

CHAPTER 3

THE COUNCIL

Here in Seltrozzo, a small northern kingdom, a conversation was underway between a boy and an old man. The boy was Yuuki Kagurazaka, grand master of the Free Guild, and the man was named Johann Rostia—Council mainstay, generous benefactor to the Guild, and prince of the Kingdom of Rostia.

As his last name suggested, he was the elder brother of Rostia’s current king, but he was also one of the Five Elders who controlled the Council. He always held his confidential meetings here, in Seltrozzo, a small, rural nation perfect for avoiding the eyes of the Western Nations.

This was because Seltrozzo was home to a safe house run by the Selt Foreign Information Bureau, the leading intelligence agency in all the Western Nations. The SFIB was established as a risk-management group, surveilling the lands outside human control and preparing for any upcoming monster threats. It had a group of talented agents, all of them ranked B or above, and its small number made it truly a team of elites. Any location under their protection would be impossible for foreign agents to infiltrate, and that was why Johann used this house for all of his most delicate meetings.

“Well, can I hear your report, then?”

“Right. It’s pretty clear that the demon lord Rimuru’s fully on to me. I went out of my way not to leave any evidence, using merchants from the East and so on, but regardless…”

“Then can’t you talk your way out of any suspicion?”

“Yes, my own staff suggested the same thing, but there’s no guarantee ‘talking my way out of it’ would keep me safe, you know? He is a demon lord, keep in mind. Rile him the wrong the way, and it’d be like stepping on a tiger’s tail.”

Yuuki didn’t hide the fact that Rimuru was suspecting him. He had no reason to. After all, Johann—this Five Elders member—was essentially Yuuki’s boss.

Boss was the right term, because this was strictly a business relationship between the two, one that existed because they both profited from it. The Council funded the Free Guild, and in exchange, the Guild carried out work for the Council. It was a simple, give-and-take sort of agreement—on the surface.

From the Guild’s point of view, they couldn’t survive without support like this from the world’s nations, the funding and preferential access it received for its organization’s work. The Guild had more influence now than back in its Society of Adventurers days, but in terms of power, it still wasn’t above the Council. It was the behind-the-scenes support from Johann the Elder that helped Yuuki develop the Free Guild as much as he had these past few years; that was another reason Yuuki had to mind his manners around him.

“And you can’t defeat this demon lord?”

“Are you kidding me? The way I see it, you could assemble a hundred A rankers, and it still wouldn’t be possible.”

“You’d go that far? Perhaps it’s smarter not to make him our enemy, then. But…”

Johann paused, his sharpened eyes glaring at Yuuki, before continuing.

“…it is the elders’ opinion that the demon lord Rimuru is a hindrance. And your missteps are the cause, Yuuki.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“Your little conspiracy with the demon lord Clayman. If that had succeeded, we wouldn’t have had to deal with those sniveling Eastern merchants to open trade routes with the Empire. Once we had secured that, all we’d have to is wait for Veldora to fade into oblivion a few centuries from now, and the Forest of Jura would no longer be a threat. In fact, demon lords like Carillon and Frey could’ve served as protective walls for us. And now look.”

“Well, I don’t see what I could’ve done, you know? You really can’t plan for someone like him.”

Johann was one of the people aware of the plans Yuuki’s group was working on. They were applying their own spin to the games played among the demon lords, trying to work them to their own advantage. And the whole reason that was possible…

“Yes. Yes, you’re right. You couldn’t have done anything. We never could’ve imagined a monster like that in our way. But couldn’t you have bested him?”

It was the young girl who entered the room now, silently closing the door behind her. Maribel Rozzo, the very person who’d formulated this whole plan. She slipped into an ornate chair, joining the other two.

“Oh… M-Maribel. And is the venerable Granville with you?”

“No, I’ve come by myself today. But I’d still like to hear the answer to that question.”

Maribel turned to Yuuki, paying Johann little mind.

“…It’s just not possible,” he replied, as if captured by her gaze. “Rimuru alone would be a challenge, but he’s got the Storm Dragon with him, too, you know? Forget it. There’s nothing anyone can do about him.”

“You saw Veldora?”

“Yeah. He was going around in human form, but he introduced himself as Veldora and everything.” Yuuki meekly answered the question.

Maribel expected nothing less from him. “Right. The demon lord Rimuru is the key to sealing Veldora away. If we let that evil dragon free, he’ll spread ruin across the whole world. Grandfather told me himself.”

“Indeed,” Johann said. “Your grandfather personally witnessed the darkest days of that dragon’s rampage. He’s always quick to remind me of why our god is so fearful of him.”

“Yes, and now Rimuru has tamed him. Meddling with them is dangerous…but if we want my Rozzo family to prosper, we need to crush the rise of Tempest.”

“What a headache this is. Yuuki, couldn’t you defeat Rimuru if you truly put your mind to it?”

Johann was now repeating himself. Combined with Maribel, they had now asked the same question three times. Didn’t Yuuki have what it takes to beat Rimuru? But this time, Yuuki had a different answer.

“We’re talking about someone not even Hinata could beat, you know? It’s gonna be really hard for me to win if I fight him. My chances could go way up under the right conditions, but…”

What it sounded like he meant was: If it was just the demon lord Rimuru by himself, maybe they could make it happen.

“…So what’s your next move?” Maribel asked.

“My general strategy will be to avoid direct confrontation with Rimuru. Even if I did beat him, I just don’t see it earning us much. We’d have to pay far too much of a price for it.”

Yuuki went on to discuss their future plans, including Kagali’s upcoming ruins expedition. As Maribel had ordered, he was leaking out the info he gained from Clayman, and Maribel and Johann were now acting on it.

Maribel thought for a moment.

Eliminating Rimuru, or at least rendering him harmless, was something she wanted to achieve at any cost. The greatest wish of the Rozzo family would have to go unfulfilled otherwise. Maybe it’d be easier to seize the world if they worked with the demon lord, but Maribel had already deemed that a poor choice.

The problem was their differences in thinking. With this world as well, Maribel intended to take it from a single, gold-based standard currency to a paper-based economy spearheaded by each individual country. She wouldn’t eliminate the current money system; she’d just implement new currencies in each nation. It didn’t have to be paper either; silver or copper or whatever was fine, too. Basically, if she could build a world where currency markets went up or down depending on the power of all nations involved, then perfect.

That’s how foreign exchange worked, and it’d be the Council—and the will of the Five Elders—that set it up. That was the one absolute must to victory here—they needed to be the people deciding the value of things. Against the weaker nations, they’d even levy punishing taxes or conscript their populations into military service in the name of monster hunting. It was a perfectly legal way to subjugate one nation under the rule of a stronger one.

All the conditions were in place. There were no outstanding issues to deal with. Maribel’s plan to economically rule over the nations in the Council of the West was proceeding along fine—even Granville was happy with it. They had spent the past few years completing the groundwork for it. And now, with the rise of Rimuru and his nation of monsters, it was all going haywire.

Maybe things weren’t in crisis mode yet, but Maribel could see what was in store. The demon lord Rimuru would likely offer the Western Nations their defensive support, in a bid to win their trust. With all that military power in the backdrop, he’d have them open up an economic relationship, to a certain extent, using Blumund, a small kingdom, as a foothold into the West. He’d run all the logistics, give his people the joy of working, and guarantee their safety.

I wish he wouldn’t mess with me, Maribel thought. Other large nations, like Dwargon and Thalion, were already complete, permanent packages—she may not have liked them, but she could accept them. But right now, Tempest was riding straight into Maribel and her companions’ home turf. If they expressed a desire to join the Council of the West, it’d be like torching their personal hunting grounds. A declaration of war.

She refused to accept that. She was sure that she and the demon lord Rimuru were incompatible with each other at the core. There could only be just one ruler—a single, overwhelming force. You had to be the one calling the shots, or else you were never promised a sure victory. And as long as the Rozzo family was attempting to rule all of humanity, Rimuru would always be an obstacle. Even if they could work in harmony at first, it was clear to her that they’d grow apart over their respective interests.

That was why Maribel saw the demon lord Rimuru as such a threat.

It was easy to say she’d eliminate Rimuru, but actually doing it was much harder.

She had participated in the Founder’s Festival, so she could have a chance to observe him. It took some convincing with Granville, but he gave his okay after she promised not to do anything to Rimuru. The visit convinced her that she was right all along. Tempest was just too attractive of a city, brimming with desires, and in time it’d become the cutting edge of trends, building a new age for the whole world. The more they opened up and forged deeper relations with other nations, the more valuable it’d become—and before long, the Rozzos would no longer be able to make unilateral decisions.

Yes… Yes. Everything’s going the way the demon lord Rimuru wants it…

The mere thought made Maribel want to fly into a rage. She resisted the urge as she pondered how to respond.

Defeating him was out of the question. Even if they succeeded, they had no idea how Veldora would respond. Letting a monster capable of wiping out a force of twenty thousand elites single-handedly go around unfettered was the height of folly.

So that left rendering him harmless—either through coercion or persuasion.

If they opted for coercion, Duke Meusé’s failures offered some important lessons. Maribel had perfectly set the table, hoping to indebt Rimuru in a way that followed every rule. Instead, Rimuru followed the rules to take revenge. The duke was a fool for misreading the opportunity, but what really deserved praise was the personal connections Rimuru enjoyed.

Yes. If there’s a snake in the grass, you’d have to be a fool to prod at it…

And now the demon lord wanted to join the Council. It was easy to oppose that.

Maribel had cornered the market for grain, in anticipation of upcoming wars. Now, thanks to Farmus’s civil war, the marketplace was having to turn to private stores to keep their shelves full.

Maybe we should disguise people as night bandits and have them torch the villages around the big cities. That way…

They could keep raising the prices of staple foods, as well as restrict the amount of bread that entered the market. With the smaller nations, just a little bit of tightening could lead to major food distress. When people lacked food, they got angry, and that anger was directed at the people who started the war. There was nothing easier than riling up the unintelligent masses, and pinning all the blame on Rimuru would be a straightforward task.

And then—voilà. The representatives from those smaller nations would oppose Rimuru’s Council bid. It’d be perfectly simple for Maribel to engineer.

But…

No… No. It used to be a given that you couldn’t magically transport food, but I guess that demon lord’s made it happen. Judging by the sheer variety on offer in their dinner banquets, I think it’s safe to assume that. And given his connections to people as big as King Gazel and Elmesia of Thalion, accepting him would probably lead to fewer problems…

Engineering food shortages in the smaller nations could just give Rimuru a chance to provide them with support. If they scoffed at that plan and tried to coerce him out of it, they’d just be repeating Duke Meusé’s error. As Maribel concluded, trying something that already failed once could very easily come back to bite them.

She wasn’t self-absorbed enough to think she could carry everything out flawlessly. All she needed to do was proceed slowly, methodically, and carefully. With that in mind, winning Rimuru over to her side seemed more doable.

If we want to sway him, we should try meeting with him and offering a chance to join a united front. If I’m willing to compromise a little—No, I can’t do that. No need to be timid. I’m Maribel the Greedy. Whether he’s a demon lord or not, I swear I can rule over him!

There’s no other option, she thought.

The unique skill Avarice could freely control its target, ruling over their desires and making them do their bidding. Just as she had done with Yuuki, Maribel could easily bring him under her rule, with him none the wiser.

She had not one, but two ways of doing this.

The first was to overwrite the target’s desires with Maribel’s own, making them into a cooperative partner with the same goals. This approach had a weakness—she needed to be within conversational distance of the target to trigger it. Plus, like a slow-acting poison, it took a certain amount of time to take full effect. If she didn’t want to arouse the target’s suspicion, she’d have to make several contacts with them to make it seem more natural—and since the conversation would need a reason to take place, there was only so much desire she could inject at once. It required a major time commitment.

The second approach, meanwhile, went much faster—it involved using Avarice to force the target to accept her rule. A quick injection of greed could even destroy the target’s self-awareness, turning them into a living puppet.

This, of course, was much more dangerous. Depending on the size of the target’s desire, this approach could also take some time—and even if it only took a few seconds, that’d be more than enough for someone as powerful as the demon lord Rimuru to kill Maribel. Taking this tactic required very careful preparation, which was why Maribel immediately gave up on it against Granville.

Those were the two ways Avarice could take over a person. And given the way that it worked on people’s primordial desires, there wasn’t a soul in this world that could resist it. The main drawback was its dependency on time, not to mention the size of the target’s desire.

No matter which approach she took, Maribel couldn’t take over a target unless they had a certain amount of desire inside them. The larger that desire, the firmer the grip Maribel could have over them. But what if the desire wasn’t big enough? Given that Avarice controlled people’s desires, if there wasn’t much to work with, the skill couldn’t influence them enough to be successful. She could prod that desire, inflating it enough so she could take hold, but again, that took time and opened her up to suspicion.

That was why she couldn’t take over the mind of Hinata the Saint. Maybe she could if they met more often, but Hinata would’ve questioned her motives if she kept popping in for no reason. Maribel couldn’t risk that much danger, so she gave up on the effort. On the other hand, she held regular secret meetings with Yuuki through Johann the Elder. Seizing his mind was easy.

Now her main question was Rimuru.

I saw him up close, but he didn’t seem to have much desire despite all his outrageous behavior. It’s not fair…

At the dinner banquet, she had a direct view of Rimuru. With that insight, she felt what might be just barely enough to rule over his desires. With a desire that small, she could take it over quickly with just a few sessions, but it wouldn’t give her much overall influence on his behavior. Of course, once she got that foothold, the rest would come falling down after it, she figured.

If worse came to worst, she could use her final option. If that worked, the demon lord would be Maribel’s to use as she pleased—and since Rimuru had tamed Veldora, the Storm Dragon would essentially be hers to control as well. A dragon even the supreme being Lubelius feared. An attractive prize, to be certain.

Best to keep up my observations for now. Then I can consider my options and come up with the safest approach to subdue him!

Her mind made up, it was time to concoct a strategy.

Yuuki advised against direct confrontation with Rimuru. That’s why the demon lord Kazalim, under the guise of Kagali, would be guiding him through the ruins. Those ruins had their dangers, but apparently Kagali had no intention of putting Rimuru in harm’s way inside them. She could use that as part of her game plan.

“Let’s send him a letter. We can invite Rimuru to the Council and see how he reacts.”

“You think the demon lord would agree to it?”

“No worries there. Joining the Council of the West is one of his burning desires.”

“How curious.”

“Well, Rimuru wants to work hand in hand with humans. He wants to prove that the monsters under him are harmless as long as we stick to his rules.”

Yuuki’s explanation made sense to Maribel, as dumb as it sounded to her. Being bound by rules meant losing your freedom. Doing away with your demon lord military force? Staying on the same tier as the human race? It seemed supremely stupid to her.

“So why don’t we make that dream come true? Then I can inject him with my poison,” said Maribel.

“Ooh, scary. Isn’t Yuuki Kagurazaka just as strong as Hinata the Saint? If he and Rimuru fought for real, he has good prospects to win, I think. But now that you have him, you want a demon lord as well?”

“Yuuki’s ambition is too strong. He doesn’t even realize I’m controlling him. He thinks he’s making these negotiations out of his own free will.”

As Maribel explained right in front of Yuuki himself, this was a happy thing for him. Her rule over him meant that he wouldn’t be pushed down by any excessive greed. Yuuki ignored it all, not responding to it—that was how perfect her domination was of him.

“…And I’m sure the demon lord Rimuru is like a child before you, Maribel. And you’ll have full control of him?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m just worried that your rule could be broken, somehow.”

She flashed a cold look at the flustered Johann. “There’s no need to worry about that. Once I cloud someone’s desires, they’ll never return to normal. Not unless you overwrite the desires I implant in them.”

Maribel was greed personified, enough so to cultivate the unique skill Avarice within her. There was nobody in the world who could desire something more. She was fully convinced of that, and it made her laugh off Johann’s concern.

“Y-yes, I imagine not. I trust in you on that, Maribel.”

Johann the Elder tried not to invite Maribel’s wrath upon him. She was the de facto number two after Granville, and not even an elder was safe around her. If he got on her bad side, she might try to control his mind next. He had made a blood oath with Granville to avoid that, but once Maribel took over, he didn’t think he could rely on that oath too much. Thus, he never dared to lift a finger against her.

“Everything we say in here is a secret, all right?”

“Of course, Maribel. I’m not in any hurry to die.”

“Smart decision. Now, Johann, I want you to send a letter to Rimuru, leader of Tempest, for me. I’ll write it out for you right now, so make sure it reaches him before the next Council meeting, please.”

Without waiting for a response, Maribel began writing the letter. The sight of her scribbling away on the fancy, expensive paper struck terror in Johann’s heart. It was the kind of terror you’d feel if a girl like Maribel, hardly even ten, treated bossing people around like it was her God-given right. She had the air of a ruler, and not one of the Five Elders was a match for her.

“All right, Maribel. You can leave that to me.”

He left the room quietly with Yuuki, not wanting to bother her.

Even after Yuuki and Johann left, Maribel continued to weigh her options. She had all the time in the world. She would draw up plans, lay out the framework, and see this through. She had more than enough pawns at her disposal. And once again…

This’ll be fun. This’ll be so much fun.

…Maribel, the girl who trusted not a soul in the world, got lost in her own reverie.

The man fell to the ground, a flood of red, bloodlike particles shooting out in front of him. His eyes had burst open in surprise; he probably never saw it coming.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You left yourself open, you fool!”

Milim’s excited voice thundered across the hall as the man’s five remaining companions grew tense and nervous. They banded together, keeping a wary eye on their surroundings—but they could do nothing.

“Blowing wind, grow into a tornado and slice into my enemies! Time to rage—Tornado Blade!!”

Bunching up like that was a mistake, and I all but sneered as my Tornado Blade slashed into them. This was kind of a ranged version of Windcutter, one that cost a lot of magicules but caused slashing damage to multiple enemies within a given space. This made it great for battles against groups of foes.

Milim had acted first, sneaking up on one person as he went ahead to check for traps. After killing him, she quickly shot out of the area to avoid getting caught in my magic. The group had no idea what happened; the moment they huddled up for safety, Milim was out of the way, and they were cut to ribbons by my Windcutter.

“Look out, it’s Scarlet! Be careful!”

“Shit! That magic got Marja and Nadja. And Gene’s not breathing either?!”

“Damn you! All of you!!”

The surviving enemies, beginning to appreciate their situation, started ranting at us. By enemies, of course, I meant the labyrinth challengers.

We were dealing with a group of adventurers this time, by the looks of it, and a pretty well-balanced one at that. But our party had the power and experience to outclass them. That first surprise attack took out the enemy’s main search specialist, and before they even knew we were near, my opening magic landed the first strike. Even before we noticed them, we had an invisibility magic deployed, allowing us to discover the enemy first. This magic was canceled once we began to attack, but by then, our foes had already lost one or two people—the magic attacker and healer in the back row, to boot. That decided the battle right there.

Now that they could see us, the enraged front-row adventurers were making a beeline for us.

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Tough luck!!”

“Ohhhhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! You’re not getting past us!”

Veldora and Ramiris were certainly enjoying themselves as they withstood their charge. By now, I had nothing left to do—just take up a supporting role and make sure those two had enough space to move in.

I used my Analysis magic to examine the fighters running toward us. Above them, I could see bright-red bars that were less than half full.

