

CHAPTER 1

THE EVE OF THE FESTIVAL

This time, it was Yuuki himself giving orders to Team Lightspeed.

Recently, an enormous slave market had been uncovered in Ballachia, one of the smaller kingdoms that ringed Englesia. Fortunately, a runaway slave had contacted the relevant authorities for help, and now they needed to form an expedition to investigate. But while Ballachia was small, there was a chance this market was backed by the kingdom itself. The assignment was ranked a B-plus or greater in difficulty, not the sort of thing your average brawling adventurer could tackle.

“I wanted to turn this down,” Yuuki admitted to Masayuki, “but I can’t say no to one of my sponsors. As famous as you guys are, I’d like you to act as a lure.”

Sending the investigation team in without support was likely not going to be successful. So, Yuuki explained, he wanted Team Lightspeed to join them on the expedition—and while the team collected evidence about the slave market, Masayuki and company could stay active in public, ensuring the Ballachian government’s attention stayed on them. An A-ranked team like Masayuki’s couldn’t be refused entry by the kingdom, and with the investigation team doing the nitty-gritty detective work, the party would strike a nice balance between brains and brawn. It didn’t seem too tricky to the Hero’s ears.

“Masayuki, let’s give these people a hand. Why, a nation that small could declare war against us and we’d still win!”

Jinrai was alight with the burning flame of vengeful justice. Ever since Masayuki had beaten him, he had become more refined, gentlemanly, a far cry from when they’d first met.

“Yeah,” Bernie added. “There’s no way we can let slavery happen in this day and age. With Masayuki’s strength, we can put things right fast.”

As an otherworlder, Bernie had some kind of unique skill as well, making him resistant to Masayuki’s Chosen One. That didn’t stop the man from respecting him nonetheless. Masayuki couldn’t guess why—especially given how much he liked complaining to Bernie about the issues in his life. But despite that, Bernie trusted and helped him in innumerable ways. His impartial impression of Masayuki felt like a cherished dose of reality, one he referred to often. And if Bernie felt that way about this, the decision was clear.

Jiwu, meanwhile, was more curt.

“Right. If Sir Masayuki says yes, I will join him.”

She had a blind, incontrovertible faith in him, it seemed, almost never voicing a contrary opinion—and she had just made it unanimous. It wasn’t much longer before they set foot in Ballachia.

They were in an ornate reception hall, the site of a ball attended by nobility not just from Ballachia but other nearby kingdoms. And Masayuki, an invitee, was being faced with a situation so terrifying, he would do just about anything to escape it. The slave market did exist here—and he’d just gotten to witness it for himself.

Give me a break. Isn’t that the investigators’ job?! It almost made him want to cry. Not again…

He was on his way back from a small journey to find a restroom when he heard a soft voice from a room he happened to pass by. He didn’t intend to peek inside, but he took a glance anyway—and Braeber, the earl serving as Masayuki’s tour guide, was there.

They locked eyes.

“…”

“…”

It happened in an instant.

“Um, are you—?”

“Well, this certainly isn’t helpful,” Braeber said, still smiling. “If you heard me, I suppose there is little I can do. I had a muscular soldier standing guard at the door, but I certainly didn’t expect you to defeat him. I should have expected as much from the Hero, shouldn’t I?”

Soldier? What soldier?!

“Whoa, wait a—?!”

He was about to lodge a complaint but got cut off.

“Ahhh! The Hero has gone mad! He must be stopped! Everybody, after him! We must subdue him!”

Much to Masayuki’s shock, the man Earl Braeber was talking to grabbed the sword he was leaning against—and slashed the earl down with it. Then the man tossed it away and began screaming, attempting to frame Masayuki for the attack. What ensued next was predictable. A dozen or so soldiers flocked to the scene, carefully eyeing Masayuki and his companion Jinrai.

“Well,” Jinrai said, his fiendish face twisting into a smile, “look what the cat dragged in. Masayuki doesn’t need to waste his time with you lot. Let me dispatch you all!”

Jinrai went on the move. And with the Chosen One support Masayuki provided, his performance in battle ventured into the realm of superhuman.

“Tch! Monster! But my enemy is the Hero who tamed that beast, for getting in my way!”

Gohsel, the marquis who had just struck down Braeber, gave Masayuki a loathsome scowl.

“You see the tide of this battle. Give it up and surrender—”

Considering how Jinrai was systematically destroying the gaggle of soldiers who poured in from the adjacent room, Masayuki figured the fighting was done. He was wrong.

“Heh-heh-heh… How kind of you to offer, Hero. But if anyone was witness to this scene—this travesty—all of them would side with me!”

Then Masayuki recalled Earl Braeber, still on the ground. He could hear footsteps; more people were coming toward the commotion.

“Blast! This is bad news, Masayuki…”

They were in the Kingdom of Ballachia, and while the Hero’s name was known worldwide, Masayuki was still just a guest. Marquis Gohsel was a figure of power and authority here; between him and Masayuki, he would be the more trusted of the two. That’s why Gohsel was acting so confident right now—and why Jinrai was biting his nails. But Masayuki didn’t fret for a moment. Internally, he was annoyed, but already, his instincts told him things were going just like they always did. His skill, Chosen One, always had a knack for bending situations in ways that made him the hero of the day.

And it happened again.

Soon, the room was awash in curious rubberneckers, including a few Ballachian noblemen and foreign dignitaries. The marquis had been standing triumphantly in one corner—but now shock was racing across his face.

“…Ah…ahhhh. What, what has become of me…?”

With a groan, Earl Braeber regained consciousness.

“Sir Masayuki, this is a valuable witness, is he not? He was still alive, so I healed his wounds.”

Jiwu, who had slipped in at some point, had cast healing magic on Braeber—and now she was looking right at Masayuki, fishing for compliments.

“Hey there, old man,” Jinrai thundered, turning toward Braeber. “Lucky for you, Masayuki’s such a forgiving lad, huh? If you tell the truth to everyone right now, I’ll make sure slave trading’s the only crime you get charged with. But if you try to keep anything secret…I imagine that man over there’s just gonna slash you down again, won’t he? So what’ll it be?”

The vicious smile on his face told Braeber everything he needed to know. He thought for a moment, calculating, then resigned himself to his fate. Hanging his head, he began his confession.

“What the devil is happening in here?”

And the king of Ballachia chose that exact moment to step in. As the nobility fell silent, things resolved themselves quickly. It all happened exactly how Masayuki had predicted it would.

Things got even more heated.

Military police quickly stormed the residences of Earl Braeber and Marquis Gohsel, uncovering evidence of their slave trade. It revealed a scandal—Gohsel was one of the leaders of an organized crime ring. And not only that: Their headquarters was right here in Ballachia.

The news weighed heavily upon the king. Orthrus, the slave-trading group whose sphere of influence was largely in the Western Nations, was using this small nation of Ballachia as a front. It was a sad state of affairs, one the king refused to ignore.

Orthrus dealt in much more than just slaves, however. They ran a diverse business, handling weapons, armor, mysterious potions, drugs, monsters, magic items, even arcane Artifacts. They were too powerful for a small kingdom to topple—and so Ballachia’s king had enlisted the Free Guild for help. And if the Free Guild was involved, Team Lightspeed no doubt would be as well.

A person can grow used to extraordinary events all too quickly—but really, Masayuki could predict all of it. Ahhh, I figured this would happen, he thought as he accepted the king’s request.

Before long, a large number of adventurers—including Masayuki’s A-rank party—gathered together for an operation to sweep up Orthrus. Counting the support troops from Ballachia, they numbered over two thousand in all—and once Chosen One had sunk its teeth into all of them, they exhibited astonishing force.

Orthrus’s base of operation had several hundred members on standby, including multiple A-grade fighting forces and a few captured magical beasts. This made them as powerful as a country themselves—but with Masayuki and the assault team he led, Orthrus was thoroughly and completely cleansed from the nation. Masayuki himself hardly had to do anything—or, to put it another way, his mere presence helped everyone shine, whether he knew it or not.

Thus, without a lot of work, the operation was a success, and the notorious Orthrus was smashed for good. Once again, things turned out well without Masayuki lifting a finger, and this latest feat meant he was famous not only in Englesia but all the way to the far edges of the Western Nations.

As usual, things went off without a hitch. It might’ve been nice if the story ended there—but this particular mission left a certain problem behind.

Among the slaves released and put into Guild custody were mixed in monsters—including some ferocious magical beasts, which were killed on the spot. However, some of the slaves couldn’t be dealt with so swiftly—namely, the elves.

The issue of what to do with them soon arose. The elves wanted to return home to the Forest of Jura, but the Guild couldn’t just drop them off and send them on their merry way. Certain geopolitical issues were involved. Jura had only just come under the jurisdiction of the demon lord Rimuru, and if the enslaved elves sought Rimuru’s help, there was no guessing how he would respond. Perhaps he’d retaliate against Ballachia somehow. The Western Nations knew about the disastrous scene over in Farmus—and if a nation that big could fall, there was no way one as tiny as Ballachia could defend itself.

“S-Sir Masayuki, please, please do something!”

Their king, a dignified man usually, was all but pleading for help in his private chambers, away from prying eyes. Masayuki, feeling too guilty to turn him down, agreed. It can’t be that big a deal, he casually thought. All I’m doing is taking the elves to Tempest.

That was the start of his mistake. For everyone who heard that the Masayuki was traveling to Tempest took that to mean the Hero was finally sallying off to slay a demon lord.

The rumors spread like wildfire—but Masayuki didn’t take them too seriously. His mind was used to the routine, and it told him that, like always, it’d turn out just fine in the end. Certainly, Chosen One was a unique skill to be feared when set off; there was no doubting that. But no matter how strong you are, there’s always someone stronger ahead—a fact Masayuki was too proud of himself to remember.

“Right,” Masayuki said through his magic link. “In that case, we’ll meet over there.”

He was submitting his report and discussing future plans with Yuuki. Due to the multiple layers of barriers protecting Englesia, completing a magical link like this required sending your thoughts encrypted through certain wavelengths. It wasn’t something you could pull off on short notice, so they had agreed to reach out to each other only at certain times.

So Masayuki shut it off and sighed.

“Yuuki worries far too much.”

“You said it.” Jinrai nodded. “If you wanted to beat a demon lord, Masayuki, that couldn’t possibly be a problem for you.”

Bernie was less optimistic. “I’ll remind you that even Hinata the Saint could only fight this Rimuru to a draw. It’d be wise not to let your guard down.”

Masayuki gave this a vague nod. It made him think a bit. Things had gone swimmingly up to now, but really, he hadn’t done much at all. He didn’t know Hinata; they had never met, but Yuuki had nothing but praise for her, and Masayuki respected him. If she couldn’t beat this guy, maybe he was a lot tougher than Masayuki thought at the moment. It gave him pause.

“Yeah, you’re right. Everyone says Rimuru wants to make nice with people. We probably shouldn’t go in raring for a fight.”

“Ha-ha! Sounds to me like this demon lord knows his days are numbered!”

“Demon lords are evil, plain and simple!” said Jiwu.

“Well,” Bernie added, “we’ll have to see how he acts and decide based on that. But if the Saint and the demon lord have reached an agreement on matters, then only you, Masayuki, are qualified to be a true ‘Hero.’ You had best act carefully along those lines.”

Masayuki nodded. “Yeah. With all your help, I bet I could beat him, but let’s take things slow and steady, okay?”

The question of whether to fight Rimuru would be left for later. For now, they would wait and see.

In the eyes of Masayuki, all three of his companions—Jinrai, Bernie, and Jiwu—were utter beasts. He himself was nothing to write home about, but he couldn’t imagine anyone from this trio actually losing a battle. I mean, he reasoned, if I actually got in a fight, I guess I’d win somehow, but it’s not like I got a grudge against this Rimuru guy or anything… No point trying to start trouble.

So as they packed up and set off for Tempest, he was pretty optimistic about how this trip would go.

Even after all those royal audiences I gave, my schedule was just absolutely packed. Now I was entertaining human guests.

At the moment, our nation was receiving delegations from all around the world, one after the other. Some of the earlier parties arrived a good week ago, I heard. And not all of them received formal invites—there were also merchants, picking up on the rumors and bringing even more energy to town. Previous visitors were showing them and other new guys around, acting all proud of themselves, and even the nobler dignitaries and royal families stopping in looked around in wonder at the unfamiliar sights. It seemed, at first glance, that my expectations had paid off and our plan to make this a tourist hub was working.

Still, our town was only large enough to lodge maybe three thousand nobles at best. For commoners, that number was more around ten thousand, but in terms of higher-end accommodation, there wasn’t quite that much. The service and the dining we had to offer were completely different, and considering we had people in royal lines of succession showing up, we had to consider security as well. Thus we made sure each noble was given ample space to work with.

Given all the dignitaries we invited, we had banned the general public from our luxury inns, whether they could afford a suite or not. Some of the richer merchants in town could, but I was worried about offending them if we were too busy with nobility to offer good service. But apparently, I didn’t need to worry. Mjöllmile was on it, making sure all the more powerful of the merchant class were set up to their satisfaction.

“Great job, Mollie.”

“Heh-heh-heh! Ah, Sir Rimuru, this much is simple to provide. You have Sir Rigurd and everyone else in town to thank for making a habit of being so thorough with their work!”

Mjöllmile was a really reliable guy. It went without saying that Rigurd, Rigur, and everybody working under them deserved great praise, but when it came to good customer service and satisfied lodgers, Mjöllmile was my go-to man. All things considered, I figured we were off to a pretty good start.

“Okay. Keep it up!”

“That I will!”

Leaving the rest to Mjöllmile, I resolved to devote myself to our most important of visitors.

We were in our meeting hall.

Shuna and Shion were busy with all sorts of prep work. Catering for such a large crowd, after all, meant careful advance preparation. And Gabil and Kurobe were just as busy, performing final checks on the exhibits they had going. Since I wasn’t dealing with monsters right now, I didn’t need to put on such an overpowering “I am stronger than you” act—thus I figured we didn’t need my entire staff on hand. And given the lack of a strict species-based hierarchy, things didn’t have to be nearly as solemn and pretentious.

