had no reason to turn Hinata down.

“Well, they’d all be welcome here.”

“Hee-hee! I thought you’d say that.”

Ignoring the gasps of surprise around us, Hinata and I came to an agreement. Priests were now going to be lurking around the labyrinth.

I thought that was the end of the meeting, but Hinata had one more suggestion.

“Also, changing the subject a little, I’d like to have the paladins try conquering the labyrinth as part of their training.”

“Huhhh?”

“We could have Sir Veldora over there—say, weren’t you selling takoyaki at one of the food stalls?”

“That… That doesn’t matter, does it? Just go on with what you were saying!” I begged.

“Y-yes! I was certainly not running a takoyaki stand under the name ‘Alias’!”

“…Oh. And here I was trying to kid myself that it was someone else… Well, all right,” Hinata grumbled, looking a bit tired out. But there was no fooling her. Although, really, anyone who knew Veldora would’ve spotted it.

The Storm Dragon insisted that he wanted to run a food stall with a grill during the festival, so I asked Mjöllmile to get him a space and someone to help out. Then, for reasons that were beyond me, Veldora convinced the busy Kurobe to craft a special grill top for him—one made for cooking takoyaki, the balls of batter and octopus, more popularized in the city of Osaka.

I allowed this provided that nobody found out it was Veldora running it, but—really—everybody in town knew the guy anyway, so I begged everyone involved to just keep it a secret from the coworkers at the stall. Along these lines, I asked him to come up with a fake name for the festival, and he decided upon “Alias” for it.

Thus we had “Alias Takoyaki” among the stalls, and from what I heard, it was actually a huge success. But now we were going way off-subject.

“So, um, if we can forget about that for a moment, can you tell me more about the paladin training you’re picturing?”

I lobbed the conversation back toward Hinata. She didn’t protest, thankfully.

“Based on what I’ve seen, new paladin recruits likely wouldn’t be able to win against that Bovix guy from the tournament. So I’d like to group them in parties of five or six and let them go inside. It’ll give them more on-the-field training, and it’ll also help train the Priests I mentioned. And if I had to guess, our higher-level paladins could probably make it to Floor 50 right now.”

“Oh? That is quite fine by me. In fact, bring them on!!”

Veldora was certainly up for it. And paladins were all ranked A or higher. With that kind of force, a few of them in a team could probably get past Bovix.

“I’d also like some of our captains to join in.”

More murmurs of surprise from the crowd.

“Do you mean that, Lady Hinata?!”

“You would have us dive into the labyrinth as well?”

Arnaud and Bacchus, the first paladins to ever stay in Tempest, immediately fired back at Hinata. She didn’t relent.

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s the perfect training ground, and you’ll never get killed in there. If foes that strong are found around Floor 50, they’ve got to be even stronger below there. Maybe even you couldn’t win.”

Veldora contentedly nodded. The paladins, meanwhile, were livid.

“N-no, um, I don’t think so, Lady Hinata. We’re the Crusaders, the most powerful army out there…and we have a Saint among us, the complement to a demon lord.”

“Exactly. The demon lord’s personal leaders are one thing, but a typical dungeon monster would be cannon fodder to us—”

“Then prove it to me.”

Arnaud and Bacchus’s defense was pulverized by Hinata’s perfectly fair argument. Certainly, if they could beat Floor 100 and conquer the whole labyrinth, that’d prove they were correct, all right. That was the pure truth, and there was no possible way to spin it.

Sadly, though:

“W-wait a minute! But isn’t the guardian of the hundredth floor…?”

“Heh-heh-heh… Kwaaah-ha-ha-ha! It’s supposed to be a secret, but I will let you in on it—it is I, Veldora the Storm Dragon!!”

He was certainly enjoying himself, as Arnaud and Bacchus turned pale with despair. There was no turning back now. I gladly accepted Hinata’s request.

That seemed to finish up most of our business, so I decided to take this opportunity to get one thing straight. In fact, this was the main reason I’d called so many people in here.

“Now, there’s one thing I’d like to ask all of you…”

My question was about the merchants from eastern lands. I had a suspicion they were plotting something, so I wanted to discuss this as I cautioned the rest of the hall about them.

“Our nation is open to anybody, and we allow people to go in and out as they please, so I’m sure Eastern merchants are taking advantage of that. But…”

“Yes, King Gazel, we have been putting them all under surveillance.”