“They got less than half of their HP left. You guys can take care of them yourselves, right?”

There was no self-aggrandizing there.

Yes, the red bars above the fighters’ heads showed their remaining stamina. That was what I configured my personal Analysis magic to display; I tried to set it up like a video game for instant comprehension. If other people used the same magic, they’d probably see something different—regardless, it was pretty convenient for me. The familiar readouts let me quickly confirm the situation and give out the most suitable instructions to my team.

By this point, we were pretty much guaranteed to win. A front-row set of fighters with no rear support was no match for Veldora and Ramiris. With no one buffing or magically healing them, we’d continually whittle down their stamina until it was over. A more careful party would’ve kept a barrier over them at all times…but not this one, apparently.

It didn’t take long for my two companions to prove me right, smiling insidiously as they slashed the remaining three adventurers into a bloody mess. It was an easy win.

Using Milim’s surprise attacks and my magic to dispatch the scouts and back row first was proving to be a sure-win tactic for us. Of course, we’d been kind of overfishing the pond, so to speak, so our efficiency was starting to suffer. It wasn’t perfect yet, but more and more parties were learning how to counter us. These challengers weren’t fools, after all, and they were clearly making a dedicated effort each day. I was glad to see that, but we needed new strategies to deal with them.

…As I thought about this, the final survivor disappeared into a flurry of light particles. The battle was over—another sight I was getting used to.

“We did it! These punks were no challenge at all!!”

“Heh-heh-heh… You’re right! We’re invincible, the strongest there is!”

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! All these little ants! They leave me a tad unsatisfied, but…”

My companions were getting thoroughly carried away now.

…What were we doing, you ask? Well, researching new battle techniques against the labyrinth’s challengers, of course. We were eager to learn, so we’d been putting in a lot of hours down here.

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I mean, you heard of Team Green Fury, right? We were able to beat them last time, but we can’t rest on our laurels. They got called back to their “home country” or whatever, and they may never come back—but maybe they just had some trouble procuring new equipment. We didn’t know if they’d pay a return visit sometime, and we wanted to be ready to fend them off if it happened.

Thus, even after Green Fury was behind us, we kept diving into the labyrinth, sliding into a familiar pattern of fighting off challengers. It kept the labyrinth lively, too.

A few days after our pitched battle with Green Fury, Masayuki’s party made it past Floor 40.

Masayuki really was born under a lucky star. Apparently, acquiring the entire Ogre Series of equipment was pretty simple for them. It was only natural, then, that they stomped all over the tempest serpent. Now their focus was conquering Floor 50.

The news of Masayuki breaching the forties energized the rest of the challengers. That was just what we hoped for, and now the more talented parties were aiming for Floor 40 as well.

Our experiments with releasing some videos of the boss battle gave us a huge response, too. The recording of Masayuki’s team fighting the tempest serpent, as shown on our projector, created buzz all over town; people wanted us to play it again and again.

As Mjöllmile and I saw it, this was a business opportunity. In a TV-free world like this one, battle footage from the labyrinth was as good as entertainment got. We may need to edit out some of the gorier content—but then again, maybe there’d be demand for the uncut version, for the right price. We could work on that. Of course, there’d also be broadcasting rights, likeness rights, all those other little details…but I could let Mjöllmile work on that for me.

In fact, I bet Masayuki’s smile could sell a lot of different products. The endorsement contracts alone might make him rich. He’d be happy; Mjöllmile would be happy; we’d all be happy. It’d be a trial-and-error process, but I’d like to see how that worked out.

And video content wasn’t restricted to the footage recorded by magical items. In fact, we had a lot more saved up. Raphael was reading a massive amount of data from the labyrinth and running Analyze and Assess on it made it possible to replay entire fights in visual form. We used that, for example, to create highlight reels for challengers—and this, too, was a huge hit when we broadcast it. It really riled up the more attention hungry of the challengers; one of them reportedly claimed his video footage helped him find a girlfriend.

Even people who didn’t really take the Dungeon seriously were starting to get into it, thanks to our shows. And I understood it. Maybe it was a little self-serving, but if it whipped up enthusiasm, then great. But it was our job to give them a dose of reality, too. Tough love was in order here—we couldn’t let them get soft—and so we continued to hop inside our avatars and torment the challengers.

Nowadays, people were calling us the Dungeon Dominators, fearing and respecting us. Our appearance had dramatically changed as well.

The ghost I controlled now had a Fear Aura, a bluish-white, flame-like shimmer that burned around its body. I liked it; it really added to the atmosphere. Veldora’s skeleton, meanwhile, had all of its bones refurbished—after seeing Ramiris change her armor out, he started whining about his own upgrades. “A golden skull would suit me well,” he said when I asked. Eesh.

I thought about ignoring him, but considering my project for Diablo, I figured Veldora may as well join my experimentation with temporary bodies. I could, for example, replace his skeleton with a framework made of whatever metal I wanted to test out. Pure gold has durability issues, so I decided to go with the strongest material I had, although it was still in the experimental stage. It happened to be golden in color, too, so it worked well.

This material is known as orichalc, a special alloy made by adding gold to magisteel and refining it with a denser dose of magicules than usual. Focusing on the “everlasting” element of gold and other precious metals, I was hoping to add that element to magisteel as well. The results were a grand success—this orichalc was better than magisteel in all aspects, not just strength. It was crazy. The only problem was that I couldn’t produce much of it—gold itself is both rare and unavailable for mass production—but hey, Veldora asked nicely, so I prepared an orichalc skeleton for him.

Just like with Ramiris, the bones could be made of anything as long as he hung on to his master core. The conversion was a total snap, and now he was a gold-colored skeleton fighter. The durability far outclassed his original bones; it was excellent, almost needlessly so. As he moved around in it, I kept a careful watch, seeing how much punishment it could take and whether any problems cropped up.

Milim, meanwhile, was now a celebrity—a terrorizing sight that people had named Scarlet. Her unbelievable speed made her look like a crimson shooting star, they said. Her battle style, abandoning everything except speed and relying on quickness and critical hits, had made her a legend…one spoken of in hushed, fearful tones.

Even Ramiris had changed a little. Like the proactive fighter she was, she had taken on a more eerie presence, a purple Death Aura shimmering around her heavy living knight’s frame. One swing of her Death Axe overwhelmed her foes, and her unrelenting battle style made her well-known as a suit of armor who fought like a berserker. That knight might even be stronger than the real Ramiris… Actually, I take that back. Wouldn’t want to damage her reputation.

So we had become famous in just a few days. The reaction from the challengers was just as great. They feared us, keeping a keen lookout for our presence. That made sense. We were stronger than some of the weaker bosses, and in terms of sheer malice, far above them.

As I mentioned, our main goal was to research fighting techniques in the labyrinth. This wasn’t playtime for us—I can’t emphasize this enough. Day in and day out, we gave our all to the research, and I was sure this persistent effort would come in handy for us someday.

And it did. Challengers would occasionally use rare extra skills against us—or even original magics that I presume they invented themselves. I learned a lot from that, and now that Raphael could obtain information directly from the labyrinth, everything anyone did in there could be examined in my research. Raphael ran Analyze and Assess on all of it, so the Dungeon was turning into a treasure trove of data for us.

Even better, just as our personal battle experience was reflected in our avatars, the things we learned in avatar form were retained in our original bodies. This was an unexpected side effect, and I was considering how we could use it on things like new types of training.

Our research was continuing on a daily basis, so I suppose it’s only natural that we learned a lot.

One time—just one time, I promise—we got a little carried away and decided to try conquering our own labyrinth. The result: utter defeat.

With our current abilities, Bovix, boss of Floor 50, was like crashing into a brick wall. The frontal approach we preferred was useless against an over-A opponent like him. The effectiveness of our surprise strikes would need to be evaluated, but more than that, Bovix was just too much for us. I was glad we could rely on him, but now we felt like we had to beat him.

So we decided to get serious about building up our characters. Again, strictly for research purposes. Research—and training for ourselves, too. Definitely not for fun. Make sure you don’t get the wrong idea here.

………

……

…

We watched as the fleeing challengers faded into the distance. “That was an easy one,” I muttered. The other three nodded.

We were on Floor 38 or so of the labyrinth, and given how close we were to the tempest serpent, there were a lot of strong fighters around—people who could give us a tough fight if we didn’t pay attention. For our current state, it was the perfect hunting ground.

Just as we were about to keep going, the Replication of myself I kept in my office for emergency purposes contacted me. What could that be? I thought as the message EMERGENCY VISITOR flashed before my eyes.

I guess playtime was over. Wait, no—we weren’t playing. This was research. Very important stuff. I reminded myself of that as I returned to my office.

There I found Shuna and Rigurd waiting for me, as well as someone else—a woman I knew well. It was the ex–demon lord Frey, lounging in one of my chairs. I guess this was my emergency visitor.

Seeing me enter the room, Frey walked right past Veldora and rested her eyes upon Milim behind me. She gave her a friendly smile.

“Ah, Milim! So you were here, were you? By the way, have you finished up the assignment I gave you yet? I found my watchmen bound and unconscious on the ground, but you’ll tell me what happened to them, won’t you?”

The smile stayed on her face the whole time. This was more an interrogation than a friendly question, I felt. Frankly, it scared me. It wasn’t even directed at me, and I still wanted to be anywhere but here. In fact, it was exactly like when my school friend came over to play after finishing his homework, only to have his mom find out he hadn’t finished it at all, so she stormed over to drag him back by the ear. Ah, nostalgia.



As for Milim herself:

“Gehh!! F-Frey?! N-no, um, I can explain everything…!!”

The moment their eyes met, Milim grew intensely nervous.

Welp. Guess the party’s over for her. And lemme just make it clear: We’ve got nothing to do with this. Okay?

“Ha, ha-ha-ha… Milim, if you had work to do, you should have let me know, all right? I really shouldn’t keep you here then, huh? Better head on back and get that work done!”

“Mmm,” rumbled Veldora, “Rimuru is right. Our apologies for occupying you so long with our research. You should have told us you had work to do. Sorry to drag you along with us!”

“Y-yeah, yeah, that’s right! Boy, Milim, coulda said something before we took you across kingdom come!”

Ramiris got the picture for me, too. Great job. See? That’s the teamwork we’ve been building.

Now we’ve hopefully demonstrated that we knew nothing and aren’t involved in any way. There were tears in Milim’s eyes as she looked at me, but…well, sorry. I don’t think I can save you here. Also, please don’t drag us into this.

“N-no! F-Frey, listen to me!”

Milim tried to protest one final time, but Frey’s iron smile sunk the effort. Resistance was futile. Milim was now hers.

Picking her up by the scruff of her neck with her talons, Frey fully neutralized her. With that, she dragged her all the way back to her homeland.

Phew. That was scary. I thought we were all going downtown there, but we made it through scot-free.

But just as I breathed a sigh of relief:

“By the way, Sir Rimuru, what have you been doing all this time?” Shuna had appeared behind me without warning, and she had a sharp question ready for me.

Sweat that I knew I physically couldn’t sweat seemed to bead up on my forehead. No. I’m fine. This is fine. I wasn’t playing this whole time. It was research! Yes! Research!

My resolve firmed, I decided to make excuses. But before I could give it a shot, Veldora spoke.

“Hmm, I think we might be getting in your way here. Allow me to continue my sorcery research back in my own chambers. There is much deep knowledge even I may still glean from it…”

He kept up his muttering as he took a volume of manga out and turned around.

He’s running out on me?!

By the time that thought crossed my mind, it was already too late.

“Oh, yeah, um, I think I’ll join him down there…”

Now even Ramiris was stabbing me in the back. They both walked briskly out of the room, leaving me to rot. I can’t believe them! Only at times like these did they operate like a practiced team.

But I couldn’t dwell on my heartless friends. I had to give a reason fast, or else Shuna’s rage would scare me to death. A bad excuse would destroy me here—calling it studying or research seemed a little weak to me.

As I watched Veldora and Ramiris leave, my brain cells went into full operation, desperately seeking the best response. Dammit. I couldn’t think of anything. But I didn’t need to panic yet. If it’d come to this, I had one last resort.

It’s time to shine, Raphael!!

Nope. No need to fear. I had Raphael, a font of wisdom, on my side. C’mon, I begged my friend. Give me a shining excuse that’ll get me out of this.

And the result:

Understood. There is no need to make excuses. Just stand your ground, and the problem will be resolved.

Huh? No need to make excuses?! What do you mean, just stand my ground—?

“Oh, there you are, Sir Rimuru! I’ve been looking for you!”

Just as I had that thought, my beloved Mjöllmile burst inside, looking harried as usual. So that’s what it meant. Talk about deus ex machina. Mollie, you’re a savior!

“Ah, hello, Mollie. I was expecting you here soon.”

Following Raphael’s advice, I stood my ground and acted like I planned for all this. Mjöllmile gave me an odd look, but then began nodding, seeing the wisdom of playing along.

“Ah, glad to hear, Sir Rimuru. We’ve received a letter from the Council, but have you had a chance to read it? It was in a very tightly sealed envelope, so I’m wondering if it’s a request to visit them so they can deliberate over our admission…”

Huh? A letter from the Council? They wanted to hold a conference to decide whether to let Tempest join them or not?

So the moment had come at last. Really gotta hand it to Professor Raphael, though. Did it realize the Council would get to work right this moment for me? Ah, no way. Not even it could—

Understood. Green Fury was hired by the Kingdom of Englesia. Based on the timing involved, their primary goal was clearly to investigate matters inside Tempest. Also, according to a report from the subject Soei, agents from multiple intelligence organizations were sending reports back to their home nations at the same time. Putting this together, it is very likely that moves were made over the past several days.

Okay, maybe it could do it. It was just as the professor calculated! But I didn’t remember hearing about any report from Soei…

Understood. It is believed that my lord was too preoccupied with his games to pay attention.

Don’t call it a game!

They say there’s no kidding yourself, but I guess there’s no kidding Raphael, either. But it had a point. I was pretty serious about matters up until we defeated Team Green Fury, but after that, yeah, we were just having fun.

But Raphael definitely got me out of a jam there. Patting myself on the back for not trying to come up with some convoluted excuse, I tried to frame it like I knew everything all along.

“Yes, I definitely think you’re right. Their investigation teams were in the labyrinth as well, so I played along with them for a bit. They all came hurrying back to their homelands after a while, though, so I figured we’d see some movements soon.”

“Oh! Are you talking about Green Fury, perhaps?”

“You got it, Mollie. They were a little too strong in my mind, so I did some looking into them.”

That was a huge lie. I was just riffing on what Raphael said. But that’s all right.

“I see, I see. Some secret investigations, eh? Very impressive, Sir Rimuru!”

Shuna gave me a broad smile and a nod. Thanks to standing my ground, I managed to pull the wool over everyone’s eyes.

Now that the danger was past, I accepted the letter from Mjöllmile and looked through it. It definitely was an invitation from the Council. Raphael was proven right, and I had just saved a ton of face.

But…man, that was close. Getting too caught up in games always trips you up in the end. That was a valuable lesson for me, and I’ll try to temper my Dungeon time going forward. I’ll need to be more careful—all good things in moderation, and so on.

The Council of the West is a league of nations dotted around the Forest of Jura. Representatives from each of its member nations gathered in Englesia every month for a conference, the aim being to work things out for each other’s mutual benefit in areas outside the jurisdiction of any single country.

Each member nation, no matter how small, had an equal say as they all deliberated together. The ideal here was to protect the greater good for all humankind—the greater good, in this case, meaning preservation of the human-populated parts of the world.

The Council’s top priority was conducting anti-monster measures, but they also dealt with droughts, pandemics, typhoons, earthquakes, and other disasters. When it came to the distribution of extra food and other goods between nations, deliberations could often get mired in intergovernmental differences, so for essential goods and services, the Council stepped in to debate and organize things instead. If famine broke out, they worked to provide relief; if a large number of monsters appeared somewhere, they could send extra soldiers to deal with them. This, of course, was never easy—all sorts of problems cropped up on a constant basis.

Funding for the Council was provided by its member nations, each of which paid a different percentage of the budget. Even though each nation paid differing dues to the Council, they all had equal representation in the conference itself. This created some dissatisfaction among the members, so to address that, nations were allowed to send more selected representatives to the Council based on their share of the funding.

Of course, that opened up the possibility of throwing the Council off-balance, so regulations stipulated that member nations had to contribute a much larger percentage for each extra councillor they added. Despite that, a country sending more members inevitably meant they got to have a larger say in matters. With that in mind, the larger nations often paid several times the usual budget contribution so they could send several councillors over.

As discussed, the Council’s activities had no direct bearing on the interests of its member governments. Despite that, it was still a good place for larger nations to show off to the world. The more of a say they had in the Council’s agenda, the better chance they ran of getting favorable treatment when everything shook out. If danger came along, they could apply pressure to make sure their country was looked after first.

The funding received was used to conduct the Council’s business, which was always decided by majority vote among its representatives. For example, let’s say a dangerous monster appeared somewhere. The Free Guild, a lower branch of the Council, was tasked with dealing with it, so the Council would send a formal request to deploy adventurers to the area.

But of course, there might be more than one monster, and they could be threatening more than one country. The more powerful nations would likely act to procure stronger adventurers for their own country first—that was a given. Sending more funding to the Council indicated that you were a more valuable presence among the Western Nations. There was no point diverting limited resources to protecting something useless. Countries with excess capacity could help, but otherwise, they’d be shut out. That was the reality of it—the weak were given the cold shoulder on an equal basis from everyone, in a very cruel game of numbers.

This was why being late with your share of contributions was never allowed. The minimum contributions were always collected, and anyone who couldn’t make the payments was booted out of the Council. To the weaker nations, that was a matter of life and death—it meant nobody would help them if things went south. It was the Council’s job to make those decisions as well, so it was a given that countries with more councillors had a lot more power in the group.

These contributions, of course, weren’t cheap. They piled up based on the number of representatives you sent, so even a superpower like Farmus could only send around five, at most. The fall of Farmus was thus a huge event, nothing the Council could afford to ignore. Between figuring out how to handle the new Kingdom of Farminus and addressing the rise of the troublesome Jura-Tempest Federation, tensions were understandably high around the Council right now.

After the Tempest Founder’s Festival, the Council held a special session that quickly erupted into chaos, with representatives yelling at one another until they were hoarse. Hinata Sakaguchi attended as a guest of honor, given her close relationship with the demon lord Rimuru.

She could have turned down the invite—unlike the Free Guild, the Western Holy Church wasn’t a subgroup of the Council. They were on friendly terms but existed as completely different structures. As a leading figure in that organization, Hinata had every right to ignore the summons. But when she heard the Council’s subject matter, she decided to join in. They were set to discuss Tempest’s admission into the Council, a resolution that could greatly affect the future direction of the Western Nations, and considering that, Hinata couldn’t stay away.

The current chaotic disorder in the Council made her wince a little.

When you collect a bunch of fools together, it’s not surprising how little work gets done…

Hinata led all of her own meetings, keeping decision-making as quick as possible without things falling too far out of hand. A serious enough disagreement, after all, could always be decided with battle—such was her philosophy. And in the conferences in Tempest she attended, they always managed to decide on vast, pondering matters, even with all the big names that constantly seemed to join in. It was hard for Hinata to comprehend—like something out of a fairy tale.