I was, obviously, in human form, dressed to the nines in order to express my force and financial wealth. That part, frankly, I didn’t care about. Being a slime would’ve been a lot easier, but I’d given up on pushing that. On that note, none of my advisers was willing to budge.

The nobility from the Western Nations were inoffensive enough in their greetings to me. The king of Blumund arrived in the midst of our hellos, looking like the same nice, approachable middle-aged man as ever—the kind of king you’d expect in an illustration from a book of fairy tales.

Next to him was his queen, beautiful and still looking young. I didn’t know her age, but apparently they had been married over twenty years. At first glance, they didn’t look like the best of matches, but they were a loving one, and the people of Blumund were great fans of them both.

“I must apologize for not thanking you sooner,” he told me. “You winning over Marquis Muller and Earl Hellman, as well as applying pressure to the Western Holy Church, helped us all a great deal.”

It was this man’s consent that had allowed Fuze to move so freely. I could have pulled off that plan only because of the promises he kept. And thanks to his singing my praises far and wide, my reputation actually didn’t seem that bad. Judging by the increasing number of merchants coming to my nation, the Kingdom of Blumund certainly proved influential to me.

I gave the king thanks, but he laughed and waved it off. “No, no, Sir Rimuru! There’s hardly any need to thank me. All we did was live up to the terms of the treaty we ratified. And did Fuze tell you, by the way? I had staked quite a bit on you. Our nation’s fate, in fact, is now tied in with yours. And I did this because we do stand to profit, of course, so there’s no need for further thanks!”

He gave me a gregarious smile—but I could tell the king of Blumund could not be taken lightly. He just said, to my face, that he had his own interests in mind. The idea of requiring further thanks made him laugh.

“Still,” I said, “I am happy to see that you trusted in us.”

Showing gratitude is always important. I didn’t mean to keep banging on this point, but I wanted to bring it across.

“I truly wonder if you really are a demon lord sometimes,” the king replied with a snicker. Then he recomposed himself and looked me in the eye. “And I do understand that our Viscount Cazac caused you quite a bit of trouble. I’m quite glad you were able to rescue your countrymen from him.”

Ah, Viscount Cazac. It was mostly Mjöllmile he’d caused trouble for, though. And if I had to guess, that “Orthrus” gang had been operating in the Forest of Jura well before I became demon lord. But it was a stain on the reputation of Blumund, I suppose, although it really all came down to the viscount himself.

He was just a patsy, really. A horrible man. It wasn’t like he’d personally cracked the whip or anything, but a crime is a crime, as much as Cazac apparently crowed about how the nobility can treat low-born monsters any way they want without penalty. Expecting to get off scot-free was far too selfish.

“Well, with everything fully settled now, I have no interest in dragging that case any further,” I replied.

“I appreciate that!”

“So what will you be doing with him?”

As part of Blumund’s nobility, I couldn’t prosecute him under my own rules—but no punishment at all was unacceptable. I didn’t want to make this a huge incident, but whether or not I did anything depended on the king of Blumund. He, fortunately, understood this.

“Cazac no longer holds a noble title,” he said, voice turning low and ominous. “Given his ties with international criminal gangs, it’s fair to say he’s forgotten his duties as a nobleman. I would hardly abide the likes of him referring to himself as Blumundian nobility. Thus, he has been stripped of his titles and exiled from our lands. The House of Cazac is no more, and thus I consider the case to be closed.”

No problems there. It almost seemed too harsh a penalty, but then, slave trading violates international law. Treating him with kid gloves could even make Blumund’s king look like a pushover. Thinking of it that way, the punishment felt almost merciful to me. Cazac had been a noble his whole life; finding another life for himself would doubtlessly pose difficulties. Without his name, fortune, or even a familiar homeland, I didn’t envy the path this man had ahead of him. But if he could stay alive, maybe he could turn over a new leaf. The punishment fit the crime, certainly, and I had no objection to it.

“Very well. I am willing to accept that punishment.”

“A relief to hear! Is it safe to say that our treaty remains in effect, then?”

“I’d hope for nothing else. May we remain partners for years to come.”

We exchanged a firm handshake. The incident was behind us.

Now it was on to the main subject. The king’s face brightened as he immediately got down to the business on his mind.

“Sir Rimuru, I heard the news from Fuze. He spoke of some grand operation you had in the planning stages?”

Apparently, he wanted to hear more about the outlook on the future I’d given Fuze.

“Well, that’s something involving much more than just your kingdom and mine. I’m hoping we can assemble representatives from all the nations involved for further discussion. I intended to travel to you to discuss it in detail, but…”

“Oh-ho-ho! No need to be so secretive. Fuze gave me a short rundown, but it sounds like something that could very well affect our position in the world. I could hardly leave the matter to my bureaucracy.”

“In that case, I could go into some detail…”

The official discussion was planned for another day. For now, I gave the king my basic plans for turning Blumund into a distribution hub for the world at large. But:

“…I see. Hmm, hmm…”

“My lord, this sounds like a proposal we should move every mountain to make a reality, doesn’t it?”

I had given only a quick rundown, but the king had a different look about him by this point. The real him was now on the surface, revealing a man burning with ambition—and his queen, who hadn’t spoken until now, had just as much trouble hiding her excitement. It seemed this woman was as equally astute as her husband. No doubt my pitch was all she’d needed to accurately calculate how much profit was on the table.

Blumund’s king wasn’t their only leader I should watch out for. Here we had a king with a gambler’s penchant for snap decisions, along with a calm, collected, and calculating queen. Their powers combined must’ve been what had made this small kingdom so continuously influential.

“Of course,” I cautioned, “this only happens after the Founder’s Festival is a resounding success. It’s still three days before it begins.”

“Oh-ho-ho! I’m sure there is little to worry about. Why, it hasn’t started yet, and just look at how lively things are! And I can only imagine how many nobles worldwide are making the journey over here.”

“I can only imagine,” echoed the queen. “But as you said, Sir Rimuru, there is no need for us to hurry matters. A plan like the one you proposed will require an agreement from all the nations involved. In the meantime, we will work with our own government to ensure a consensus on this matter.”

“My lady is right. It was simply delightful to hear such a fine proposal from you, Sir Rimuru. Now, shall we be on our way?”

“I hope the Tempest Founder’s Festival is a resounding success,” the queen closed as she and her husband got to their feet. They had no intention of acting all pompous and wasting my time talking in pointless prose. They had what they came for, and now they were done with me. I liked them for that. It was much easier to deal with.

“Thank you,” I replied. “Please enjoy our nation to the fullest.”

“We certainly intend to!” the king shouted as they walked away, to which the queen added, “Yes, I can hardly wait.”

The day after I spoke with Blumund’s royal couple, I was greeted by another big name—Gazel, the dwarven king.

“Well, Rimuru, here I am!” he said as he sat across from me with an audible whump. “My first journey by carriage in far too long! I’m exhausted!”

Imposing as always, to be sure. He was already reaching out for the tea and snacks on the table, like they were his God-given right.

“Whoa there. Don’t take mine, too, all right?”

I was a little slow on the trigger. In an instant, the last doughnut on the table was up and into his mouth. I had been looking forward to that. Who knew he had a sweet tooth to go with his tremendous drinking habit? There’s just never any underestimating him.

“Ahhh, no need to sweat the details. If such trifles still bother you, you have much left to learn, mm?”

Much left to learn how? You’re the one stealing my doughnuts. I stared at the self-serving Gazel, but he gave me no quarter, returning the gaze.

“And thanks to the chiefs raising a hue and cry, we had a whole caravan of carriages. The length of it was ridiculous. And it’s all your fault, Rimuru!”

As he explained—in great detail—the journey here from Dwargon normally took a day on winged horse. Since this was an official state visit, however, he wasn’t allowed to go with the Pegasus Knights alone. It wasn’t just because of security concerns, either. Gazel would be seeing nobility from around the world, and as king of the mighty nation of Dwargon, he needed to show he was a military power. This meant having to pack multiple changes of clothes and such, along with administrators and attendants to help dress him properly. It made his entourage a more than decently sized crowd.



“If you travel as a king, you need a royal amount of preparation. Having a paved highway to travel on was certainly a boon, but the past few days of travel were just murder on me.”

That must have been why Gazel kept skipping out on his kingdom to travel as light as possible. And come to think of it, Soei had reported that the highway from Blumund was jam-packed with carriages and the like, enough so that the watch needed to play traffic cops for a while, and all the inns along the way were booked solid. Which was great, in a way, but it also reminded me of the need for a larger-scale transport system. Cars in Japan these days, after all, break down very rarely—and if they do, you can call for roadside service and get it handled in no time flat. In this world, though, if you break a wagon axle or something, you’re in trouble. Simply carting the vehicle out of the way of traffic is a painstaking ordeal. You also had horses to take care of, and overall, the whole thing was rife with pitfalls. I deliberately planned for wide highways in anticipation of this, but it still didn’t solve the problem. I was gathering info on these incidents so we could tackle them in the future, but judging by Gazel’s tale, long-distance travel as a noble was an extremely arduous undertaking.

It seemed the traffic jam had mainly been caused by far more nobles deciding to participate than I’d planned for. I’ll need to consider things like that more next time. It’d be nice if we could develop trains and make all of this a lot more comfortable, fast.

But regardless.

“You know, I didn’t expect to see you here at all. I figured you’d send an envoy instead.”

It was true. I really hadn’t. So I was honest with him, hoping he’d take the hint to stop griping at me. It didn’t work.

“Pffft! You think I would do that? When I know you’re up to some kind of scheme again? I can’t sleep at night until I see what it is with my own two eyes! And also…I have a question for you.”

“What?”

“So you fought Hinata Sakaguchi? The whole ‘draw’ thing… That’s a lie, isn’t it?”

I figured he knew that, and he did. He was aware I’d fought her, and he didn’t believe the official results one bit. By the looks of things, he assumed I beat her.

“Well, you could call it winning the battle and losing the war, but yeah, I won.”

I explained to Gazel how it had all worked out in the end, warning him to keep it under his hat for now.

“Unbelievable. That woman, of all people… Frankly, she’s stronger than I am. Her swordsmanship, for one—but even in overall strength, I’d lose. You really beat her?”

This was some real talk from Gazel. I guess I’d impressed him. As a Hero King, Gazel would never get a chance to spar with Hinata, so he used his network of spies to analyze her strength instead. The conclusion he made from their findings: He’d be on the ropes. Hearing I’d won must’ve sincerely surprised him.

“Luck had a lot to do with it. I mean, she really was a lot stronger than Clayman, and he was a demon lord. I think the skills I’m blessed with had a lot to do with it.”

Let’s be straight: If I didn’t have Raphael, I’d have lost. And Raphael is a skill of mine, but he’s also managing all my other skills. If he hadn’t harnessed some powers I wasn’t even aware I had, there’s no way I could’ve beaten Hinata.

“Ha! Luck is as important a strength as any other. I’m glad to see my old sparring partner succeed, but I hate to admit how inferior I am that readily…”

“Well, what do you want me to say? With my own ‘real’ powers, I can’t even beat Hakuro yet.”

“Ahhh, you’re as strange to me as always, aren’t you? ‘Real’ or not, those skills are part and parcel of your battle strength, aren’t they?”

He looked a bit exasperated, but I really meant it. Without Raphael, I think my best match for a sparring partner would be Gobta, actually. Not that I’d tell anyone.

“Well, whatever. So,” he said, erasing his scowl and giving me a serious look, “what are you up to this time?”

This was his way of switching to his main subject, apparently. I had no idea what it was.

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?! The Western Holy Church sent us a missive asking to open a channel for future negotiations! They used to classify us as a nose away from monsters! Why’d they overturn their doctrine like that? It was so sudden, I just know you have to be behind it!”

Ah!

Gazel’s shouting reminded me of my conversation with Hinata and her people. Yes, I had suggested that she could get King Gazel involved. The Dwarven Kingdom had retained its neutrality for a thousand years. You could place boundless trust in them, and even the most orthodox adherents of the Church couldn’t seriously think dwarves were the same thing as monsters. Some, maybe, but it had to be a tiny minority.

That was my motivation behind the suggestion to Hinata, but I forgot to, um, actually ask King Gazel for permission to do that. Or, really, I didn’t think I needed his approval—I wasn’t expecting him to get this riled up over it. Best to play dumb for now. I doubt Hinata explicitly said it was my idea.

“Ohhh? Well, um, I have to say, it’s the first time I’ve heard about this. But you know, I think duking it out with Hinata has helped us develop a sort of friendship. That’s how we reconciled things, besides, and we agreed that we’ll try to stay on good terms in the future. So maybe that got them in the spirit, huh? Like, it inspired them to make some official overtures with you, too?”

“…Hohh?”

Gazel raised a doubtful eyebrow. It’s times like these that I seriously wished I was in slime form. I thought I could feel a cold sweat running down my back, even though I don’t actually sweat.

Caution. The subject Gazel Dwargo is applying Read Thought to your surface mentality. This is being permitted due to a lack of perceived hostile or malicious intent. Block this skill?

Yes

No

Yes! Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!! If it’s something that important, then just tell me, Raphael!!

But that explained things. I had thought it was a little strange before, but Gazel can read people’s minds, huh? No wonder I’ve always felt a bit odd around him, like he was probing my brain for answers. Between his accurate reading of my actions during battle and how he always seemed a step ahead of me in our conversations, it only made sense he was doing that.

The Great Sage evolving into Raphael must’ve helped me recognize the Read Thought when Gazel pulled the trigger on it. It didn’t seem to be active all the time, thank heavens, but who knows how much info he took from me just now…

I gave Gazel a glance. He grinned back at me, a blue vein visible on his forehead.

“Heh…heh-heh. You saw my Read Thought, did you? Well, I applaud you for it, but if you blocked it, that must mean you’re thinking something evil, I presume?”

“N-no, no, I, uh, don’t think so?”

“You fool! I caught a glimpse of you there! It told me you thought it best to get me wrapped up in this!”

Crime never pays, I suppose. He then more or less forced me to confess exactly how my conversation with Hinata had gone. And then:

“I see. So the Seven Days Clergy was behind their humans-first policy…”

“Yeah. And I think Hinata’s people are thinking about purging the Church of anyone poisoned by the Seven Days’ thinking. Given how they’re all dead, I’m sure she can sniff out their sympathizers well enough.”

