

CHAPTER 1

BETWEEN MONSTER AND MAN

Clayman was never one to place too much trust in his strength.

He was the demon lord who took over all of Kazalim’s lands. Once Kazalim was defeated at the hands of the demon lord Leon, all the people who served him came to rely upon Clayman for guidance. The domains of the two lords wound up being merged under Clayman’s rule, something none of the other demon lords voiced any complaint over. It all happened fairly quickly, thanks to the ever-careful Kazalim’s preparations in case the worst came to pass.

This resulted in a large war chest for Clayman to work with, allowing him to build a first-class force despite being a relatively new member of the club. Financially speaking, he was number one in the group—or to put it another way, Clayman was the demon lord who best knew how to manage his money. He engaged in under-the-table trade with the Eastern Empire and had a roaring business going with the Dwarven Kingdom as well. Taking advantage of both trade connections allowed him access to the newest weapons and armor from both east and west.

He took advantage of his access to past relics and magical armor to boost his war power. It proved to be useful bait to make power-hungry magic-born do his bidding. His riches attracted them right to him, ripe for using and abusing. That was how Clayman preferred to do business, and it didn’t mean he was stingy with his earnings. He lavished his forces with gifts, carefully meting them out so he could establish a vast network of coconspirators in nations across the world—none of whom even knew one another’s faces.

Everything was going the way he planned it. His ultimate mission, to gain access to every piece of information and place the entire world under his rule, was already halfway complete.

The only thing Clayman lacked, he knew, was power. War, in the end, was ultimately a game of numbers—that was his reasoning and also the rationale for why he never overestimated his capabilities. No matter how much power he had built up, he knew all too well that he could still falter in the end. That was how much of a shock the demon lord Kazalim’s defeat was to him, although Clayman did feel he was a little too unprepared for it.

So he established roots at the core of each geopolitical force and gradually, carefully, expanded on them. And now, Clayman had new strength to tap, truly decisive strength. That was the demon lord Milim—capable of enough overwhelming violence to stand head and shoulders above the other nine. Carillon, whom Clayman appraised as stronger than him, barely put up a fight. She destroyed his nation completely by herself.

And now that he had the power he lacked within himself, Clayman could feel his mood soaring to the skies. He had always wanted to defeat Leon, and now he believed that desire was within sight.

Before that, however…

Heh-heh-heh. How nice to see that boy came to the same conclusion that I did. Have the hated Holy Church fight against the magic-born Rimuru—that’s the best way to sap the strength of both sides.

Have them crush each other. No need to go through any pain themselves.

To make that happen, we need more information on the Holy Church’s internal workings. Could they truly be connected with the demon lord Valentine…? If we can convene Walpurgis right when we send Laplace back in, there’s little doubt that security will be lighter. A fine plan of action!

He brought a glass of wine to his lips, savoring the taste and basking in euphoria.

The wine was a hundred-year-old vintage, old enough that one could almost taste the time and labor put into it, to say nothing of the aroma. Only the most carefully picked examples reached his cellar, carefully stored to ensure only the highest of quality, waiting ever so patiently to be served—all this, just for the sake of Clayman. To him, all of this was a given. It was perfectly natural for him to believe that, for a mighty king like him, only the best would be appropriate.

He let the aroma settle in his nose as he began to think.

“So what should be the pretext of this Walpurgis…?”

It was set for one week from now, at night. It would be a new moon that night, the time of the month when the power of vampires was at its weakest. Every measure had to be taken to ensure Valentine couldn’t flex his full muscle. The main question to figure out was the motivation—the reason why all these demon lords were coming together. He squinted, staring into thin air.

“…If we are going to attack,” he whispered lightly, “now is the time. We could take this chance to seize Carillon’s territory as well.”

“Sure, Clayman, but ya just got ordered to sit tight for a spell, didn’tcha?”

Clayman smirked at the voice that apparently came from nowhere. “You’re here, Laplace? Just as rude as always, I see.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice me. You were that lost in thought?”

“Heh-heh-heh. Can you blame me? I have been granted the opportunity twice to awaken to my full demon lord self, and I lost it both times out of my failures.”

“Ah, no need to stew over it. The way the president sees it, the Eastern Empire’s gonna go on the move soon enough either way.”

“I’m sure they will. But you see, Laplace, I’ve come up with a wonderful idea. The Beast Kingdom’s capital might be gone, but there are still a plethora of weaker races residing in its hinterlands. Perhaps I could swallow up Carillon’s territory before the other demon lords can, gather the survivors together, and kill them. That should be enough to trigger my awakening. A smart plan of action, don’t you think?”

“Whoa, whoa, kinda pushing it a bit too far, eh? I mean, killing innocent people when we still don’t really know what sets off the whole thing?”

Clayman winced. It was not the enthusiastic agreement he was expecting.

“That’s rather out of character for you, Laplace. Do you sympathize for them? The weak are there to be exploited. What could make them happier than dying for my sake?”

“Maybe, but you already killed thousands of human slaves, and that didn’t amount to nothin’, either. How’s this gonna be any different? I tell ya, it’s not a good idea to push it right now. You needa think a little more and take your time with this!”

Laplace was right. Clayman had a history of purchasing slaves, then murdering them. The number had indeed grown to several thousand, but the effort had yet to make Clayman a true demon lord. Having this pointed out to him did little to change Clayman’s mind.

“Don’t be silly, Laplace. I was their owner, and I am free to handle my purchases any way I like. If killing a thousand isn’t enough, we’ll go with ten thousand next. We know that human souls are required for the awakening. There is no need to restrain ourselves with the weak!”

He paused, letting his arrogant theory sink in Laplace’s mind.

“Besides, this plan of action is good for him, too. I’m planning to launch this Walpurgis on the pretext that there’s a new force in the Forest of Jura whose leader has declared himself a demon lord.”

“Right, that’s fine and all, but that ain’t gonna be any reason to invade the Beast Kingdom, is it?”

“Oh, but it will be, Laplace. One of my agents, Mjurran, was killed by someone while on a covert mission. I plan to declare that it was then when I realized the demon lord Carillon had turned on me. No one should have any complaint about me taking over Carillon’s territory to gather the evidence I need to prove it. After all, I was the one who suffered the loss.”

Laplace scrutinized Clayman’s words. Eurazania was adjacent to the lands ruled by Milim—hardly a ruler who cared much about things like “gathering evidence.” The fact that Milim had defeated Carillon was really all Clayman needed to back up his alibi. He could even say he sent Milim over to investigate, for that matter. That way, Clayman’s forces could go through Milim’s land to reach the Beast Kingdom, and no one would have any reason to object. And once things were at that point, fabricating some evidence would be the easy part.

There was nothing unnatural about any of this plan. But Laplace still didn’t think now was the time to act.

Aren’tcha panicking a little too much, Clayman? Not that I’m gonna change your mind anytime soon, but…

“Yeah, what you’re saying all makes sense…”

Then Laplace recalled something that had nearly slipped past him.

“…but hang on, she’s been killed?”

He knew full well that Clayman thought extremely little of Mjurran, but Laplace thought of her as a decent, trustworthy magic-born. In Clayman’s bureaucracy, she was one of the five fingers, the highest echelons of leadership. She wasn’t too good in a fight, but as a wizard who could handle almost any situation, she was highly valued as rearguard support. Plus, she often had handy advice for Laplace and the rest of the Moderate Jesters, even if she acted like she hated it.

More than anything, though, Mjurran had common sense. Laplace gave her top marks for that.

“Ah yes,” the unmoved Clayman replied. “I don’t know what that disappointed tone in your voice is, but yes, she’s dead.”

“Huh. She died, eh…? You’re sure about that?”

“Mm? The Marionette Heart I implanted in her broke. Her real heart, which I kept here, crumbled into ash and disappeared. So yes, I’m quite sure, thank you. Her role in my outfit was over anyway, so you could say it was good timing.”

The flatness of Clayman’s report saddened Laplace a little. “C’mon, Clayman,” he chided, “would it really hurt ya to be a little sadder when one of yer best people passes away?”

He used to be a better man that that. Ever since he reached the demon lord ranks, it’s like he’s grown more and more twisted…

And this wasn’t a phenomenon limited to Clayman. Well near everyone in the Moderate Jesters—the group that Laplace called home—seemed to begin warping a bit personality-wise, as he saw it. Laplace himself was the same. He certainly had no business criticizing Clayman for it, but he still couldn’t shake the feeling that Clayman had fundamentally changed.

“Ha-ha-ha! Oh, you’re too kind, Laplace. Did you know that Teare said the same thing earlier? ‘You need to treat your tools right,’ she told me, ‘or else they’ll fall apart.’ I believe she learned that from you, Laplace? But that is exactly why, if a tool falls apart on you, you have to make the perpetrator pay for it. I can atone for the tool as well, then, can’t I?”

The sight of Clayman’s artificial smile made Laplace give up pursuing the question any further. “…Yeah. I’d like to keep her death from going to waste, at least.”

“Of course you do. I thought you would say that.”

Another smile.

Not quite how I meant it, Clayman…

It generated a wealth of mixed emotions in Laplace’s mind. He shook it off, wondering if there were any cracks in Clayman’s plan he had failed to notice.

“But y’know, Clayman, about that Walpurgis… Isn’t anyone else gonna complain atcha about it?”

“Oh, they may.” The smile disappeared from Clayman’s face. Now it was twisted in unwavering confidence and warped desire. “But now that I have Milim at my beck and call, I can just toss her in their direction, and that’s it.”

Laplace turned pale. “Now wait a minute! That’s dangerous talk, there! He said there’s a chance Milim could go berserk, too, didn’t he? Just because the president built that Artifact doesn’t mean you can get away with relying on it for everything.”

“It’s going to be all right, Laplace. Milim fully followed my orders.”

“So I heard. But she also went off script and made that crazy war declaration, didn’t she? She’s ancient by demon lord standards; she’s got to have a hell of a lot of resistance against outside influence. If you come to rely on that lady too much, I think it’s your neck on the line, y’know?”

But Clayman had little interest in the impassioned warning. “Are you envious, Laplace, that Milim is under my full control?”

“No! I’m saying that they call it a ‘trump card’ ’cause you save it until the final deal!”

“Enough from you. You have nothing to worry about. He wishes to see me awaken as a true demon lord. To do that, I will overrun the Beast Kingdom. If anyone stands in my way, I will show you just how easily I will mow them down.”

“Hang on a sec! He and the president just told you to sit tight, didn’t they? What you needa be thinkin’ about right now is how we’ll navigate this Walpurgis thing!”

“Trust in me, Laplace. If I merely sit here and do whatever Lord Kazalim tells me to do, that will not fulfill his goals for me. Now is the time to go on the attack!”

That was enough to fully shut down Laplace’s desperate protests.

In the end, Laplace was unable to stop Clayman. They were in agreement on some things, and it wasn’t that Clayman was wildly diverging from his orders. But Laplace just couldn’t shake the premonition that something was up with the demon lord. So he spoke once more.

“Listen, Clayman. Lemme ask you one more thing: Did you really decide on this plan of action on yer own free will?”

“What are you talking about, Laplace? There are two people in the world who can give me orders: Lord Kazalim and the one who resurrected him. You should be more aware of that than anyone.”

He was right. If Clayman saw nothing wrong with his scheme, Laplace had no authority to intervene. He had his own work to do, infiltrating the Western Holy Church a second time.

“All right. No worries, then. I need to get goin’, but you be careful, too, okay, Clayman? Now’s not the time to be too reckless. Whatever ya do, don’t letcher guard down.”

With that final warning, Laplace took his leave, allowing Clayman to refocus on his own thoughts.

Did he mean to accuse me of being under the influence of another? Ridiculous. Or perhaps…is he worried that I will reap all the spoils of victory for myself, because I have Milim’s powers to use as I please? Hardly like him to be jealous…

Clayman never overestimated his own strength. The self-confidence that controlling Milim gave him, however, had emboldened him. And now, it had made him take the words of Laplace, his most trustworthy of confidants, and dismiss them as mere jealousy against him.