Henrietta, knight assassin and head of Dwargon’s intelligence organization, had been keeping tabs on them. That kept them from doing much, I’m sure. Taking any action would be suicide, in fact.

“Unfortunately, we have only a small presence as a trade partner, but we do have a talented intelligence agency. We do receive goods from the East, but not many of their merchants are seen within our borders. Perhaps they do not see us as worth the effort.”

“Um, should you really refer to yourself in those terms…?”

So they came to Blumund, too, if not in great numbers. It sounded like they were watched over carefully, so no worries there.

“And is my own kingdom safe from them?”

“Of course, Your Excellency. All imported goods are kept internally by our dynasty. The thirteen kingdoms are not given the right to access them.”

The Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion’s borders were all but closed to foreigners. It barely even interacted with other nations, and there was no way for merchants from the East to get inside. I sincerely doubted any of them could hoodwink Elmesia, so they were likely fine as well.

My main worries were for Farminus, the new nation I’d left to Yohm.

“Hey, by the way, did Razen check our account books like Diablo asked?”

“You need to stop speaking so informally, Yohm… Sorry. He said he examined them all, investigated how much impact there was from the merchants, and severed ties with them all.”

Of course Diablo had it handled. It’s scary how talented he is. I thought about giving him some praise, but not in front of all our guests.

“And as far as the Free Guild goes, we’ll have to leave those decisions to each office.”

I was sure they’d have to. Not all Eastern merchants were government agents; some of them were just conducting regular business, no doubt. The Guild headquarters couldn’t tell every regional base to cut off all current trade with them. Their members needed work, after all. Thus, Yuuki instead promised he’d make sure the headquarters provided guidance as best they could, so I’d leave matters to him.

“And the Western Holy Church—or, I should say, the Holy Empire of Lubelius has halted all business with Eastern merchants.”

“Oh?”

I wasn’t expecting that from Hinata. I asked why, and she replied that they came close to being taken advantage of.

“There was a merchant named Damrada, a fairly important one, so we trusted in him… I never thought he’d actually try to trick me.”

“Trick you?”

“Yes. On the night of the Walpurgis, someone snuck into Lubelius. I happened to be around to chase him away, but I was actually supposed to be meeting with Damrada then.”

“Hmm. And those two events have to be connected, huh?”

Listening to Hinata’s rundown, Gazel agreed with her—Damrada and this intruder must be related. I thought so, too. But how was this mystery foe involved with the Eastern merchants? And wasn’t that when the demon lord Roy was killed, too? Was that this intruder’s doing?

“Well,” I concluded, “either way, I think we all know what we’re dealing with.”

Everyone nodded. Good. Building a network of nations on the alert for Eastern activity would help us get a grip on their future moves. And now that I knew we were all on the same page, I officially adjourned the meeting.

Now, only my own staff remained in the meeting hall.

“So, Sir Rimuru, have you come to a conclusion?”

“Yep,” I said to Benimaru. “No doubt about it. The ‘patron’ Clayman refused to identify is Yuuki Kagurazaka.”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… I agree. The lack of evidence is an issue, but I have no doubts, either.”

If Diablo agreed, there was no room for questioning it. I had only become sure of it after Luminus gave me her advice. The other woman I was reserving judgment on for now, but Yuuki was definitely suspect.

I mean, only a very few people knew about what had happened between Shizu and me. I wasn’t sure who leaked that info to Hinata, but she told me herself that it was a merchant from the East. Then, as I conducted my own investigations, I came across some interesting information.

“Mjurran told me that she never heard of the Moderate Jesters.”

“Clayman was always a careful demon lord,” Geld said. “He didn’t trust his own men one bit. I think he kept that company of clowns a secret from them all.”

He was right. Clayman believed nobody, and he wanted the Moderate Jesters to remain unknown to his entire bureaucracy.

“However, as Shuna proved in her investigations, he and the Eastern merchants had public connections to each other. Mjurran saw them herself. She even advised them a few times.”

“Hohh. Which means…”

“The clowns approached Clayman disguised as merchants?”

Geld and Gabil seemed convinced. I nodded back at them.

“I got some testimony from Adalmann on this subject. Apparently, the Jesters showed themselves to him.”

The Jesters did not go through any particular pains to hide themselves. They certainly didn’t disguise themselves as merchants, and if Adalmann saw them, they must have at least ventured near Clayman’s manor. No one had seen them inside, however—which made my theory more likely.

Diablo’s smile widened. “The Moderate Jesters and the Eastern merchants… There’s little doubt these two groups are connected.”