I went over the internal dealings I had seen in the Western Holy Church and Lubelius, carefully leaving out Luminus’s real identity. Gazel nodded and pondered for a minute.

“…I imagine you are right. In which case, it would be foolish to turn this down, then?”

He had decided to accept Hinata’s—or the Church’s—request.

“I thought you would say that.”

“Enough from you. Doing my diplomacy for me, without permission… But oh well. No need to be a stick in the mud during this festive occasion. You’ve given me only the best seats, I am sure? I might as well enjoy what you’ve got for me.”

After that fit he threw, he was willing to give up the subject for now. I figured he was happy enough with how things turned out, but I wasn’t stupid enough to let him know that. I had word that Hinata and her paladins would be at the Tempest Founder’s Festival as well, so I figured it best for them to meet directly and work matters out. Gazel no doubt had some of his own advisers to deliberate with, too.

So I promised him we’d set up discussions after the festival. He was soon on his way.

It was now morning, three days since Diablo’s return. Yohm’s band was here, and he picked the exact right moment to show up—we were actually holding a preopening feast this evening, the festival itself finally starting up tomorrow. Before then, however, we were at the usual meeting hall, Yohm and a few of his closer advisers seated across from me.

“Hey, pal! It’s been forever and a day, ain’t it? Well, guess what? I’m royalty!”

His clothing certainly had a few more bells and whistles on it, but the person inside hadn’t changed. He was just as brazen as always, greeting me with a defiant grin.

I smiled back. “And clothes certainly make the king, don’t they, Yohm? Thanks for all your hard work.”

“Ha! Hell, thank you! You’re the one who took some grubby bum off the street and elevated ’im up to king,” he said with a smile, “so I hope you’re gonna see this to the end, yeah? I’m all in on what you’re aiming for, so don’t leave me hangin’ halfway.”

Just as he promised, Yohm had become a fine king for me—and with Diablo’s behind-the-scenes work, he now had a firm grip on the throne.

Farmus, a nation with a long, illustrious history, had fallen. In its place was born a new kingdom, with the champion Yohm as its accepted leader. It was a nation reborn from the threat it once was, so Diablo thought fit to change its name to “Farminus.” To cement this, he also had Yohm style himself as Yohm Farminus.

Next to him in the meeting hall were two magic-born—Mjurran and Gruecith. They were his constant bodyguards, and I had no doubt they’d keep Yohm safe—although Mjurran wasn’t really a bodyguard at all, of course.

“Lord Rimuru, let me reintroduce myself. I am Mjur Farminus, wife of the king. It is good to see you again.”

Perhaps noticing my eyes on her, Mjurran lifted up her dress a little and curtsied. It was beautiful, enough to make your garden-variety rich heiress blanch.

“You fit into the role of queen like a puzzle piece, Mjurran.”

“Yeah, doesn’t she?” Yohm said, beaming with pride. “She’s educated and all, unlike me.”

“I do have some experience in this, shall we say. Clayman was such a stickler for etiquette and manners…”

There was no doubting that Clayman held himself well, or at least had a thing for noble trappings. He’d festooned his castle with ornate furniture and artwork, and I’m sure he was just as fastidious with his own staff. Looks like that helped us out in the most surprising way with her.

“Yeah, well, it’s an experience for all of us. I mean, ruling a nation’s been hard for me, too. A little bit ago, I had to formally greet every species in the Forest of Jura, and it nearly killed me. I felt like some kinda sacred idol.”

“Oh, I hear ya! I have all these nobles requesting audiences with me, and some of those idiots are already forming factions and trying to start something. What a headache, I tell ya! At least that old man Razen, our magic expert, is handling all that pretty well.”

Razen himself was not here. Things were still less than stable around their nation, and he was busy darting to and fro, attending to post–civil war matters. I feared for a moment he’d betray us—but looking back, he was only under the effects of Diablo’s Tempter spell, so no worries there. The retired Edmaris, meanwhile, had disguised his identity and was now serving as an adviser, making up for Yohm’s lack of experience and education and helping out in assorted areas of politics.

And as for Gruecith the magic-born:

“So you’re head of the Knight Corps now?”

“I sure am, Sir Rimuru. I turned the job down, but he never listens to me…”

Yohm had all but forced Gruecith to take a role in government. He certainly had the muscle for it, and none of the remaining knights voiced any complaint, so the fledgling nation of Farminus wanted to appoint him head knight, hoping to keep such talent from straying off. He’d balked at first, enjoying the new freedom in his life, but after Mjurran begged him as well, he found it impossible to refuse. Was Gruecith gonna be all right doing that? I didn’t bring it up. He didn’t seem that reluctant.

“I still consider myself part of Lord Carillon’s Warrior Alliance…but for now, I don’t mind babysitting this idiot.”

“Shut up! You’re the idiot!”

No, those two hadn’t changed much. And the sight of Mjurran wincing at them took me back as well. It was a familiar act, but this time, someone interrupted it.

“King Yohm! Captain Gruecith! You’re being terribly rude to the demon lord!”

The loud voice came from what looked like a grade-school boy, a very handsome and intelligent one.

“Ahhh, Edgar, you’re always so serious…”

“Ha-ha-ha! And why not? He’s far better put together than you. What more could we ask for in a crown prince?”

“Captain Gruecith! This is not the time for joking. I am trying my best to serve as King Yohm’s attendant, making sure he becomes a good, just king!”

Edgar, son of the previous king Edmaris, glowed red with embarrassment. He was still just ten years old, but “well put together” was an understatement. By the looks of things, he was already used to being the butt of their jokes—having to deal with such mean grown-ups at his age had to be difficult. At least Yohm and Gruecith seemed to care for him, as much as they carried on.

I wouldn’t have minded more of this pleasant small talk, but it had to end sometime. They were all tired from the voyage, and I’d have other VIPs coming for the preopening tonight. I suggested we could continue this conversation with some drinks later, and Yohm readily agreed.

“So, Yohm, as thanks for keeping your promise, I have a present for you. Diablo—”

“You mean this, Sir Rimuru?”

Before I could finish, Diablo realized what I meant and picked up a certificate we had prepared in advance, kindly providing it to me. I handed it to Yohm.

“Hey, what’s this, pal…?”

Yohm wasn’t particularly great at the whole “literacy” thing, either, so he quickly tossed it over to his assistant, Edgar. With a nod, the boy read it—and then his eyes bulged out of their sockets.

“You, you’re forgiving the rest of the reparations?!”

“Yep. Don’t really need any, now that Yohm’s king.”

They had already paid us 1,500 stellar gold coins in reparations. The total sum of 10,000 stellars was laughably astronomical, and now that our mission was accomplished, there was no need for that money anyway.

Yohm looked at the shocked child with a smile. “Heh-heh! Well, I don’t really get what that means, but there ya go, Edgar.”

He didn’t know, but Edgar sure did. No doubt it’d be another gold star for Yohm’s reputation.

Thus I became known as a person—or a demon lord, I suppose—who was willing to bargain a bit when it came to reparations.

My talks with Yohm’s group were over. They all left the meeting hall, dragging a still-petrified Edgar with them.

It was afternoon now, and I was no longer quite so busy. Visitors were still swarming in, but they weren’t eager to talk right now, either—not when there was this evening to prepare for. A lot of them certainly wanted to see me, and I agreed to, as long as they were willing to wait until after the festival.

I finally had some free time as a result, so (as I promised) I decided to travel to Englesia and pick up Yuuki. I could stop by the school there and take the kids as well—a festival like this, I didn’t want them to miss out on the fun.

The streets of Englesia were a nostalgia trip for me. It had been only several months since I left, but recalling life here naturally dissolved any tension from my face.

I couldn’t help but travel to the Free Guild headquarters in the middle of the city. Through the modern automatic glass door, I entered an air-conditioned chamber—and the moment I did, I was greeted with sharp-eyed stares. Only adventurers ranked B or higher were allowed in here, and this crowd looked the part—tough, seasoned, and not to be messed with. Looking around the chamber, it was clear nothing had changed. It made me happy.

A few of the men were openly appraising my appearance. Given they were here in the middle of the day, they might’ve been preparing for some big job or another.

“…Who’s that?”

“Haven’t seen ’im around before. Is he new? Hey, you know him?”

“Uh-uh. You think I know anyone that pretty?”

These whisperings weren’t exactly welcome news. Less than a year’s time, and they’d already forgotten about me? But then I noticed—I didn’t have that mask on now, did I? I could fully control my own aura, so I went barefaced, since there was no longer any need for it. I had considered a disguise, but it was too late now.

Fortunately, I was dressed in my old adventurer’s garb, so as long as I acted the part, nobody would realize I’m a demon lord. Besides, Shuna had expended untold efforts sewing the demon-lord outfit I’d wear for official audiences. It was incredibly gaudy, decorated up and down with nothing but the finest accoutrements, and she even knitted a full-on coiffure to top it off, so it’d look nothing like what I’m sporting right now.

There were still relatively few ways to record things around you in this world anyway. It’s not like people far and wide would know what I look like as a demon lord. Maybe I shouldn’t bother worrying about it. For now, let’s go with this.

So I strode up to the reception desk. A man walked in front of me, blocking my way. I was struck by the weirdest sense of déjà vu.

“Hold on. I dunno what kinda backwater you earned your B rank in, but you think you can just come in without a word to the vets around here? Don’t ya know it’s the polite thing for a new adventurer to give his name first?”

Actually, it wasn’t just déjà vu. I pretty vividly remembered him. This guy was Grassé, friends with Kabal and his crew, and he had whined at me about proper greetings last time, too. He must’ve lived his whole life like he was captain of the football team.

“Ummm, you’re Grassé, right? You’re always hanging out here at HQ, aren’t you? Don’t you have any work to do?”

“Huh? You know my name? So—”

“Mine’s Rimuru,” I said, cutting him off. “I was with Kabal’s party, remember?”

I mean, come on, Grassé. I know that mask is gone, but my voice is exactly the same, okay? Why isn’t he picking up on that…?

“Huuuh?! Uh, R…Rimuru?”

“Mm-hmm. And this is the first time you’re seeing my face, but at least recognize my voice, man.”

“N-no, um, but… Huh? Is it me, or were you kinda smaller last time?”

My name instantly threw Grassé into flustered confusion. I beat him rank-wise, so in his football-captain mind, I was above him. Adventuring was largely a meritocracy anyway, so acting superior based on age or years of experience wasn’t really a mainstream trend. If a new guy helps you out, you’ll naturally respect that and help him back in kind—but a lot of adventurers didn’t see the need to be friendly to total strangers, either. Things changed if you were in a party, but in terms of social cliques? That was nearly all based on rank.

“Yeah, I grew,” I said in a huff. More evolved instead of grew, but I didn’t need to be that honest. It seemed to convince him.

“Oh. I get it. But, man, Rimuru, you sure got pretty hot! You must be well near invincible by now, huh? Getting to see that sweet face of yours… I’m so moved!”

He was standing at attention now, like he did with Kabal, as he bowed to me. He always was a snake that way, but I couldn’t hate him for it.

“Yeah, yeah. But why’re you always here? Aren’t you employed?”

“Heh-heh! Aw, don’t give me that. This is kinda part of my work—I’m educating the new adventurers. There’s a lot of barriers you encounter in the B rank, as you know, and my job’s to approach any brash new guys and take ’em down a notch, that sort of thing. See those guys over there?” He pointed to the group looking at me earlier. “They’re doing the same thing. We all hang here at the HQ in our downtime.”

The group stood up straight and nodded at me.

“Forgive me—I didn’t realize you were Rimuru, a B-rank adventurer,” one of them, the apparent leader, said.

I nodded back at him. “I didn’t think I changed that much…”

“Oh, no, you have! Now that I know, I just realized you got the same outfit on, but otherwise…”

“Yeah, totally. That face is just… Wow. What a standout…”

Is it really? That much?

“All right, all right. Should I put on the mask?”

Doing that was kind of a pain, but I didn’t want to go through this every visit. I created the mask from my Stomach and applied it to my face, the adventurers looking a little disappointed for reasons I couldn’t fathom.

“So, yeah. Keep up the good work, guys. Don’t torment the newbies too much.”

With that, I headed for the front desk.

Giving my name to the clerk, I had her take me to Yuuki. He was expecting me, apparently, so it didn’t take long.

“Hey, Rimuru! Long time no see! Sounds like you’ve been through a lot, huh?”

“That doesn’t begin to describe it. I got attacked by Hinata, the Farmus Army invaded us, and then the demon lords summoned me… Just one thing after the other, you know? ‘A lot’ is the understatement of the year.”

“Ha-ha-ha! I figured you’d sum it up like that, Rimuru.”

Yuuki laughed it off, but it definitely was a lot. He understood that, I’m sure; he was all smiles, but there was a touch of gratitude to his voice.

“But, hey, at least I’m good with Hinata now. All’s well that ends well, right?”

“Sounds like it. I met her a few times to exchange information, and I told her a lot about you as a person. You know how, like, suspicious she is of people.”

“Oh, believe me, I do. She barely listened to a word I said.”

“Right? She’s the kind of person who only believes what she sees and hears for herself. It’s always been that way with her, and let me tell you, it’s not been easy.”

We chatted along these lines for a while. I’m sure it wasn’t easy for Yuuki. Hinata’s thought process can be a total mystery sometimes.

“Not that I can really talk about that with anyone but you, Rimuru…”

Hinata had a lot of followers. If Yuuki started complaining about her to the wrong person, she’d know almost immediately. Not that gossip is a good thing. I’ll want to be careful about that.

But it was time to cut to the chase.

“So what do you think? If you’re busy, I won’t force you, but would you like to check out the festival for two or three days?”

“Ha! Of course I’m going. Why do you think I tried so hard to get ahead on my work? And I’ve got people here I feel fine leaving this place to while I’m gone. Give me one moment.”

Yuuki stood up and went out of the room, calling for someone. I relaxed with my tea for a moment, and he was back shortly with a woman.

“Let me introduce you guys. This is Kagali, the vice master of the Free Guild. She’ll be running it while I’m gone.”

She was a beautiful woman, very graceful on the outside, and the business suit–like attire she had on fit her to a T. Her eyes were blue, her blond hair tied in a chignon, but her ears were the real standout—long and pointed. She had to be an elf.