But even if that’s a notable exception, she mused, couldn’t this Council be a little more constructive?

To someone like Hinata, who mostly attended active, useful meetings, the debate unfolding before her seemed like nothing short of a farce.

“We can trust that nation! I feel we should exert all efforts to welcome them as our friends.”

“You say that, but we are talking about a demon lord here. Allegedly, he can negotiate with the Storm Dragon, but if we anger him, what if he sets that menace on us?”

“No need to worry about that. I doubt this demon lord has much power himself. He’s just leaning on his buddy to posture against his foes.”

“Ridiculous! Then how do you explain the draw that he and Lady Hinata here fought to? Because I think we should appreciate this demon lord for the strength he’s clearly shown!”

It was a never-ending torrent of unintelligent opinions thrown against one another.

This is so stupid. How can they even keep this going in my presence? Their thoughtlessness is astounding.

Hinata was right about that, and yet they were arguing over whether the demon lord was a juggernaut or a pushover. It certainly left an impression on her.

“Look. The demon lord Rimuru has declared that the lands of the Forest of Jura are his territory. At the same time, however, he stated at the Founder’s Festival that he has no intention of sending monsters out to the forest’s borders. This means a lot. Councillors, we need to consider that as we work toward a conclusion!”

“Indeed. Our nation is home to a people living in constant fear of monsters. The demon lord’s statement provides salvation to them, and it is backed by fact as well. Ever since the founding of Tempest, monster-related incidents have been on a steady decline.”

“Nonsense! Has the demon lord deceived you?!”

The Forest of Jura’s monsters were managed by the demon lord Rimuru. The nations nestled along its vast border were already reaping the benefits. But whether a nation bordered Tempest, was exposed to other threats, or was located relatively safely inland, they all had different motives driving them.

The border nations here were the most welcoming to Rimuru’s reign. They had all participated in the Founder’s Festival, getting a taste of Tempest’s prosperity for themselves. Whether it was a nation of monsters or not, they reasoned, if it could directly connect to their own national interests, then bring it on.

Countries facing other threats, meanwhile, had trouble deciding how to approach this. They had the Free Guild and the Crusaders to protect them and deal with monster damage; none of these nations were large in scale, and none could afford to act carelessly here. They were all in the same boat, largely, and they had their hands full staying afloat as it was. The more quick-witted among their leaders were already scheming to see how they could take advantage of Tempest, but some of them skipped the Founder’s Festival entirely and had no inherent trust of monsters. The debate over Rimuru raged among these nations, and no matter which side they went with, their position was a pretty weak one.

Finally, the larger, safer nations (and the countries dependent on them) were, as a rule, approving. They, of course, had the luxury of tackling this question based on how they stood to profit from it—security was not a concern of theirs. They were countered by councillors who were more skeptical about Rimuru’s policies. If something were to happen, the demon lord might decide to place the full brunt of his powers upon them—such was their blind belief, and they were thus virulently opposed to him. Some were already loudly accusing the Tempest border nations of turning traitor and letting Rimuru brainwash them.

With all these clashing interests, it was a given that the meeting would be a rowdy one. From the perspective of a higher power, it was all the work of fools—but most of the representatives were just looking out for number one. Hinata knew that, which was why she could stay silent.

“All right. Why don’t we accept their argument? If they say Tempest will be our friend, then let’s welcome them in. But they’ll need to bring some gifts with them.”

“I firmly agree. Try to fight them, and we’ll just have another Farmus on our hands.”

“They’ll need to learn their place, though. Do we even know if they have any interest in respecting the international laws we’ve put in place?”

“I don’t think we need to worry about that. You’ve heard the rumors about Duke Meusé’s folly, I trust?”

“How could anyone not have?”

The real bottleneck was due to the representatives from the rich nations. They were well-informed to start with, and they were deliberately trying to stir the pot here, encouraging the chaos. Their objective was clear—they already made their conclusion, and now they wanted to guide everyone else toward it without seeming too unnatural.

I feel for the smaller nations’ representatives. They were oblivious when they came here, and now they’re faced with a choice. They may as well throw their vote down the drain…

Ignorance really is a sin. Without the correct information, you stood to lose a vast amount. And now the weak were being hounded into letting their precious vote go to waste.

Still…

But I suppose this is all leading up to Tempest getting accepted. Which is fine by me, but…

The larger nations shared the same motives as Hinata. It was a pity about the citizens of the weaker countries, but as she saw it, better to keep her mouth shut about this. She did need to resist the urge to speak up, though.

“The demon lord Rimuru’s motives here don’t really matter. The question is whether we can make good use of him or not.”

“Precisely. Given our present concern about the East’s movements, there’s no reason to turn down a demon lord’s power if he allies with us.”

Prince Johann Rostia, one of the senior representatives in the Council, was now bringing up the Eastern Empire.

“The East, you say? Meaning the Empire?!”

“There are movements? But Veldora is right next to us, in the Forest of Jura…”

Johann’s statement caused a stir among the Council. Now, Hinata thought, we’re getting down to business. The preamble went on far too long, but that’s nobles for you. They were feeling one another out, gauging how much information each side had on them. Once they were sure their side had the upper hand, that’s when they bared their fangs. That was their style, just as Johann showed when he so expertly seized the initiative.

“As I’m sure you’re all aware, the military of the Eastern Empire—namely, the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire—has begun making certain maneuvers. According to reports from passing merchants, they’ve been conducting military exercises at a higher rate than before.”

The Council fell silent at Johann’s words.

Hinata was aware of that, as were Gazel Dwargo and the heads of the other nations bordering the Empire. They probably kept tabs on the Empire through the sales of their healing potions and equipment. Since the Dwarven Kingdom was officially neutral, Gazel was no doubt following his obligations to keep what he knew confidential.

Plus, Rimuru undoubtedly knew as well. The proof was in the tech announcements he made at the Founder’s Festival. Rimuru insisted that “no, no, that was really all Gabil’s and Vester’s own work” and so on, but that was a barefaced lie. He had to be involved, too, and he meant his statement as a threat against Gazel… Not a threat exactly, perhaps, but it was Rimuru’s way of saying Hey, Tempest is making the potions now.

You can never underestimate him. He knows what’s going on in the East, and he’s needling Gazel about keeping quiet. How far ahead is he looking? It’s just amazing to me…

Thus, whether he knew it or not, Rimuru was being vastly misunderstood by Hinata here in Englesia.

Now, while all of this might’ve been known information to Hinata, it was shocking news to the majority of councillors here. Everyone sat on the edge of their seats, waiting for more from Johann; they needed as much information as they could as they debated how to protect themselves. Nations rich enough to have regular armies were one thing, but the smaller ones didn’t even have the free budget to retain one of those. Small-scale was the watchword with their militaries; they preferred to hire mercenaries at times of war, but if the whole region was building up their firepower, they’d be facing pretty slim pickings.

“Everyone,” Johann said in a voice that carried well across the chamber, “calm down. I’m not saying the Empire will make their move at once. Let us keep our heads cool and debate how to respond!”

Just as Hinata thought, this was the real topic of the day.

“And what will we do?” one representative asked, followed by many others.

“How to respond?! What measures do we even have against them?!”

“The Kingdom of Farmus is gone! Even if we wanted to build a defensive line, we can’t do that with just us smaller nations!”

“Order, please! The Empire isn’t on the move because of you-know-who in the Forest of Jura. I wouldn’t be as assured if he was still sealed away, but now he’s alive and active for us!”

“Wait one moment! You want us to pin our hopes on that evil dragon…?”

“Please, I’m telling you, calm down! Right now, if the news is to be trusted, Veldora has been tamed by Sir Rimuru, the demon lord. The very same demon lord who seeks admission to our Council, am I right? Then I think the answer is clear.”

The man calling for order was Count Gaban, a representative from Englesia.

“Councillor Gaban is right,” Johann continued. “As we face this threat from the East, now is no time to wage a war of words against each other. If the demon lord Rimuru will join the Council, I am sure their military might will aid us.”

“Ah…”

“Certainly, yes…”

Cheers of agreement rang out. Johann smiled approvingly.

“In my humble opinion, I think we should recognize Tempest as a full-fledged member.”

His voice was solemn, as if gauging the reaction around him. That alone changed the atmosphere in the chamber. Even those who feared the demon lord as a complete unknown now recalled the very real and recognized threat from the East. Tempest was a land of monsters but also a nation that responded to common sense. The Empire, on the other hand, was a ravenous foe bent on gobbling up everything in its path. They were a human enemy, and as such, if they lost to the Empire, everyone could see that they’d be next at the dinner table.

The ruling class, all of them, would undoubtedly be killed.

The Empire was a massive military state, with a history of growth powered by the nations they swallowed up. They were always thorough with their enemy, and to the Western Nations, they were a presence to be feared.

“Hmm. I think Councillor Rostia is making a valid point. A point I agree with, I should add.”

“I’m very glad you understand, Councillor Gaban! And I think you won’t be alone in this chamber. I think it’s time to take a vote on Tempest’s admission first, but what do you think?”

“Seconded. The West needs to put up a united front before anything else.”

“Quite true. Now’s no time for infighting!”

Several representatives voiced their approval of Johann. It led to a general commotion that forced the chairman to shout for quiet once more.

At the chairman’s lead, the vote began. First Johann fanned everyone’s fears; then he put on the pressure to conform. A very impressive performance, indeed, in the classic style of nobility.

I suppose this is all part of the script, too? Even without the preamble, that took forever…

Clearly Johann and Gaban were colluding on this, with a supporting cast voicing their agreement in the audience. As a nonvoting attendee, Hinata could tell that much from her seat. It was all just a scripted performance, and the ending was coming up shortly, much to her relief. Eight hours had passed since the session was brought to order, and despite the regular breaks, the exhaustion was palpable. Not physical exhaustion, of course, but the mental kind, making it all the more painful to Hinata.

I can’t believe all the stupid questions I got asked, though. They could’ve just asked me to watch Rimuru to make sure he doesn’t go crazy, but no…

That was the main reason Hinata was there. Whether the Council knew him or not, they were about to ask a demon lord to join their ranks. They just wanted to cover their asses in case he decided to get violent—and considering she (reportedly) fought him to a draw, Hinata helped the councillors feel far safer. That’s basically what the nobles wanted, although they asked her in the most roundabout way possible.

The talk about an Empire on the move was just an idle threat as well. Those military maneuvers probably were happening, but they were just an empty show of force. If they were really about to invade the West, they had mountains of obstacles to deal with first—the Forest of Jura and the Armed Nation of Dwargon, to name but two. And maybe things would’ve been different before Tempest and Dwargon forged an alliance, but now, the Empire didn’t have much to work with.

They really should’ve made their move before Rimuru became a demon lord. Then Veldora wouldn’t be back in the picture, and the Empire really could’ve had a chance at world domination…

Now the Empire was pinned down, too afraid of a vengeful, unmuzzled Veldora to act. They were too careful for their own good back when there was no sign of Veldora, and now they probably knew full well the golden opportunity they missed. Rimuru and Gazel were still on the lookout for them, of course, but the way Hinata saw it, any move the Empire could make was nothing for anyone to worry about.

She was pretty sure Johann and Gaban agreed with her on that point. Here they were, keeping the smaller nations’ eyes fixated on outside threats while they firmed up their own footing. It was so noble-like of them. Hinata had had enough of it long ago.

And after the ballots were tabulated, the ayes had it—the majority of the counted had voted to admit Tempest.

“The Jura-Tempest Federation is now officially our ally. We will hereby send a formal invitation to the Jura-Tempest Federation, and after confirming the intentions of their leader, the demon lord Rimuru, to join the Council, we will reconvene to enact the relevant procedures. Adjourned!”

With the chairman’s stentorian declaration, the meeting drew to a close. All in all, it was enough to make Hinata swear off dealing with the nobility again.

The exhausting Council session was over, and Hinata was on her way back to the Church. But her suffering wasn’t over yet.

“Hinata, could I have a moment of your time?”

She was stopped by a young man guarded by a posse of nearly ten bodyguards. He had shiny blond hair and a refreshing smile; a handsome man, although not much Hinata’s type. After eight hours of that torture session, her tolerance for anything else today was gone. She just wanted to get home, and the smile of a man she had no interest in was worthless to her.

Unfortunately, the man’s social position posed some difficulties for Hinata’s escape. This was Elrick, the first prince of Englesia, where the Council’s headquarters was located. Being rude to him could trigger an international incident, so Hinata was in no position to ignore him.

“Yes? Can I help you?”

She summoned as much social courtesy as she could muster for Prince Elrick. He smugly smiled back at her.

“Well, Hinata, I wanted to ask you a favor.”

Elrick did not know Hinata well enough to address her this casually. Given her position, she knew his name and face, but little else. This was their first conversation, and Elrick’s overfamiliarity annoyed her.

“And what would that be?” she asked as they moved over to a reception room.

“I’m thinking about testing the demon lord Rimuru at the next Council meeting. Only the upper echelons are aware of the news as of yet, but if a demon lord is joining the Council, I think that would greatly unnerve many of our people. We will need this demon lord to live up to his duties, and we need to see whether he will deign to listen to us. That’s where you come in!”

He flashed her another gleaming smile. Hinata wanted to jump out a window.

“How do I come in?” she asked, dying for him to get to the point.

“…?!”

Elrick, perhaps expecting Hinata to be a bit more cooperative, seemed daunted by her lack of interest. Still, he tried to look unaffected as he continued.

“W-well, let me explain. I describe it as a test, but the one in question is still a demon lord. If he decides to cause a scene, we’ll all be in trouble. So I’d like to ask you to provide security duties for us.”

As prince, Elrick no doubt expected the entire world to serve him at all times. He knew he had good looks, and he was convinced no woman could ever turn him down. Hinata, he was sure, would be no different. Even his bodyguards looked on like this was common knowledge.

But Hinata had her doubts. For one thing, she had every right to turn him down.

Did he think I’d say yes with that attitude?

“Why, if I may ask?”

“Why? Because I know you are a strong woman. The most powerful leader of the paladins, confidant to the Luminian god, the chief knight of the Imperial Guard itself! Among the Western Nations, you truly have no equal, and I even hear that you fought the demon lord Rimuru to a draw. With your support, I’m sure we can reveal the true nature of this demon lord!”

His sheer arrogance was clear for Hinata to see as he heaped extensive praise upon her.

What is he talking about?

Rimuru was generally kind to her, but he was a true-blue demon lord. Deliberately trying to rile him was beyond stupid. And that “fought to the draw” thing was a rumor they deliberately spread around; she couldn’t beat him at all. If Rimuru ever got really angry, it’d take a fellow demon lord like Luminus to stop him.

“I think that idea may be ill-advised. He is truly a powerful demon lord. If we were to fight again, there is no guarantee I could beat him.”

“Oh, come now! No need for modesty. Just because you’re talking to me doesn’t mean you have to act like a meek, gentle woman.”

The smile was now gone from Hinata’s face. Elrick’s self-absorbed protest deeply peeved her.

The oblivious prince was interrupted by one of his bodyguards stepping in. This large, important-looking man was Reiner, head general of Englesia’s royal knight corps—and Reiner was about to rankle Hinata even further.

“Ha-ha-ha! Lady Hinata, I can understand if you’re smitten with Prince Elrick, but now is no time for such dalliances. There’s no need to worry about matters if I’m around, but with your additional muscle, we will have that much extra insurance. So if you could—”

The chiding tone to his voice robbed Hinata of any desire to hear the rest.

“I’m afraid I cannot. The Western Holy Church and the Holy Empire of Lubelius have signed a nonaggression pact with Tempest. And a word of warning as well… Please refrain from angering the demon lord Rimuru.”

“…Pardon me?”

“Are—are you ordering me around?!”

The bodyguard, along with Elrick, seemed flummoxed by the idea that she’d actually say no to them.

Hinata had absolutely no intention of playing along. If this was an official request made through the proper channels, not even Hinata would’ve had the right to refuse. If the Council was making the request themselves, after all, it’d only be logical to call for an anti-monster specialist like her. Given the Council’s vital role in world affairs, there could very well have been an official request along those lines, once it passed through the local Western Holy Church post. And considering their future relationship with the Western Nations, Hinata wouldn’t have had the final right to turn that down.

What a pain it would have been, though…

Still, if that happened, there would’ve been a lot of intricate conditions to decide on, and given how their nonaggression pact forbade clearly hostile acts, Hinata probably could’ve found a way out of it. Elrick and his goons must’ve tried approaching her directly to skip all that…and now they were paying for it.

“You will regret this, Lady Hinata! Do you wish to make an enemy out of Sir Reiner, head general of the Englesia royal knight corps?”

“Exactly! The human race cannot allow a demon lord to do whatever he wants among us. Don’t tell me the Western Holy Church is fine with someone like him going on a rampage inside the Council!”

The other bodyguards were starting to whine at her, too—but that actually relieved Hinata. From them, she could tell this was all just a few people stepping way out of line.

“Unfortunately for you, I’m afraid the demon lord Rimuru enjoys my full trust. Now if you’ll excuse me…”

So she left, thanking her lucky stars that this entourage lacked intelligence. In her eyes, she had exhibited the barest minimum of decorum needed, so this shouldn’t become any sort of diplomatic controversy. Making this unscheduled approach to a Council invitee was a much ruder thing to do anyway. Even if a prince was involved, Hinata handled it passably well, if not exactly with perfect poise.

But—

They’re not really going to try to anger Rimuru, are they?

The anxiety bounced around her mind. The moment she swore off nobles forever, this had to happen.

Well, I turned down any involvement in it. Hopefully, cooler heads will prevail among them…

If you wanted to take on a demon lord, you’d better have had the national army backing you up. If a small group of them tried to pick a fight, it really would take a party of champions to save your ass—and they wouldn’t have the time to prepare like that. A demon lord on the Council floor was probably an opportunity too good for them to pass up, but having an unexpected event to take advantage of didn’t automatically up your success rate.

But what if this entire encounter was planned from the start?

That…seems pretty unlikely. But I better keep my guard up next time…

The thought was depressing her already.

With the invite in hand, I was now here in Englesia.

I guess they were giving me the royal treatment, because I was lodged in the fanciest hotel they had. Once this meeting was over, I looked forward to checking out the capital for the first time in a while.

Benimaru was dauntlessly guarding me, with Soei receiving reports from his spies in the shadows. Speaking of shadows, I was starting to miss Ranga’s presence in mine; he was out hanging with Gobta often these days. Gobta had fully rebounded from Milim’s grueling training, but I guess he didn’t have much time to rest. Milim had apparently declared that she was going to test him regularly from now on—with a string of real-battle competitions against Carillon. He came crying to Ranga, wailing about how he’d be killed at this rate, so I guess Ranga felt obliged to come join him…but judging by his wagging tail, I supposed he liked Gobta a fair bit. Nothing wrong with building a friendship.

So I officially brought Benimaru and Shuna along with me. A larger group would’ve presented lots of problems, so I decided to keep it small and simple. I was thinking about taking Shion as well, but I was still ever so slightly concerned about unleashing Shion in a big city. If she messed something up like she usually did, it could lead to all sorts of disasters, so I had her focus on educating her staff and keeping things orderly for me.