It was with some disappointment in his friend that he took another sip of his wine. Now, however, it was bitter. The mellow sweetness from before was nowhere to be found.

…Curse it all!

Suddenly, Clayman threw the glass in his hand against the wall. His anger was making him act out, following orders given from emotions not even he could understand.

The force of the outburst made the bottle of first-rate wine on the table shatter. But Clayman didn’t care. Instead, to calm his nerves, he took something out from his pocket—a mask molded into a smiling face.

“Don’t you worry, Laplace. I’m going to make this awakening work, and then I will have the world in my grasp. All right, Laplace? I’m not going to lose this again! So this time, at least, let’s all be one happy family together…”

There, by himself in that room, Clayman reminded himself of the hopes hidden in his heart—rubbing the mask softly, as if running his hand over a precious treasure.

Right. First decision: defeat the demon lord Clayman. That’s set in stone. If you got someone lurking around in the darkness, trying to pull off some grand scheme, better to rub him out ahead of anything else. Plus, now that I’ve declared myself to be a demon lord, I need ways to keep the other demon lords from taking action against me. Sacrificing Clayman should be a fine way to do that. There’s the other reason.

As long as we don’t know why Milim decided to pick a fight with Carillon, we can’t really rely on what she says. Time to throw my weight around a little and keep things from getting any gloomier going forward. Besides, Clayman just went too far. He needs to feel the retribution. To pay for what he did.

Moving on, our future direction. Yohm was a popular guy in Farmus, hailed as a hero by most. We’ll take advantage of this to have the current king of Farmus released from imprisonment and forced to come to the negotiating table. I want the kingdom to be a thing of the past by the time we’re done. Beyond that, we need to figure out how to deal with the Western Holy Church, as well as send out declarations to the nations we’ve signed pacts with so they’ll know our take on matters.

We had a lot to talk about. Something told me it was going to be kind of a long meeting.

I kicked things off by taking a report from Soei. Clayman was on the move, apparently, and we needed to hear all the details and confer over what to do. Thus, I was on my way to our main meeting hall, expecting to meet with Tempest leadership and the Three Lycanthropeers.

As I did, my Universal Detect sniffed out a group of fifty or so approaching town. Huh? Oh, it’s Fuze, guild master from the kingdom of Blumund. Before long, our security team had us all face-to-face. He pushed through his own soldiers to see me, his face grim.

“It has been much too long, Sir Rimuru. I am only glad that I made it here in time! We have come to satisfy our duty under the terms of the security agreement signed between Blumund and Tempest, and I feared I was already too late.”

He smiled as he spoke, but he still looked at me intensely, and the soldiers surrounding him looked ready to face death at any moment. Each was fully equipped, heavily armored, and prepared for war.

“Whoa. The guild master himself? What on…?”

“Ha-ha! No need to put it like that. Thegis is ready to take over my post, should it come to it. I’ve heard many things about this town from our merchants, that sneak Mjöllmile in particular. You’ve been engaged with the Kingdom of Farmus, it seems…”

Huh? Ummm…?

Come to think of it, I suppose it had been about ten days since we brought our visitors from Blumund back home. Did they immediately suit up and come running to our aid the moment they heard the news? Great if they did, but…

“…Even if we lack the time to erect a defensive wall,” Fuze feverishly continued, “it would be best to build a circle of personnel around the city to beef up our defenses. It doesn’t look like Farmus’s main force has arrived yet, but there is no telling when their vanguard troops may reach us. We’ve passed the date of their war ultimatum, yes?”

The steely resolve in his eyes seemed clear to me as he said his piece. Well, not just “seemed.” They were clear to me. He had already willed his guild master’s seat to Thegis. I guess he really was here to fight to the death for Tempest.

But um…you know… It’s all kinda over already. And with the way Fuze and his soldiers were all decked out in their finest equipment, ready to fan out the moment I said the word, I wasn’t too sure how to give the news.

“Or perhaps you actually intend to seize the initiative and attack first? I have to tell you, Sir Rimuru, that could be a brash move. According to our intelligence, we have confirmed sightings of an army nearly twenty thousand strong. We lack the numbers to defeat them in a frontal assault. Over the past few days, I have been working my connections—I now have a team of three hundred adventurers on standby. They may be few in number, but I assure you they are at your beck and call. This may be a protracted war; our best bet might be to use the forest landscape to wage a guerrilla campaign…”

Fuze was wholeheartedly devoted to us. Almost to the point where I wondered if he should be, really.

“Still,” he confidently concluded, “it gladdens my heart to be able to fight alongside the beasts and creatures who call this forest home.”

Now it was even harder to tell him. The Tempest leaders around me were stone silent, and the contingent from Eurazania was visibly confused. This stuff was already in the past for us all. Like, I wasn’t expecting them to actually lend us support! I know we had that treaty, but it had more than enough loopholes in its interpretation to let them weasel out of this stuff. But, however few, Fuze still got a bunch of fighters together and zoomed right over here. I was kinda happy to see that, but—

“…Ah, what a fine town this is. Beautiful buildings, well-designed houses, paved roads… It pains me to admit it, but it is far more splendid than anything one could find in Blumund. I can understand your reluctance against turning it into a battlefield. But we must hold out and await reinforcements! Our king has promised to deploy our knights, and while it will take them time to prepare—”

“Ahhh, Fuzie, one moment?”

I hated to do it, but I had to stop him, or else we were gonna be here all day.

“Yes, Sir Rimuru? Did you have a suggestion for our strategy?”

“Um, yeah, our, our strategy… Like, if you wanna call it that…”

“Is this something to be kept secret from us? Certainly, I can understand your suspicion, but I hope you can place your trust in—”

“N-no, no, Fuzie! I really appreciate what you’ve done, but it’s all over now!”

“Huh? Over? How do you mean?”

“Um, how to put it…? Well, to sum up, I kind of killed ’em all!”

“…Um? Them all? Them all, who? What are you talking about?”

I could understand his confusion.

“I mean, um, the army from Farmus you were talking about? I killed ’em all!”

“Wh-whaaa?!”

That was about all the utterly shocked Fuze could choke out. Yohm stepped up to give him a pat on the shoulder, while Kabal offered a few condolences of his own.

“No, I bet he wouldn’t believe it,” commented Elen.

“Nope,” Gido added.

Nope, indeed. It hadn’t even been two weeks since that war declaration. I suppose Fuze figured their main force would reach Tempest in a week, so we’d buy two or three days of time in open-field combat and prepare for a siege in the worst case. Considering how the war should’ve started days ago, and we were totally serene about it, I figured he had to think it was at least a bit weird by now—but seeing all of us assembled like this, he must’ve assumed we were about to sally forth and attack, or something.

In his eyes, we went from dealing with a delayed Farmus force to the war being in the books. That was a lot to take in at once, wasn’t it?

“The other day,” Rigurd finally began, “we sent my son Rigur out to you to give the news. You two must have missed each other along the way, I fear. But it is just as Sir Rimuru says. The war is already over.”

Between his and Kabal’s and Elen’s supplemental commentary, we managed in a little over a few minutes to convince Fuze that we weren’t pulling an elaborate prank.

“You must be joking,” I heard him whisper under his breath, but time heals all wounds and all that.

The fifty fighters accompanying him weren’t too enthused about it, either, so I ordered our soldiers to take them to our barracks and let them rest up. They looked exhausted enough to collapse on the spot, limp and lifeless. Hearing that there wasn’t any war to fight would cut the tension in pretty short order, I thought. They had apparently been relying on natural trails in the forest instead of the highway, in order to avoid encountering Farmus forces, and all that bushwhacking in full armor couldn’t have been fun.

So the fighters all muttered their thanks to us as they marched off to their quarters. All that remained was the hangdog-looking Fuze.

“Why don’t you get some rest, too, Fuzie?”

“Yes…” He nodded at me. “Yes, this has put my mind in quite a state of disorder. If I could lie down for a bit…”

But just as he was about to walk toward the barracks, another guest interrupted him with (im)perfect timing.

“Oops. Here’s someone else. And who could it be but…”

“But?” Fuze asked, stopping as he heard me mutter. He should’ve kept going. Once he saw who it was, resting was the last thing on his mind—because standing right there was Gazel Dwargo, king of the dwarves himself.

Something I had noticed a while ago: Having my Magic Sense skill evolve into Universal Detect had made my ability to grasp my surroundings far more accurate across a much wider range. Despite how far away they were from town, I could spot the squadron of Pegasus Knights flying in remarkably fast.

Report. Thirty knights incoming. The individual Gazel Dwargo is confirmed to be in the vanguard position.

The ultimate skill Raphael, Lord of Wisdom, gave the report as if nothing could be more trivial.

With this upgrade in accuracy, I was now able to detect and identify people I had met before. That’s incredibly convenient. Convenient…but with this range, easily enough to cover the whole town and a great deal beyond, I’m starting to think this is literally too much information. To be frank, I’m getting sick of all these reports, every single time.

So could you keep ’em a bit more on the brief side, Sage…um, I mean, Raphael? To be exact, you can report in when someone’s approaching only if they’re malicious or harmful to me or whatever.

……Understood.

It felt like Raphael really wanted to say something back there, but nothing to get worked up about. It’s always best to assign all the dirty work to someone else, if you can. Leave it to Raphael! That’s my motto.

So I turned my skill down to the minimum setting as I awaited our guests. Since it was the skill performing the ID for me, I could rest assured that these were no impostors. But before I could even tell Fuze, the Pegasus Knights flitted down in front of us. King Gazel dismounted first.

He smiled the moment he spotted me. “Ah, Rimuru, nice to see you again! So I hear you’ve become a demon lord?”

Oh, that. I thought he’d want a word about that. Didn’t expect him to fly on over himself, though.

“Ah, yeah, kinda. There’s been a lot of stuff going on around here, Gazel, so I figured I’d become a demon lord.” I gave him an awkward grin. “Not to make you feel unwelcome or anything, but we were just about to all meet up and discuss our future strategy.”

“Well, perfect! I would be happy to join this conference,” he declared, like it was his god-given right.

It was right about then that Fuze, exhausted and ready to cry, came up to me.

“Demon lord…? What in heavens is that all about?!”

He had heard our conversation from the side, and I could tell he wasn’t about to let it slide. Yeah, I didn’t really talk about that, either… Going in depth right now would just be a pain in the ass, but Fuze wasn’t going to accept a polite no, I could tell.

“Sir Rimuru, I find it hard to ignore what you just said! Because it sounded very much to me that you have become a demon lord—or something to that effect…?”

He was shaking from head to toe, about ready to pee his pants.

“Um, if you needed a bathroom, it’s down this street and—”

“I do not need a bathroom! I never said anything about a bathroom! This ‘demon lord’ business… Tell me what you mean by it!”

I suppose that feint didn’t work. Fuze was clearly starting to lose his temper, and his real personality was starting to show itself.

“Oh. Um, yeah, demon lord. Well,” I replied as breezily as possible, “I’m one of ’em now.”

This, sadly, didn’t end the topic.

“Ha-ha-ha! Rather poor taste for a joke, wouldn’t you think? I was hoping for a more serious answer from you…”

Ugghh, this is such a pain. Do I have to start from the very beginning before you’ll get off my back? And now I could see Gazel looking curiously at me, too. So as much as I hated going through all this in the middle of the street, I gave them both a quick recap.

Once I wrapped up, I noticed Fuze was muttering to nobody in particular, eyes glazed over. His mind must’ve shut off in an attempt to avoid the reality of it all. At least he wasn’t lecturing me or anything. Leaving him to his own ranting, I turned to King Gazel again.

“By the way, Gazel, are you sure it’s all right for a king to slip out of his own kingdom that easily?”

It was a sincere concern of mine. Not that I’m one to talk, but the king was being allowed way too long a leash, wasn’t he? The Armed Nation of Dwargon, in terms of national power, had to be several dozen times stronger a nation than ours. Wasn’t the king going out on trips whenever he pleased kind of a problem?