“Hello, Rimuru Tempest. Or should I call you Demon Lord Rimuru? My name is Kagali. It is an honor to meet you.”

“Thank you. This is my second time here, but I don’t think we met the first time, did we?”

I recalled the secretary who had given us tea, but not this girl. If she was the number two official in the Free Guild, I would’ve expected an introduction sooner—but there was a reason for that.

“Hee-hee! No, you wouldn’t have been able to. I’ve only returned here recently. My passion is exploring old ruins, and I’ve just come back from mapping out the complex at Soma, one of the largest in the west.”

It turned out Kagali was one of the world’s greatest active explorers, lurking around this ruin and that since before Yuuki had founded the Free Guild. Her name was not that well-known—she hadn’t taken part in the Society of Adventurers, the precursor to the Guild—but Yuuki had scouted her for her clear talent nonetheless. The Guild, after all, wasn’t just about fighting. That was Yuuki’s philosophy, which was why he had given an exploration expert like Kagali such a high position on the org chart.

Thanks to that support, Kagali had just pulled off a monumental feat—the complete mapping of the ancient ruins at Soma. This put her name up in lights for much of the world, quelling any dark murmurings of her being Yuuki’s hanger-on. Now she was a vice master anyone could respect.

“Just because it’s mapped, of course, doesn’t mean all its mysteries are unraveled,” she explained. “It just means there’s a visual guide to follow to the bottom. There’s still so much left to unravel.”



“Yep. We can leave that job to the exploration-oriented adventurers. And with the map Kagali left for them, I think they’ll make some serious progress.”

There’s the Guild philosophy at work again—instead of leaving everything to a single exceptional talent, they can bring on teams of people for the excavation work. It’d help younger members gain experience, too, killing two birds with one stone in a way.

So Kagali was now working here at the headquarters, helping educate the B-rank and higher adventurers. Given that she got a cut of the proceeds whenever the Guild sold the relics found by explorers, her take-home pay must’ve been astronomical.

“Huh. You can make a lot of money from ruins, can’t you?”

“I have to admit,” she replied, “you can. Although money isn’t my main motivation; this is more my life’s passion. I have auctioned off things I excavated in the past, however, to pay for my expenses.”

Yep. Sounds like lucrative, if backbreaking, work. And speaking of ruins…

“I wanted to ask—who’s got the rights to these ruins? Is it whatever nation they’re located in?”

“Mm…” Yuuki paused. “That’s a hard question to answer. In the case of the Soma complex, that’s managed by the Free Guild. It was discovered in a somewhat tricky location—a desert region called the Barren Lands, farther west from Western Nations territory.”

“Yes. To be more exact, the Barren Lands are located right up against the domain of the demon lord Daggrull. Thus, the area is not under governmental jurisdiction at all—everyone’s too afraid to come near it. Ruins in unaffiliated lands like these don’t have anyone who can lay claim to them.”

“Oh… We’ll have to be careful with those, then…”

“Hmm? Something bothering you about that, Rimuru?”

Yuuki must have picked up on my reaction. I needed no reminding of what that something was. It was the assorted unknown ruins near Clayman’s castle, no doubt packed with magic items. I was sure exploring it would reap a huge harvest for us, but there was one snag: Who would the items we dug up really belong to? And what if those ruins invited unscrupulous, profit-seeking adventurers—or worse, out-and-out criminals? The potential for discovering untold treasure was tempting, but even more important to consider was that treasure’s historical value. They provided leads we could follow to learn about the ancients and what they did.

It’s only natural, I suppose, to romanticize about ancient times. If we let just anyone go in the ruins and vandalize them all they wanted, we ran the risk of losing irreplaceable artifacts—that was my main fear.

There was no need to hide this fear, so I decided to bring up the topic with Yuuki. We had an expert explorer on hand, besides.

“Well, actually, there’s another complex of ruins in Clayman’s old domain.”

“There is? You’re sure of that?!”

Kagali’s eyes instantly fixed upon me, like a predator aiming for the kill. It was quite the onrush, and it honestly surprised me a bit.

“Yeah. Clayman had this vast fortune and collection and stuff. He handed out magical weapons and armor to his forces like candy. I’m thinking he harnessed the things he found in that ruin to finance it. The thing is…”

“Yes?”

I paused for a bit, unsure, before continuing. “This might be rude to say to someone who makes exploration their profession, but I’m not really interested in plundering ruins just for the treasure. I want to know how the people there used to live, what kind of culture they had, and why their cities fell. I think ancient people deserve at least that much respect, so we don’t let the past go to waste.”

This was just me being sentimental, I knew. It wasn’t that I didn’t care at all about treasure; there were just more important things. That was why I ordered that ruin closed to outside visitors for now.

“You’re more of a romanticist than I thought, Rimuru.”

“What do you mean, ‘more than I thought’? I’ve always been this way, Yuuki.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, you’re right.” He smiled at me, convinced. “You’d have to be, to come up with an idea like building a nation of monsters.”

Kagali, for her part, mulled this over for a bit before nodding. The predatorial drive in her eyes was gone, the intellectual spark now firmly back.

“I see… Certainly, that’s a perspective I did not have. But I understand it. I am not a fan of seeing ruins get vandalized myself. We need to build the right sort of expedition team before we send them to Soma, of course.”

Maybe the romantic part of my thoughts didn’t come across, but at least she saw the need to keep the ruins protected. Hopefully she could lead that effort. She certainly seemed like the right fit.

So that just left one problem.

“Right. Well, the problem is, I’m the sole person responsible for caretaking Clayman’s territory. The demon lord Milim will eventually annex that land, but for now, it’s being run by us, the people who defeated Clayman. I think it’s fair to say he kept those ruins in pretty good shape, so I don’t want to be the one who messes them all up. I think I’ll have to bring this up with Milim—we need to make sure we’re thorough with handling them.”

“Oh, you aren’t going to rule that territory yourself?”

“It might be too much for me. It borders the Eastern Empire, and I don’t really feel like—um, I mean, having to run a border defense line against them is a pretty tall order. We can’t devote that many forces to it.”

Clayman’s domain was a buffer zone with the Empire. It contained a road known as the Valley of Death that wound its way through rugged mountains—a dirt path, not paved at all, but it still provided passage between Clayman’s lands and the Empire. The area was packed with undead creatures, but there was also evidence that Clayman’s forces made regular use of the trail—suggesting that the Empire was carrying out some kind of plan of action through his domain. It wouldn’t hurt to be on our guard about that.

We could deploy the army over there, but we’re running short on personnel right now. Managing the whole of the Forest of Jura took a vast amount of work. I was thinking I could leave Clayman’s land to Milim, and if the Empire ever made any moves, I’d just let Milim handle everything.

“So if we wanted to explore those ruins, we’d need the demon lord Milim’s permission?” Yuuki asked.

“I suppose so, yeah.”

“Ah… I have a keen interest in them, but do you think we’d be able to avoid interference?” inquired Kagali.

“Oh, I’m sure she’d say yes if we asked…but knowing her, I guarantee she’ll want to go in, too.”

“That…”

I was sure that condition would make any would-be explorer hesitate. The general public, after all, feared Milim deeply. Kagali seemed disappointed, but she shouldn’t give up yet. Milim would definitely come along, no doubt about that—but if I’m there, too, what’s the problem?

“But, you know, I was planning to explore those ruins anyway, so having an expert like you along would certainly put my mind at ease, Kagali. And since we’ve introduced ourselves to each other, maybe I could pay you through the Free Guild to help with that effort? What do you think?”

“Meaning that you’d have the right to whatever we found, Rimuru?”

“Well, we can talk about that. I have a museum in my capital, so I’d prefer to put it on display there rather than sell it off. But it’s still gonna be Milim’s land, so we’ll have to discuss matters with her, too. It’s hard to make a decision either way right now.”

“I see. But you’re definitely gonna stage an expedition sometime?”

“Yep!”

“Indeed,” Kagali chimed in, “if I don’t have to worry about expenses, I’d be delighted to take that offer. And if you can handle negotiations with Milim for me, I’d have no reason to say no.”

It looked like Kagali’s interests weren’t strictly about profit, either. She had an intellectual bent as well, and if she did, there were no issues between us. So it was decided: She’d organize the team, and I’d talk to Milim and convince her this was a good idea.

“Does all that sound good to you, Yuuki?”

“Sure! The Free Guild would be happy to help!”

“Now I’m looking forward to this. I’ll begin making arrangements for this while I run operations in Master Yuuki’s absence.”

Ah, right. We’d gotten a little sidetracked, but I was here to invite Yuuki over.

“Thanks very much, Kagali. Sorry you’re staying here while we get to have all the fun, I guess.”

“Hee-hee-hee! Oh, I don’t mind. Enjoy yourselves to your hearts’ content.”

“Thanks. The Guild’s in your hands!”

After saying our good-byes, Yuuki and I left the Guild headquarters. I hadn’t expected this, but now we had the ball rolling on exploring those ruins. I really wasn’t sure who to enlist for that effort, so having an expert oversee operations was reassuring. It wouldn’t be until things calmed down after the Founder’s Festival, but I really couldn’t wait to see what we found in there. We could all stand to learn a lot—maybe it’d even give me some hints for the underground Dungeon we’d built back in town.

Such were my thoughts as I took Yuuki along to my next stop.

I removed my mask outside of the HQ. Given that I no longer needed to hide my aura with it, I only really required it in places where revealing my face would cause trouble.

Yuuki, carrying a large knapsack, was eager to talk to me. Receiving that written invite, he must’ve had time to prepare in advance—and given the size of his bag, he must’ve been planning to stay at least a few nights.

“So are you gonna bring the kids along, too?”

“Yeah. Now that Hinata and I are even, none of ’em has any reason to be against me. There might be an issue or two with them being over there, but we got some pretty serious security, so…”

We had to, given all the dignitaries we invited. And if we could keep all of them safe, there was no reason we couldn’t protect those five children, either.

“Okay. In that case, go right ahead.” Yuuki smiled. “They’re a lot more devoted to studying these days, so maybe they’re due for a break and a reward.”

I didn’t send any advance notice to the kids. It would be a complete surprise to them. I kept quiet until I was sure it’d be okay to invite them, and hopefully they’d forgive me for that. I knew they really needed some more advance notice, but depending on how things went, I might’ve had to say no to them. No point in revving them up and disappointing them later if things went awry.

After walking for a while, we came to a familiar schoolhouse—the imposing home of Englesia’s Free Academy. A word with the gate guard, and we were taken inside—I was with Yuuki, the school’s honorary chairman, so it took no time at all.

We were soon greeted by the vice principal, who guided us into a classroom.

“Hey, guys! You all doing well—?”

Before I could finish saying hello, Alice tackled me like a lineman.

“Ugh! Mr. Tempest! You’ve been gone for so long!!”

I didn’t think I had been, but maybe that was just my grown-up’s perspective? Children have a different sense of time than we do. I guess this must’ve been hard for them.

“She’s right. You promised me you’d come in regularly to visit!”

“Yeah! Gail’s telling the truth! I thought you forgot all about us!”

“But I’m glad you’re here now, Mr. Tempest!”

Gail, Kenya, and Ryota all gathered around me, expressing their joy even as they complained to me. Chloe wasn’t far behind them, grabbing on to me and smiling.

“Welcome back, Mr. Tempest!”

“You’re as popular as ever.” Yuuki laughed as he watched. “I’m a little jealous.”

“Oh, Yuuki’s here, too!”

“Are you gonna fight me today like you promised, Yuuki?”

“Me too!”

“Right. Our spirit force handling’s improved a lot lately.”

Noticing Yuuki made the children’s smiles grow wider. Kenya was even challenging him to a fight, and Ryota and Gail weren’t far behind him. If they had their powers more under control now, I was sure they wanted someone to test them out on. But we were here for different reasons.

“Ah-ha-ha! You’d need to train another hundred years to beat me. I’ll fight if ya want, but not today, all right?”

“Awww, why not?” Kenya protested.

“Sorry,” I said, “but there’s no time for that today.”

“What do you mean?” a confused Chloe asked.

I looked right back at her. “Well, I wanted to invite all five of you to my homeland. We’re holding a big festival starting tomorrow. If you don’t want to go, that’s fine, but—”

“Hurry! We gotta get ready!”

“All right, Ken!”

“Whaaaaa—?! Why didn’t you tell us sooner?! This is huge!”

“Yeah, Mr. Tempest! How can you just say this out of nowhere?!”

“Um, um, I can’t wait!!”

The children immediately sprang into action, not waiting for the rest of my speech. They didn’t waste a moment of time. The decision was unanimous.

“All you need to bring is a change of clothes, guys!” I shouted as they scurried off. There was no response, all of them departing like a storm and shouting the whole way.

The teacher presiding over class at the time was understandably a little confused as he watched us. “That’s quite a surprise to see.” He sighed once they were gone. “They’ve never been quite that friendly to me…”

“Ah-ha-ha! You’re doing a great job with them. They’re a little better now, but it takes a rare teacher to wrangle the likes of these kids.”

“No, no, I suppose it’s only natural that you need to prove your strength for them to listen to you. I hate to say it, but I think I might actually lose to them if I don’t pay attention. There’s no doubting the power they pack, no. By the way…”

The teacher didn’t look familiar. He must’ve been hired on to replace me.

“Oh, I’m sorry. My name’s Rimuru, and I was teaching them before you. Sorry to interfere with class.”

“Ah, you are Rimuru! I surmised as much when the children called you ‘Mr. Tempest.’ My name is Klaus, and I was hired by the academy as your replacement.” He gave me a bitter smile. “And don’t worry about the class—the vice principal warned me in advance that we may be canceling it for a bit starting today.”

As Yuuki explained, Klaus was once an adventurer, a hunting specialist with a rank of A-minus. He was now approaching fifty and considering retirement before very long.

“Wait, you said you might even lose to them? They’ve gotten that strong?”

“Well, what did you expect? They take pride in the fact that you trained them, sir.”

“Yeah,” Yuuki said, “if they snuck up on me, maybe I’d even lose.”

They must’ve grown a lot. That was impressive, especially in such a short time. It gave me something to think about, as a resolved-looking Klaus turned toward us.