Geld was too busy directing the construction of Milim’s new capital to get away from that. Diablo was still off on his epic journey wherever—he talked about the protégés he’d round up, but was he struggling with it? Because the production of his body vessels was proceeding along well—I wanted that wrapped up before he returned, so really, there was no need for him to hurry things along. I’m sure he’d zoom right back if I called for him, but I didn’t have any pressing work for him, so no reason not to give him some free time.

Hakuro was off with Momiji to the land of the tengu. Gabil was out with Middray visiting the City of the Forgotten Dragon—it was home to a flock of wyverns, apparently, and he intended to capture some and attempt to domesticate them. Building Team Hiryu into a stronger fighting force had been on Gabil’s mind for a while. As part of that effort, he decided to try building a flying squadron with wyverns as mounts. It was easy to forget given his newfound career as a scientist and researcher, but Gabil was still a powerful warrior beloved by his followers. I think he was on to something with that idea—if he made it work, I’d need to amply praise him for it.

Thus, the rest of my top-level staff were busy with other matters, so it was just two others and I who went to Englesia, meeting up with Soei there.

Our first visit was to some clothing stores, lined with the kind of show windows you’d find in modern Japan. In much the same way, a lot of passers-by liked looking at them, indicating just how much of a city the Englesian capital had become. The window in this particular shop also seemed astoundingly tall to me—glass was a fairly common thing to see around here, but panes this size could cost as much as a small house by themselves. If the shop was using these for display purposes, they must’ve been doing a damn good business. As Mjöllmile advised: Look at the flow of people, and you can see they made the right choices.

By the way, our town had show windows like this as well. When I told everyone what I saw in Englesia, Shuna and our other female staff demonstrated a keen interest in adopting that custom. I had no reason to turn them down, so after discussing it with Mildo, I had him work on manufacturing glass for me. We had a valued partner in Raphael, so it didn’t take long at all to produce practical show windows.

Regardless, we were clothes shopping at Shuna’s request. She was curiously peering at all the new fashions in those windows right now, and I have to say, it was all pretty gaudy. In the stores we passed, there were lots of outfits with novel designs we never saw back home. The clothes Shuna and her team sewed, after all, were mostly ensembles gleaned from my own memory, but these shops were full of original pieces from entrepreneurial designers. They all seemed to compete with one another on the racks, and the sight was more than enough to capture Shuna’s heart.

“I certainly don’t want to lose out to all this,” she whispered, resolute. “I must redouble my efforts…!”

“Yeah, keep up the good work! And, everyone, go ahead and select whatever you like. I’ll cover the cost.”

“What?! Are—are you sure?”

“Me too?”

“…I’ll keep this on, thank you.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! I don’t pay you a salary anyway, so at least let me be generous with this.”

As thanks for their usual hard work, I decided to give all three of them new clothes. I had a suit along with me for tomorrow’s conference, but Benimaru and Soei were still in full battle gear. They fit in with the adventurers milling around town, so nobody brought it up, but on the streets, they were too imposing for my tastes. Shuna was in her usual shrine-maiden garb as well, and I think some fashionable casual wear would do her some good.

So I had them pick out their favorites.

Benimaru and Soei went with tailored jackets, shirts, and skinny jeans—Huh? All right. It looked good on them. And Shuna went with—Whoa! A fluffy white gaucho skirt and an ice-blue knit vest? Cute! That really worked on her!

“That looks good. I like it, Shuna!”

“Thank you very much! I’m glad to hear that, Sir Rimuru.”

Yep. The shrine outfit is fine and all, but something casual wouldn’t hurt her, either. It’s also novel on her—fresh, if you will.

Since we were there and all, I decided to purchase several outfits. We’d no doubt use these as models to sew our own, starting next time. I also purchased a thin, dark-blue dress for Shion as a souvenir. She’s got kind of a cool demeanor—in terms of looks anyway—so I figured she’d stand out in that.

“I’m sure she’ll love it!”

“You think so?”

Glad to hear that.

“Yes, I’m positive.” If Shuna said so, it was probably true.

“And you guys look okay in that, too, so go ahead and take it.”

“Not as much guidance for us, huh?”

“…No.”

Benimaru and Soei sounded like they had complaints, but who knows? And why were they still trying on outfits? They acted like they didn’t care, but now they were diving deep into the racks. A handsome man looks good in anything, so I really didn’t think they needed to agonize over their decisions that much…

Meanwhile, all my decisions were snap judgments. It wasn’t like I could describe the difference between one ensemble or the other, so I had the store clerks pick for me. Couldn’t go wrong with that, I figured.

Finally, we made our selections. We were fitted for them on-site, which let us change right into them.

Shuna was now lovingly clutching the box of clothes I got for her, smiling broadly. Unlike my disappointing secretary Shion, Shuna pretty much always had it together—the gap between them was charming like that. Benimaru and Soei looked happy about their own clothes, too, so I’d call this outing a success. They pretty much worked day and night, so I really wanted to thank them somehow. If this excited them that much, I thought as I settled the bill, I should’ve taken them here sooner.

After changing into new clothes, we headed for the café our old friend Yoshida used to run. A trainee of his had taken it over, and it was doing a pretty decent business—and since we were one of their suppliers, we were allowed to make purchases at a discount. We were scheduled to meet Hinata there, whom we heard had arrived in Englesia before us; I figured we could enjoy my first Englesian lunch in a while as we talked over tomorrow’s conference.

As we waited for her, I let Soei give me a briefing. He had his feelers all over the Western Nations, so I figured he’d know why they chose this timing for the invite.

“All right, Soei, your report?”

“Certainly. First, I’d like to start with some of the feedback from the Founder’s Festival…”

He gave me a rundown of the more important rumors and discussions he had picked up from across the land, in an easy-to-grasp fashion. I appreciated that.

The response to the Founder’s Festival was pretty positive. From the royalty up top to the farmers at the bottom, people talked about it all over the place. The Dungeon was also generating tons of buzz—our ad pitch to the nobility must’ve worked, because a few of them were forming teams of challengers to conquer the Dungeon. Even people from faraway lands, not just the border nations, were reportedly curious. At this rate, I thought we could expect even more customers soon.

After that pleasant news, we got down to business.

“So did you investigate the merchants—and who’s behind Duke Meusé?”

“I did not neglect that, Sir Rimuru. From the merchants’ families to their business relations, I conducted a thorough investigation. Based on that, I did not find any connections to particularly suspicious figures. However, these merchants did go through several government intermediaries in order to obtain business licenses in the nations they work in, and when I traced these officials, I found they all had connections to Duke Meusé.”

So…what’d that mean?

Understood. The merchants were likely doing the bidding of the subject Meusé.

All right. So there’s probably not much point investigating those guys further.

What about Meusé, then? I guess there really is some kind of secret cabal running the Western Nations, and they might be scheming something new right now, as we speak. Meusé seems like a competent enough noble. We better keep him under surveillance.

“So Meusé did a good job covering his tracks, huh? What’s that potential threat up to now?”

As competent as he might be, though, there was no escaping Soei’s eyes. No matter what kind of seedy group he tried to buddy up with, it’d only serve us in catching him red-handed. But Soei quickly banished that thought from my mind.

“He’s dead, Sir Rimuru.”

“Huh?”

“We believe he was felled by some manner of long-range attack.”

As the duke of Ghastone, Meusé was something of a big shot. If someone like him was murdered, I really was starting to wonder about this mystery cabal. And if this was that cabal’s way of escaping capture, they must have a lot of power to work with.

Report. There is the possibility that they have noticed the subject Soei’s investigations.

So they shut him up, huh? Maybe we should give this adversary the respect they deserved. They weren’t playing around.

“And you didn’t see who did it?” Benimaru asked.

“No,” Soei flatly replied. “I didn’t detect any presence at all until Meusé fell to the ground in front of me.”

He only heard the sound of Meusé collapsing, so there wasn’t a whole lot he could do to stop anything. He sounded despondent about it, and I couldn’t do much apart from console him.

“That’s pretty unbelievable. If not even you could spot them, they must’ve been attacking from thousands of feet away. You would’ve detected the magic if they used any, and if it was some flying projectile, you would’ve picked up the lingering aura from that, right?”

It really couldn’t be that easy to hoodwink him. I’ve got Raphael with me, of course, so Magic Sense lets me detect pretty much anything. But this…?

“Maybe it was a sniper, huh?”

“A sniper?”

“What is that?”

Ah. Not a concept Benimaru or Soei were aware of. Shuna gave me a curious look as well, and I suppose I could see why. This world didn’t have guns…but then, would it be so unusual for an otherworlder to have one?

“You said a gun? I’m pretty sure Yuuki has a handgun.”

“Wha?!”

The sudden voice from behind almost made me fall out of my chair. It was Hinata, sneaking up in an attempt to startle me. Benimaru laughed in my face. Even Soei was stifling a chuckle, a hand covering his mouth. I looked so dumb.

“Come on, my brother! And you too, Soei!”

Shuna, thankfully, yelled at them on my behalf, so I resisted the urge to speak up. And, I mean, if Raphael would’ve been kind enough to say something to me—

Report. No malicious intent was detected.

…Yeah, I bet. So it’s my fault for acting all haughty, like always. I sighed at myself and played it off with a chuckle.

With Hinata at the table, we all ordered lunch. For one silver coin a pop, we got a pretty fancy spread, and we avoided any serious conversation as we enjoyed it.

Full and satisfied, I decided to order some coffee—a little mature bitterness to round things out. And with enough sugar and milk, I had the perfect harmony between bitter and sweet—

“That’s pretty much a café au lait, now, isn’t it? I’d call you mature if you took it black, but that’s liquid candy you’re drinking.” Hinata hit me back hard. I guess my inside voice had leaked out again.

“Will you shut up? This is fine! It’s all part of the atmosphere!”

“Oh? Because between that and your outfit, there’s nothing ‘mature’ about what I’m seeing at all.”

Oof. First the coffee and now my clothing? And… Boy, is that really how I look? The clerk at that shop arranged what I thought was a neat poncho-type thing. I thought it was…yeah, maybe a little on the young ’n’ springy side, but I trusted the staff there. And now look… I regretted ever trusting in a store employee’s fashion sense.

“Dammit! This does seem like kids’ wear, doesn’t it?”

“No, no, Sir Rimuru, it’s lovely on you!”

“R-right. Yeah. Looks great.”

“I thought you liked it.”

It’s “lovely” on me? So I look like a kid to them?! Man. What a shock.

My clothes were comfortable, at least. I didn’t dislike them. But that’s not the issue. I’m supposed to be high society, you know? I had even grown a bit lately, enough that I could probably pass for a middle schooler.

“It makes you look cute. Those are the facts. Give it up.”

My shoulders slumped at Hinata’s verdict. I guess I’d have to. I don’t have the slightest amount of adult charm. I already am grown-up! Why do I have to be obsessed with my height at this point in life? Maybe I’m just gonna have to face reality soon…

Hinata, meanwhile, wasn’t as brightly dressed as she was at the festival. She was looking smart in her paladin uniform, a dignified beauty in an outfit usually meant as menswear. Maybe she and I should swap looks? I resisted the urge to verbalize that thought, still a bit peeved as I went back to our first subject.

With all due respect to the late Duke Meusé, we needed to discuss the method of his murder.

“So if there are handguns around, do you think a sniper did it?”

“I don’t know much about guns, but a handgun’s range doesn’t go beyond fifty yards or so, does it?” said Hinata.

Hmm. Maybe. So we’d need something like a rifle.

“Are there sniper rifles in this world or anything?”

“I couldn’t tell you. I’ve certainly never seen one, but I can’t guarantee there aren’t.”

Right. But maybe it’s better, for now, to assume there were and act based on that. I decided to send a Thought Communication to Benimaru and the others to describe the kind of rifle I was envisioning.

“Hmm… Interesting weapon.”

“Yes, if someone used that, I can understand why I didn’t detect it.”

“I think I could handle this weapon well enough. We can mix up the required gunpowder, and I imagine Dold would be able to make the unit itself for us.”

The three of them had a variety of feedback. Benimaru didn’t seem too impressed, but to Soei, it was a threat that he clearly didn’t have a countermeasure against as a bodyguard. It was a different sort of mission—and a different sort of challenge.

Shuna, meanwhile, was eager to make one of her own, the scariest reaction of all. I’m sure it was possible, yes, but should we? The development of guns changed the entire nature of wars—although the nature of war in this world was more about the quality of your offense than the quantity, which often made traditional Earth strategy obsolete. Bringing guns into the mix seemed dangerous to me; I figured we should hit the brakes on that for the time being.

“In the other world, this is a brutal weapon, something that can make even a powerless person the strongest out there. I can’t say how effective it’d be over here, but maybe you could defend yourself against a magic beast or the like.”

“Well, you can run out of bullets, but you will never run out of magic. But you could always make higher-caliber weapons for extra punch, and with enough of them, you could be a serious threat. But I hope you won’t start mass-producing them just because you can, all right?”

Yes, it certainly wasn’t impossible. In fact, it was very possible. That was why Hinata put her foot down so fast.

“Ah, we’ll see. I think magic’s gonna win out in a fight, but arming the general populace with guns would still be dangerous.”

The lack of widespread gun ownership in Japan made me feel that particularly keenly. Looking at the news from overseas, you had situations where guns helped protect someone, but there were a lot more cases where nothing would’ve happened if guns hadn’t been added to the mix in the first place. With that in mind, giving everyone access to such a lethal weapon out of nowhere seemed hazardous.

“All right. We’ll keep this strictly confidential and stick to research only, then.”

That seemed to placate Shuna, so we decided to go with that. And besides, threat or not, they didn’t work on us, so it wasn’t that big of an issue, was it?

Report. Someone without the relevant knowledge would not understand what happened if they witnessed someone being shot to death. There is a potentially high chance someone near the victim is suspected as the killer.

Hmm? That word of caution from Raphael sure came out of nowhere. What did it mean? Someone near the victim…

…Oh, right! If someone right by me got assassinated, I’d be a prime suspect, wouldn’t I? That did make sense. And since Hinata was so closely involved with me, she probably wouldn’t be allowed to testify on my behalf. If the killer got away, and the weapon was never found, there was every chance I could be framed for murder.

That was close! I could’ve fallen right into that trap if we didn’t have this little chat. Not that I knew whether a trap was in place at all, but if Raphael was on the lookout, I’d better assume there was.

“Either way, we’ll all have to be real careful at tomorrow’s Council meeting.”

“I don’t think non-magical lead bullets would do much more than sting if they hit us, though. I don’t see cause for too much alarm,” said Shuna.

“No, I wouldn’t underestimate it like that. Like Hinata said, higher-caliber weapons are more of a threat, and for all we know, there may be magic-infused bullets out there. Plus, if anyone got shot in the middle of the conference, I think people would point their fingers at me first.”

“I worry about that as well. I will station Replications around the Council and stay on enhanced guard,” said Soei.

That’s Soei for you. He must’ve reached the same conclusion without me pointing it out.

“Right. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

I trusted he could handle any suspects he stumbled upon. With that concern addressed, I went back to the main topic. “So, Hinata, why are they calling me here anyway?”

I still hadn’t heard exactly what would be discussed tomorrow, although I had my hunches. Ramiris and Veldora thought it was about a dragon causing trouble, or a mystery demon lord rearing his ugly head, or some other nonsense. It wasn’t any fairy-tale junk like that—they wanted to see if they could accept me as one of them. And based on the four-star treatment I was receiving, I expected some good news.

“Well, the resolution to let Tempest into the Council passed at the last special session. At the regular session tomorrow, you’ll be asked to sit for a Q&A before they officially enact it.”

Bingo! Those fools could spout off all that nonsense because they were oblivious to the truth. I was smart to ignore them.

“Oh, really? I was expecting as much.”

I nodded, as if I knew everything in advance, as Hinata gave me a doubtful look.

Report. Based on the current situation, there is no other potential possibility. The subject Hinata Sakaguchi is believed to be thinking “Why that act?” at the moment.

Huhhhh?!

So sneering at her just made me look stupid, huh? And sure, I didn’t have any doubts about this, but even I had my guesses about what they wanted. Like, what if they asked about my magitrain ideas or the requests to sell the weaponry Kurobe showed off? Or what if they interrogated me about which countries were asking us to reveal our research results? There was a pretty broad range I could picture, which gave me a headache.

But Raphael was confident this was about Tempest’s admission. I wish it could’ve clued me in earlier. With a nervous cough, I took a sip of coffee. Hopefully, I covered myself well enough…

“Regardless, it’s still not official yet, so try not to do anything dumb, all right? And I think, during the Q&A, they’ll probably ask you some tough questions and try to get under your skin as a demon lord. Don’t fall for their tricks, okay?”

I wasn’t sure I covered for myself at all, but Hinata didn’t seem to care either way. I guess it’d be trouble for her if I screwed up the meetings—since the Holy Empire of Lubelius was supporting us and all, it’d make them look terrible. Thus, she was focused on giving me warnings, first and foremost. How unsettling! I have the patience of a saint! Nobody could anger me that easily.

“Oh, you’re worrying way too much. Unlike you, I know how to deal with adult social situations.”

“Huh? If you’re picking a fight, you know I’m game anytime.”

“Uh, no, um, not like that…”

See? There’s the difference between Hinata and me—the way she so readily flips the switch. But getting her any angrier would be bad news for me. I closed my mouth, a little fearful.

“But you do have a point. They’re giving me all the bombast of a royal guest, so I am worried that they’ll want something from me in exchange. You’ve been looking into that, too, right, Soei?”

“Yes, and I do have some information along those lines. Beyond that, it’ll come down to the motives of the royalty involved in this affair, as well as what their subordinates think…”

“Right. I’d appreciate it if we could talk that over later.”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru…”

Not him and me, but him and Raphael, really.

“…But there is one thing I’d like to ask Lady Hinata.”

“What’s that?”

Hmm? I thought we were done here, but Soei had concerns of his own. He had deployed his team to the four corners of the globe, looking into matters. As they investigated the shadowy committee running the Western Nations, they were also gathering information on each nation they visited. I was used to relying on them by now, whenever there was something I wanted to know—and knowing Soei, he must’ve heard some relevant rumor by now.

“It seems that several ministerial-level government officials from around the region are attempting to take advantage of our nation. Their aim—”

“…is to have Tempest serve as a defensive wall against the Eastern Empire?”

“Yes. Exactly, Lady Hinata.”

She had guessed it before Soei could finish. She must’ve had her finger on the pulse of it, too.

“So if a war breaks out, they want us to help them? Because right now, the only obligation we have along those lines is to Blumund. Is that correct?” Benimaru, for his part, concluded from his own analysis that Soei was worrying too much. He smiled at him—and I’d say he was right.

But the real issue lay elsewhere. Hinata probably realized that as well, and judging by how worry-free she seemed, she must’ve reached the same conclusion I did. Plus, in my case, I had Raphael predicting the future for me, so I could trust in that. If Hinata agreed with me, that just sealed the deal. So let’s check on that.

“Benimaru’s right. Our only treaty along those lines is with the Kingdom of Blumund. But even apart from that, I don’t think we need to worry about the Empire.”

“Could I ask why you think so?” Soei questioned, apparently quite worried. He always was serious-minded like that. To calm his mind, I decided to lay out the conclusion Raphael led me to.

“Well, first off, it’s important to think about things from the Empire’s standpoint. If the Empire tried to attack the Western Nations, what kind of strategy could they devise for that?”