“Pfft. What is the issue? I have a decoy fully serving for me!”

Huh? I thought decoys were meant for, like, drawing the attention of assassins away from the real thing or something? Or were they meant for playing hooky like this? I wasn’t too sure either way, but whatever. Gazel had Pegasus Knight captain Dolph with him, along with quite a number of his trusted companions. For a security detail, it was almost too extensive.

“Regardless, Rimuru…” He turned his now-kingly eyes toward me. “The report Vester sent me three days ago—that was no mistake, then?”

“Oh, you mean the twenty thousand—”

“Wait, Rimuru. I had heard the Farmus force had gone missing under mysterious circumstances. Do you know something about that?”

“Uh, missing?”

Huh? What was he talking about?

“The way Vester phrased it,” he slowly continued, “a force of some twenty thousand troops simply vanished before they could reach this town. Do you have any idea what may have happened to them?”

He gave Vester a sidelong glance out the corner of his eye, the silent pressure he emitted almost making his subject collapse to the ground. I joined his gaze. Vester vigorously shook his head at me.

“I received the report as well, Vester.”

This was Vaughn speaking, admiral paladin for the dwarven army and sworn friend to King Gazel; and to Vester right now, a source of terror.

“At the time, I believe you told us that the Farmus force had disappeared, and you were investigating why. The report was curious enough to us that we decided to venture over ourselves, but is this the explanation?”

His annoyance might be understandable. I had just brutally massacred a force of twenty thousand, and Gazel and Vester were trying to kind of gloss over it.

“Well, yes, um, the cause still isn’t quite known yet…”

Vester began choosing his words carefully, trying to guess at the intentions of his dwarven friends. He was a quick thinker like that, already trying to bury the lede on what I had done.

“Fool!” I heard Gazel whisper to me. “If you tell the truth here, you’ll become an enemy to all humanity—or if not the enemy, a symbol of terror worldwide.”

Yeah, I guess so, come to think of it. Someone who can kill in the five figures on one go was scarier than a nuclear bomb, really. The fewer people who knew about this, the better—and certainly, nations and people who weren’t directly involved at all didn’t need to hear the story. The Kingdom of Farmus attempted to invade monster lands, only to go completely missing due to an unknown incident or incidents. That much was the truth, decent enough to spread across the land.

There’s Gazel for you. Far more shrewd than I would ever be. Which means I now have to walk back what I just said a moment ago. Ugh.

I didn’t mind if the townspeople knew; that wasn’t the problem, and it was too late now anyway. Nobody was about to go blabbing it to the general public regardless. The main issue was Fuze. I gave him a glance; he was still in a state of panicked confusion.

“Ummm, Fuzie?”

“Sir Rimuruuu…”

So now what? I just declared to him that I wiped out the entire Farmus military by myself. Should I laugh it off as a lie?

But as I thought about it, Fuze sighed and raised his arms up. “I heard nothing. And of course, I don’t think my fighters in the barracks will remember anything by tomorrow morning. We’re all so exhausted right now, we must be hearing voices in our heads.”

Guess he’s staying mum for me. He seemed remarkably more aged to me now, sorrowful. I suppose he found this the most convenient way to solve the problem—and certainly, the best way to tie up all the strings here right now.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee… In that case, allow me to visit them to make sure,” Diablo offered. He had sidled up next to me out of nowhere with that smile on his face again. Funny guy. The perfect butler. You could ask pretty much anything of him, and he’d do it. At the moment, he was gleefully taking care of the assorted errands I asked him to do. I think I might have heard him whisper “I am quite gifted at altering memories” to me just now, but let’s pretend I didn’t.

Fuze had mixed feelings about it, I could tell, but he was willing to deal with it as long as his people were safe. He understood King Gazel’s take—the fewer people who knew, the better. When politics get involved like this, governments might not be afraid to shut witnesses up permanently, after all. Maybe it’s smarter to shut your eyes now and again.

Still…

“I will not question how my fighters are handled, but I insist on joining this conference of yours.”

It sounded to me like this was one point Fuze refused to negotiate on. His eyes were resolute—he must’ve figured the topic of our meeting wasn’t something he could afford to be in the dark on.

“All right.” I shrugged. “I want you to believe that I’m not hostile to humanity. I won’t keep you out.”

And so, Rigurd guided Fuze to a waiting room. Since we now had a dwarven contingent participating, we needed to set up a larger meeting hall for everybody, and in the meantime, they could all probably use some rest.

“Hmph,” grumbled Gazel as we saw them go off. “You trust that man, Rimuru?”

“Yeah, he’s safe.”

Fuze was a trustworthy man. I was confident enough in that.

“Mm. Then I suppose the problem is those people.”

He turned his attention toward the empty space behind us. Um, or was it empty? I turned around, surprised, only to find an unfamiliar group watching us. There was a well-dressed gentleman at the lead, his face well-defined; he must have been very popular with the opposite sex when he was younger. His eyes were notably sharp, and he was flanked on both sides by five or so guards, all outfitted in similarly fine gear; perhaps high-ranked military officers or the like.

The group was clearly well trained, and…man, they were right behind me this whole time, and I never noticed? What the hell happened to Universal Detect, man?!

However, I was the only concerned witness, it turned out.

Report. No clear hostility detected among the group.

If that’s what the somewhat pouty Raphael had to say, I could believe it. Maybe this was my fault. I did just tell it to stop giving me reports all the time. I suppose “malicious or harmful” is a bit too vague to make much sense of. Raphael had a right to be angry, perhaps.

Sorry, I said to myself. Go ahead and give the full reports from now on. It seemed kind of lame, really, apologizing to one of my own skills, but I at least wanted to express my feelings.

As I underwent this internal conflict, Gazel and the mystery group were already engaging each other.

“And you people are…?”

“Ah, I see it’s the emperor who enjoys hiding in his underground burrow! Very impressive, to see a coward like you provide backing to the ‘demon lord’ like this…”

The stern greeting did nothing to break the man’s easygoing style. He was clearly trying to goad the dwarven king while the officers rolled their eyes at him in exasperation.

Gazel, recognizing them all, flashed a bold smile. “Aha. You, then. The elf descendants whose heads are always in the clouds. Did you descend from that fancy tree city of yours, then?”

I suppose they all knew each other. Raphael was right—no malice to speak of; these two just didn’t get along too well, is all. Or more like they enjoyed arguing for the sake of arguing.

“Sir Rimuru, I believe these to be envoys from the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion,” stated Soka, one of Soei’s operatives. She had apparently brought these people here—and once the man recognized King Gazel, he immediately started giving him crap.

“You never change, do you, Erald?”

“Neither do you, Gazel.”

This was the way the two decided to greet each other, looks of sheer contempt on their faces.

“And that girl there is…?”

“Oh, hello there. My name’s Rimuru, and I run things around the forest alliance we have here.”

Erald, the squinty-eyed guy, had his eyes turned to me, so I gave him a casual hello. Any visitors from Thalion needed to be treated with the utmost courtesy—not that I really knew anything about manners or diplomatic customs or anything. Becoming a demon lord’s great and all, but it’s not like there’s an instruction manual for it. Hopefully I’ll track someone down who can teach me the finer points sometime.

Upon hearing my name, Erald suddenly tensed up—then opened his eyes as wide as he could. “You!” he bellowed. “The demon lord who seduced my daughter! I hope you are prepared to atone for that!”

He immediately began to cast what even I could tell was a vastly overpowered flame spell. Yikes. Chill out, dude.

Based on the knowledge I gathered, a flame spell on such a high level was one of the most difficult pieces of magic to pull off. The whole family of fire magic occupied its own branch in the tree of aspectual magic, starting with your garden-variety puff of Fire and moving on from there to Fireball and the more difficult Fire Wall and Fire Storm. The harder it is to pull off, the more of a boom it makes.

At the very peak of this scale lies what, for the sake of simplicity, I call “compounding” magic. Combining the burning nature of flame spells with the shock-wave effects of explosive spells, for example, can provide magic on a scale beyond either of the original two types. That was just the type of compounding Shizu was gifted at, come to think of it. The main difference was that she relied on an elemental spirit to power her casting. That’s not easy, not unless you’re as talented a caster as Shizu was, but once you have that relationship in place, the elemental will do most of the fine-tuning for you.

Compounded spells on the very tippy top of the scale like this were quite hazardous, because they required you to control the magic manually. But since they were not a part of any “official” magic family, they offered a great deal of freedom. You had full control, juggling aspects of the spell like launch speed, targeting accuracy, size and scope of the effect, and duration. If brute strength was all you wanted, you could level a town easily enough with one.

This, of course, came at some danger to the caster. You needed enough spiritual force to gather the required magicules together to keep the spell under control, or else it wouldn’t work, letting that energy run amok instead of being consumed—and potentially raze the entire area around you. It goes without saying that this sort of magic wasn’t something the general public saw much of—we’re talking literally military-grade stuff. You had to be at least an accredited wizard to be allowed to touch it.

It was absolutely not the kind of thing I wanted in my city, and now Erald was casting it. What was he thinking? It made no sense to me. And what’s he mean seduced?

The whole thing left me confused for a moment, but again, I shouldn’t have worried. From the side came a loud bang, like someone fired off a shotgun, and then Elen’s distressed shouting.

“Dad, come onnnn! What are you here for?!”

She barged in, looking livid, and immediately gave Erald a bop on the head before he could react. It was enough for him to come back to his senses. I suppose he was her father, then? And judging by the chewing out Elen was giving him, he must’ve been a bit regretful by now. Scary, isn’t it, seeing someone fly into a rage without warning like that? He seemed like such an intellectual gentleman, like Gazel. So much for that.

“Ah… Ha-ha-ha. Sorry about that,” he said with a cheerful smile. “I was informed that a demon lord had kidnapped my daughter, and I suppose I lost my cool for a moment.”

Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you get to cast maximum-force fire magic in my town. What a loony dad.

“No, my lord,” one of his men, a timid-looking assistant, coolly observed. “Our reports involved far more than that, but you jumped to a hasty conclusion.”

“See? I knew it! This is totally your fault, Daddd!”

I felt a little bad for Dad, visibly withering on the spot, but he had it coming. If anything, I wanted him to regret it even more.

“…You always were too overprotective a father,” Gazel said once things calmed down.

“I am not,” Erald fired back unapologetically. “How can I help it? Elen is simply too precious to me.”

“Yes, all children are to their parents, but… Ah, this is pointless.”

The way Gazel rolled his eyes told me that Erald was known for this. You can’t fix the fatherly instinct, I guess.

Once things had simmered down between Gazel and Erald, Elen stepped up to say hello, an elegant air surrounding her despite her rough adventurer’s garb.

“I am sorry I have been out of contact, King Gazel.”

“Ah, Ellwyn? I hardly recognized you! How grand it is to see you in good health. I see the years have been very kind to your beauty!”

“Keep your hands off her, Gazel!” Erald interjected, earning him another slap from Elen and round of admonishment from his assistant. Gazel just shrugged, apparently used to this act. If Elen’s on the scene, her father just loses all sense of self, doesn’t he? Not exactly the member of the intelligentsia I took him for at first. Better watch out for that.

“Sir Rimuru, this is Erald Grimwald, my father and archduke of Thalion.”

“It is an honor to meet you, leader of Jura and master of the monsters. As my daughter just said, I am Archduke Erald Grimwald. Please, just Erald is fine.”

So this guy’s an archduke in the Sorcerous Dynasty? That’s pretty high up there, isn’t it? Dwargon isn’t the only kingdom sending their big guns over to see us. I would later learn that he was closely related to the Thalion royal family—the current emperor’s uncle, in fact. That explained why he was acting so familiar and casual around Gazel. To put it simply, he was one of three most powerful people from his native country.