“Sir Yuuki, I have a request.”

“Mm? What’s that?”

“It’s something I’d like to ask Sir Rimuru as well—but at this rate, I can see myself as no longer able to win against them before long. It’s an advantage that goes beyond any technical skill they have. But letting them slide by with just this much wouldn’t be good for them. I think they need an adult who can serve as a kind of wall for them.”

“How do you mean?”

“It’s simple, Sir Yuuki. These children still have the potential to grow. I don’t want them defeating me to make them arrogant, and thus, I was hoping we could provide someone who can train them in fighting technique.”

I get it. Klaus really seemed to be looking out for these kids. Each one was housing a high-level spirit inside them—spirits that neutralized the magicule energy granted to them in the crossing from their world to this one. As they grew, however, they became able to control and harness these spirits’ powers—and unleashing this extra energy would make it simple to cast spirit-magic spells, for example.

They really could become talented elementalists, the way Shizu had. Kenya even had the potential to go Hero-level, just like the light elemental we met said. With the right instructor, fabulous powers would be far more than just a dream to him. Like Klaus suggested, he needed a gifted teacher to guide him along. But:

“All right. So we’ll want a good teacher along those lines, huh? But if we’re talking someone stronger than you, Klaus, it’d have to be a current A-ranker. Hiring someone that far up as a teacher might not be possible…”

Yuuki was right. That was a problem. A retired adventurer would be glad to accept a steady job like that, but an active one could earn a lot more money taking challenging jobs than watching a classroom of kids. The Guild, too, had a mission to keep people safe; they’d naturally prefer their top talent to be working in the field for them.

“I imagine not,” Klaus said with a sigh. “If we’re looking for someone ranked A or higher willing to work as a teacher, well, I sure can’t think of anyone. I can certainly teach classwork and adventuring skills well enough, but…”

He understood full well that this was a big ask. And, yeah, recruiting adventurers to teach must’ve been a pretty tall order. So I made another suggestion.

“In that case, you know, I’m planning to start a school of my own back home. We got a lot of B-ranked dudes over there, and I could probably have Old Man Hakuro, my own teacher, serve as an instructor. When it comes to swordsmanship, at least, he’s better than I am, so I’m sure he could teach them that much.”

Hakuro would be just fine—when it came to sword skills. The children needed more instruction than that, of course, but…

“Whoa,” Yuuki marveled, “that actually sounds great! Would you mind taking over custody of them for a while, then?”

“Yeah, that’s another idea. But they’re still gonna need to learn life skills for human society from somewhere.”

Children learn a lot of these skills interacting with one another. Robbing them of that chance, I worried, could stunt their communication skills as they grew up. We’d be seeing more and more adventurers in Tempest over time, and their own children would probably be attending this school I pictured—but that wasn’t likely to gain major momentum for another few years. Until then, they’d have to live in an environment with no other human children, and that struck me as problematic.

“Oh, because it’s nothing but other monsters instead of human kids?”

“Yes, that could be an issue…”

Yuuki and Klaus had the same misgivings, nodding their agreement. I was glad we were on the same page with this—but I couldn’t rest easy yet. There was something else on my mind.

“Which, I mean, they could just travel to Tempest for instruction in battle. We have the teleportation magic for it; they could come over a few times a week if you like. But given their background, I think they better get some instruction in elemental spirits as well.”

This wasn’t a “problem,” exactly, but still not something I wanted to compromise on. The elemental spirits within them helped protect their lives, to a large extent. If they wanted to harness their powers correctly, they’d need more core knowledge about them—knowledge I simply didn’t have. Not to put too fine a point on it, but everything I knew about this world was gained strictly off my own experience. Me trying to explain elementals would be like you or I explaining how to breathe through words alone. I could go over logical facts and stuff, but I couldn’t impart the real essence.

I was reminded of the way Hinata and her paladins fought, a fusion of sorts between spirit magic and swordsmanship. It was a unique approach, and mastering it must require a deep understanding of spirits. If they could impart that to our kids here…

“And, you know, when I think about spirits, I think of the paladins. Should we ask Hinata?”

“Hmm… I was thinking the same thing, but Hinata can be kinda scary, you know?”

“Well…true.”

“She’d never allow the kids to take advantage of her, that’s for damn sure. But I’m worried she’ll be a little too harsh on them.”

“That’s hard to deny, yes.”

Yuuki and I looked at each other and sighed. But we’d need to save this discussion for later. I could already see the children running back to us, luggage in tow. It was festival season. No point in pondering these thorny issues when there’s so much fun to be had. For now, I could ask Hakuro about instructor work and worry about other matters later. It was procrastinating, I know, but we’d figure something out.

So, following the same thought process I usually turned to for issues like these, I mentally switched gears and quit my worrying.

Leaving the main gate into Englesia, I set up a transport gate in a secluded location. This wasn’t “magic,” technically, so I could deploy one without any magic circle required. Yuuki looked at me rather coldly about that, but the kids were used to it.

“Mr. Tempest, if it’s that easy for you to use these gates, then come visit us more often!”

It was Kenya complaining, and he was absolutely right. I apologized profusely to him. With all the stuff that’d happened, it’d been hard to find free time and I couldn’t really guarantee anyone’s safety, but no point telling him about that. It’d just make the kid all anxious. So, while dancing around the subject a little, I promised to go back to see them more often.

On the other side of the gate, I took Yuuki and the kids straight over to my favorite lodging in town—a private area, separate from the four-star nobles’ accommodations and reserved for our top officials. Yuuki went off to his room, and as he did, I turned toward the children.

“I’m sorry, guys, but I still have some work left. You’ll have to wait until tonight to see me, okay?”

“““Awwwww!”””

None of them was too excited to hear this.

“Quiet!” I took a pendant out from my pocket, silencing them. “I thought we could use this to play a game, but…?”

That lifted their spirits. They were eager to hear more, and once I was sure they were, I began to explain.

“You see this pendant here? It’s kind of a free-pass ticket to all the booths and stuff in the festival, starting tomorrow. Carry this around, and you can eat and drink all you want in the stalls, and you’re free to come and go through any of the event halls you like. But just remember, there’s an upper limit of one hundred silver coins—use that up, and it’s game over. You’ll have to go back to your rooms then, and I’ll give you homework as punishment. But if you’ve been doing your work up to now, I’m sure you’ll be smart enough to stretch this out for three days. Sound like fun to you?”

I knew from the start that I couldn’t watch these kids all day, so I thought up this tactic for them. That’s what you normally did with kids at a fair, right? Give them an allowance and let ’em run free. I felt bad about not taking them around, but I figured the kids would have more fun alone anyway. And with Soei’s agents deployed across town, they’d have no trouble keeping tabs on them.

This way, at least, I could let them loose on the festival without major concern. And, really, one hundred silvers was a crazy-generous budget. Most of the stalls and attractions didn’t even charge you one silver; you’d have to make a concerted effort to spend that much in three days. I called it a “game,” but really it was just a premise I’d invented to set them on their way.

“Let’s do it!”

“I bet there’s all this rare stuff to see… Can’t wait, huh, Ken?”

“Yeah, I can’t!”

“Thank you, Mr. Tempest.”

“Um, I’ll buy something for you, Mr. Tempest!”

They were up for it, all bursting with anticipation. I gave them the pendant, returning each of their excited nods. It’s always fun, I think: that anticipation before a big event. I also thought about telling them Ramiris was in town but decided against it. I planned to introduce them after the fest anyway, so no need to hurry things. Besides, all the kids—Kenya and Alice in particular—were already busy planning out the next three days of fun. The servants at our lodging would take care of the rest of their needs, I figured.

“Okay, guys, if you need anything, just ask the hostess in charge here, all right? And I doubt you’ll need to, but if you have to contact me about something, just hold that pendant tight and think hard about me. It’ll trigger a messaging magic.”

“““Okay!””” they all shouted back. Good to see them so eager. And with that, figuring I would be in their way beyond this point, I left their room.

Now I had wrapped up all the necessities.

I had a little time before the preopening, so I thought I would take a quick break in my room before it began…but the world had other plans for me.

“…Sir Rimuru, the Hero Masayuki’s party has arrived outside of town.”

Soei quietly appeared to whisper the news into my ear. A Hero, huh? What kinda dude could this be? I thought over the possibilities as I came by to greet him.

As I did, I could see several elves getting jostled around on a large wagon. I had heard they were freed from that Orthrus ring, and I guess the news was true. It was a pretty fancy wagon, too—they must’ve been treated well post-rescue.

On another, smaller covered wagon was a boy with blond hair, sitting in the cabman’s seat with another man holding the reins. Was that Masayuki the Hero? He looked Japanese to me, but with the rounded lines to his face, there might’ve been something in his blood from elsewhere. That sort of pop-idol look, you know? Silky blond hair, almondlike eyes with double-fold eyelids… His face was childish, but he just projected this aura of coolness.

The girls must’ve loved him…but frankly, he didn’t look very powerful to me. You can’t judge a book by its cover, though. He was definitely an otherworlder—I could see it in the faint Heroic Aura he emitted. It was meant to be intimidating, but it didn’t work on me.

Bracing myself, I retained my cool as I turned my eyes toward Masayuki. The party must’ve noticed me just then, slowing down and coming to a stop in front of me.

“You’re the demon lord Rimuru? Funny to see you personally greeting us at the door!”

“Well, Sir Masayuki is a renowned Hero. Not even a demon lord could afford to ignore him.”

“Hee-hee-hee! What d’you think, Masayuki? Wanna settle things right here ’n’ now?”

Sheesh, that was sure friendly of them. I was glad they’d rescued those elves, but what did I do to deserve getting dissed like that? Well, gotta bottle it up. Anger right now would be ill-advised. I was trying to frame myself as a helpful, harmless demon lord, on good terms with Hinata and everything, and no way I could let that effort go to waste.

“Ha-ha! Harsh words from the Hero’s friends! Well, out of appreciation for you rescuing our countrymen the elves, you are free to enter and stay in this town. I could even prepare a house for you, if you want, and feel free to stay as long as you like. But just so we’re clear, I’m not interested in ‘settling’ anything right now, all right?”

There were merchants around us. I decided to take a friendly, humble route. It didn’t exactly provide the results I wanted.

“Ha-ha! Look! The demon lord’s afraid of you, Masayuki!”

The large, seminude man who took the reins roared in laughter as he looked down at me.

“I understand you are seeking friendship with us humans. But I’m unsure how much I can trust this. The rumors say that you’re the one who schemed to topple the government of Farmus. Perhaps you’ve managed to trick Hinata the Saint well enough, but don’t expect to be so lucky with Masayuki here.”

Talk about turning a deaf ear. They were hell-bent on making me out to be the villain, it looked like. But oddly enough, the Hero himself still hadn’t said a word. He had tried to, but every time, one of his companions would speak up first. To be honest, they were acting more like groupies.

“Hmph! The evil must be dispelled, if you ask me. Sir Masayuki, defeat this demon lord at once and bring peace to—”

Guys, I’m telling you, we’ve already got peace.

The nearby merchants were giving me confused looks, no doubt totally lost. If I didn’t put my foot down, I felt like there might be repercussions. But I couldn’t really stage a fight here… Before I could get too worried, however, someone tossed me a life ring.

“What’re you guys doing?”

Yuuki, in a fresh set of clothes, had already heard the commotion.

“Oh! Yuuki!”

For the first time, Masayuki spoke up—and from the sound of it, he had been hoping for divine intervention as well. But his companions weren’t having any of it.

“Well, hello there, Yuuki! Why’s the master of the Guild himself keeping tabs on a demon lord?”

“I’m not, Jinrai. Guys, Rimuru seriously wants us all to get along, okay? And as proof of that, I’ll point out the fact that you’re all still alive.”

So the larger guy was named Jinrai. Yuuki explained to him about how I’d fought Hinata to a draw and that I’m not a bad demon lord. It didn’t convince all of them.

“What do you mean by that? The way you describe it, are you implying that Masayuki is weaker than Hinata the Saint?”

“Don’t be that harsh with him. A mere demon lord could never stop Sir Masayuki. And even the guild master could never be forgiven for insulting him this way!”

Masayuki himself was still silent. He sure had some extreme fans.

“Yeah, Yuuki. Like Bernie and Jiwu said, don’t treat Masayuki like a fool, all right? I dunno how strong Hinata’s supposed to be, but a draw’s the best she could do against this guy? In that case, it’s time for the headliner to make his debut, ain’t it? Masayuki could whip this demon lord easy!”

The lauded Hero looked like he wanted to be somewhere else right now. Maybe he didn’t seek conflict with me at all, then? Yuuki, realizing this himself, stepped up to assuage his friends.

“Guys, guys, calm down. Like I told you, Rimuru isn’t hostile against us. There’s no point fighting him.”

“But he’s a demon lord, ain’t he? Who knows when he might hatch some nefarious scheme! And with the Western Holy Church sitting on the fence, ain’t it about time Masayuki shows everyone just what kinda Hero he is?”

“No, I’m telling you—”

Hmm. I see. I could understand where this guy Jinrai was coming from, actually. I was a demon lord, and he didn’t trust me. And sure, if you weren’t familiar with me yet, maybe you’d feel the same way as Jinrai did about me. I still didn’t know what the so-called Hero thought of all this, but at this rate, we’d never come to terms.

So I decided to accept the challenge. But:

“All right. In that case, I’ve got a suggestion. We’re planning to hold a battle tournament at the festival starting tomorrow. If you enter it and emerge as champion, I’ll gladly accept your challenge! That, and you’ll be able to prove your strength to everyone there. Not a bad offer, right?”

I’ll take the challenge, but before that, I wanted Masayuki and his team to enter the tournament. It’d help me learn how they fought, and for that matter, it might show that I shouldn’t bother with them in the first place. A pretty shrewd idea, I thought, although I wasn’t sure which of them would get to fight in the arena yet. I had planned to restrict the competition to fighters ranked below A, as I was still a little anxious about the arena’s structural integrity. It did just fine against magic from high-level elementals, which was special-A stuff…but hey, if it crumbled, we’d just build it again. As long as we made sure no onlookers got hurt, us duking it out there shouldn’t be a problem.

“Oh? You’re in that much of a hurry to embarrass yourself in public?”