Their goals for the attack were also key, but let’s put that aside for the moment. If they wanted to wage war, they’d need to select an invasion route. There was a path straight through the Forest of Jura, a harsher one over the Canaat Mountains, and a potential sea route, the old trade passage dating from before our highway system. And while it depended on how large a force the Empire sent, there were issues with every option.

The sea route was a challenging one. It was the most direct path to the Kingdom of Farmus, but once you left the shores and went into coastal waters, you left yourself open to the large sea creatures that called them home. You’d be sailing right into a nest of over-A monsters, and even a large fleet wasn’t guaranteed to make it through safely.

Even the spear tuna that was such a delight at our dinner banquet was a tough foe to face in open water. If one rammed your ship at sixty knots, or nearly seventy miles an hour, it would easily tear a huge hole in the vessel. But even a steel-sided ship couldn’t breathe easy, because among the creatures in the ocean, a spear tuna was still on the small side. These creatures lacked intelligence but brutally attacked anyone who dared intrude into their territory. There wasn’t a military vessel on this world that could take a ramming from their thirty-foot-long bodies and stay afloat.

Thus, only merchants with an intricate knowledge of safe sea routes dared to cross the ocean.

So what about the Canaat Mountains option? Well, that’d involve traversing a hellscape known as the Dragon’s Nest.

Dragons are willing to let a merchant caravan go by unharmed, but something bigger—say, a large army—was a great way to invite their wrath upon you. They weren’t human, so negotiation was out of the question. If they mistakenly decided you were hostile, it was all over. These dragons were led by a powerful Dragon Lord, and if they had you in their sights, they’d pare down your army well before you had a chance to fight your war. If you won, then fine; if you lost, the whole world would laugh at you. And even if you did beat those dragons, you had the Western Nations’ forces waiting for you on the other side. The feature presentation, in other words.

Besides, a military march through rugged mountains was an ordeal in itself. The path only opened up in the middle of the summer anyway. When the snow and ice settled onto those frigid peaks, all the magic in the world wouldn’t get you through.

No, any strategist who hadn’t lost his marbles would avoid this route at all costs.

Thus, your only choice left was through the Forest of Jura. But:

“The forest is the territory of a demon lord, and that’s me. And there’s Veldora, too, right?”

“Yeah. And now that the whole world knows of the Storm Dragon’s awakening, the Empire can’t afford to make any funny moves. They feared him even when he was still banished, so right now, they’re essentially frozen in place.”

Exactly.

We had spread the news that Veldora destroyed the Farmus army, and the Empire heard about that quite some time ago, I’m sure. Any ambitions they had along those lines must’ve been shelved by now. The Empire had feared Veldora for ages, and that fear made them too careful for their own good. If they had acted sooner, they might just have wiped us out, for all I know.

But now Veldora’s here, and Veldora was chiefly why Raphael assured me we were golden.

Report. That was a prediction, not a conclusion. The situation is constantly changing. If I obtain new information, I will need to factor that into my assumptions.

Wow. What a worrywart. But that was fair. Working on bad assumptions can lead to some serious pitfalls later.

“It is true that the Empire is making some ominous moves. The Shadows I tried as familiars have proven pretty useless, so I was thinking we had better conduct a more thorough investigation soon. However…”

Soei’s time was already occupied with exploring the Western Nations’ underground, and members from Team Kurayami were carrying out their own missions as well. About all he could do was send out Shadows, low-level apparition creatures that ranked a D but could use Shadow Motion and Thought Communication, making them perfect spies. On paper, at least. Unfortunately, they were too weak to penetrate the barrier that protected the Empire.

It was hard, however, to send over anyone stronger than them. If I was deploying people to places with unknown security situations, that limited my applicant list to those Soei could vouch for. And if I detached any of those people from their current missions, that would hinder my orders.

Soei was talented but not omnipotent. Even after his evolution, he could only deploy up to six Replications of himself at once. Those were the trump cards he used to carry out the dangerous work I always sent him off to. He needed to leave some on tap in case a battle broke out, so if I sent any of those to the Empire, I’m sure he’d worry over who would be left to guard me.

“The Empire’s moves really aren’t being looked at that seriously, though. It’s more of a cover story, an excuse for letting Tempest into the Council, that’s being spread around by a few of the louder representatives. But if you’re that concerned, Sir Soei, I could conduct some investigations myself.”

Oooh. I see that Hinata, like Raphael, doesn’t like trusting her own thoughts too much. I always knew how wary she was, but seeing that in action, I kinda had to admire it. I could learn from it, in fact.

But now she’s volunteering to help investigate, huh? I might as well take her up on that—

Report. Please ask her to look into the Armed Nation of Dwargon as well and see whether military activity is possible within its underground cities.

…Raphael never wavers, does it? Now it’s trying to work Hinata to the ground, too. But that made sense to me. The Canaat Mountains had some paths that led into the Dwarven Kingdom, the territory of Gazel. I couldn’t imagine the Empire can do much with those roads, but it’d be worth looking into, just in case.

“Could I ask a favor when you do, Hinata?”

“What’s that?”

“I’d kinda like you to investigate the structure of the Dwarven Kingdom, I think.”

“Right, the Dwarven Kingdom’s a city crafted from a cave underneath the Canaat Mountains. Hmm… That could be a possibility, too. You act so careless, but I really can’t let my guard down around you, can I?”

“Ha—ha-ha-ha… Right?”

“All right. I’ll look into the Dwarven Kingdom as well.”

I wasn’t sure what prompted Hinata’s admiration, but fine. I thought Raphael was carrying on about nothing, but there’s no sure thing in this world. I was just thinking about how I needed to be more careful. If there’s a weed bothering me, better to uproot it now rather than later—and if Hinata was volunteering, no reason to hold back.

So we carefully went through the rest of our discussions, talking about closely held state secrets and other vital affairs in the early-afternoon café space. We had a magical Soundproof Barrier over us, so nobody was going to eavesdrop on our conversation anyway. Skills can be so useful like that.

Hinata was kind enough to brief me on a few other things, too. It seemed like a lot of people wanted to take advantage of us—and not just for military purposes. Humans, after all, were suspicious folk—I should know; I used to be one. That’s why what Hinata told me made so much sense.

“I just want you to know, all right? There are people out there trying to use and abuse you, so don’t let them shoehorn you into anything.”

I had to accept that as correct. Whether I would listen to that advice was another question.

“What do you mean, use and abuse me?”

“Well, in terms of your military, at the very least. That’s something I’d want from you, too, and that’s what you want to see, right?”

As she put it, one condition for joining the Council was that we’d be responsible for management of the entire Forest of Jura. The member nations were unanimous on that, since we’d function as a bulwark against the Empire.

“I got no problem with that. With fewer monsters out there, I’m sure we’ll see more people challenge the labyrinth. We do want that, yeah.”

“Better not freely admit it so much. I’ve had to deal with a lot of heads of state in my time, and let me tell you, they’re clever. They might even ask you to station troops in their countries to keep monster damage down.”

Normally, allowing foreign troops to stay in your nation wasn’t the kind of thing governments liked to see. But as Hinata put it, in a world where monsters were a universal threat, leaders wanted to retain as much war power as they could. Many of them weren’t afraid to use other nations’ troops for that, including the Western Nations’ Temple Knights.

Proposal. You could deploy troops to their nations to create an obligation to you.

If we were recognized as a nation, it made sense that we could deploy our army to foreign lands as a peacetime maneuver. If something came up, that’d make it easier to exercise our military authority. My home country back in my previous world took that strategy a lot.

“Hohh. I see, I see. That’s not a bad idea, actually. Why don’t I let them use us?”

“I can’t say I like letting them think they’re taking advantage of us, but…yes.”

“It’s essentially giving influence to our nation, isn’t it?”

I grinned as Benimaru and Soei voiced their agreement. Shuna kept up her own smile, and I suppose her lack of complaint meant she agreed. And if we were all on the same page, that meant I could do what I wanted tomorrow.

“Why’re you looking all sinister?” an exasperated Hinata asked. Guess she’s reading my mind again. But she didn’t say anything else, which I took as her tacit approval.

That marked the end of our lunchtime discussion, but before she left, Hinata brought up something else, as if she had just thought of it.

“Oh, right. I think there’s also a group planning to do something stupid at the event tomorrow, so be on the lookout for it, okay?”

Once again, she warned me not to lose my temper or lash out at anyone. What she meant, I suppose, is that the Council wasn’t a monolith, and I should treat everybody there as one and the same. Eesh. Why was she so concerned about a pacifist like me? She didn’t need to say it; I understood just fine. So I told her she was worrying too much, and we left it at that.

The next day came.

We were heading over to the Council’s meeting hall—Benimaru, Soei, Shuna, and me, all in suits and lookin’ sharp. It goes without saying that all our weapons were in my Stomach, so at a glance, it would’ve looked like we were unarmed.

Hinata had given me her full briefing, so I didn’t have an iota of anxiety. Maybe a few councillors wanted to take advantage of us, but on the question of my admission to the Council, all my worries were behind me. If I was recognized as a friend to humankind here, that’d be one step closer to the ideal society I had in mind—a world where man and monster coexisted and shared in one another’s prosperity. To borrow a phrase from Mjurran, a Monster-and-Man Cooperative Alliance.

On the monster side, we already had magic-born, dwarves, elves, and more living with one another. That alone already resulted in a massive new economic sphere, but as an ex-human, I really wanted to reach out to them as well. But humans, you know—they’re greedy. It’s all What do I get out of this? with them, and they’re willing to shut out their own countrymen just for thinking the wrong thing. But that greed helps them improve their lives, too, and it’s the engine driving all sorts of new and expanding entertainment.

They weren’t simple to deal with. Not like monsters. Better avoid expecting too much here. I couldn’t assume this would go great from the very beginning.

When I reached the Council hall, several councillors were there to greet me. They were from our border nations, and based on what they heard from the Founder’s Festival participants, they wanted to forge friendlier relations with me. I sure appreciated all the compliments, and I responded in kind, figuring it best for the future. They started smiling at me, the ice now firmly broken.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I heard you were a demon lord, Sir Rimuru, but what I didn’t hear about was how much of a sociable leader you are!”

“I would certainly like to maintain a friendly relationship with you, going forward.”

“No, no, the pleasure’s all mine. I’ve got a slate of events in mind going forward, so if you’re interested, please feel free to attend!”

I got the idea they were still a bit too leery to attend the Founder’s Festival. Now, though, they were being downright familial with me. All that effort from Rigurd, Mjöllmile, and the others must have been paying off.

Now I was feeling really good. Hinata gave me all sorts of doom and gloom yesterday, but I guess I really didn’t need to worry. But the next person to greet me sent me straight into a depression.

“A-hem! People, people, quit bothering Sir Rimuru. Councillors from tiny dots on the map with hardly anything to them shouldn’t be occupying his time all day!”

“Indeed, indeed. All this rudeness may give Sir Rimuru the wrong idea about our Council. So please, remember your place and leave him alone.”

My little entourage was promptly chased off by a group of representatives who acted like they owned the place. I wanted to ask who was being rude here, but I held back. Soei told me via Thought Communication that these people were from nations with some clout in this Council—every representative was allegedly equal, but that wasn’t really the practice. That was shown perfectly well by these people who took it as their prerogative to lord it over their peers. There was definitely a pecking order here, based on your social standing.

“Right, Sir Rimuru. I tell you, you’ll never have any constructive conversation with people like that.”

“Yeah, thanks. And what would you call constructive?”

I really didn’t want to deal with these guys, but I decided to play along.

“Heavens be! I suppose you may not be picking up on the hints, Sir Rimuru?”

“Ha-ha-ha! It stands to reason, I think. Sir Rimuru has never had to deal in noble etiquette before. But don’t worry. We’ll teach you everything you need to know!”

A simple question, and already they were answering me with stuck-up laughter. They made it seem so natural that I couldn’t even tell if they were being deliberately malicious. A bit overly familiar perhaps, but it beat being feared…I think?

“By the way, Sir Rimuru, I hear you’ve been busy crafting a great deal of interesting things?”

“Yes! They say you’re considering a magitrain system, for example, and let me tell you, my nation would be more than happy to be part of that effort.”

“Ah yes, precisely. And the same is true with mine. We’d be happy to pitch in! Of course, we’d like a little, ah…well, you know…in return.”

Um, sure.

So this is what jaw-dropping means. Rude ain’t the half of it! I went lightly because these are presumably nobility, but that was a mistake. I must’ve really given them the wrong first impression. But I was on their turf. I needed to hold back, or things could easily spiral out of control. Broad mind, broad mind. Given all my grandstanding to Hinata, I couldn’t get riled up here.

“Well, we need to put rails in place before we can run any magitrains. We’ve already created an order for our layout construction, so I’m afraid I can’t take any more requests right now.”

“Ah, no need to worry yourself over such details. I will gladly arrange matters with my government, so if you could give us some priority with your delivery, that would be quite fine.”

Something told me he had no idea what a magitrain was. He’d never seen the real thing, after all. As if that weren’t bad enough, he was also completely ignoring my own priorities and throwing thoughtless, one-way demands at my feet.

But…again. Patience.

“No, no! As I said, there’s an order to this—”

But as I tried to bottle up my anger and turn him down, the demands just kept piling up.

“Then perhaps some other product, then? If you could arrange for some weapons or armor, we will be happy to buy it. Of course, don’t forget to compensate us later!”

The bearded man in front of me, representing the duchy of Laquia, was a particular eyesore. He was not-so-stealthily demanding a bribe. I wondered if he had somehow forgotten I was a demon lord.

The nations adjoining the Forest of Jura were exposed to monster threats, but these more inland nations enjoyed total peace and security from them. That’s why they prospered so much, I suppose, and maybe they just didn’t see a demon lord as that big of a deal…but this was still an awful way to approach me. I felt like an idiot for even giving him the time of day.

“Also, may I inquire as to what kind of education your agent Mjöllmile has? I asked my officials to have him open some business channels, but he’s been rather evasive about giving a reply, I hear. Would we be able to work with someone else instead?”

I wanted to yell “Shut up!!” at him. If this was the type Mjöllmile dealt with, then I was inadvertently putting him through a ton of pain. He always seemed to brush them off with ease, but some officials are more stubborn than others. I had a lot to learn from him.

“I’ll look into that,” I replied with a smile. Such a lovely turn of phrase, “I’ll look into that.” Indicating your interest in getting the job done, but offering no firm timetable, freeing you from the obligation to actually do anything. The secret weapon of elite office staff everywhere. That was the brilliant strategy I deployed—bluff my way through, then pretend the conversation never happened.

“Ah, good to hear!”

“We’ll look forward to future matters, then.”

“And now, we’d best be on our way.”

“Don’t be shy about offering your lineup, now! We can talk any time!”

That phrase deftly shooed all those fools away. Now that’s how an adult deals with matters. If you want something, go buy it yourself; that’s what I say.

“Ah, certainly, I look forward to that,” I lied as I saw the representatives go.

What a pain they were. I had no obligation to give them anything. It’d be much surer for us if we just sold our wares through the Free Guild—at least they didn’t demand bribes.

A few other councillors approached me as well, and I gave some quick greetings before moving along. Any long conversations here seemed likely to get me in trouble.

It was still morning and already I was getting a bit testy, but at least this was good experience. If I caused any problems before the conference even began, there’s no telling what kind of tongue-lashing Hinata would give me later. I decided to accept things as they were as we entered the hall.

“Should you have let them go like that, Sir Rimuru? I can’t believe you forgave their flippant behavior…”

Benimaru turned to me the moment the attendants guided us to my seat. He held back before, following my lead, I suppose. I was ready to vent back at him, but Soei and Shuna beat me to the punch.

“Don’t expect Sir Rimuru to act like you. The bleating of little minions like them would never be enough to disturb his mind.”

“Exactly, my brother. Sir Rimuru has a heart as broad as the wide-open sea. It would be foolish for him to engage with the common crowd like that.”

Um, sure. If that’s what they say, I guess I’ll just have to play along.

“Yeah, something like that. Benimaru, if you let that rile you, you’ve still got a lot to learn.”

Of course, I was angry on the inside. But if Shuna and Soei were kind enough to misread my body language for me, I had to work with it. I spent a few more minutes lecturing them on the finer points of interacting with humans.

The seats were laid out in a fan shape, with us at the base, where the chairman would normally be situated. This put everybody’s focus squarely on us—one desk and one chair. My associates had to stand behind me.

The chairman emceeing this session had moved to a safer seat on the second mezzanine. I say “safer” as compared to us. Being a demon lord must’ve put a lot of people on their guard around here, and having all their eyes on me made it terribly difficult to collect my thoughts.

So the meeting was formally brought into session, but that’s when hell really began for me. I was trying to be shrewd, as haughty as my post demanded, but I couldn’t lose my temper, either. I had to hold it all in, listening to everything the councillors said.

Hinata had clued me in on the agenda before I came here. First, on the subject of Tempest joining the Council of the West, the representatives were debating on assorted conditions to impose on the deal. These could be broadly divided into three demands:

One: adherence to international law

Two: access to our economic sphere

Three: provision of military power

Number one was no problem to me. If we became a member, we’d have a duty to follow the law, big or small. The Council didn’t have any right to be involved with the internal laws of other nations, which eased my concern. Each individual merchant would have to follow the rules of whatever country they were doing business in, and if any problems arose, they’d be resolved following those laws. Got a problem with that judgment? The merchants could file a complaint with their nations’ embassy. Depending on how that turned out, it’d either become an international issue or the merchant would have to give it up.

Frankly, I liked that system a lot more than what I saw after the Founder’s Festival. It established an international legal framework to preside over cross-border issues, complete with an international court and a judge from a third-party nation. In fact, that was part of the Council’s role in this region, with representatives recusing themselves as the legislature debated issues involving them. Nothing too tricky about it.

Of course, to keep things fair, we needed to enact and announce a body of law for our own nation. That was an issue, but I had good ol’ Raphael on my side. It had a full grasp of laws from all nations, and it used it to perfectly cover all the bases as it defined our own set for us. We already sent a copy of that to the Council, so all was well.

Providing access to our economy presented a few issues.

Given the lack of patents in this world, the trend was for whoever produced the best copy of something to win all the marbles. Before that, however, there was that “heavenly army” that attacked whenever our civilization got too advanced, an army of a million angels descending from the sky and razing our cities to the ground. That’s why the Western Nations had no gas or electricity—not even steam engines.

But this didn’t mean life was difficult. We had magic and, by extension, magic-driven items. Our attire didn’t lose out to Japan at all, and while the transport of fresh foods was out of the question, our nations were good at food storage. There was some excellent magic being harnessed for building construction, leading to some very impressive work—I’m not sure you could replicate some of the castles and other standout projects with modern Japanese technology.

So everyone’s core needs—food, clothing, shelter—were being fulfilled, and life was actually pretty pleasant in the cities. So what’s the problem?

The problem was that, between Vester and Gabil’s presentation and Kurobe’s weapon and armor exhibition, word about our technology was starting to leak out, as shown by that bearded guy from Laquia asking about my magitrains. Yohm and Mjurran were commanding large groups of workers, of course, so this was expected. I didn’t mind if people knew about our stuff, but I did mind the people who tried to steal it.

Or really, trying to steal it was one thing, but now you had people like that Laquian guy trying to make us build a railroad and calling it a business transaction.

“Laquia should share in this first!”