I could hardly hide my surprise. Does that mean…? Wow, is Elen some kind of crazy-influential fairy-tale princess?! I knew she was of noble blood, but not that much! She’s not far from the throne at all, lineage-wise, and she’s working as an adventurer? Talk about being given a lot of freedom! And I can’t be the only one to think it’d be better to put a stop to that, not that Elen herself would likely care. I imagined she probably had people keeping an eye on her, given how sure she was that the advice she gave me on becoming a demon lord would come back to haunt her. And all that trouble she gives Kabal and Gido, too. I really ought to reward them for that next time.

But for now…

“So did you travel here just to inquire about Elen?”

I doubted it, as I sized up Erald.

“Hee-hee-hee! No, of course not. As we consider how we should interact with your nation, I wanted a chance to see you with my own eyes—this leader that my daughter seems so fond of. Given the sense of authority you appear to bring to your people, I find it hard to believe you are a slime at all… But still, I feel I have a much more complete picture of your strengths now.”

He accentuated this with a nefarious-sounding laugh. I suppose that overpowered flame strike was his way of testing me as well. Me—and Benimaru, Shuna, and Shion adjacent; none demonstrated a hint of panic—it wouldn’t have; they had already seen he had no intention of actually launching it. Given how hotheaded they all were not long ago, that was some palpable growth.

“It was clear,” Shuna explained, “that you had far less than the required energy needed for the spell you were casting, once I read what it was.”

Erald grinned at this, a bit ashamed that his act was spotted for what it was.

“Well, I suppose I have quite a while to go, if you can see through me that clearly!”

“Not at all,” she calmly replied. “Between the speed at which you deployed it and the skill you showed at making it look real, it was an impressive sight to see. Considering the artificial body you possess, that level of accuracy is remarkable.”

“Oh? You noticed I was using a homunculus? Color me surprised.”

“Yes. It seemed to me you had fused your spiritual body into it. Very impressive. It would certainly take a nation of magic-users such as yours to pull that off.”

I used Analyze and Assess at Shuna’s suggestion. She was right; Erald had borrowed this body from somewhere else. His officers were all “real,” but once you reach the higher ranks of nobility, I suppose it paid to be careful. I had thought he was rather lightly outfitted for a summit with a self-styled demon lord. Maybe the dwarven King Gazel over there was the crazy one.

Still, it was really something. An elaborately fine-tuned homunculus, indistinguishable from a human being. Once things calm down, I’d love to learn how that works.

So Erald was here to size up our nation and its leaders. That and a few other things, too, I’m sure, but we can tackle that later. No need to force it out of him right this moment.

Since he’s here and all, I figured I might as well have him join the conference, so he’d have more stuff to judge us with. I wanted his take on our future direction as well, and this would be a good opportunity for that. It might result in us and the Sorcerous Dynasty becoming enemies, of course, but we’d just have to cross that bridge when we came to it.

Gobta ran up to inform me that the meeting hall was ready.

I was planning to have this be a more informal confab between Jura buddies, but things had changed. This really was a summit. Usually, with things like these, you’d have lower-level diplomats meet up first and agree in advance on questions to ask and topics to tackle, figuring out where there was room for compromise once both sides were aware of each other’s stakes. Here, though, there was no greasing the gears in advance. We’d be giving frank opinions to each other, and in the end, we’d pin down our federation’s future. It wouldn’t be going too far to call it a war of words.

Steeling my resolve, I headed for the meeting hall, ready to emcee one of the most important gatherings I—and Tempest—had ever experienced.

In later years, the event would come to be known as the Monster-and-Man Summit.

In the hall, I found everyone standing upright, awaiting our arrival. All the main powerbrokers in the event—the Three Lycanthropeers, Fuze, King Gazel, and Archduke Erald—were shown to their guest seats. Once I took my own at the far end of the hall, everyone else sat down.

The air was heavy when the talks began.

We began by having each side introduce themselves, given the multiple large nations now involved. Some already knew one another, but I thought it best for politeness’ sake that everybody was on the same page.

“So. Let’s begin by having our guests introduced.”

I turned to Shuna, who promptly began reading off names.

The Beast Kingdom of Eurazania, represented by the Three Lycanthropeers from the Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance. Given that Phobio and Sufia had a slight—all right, serious—tendency to think with their sword-swingin’ muscles instead of their brains, I figured we’d mostly be focused on Alvis’s feedback.

The Armed Nation of Dwargon, land of the dwarves, represented by their kin himself, Gazel Dwargo. He seemed perfectly content with me trying to cover up the whole twenty-thousand-dead thing. He undoubtedly had his own motivations for it, so I suppose I ought to keep that under consideration. It seemed like I’d be able to rely on him quite a bit going forward.

The kingdom of Blumund, represented by…no one, officially, although having the nation’s guild master in Fuze wasn’t a bad substitute. Fuze was intimately connected with Baron Veryard, one of the kingdom’s top ministers, so he did have enough authority to be here and provide some valuable advice.

The Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, very suddenly represented by Archduke Erald—a sharp-minded, noble-looking, powerful figure, even if he was near powerless to defy his beloved daughter. If he was here to gauge the worth of our nation, I presumed he wasn’t foolish enough to let Elen sway his judgment. He wasn’t someone to neglect—and definitely not someone to drop my guard around.

Besides…Thalion was powerful enough to take on the entire Council by itself, on the same level as Dwargon. If all went well, we could establish formal ties with them, perhaps. I didn’t want to be greedy, though, so baby steps would be key in dealing with him.

Sizing them all up like this, we had a fairly prestigious lineup here. In a way, I was glad all these humans were here for it. If it was just us Forest of Jura denizens, our deliberations might’ve drifted off the rails entirely.

Next came introductions from the Tempest side. One by one, I had my top brass talk about themselves a little bit. Rigurd and the hobgoblin elders practically oozed authority by this point, decked out in befittingly regal-ish clothing and not losing out at all to their counterparts in foreign lands. More regal than myself, really. The bedrock of our whole nation.

Once every department in town checked in, we next heard from Treyni, dryad and caretaker of the forest. Having such a lofty local presence around seemed to surprise Erald at first, but he bottled it up and nodded a greeting to her. Gazel found this more than a little amusing, even though I’m sure he and his crew were just as surprised about the whole damn thing when they first met her. Ah well.

Finally, there was the contingent from Farmus—Yohm, Mjurran, and Gruecith as well. I wanted to have them build a new nation for me, something I was planning to suggest at this summit. Would people be open to it? That was a vital part of the whole thing, something that’d augur the ultimate success of this event.

Once Shion and Diablo behind me gave a couple of quick hellos, the meet-and-greet part of the summit was over. Oh, wait. Forgot someone.

“Shuna, do we have a change of clothes for Veldora?”

“Yes, Sir Veldora is…”

Before Shuna could finish, a loud, hearty Gwaaah-ha-ha-ha! filled the hall. I wanted some clothing for him since being in the buff probably wouldn’t impress too many visitors, and it looks like we were just in time. The doors opened to reveal Veldora, taking in the sight curiously. I stood up to greet him and explain things to our visitors.

“I have one more friend to introduce, one whose name should be familiar to you all. I know this may sound surprising, but…”

The Tempestians in the audience nervously gulped. They already knew Veldora well enough, but having a legendary, villainous dragon in their presence still unnerved them more than a little bit. I could feel the electricity in the air as silence began to take hold.

“This is the Jura-Tempest Federation’s friend, Veldora.”

“Yes, Veldora! Some also refer to me as the Storm Dragon! Although, so few have an encounter with me and live to tell the tale, so perhaps you all should consider yourselves lucky. Lucky and honored to be in my lofty presence!!”

Pompous as always, I could see, although it suited him well. But could I really trust him to behave at a summit like this? All I could picture was him growing bored in five minutes and attempting to butt in.

“For today’s summit, I was kinda hoping you could join in as an adviser and maybe try to stay on good behavior. Or you can leave, if you want?”

“Gah-ha-ha-ha! Why the cold shoulder, Rimuru? Don’t leave me out of the party!”

“Well, look, we’re trying to have a serious conversation here, so just try not to get in the way, all right?”

“Trust me! There is no way I would ever interfere with you!”

If that’s how he saw it, I had to be content with that. If worse came to worst, I could give him some of that beloved manga he took from my mind to keep him quiet.

The hall remained quiet as Veldora and I spoke, nobody moving an inch.

Well… Hmm? Actually, Fuze and Elen had passed out on the floor. Rigurd and the other hob-gobs were prostrating themselves before us for some reason, while Gazel was shouting “A moment, Rimuru, please! We must discuss this at once!!” and order was generally falling apart all over the place. The whole thing was pandemonium, and it goes without saying that the summit had to go into recess for a bit. Not that we had started yet.

There was panic in the aisles, a lot more than I was expecting. You would think the apocalypse was here. Man… That Veldora. Guess that Storm Dragon stuff wasn’t just a nickname after all. I suppose I should’ve expected it. Having a catastrophe-rated monster, the highest level of danger there was, stroll into the meeting hall without warning was bound to lead to chaos. They were treated as stronger than demon lords, even.

But think about it. If that guy’s gonna sow chaos sooner or later, might as well get his intro out of the way quickly. Considering my plans, I couldn’t leave Veldora and his motivations out of the picture. So I wanted him here, even if it left the other guests limp and pale with terror.

As much as Veldora was keeping his aura bottled up, some of it might’ve been hitting them all anyway. Benimaru, Shion, and my other leaders shut off their auras as a habit, something we were all used to now that weaker monsters and humans were frequent visitors. Diablo, despite being the new guy, could fully switch it off without me having to ask. I was honestly impressed. He was a good model for the others to follow.

So Veldora was still a problem in that aspect, but thanks to our intensive training, he could now adjust his aura on the fly. He proudly proclaimed it was like child’s play to him, but it was really more thanks to the ultimate skill Faust, Lord of Investigation.

With that, I figured he’d be fine to bring out. Was that too optimistic, maybe? After all, even when sealed away, his aura was still daunting enough to keep any monster ranked B or below at bay. I ran Analyze and Assess on the magicules that filled the hall. No problems there. So the cause would have to be—

“Rimuru? We need to talk.”

Gazel was there, giving me a pat on the shoulder and a threatening smile. “Let’s delay this summit, so I may have some time.”

He must have been serious about it, given his shouting earlier. My instincts told me not to defy him. So I declared recess and stood up. I didn’t hear any complaints from the gallery (not that all of them were conscious enough to voice them).

Leaving the hall to my assistants, we moved into the reception area. I left Veldora behind at Gazel’s request, which I figured wouldn’t be a problem. Some of the attendees, the Three Lycanthropeers included, were so keen on currying favor with the Storm Dragon that I was sure he’d be occupied for a least a little while.

………

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…

I was alone in the room with Gazel and Erald. Shuna was off brewing tea for the whole conference while Benimaru and Shion fought to calm things down.

“Let me just say this first,” Erald began. “I have been given full freedom of action by Her Excellency, the Heavenly Emperor. It is my word that will decide the position of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, and I would advise you to keep that in mind as you explain all this to me.”

The doting-father Erald was a distant memory. Here was the Thalion statesman, the face of an all-powerful nobility, and even I had to admire the dignity he held himself with. So Thalion wouldn’t be willing to sweep this incident under the rug? He didn’t voice any intention of hostilities against us, but depending on what I decided to do, we might become foes regardless. At the same time, I figured, he also had to clean up after Elen, what with everything she’s been doing around here.

Which meant, hey, if we aren’t enemies, it couldn’t be a problem to ask for an alliance.

“All right. I promise I’ll be honest with you as well.”

He seemed to be speaking frankly with me. I should be just as serious with him. So our confidential talks began.

We kicked off with Gazel.

“So what did you want to talk about?”

“Certainly not the weather, you fool!” Not even the dwarven king could hide his shock as he excitedly half shouted at me. “Why has the Storm Dragon been resurrected?!”

That was a rare sight from the normally coolheaded Gazel. He must’ve really flipped his lid. I thought about talking my way out of this, but there was no point to it. So I decided to summarize things—at least, the part about how I ran into Veldora in the cave and agreed to help him out of his prison.