“What do you think, Masayuki?”

“You should accept the offer. It’ll help spread your name far and wide! Yes, let’s prove you’re on the side of justice, in front of the very people you must keep safe!”

“Um, yeaaah…”

Masayuki’s attendants were all gung-ho about it. Masayuki was not. His eyes darted around, seeking an escape. Was this dude really all right? This wasn’t, like, just a huge bluff or something, was it? Nah, it couldn’t be. This gang apparently crushed Orthrus, which Soei described to me as one seriously dangerous organization. That’s not the kind of feat you could bluff your way through. Even if he was a big faker… I mean, hell, he could say no anytime.

“…Well, all right. I accept your invitation.”

Ah. Guess I really was overthinking it. After a few moments spent in thought, he said yes.

“Whoa, you sure about that, Masayuki?” a worried Yuuki asked.

The Hero smiled slightly. “Oh, I’ll figure something out. It ought to be just fine. It always is.”

That’s a lot of confidence! Especially considering I’m right in front of him.

“Very good,” I replied. “And this being a tournament, there’s not gonna be any killing, all right? Keep that in mind for me.”

“Hmph! Who do you think you’re talking to? Let’s go, Masayuki. We’d better rest up for the big day tomorrow!”

“Yes, Masayuki. Considering all the onlookers here, no way this demon lord’s going to chicken out now!”

“And don’t worry. We’ll keep a close eye out for anyone trying to poison or assassinate you.”

“A-anyway, we ought to get going. Better find out when the tournament begins.”

“Rimuru,” Yuuki said as they left, “you aren’t really going to fight Masayuki, are you?”

“Ummm… I don’t know yet. I mean, do you think he could win the tournament?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.” Yuuki sighed. “He’s won a couple Englesia battle tournaments in a row, and honestly, I’ve never heard of him losing against a monster before. A lot of his strength is still an unknown to me.”

I could read it on his face. This was something he did not want to deal with.

“Well, whatever happens happens. But let’s give this a positive spin, huh? Having a bona fide Hero in my tournament’s a mark of prestige.”

It’s all about perspective. Yes, this was a thorn in my side, but compared to conferring with demon lords or fighting Hinata, it didn’t strike me as that depressing. We’d need to think of some measures later, but I saw no reason to dwell on it any further.



And then evening came—and with it, an ornate reception hall packed with dignitaries from all over.

We had tons of nobility in there, all dressed to the nines in their flashiest formal gear. There were more men than women, by the looks of it, but I guess I had earned the trust of quite a few nobles, because I saw some with their spouses and children. There was even a young doll-like girl with blond hair among them, making for quite a spread of ages.

Tonight’s plan called for a pretty loose invitee list. Anyone could come if they liked, and we’d be serving them buffet-style, with a variety of food spread out on the table and invitees free to pick and choose. Plus, there was something you wouldn’t see in any other country—a section of the chamber decorated Japanese-style, with tatami mats on the floor. This took up about half the room, with invitees obliged to remove their shoes before stepping on it.

This wasn’t a tradition many guests were used to, so the tatami section was still sparsely populated. But it wasn’t empty. I saw a few people trying the space out, relaxing on new and unfamiliar zabuton floor pillows. King Gazel was one of them, and this wasn’t his first time, so he was well used to it. We spoke for a bit. Apparently, he’d gone around town this afternoon, seeing how it was developing—the sewage treatment facilities, the rails we were constructing, and so on. He spent a while gazing at all the buildings and entertainment we had built, much of it based on my own whims.

“What will you be doing with those rails, if I may ask?”

“Well, on that topic, I actually had some things to discuss with you. I’m thinking about developing these new vehicles called ‘trains,’ and I’d really like you to join in.”

“Hohh? Well, if it’s my beloved sparring partner asking, I’ll gladly accept.”

That was fast. I guess seeing those rails convinced him it was worth signing on for. If anything, I bet he would’ve insisted on joining, even if I told him he couldn’t. No need for that, though.

“’Scuse me,” I heard someone say as he sat nearby. This was Yohm, another familiar face, and he just whumped himself down right in front of King Gazel, who greeted him with a grin and deftly poured some wine into his cup. It was surreal to watch the king of a brand-new nation chatting with someone like Gazel—no doubt the sight would make some people rethink their opinions of Yohm.

The three of us chatted about this and that awhile. Gazel’s main purpose here was to show people that we were friends. The more intelligent people watching us would have to raise their opinions of Yohm and me. Here, they’d think, were two people the Dwarven King obviously respected—and that, in turn, would give us more leverage at the bargaining table. In effect, Gazel was providing support fire for us.

Of course, I was sure he’d scrutinized what we talked about before, making calculations to ensure the Dwarven Kingdom stood to profit from it. But I still definitely appreciated it. It reminded me all over again that in Gazel, I had a trusted confidant.

Some of the attendees had a chance to try out our large public bathhouse before the party. It was generally warmly received, the bath attendant fielding all sorts of questions.

Bathhouses already existed in the larger nations of the world—the novelty here was the hot-spring water itself, I assumed. We kept careful tabs on the healing properties of the minerals and such it contained, so now it could be easily replicated. A number of nations asked if we could bring a bath like this to their homeland, and I planned to reply to this customer commentary at a later date. My answer was always going to be sorry, come visit us again, but regardless.

A few of our bath customers were in the tatami space now, relaxing in the light yukata kimono we’d provided. They were quite muscular folks, discussing with one another what they had seen and experienced. One of them wanted to speak one-on-one with me, but I just didn’t have the time to get to everybody in the chamber. I thus reached out and greeted those I was able to timing-wise as I made my way to the seat of honor.

Many of the people here were seeing me for the first time. I felt a lot of curious gazes upon me—people who turned pale upon learning I was a demon lord and people all the more curious and observant upon hearing the news. I was still not used to so much attention at once, so I gave them all quick hellos before reaching my seat. It was time to officially get this party started.

“Ummm, first off, thank you for coming here today. My name is Rimuru, and as you all know, I have recently been appointed a demon lord. However, tonight isn’t the night for intense political discussion. I hope that all of you here will enjoy the food of our nation that we’ll present to you tonight. I was never one for long speeches, so let’s begin!”

Everything was set to go. Food is an integral part of good hospitality. Hopefully the sincerity behind it came across to everyone.

Each table had a waiter attending to it; Vester had drilled them on how to divvy up the available food upon request. What he taught them—about how everything came down to providing the best possible experience for our guests—was about to be unleashed on the public.

My speech over, I lifted my cup in a toast. The eve of the festivities was underway.

The cold beer, for one thing, led to loud cheers and applause. I figured it would. If your alcohol consumption involved not much carbonation, Tempest’s beer must’ve been a huge surprise. I mean, it’s ice cold. I instructed everyone thoroughly on Japanese-style service here, chilling the glasses and everything. I couldn’t compromise on that, for my own sake.

Even better, I had lovely elven girls pouring for me. No one was forcing them to, okay? They’d personally volunteered to help out, and we were letting them. And they were a big hit, too. Having such beautiful elves going around the hall with drinks, wearing yukata, was no doubt quite attractive to people only familiar with women in dresses. And the way they greeted you—with a polite seated bow on the tatami mats, three fingers of each hand on the floor—had a kind of universal attraction among men, no matter where they came from. A lot of them were blushing, and not because of the booze.

I mean, you know how breasts can look under a yukata. Hee-hee-hee. Just as I calculated.

But, ah, the ultimate blending of Japanese and Western styles! Seeing people in yukata dotted among all the nobles in formal wear was something different, definitely. Something you could see only here. Things were getting a little hectic at this party, though we’d expected as much. Really, the party itself was a crazy idea from a common-sense perspective—but why let it bother me? I treated it as perfectly normal as I watched the other guests.

The tables were lined with the latest and greatest work from Shuna and Mr. Yoshida. It was all excellent; I could guarantee to everyone attending that they would enjoy it. You had smoked chiducken and vegetable sandwiches, cowdeer steaks, sautéed veggies with red bean paste, karaage fried chicken, and roast-beef salad. For palate cleansers, we offered assorted fruit sorbets, and there were even a few dishes from the Walpurgis I attended, like black-tiger stew and grilled sage rooster. Tracking down those monsters wasn’t easy, but with the leads I had beforehand, we managed to procure them over the course of three days.

This food, made with the finest and rarest of ingredients our nation had to offer, seemed to fully satisfy the palates of our noble attendees—all of whom were dyed-in-the-wool gourmets, no doubt.

And that wasn’t all.

A large fish was brought into a corner of the hall, on the border between the Western and Japanese sections. The monster was called a spear tuna, bearing a solid-looking exoskeleton and a sharp, spear-like head. Even without the horns, it was over thirteen feet in length and looked viciously mean from nose to rear fin.

Why did we bring in such a behemoth? Because despite its appearance, this fish had the nicest, most well-rounded taste to it. The armor-like exoskeleton hid lean red meat, similar to tuna. I happened to catch one during a fishing competition with Gobta, and all I can say is, good thing I bothered to run Analyze and Assess on it before tossing it back. It told me that the fish was both nonpoisonous and packed with nutrients. Pour a little of our soy sauce on it (now ready for practical use), try it out, and… Well, it was good. Really good. The experience drove me to show it off to the crowd at this party.

I’d actually caught this guy myself. I had grown pretty adept at moving in the water by now, and it was a good experience for me. I’d have someone else handle that next time, of course, but either way, this was a freshly caught spear tuna. Meanwhile, Hakuro cut and trimmed it for me. The first time, he used a well-honed long knife from Kurobe to dice it up and present it in pieces, arranged all lifelike on the table. This time, however, he’d be performing for a crowd, so he took his time, slowly slicing up the body. Deftly avoiding the spear tuna’s solid exoskeleton, Hakuro’s knife ran through it like butter. It was the most artistically beautiful dissection I had ever seen; even Shuna was surprised at his dexterity. Put a knife in his hand, and he truly had the air of a craftsman.

Shion, behind me, really wanted to help out with the knife I had gifted her, but I dissuaded her from the idea. The reason should be obvious. I couldn’t feed inferior goods to a group of world dignitaries. This wasn’t something I could joke around with. Shion was my secretary-slash-bodyguard, and I wanted her to stick to that.

How did the crowd respond? Well, more than a few were surprised—even scared—of the vicious-looking sea creature when it was first brought in. But as Hakuro’s trimming unfolded, looks of joy started to creep over their faces. Then the head came off, the body was cut into four sections, and the dishes slowly filled up with the resulting sashimi pieces. In the center were the fattier cuts of white sashimi, the red pieces fanned out around it. The mere sight of that made me salivate, but the crowd—most of whom had never had anything like this before—was a little more nervous.

As they continued to watch, Hakuro began to make sushi out of some of the pieces. This feat, I wasn’t expecting.

White rice, cooking sake, vinegar, mirin, and soy sauce. We had all of those now, and they added incalculable depth to our cuisine, as was clearly being demonstrated here. But, man, I never thought I’d get to eat real sushi in this world. Apparently, Hakuro’s grandfather had told him about it when he was young, but…whew. I sure felt for that guy. Coming to a world like this, and all he could think about was sushi, this thing he’d never enjoy again in his lifetime. He must’ve had so many regrets.



Compared to him, I had it damn lucky. Like Hinata told me as well, trying to replicate Japanese cuisine in this world was, to say the least, a challenge.

Hakuro’s granddad, though, huh? I remember him described as an otherworlder named Byakuya Araki. Did he live back in, like, the Edo era, maybe? Samurai and shoguns and so on? I doubted he was a sushi chef himself, but when could he have been born?

…But, ah, it doesn’t matter. Gotta live life in the now.

The buffet table was alive with chatting guests. The food was a hit, everyone raving about it. Shuna and Yoshida had given everything they had to their team-up, so I’d say they deserved all the praise they got.

On the other hand, the sashimi and nigiri sushi Hakuro made for the crowd was still being wholeheartedly ignored. Maybe the terrifying sight of that spear tuna was a little too stomach-churning to whet their appetites. I spotted at least one show-off telling his friend, “Good heavens, that’s an A rank…,” and so on. There’s one trivia whiz in every crowd, isn’t there?

But…c’mon. It was freshly cut sashimi; there was no way it could taste bad. I wished they wouldn’t act so boorish and give it a try, at least. In this world, you could detect poison in food without eating it first, so everybody here knew that wasn’t a concern. The visuals must’ve convinced them this was some kind of low-grade garbage food.

Well, if nobody was willing to step up to the plate, it was time for me to lead off.

“I’ll take one.”

“By all means!”

Hakuro was kind enough to whip up a new piece of toro fatty tuna for me. I placed some soy sauce on it and popped it in my mouth. The combination of fragrant wasabi and the tuna’s melt-in-your-mouth umami came together, forming an explosion of supreme taste.

It was so gooooooood!! So good. I mean, I’d been to crazy-fancy places in Ginza before, and I’d never had anything at this level.

“This is amazing, Hakuro!!”

“That it is, I’m sure. I was concerned such fine fish may not last long tonight, but I fear the audience reaction is a tad disappointing. It will be something to look forward to over drinks tonight, though, no doubt!”

Hakuro and the rest of the staff would eat after the guests left. He must’ve been hoping for some spear tuna to enjoy with his sake later. And he was right—the snub from the guests was a pity, but if he’d made this for himself anyway, then no harm, no foul. In fact, he almost seemed to want them to hate it.

Unfortunately, it was Hakuro who had to be disappointed.

“Would you make me a piece of tuna underbelly without the wasabi, please?”

Well, well, who’s this? Someone with a lot of guts, asking for the ootoro, arguably the best part of the whole tuna. And no wasabi?!

“What are you, a child?”

“Oh, shut it. I don’t like that sting in my nose.”

It was Hinata, dressed in a simple night dress and acting a little too big for her britches for my taste. Ordering sushi like it was her divine right!

“Too bad there isn’t a little more variety.”

And now she was complaining about that? First no wasabi, then a larger menu? Okay, I’ll grant you that not everybody’s on the wasabi bandwagon—it can be tough if you’ve never had it before. I asked for no wasabi up until around middle school age myself. But as a grown-up, a real connoisseur knows how to enjoy the flavor of the wasabi as part of the package.