“How could you be so thoughtless? Sir Rimuru, the Republic of Zamund is far more worthy of serving as Tempest’s closest partner!”

“Order! Now is not the time for debate between member nations. You’re simply baffling Sir Rimuru!”

If the white-bearded chairman hadn’t stepped in to quiet things down, we might’ve been bogged down forever.

Open markets, in themselves, weren’t a problem, but I wasn’t expecting an obligation to share all of our tech. If they see us as some kind of international handyman for them, I dreaded how they might try to use us in the future.

Now I saw why I had reason to worry about the things I did. And despite how depressed I already felt, the conference was still dragging on.

As for the third condition, a military power-sharing deal, we’d need to have some debate on that.

Following Hinata’s word of caution, I had Soei do some more research for me. We know there were people who wanted to tap into our war power under the name of military cooperation, but the same was also true for us. Tempest would be responsible for managing the Forest of Jura; the proposal was for us to handle monster-related issues, and I was fine with that. That much I predicted from the start, and it worked better for us. Even in my discussions with Hinata, we agreed that Tempest would handle Jura defenses, while the Crusaders covered things in the Barren Lands.

My nation would cover the bill for this monster defense, which I’m sure the Council loved. After all, if we wanted to keep the economy running smoothly, world affairs needed to be kept stable. Nations wary of the Eastern Empire no doubt appreciated our defensive power as well—not that I expected it to happen, but if push did come to shove, we’d be there on the front line of it.

So yes, the Council definitely wanted to take advantage of us. That’s why I needed to be sure we could do the same in return.

We would defend the Forest of Jura—that was a given. But the smaller nations also wanted to use our excess capacity to help protect themselves. There may have been fewer monsters venturing out from the forest, but they still couldn’t defend against unexpected monster intrusions. Some flying monsters were particularly dangerous, and the nations couldn’t afford to cheap out on their defense budget. But there were patrol soldiers and monster-hunting adventurers to pay, and if the Council didn’t cover the cost, they’d have to make up the difference with taxes.

Even worse, if they had to wait around for the Free Guild to show up after a monster discovery, they couldn’t prevent damage before it happened. Nations that had Luminism as their official religion enjoyed regular patrol visits from the Crusaders, but there wasn’t an infinite number of them. They had a huge amount of terrain to cover, and I’m sure there were times when they were simply unavailable when needed the most.

That’s where we came in. Each nation could pay us a defense fee, and then they’d be free to use us however they liked. At the same time, though, they’d be relying on us for national defense, so they wouldn’t be able to ignore us any longer. It’d be a display of power for Tempest—and a way to expand our influence on the Western Nations. The money they’d pay us would also strengthen our position—two birds with one stone, really.

And what if the Empire really did attack? Then, for better or worse, Tempest was right in the middle of their invasion route. If a fight couldn’t be avoided, it’d naturally be well-advised for us to shore up our rear support. If they accepted our defensive forces instead of fearing us, we couldn’t ask for anything better.

If we wanted to make this work, there needed to be an absolute, overwhelming difference in war power—enough to make other nations think they could never beat us in a war. It’d be ridiculous to entrust your defenses to another country otherwise. And if we could make the Western Nations take a “if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em” stance with us, our mission was as good as accomplished.

As each of the representatives gave us demands and played interference with one another, the chairman completed his preamble.

“…Those are the conditions placed upon the admission of the Jura-Tempest Federation. Lord Rimuru, do you have any objections?”

I had better give him some, or else I’d be consenting to everything. I could ignore the councillors’ inane commentary, but I better not commit any oversights with these conditions. I wanted to take advantage of these guys, but unless I could bind them down with a treaty, I was wasting my time.

Isn’t this the kind of thing we work out on paper first, then get a chance to debate on? That annoyed me a bit. What if I couldn’t give them an instant reply in this session?

I assumed this was another way of harassing me. But I had Raphael with me, considering all the oral arguments and using my own hands to write them down. Talk about omnipotent. So I had my friend think about the issues and come up with a rebuttal.

“Well, I’ve considered all of your conditions and prepared a list of my doubts and alternative suggestions for each one. If you can accept those, I have no reason not to go forward.”

I handed the documents I had written up to Benimaru, who took them to the chairman. He accepted them, looking a bit overpowered by him.

“…Wha?!”

I had agreed to the general outline of the conditions offered—but I had changed a few of the stipulations to ensure I still profited, even if they took advantage of me. Raphael was kind enough to mark out all the sections to change for me, so (unlike an oral agreement) everything was set in stone after the fact.

The chairman, no doubt seeing us as mere monsters, looked at the documents—a complete, blow-by-blow rundown of the explanation he had given us—and blanched. I could understand his surprise when he saw my revisions in red pen, all but spelling out for him that he couldn’t pull a fast one on me. It was all Raphael’s doing, not mine, but let’s gloss over the details here.

“If you have any concerns, I’d be happy to discuss them.”

If he couldn’t accept my terms, there was no urgent need to join the Council. I’d just presume that my quest for general acceptance from humankind was still a bit premature and deepen my ties with the nations that already accepted us.

“No, no, there are no problems, exactly…but if possible, Lord Rimuru, I would like some time to debate these matters.”

The chairman, being no fool, must’ve realized that he couldn’t browbeat us like usual. He would carefully go over my revisions, and he voiced no real complaint about that. Not that I got any time to deliberate—but even if I protested, I wouldn’t have gotten any. So for now, I agreed to his request.

Why was this happening?

The desk, kicked into the air, was suspended in space, slowly falling to the ground—and in the midst of this nearly stopped moment in time, Hinata’s eyes seemed particularly cold to me. She didn’t need to use her voice to tell me what she was thinking: You’ve done it after all.

With a heavy sound, the desk crashed to the floor. I buried my heel in it, crushing it beyond recognition. Too late to turn back now.

So I reclined in my chair as if I had planned all this, crossing one leg over the other. Then, giving a gloating stare at the councillors gaping at me, I heaved an internal sigh.

Look, I kept it bottled up at first. I had a reputation as a grown, mature leader for Tempest, and I took pride in having a heart broader than the ocean. That much, I think I’ve made clear from my recent actions. People called me a bastion of fortitude; I could even handle Milim with no problem. That broad heart of mine allowed me to laugh off and forgive all her selfish bantering.

But what if, instead of Milim, you had this room full of unattractive, obsessed, materialistic old men who never even bothered to hide the avarice glinting in their eyes? You could find the answer in that twisted desk in front of me.

After an extended, three-hour break, the meeting went back into session.

Here’s where my problems began. In response to the documents I submitted, the representative created something they called a list of requests and handed it to me. Judging by the tired look on the chairman’s face, this was done against his will, but I didn’t have any sympathy for him.

A quick look through the list showed me that I could accept absolutely none of their demands. Here’s a rundown:

• Open a magitrain line to Englesia, with Tempest handling all construction and costs.

• Provide high-quality weaponry and armor. Tempest is requested to help the Western Nations strengthen its military preparations.

• As the labyrinth that appeared in Tempest is a treasure to all humankind, add the Council to its administration team.

• Upon admission, Tempest will provide a preset amount of taxes on a yearly basis. Due to safety considerations, the representatives it selects must be humans.

And so on—there was a lot of nonsense written down.

I gotta hand it to them; they made me lose my temper in the space of three seconds. These conditions weren’t even worth debating. This wasn’t just an unequal treaty; I’d sooner give up living with humans entirely than sign on to this.

“All right, people. Are you making fun of me? You’ve been prattling on and on today, but what makes you think you’ve got the right to make demands to a demon lord?”

My kicking the desk to pieces made the hall notably quieter. Holding back my rage, I spoke directly to the chairman, currently hanging his head in shame.

“Sir Rimuru is asking a question. Don’t just sit there quietly. Please answer him.”

Shuna, smiling, delivered a follow-up blow for me, and I think that had more of an effect than anything I said. The councillors looked fully cowed now, some of them breaking into a cold sweat.

“I think you have the wrong idea here. Our nation has already almost completed a gigantic economic bloc of its own. The one reason we want to join the Council of the West anyway is so we can show the human race that we’re not hostile to them. But if you don’t want that, I’ve got no intention of forcing things along here…”



My voice rang quietly in the silent chamber. I wasn’t shouting at all, but it seemed to make all the representatives’ minds shiver with fear.

I wasn’t using Lord’s Ambition or anything like that. Against a human target, Lord’s Ambition would cause sheer panic at best, insanity and death at worst. No need to break that out. And I wasn’t brainwashing them at all, either—if I did, I’d be throwing all the goodwill I built with humanity out the window. I had no interest in living out my life with a legion of boring puppets who said nothing but yes to me.

No, this was just me being riled into destroying the desk and laying out my full opinions. But even that had a massive effect.

“N-no, Sir Rimuru, that was not at all the motive behind our requests…”

“C-certainly not! We simply provided our perhaps overly optimistic feedback out of a desire to deepen our friendly ties with you.”

The browbeaten councillors desperately began making excuses. The more of them I heard, the more annoyed I got.

First off, why was the king of a nation only a “sir”? If I was convening with other kings and leaders, I’d expect that—but being called it by someone without a country to govern was the same as saying I ran no nation at all. It was a nation addressing a colony, and it demonstrated zero respect for us. I’m sure they looked down on us as a bunch of monsters. I could put up with being looked down upon personally, but if it was my whole country? Forget it.

I am a demon lord and expected to be treated that way, but this was even worse than I expected. My hotel was first class, and lot of the councillors here treated me with respect, so maybe I let my guard down a little—but still, this was horrible.

“Oh? Then what was your motive? Because to me, this sounds like you want my nation and me to work day and night for you as your slaves.”

“No, not at all!”

“That was not our intention whatsoever! It was nothing like that—”

The councillors argued mightily. If these nobles were meant to represent entire nations, it just made my head hurt. Even with a heart as tolerant as mine, having to negotiate with people like this was testing me. If Yuuki had made these sly old dogs do his bidding, then he must be the slyest fox of all. I wish I could follow his example, but I don’t think I could.

Suggestion. Would you like me to automatically handle this?

Yes

No

It sounded like Raphael was saying something, but I’m sure I imagined it. Yes, it’s a trusted, talented assistant, but it’s still just a skill. It shouldn’t be able to so freely speak its mind like that. I guess I’ve been relying on it so much, I’m starting to hear my own internal desires spoken back to me. If something like that were possible, I’d probably have Raphael give all my speeches for me, and it’d be—like—why did I suffer for so long, then?

I shook my head, attempting to shake the delusions from my mind, then stared back at the councillors.

…Crap. Now that my mind was cleared out, I just realized I had no idea how to resolve this situation. Haste makes waste—and all that. I just made things super-complicated for myself, and fixing it all up was going to be an uphill battle. The representatives were frantic for a solution, and honestly, so was I.

Report. It is not a problem. As you intended, Master, I have confirmed the effect of the spiritual interference affecting the room.

Um, what?

I wasn’t intending anything there. I wasn’t thinking at all. I was pissed off, so I reacted accordingly. And now—

Report. With this quantity of samples, I have discovered the laws governing the spiritual interference. As with the subject Gaiye, the majority of councillors in this chamber are under the effect of spiritual interference from someone. Remove the interference?

Yes

No

Well, I mean, sure…

I thought Yes in my mind without hesitation. The moment I did, the previously silent councillors began to speak up again.

“Well, of course Lord Rimuru is angry! How could we make up for this disgrace—?”

“Wait! These conditions weren’t even brought up in our previous special session!”

“Who tried to slip these past us?!”

Things started to change pretty quick. Raphael strikes again. No matter the issue, I can always rely on it.

“Heh-heh… Looks like the councillors regained their senses,” I defiantly muttered, as if this was my plan all along. I just wanted to look cool, really, but it sure elicited a response from Shuna.

“They certainly did! I thought they were acting a bit strange, but someone had taken over their spirits?”

Well, Raphael?

Understood. It is a type of Spiritual Interference skill. It does not exert any influence on magicules, so confirming its presence took some time, but it is statistically impossible for so many people to possess such similar wavelengths. It was believed that canceling it would take time, but your anger wavelengths created an open seam.

Right. Exactly like I pictured it—let’s go with that.

“I don’t think it was that strong,” I ventured, without any evidence. “The spiritual interference gave the councillors a sort of tunnel vision, maybe?”

Shuna and the rest of my crew gave me looks of impressed respect.

“I see. So you placed pressure on them to shake them out of it?”

“That’s right, Benimaru. I considered it all clearly before doing it.”

Better phrase it that way, I don’t want them to start imitating my temper tantrum just now. Plus, this gave me the perfect excuse for Hinata. We’re all good…

…but I still had my doubts. Who carried out that spiritual interference, anyway? Probably not Yuuki, I don’t think; I doubted he’d take an approach that left so much evidence like this. If he did, he’d need some motivation to—but no point pondering over that. Now wasn’t the time to pursue the culprit.

Right now, I needed to solve the problems staring me in the face. The newly awoken councillors were bearing down on a subset of the Council, the group who created that list of demands. There were more than I thought, but they still looked like all was well. They must’ve had some other scheme in mind.

Suddenly, I felt something odd. A few of them were looking toward a door deeper inside the chamber. Turning my ears toward it, I could hear several sets of footsteps. Did someone call the royal guard?

Report. No such movements were detected, so it is believed this was planned in advance.

Mm-hmm.

Maybe they set this up to have me cause a scene so they could arrest me? Against a demon lord, that took a lot of guts. Maybe it really was that sloppy of a plan—I could picture it—but if so, the people of Englesia and its surrounding nations must have been pretty oblivious to danger. They were so far away from the threat of demon lords that they must’ve gotten soft. The same was true of their councillors; there must have been a lot of optimists around there.

Or maybe these were the fools “scheming something” Hinata had warned about?

The moment that occurred to me, the door opened, revealing a dozen or so soldiers led by a larger man.

“Well, someone’s sure in a lively mood! So you’re the fool calling himself a demon lord? You certain you can afford to act so high and mighty if you’ve only got three people with ya?”

The large man immediately began shouting at me the moment he came inside. He gave a vulgar smile as he made no attempt to hide his disdain for me. This wasn’t just rude; he was trying to start a fight, and there was no way to excuse it. My friends and I gave one another dumbfounded looks.

Hang on. This was part of their plan. They had some kind of deep design behind this—

Understood. It is believed that this man has nothing of the sort.

…Oh, really? So he’s just a huge idiot?

“Um… My name is Rimuru, and yes, I call myself a demon lord. Are you confusing me with someone else?”

Juuuust in case, I thought I should ask. Whoops, wrong guy wouldn’t cut it when the dust settled, so I tried to figure out the man’s true motives.

Shuna’s smile had disappeared, and Benimaru was so angry that he was now frozen in place. Soei was about ready to whip out the sword he had hidden on him, and weapons in the chamber were gonna be real hard to explain later. I was just as livid as them—in fact, I was so far gone, I almost wanted to laugh. That was how I remained coolheaded enough to ask the question.

But the results were pretty lacking.

“Yep. You’re the one. He said that idiot’s name was Rimuru!”

No mistake, then. Which meant I was safe doing him in, but…

“…Look. Can you quit it with that? I dunno what you want, but do you think you’ll get away with that kind of lawlessness in front of all these witnesses?”

This wasn’t something I could really say after bashing up that desk, but that was then. Let’s use the law as a weapon to chase this freak away, because otherwise, I really might kill him—and if I didn’t, I feared Benimaru or someone else would lose it.

But the large man kept at it.

“Moron! This is my big chance! Once I knock you around and put this on you, all of you monsters will be under our command!”

Uh, what? Knock me around? Under his command? What’s he talking about? Maybe I really was a moron, because I didn’t understand him at all…

Understood. This fool is saying that he will defeat you and make you follow his commands.

Yeah, I know! If you keep explaining things with a straight face like that, I really will look like an idiot.

And what’s that in the man’s hand? It was none other than an Orb of Domination, the very artifact I saw in use back when Milim pretended to be hypnotized. It looked real, but would that work on me?

Understood. It is impossible to rule over my lord with the Orb of Domination.

That’s a relief.

I don’t know where this lumbering man found it, I thought, but I’d better break it before it puts anyone in danger.

I stood up from my seat. It must’ve woken the chairman from his stupor, because he started shouting in a panic.

“W-wait, Lord Rimuru! This is some kind of mistake. No one in the Council is sponsoring this! Please, confirm it with Lady Hinata if you wish! She’s an impartial party!”

He was respectful toward me, and I didn’t think he was lying. Hinata didn’t say anything about this; in fact, she warned me to stay on guard. I didn’t think it’d be this in-your-face stupid, but for now, I couldn’t do much except sit back and see how things went.

The chairman wasn’t my enemy. Neither was Hinata. And I had a lot of allies among the councillors as well.

“I know nothing about this! What is going on here?”

“Who sent you here?”

“Those soldiers’ armor bears the emblem of the Englesia royal family. Is Englesia instigating this?”

I could hear them shouting above the confused representative. Clearly, they couldn’t have been involved. This wasn’t something the Council hatched—it was the work of a smaller group gone clearly out of control.

Amid the chaos, one person made a coolheaded decision. That was Hinata. When the chairman stated her name, she stood up and stepped between the large man and me.

“Sir Reiner, what is the meaning of this?”

Reiner, was it? If Hinata knew him, was he famous around here?

“Do not come in here without permission! We are in the middle of a Council session. Soldiers like you are not allowed!”

Emboldened by Hinata’s actions, the chairman began yelling at the group as well. But instead of Reiner, one of the councillors answered him—Count Gaban of Englesia, I think his name was.

“Ha-ha-ha! Worry not, Chairman Leicester. I called them in here to discipline that lawbreaker over there.”

Gaban was all smiles from his seat in the second tier, close to the chairman.

“Sir Gaban, have you gone mad?!”

The chairman’s face went red as he shouted. I could see why. If a fellow councillor was involved, that kind of prevented the chairman from claiming the Council wasn’t in on this. And as long as we had an impartial observer in Hinata, this ridiculous farce could very well benefit me. I hated all this verbal abuse but decided to weather it for a bit.

“Sir Gaban! I was not informed of this!!”

This was Representative Johann Rostia, a prince, screaming now. He was among the more decent councillors, not placed under spiritual interference. I remember the disgusted look on his face when things first went awry. Looks like he was siding with me here—I presumed he was on the pro-admission side.

“Everyone, please, calm down. I know that we all fear the demon lord Rimuru. Am I wrong? And Sir Reiner here is the strongest man in all of Englesia. He is here to defeat Rimuru, rule over him, and make this member of the Octagram into his personal pawn. And with him…comes Veldora!!”

Even with the other councillors telling him off, Gaban remained unaffected, using his seat to formally declare hostilities against me. Several councillors shouted their agreement.

If it was getting to this point, I no longer had any reason to hold back…but the situation was progressing so fast, I was getting left in the dust.

“I-impossible!”

“Unforgivable! How dare you disrespect the Council!”

“Indeed! Are you ignoring the will of the Council and prioritizing your own motives instead?”

Even more councillors stood up and began airing their grievances.

This was starting to look ominous. Some of the representatives didn’t look well, hanging their heads. Given Gaban’s dauntless behavior, he probably had another trick up his sleeve. And I was right.

“Order, please, gentlemen. What my knight Reiner says is true. And now the demon lord’s been kind enough to come visit us. How could we afford not to use this opportunity?!”