Once I wrapped up, Gazel groaned, a hand covering his face. “This is beyond all expectation. You becoming a demon lord is a problem in itself without this to contend with…”

I thought about lightening the mood by saying “Oh, no need to compliment me that much” but opted against it. If I was wrong, it’d send Gazel flying into a rage.

“So, Sir Rimuru, is that really, truly…?”

I nodded at Erald. Veldora was in human form and hiding his aura, perhaps making it a tad hard to swallow.

“…I suppose it would have to be,” he observed. “No one, man or monster, would be foolish enough to pretend to be that terrible dragon.”

I suppose not. That must be why Elen and Fuze were so readily accepting. Names held particular importance for monsters, but even a human would earn no advantage whatsoever from pretending to be the Storm Dragon. And Gazel never doubted it from the start. I asked him why later, and his reply was simple: “Because I couldn’t read him.” Which implied that Gazel has some kind of intrinsic mind-reading ability. Strong in more ways than one, I guess. But I digress.

“What should we do with this, though…?”

“Indeed,” Erald said to his fellow king. “And here I am, already frantic enough attempting to clean up after all my daughter’s misdeeds…”

I suppose the two were much closer friends than they seemed at first glance.

“Do we announce this, or do we cover it up? There’s the problem.”

“The Western Nations are not a concern,” Erald said. “Even in Thalion, I see no issue with reporting this to Her Excellency the Emperor and no one else. But…”

“But the Western Holy Church, yes? Secrecy will earn us nothing with them. The Church has made it clear the Storm Dragon is the one dragon type they are most hostile to. If it’s resurrected, they would know immediately.”

“And if we tried to hide it, we would need to feign ignorance, which would be impossible to back up. Either way, he would be branded an ‘enemy of god’ in short order.”

The two pondered what to do. Me? Oh, I was just saying “mm-hmm” or “yeah” now and then. Not a bad gig.

“Are you listening, Rimuru?”

“Yes. You’re the one who roped us into this crisis, one that puts a great deal of trouble upon all of us. We need you to think more seriously about matters, or…or I don’t know what we’ll do!”

Oops. Guess they’re pissed off. Let’s just be a bit more apologetic and give my side of the story.

“Well, there’s no way to fully hide Veldora, so my intention’s to let the word out to the public. There’s no way my nation’s going to avoid the Church’s eyes anyway, so…you know. I’ll figure something out.”

“Hmm.” Gazel nodded at me. “If that is your decision, I have no qualms with it.”

“A demon lord and dragon joining hands is not at all a laughing matter. This has become a more pressing issue than even I had thought at first. But looking at it another way, this is also a stroke of good luck, being able to participate in this summit. I have obtained exactly the information we need to decide how our country will stand…”

Erald, meanwhile, was discussing his country’s standpoint more than his own, with another one of his eerie smiles. His take: It would be foolish to pick a fight against a nation with both a disaster-class demon lord and a catastrophe-class dragon. Gazel agreed with him, solemnly nodding. In terms of international pedigree, Tempest couldn’t hold a candle to superpowers like Dwargon and Thalion, but if you focused solely on military strength, we didn’t just match these guys; we surpassed them. Gazel and Erald, in their own ways, were admitting to that.

“Should I take that to mean,” I ventured, “that should hostilities break out between us and the Western Church, you will take our side?”

“That is what you ask?” Gazel bitterly countered. “Rimuru, you truly must learn how to express these things better. Thank heavens this is a confidential talk…”

As he explained, just because he had no reason for Dwargon to see Tempest as a foe didn’t mean he was obligated to expose his own nation to danger. That was doubly true in the case of the Western Holy Church, which the Dwarven Kingdom was not particularly connected to. Instead, all he could promise was that we could retain current relations, with neutrality being the word of the day.

That left Erald, archduke of a nation I hadn’t even begun to try establishing relations with. Despite the circumstances, he seemed oddly willing to see things my way…so far, at least.

“I’m glad to have your support, Gazel. So, um, mister…um, Sir Erald, could I ask why you are being so kind to me with this…?”

Erald looked similarly reluctant to put it into words. “…You know you can call me whatever you like here, ‘sir’ or not. Just please be sure to include my name and appellation in public, Sir Rimuru. As the leader of a nation, there is absolutely no reason to place yourself below other leaders on the record—not unless you are eager to become the vassal territory of another nation. But to answer your question…”

Funny how he’s taking pains to save me from embarrassment. I guess he’s got a kinder side as well. I thanked him for that, only to be greeted with a stare and a long sigh before he began to explain why he was here and what he wanted.

It all started with Elen, his daughter. Her leaking info about how to awaken as a demon lord had led to an investigation as to who should be held responsible. It was kind of like she had created a new one, I suppose, and no nation could afford to ignore that. But then the archduke sprang into action. Someone like Erald had enough strength to kill the whole affair, and he did, making sure only the emperor knew the truth. All that remained was for him to gauge the situation and take action as necessary.

Keeping tabs on us magically was apparently quite a strenuous feat for him, but he still managed to confirm that I had indeed become a demon lord. He could’ve just played dumb if I had failed, but once I did, I could no longer be ignored. So he was here to size me up and potentially send a force over to suppress me should things go awry.

“So,” he said in closing, “I wanted as few people to be aware of those facts as possible. Thus, I came out here myself.”

In other words, I supposed, if he thought I was an evil presence, he would’ve destroyed us all and pretended nothing had ever happened.

“And what’s your decision, then?”

“Well, as I said before, my decision for today is friendship over hostility.”

Aha. That makes sense. And being seen as non-evil made me kind of happy, too.

“A fairly obvious choice,” Gazel retorted.

“Of course. Our nation enjoys freedom of religion. Our people adhere to more than only the monotheistic Luminus faith. I seek to prioritize the fortunes of our nation, rather than sacrifice myself for the sake of religion.”

“Pfft. I never did like you, Erald, but we keep agreeing on these matters. My nation and the Western Holy Church do not share a common motive, either. From the very beginning, I intended to support our friends in Tempest.”

They shared a smile.

“But this doesn’t mean we’re without problems of our own. For example, the Farmus force that Sir Rimuru destroyed. Whether it was war or not, the death toll is simply too high.” Erald scowled. “And to think it was my daughter who planted that seed…”

So that was his real motivation, then. The problem wasn’t whether I was evil or not—it lay in whether the circumstances of the battle was known to the Western Holy Church. A demon lord who killed twenty thousand was going to look pretty damn evil to just about any sane person. It would lend valuable credence to the Church’s declarations, and I’d be named an enemy of god in short order.

Now I see. The fallout from forging friendly ties with such an evil presence—i.e., me—could be uncomfortable for any nation to deal with. Sounded rough. I began wondering what we could do about that, before Gazel grinned at me.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got an idea.”

Oh, could it be…? The way Gazel went on about how the Farmus army went “missing” earlier?

“All the bodies are gone. There is no evidence. And scarily enough, there are no survivors, either, are there?” He smiled. “Then why not change the plot to whatever we damn well want it to be?”

The common people, along with the rest of the world? They didn’t need the truth. Just give ’em a nice-sounding story, and everyone will be happy.

“Hohh, a fascinating offer,” Erald said, eyes shining as he went back into statesman mode. “Would you mind if I contributed to that, Gazel?”

He must’ve intended to fabricate a convenient story, one that ensured none of our hands were dirty. That’d help out Elen, he no doubt believed, and somewhere down the line, it’d even help Thalion’s fortunes. Better go all in on this, then. Besides, I had already decided to keep my nation safe, even if it meant massacring twenty thousand. Even if I have to shoulder heavier crimes, that faith of mine wasn’t going anywhere.

“I suppose you have the broadness of mind to deal with whatever may come, Rimuru? Very well. A king must never live with regrets.”

Yeah, no point ruing the past. That was part of the Initiation, and I needed it.

“I’m ready for anything. But what’s the story you have in mind, Gazel?”

“Heh-heh. Well said.”

Gazel’s eyes on me softened. We had little time left and a great number of details to work out.

………

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…

The chaos had subsided by the time we were back in the meeting hall. Cooler heads had prevailed, and the unconscious had been attended to. I wasn’t expecting this kind of furor, but ah well. What’s past is past. Gotta focus on what’s ahead. I got to discuss things with Gazel and Erald, too, and if you think about it, that was a golden opportunity.

Fuze and Elen and the others were sprawled out on their chairs, all but lifeless.

“Are you all right? How are you feeling?”

“I…I heard nothing about this devastating news…”

“You, you’re just awful, Rimuru! I didn’t hear anything about that. V-Veldora was your friend? Did, did you ever mention that?”

They had a lot of, shall we say, negative feedback. I mean, what do you want from me? I couldn’t really say “Well, I had swallowed him into my Stomach” and even if I did, they’d never believe me.

“Oh, didn’t I? I think I did, maybe…? Well, there’s no point dwelling on the past. Come on! We got a summit to run!”

I tried to give them as breezy a smile as possible. It didn’t work.

“““Don’t gloss over it!!””” they all shouted in unison.

“Ha, ha-ha-ha, yeah…”

I did what I could to soothe them, smiling as I kept chattering away. Why’re they acting so mean with me, though? I’m a demon lord now, and they’re treating me the exact same way. Which I was glad for; I didn’t want things to get all distant and weird. But maybe a little more respect?

“Are you even listening to me?” Elen protested. “You could at least try to be a little more apologetic!”

“Yeah, she’s right, pal!”

“This has been hard on the ol’ ticker,” commented Gido.

Respect seemed like a distant dream at the moment. Of course, it’s totally in character for them all.

Fuze hadn’t changed, either. “Ah, I just… How am I going to report this to my boss…? Wait! I’m a guild master, aren’t I?!” He had already accepted the situation, just as bold and brazen as before. I couldn’t believe this was the guy who let Veldora freak him out a moment ago. If I hadn’t advised him to use the bathroom earlier, I’m sure he would’ve peed his pants.

I congratulated him on that. He glared back at me.

“As if none of this is your fault… I’m going to report this in detail to my bosses, then bill you for the mental distress you’re putting me through!”

And here I was expecting him to thank me for my timely advice. Now he’s angrier than ever. Well, whatever. At least my joking around helped Fuze find his voice again.

So everyone had now accepted Veldora, more or less. It was another hour before we finally got the summit rolling again.

Now we were starting for real.

Our conflict with Clayman remained an internal affair for the moment; that could wait. Soei gave me a quick report, but apparently, they couldn’t discover Clayman’s main base of operations. The fact that he had an army on the move was concerning, but Soei was keeping up his watch.

Nothing new was going to happen with that immediately, so I decided to get this summit wrapped up first.

I decided to begin with a recap, as annoying as it was to me. We had all been through a lot, but laying out everything in detail to everyone at once should save us time later. I wanted everyone to be on the same page.

So I began by relating how I met Veldora, dropping in my status as an otherworlder along the way. Hiding my origins seemed meaningless at this point. All of my people in Tempest knew, and I had no vested interest in keeping it from Gazel or Erald. It’s not like a demon lord also being an ex-otherworlder would give them anything new to work with against me. Leon was one himself, after all.

I gave a quick summary of the orc lord fight and how it led to us building the town here. Sharing information was important, even if doing so led people to react in different ways.

Moving on, I shifted to my voluntary journeys in Englesia. This involved a lot of glossing over of my life there, along with the request I received from Yuuki, but I did go into detail about my fight with Hinata. Man, she was rough. If it had been anyone besides me, they probably would’ve been killed—Benimaru or Soei, even. Her skills were on par with or beyond Hakuro’s, and she could cast magic the likes of which I never saw before. That Holy Field one was particularly nasty. I used Thought Communication to let everyone else experience my memory and recognition of it. She might have a smaller version of that in her pocket, ready to spring on single targets. I didn’t think anyone in the room could do much against it, but it was better than going on nothing. The more they knew about the threat Hinata posed, the better. They might be able to escape, at least.

“Hinata Sakaguchi?”

It was Fuze who reacted first.