“What do you mean ‘a real connoisseur’? What’s that even matter? If it tastes good, it tastes good.”

She was chortling at me now…but she was right. Goddamn it. Why does Hinata have to be so rational about everything?

So she picked up the plate from Hakuro, beaming. Slowly, she placed a piece inside her mouth, closing her eyes.

“This…really is excellent. First sashimi and then sushi… It rankles me, but I have to respect you, Rimuru.”

Sounds like a satisfied customer. She savored the tuna, a look of joy on her face.

“Right,” said Yuuki, coming up from behind, “I’ll have one, too. Oh, and with wasabi, because I’m not a kid.”

Given the jab at Hinata, he must have been observing us for a while. I knew he had sampled quite a bit from the buffet, but he must’ve still been just as hungry. Taking a plate from Hakuro, he finished off the contents fast, no doubt waiting for this moment.

“Whoa. It’s just melt-in-your-mouth! Man, getting to eat sushi this good, over here… It’s honestly kind of moving.”

He was already reaching for the sushi as he spoke, a smile on his face.

“It certainly is different from freshwater fish,” countered Hinata, “is it not? You know, I asked the Free Guild for fish like this, but they turned me down, and I can’t magically transport them to me. I had given up on it. But this definitely brings a little more joy to my life.”

Apparently, Hinata had missed seafood so much that she’d asked Yuuki to bring some over to her. That, however, was logistically difficult—there were so many issues to deal with, they couldn’t find anyone to tackle the job. Hinata must’ve brought that up to get back at Yuuki for his wasabi jab.

“Well, I couldn’t do much about that,” Yuuki replied with a pained grin. “The northern seas are too full of giant fish to be safe, and the south is too far away to make transport very efficient. And you can’t make a profit off seafood if you’re shipping it in just from inland waters.”

He was right. Logistics in this world were still pretty weak. As I expected, inlanders had almost no chance to sample fresh fish. Getting seafood to them was just too difficult. Wagons could carry only a little at a time, and temperature control was a major hassle. You’d have to either bring along a sorcerer or have vast quantities of ice available in each town—and even then, there was no telling if you could maintain freshness from the shores all the way to inland cities. You’d have to be pretty rich to have a chance at a fresh fillet, and in fact, the idea probably wouldn’t even occur to you in the first place. The concept of fish in stews and such existed, but again, the problem was supply.

This, too, was just what I pictured. Thus, I wanted to take this opportunity to tell the world about the delicacies they could enjoy only in my nation. I’d build more of a distribution network later, but until then, I wanted Tempest to have a monopoly.

Whether they were put off by the spear tuna’s appearance or hesitant about exotic food cultures, nobody had touched the sushi or sashimi. But now, with both Hinata and Yuuki singing its praises, the tides were about to turn. A man stood up from the corner King Gazel was occupying and came over.

“Sir Rimuru, can we have some as well?” he asked.

If I recalled correctly, this was Dolph, captain of the Pegasus Knights.

“Certainly, go ahead. I’ll have it brought over.”

As if on command, Hakuro’s hands began moving at astonishing speed. The plates were quickly lined with fresh-made sushi, sashimi, and osuimono, a light seafood broth. These were brought over by our elf-girl waitstaff, all arranged in a neat row in front of Gazel, Yohm, and the others seated on their pillows.

Now, for the big moment. How would they react?

“…Mm. Excellent as always.”

“Kahhh! This is good!!”

With a swig of chilled sake, Gazel grabbed a piece of sashimi—and it certainly didn’t seem to disappoint him. Yohm, meanwhile, was enrapt at his first bite, expressing himself in his usual honest (and very un-noble) way.

The rest of their friends had similar praise for it.

“I had no idea that monster fish could be so delicious!”

“I thought fish wasn’t good for much of anything apart from grilling…”

“Hey, if it tastes good, it tastes good, you know?”

“Yes, and certainly Sir Rimuru has never brought us anything short of excellent!”

Good, good. Glad I had everyone satisfied. And even better: A large number of people were observing their reactions.

“Me too! I’d like to have some!”

The moment one noble shouted that, a mad dash of orders for Hakuro ensued. Now it was a big hit—one that made Hakuro happy, if a little regretful. Yeah, I wasn’t so sure he’d have something to enjoy with his sake tonight after all. I actually have another spear tuna on hand—let’s surprise him with it afterward.

After Hinata and Yuuki kicked off with their light banter, they were exchanging heated opinions about every other topic in the world with each other, drinks in hand. It was hard to tell if they liked or hated each other—but their little debate over wasabi had turned this offering into a success story. It wouldn’t be nice to interrupt them now, so I resolved to thank them later.

So the party continued. So far, I’d call it a big success. All the food, Western- and Eastern-style, was earning raves. This was a “come if you like” thing; nobody’s attendance was required, but a lot of people showed up anyway. If we kept up relations with them all, I’d have to be sure to dangle these foodstuffs in front of their eyes and tell them we could get a regular supply going.

This much, too, was as I’d planned it. This kind of on-the-ground PR was my job. I’m not just here to live it up and dine on the hog, no. I’m not extravagant and selfish—that was all prep work for a chance like this!

…But enough excuses.

In that way as well, the event was proceeding as planned. But then:

“U-urgent news, sir!!”

A soldier burst into the room. I guess we had a problem.

As one would expect, there were guards posted all around this reception hall, including the personal bodyguards of the political figures inside. The area around the building was thus full of people, and if there was an issue out there, it was likely to be a serious one.

“What’s up? What happened?” I spoke slowly to the soldier to calm him down. I’d love to run out and see things for myself, but I couldn’t act agitated right now. But before the soldier could answer, a large contingent of bodyguards from all manner of nations tore into the room at great haste.

Seriously, what was going on here?! Our security program was supposed to be perfect. If we had an incident on our hands, something seriously went wrong. I didn’t sense any particularly large aura approaching; this wasn’t a monster attack. If it was, it would’ve been detected sooner. Milim and Carillon were a bit late, but their arrival wouldn’t trigger a panic like this.

So what could it be…?

The soldier turned toward me. “A large flying object has flown in! It’s outside of town!”

As he spoke, the other bodyguards were giving their own reports to their respective bosses, shouting in loud voices.

“Reporting, sir! The emperor of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion has appeared!!”

“It’s an emergency! The Heavenly Emperor, Elmesia El-Ru Thalion herself, has set foot upon this land!!”

“Her Excellency the Emperor and her entourage are walking toward this reception hall!!”

I was freaking out for a moment, but to sum it up, this was just the emperor of Thalion arriving a little late.

“Whew. That’s a relief. I was wondering what was up.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. But Gazel, who deigned to get up from his seat to approach me, was sighing for other reasons.

“Just as thoughtless and ignorant as ever, eh? What else would happen if Emperor Elmesia left her borders? I know we’re all trying to gauge one another at this event—even me—but the emperor herself is simply too much to handle. I am sure even those not in attendance tonight are hurriedly sending missives back to their homelands.”

“What do you mean?”

I wanted more details, and Gazel was just waiting for the chance to give me some. He just loves to go on about all his knowledge in front of me, like some kind of genius—but it did help me, I realized, so I resolved not to complain too loudly.

As he put it, the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion was a large country, one as strong as the Armed Nation of Dwargon, despite being fully independent with no involvement in the Council of the West. Plus, as the term Dynasty suggested, it was a federation of thirteen distinct kingdoms. In terms of power, the Council of the West was definitely the biggest force out there—but given its parliamentarian system, it couldn’t immediately carry out policy at a moment’s notice. Dwargon, on the other hand, was a monarchy under Gazel, so while it fell behind in overall power, its statements still held sway with the Western Nations. The same was true of Thalion.

“Elmesia holds immense power in Thalion. She’s hailed as a descendant of divinity, and she’s the one who declared herself Heavenly Emperor in the first place. I don’t know how divine she is, exactly, but it’s absolutely true that Thalion was founded by a high elf named Elmesia. That woman’s been around for longer than Thalion itself.”

It wasn’t even remotely on the same scale. Dwargon’s history extended back for a thousand years. Compared to that, it was said Thalion could trace its roots back over two millennia.

“Do you see what I mean now, Rimuru? Even I have to be respectful to Elmesia. And imagine if you were a human, with your short life span. Why, you would never have a chance to meet her in your life, even if you wanted to!”

Given Gazel’s obvious distaste for her, Elmesia must have been one tough cookie to deal with. Hmm. I meant to invite only Archduke Erald, I think…but I guess we’d landed someone even bigger.

“Yeah, you know, I guess it’s important to write a name down on your invitations, isn’t it?”

“…I don’t think that’s the problem,” a peeved-looking Gazel replied. But she was here, and I had nothing to counter him with. We’d just have to give her the best service we possibly could.

As we spoke, a commotion erupted near the entrance.

“Looks like she’s arrived.”

“Stay on your guard, Rimuru. Think of her as the slyest old fox you’ll ever see.”

If that’s how Gazel put it, I suppose I’d have to resign myself to some serious competition. I gave him a powerful nod, showing him I was ready to accept this.

The hall was in a furor. As I suppose it would be. Here, after all, was an emperor of a vastly powerful nation—one who apparently hadn’t even made a public appearance in decades. Most everyone in the room would normally never get a chance to see her their whole lives.

Elmesia El-Ru Thalion, the leader who declared herself Heavenly Emperor, solemnly strode inside. Everyone there no doubt thought of her as the personification of beauty. They all watched her silently, captured by her presence. Even me, I think—especially since, externally, she looked like such a beautiful young girl. Her skin was like fresh snowfall, her hair a shiny silver. Her ears were long and pointed at the ends, her penetrating eyes the color of jade.

She was female, judging by what Gazel said—no denying that. Are high elves purebred from the fairy races, then? If not, then they must be closely related. Fairies came in all sorts of types, I suppose, but some were descended from the high-ranking spirit classes, and maybe this Elmesia was an example of that, a menace from ancient times. No wonder Gazel was wary of her.

And we had to watch out for her entourage as well. Each guard practically oozed power. They were dressed in ceremonial gear, but even that stuff was all magically charged. All Legend-class, I’m sure. It was strength on the level of Hinata’s sword, Moonlight—and it was coming from their clothing. They had to be at least as strong as Arnaud and the paladins—or maybe, judging by the quality of their gear, the emperor’s guard was even better.

It’s a big world out there, I thought.

Then, waving a hand to keep the guard at bay, the emperor stood before me.

“I have accepted your kind invitation,” she said in her clear voice. “It gladdened me.”

That voice was enough to make all the invitees here melt, it looked like. One might confuse it with a charming magic, but it wasn’t. Her voice really was just that mesmerizing.

“It’s an honor to meet you as well,” I said, returning the favor before her.

Then Elmesia’s jade-colored eyes looked at me.

Warning. Spiritual Interference detected… Blocked. This was likely not an attack but a natural side effect of Heroic Aura.

Oh man. This lady’s Heroic Aura on a level that even beat Gazel’s. That means she was at least as powerful as him and quite likely even more so. Demon lord–level, perhaps? It seemed like a keen idea not to get on her wrong side. This was a peaceful invitation, and I wanted to appeal to her with everything I had so we could build a friendly relationship.

“Now, we have some food prepared for all of us, so I hope you will enjoy the remainder of the evening.”

“Yes, I am most pleased to see so much careful attention paid to these proceedings. I do look forward to the festivities beginning tomorrow, and I hope they prove to be eminently enjoyable. Also…”

Elmesia had a calm, composed smile on her face as she spoke. Then she brought her face closer to mine. “Doesn’t have to be today,” she whispered so only I could hear, “but I want you to make some time for me, y’know. There’s something I wanna discuss frankly, in a more relaxed environment.”

It was a markedly more casual way of speaking—Elmesia’s true colors showing, I imagined. As someone still getting used to playing the role of a stern, dignified demon lord, it made me feel an affinity for her.

“All right,” I replied. “I’ll let you know when I work out a time.”

She nodded, smiling, then returned to her ring of guards. She kept the smile up, as people clamored around for a chance at winning favor with her while she headed for the buffet table.

By the way, I was surprised to see that Erald, the archduke I did invite, was nowhere to be seen. But then I matched eyes with one of her guards.

Whoa, it’s him?!

He looked so imposing that I totally ignored him at first, but I guess he was here. We exchanged glances and nods, but I definitely wanted to give more formal hellos later.

It was only a short exchange, but it still exhausted me. Fortunately, Elmesia was now distracting people’s attention away from me, so I decided to kick back in the tatami-mat section. I had assumed this would be a chill little open-invite event, but now I had some real power brokers in here.

“Man, I’m beat.”

“About to get swallowed up, aren’t you? Better keep yourself sharp, or else that old f—”

Gazel stopped himself, taking a swig from his chilled sake to change the subject. I’m guessing the even chillier stare from Elmesia was the reason. I’m sure I wanted to know what he almost said there, although I could venture a guess. Good thing he didn’t finish the sentence. Elves have pretty good hearing, and loose lips sink ships, as they say. I’ll need to be careful, too.

But regardless, time to unwind. I toasted with Gazel and Yohm, opening things up with some chitchat. Unfortunately, I couldn’t relax for long. There was further commotion at the entrance—another celebrity appearance, by the sound of it.

“Looks like she’s finally showed up.”

“She sure has,” I replied to Shion with a nod. “I was worried she’d be too late before long.”

I prepared to give my good-byes and stand back up.

“Oh, Milim’s here?” Yohm said, recognizing her. “Man, she’s painted up all pretty tonight, huh?”

Ever since they had a bit of a tussle, Yohm had kindled something of a dislike for Milim. The fact he managed to keep it just to “dislike” probably spoke volumes about his personality. No way any normal person could speak of a demon lord as “painted up” like that, I don’t think. I really had to hand it to him.

“…I see. Bring in the demon lords, eh?”

Gazel’s eyes were sharpened on Milim as well, but it took Yohm to tell him who she was. But I’m sure a few other faces by the door were more familiar to him. After all, she was being led in by members of my own staff—Benimaru, Diablo, Geld, and Gabil.

Now the dwarf king looked nervous. And why not? This quartet was guiding ten people inside, Milim included. She was taking the lead, with two attendants on either side—a bald man named Middray, the head priest of the Dragon Faithful and a fighter worthy enough to earn praise from Benimaru. The other robed attendant was more easygoing. That must’ve been Hermes, the guy Gabil had fought against.