With these words, a delicate-looking man strode into the chamber. This blond-haired figure wasn’t a councillor but certainly acted like their boss. I thought I detected a murmur of surprise among the Council; I could guess he was pretty high up. But the next moment:

“Prince Elrick, what is going on here? I thought I advised you to refrain from any foolish behavior…” Hinata confirmed it for me.

Apparently, this was the honest-to-goodness prince of this nation—and not even a council could be rude around a prince. No wonder there was so much consternation in the chamber.

So was this Prince Elrick the mastermind behind all this? He had incited at least a few councillors, by the looks of it.

“Hinata, I am disappointed in you. You’ve grown fearful of the demon lord and abandoned your post as guardian of humankind.”

“…What?” came the cold, low-pitched reply.

Wow. He really pissed her off. Now I wasn’t sure I needed to act at all.

“Enough back talk, Hinata. All right? You may be the leader of the paladin forces or what have you, but there’s no possible way you could best me, the head general of the Englesia royal knight corps. You can’t even beat that wispy weakling of a demon lord—instead you lick each other’s wounds. What a laugh! I bet you wet your pants running from him, didn’t you?”

That vulgar smile was still on Reiner’s face as he picked a fight with Hinata. Oh, man. Even I could feel the blood draining from my face.

“You…”

“Hee-hee-hee! Can’t even reply, can you? I’m assuming I’ve hit the nail on the head? Well, Ms. Crusader captain… That’s a ceremonial title I presume you obtained by exercising your womanly wiles on that dirty old cardinal? Yes, I’m sure it was a sorry fight indeed between you and that demon lord. And a demon lord with no interest in killing his adversary? Don’t make me laugh!”

Oh, now I’m taking the heat again. I really wish he’d stop.

“But I’ll hand it to you, Hinata. You are attractive. If you’ll be my lady, I promise I’ll take good care of you as a concubine. You know?”

Ohhh, man. Now he’s dead.

Hinata’s expression didn’t change. She was the cool, reserved beauty she always was. But the colder she looked on the outside, the more her insides raged like bubbling magma. Her patience amazes me, it really does. I would’ve lost it hours ago.

“Now, now, General Reiner. Isn’t that going a little too low? But I’m interested in the demon lord as well. I wouldn’t want you to have him all to yourself, you know. What do you think?”

I felt an indescribable chill run down my spine. Was this Gaban guy coming on to me?! The thought, and this man, sickened me—and after today’s events, it’d take a lot to move me at all. Good thing he was far away from me, because otherwise, I might’ve clocked him just now.

“…Prince Elrick, as the prince of Englesia, are you willing to allow this man, Sir Reiner, to say such things?” Hinata hid the anger in her cold voice as she asked the question.

Elrick just smiled. “Hee-hee-hee! Hinata, if you had cooperated with me, I would have given you much more honorable treatment. If you wish to blame anyone, blame yourself for angering Reiner. And yes—I forgot to mention this, but Reiner is more powerful than an A-ranked adventurer. And he’s not alone…”

With that, Elrick snapped his fingers. The door immediately opened once more, revealing a man in black, another in a green robe, and a group of people in overcoats with a familiar emblem on them. Come to think of it, I knew the first guy, too. It was Gaiye, the dude who got his head cut off by Delta the dryad. And those overcoat guys were definitely Green Fury, the team our avatars waged a life-and-death battle against.

So was the green-robe guy part of the Sons of the Veldt? He was hooded and wearing a scarf over his face, making for a mysterious, unknown figure—but he acted all upper-class, so I figured he maybe ran the Veldt or something.

“Allow me to make some introductions. This is Sir Gaiye, an A-ranked adventurer and now Reiner’s aide-de-camp. And this…”

Elrick placed a hand on green-robe guy’s shoulder. The theatrics made it clear just how self-absorbed he was.

“…is the leader of the world-famous mercenary group, the Sons of the Veldt. I assembled as powerful of a team as I could, as I thought defeating a demon lord with anyone less worthy would be poor manners. Yes, you see, there are dozens of people like you running around here. Just because you have a little strength to your name, you know, doesn’t give you the right to act like a king.”

He certainly had confidence. And if he wanted a fight, I was happy to give it to him—

Report. Doing so would have a 100 percent chance of damaging your reputation.

…Right? Even to me, a demon lord starting a fight in front of such an influential audience seemed like a poor idea. And my policy was to fight a challenger only after they conquered my labyrinth. If I started bending that rule for no good reason, I’d have to duke it out with every idiot I passed by on the street.

And what’s more…someone in the chamber was angrier than me. People are strange that way. If someone else gets angry first, that actually has a calming effect on you.

“Let me ask you, Prince Elrick. What you are doing is antagonizing not only me, but the entire Western Holy Church,” said Hinata. “Are you prepared to accept the consequences?”

“No need to worry. I will not cause any trouble for the Western Holy Church, nor for the Holy Empire of Lubelius. Just sit there and watch, and I will guarantee your safety.”

Seeing Hinata fight to keep her cool, I forgot all about how angry I was.

But from the chairman on down, there were councillors attempting to defy Elrick’s group. We weren’t alone in the lion’s den here; we hadn’t been rejected by the Council. These were just some idiots gone out of control. Maybe it wasn’t worth getting worked up about.

“That is not the issue. I have been asked by the Council to attend this session as an impartial observer. My role is to ensure its proceedings remain fair, and I am thus in no position to let your recklessness go unanswered. If this was the Council’s will, that would be a different story, but please don’t expect I will allow a single person to act out of line like this!”

Given their relative positions, Hinata was trying to reason with Elrick first. I doubted it’d work much. The words just weren’t reaching him.

“Lady Hinata is right! This nonsense will not be tolerated in the chamber!”

“Prince Elrick, I heard nothing about this! And Sir Gaban, do you expect no repercussions from this?!”

“Lord Rimuru himself came out here for us. This treatment is going to spark an international incident!”

“This is unforgivable! Is this how the Kingdom of Englesia oppresses its people?!”

Rage, anger, ranting—more and more councillors were putting up a fight. Now I felt like I was in a theater, watching the events unfold from my seat. My starring role might’ve been taken from me, but I didn’t care.

“Without fairness, can you call it a Council at all?!”

Now the chairman was shouting. I cheered him on in my mind. Keep it up!

“Shut your mouths, old men! You can simper all you want once I’ve taken control of the demon lord!”

Reiner, meanwhile, was already up on his imaginary victory podium. He had already riled Hinata past the point of no return, so I doubted I needed to do anything. I figured we’d just ignore him.

“Prince Elrick, our agreement only covered our bodyguard services for you alone. Any hazardous behavior you engage in would void our agreement…”

Whoa. So the Sons of the Veldt leader wasn’t in on this? And here I had bunched them all together in my mind. Good thing I learned the facts in time.

“Y-yes! The demon lord Rimuru is the most dangerous figure I can personally think of! That labyrinth he created is crawling with all kinds of insane creatures! You’d have to be a madman to come up with it!”

……

Should I take that as a compliment?

Maybe all that fighting was worth it after all. The elementalist leading Green Fury was almost too scared of me now.

“Hmph. Nonsense. You cowards do nothing but get in my way.”

Ah, but Gaiye’s in the same boat with Reiner, eh? They seemed pretty alike—overconfident and turning a deaf ear to all outside opinion. He was flashing hateful looks at me now, although I really didn’t know where the grudge came from.

Either way, the chamber was one step away from erupting into full-fledged combat.

Elrick, taking charge in the midst of this stalemate, raised a hand.

“Order!! All of you, listen. Prince Elrick is speaking!!” shouted Gaban, who had come down from the mezzanine to stand next to Elrick.

The prince nodded his approval, took a long, careful look around, and suddenly spoke. “Councillors! Now is the time to express your will to me! Will you join us, the heroes who will slay the demon lord? Or will you side with that nefarious lord and betray humankind? I, Prince Elrick von Englesia, know in my heart that the representatives before me will make the correct choice!!” He gloated like a stage actor.

“What,” I reflexively replied, “we’re gonna vote on it now?”

The prince nodded back at me, like this was common sense. After that wacky entrance he made, he still wanted to try upholding his honor? Besides, if we held a vote right now, there’s no way he’d win a majority of—

“Heh-heh! Why not? We must decide this democratically, by vote. Of course, I’m sure we hardly need to. The Council, you see, is firmly on my side.”

That piqued my interest. He was supremely confident, as if he already knew the results…which, if you thought about it, was ridiculous. Not even a prince could get away with this outrageous behavior in an international council like this.

So why was he doing it?

Understood. He has likely bribed many of the councillors.

Ah, I knew it. But I didn’t think he’d buy off representatives from foreign nations as well. It’d be an international scandal if it got out, so I discounted any possibility of that. Served me right for making the wrong assumption.

“Now, let us decide—fairly and honestly! We are about to defeat and take rule over the demon lord. All in agreement, stand up!!”

As the prince’s voice rang up to the rafters, several councillors rose to their feet with vile smirks. The collusion was obvious.

Well, I suppose it’s come to this. Even if today’s turned out disappointing, I’ve got all the time in the world. If we’ve been rejected, then it’s our duty to accept those results.

Report. There are no problems. This is within expectations.

Um…it is?

I was struck by the vision of Raphael letting a dark grin materialize on its visage. Come to think of it, Soei had done a lot of investigating, hadn’t he? People’s opinions of our nation; the financial states of all the countries; how the royalty and nobility approached them… He had even pored through the legislative proceedings of each member nation.

Raphael had examined all of it in intricate detail, and inside my Stomach, it had quickly created a set of documents for me. I took them out. It was a set of ledgers.

…Ooh! Secret ledgers! Were these really within your expectations, Raphael?

I couldn’t believe this guy had actually found dirt on all the paid-off councillors. If I revealed these detailed lists of bribes given and received, I could take down everyone involved in one fell swoop. And now that I had incontrovertible evidence, this really was nothing more than a farce.

That’s Raphael for you. No stone left unturned. It was honestly scary.

Report. My lord will be victorious without needing to reveal that evidence.

Hmm?

Before I could figure out what it meant, the vote was over. Several councillors stood up and started clapping. Seeing this, Elrick’s voice boomed out again.

“We have our results. And the Council’s majority agrees. The resolution has passed!”

Gaban and Reiner had similarly sinister smiles as Elrick gloated to the audience. They were ready to capture us at any moment…but not so fast.

Fewer than a third of the Council’s members were actually on their feet. The majority were still sitting down. That fool Elrick was so sure of his plan that he declared victory without even looking at the seats.

Now the councillors clapping for Elrick realized they were the minority. They nervously looked around, faces growing pale. The results were clear. The majority was against slaying the demon lord—in other words, me.

Interestingly, I had more ledgers on me than the number of people standing up. They made up more than half the Council, in fact, but I guess a lot of them had a sudden change of heart.

Understood. It is believed that, after removing the spiritual interference earlier, they have regained their consciences.

I see, I see. They regained their wits and realized how foolishly they were acting. Excellent. It meant the people seated right now had weighed the issue fairly and decided to side with me. The bribes were apparently good enough for some of them, but—

Understood. It is believed that the spiritual interference stimulates the desires of its targets. It appears to exact a powerful coercive force on them.

Huh. I kinda sympathize with them, then.

Between that and Masayuki’s Chosen One, mind-altering skills are a menace indeed. Masayuki had no control over it, but it looked like this skill user could target individual people. I didn’t know who it was, but it was definitely someone to watch out for.

That blond dude, maybe…?

Well, at least the freed councillors saw the light in time. They all seemed friendly enough to me, so maybe I could keep quiet about the bribes. Really, though, if the fate of nations can ride on the choices of just a few councillors, I think there might be some issues with the whole Council system.

If organizations like the League of Nations or the United Nations can’t keep themselves pure like that, it’s only a matter of time before they go rotten. Corrupt representatives ruin the reputation of the nation they represent. If you’re going to leave nations’ destinies to individual personalities and dignities, then I wish they picked the councillors here a lot more carefully.

But then, that’s nothing for me to worry about. My concern right now was with the people who stood up. Anyone who kept their head down and engaged in injustice like this needed to pay for their crimes. Before that, I thought, we should open the eyes of the fools who still hadn’t caught up with events.

“Hey. Take a breath and look closer at the room.”

I kept myself composed as I spoke to Elrick.

“Hah! What are you—?”

He hadn’t noticed the vote yet. It’s amazing how much you could embarrass yourself when you were this stupid.

“What are you, a clown?”

“What?!”

“No, pardon me, Prince Elrick. It was just so comical, you see.” Even Hinata, coldly viewing this farce, chose this moment to join with me. She may have seemed frigid, but right now, she was bursting to fight.

I didn’t want to lose out to her, but Hinata’s lips were simply moving too fast.

“The majority of the chamber voted against your opinion. As the observer, I hereby declare that this vote was carried out in a fair, legal fashion. Of course, I’m sure the Council will hold an inquiry later to determine whether you had any right to call for a vote in the first place.”

“…Hah! I refuse to stand for this nonsense! Have you all forsaken me?!”

Pfft! I love it. His anticipated results failing to happen, Elrick was now carrying on like a child. Considering how much of a narcissist he was, seeing him break down like this was the height of comedy. Hinata was all smiles, and so was I. I could just feel all the frustration from before dissolve away.

“…Y-yes. Yes, Prince Elrick is right! Do you understand what this means, everyone? If you pull an act like this, we will rescind our nation’s support to—”

“Wait. What does that mean, Sir Gaban? Would you mind explaining it to us?”

The exhausted-looking chairman cut Gaban off right as he was shouting, spittle sticking to the edges of his lips. Something about that statement must’ve caught his attention. “Our nation’s support,” perhaps?

Understood. It is excerpted in the previous documents.

I looked back at them. Ah yes. Now I see the transactions in detail.

“Anti-flooding construction in the Kingdom of Raibach. Food support for the drought in Carnada. They’ve made many other promises of support to an assortment of nations. And this is how they were meant to pay you back, huh? But if you’re going to cut off that support after they stopped taking your orders, it’s all but admitting to the malignant bribery you’ve been engaging in.”

“Wha…?!”

“Why do you know about our internal affairs?!”

Elrick was silenced. Gaban was unable to hide his shock. I remained calm and lorded over them with a light smile. That was all I needed to bluff my opponents. I didn’t really know what was going on, either, but if that’s what Raphael said, I was sure there was no doubting it.

Now Elrick’s allies were beside themselves with panic. The chairman, sensing my gist, was staring at them like a man possessed. The Council had just taken another turn—now things were tilting our way for good.

I saw one of the councillors try to sit down when no one was looking. None of that, thanks. Soei’s Sticky Steel Thread had already kept them standing in place.

“Ah, I knew it,” said the Sons of the Veldt leader in an indistinct, genderless voice. “We’re not in the business of guarding someone looking to prod the hornet’s nest.”

I guess their business transaction with Elrick was over. Victory was ours. By now, our objectives were as good as accomplished…but there were still some fools here who refused to accept defeat.

“Enough of this utter garbage! Prince Elrick, now is no time to give up. Once I defeat the demon lord, our problems are solved!”

“Ah—ah, Reiner!!”

“Y-yes, General Reiner. We still have you, the greatest weapon in our arsenal. What a sight for sore eyes!”

They didn’t know when to quit, I guess. Now they were casting the entire Council aside to fulfill their aims. I doubted it would work, but then, I didn’t know much about an idiot’s thought processes.

“Are you trying to defeat me?”

“Of course, you fool! Or have you gotten cold feet now? Crawl up here and lick my boots, and I’ll think about keeping this painless for you!”

Reiner’s vulgar smile was back. He was flashing the Orb of Domination around, so I suppose he was still intent on stuffing that into me somehow. Gaiye, behind him, gave out some sort of order to his soldiers. They promptly moved to block the door. I suppose they wanted to keep everyone in here, to keep word of their blunders from getting out. The Sons of the Veldt had already taken a step back, but there were still a few upper-level adventurers on Elrick’s side, weapons out and pointed at us.

“W-weapons in the chamber! Of all the foolish things…!!”

The chairman was screaming his head off, but the soldiers were keeping anyone from leaving the mezzanine. I stopped hearing him after a while, so I guess he got captured along with the other councillors.

If it’s come to this…

…I thought, but Hinata moved first.

“As observer, I refuse to accept this reckless behavior. Also…”

Hinata smiled at Reiner, reminding him of all the insults he lobbed at her. She wasn’t armed, since weapons weren’t allowed in the chamber, but if she was, I’m sure she would’ve had her hand on the hilt of her sword by now. They’re so dead.

“…Rimuru, I’ll take care of this.”

“Heh-heh-heh… Oh, this is rich. I am the strongest man in Englesia, and I say it’s time to expose you. Some Saint you are! You might’ve gotten carried away, being touted as the guardian of humankind and all, but that ends today. It’s time to give you a dose of reality!”

Never once reflecting on her actual skills, Reiner gave Hinata all the bombast he could muster.

And you know what? He wasn’t weak. An over-A in rank, even. He could probably wage a pretty even battle with a magic-born like Gelmud. But he wouldn’t know, would he? In a land as peaceful as Englesia, he was an outstanding talent and font of strength, but he hadn’t put in hours on the battlefield fighting monsters. That’s why he was so oblivious to the threat they posed. Gaiye was the same.

“Heh… Would you allow me to engage the demon lord, then?”

“Of course! But don’t kill him, Gaiye. Make sure you control the force of that holy sword I gave you.”

“No need to remind me. With this piece of equipment, I’ll never face failure again!”

Gaiye wanted to go against me. Whatever fancy weapon he got put him in high spirits, but it wasn’t anything that extraordinary—kind of toeing the line between Rare and Unique. Plus, if he’s relying on equipment and skills instead of actual talent, it’s unlikely he had much of the latter to work with. Gaiye’s another over-A fighter, but to me right now, he wasn’t even a threat.

Faced with a foe like this, the honest thought in my mind was Man, I really don’t wanna have to deal with this. But apparently, I wouldn’t need to.

“All this time, I’ve put up with your humiliation…but you have been far too rude to Sir Rimuru, the man I respect and admire.” Shuna stepped in front of me, her attitude suggesting she’d take no prisoners. Quietly, she walked up to Gaiye. Wow. She might be way angrier than me.

Looking around, I spotted Benimaru, frozen in place and not moving an inch. He was caught flat-footed, and when our eyes met, he gave me an awkward look. Yeah, I get it. We were of the same mind, and one glance was all it took to confirm that.

“Heh-heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! How long will you continue to put me down?! Aren’t you ashamed at all, Demon Lord Rimuru, hiding in the shadow of this poor little girl?”

Shuna was right in front of Gaiye as he continued to scoff at me. What did he expect from me? If Shuna was ready to kick ass, I didn’t want to steal her thunder. And if Benimaru was reluctantly giving her the stage, I had to follow suit.

“Silence. There is no need for Sir Rimuru or my brother to bother themselves with you. I am more than enough.”

“Hmph! If you say so. But you better not regret this, all right? Man or woman, I go easy on no one!”

With that, he took out his sword. It was a holy one—pretty cool-looking, I thought. But Shuna’s smile only widened. Her Parser skill must’ve already stripped Gaiye’s abilities bare for her, and if it did, I had nothing to worry about.

If something went awry, Soei was already poised to step in, so I decided to cheer her on instead.