“She may seem cruel at first. I suppose she gives the impression of a crazed murderer to most. But according to the information we have, she’s actually a little different from all that. For one thing, she’s always willing to extend a helping hand to anyone who depends on her, and anyone willing to accept her help is sure to receive it—but if you don’t listen to her advice, she’ll never deal with you again. Whatever her motivations, though, I am assured she is a rational leader.”

He seemed to know a lot about her—and was willing to come to her defense, too. I didn’t want to fight her, either… It’s just that she didn’t want to listen to my story one bit, you know? If she refuses to help people who ignore her own background and situation, that describes my interactions with her pretty well. She must have a ton of people seeking favors from her, and I can see how she’d want to ignore them after a while. Pragmatic would be the way to describe it. Yuuki described her as a realist, too. I’m sure Fuze’s intelligence was valid. He sure seems well-informed, doesn’t he?

Gazel nodded at this. “Mm. The guild master of Blumund clearly has a finger in every pie, as they say. The accuracy of your information is equal only to that of my own dark agents. I will gladly testify that what you heard is exactly what we have heard.”

Nice to have the confirmation. But:

“Maybe so, but she didn’t listen to me at all.”

She didn’t. From the get-go, I was her target. Even if someone was feeding her a line about me beforehand, it was like she was deaf to me.

“Well,” Erald said, “that would be because one core tenet of Luminism is that you are never allowed to bargain with monsters.” I was surprised to hear that from him. Hinata was enough of a celebrity to even be known in Thalion, it seemed. She had a rep in places I never dreamed of… Although, I suppose any nation’s intelligence agency would keep tabs on the most powerful knight in the Western Holy Church. Is she famous because she’s beautiful? I thought for a moment but decided it best to keep that secret.

Following their guidance, I began to build a picture of Hinata in my mind. She was notorious for her cruel words and coldhearted actions, but apparently she had never actually broken a single tenet of her religion. She was the model soldier in every way, an unblemished guardian of law and order. So why didn’t she put an end to the summoning rituals taking place worldwide? The kind of rapid-fire summons favored by certain lands bore a very high chance of bringing children over. It was evil, really, on a national level.

“On the other hand,” Fuze countered, “do we really know for sure Hinata is aware of all of this summoning and willfully ignoring it?”

A fair point, but…

“Summoning magic powerful enough to produce an otherworlder is a forbidden, secret Art, not the kind of magic you’ll see in public. The Council of the West has criminalized it, and I’m sure you won’t find a lot of nations who’ll voluntarily admit to it. They’ll just say ‘No, we don’t do that’ and then make it impossibly difficult to pursue the issue any further. The Western Holy Church holds a lot of sway in their region, yes, but if we’re talking about getting to the point of freely meddling in internal government politics, then no, it’s not that deep.”

Even if a kingdom like Farmus used otherworlders as military weapons, I’m sure they’d just explain it away as, you know, discovering an otherworlder on their doorstep and giving them shelter. Without solid evidence, not even the Church could investigate. You couldn’t really complain that Hinata was negligent, per se.

And that brought to mind something else Yuuki had mentioned:

“If something seems the most effective way to her, she’ll do it, I guess you could say, but…but it makes no sense to me, no.”

Maybe Hinata really was working to stop this, in her own way. If so, there was no point stewing about it here.

“The point is,” I reflected, “Hinata’s a serious threat. If I could at least get her to talk to me, we could set something up where we don’t have to be dueling to the death…”

But if the Church labeled me a foe of all divinity, a duel would be unavoidable. I wanted to avoid that if possible, but if it happens, it happens.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Perhaps I could go out and take care of her, then? There is no better way to quell your anxieties for the future than eliminating the problem from the start, no?”

Wow, Diablo. Confident much? Being the new guy on the team must’ve made him hungry for work. I really wish he would think more before he opened his mouth.

“Whoa, man, you realize that even I lost to— Um, I mean, fought to an even tie with Hinata, right? Just because you’re on the scene won’t make it some open-and-shut case!”

“He’s right, Diablo,” Shion added. “If someone like you wants to face him down, then I’ll go over and finish her off first. I await your order, Sir Rimuru!”

See? First Diablo starts mouthing off, then Shion joins the fray and goes all battle crazy again.

“Now, now, Lady Shion. I do owe you a debt for teaching me the ins and outs of assisting Sir Rimuru, so I hardly wish to berate you…but I sadly cannot believe that you could defeat Hinata.”

“Oh, really? So you think you’re stronger than I am? Well, fine. Let’s go out and settle this for—”

“We will settle nothing!” I shouted to distract them.

Diablo might have acted all calm and collected, but I guess he enjoyed egging people into a fight, too. He was polite to me, but that didn’t seem to extend to the rest of his superiors. Pretty brazen for a new guy. And the way he provoked potential opponents was downright dangerous with the hyper-impulsive Shion.

“Gwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! So it’s time for me to take action, is it? Very well! Allow me to just step out for a moment—”

“You’re not going anywhere, Veldora! If she targets us, we’ll deal with it then, but there’s no need to take a fight to her right now. Let me just repeat, I don’t want to antagonize the Western Holy Church!”

I had forgotten Veldora was seated next to me. He was ready to fly out the door before I stopped him.

Man, all these problem children… They’re growing fast, but still, education’s so important for them. Come to think of it, Benimaru and Soei weren’t itching to start fights at all anymore, and Geld had enough common sense that I could rely on him. Gabil got carried away a lot, but he still knew his place, so he never caused me many headaches. Plus, the way Ranga practically resided in my shadow, ears perked up for my command—he was almost cute compared to the others.



The big issue was with Shion, Diablo, and Veldora. Any mixture of the three was dangerous. I could feel my anxieties ramping up. Better be more careful dealing with them.

“Either way, that’s enough debate about Hinata and the Church. We may fight them depending on how matters unfold, but I intend to proceed with caution and watch what happens!”

So that was settled. But one thing I couldn’t forget was the presence of someone maneuvering behind the scenes. Hinata knew about me—she had an “informant,” she said, but there weren’t many people out there who knew I killed Shizu. It’d be hard to identify the mole, but it had to be someone I knew. The Kabal-Elen-Gido trio; Fuze and a few other Blumundians; and Yuuki. Beyond that, the only ones who knew all lived in this forest.

But that would mean…

Raphael was busy deriving a list of suspects for me. I appreciated his logic, but it could be someone, or something, we had no knowledge of at all. I didn’t want to work with the wrong impression, and I didn’t want to suspect anyone without real evidence. Better just lock that in my mind and keep my eyes open.

What was the point behind having Hinata and me fight each other anyway?

Was someone hoping I would dispatch her?

Did they want to obstruct me from returning to town?

Or did they want to lure Hinata out into the open?

…Or all of those things.

Seriously, Raphael? Talk about greedy. There were too many unknowns, and I couldn’t shake the impression that I was being played like a fiddle. Let’s just be patient for now. It can wait.

Getting back on track, I told the assembled group about how our town was attacked once I escaped Hinata—a wild, bloody conflict, engineered by a clutch of Farmus otherworlders. I wanted to do something for the victims, so I elected to make myself a demon lord…but before I could continue, Elen made the confession herself.

“And my dad already knows, doesn’t he? Like, that’s the whole reason you’re here, isn’t it?”

Wow. The way she looked at Erald with those upturned eyes. Dangerously cute. The poor guy’s like putty in her hands with that act.

“Elen…” He sighed, resigned. “It doesn’t matter if I know or not. There’s no need for other nations to know, too…”

I could guess how he felt. This really was Elen’s fault. What she did went beyond rocking the boat—it totally ignored the balance in this world. But Erald had guessed this would happen. “I’m sure,” he had said in our earlier secret talk, “my daughter Elen will reveal she gave you the demon lord suggestion. The only way to stop her would be to drag her back home, and she’d hate me for it. It would be a terrible plan.”

He might’ve tried sounding like an expert strategist when he said it, although he sounded more like an idiot to me. Hard to tell, really. But Erald’s prediction was right, so maybe the former.

I turned my eyes toward Gazel, a bit conflicted about all this. Seeing him nod back, I decided to proceed with this discussion the way we had planned.

“All right. And thanks to that, I used the assembled Farmus forces as a sacrifice, and one thing led to another, and I successfully became a demon lord.”

That wrapped up the basic story I had. Now for the real work.

“So… Right. Everything I just discussed with you is the truth, but what we’ll announce to the public will be adjusted somewhat.”

The Tempestians in the audience seemed pretty thrown by this. To the monsters, brute strength meant everything. Something like fudging the details for the story we’d give other nations must’ve seemed pointless to them. But lies and deceit are what politics are all about, really.

“What is the reason for this?” Benimaru asked for the group. “And in what way would you change it?”

I was ready for this question. We worked that one out in advance, too.

The way we’ll do this is that I’ll declare myself to be a demon lord, but we won’t reveal that I’ve actually awakened.

This is based on the assumption that other nations have no idea what actually went on around here. There’s no way for them to investigate the facts. Every potential eyewitness is dead, and apart from those of us in the room, only three humans know the truth. Everybody knew that the king of Farmus was a greedy tyrant, so it would be easy to frame our actions as justifiable self-defense.

By our logic, it’d sound far more credible if Farmus lost following a fully engaged battle, rather than being annihilated by a single demon lord. We’ll also say that all those many piles of dead had unwittingly opened up an awful, dreadful seal. Yes, the blood that they shed as they lay there seeped its way underground, opening the eyes of the dragon that stirred below—in other words, resurrecting Veldora.

Luckily, the champion Yohm, accompanied by me (the plucky Jura-Tempest Federation leader who’s angling to become a recognized demon lord), worked together to coax the dragon to our side, at the cost of many sacrifices. Quelling the beast’s anger, we agreed to worship Veldora as our guardian. Setting things up this way would establish my claim to the demon lord name and neatly pin all the blame on Farmus while establishing us as the good guys.

“Think about it,” Gazel commented. “People fear what they do not understand; they will never willfully accept it. A monster who singlehandedly destroyed an army of twenty thousand will find no one willing to believe his claims about peace and friendship.”

Fuze and Yohm seemed to understand, as much as they groaned about it. And these guys were two of my closest confidants. Someone who didn’t know me? They’d react just like Gazel said they would. I could wind up at war with all the Western Nations the next day.

“But,” he continued, “if we claim the Storm Dragon is behind the twenty thousand missing soldiers, that would be easier for the masses to grasp. The Storm Dragon is already a living catastrophe, after all, a mastermind of all types of destruction.”

This seemed to convince the crowd. Only Veldora stayed in his seat, snickering “Heh-heh-heh, call me a mastermind, will you? You are a smart man, indeed” and completely missing the point. Well, if he’s happy, I’m happy.

“I support this plan of action as well,” Erald said. “Stating that my daughter helped Sir Rimuru become a demon lord would inspire nothing but fear and disdain. Much better for him to have been able to negotiate successfully with the Storm Dragon because he became a demon lord. He’ll be much more appreciated that way, I think you’ll find.”

He smiled, his eyes looming over the meeting hall in search of dissent. I swear, he’s the kind of guy who would do anything for Elen.

“Oh, Dad… That’s exactly the kind of nefarious scheme I would’ve expected from a noble as crafty as you…”

I couldn’t tell if Elen was praising him or making fun of him, really. It made me feel bad for Erald a bit, as I waited for the audience to quiet down.

“And that’s not the only advantage for me,” I said. “It’s important that the human race doesn’t needlessly fear us, but this might also fool the other demon lords eyeing me into thinking that Veldora’s the only threat, right?”

And that would give me some breathing room to work with.

After I thrashed Farmus, the demon lord Clayman must be on the lookout for me, at least. If we spread the rumor that it was actually Veldora providing the big guns, I think that’d make me less of a worry to him. Gazel, king of an allied nation, wanted to have Dwargon come out of this looking good. Me, I wanted the Western Nations to think nicely of me, while making anyone hostile to me underestimate my abilities and put their guards down a little. For now, it was much more helpful if they thought I was a whiny pushover than someone worth fearing.