“Right,” Benimaru said with a smile of his own. “And if Laplace didn’t show up in that battle, then it was likely him who killed Roy.”

Out of the three Jesters I knew, Footman and Teare were busy behind the scenes in the battle against Clayman’s forces, looking for and killing any magic-born liable to betray the demon lord. What was the third among them doing, then…? Benimaru had to be right—this other Jester was infiltrating Lubelius, in search of something.

“Everyone who knows about Shizu and me was present at today’s meeting. That was why I asked the last question I did.”

Kabal, Elen, and Gido were out of the question. Gazel and Elmesia could be crossed off the list. Fuze, Veryard, and Blumund’s royal couple were beyond a reasonable doubt—they had no clear motive and only trivial connections to the merchants. And Hinata, being almost victimized herself, couldn’t have perpetrated this.

That just left Yuuki.

“He admitted that he has connections to Eastern merchants, yes.”

“He couldn’t have pretended otherwise. That high-quality paper they’ve got is made in the Eastern Empire, apparently, and Yuuki always had an ample supply of it. There’s no way he could’ve denied it.”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… We could’ve extracted something more from him today. A written confession or the like. A pity we didn’t.”

It was, but I wasn’t too sad about it.

Shizu and I had a unique relationship. Nobody who knew about it was the kind of person who’d breezily gossip about it to complete strangers. If someone leaked the news, it had to be someone opposing me. And if you considered the list of people who were sure that information leak would make Hinata act—Yuuki was the only one I could think of.

To tell the truth, I had suspected Kabal’s group at first. But it was Elen’s advice that made me decide to become a demon lord in the first place. Plus, with Elmesia backing her up the whole time, there’d be no reason for her to tell the Eastern Empire about me. Revealing such a vital secret would benefit the enemy alone, not her at all—and the same was true for the Blumundians. If they wanted to oppose me, they wouldn’t have signed a treaty with me. They would’ve just held back, avoiding deep ties with us, and profited from the fallout.

“If I had to guess, the Eastern merchants are trying to expand their influence in the Western Nations. And the Church forces got in the way of that, didn’t they?”

“I think so, too. If they pitted you against Hinata, Sir Rimuru, chances are they hoped you would kill each other off.”

“Yes. It is clear that it didn’t matter to them who killed whom.”

Benimaru and Diablo were in agreement with me. I went on.

“The two main influential groups in the Western Nations are the Council and the Church, and I’m guessing the Eastern merchants are trying to work on both of them, slowly expanding their clout over time. And working with them…”

“…is the Free Guild, then?”

I briskly nodded at Diablo. As motives went, this was the biggest and most plausible one. I had no physical evidence to back it up, but my conclusion was already made.

“So what will you do?”

I thought I could hear Diablo offering to assassinate him at once, but I pretended not to.

“That’ll depend on what our foe does. I wondered if I was wrong for a moment, judging by how much support he offered us today, so let’s just be very careful with him and see if we find a way to grab him by the tail.”

“Very well. I will ensure the Guild building in town is kept under constant surveillance.”

“Thanks, Soei. Everyone else, I don’t want to see any unauthorized moves from you!”

“““Yes, sir!”””

Excellent.

Honestly, I wanted to corner the guy right now and interrogate him. But without evidence, if he talked his way out of it, I’d be sunk. Yuuki ran the entire Free Guild, and I couldn’t accuse him out of the blue with nothing to fall back on. And besides, maybe—I mean, it’s not a nonzero chance—maybe I really was wrong about all this.

Understood. The chances of that are believed to be extremely low.

They’re believed to be, that’s for sure. Without real evidence, not even Raphael could make a firm conclusion.

“Well… In my old world, we had a concept called ‘presumed innocence.’ In other words, someone’s always innocent until it can be proved that they’re guilty. But even so, don’t let up on them.”

My staff nodded their understanding.

I had no idea what Yuuki was thinking. Hinata, Clayman too, the Eastern merchants, the Free Guild, maybe the Council itself, and I—perhaps we were all dancing on the palm of his hand. We couldn’t be sure of that right now, but that was about to change. We knew who to watch out for, and now we just had to quietly prepare and wait for the confrontation to come…

The excitement of the festival was over. Normal life rushed back into the scene all too quickly. We had a mountain of things to do; problems kept piling up, no matter how many we solved. There was no time for me to wallow in melancholy.

I heaved a gloomy sigh as I thought about the game of wits Yuuki and I were likely about to engage in.