And so, as the leaders of the Council and I looked on, the battle between our two groups began.

I might’ve tried to make that sound epoch-making, but the fight was over in an instant.



First off, Hinata against Reiner. This was like an elephant against an ant.

There was Hinata, dressed to the nines in the formal wear she picked for the Council. It didn’t look too suited for physical work, but she still lunged at Reiner, not a single wasted motion in her approach.

“…Huh?”

Reiner, meanwhile, couldn’t keep up with her at all. I couldn’t blame him. She wasn’t going at 100 percent force right now, but she might very well be stronger than a demon lord or two.

Reaching for his chest, she grabbed Reiner by the hand and shoulder and threw him straight off his feet.

As for Gaiye, he lived up to his word, offering no quarter as he slashed at Shuna. But that didn’t alarm her, so she removed her folding fan and made a single swipe. That was all it took for Gaiye’s blade to snap off.

“…Haahh?!”

His pained wail sounded less than heroic, but Shuna wasn’t done yet.

“What garbage. I’m not going to make this kill easy for you. You said something about the A rank, if I recall, but would you mind fighting seriously for me, please? Don’t tell me you’re giving up just because your sword’s broken?” She pointed the fan at Gaiye, egging him on.

“Damn… Damn you…!! A monster like you, acting like my lord and master…!!”

Indignant didn’t begin to describe Gaiye’s state just then, but Shuna was clearly toying with him. The talent difference was clear, and if he thought he could win, I had no idea what was going through his mind.

Still…

“Shuna’s a damn good martial artist, isn’t she…?”

“Yes. She’s been learning jujitsu from Hakuro.”

Shrine maidens are certainly versatile. Of course, Hakuro’s jujitsu was the old style, suited for real-life combat. A lot of its moves were designed to kill, putting the art well beyond the bounds of self-defense. If that’s the kind of thing they taught ogre princesses, there was no denying that race’s battle chops.

Shuna’s follow-up attack continued. Gaiye had taken out a backup sword, but she kept toying with him, knocking him down with a foot sweep. His heavy armor backfired on him as he frantically tried and failed to get up.

Now she loomed over him, her fetching lips reciting a spell.

“I dedicate my prayers to my god. I seek the power of the mighty spirits. Now, heed my request…”

The prayer coursed through space and time to reach me. It didn’t have to since I was right there—but that didn’t matter.

“Huh? Whaa?!”

A multilayered magic circle surrounded the flabbergasted Gaiye.

“Wait! This—this magic…!!”

Oh, he knew it? He really did break the A-rank barrier, then. But understanding it and being capable of defying it were two different things. The spell was near completion, and there was no escaping it. Could he withstand or block it? I doubted it. After all, this spell…

“Ah—ahhhhhhh…?! Stop—stop it…!!”

“…Consume all! Disintegration!!”

…is the most powerful of all holy magic.

A torrent of light swallowed Gaiye whole, consuming everything inside…or so it appeared. Just as I was thinking Oh, great, she killed him, I realized it wasn’t the case after all.

“Ah—ah, ngh, hnnnhhh…”

The swirl of light disappeared, revealing a half-naked Gaiye. His legs must’ve failed him, because he was sitting down on the floor and weeping like a schoolyard kid.

Well hey, at least he’s alive!

“Oh dear. My skills are still so immature; I suppose my magic didn’t work. I knew I shouldn’t have tried a spell I’m still practicing…”

She smiled the whole way through. I had to resist shouting “Yeah, right!” at her. Using Disintegration to strip only the armor off someone, after all, is an impossible feat unless you had perfect control over the spell.

…Really, though, it wasn’t that long ago since I had Shuna and Adalmann work together to learn holy magic. And she’d already learned the hardest spell? What a magic phenom she was. Her Parser skill must have been offering her tons of support.

Regardless, though, it meant she beat Gaiye without breaking a sweat.

That left Hinata, but the results were already clear as day.

“G-General Reiner! Stop playing around!”

“Silence that impertinent woman at once. You must defeat the demon lord! We have no time for games!”

Gaban and Elrick, failing to grasp the situation, were shouting at Reiner in unison. Reiner couldn’t move. Hinata’s stare was just too withering for him. Only after that throw did he finally realize just how much stronger she was.

“Not coming back for me? Then how about I head over to you?”

The moment Hinata moved to take a step forward:

“Ah—ahhhh…?!”

With one of the most pathetic screams ever uttered in the world, Reiner buried his head in his hands and fell to his knees. A steaming liquid was leaking out from his crotch. Holy crap. Who was wetting their pants now, huh? It was so exasperating that I didn’t know what to say.

“Wha…? General Reiner?!”

“What—what has happened? As strong as you are, Hinata the Saint should pose no challenge at all!”

Seeing someone refuse to accept reality like this is scary, isn’t it? It made it so easy to issue the cruelest of orders to people. Reiner just kneeled there, tears and spittle intermingling all over his face. So much for that. It was a mismatch from the start, but I assumed this was the end of it.

With that settled, I looked around at the people standing by their ground-floor seats.

The most prominent one was Elrick, in the front row and acting strangely. The Sons of the Veldt were huddled next to him, but I doubted they wanted a fight. They were keeping a natural distance, appealing to me with their body language that they wanted nothing to do with this.

“All right, Elrick—sorry, Prince Elrick? You picked a fight with me, so what’re you gonna do now? Keep going?”

“Ah, um, no…”

“And you guys who stood up. I’m assuming your home nations fully sanction your behavior today, right? So can I presume them guilty of the same crimes?”

“N-no, that, uh…”

“S-Sir Rimuru, please, one moment… I mean, L-Lord Rimuru…”

“Please allow me to speak for a moment!”

I was greeting them with a smile; they were keeping their pallid faces down. A few of them were trying their hardest to plead their case, but I ignored them. Soei had forced them to remain on their feet, so all these councillors who incurred my hostility could do right now was plead for mercy. Whether I engaged with them or not, they were powerless. This way, I knew I had the upper hand.

From the side, it may’ve looked like a pretty little girl nonchalantly lording it over a bunch of grown-ups. A rare sight if you ever saw one. Comical, probably.

No way a faceless crowd like this could ever oppress a demon lord. Their lack of common sense—or a mind too weak to notice reality—just lost them the day. And what a sloppy strategy! I can’t believe they really thought they’d beat me and turn me into some kind of puppet demon lord. I suppose Hinata was right; they wanted to rile me into making the first move, but…

“So how to settle this…?”

Well, hang on. Over half the councillors were subjected to spiritual interference, their desires stimulated. Without me intervening, they would’ve sided with Elrick, and his measure would’ve passed, putting me in a bad spot. No matter the internal circumstances, it was nigh impossible to reverse a completed vote. Things only worked out like this thanks to Raphael.

But clearly, someone’s out to get one over on me here—

Report. Murderous will detected. The target is the subject Elrick.

Oh crap!

My Magic Sense skill was picking it up, too. Over a mile away, someone was eyeing this chamber with malicious intent. But what would they do from this far…? I promptly invoked Mind Accelerate and gauged the situation.

Via Magic Sense, I saw a girl with red hair and kind of a wild look. In her hand was something small, black, and metallic—a handgun.

Huh? A handgun from that range?! And I didn’t know how far one could shoot, but—

Understood. It is the Walther P99, a compact, lightweight, but highly capable pistol with an effective range of fifty-five yards.

…I didn’t need to know all that, thanks.

Maybe it’s a really good gun, but if it can’t clear a football field, it’s pointless. Our chamber is almost in the center of Englesia, built inside a special security zone. Anti-magic defenses are built into its walls, sturdy enough that your run-of-the-mill attack couldn’t even make a dent. Besides, any bullet fired would be subject to the physical laws of gravity and air resistance. Maybe it was enhanced with magic or skills, but if so, there was no reason not to use a full-on sniper rifle.

Of course, you needed to see a target to shoot it…and there shouldn’t have been any way for the girl to see Elrick from her spot. Even if she had access to Magic Sense to pinpoint his location, there was a wall in our direct path, making a sniper strike impossible. After the recent assassination of Duke Meusé, security had been beefed up around the chamber. I was on my guard as well, and I had already confirmed that this building was a poor choice for an assassination strike from far away.

So her behavior shouldn’t have meant anything to us. Shouldn’t have. Or was she aiming for a ricochet that’d changed the path of—

The moment I had the thought, the red-haired woman fired her handgun.

In the midst of dilated time, I could see the bullet fire out from the barrel, flying at blazing speed…only to be swallowed into a black hole that appeared out of nowhere.

…Huh?!

As I goggled, the bullet disappeared.

Report. This is Spatial Connection, a type of Spatial Motion.

Spatial Connection was just that—a skill that connected two recognized points in space together. If the distance involved was small and the portal tiny, it apparently didn’t take that much effort to deploy.

But I didn’t have the time to listen to that explanation. The red-haired woman had used Magic Sense to pinpoint our positions, then aimed carefully and launched her skill so her bullet would reappear within close range of Elrick. Thanks to that, she was about to assassinate someone across a full mile of walls, homes, and who knows what else.

A small black hole opened up in the air, about a foot and a half from the side of Elrick’s head. Coming out of it was a sure-kill bullet running at a quarter mile a second. It was a point-blank shot, and there was nothing blocking it from drawing nearer and nearer to him.

Slowly but surely, I watched it unfold. But I couldn’t do anything. My voice wouldn’t reach him in time. Nor could I move quickly enough to try to stop it.

…It is not a problem. Launch the ultimate skill Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony?

Yes

No

Oh, that’ll work? I thought as I invoked it. And then… Whoa. Neat. Ignoring all time and space, the bullet tumbled into my hand, all its energy gone.

“…?! Are you okay?”

A disturbed-looking Hinata was already talking to Elrick as she approached him. The Veldt leader appeared just as shocked as he stole a glance at me. I said nothing as I checked up on Elrick. He didn’t seem to understand what was going on and was just staring into space. Only a couple of us did know, really. But whatever happened must’ve triggered the building’s magic security network, because alarms began going off chamber-wide. The session would have to adjourn for a while.

“Soei, capture the assassin.”

“I have a Replication on its way.”

As we waited for the councillors to calm down, I carried out the tasks demanded of me. Already, there was an investigation happening nearby.

“You could kill a person with this?”

“Yes, it’s called a bullet. You need a special tool to fire it, but there’s not one near us at the moment.”

“So the assassin was targeting Prince Elrick? But what for?”

“To frame the demon lord Rimuru, of course.”

“Indeed, indeed. If Prince Elrick was killed at this point in time, suspicions would naturally turn to Lord Rimuru. It’d certainly complicate our efforts to admit Tempest into the Council.”

“Yes, that was probably the real motive. These fools were likely set up as disposable pawns the whole time.”

The security chief, Sons of the Veldt leader, Chairman Leicester, and Hinata were discussing matters here. I was certainly glad to be cleared of doubt.

Elrick was safe now, although he’d need to face up to the commotion he caused in the chamber later.

“Am—am I being targeted even now?” he asked, his face haggard. He might’ve been a fool, but I didn’t want him dead or anything.

“I think it’s all right now, Elrick—sorry, Prince Elrick. When the assassin missed you, that put an end to the ambitions of whoever wanted you dead. At this point, there’s no reason for them to try again.”

By now, it was no longer possible to frame me for murder. Elrick was no longer of use to them, you could say, and therefore he had no need to fear for his life.

“B-but I’m the prince of a superpower nation. People could exploit me in so many ways…”

Ummm, you think so?

Maybe he was vulnerable, as someone in line for the throne, before he pulled all that nonsense today. But he wasn’t officially crown prince, and there were other people in the line of succession, so at this point…

If Elrick had actually succeeded today, he would have been a hero, I suppose—but Englesia wasn’t easy enough on its royalty that an idiot prince doing dumb things would be allowed on the throne. Maybe the people would sympathize with his motives, but they’d never forgive him for screwing up. After today, Elrick’s chances of being King Elrick someday were as good as gone.

“But hey, life’s not all about becoming king, is it? You’ll probably need to atone for today somehow, but after that, why don’t you try reconsidering your future a little? I mean, I became a demon lord just by sort of drifting along, but I never really wanted to be one or anything. But there’s no going back on it now, so I figure I may as well take advantage.”

“Heh-heh! A demon lord offering me comfort? I thought you’d be scarier… More vengeful.”

“I’m not trying to comfort you. But generally, I’m a pacifist.”

Elrick’s shoulders slumped down as he resigned himself to his fate. “I was a fool to be tricked like that, Gaban. It’s time for you to take responsibility.”

“P-Prince?!”

“You were the one who approached me. I fell for your cajoling, and I must atone for that…but you had best prepare to do the same, Count Gaban.”

Elrick had now fully given himself up to the security team.

It was pretty obvious that Gaban was the main person behind all this, rounding up Reiner and Elrick and convincing them to cause this wild scene. I’m sure someone’s using Gaban, too—that mystery organization, perhaps. I can’t write it off as a conspiracy theory. It’s probably best to conduct a full investigation, but not even Soei’s found any clues yet.

If we can capture the sniper, though, maybe that’ll lead to something. Let’s hold out hope for that—and meanwhile, there’s someone else I need to consult about.

“So, Gaban, there’s something I wanted to ask…” I turned my eyes to Gaban in custody.

“Wh-what? What does a demon lord want from me?”

Even now, his attitude still had problems.

“I want you to tell me what you were scheming when you enticed Prince Elrick to join you.”

“Hmm? I’m not sure what you mean. I don’t know anything.”

“Wh-what?! Are you abandoning me?!”

“And where’s your evidence? Yes, I was asked by the prince to invite you here, but I certainly had no idea he would try something like that.”

“You will not talk your way out of this, Sir Gaban. Both the other councillors and I in this chamber will speak against your case.” Johann was having none of it, and neither were the assorted representatives nodding along with him—including a few being forced to keep standing. No problem finding witnesses, then.

“Behh… But it’s true! I didn’t know. The prince designed all of this! All I did was follow his orders!”

“Nonsense! You’re the very one who procured the orb and brought the plan to me!”

“I can’t say I know what you’re talking about. Again, you will need to find some proof—”

Gaban was sticking to his story. And as sly as I’m sure he was, he must’ve been convinced that no evidence was left. Would it be hard to pin anything on him, then? It’d probably damage his reputation for a period of time, but at this rate, I could see him returning to the scene after a while. That’s the nobility for you—you can’t take your eyes off them for a moment, and they’ll never go down too easily. A more direct approach—with weapons—would be quickest, but that was a last resort.

As I thought about this, the door suddenly opened.

“His Majesty the King Aegil is here!”

The attendant’s shout was audible across the chamber, and those responding to it immediately stood at attention. I was about to join them before Shuna and Benimaru stopped me. Yeah, me kneeling or whatever would’ve presented an awkward picture. Apart from Hinata and me, however, everyone was focused entirely on the new royal visitor. Even the chairman was bowing his head. That’s the kind of respect the king of a nation like Englesia deserved.

King Aegil glanced at the councillors Soei had restrained. He didn’t linger on them long before turning to me, his bushy blond hair going well with his curly mustache.

“I see my son’s caused you some trouble.”

“You could say that. But I think we’ve cleared up our misunderstandings?” I had no intention of exaggerating things. If human society could accept us, better to let a little rudeness now and then slide.

“…Ah. Very good. Then as his father, not as a king, I give you my apology and my appreciation.” He lightly bowed his head at me—the king himself.

I was willing to accept that. “Consider it forgiven. But I don’t want to see a repeat.”

“Yes, that I am certainly aware of. I hope to build a good relationship with you.”

King Aegil looked straight at me, providing me with what I felt were his honest feelings. I figured I should trust him on that. If he reneged, I could consider my options at that time.

“It’ll be good to work with you, then.”

“And with you.”

We shook hands. He was also kind enough to forgive the busted-up desk, so as far as I was concerned, our reconciliation was complete.

“All rise!”

Everyone raised their faces. They had all overheard our exchange, but I supposed this formality indicated that it wasn’t meant to be on the record. A king wasn’t supposed to bow to a foreign power that readily, and I supposed King Aegil saw it as a last resort.

“F-Father…”

“Enough. You need some remedial education, I see.”

“…Yes, Father.”

“Mm.”

With a nod, King Aegil turned to Gaban. “Count Gaban?”

“Your Majesty!!”

“You were talking about evidence. Were you expecting a quick escape because you thought I wouldn’t intervene?”

“N-no, Your Majesty, not at all…”

“I have called for magical inquisitors. I will let them decide your treatment.”

“Gehh?!” Now Gaban seemed concerned. He clung to the king. “P-please, forgive me! I will tell you everything, so please, Your Majesty, have mercy!”

His desperation might’ve evoked sympathy among some people, but King Aegil’s reaction was merciless. “Take him away.”

“““Sir!!”””

One glance at his attendants, and his royal guard sprang into action.

“Now, Sir Reiner, Sir Gaiye… You’ll come with us as well.”

The guard began to haul them off.

“Stop! Let me go!”

“Who do you think I am?!”

They tried to resist but were stopped in their tracks by a group of hooded men that appeared—those magical inquisitors, I supposed. Reiner and Gaiye tried to resist as well, but the men had them subdued in short order, treating those admittedly powerful men like little children. I could tell these weren’t your average prison guards, no.

Englesia really is a superpower, huh? And they got some pretty tough hombres working for them.

Report. It is likely a show of force, to prove to my master that they have powerful fighters at their disposal.

Ah. One of those “don’t mess with us” things? This must’ve been their way of demonstrating that Reiner wasn’t the best Englesia could produce, an attempt to preserve their dignity. It’s hard being a king. I guess he had to stay on his toes to keep a demon lord like me from taking advantage of him. As if Aegil wouldn’t have used my power to make Englesia the world’s dominant force if Elrick had actually succeeded…

…Well, if you wanted to keep a legion of sly, cunning nobility under your finger, I supposed you needed that type of malice in you.

“Excuse me, then. And please allow us to handle this affair.”

With that, the king’s entourage left. They confiscated the Orb of Domination, too, by the looks of it, but I didn’t mind. I had already disabled it while no one was looking—it wouldn’t do to see it used for evil purposes. It also wouldn’t do for me to carry on about it any longer, so I let it go without comment.

Following an afternoon break, we continued with the legislative session. The councillors seemed a lot less energetic than they were in the morning hours, somehow. That was lucky for me, because I didn’t need to cajole them into passing all the day’s important business.

The following three resolutions were enacted today:

• Tempest is recognized as a nation.

• Tempest will officially join the Council.

• The Council’s military rights will be assigned to Tempest.

These were accepted without protest and passed, barring any issues, by unanimous vote. It was a long road to get there, but everything I wrote up for the Council was accepted in the end.

I’m really not good at this level of brinkmanship with a room full of hungry sharks. People can scoff at my ideas all they want, but having to feel out my opponent’s mind and objectives just tires me out. I think I’ll let Raphael handle that for me from now on.

…Understood.

Today it was brute strength that let me take control of my problems. But I didn’t lash out first—it was Hinata and that charming young Shuna. In fact, I was the guy who saved Elrick’s life. This amply demonstrated the broadness of my heart, I think, so I was pretty satisfied with myself. What’s more, I had taught them all a valuable lesson: Attempting physical force against a demon lord was meaningless.

The session behind us, we left the chamber. It was a stormy day, but now, it was finally over.