“Besides, if word gets out that we’ve got the authority to negotiate with Veldora, that’s gonna keep a lot of nations from messin’ with us, don’t you think? No matter what the Western Holy Church says, I think there’s a good chance they’ll have trouble finding anyone to carry out their orders.”

That might be the biggest advantage of all. Even before Gazel’s suggestion, we needed to reveal Veldora’s presence sooner or later—and if we did, we might as well do it when he’s at his most useful. We were planning to tango with Clayman soon, so deliberately antagonizing the Church right now was nothing short of idiotic. Waging a two-front war would just spread us out too thin; we had to avoid that as best we could.

The trick here was to keep our foes as unworried about me as possible but as worried about Tempest as we could manage. I tell you, Raphael made some choice edits to what was already a killer scheme from Gazel. Sensing his, my, and Erald’s motivations, he weaved them all together to get the most use out of them in this plan. Amazing work. Ever since that ultimate-skill evolution, his mind’s been sharper than ever before.

“I see,” Veldora said, nodding his satisfaction. “So now you have a reason to take care of me, then?”

Oh, great. He only listened to the parts of this story he liked, didn’t he? That wasn’t quite what I meant…but ah well.

Apart from him, the rest of my government seemed to enjoy the idea. “I understand the merits of this,” Rigurd said, looking a tad relieved as he vigorously nodded. “In this case, we can continue negotiating in much the same way we have before.”

That must have been a worry for him; how this would affect future trade with other nations. He was developing a keen eye for Tempest’s economic development that I appreciated.

“Brilliantly done, Sir Rimuru! A truly ingenious plan!”

“No, Shion,” I admonished, relieved that at least she understood the gist of it. “King Gazel thought it up. I just made sure all our feedback was included.”

“My thanks to you, King Gazel,” Sufia commented, baring a fanged grin. “Now when we make our move, we can expect great things from Sir Rimuru’s forces!”

Phobio and Alvis seemed just as eager for the idea. The Three Lycanthropeers were on our side.

Benimaru’s mind, meanwhile, was already elsewhere. “Heh-heh-heh… Very well. So now we can focus entirely on Clayman? If we can’t win this, it will just prove we were talentless from the start.”

Good to hear. I’d need him on the field. Soei, Geld, and Benimaru were of a similar mind, ready to roll out this very moment.

Now I had dozens of passion-filled eyes fixed upon me. I nodded back at them. I need you to wait a bit longer, guys. You can go hog wild once this summit is over.

We had a backstory—and now that we had somewhere to start, we needed to decide what we’d do next.

I told the audience about how we had the king of Farmus and a Church archbishop in our custody. In their place, we would support Yohm as the land’s new king and launch a plan to build a new nation for its people.

Now Fuze was groaning again. After falling silent for a while, I guess he had finally worked everything out in his mind.

Gazel was similarly quiet, eyes closed. His friends were bouncing ideas off one another, but opinions seemed to be split, without any clear consensus. Even Erald offered no words, no doubt coldly considering how the Sorcerous Dynasty should react to this.

I watched them all closely as I continued my guidance.

First off, we would release the current king, then force him to pay reparations for invading our country. This would be a pretext, of course; the actual aim was to throw Farmus itself into a state of civil war. If the king managed to gather his nobility again and attempt a resistance, his life was as good as gone. I was dealing with a king here. I wasn’t about to let him off the hook twice.

Now, if this king meekly agreed to our demands at this point, we’d delay the whole Yohm-as-king thing for a while. By Raphael’s estimation, however, the chances of this were practically nil. Even if he suddenly became a king who lived up to his promises, fulfilling his obligations would be punishingly difficult. His nation had just lost twenty thousand men and women of working age, and he needed money to rebuild his power. He’d be forced to claim it from the nation’s noble families, but they were all far too greedy to cooperate.

No, the king would find some excuse or another to ignore the reparations entirely. Then Yohm would raise the flag of resistance, staging a coup to help restore good faith in the government. It was the duty of the survivors to take responsibility for a lost war. What if the king didn’t do that? What if he ordered his government to de facto shake down the nobility for money instead? He’d lose any authority he had.

The whole reparations thing was a wedge to rip the king apart from the nobility. Once he had lost all influence with them, the internal factions of their government would undoubtedly fall apart. The king’s sons were not of adult age yet, reportedly; it was easy to imagine them becoming puppets of the nobility. That, in turn, would certainly lead into battles over succession.

Either way, whenever things descended into physical combat, Yohm would step forward, and the exhausted masses would hail him as their champion. No matter which way it shook out, it all meant that the current kingdom of Farmus was about to meet its downfall. Tempest, of course, would announce its support for Yohm, a champion they had been on good terms with for a while now. Once Yohm declared the establishment of a new kingdom, we would be the first to officially recognize it and open sanctioned relations.

The nobility, the source of current ruling power, would no doubt form an alliance to fight back, but we’d already factored that into the equation. We’d simply exile them all, except for those who offered to cooperate from an early stage. If they insisted upon meddling with us, then they’d have to just disappear, sadly. We would serve as a deterrent to any such alliance, preventing any direct military activity while we sorted out who was friend and who was foe.

In the midst of this, we would take the time to announce new policies that would win the trust of the people, boosting Yohm’s popularity. Once this happened, the plan was to destroy the opposing forces.

A nation couldn’t be built overnight. Even at breakneck speed, it’d have to extend to two, maybe three years. Of course, Yohm might be on the throne even quicker than that, if the current king made some particularly ill-advised decisions…

That was the basic outline. It meant that, however the timeline wound up actually working out, Yohm was ultimately all but guaranteed to become king.

“Personally,” I explained, “I have no interest in oppressing the people of Farmus. In terms of allowing their own ruler to go around like he owned the whole world, however, I’m not absolving them of guilt. They will have to put up with some tight times for a while, and I’d like them to put in a solid effort at rebuilding once it’s all said and done.”

Everyone thought silently for a moment before Gazel spoke up. “I like this. I have no objections to the plan itself. However, Rimuru, the idea of Yohm becoming king is another issue altogether.”

He stood up, putting the full force of his gaze upon Yohm. It was powerfully withering, even from far away. Having experienced it myself, I knew exactly how the man was feeling right then.

“…Ngh?!”

Yohm let out a grunt and clenched his teeth in the process, but he met Gazel eye to eye.

“Hmph. Well, he has great willpower, at least. But what of his character? Is he prepared to feel for his people, to take up their pain and stand before them?”

A hush fell upon the meeting hall.

“Heh. How the hell should I know? I’m not here to be a king ’cause I want to. But if I turn down this role after he’s put his full trust in me, what kinda man would I be, huh?!”

“Hmm?”

“I’m just sayin’, I don’t wanna convince myself I can’t do it and give up before I even try. I also wanna impress the woman I love, too, I’ll grant ya that, but if I’m going in, I’m going in at full power.”

There was no waver to Yohm’s voice. He was speaking a heap of nonsense, but his determination made it all oddly convincing.

“…Fool,” Mjurran whispered.

“But so much like Yohm, eh?” the beastman Gruecith replied, grinning. “You have my word on this, Dwarven King. This guy’s an idiot, but he’s not an irresponsible idiot. Once he takes something on, he’ll carry it out all the way to the end. And I, Gruecith, promise I’ll be there with him the whole time!”

Mjurran nodded her agreement as all three sized up Gazel.

“…Is that the case? Very well, then. If you need anything, call upon me.”

Like a light switch, Gazel turned off all his intimidation, nodding at them good-naturedly. I guess they all passed his final exam—and if they have the Armed Nation of Dwargon backing them up, that was huge.

“I have to say, though, you found quite an interesting man here,” the king added with a smile.

“He seeks the throne to impress a woman?” a shocked Erald stammered.

“Nice going, Gruecith. I sure wasn’t expecting you to stand up here and abandon Lord Carillon in front of us all!” chided Phobio.

It felt like a circus, really.

“Yohm,” intoned Gazel once everyone was done laughing, “what we seek from your nation is agricultural production. I don’t want to meddle in your political affairs, but listen to this: I know Farmus can keep itself afloat through its black-market trade in my nation’s manufactured goods, but I think we’ve recently proven that this won’t last forever, hmm?”

It was true. The exorbitant taxes Farmus placed on imported goods before reselling them had made it into one of the world’s most notorious price-gouging outfits. They were not exactly one of the Dwarven Kingdom’s favored customers. Now, with a new highway linking Dwargon to a vast, fresh market, Farmus was losing its previous advantage. If the kingdom wanted to survive, it needed to have something new—and instead of a field where it’d be competing with other nations, it’d be easier to coexist if they blazed a trail into unexplored markets.

I had heard before that the Dwarven Kingdom faced issues with self-sufficiency in their food supply, so I could easily tell what Gazel was hinting at. I was just thinking that I wanted a new import supplier of grain for our nation, something that wasn’t so dependent on what naturally grew in the forest. In short, the idea made sense.

“I’d like to be in on this, too. Add new grain varieties for us to your list!”

“Who woulda guessed you’d jump on the train, too, huh, pal? …Well, I’ll get on it. We’re pretty developed agriculturally over in Farmus. I think it’ll be easier for folks to accept than you’d think.”

Thus, with Gazel and me sharing common goals, we made a preliminary agricultural agreement for whenever Yohm was crowned.

We agreed to take a break at this point while Shuna passed out tea to everyone. Once we were done, I dove right back in to the summit, reenergized. With Yohm formally accepted by the summit, our mission to build a new Farmus was now under way. That was really the trickiest part of this whole meet; the rest was much smoother sailing.

“So as a representative of Blumund,” Fuze stated, “I have a proposal. Listening to King Gazel and Sir Rimuru speak, I believe we might have something to offer this plan as well. In Farmus, there are two noblemen—the Marquis of Muller and Count Hellman—who share an intimate relationship with Blumund. If we could negotiate with them to join our side on this matter, I think they could do much for our cause, don’t you think? I believe they will provide staunch support when it is time for Yohm to take action.”

Whether he’s a Guild branch leader or not, does Fuze really have that kind of power? Fuze, perhaps sensing my disbelief, gave me an awkward grin.

“As I stated, I represent Blumund here, and you may consider me to be a part of the Blumund government. I make this proposal not as a guild master but as a public servant.”

As he explained, Fuze apparently had a seat in Blumund’s intelligence department—not as a member of staff but as kind of an assistant supervisor to the whole outfit. Which was fine and all, but this was kind of a huge offer he was making, wasn’t he? Could he really decide on this solo?

I asked him about this, and then he gave me an even more startling revelation. While I was meeting with Gazel and Erald earlier, he had already tipped off the king of Blumund about events here and had him draw up a document providing him full representational rights. That’s the kind of quick footwork I suppose I should expect from a tiny kingdom like that—not to mention a sign of just how much Fuze was trusted.

As he put it, Fuze had “several pieces of info that would sink the whole kingdom if they were released.” Secretly, I considered making him tell me somehow. I couldn’t help it.

So Fuze had been taking advantage of his position to divert all kinds of information his way—anything he thought might be necessary, even before he heard about our plans.

The way he described it, the Marquis of Muller and Count Hellman could basically enjoy the Blumund king’s personal support. Being a powerful noble in Farmus, the marquis was in no position to offer any public kindness to Blumund, but he and their king were close friends behind closed doors. Muller, in fact, was distantly related to the Blumundian royal family, and they had gotten along well for many years. Count Hellman, meanwhile, owed a great debt of gratitude to the marquis, making it extremely unlikely he would betray him.

“Wow, you sure you want to reveal all these secrets to us?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Oh, it’s fine. I am sure the Dwarven King was well aware of it all before I came here. The dark agents of Dwargon are just as talented in their jobs as our own intelligence group.”

As neighbor states, Fuze must have figured the dwarves would have known a thing or two about them already. Gazel simply twitched one of his shoulders upward a bit, offering no further reply. Henrietta, the beautiful night assassin poised behind him, blinked a bit as well. Soei praised her as a talented agent, and I could believe it.

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! Oh, you are being too humble,” she said. “The kingdom of Blumund’s bread and butter lies in intelligence. If you are posted in the center of a spy agency for a nation that treats information as salable goods, I’m sure you must be far more talented than my own team, no?”

The voice was friendly enough, but her expression indicated she didn’t actually believe what she was saying.

“Ha-ha! No need to be so harsh on yourself. Our fighting forces would have nothing on your dark agents, I don’t think! In terms of intelligence gathering, of course, I do believe we enjoy some useful advantages.”

Fuze was just as headstrong, it seemed. But Blumund’s small size allowed it to cover intel from every nation in the world, no doubt. That was the most powerful weapon it had to defend its borders with. But regardless, if Fuze said it, it had to be true. Those two Farmus nobles definitely need to be recruited—and fast.

“Did you hear all that, Yohm?”

“Yep. I’ll add it to the list.”

We’d sell Yohm to them first. He’d enjoy a true champion’s welcome, and it’d be an epic event. But we could work out the details at another time. Yohm’s team could handle that at their leisure.

“Great! So that’s how Yohm the champion will gain a country of his own soon.”

Everyone murmured their agreement, Yohm bringing a hand to his head in bashful embarrassment. I’ll pretend I didn’t see that and declare this topic well and truly settled. Next up—

Just as I was about to proceed to the next topic, Erald apparently finished processing our discussion and burst out into hysterical laughter.

“Pff! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is so entertaining! The leaders and representatives of entire nations, expressing their minds freely without doubting one another for a moment… I feel almost like a fool for staying on the alert around you all!”

He couldn’t help but chuckle at the ridiculousness of it all, even though the light remained sharp in his eyes. This was absolutely the face of a high nobleman, not Erald the helplessly devoted father. Archduke Erald of Thalion, a man whose position made speaking his mind virtually impossible.

Without warning, he stood up, overwhelming the air around him. The sudden change in atmosphere turned all eyes silently toward him. We nervously awaited whatever he might say next.

The meeting hall was silent, save for the turning of the pages as Veldora read some manga… Whoa! What the hell, man?! I didn’t even give that to you yet! Where’d you pluck that out from?! …Ah well. He had no interest in listening to anyone here anyway. As long as he’s shutting up, I have no complaints. He certainly helped relieve my tension just now. Let’s just see what Erald has to say.

The archduke cleared his throat to return the attention to himself, then solemnly opened his mouth. That’s resilience, there.

“…Allow me to ask. The man over there… Fuze. Do you truly place your trust in this monster, Rimuru?”

“That… How do you mean, sir?”

“I mean, even if a bunch of monsters decide to go and start a country, did you have to officially recognize them? And was there any need to establish official trade relations, for that matter? In terms of your relative locations, you certainly could have acted with less haste.”

“We…”

It seemed like an honest question, not one hurled out of spite. That was why Fuze found himself without words, having trouble finding his reply.

“What I am saying is this. If I were in your position, I would engage them in trade, yes, but I would also see how the Western Holy Church reacted. Give them confidential reports, you see, and leave matters to them if there are any problems. That way, you enjoy all the profit, but you aren’t beholden entirely to one side should issues crop up later. Isn’t that the way any smaller nation should handle matters?”

The words, and his gaze, were sharper than any sword. And Erald wasn’t the only one—it seemed like everyone’s eyes were upon Fuze now.

“Ugh, why me?” he whispered to himself, and then: “All right! All right! In that case, allow me to be honest!”

Resigned to his fate, Fuze tore at his hair and began speaking loudly. His usual brazen personality was back—he was facing the Archduke of Thalion, and he had had enough of all this formal, ceremonial speech.

“Duke Erald, I was of the exact same opinion as you. I stated the same case to my superior as well, not to mention a nobleman friend. But I was brushed off…”

As Fuze went on to explain, when he tried to convince his boss of this, his concerns were immediately dismissed. The reasoning: “What if Tempest decides to declare war on us?” This was before I visited Blumund but after the battle with Charybdis ended.

To them, we were this nation packed with high-level magic-born, powerful enough to take out both Charybdis and an orc lord. Waging war with them, Fuze was told, would result in instant annihilation. Luminism was not widespread in Blumund; the Western Holy Church would provide little serious backup. Any unwise moves, and the country would cease to exist. Resistance, they concluded, was futile.

—So what to do, then?

“We’d earn their trust, build a mutual friendship, and find a way to coexist. We wouldn’t be afraid to cooperate with them as much as possible. That was the conclusion the highest levels of Blumund government made. And I mean, your nation and the Dwarven Kingdom are powerful enough that you have all kinds of choices available…but with us, one misstep, and it’s over. And if we’re wagering our fates here, better to trust in the monster lord than the Church. That’s basically it,” Fuze explained with some chagrin.

Thinking about it, having his exact thoughts pointed out to him made me feel kind of sorry for Fuze. It was basically admitting that the kingdom of Blumund was too puny to take up Erald’s common-sense suggestion. Not that it was wrong, but…still, good or bad, right or wrong; that wasn’t important. They had decided to fully trust me.

It was beyond reckless… Or was it, really? If it blew up in their face, that was it, but they had concluded that there was no other way for them to survive. I was as powerful as an entire army; no wonder they saw me as a threat. Better to fight with us, not against us. For a small nation dealing in intelligence and living in the shadows of superpowers, maybe that was an effective strategy. Definitely reckless, but in a way, effective, maybe. Effective against me anyway.

Regardless, I was sure I could trust in Blumund as well—and Erald must have come to the same conclusion.

“…Still, that is quite the brash decision. And if I could change the subject for a moment, I understand you came here to provide military assistance to Sir Rimuru? Was that the decision of your, ah, superior as well?”

“Exactly. We’ve ratified a common security agreement, and I’ve been ordered to follow it to the letter. Of course, even if the government broke its promise, I would have come here anyway. I’m a free man, I’ll have you know. The Guild is unaffiliated with any nation by design—normally, you see, it’d be crazy for someone like me to be here. You could say my luck ran out the moment I was appointed to Blumund’s intelligence team…”

He sounded like he had no idea why he took the job in the first place. Almost too honest of him, not that he could do much about it now. I had no idea his king was so dedicated to keeping his word, though. Complying with that agreement and bracing themselves for war with Farmus… And here I thought that treaty didn’t earn us much of anything. Now, I was glad for it. I had real insight into how they thought of us at present.

Sticking to promises lies at the core of any human relationship. That applies to nations as well; any nation that doesn’t follow its promises, or treaties, can’t really be trusted. This whole incident had proved to me that Blumund is eminently trustworthy. They risked their necks because they believed we would win, not that even they thought I’d wipe out the enemy by myself.

“Can I guess who this superior is? He sounds like quite the gambling man.”

Fuze nodded, seemingly fighting back tears of frustration as he smiled. “…As you’ve probably surmised, it is His Majesty the King.”

You know, he did seem like a pretty nice guy when I met him. Guess he’s more of an expert at this whole nation-leading thing than I thought. You need the guts to go all in when you’re running a country, sometimes.

“…So,” he continued with a sigh, “that’s what was going on, and his choice wound up being the right one. Never in my life would I have imagined you defeating a force of twenty thousand, Sir Rimuru. And resurrecting the Storm Dragon? It’s no longer a question of trust at all, I’d say. And that document giving me negotiation rights here? I think the higher-ups may’ve set a new record drawing it up.”

It was like he was the sole bulwark keeping his homeland from collapsing. I could understand why he was a tad overwrought.

“…Ah. I see now.” The tension disappeared from Erald’s face as he lowered his head a bit toward Fuze. “I apologize, Sir Fuze. Thanks to you, however, I fully understand the kingdom of Blumund’s intentions, here.”

“Sly as always, aren’t you, Erald?” interjected Gazel. “You know I trust Rimuru. There’s no need to go feeling out other nations to satisfy your doubts.”

“You may say that, Gazel, but it’s not going to be that easy for us to forge a new pact with a nation of monsters. I have a new, and healthy, respect for the king of Blumund.”

“Ha. Enough of that rot. You came here because you had the decision made beforehand, did you not? So what is your conclusion, master strategist Erald?”

Erald reacted stonily to Gazel’s provocation—not because he was relatively safe in his homunculus, but because he really did just have that much nerve.

“You could say I have…made my own conclusions, yes. But before I answer you, can I ask one more question?”

He turned to me next—

“Dad, come onnnnn! Stop acting all stuck-up and just answer!”

“Whoa! Hey, lady, pipe down!”

“Yeah! The archduke’s trying his hardest to look all cool for you, okay?!”

The tension in the air was thoroughly ruined by Elen and her two cohorts. “So much for the master strategist,” mused Gazel.

I felt a little bad for Erald, so I decided to bring some solemnity to the environment. Meaning I unleashed a bit of Lord’s Ambition.

“…Let me hear it, Erald.”

I could hear my government stir in their seats, even as Gazel and his friends groaned in astonishment, and Yohm, Fuze, and the Eurazania contingent began sweating. I set it to run as long as possible, but it was even fiercer than I gave it credit for. This was, after all, the merger of skills like Coercion and Magic Aura, something I could use as an attack. Misuse would be dangerous.

Still, I thought I had gotten pretty good at acting all kingly like this. The trick was to erase all expression from your face as you spoke. Hiding your emotions and taking a dispassionate tone was enough to freak your audience out, really. Between Shizu’s good looks and the wispy, transparent feel of a slime, the mix gave me this perfect sort of mystique. Add Lord’s Ambition to the picture, and it was perfect. I didn’t need anything else. If I let my emotions bubble to the surface and started acting more like myself, that mystique vanished in short order. You had to train at this, really, so as a former middle-class schmo, I think I was doing pretty well.

Either way, it was enough to take in Erald.

“…Heh. Impressive. In that case, Demon Lord Rimuru, let me ask you: How do you intend to wield your powers as demon lord?”

Oh. That? Simple. I wanted to create a world that’s easy to live in, the way I picture it. A bountiful world where people could be as content as possible. No bluffing, no dodging it; that’s what I really thought. So that’s what I told him.

“…That kind of thing, I guess. And I’m sure I’ll have some stumbles along the way. It’s not going to be that easy, I imagine.”

“You—you seriously believe you can build that kind of fantasy world?!”

Oops. That sounds like real surprise, there. I’ve successfully managed to shock a high noble who almost never reveals his emotions.

“Well, you know, that’s what my power is for. Ideals are just a bunch of raving without power to back them up, and power is just kind of a vacant void without ideals to back it up, isn’t it? And I know I’m pretty greedy, but I’m not into seeking pure power for power’s sake with no other particular goals in mind.”

I was rephrasing a famous line or two in my mind, and I think I managed to get my point across. I mean, doesn’t this go without saying? You work at something because you want to accomplish something. That’s the essence of humanity, I think.

“Ha, ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hilarious! That is hilarious, Demon Lord Rimuru! A demon lord versed in the concept of karma! I think I understand why you managed to awaken yourself now!”

I didn’t stop him from laughing at me. Let him have his fun. And once he settled down, he stood up and kneeled before me.

“My pardons. Demon Lord Rimuru, as the envoy of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, I hereby request the establishment of formal relations with your nation, the Jura-Tempest Federation. I hope to hear a positive reply from you…”

The hall fell quiet again…except for that page flipping. Better not let that bother me. If I turned toward him right now, it’d ruin the entire atmosphere. The sight of a Storm Dragon lying on a bench, reading manga while sipping some iced tea he had someone make for him, would just scramble my brain.

“…I was hoping we could build a positive relationship myself. I will gladly accept the offer.”

Cheers erupted, and everyone leaped out of their seats to celebrate this memorable new bond.

Today, we welcomed another faithful ally.

So we now had the beginnings of diplomatic relations with Thalion, our third human nation. Soon, Farmus would be no more, and Yohm would be at the helm of a new nation. Slowly but surely, the map was being redrawn. Things were moving, and accelerating, faster than I had pictured at first.