Behind this trio were two former demon lords—Carillon the Beast Master and Frey the Sky Queen. Carillon looked just as majestic as always, and Frey was in a dress I could describe only as “provocative,” turning heads all across the hall. Both of them, to be sure, struck an almighty presence.

Trailing Carillon were the Three Lycanthropeers. Say, this was the first time I’d seen Phobio in a while! He looked a bit thinner than before, but I was glad he was well. Frey, meanwhile, was attended to by a pair of beautiful identical twins, their blond-and-silver hair suiting them well. I had heard of them—they were the “Twin Wings,” her closest servants. I hadn’t realized they were actual twins, but I was sure they were two powerhouses in a fight.

In this group, we had a set of massively powerful rulers, all declaring Milim to be their new queen. Nobody could hide their nerves around them, and I could see why.

“Yep,” I told Gazel as I stood up to greet them. “I’m gonna go say hello.”

The moment Milim saw me, she burst into a broad smile.

“Hee-hee-hee! The day’s finally here!” she shouted. “Can’t wait to see the kind of food that’ll make Middray moan with excitement!”

“Not a problem,” I replied, voice low. “But isn’t anyone angry with you?”

Milim had spent much of the lead-up to this festival poking around my Dungeon and generally avoiding Frey as much as possible. She had been here in town until yesterday, in fact, and they were all late arriving today. This suggested Frey was livid with her, and I was concerned about that.

“Oh, um, no worries there,” she whispered back. “I emphasized to Frey that I’ve built up my self-awareness as a ruler, so I was out protecting my territory the whole time—and she believed me!”

Judging by the sweat running down her face and the way her eyes darted around, I had trouble believing her. Frey was an intuitive woman. Milim had been busy protecting the labyrinth floors I assigned to her, not any of her own lands. If Frey finds out, then I could be dragged in through no fault of my own—but for now, I’d just have to believe in her. I’d have to, but no matter what, I wasn’t involved, okay? Even if it means ditching Milim at the side of the road.

“Thank you for inviting me today,” Frey said after I was done with Milim. “I apologize for our tardiness.” Then she looked into my eyes. “Lady Milim,” she furtively continued, “our new master, was absent from my sight until this morning. It took some time to fit her for her ceremonial wear…”

“Ah, ah-ha-ha, yes, I see! Well, I certainly don’t mind it at all, so please enjoy yourselves for the next few days.”

I turned my eyes away from her penetrating gaze, talking my way out of my imagined predicament. As a slime, if I ever got nervous, it’d never be discernible on the outside. Now, I feared my eye movements made my inner intentions bleedingly obvious. Whenever I dealt with anyone as intuitive as she was, I could never afford to look them in the eye.

“…Oh, of course! Here I am, leaning on you to build an entire new city for us, and now you’ve even invited me to this grand event… I have so much to thank you for.”



Frey smiled. The thanks helped me loosen up a bit. That was all it took to create new problems for myself.

“Well, I hope our food here is to your liking. And ah yes—are there any ingredients you can’t have? We do have chicken on the menu, but if that’s a problem—”

It was only at that point that I realized the mistake I was making.

“Chick…en?”

Tension cut across the air like an icicle. Oh no, I thought, but it was too late.

“Ah—”

“Sir Rimuru, are you equivocating myself with livestock?”

“Ummm, no, I didn’t mean to…”

Frey was still smiling. The Twin Wings around her all but snarled at me. What a mistake. What did I just say? Loose lips do sink ships. They had just sunk mine.

But as I agonized over how to react:

“Pffft! Bwah-ha-ha-ha! Oh man, Rimuru, that was great! You’re just the most incredible man ever. You, calling Frey a bird… That’s just brilliant!”

Carillon, failing to read the room one bit, burst out in laughter.

“Yeah,” Milim respectfully added, “I could never do that.”

Stop it, guys. Quit giving me those sparkling, wonder-laden eyes of yours.

“May I ask what’s so funny, Carillon? And you too, Milim?”

Now Frey was annoyed. I was clearly at fault.

“No, no, I’m sorry. That was a mistake on my part. I just thought you may not like poultry, but I see I was overthinking matters.”

At a time like this, a humble apology is your best bet. Trying to cop an attitude could lead to even worse disagreements later. So I tried to calm Frey down as best I could, bowing my head despite everyone around me.

She reacted to this with a look of surprise. “Hee-hee! Ah, Sir Rimuru, you’re exactly the sort of person I hoped you might be. I realized you didn’t intend to insult me, but I just wanted to test your reaction. Now I know. Seeing how you hold yourself has doubtlessly helped Lady Milim grow and mature as well.”

The composed smile returned to her face. Milim was no longer a tyrant. She wasn’t exactly a benevolent ruler, no, but at least she was willing to listen to people a little more—and Frey must’ve thought I was the reason, so she used my mistake to test me a little. She must’ve hoped I was an example for her to follow.

Bowing to her, then, was the correct answer. If Milim was imitating me, after all, I should’ve expected Frey to test me. If I was a bad example for her, after all, she might have kept Milim from visiting me. I had to hand it to Frey—I thought she was a scary big-sister type, but she really was looking out for Milim.

As for bad examples…

“By the way, Caaaaaarillon? What exactly was so funny again? Would you mind explaining in a way I would understand?”

A wave of pressure crashed on Carillon’s head. I could almost hear the sound of twisted metal when it hit home. Frey descended upon him with lightning speed, her graceful hand palming his entire head. In terms of muscle, Carillon could win out, but this eagle-like grip was definitely something Frey had over him.

“W-wait a sec! Ow, ahhh, seriously, ow!”

Frey’s arm was stiffened from her elbow to her fingertips. Her fingers grew into talons harder than steel, expanding in size as they dug into Carillon’s head. Yeah, I bet that hurt.

“No, that… Really, I can’t take any more! I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Please forgive me!!”

Despite their master’s shouting, the Three Lycanthropeers didn’t move a muscle. Phobio fidgeted a bit, clearly worried for Carillon, but the other two just gave the ex–demon lord exasperated stares. Yeah, Carillon could no doubt hold out a little longer—and given his obvious lack of regret, he probably had it coming, too.

“Are you watching, Milim?” I asked. “If you do something bad, you apologize. That’s the correct choice, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I agree! And for that matter, I’ll try not to get you angry in the first place, Frey!”

Milim understood what I was trying to tell her. She could play till she was pooped in the Dungeon, but moderation was key. Take care of everything that needed to get done first, and that made your subsequent recreation all the more fun. If you could accomplish that, then great—just watch you don’t cause offense like Carillon.

“Whoa! Come on! Hey! Stop chatting over there and help me!!”

Milim and I nodded, the struggling Carillon serving as a fine example of what not to do.

“Don’t just ignore me! Owwwwww…”

His voice was fading from my ears. Thanks, Carillon, I thought as Milim and I waited for Frey to cool down. We’ll never forget your sacrifice.

Even as this little fracas was taking place, Shuna was fully carrying out her duties for me.

“All right, here comes more food!” she said with a smile as she brought out all sorts of dishes, the crowd cheering her on.

Putting Carillon’s sacrifice behind us, we all moved on. “Hey!” he protested as Frey finally released him. “Milim! Rimuru! I was screaming at you to help me!”

“Oh, stop complaining! You’re totally fine!”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Frey wasn’t really serious, so it wasn’t that big of a deal, was it?”

Carillon was clearly unharmed, so I felt safe saying that. Apparently, I was wrong.

“No, it was! From the moment she put her claws around my head, that knocked out all my skills. I think that’s Frey’s unique skill or something. If she used that on the likes of me, then it must seriously be love!”

I really didn’t think so, but I didn’t tell him. Shuna’s cuisine takes precedence right now. The dishes were all placed on a single round table. Our attendants had reserved this set for Milim’s party.

“Thanks in advance for this,” Milim said to Shuna. “Middray’s a pretty stubborn guy, so I want something that knocks him on his butt on the first taste!”

“Hee-hee-hee! I understand, Lady Milim. Enjoy!”

Shuna smiled, putting Milim’s mind at ease. They had taken a liking to each other, so Milim looked even more reassured than when I’d spoken to her.

However:

“I have to say, Lady Milim, I am not impressed by you being taught all these blasphemous ways…”

The moment dinner was served to Milim’s servant Middray, he immediately started chiding me. This was exactly who Milim was talking about in the letter she sent. Hermes, meanwhile, was looking at me, hands clasped together in a prayerful apology—he must’ve been worried Middray’s words would anger me. The long-suffering type, I guess. I liked that.

Watching us from afar, meanwhile, were the now-well-fed nobility, busily chatting with themselves. It was chitchat, yes, but it was noble chitchat. Info gathering was the name of the game, and right now, they were more interested in our exchanges than their own conversation. The question on their minds: How would the demon lord Milim and her people react to the food they considered so tasty? Especially given how one of them, Middray, already demonstrated so little understanding of our efforts? Some would no doubt conclude that, while having different values wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, humans dealing with magic-born would remain an uphill battle.

If that happened, then so be it, but I figured we were fine. Hermes, Milim’s other attendant, apparently wanted to spread the general concept of cuisine among the Dragon Faithful, besides.

So I decided to engage Middray. “Blasphemous?” I asked.

“Hmph! Since ancient times, we have deemed it proper to praise the blessings of our foodstuffs—and to enjoy them as is, in their natural form. And now I am presented with this…”

It was a salad with dressing. That was no good. Neither, it seemed, was potato salad, since it meant mashing the potatoes and defiling their original form.

“And what manner of behavior is this? Grilling meat—all right, fair enough. But why do you then stain it with this mysterious liquid? It is deplorable—truly deplorable!”

Middray must’ve been angry, because I saw a throbbing vein on his forehead as he glared at me. This offended Shuna enough to wipe the smile from her face, and she glared right back at him. Hermes, noticing this, grew pale and started bowing profusely to Shuna and me…but Middray, not bothered by this, kept right on going.

“What sheer disrespect for our natural blessings! I was prepared to accept whatever you choose to do within your own territory, but now you are getting Lady Milim involved? Outrageous!”

He pointed out the hearty soup and bite-size cream croquettes on the table as he lectured me on his food theories. The sheer force he put behind each word certainly made it clear why Milim asked me for help. Trying to reason with him was exhausting…or, really, stultifying. He was the type who believed he, and only he, was correct, refusing to lend an ear to anyone else.

But that would end today. It’d be one thing if their palates evolved differently from ours, but the only issue here was Middray’s way of thinking. And it wasn’t just a wrong assumption of his or anything—there was just nothing correct about his theory at all. I mean, Milim—the figure he worshipped—couldn’t wait to chow down on this. She was pouting, like a dog ordered to wait for a treat.

It was time to finish this. I knew I had it in the bag. If I got Middray to say, This is good, I won. Just one spoonful of anything from Shuna would seal the deal once it crossed his lips. Thus I was optimistic about this—but then reality came along.

“I absolutely refuse to recognize anything even close to this!!”

Middray was still enraged, uninterested in a single morsel. My victory rode on the assumption that he’d at least try something, but if he wasn’t up for that, it meant I’d lose without a fight.

Milim gave me a concerned look. Hermes’s gaze was skyward, wondering where everything went wrong. With all the yelling from Middray, we were starting to draw a large audience. Even the lower-ranked invitees, the kind who failed to get an audience with Elmesia, started gathering to see how this would turn out. If I lost this verbal sparring match in front of this crowd, the fallout might affect a lot more than my street cred.

“Rimuru,” a worried Milim said, “I didn’t expect Middray to be so stubborn about this. Should I maybe ask him to go to another room for now?”

“Yes,” added Hermes, “I’m sorry about our head priest. He’s always a little hot under the collar, but he’s really not a bad man… I didn’t expect the topic of food to enrage him so much.”

“Hmm… I thought a taste would change his tune, but I underestimated him. I don’t want to force the issue, so I don’t know…”

I mean, we didn’t have to work this out today. The festival only truly began tomorrow, so there was no need to rush things. So I decided to learn from my mistake, think of a better way to deal with Middray, and move on.

But someone wasn’t willing to let this slide. The hall echoed with a loud wham as Shuna—a smile of a very different sort on her face—slammed her hands against the table in front of Middray. The head priest’s eyes shot open—out of surprise, not pain. I could see why. Shuna had reacted incredibly fast. Even if you were prepared for it, not many people could’ve reacted in time.

“Wh-what are you doing?!”

“Silence!!” a glassy-eyed Shuna shouted, taking a bowl of stew and thrusting it in his face. “See all the ingredients in this stew? This is what Sir Rimuru sees as their ideal state!”

Um… What? What’s that mean?

“Under Sir Rimuru,” she continued as I sat there stupefied, “there are gathered lycanthropes, there are harpies, there are the magic-born who once served Clayman… There are even dragonewts like yourself. Any one of those races alone would be powerful, I am sure. But bring them all together…and they will enjoy even more power than ever before. Please try this.”

With unexpected force, Shuna made Middray grasp the spoon. Swallowed up by the momentum, Middray meekly brought it to his lips. And here I had given up. Shuna made it look so easy…and once we reached this point, the results were just what we expected.

“…!!”

Abject surprise crossed Middray’s face.

“Wh-what is this…?!”

“Well? It’s good, isn’t it?” said Shuna. “This is called ‘harmony.’ Each individual ingredient tones itself down in order to form a complete overall taste. That’s the fervent hope contained in this stew.”

…Oh. And here I thought it was just a nice bowl of soup.

“It… It’s good. Better than any kind of vegetable I’ve eaten before… This single spoonful has so much depth to it…”

Yeah, I could imagine. Compared to raw veggies, Shuna’s cuisine is always gonna take the prize. To Middray, it must’ve been an unprecedented, revolutionary discovery.

“Um,” a red-faced Hermes said, “I would appreciate it if you could stop looking at me like a poor beggar on the road…” Very clearly, he didn’t want people to think he was like his boss. I’d probably say the same thing. I knew all about people trying to do the right thing and their bosses shutting them down—and those very peons being held responsible anyway when things went south. I felt bad for him, so I gave him a reassuring nod for his troubles.

Even as Hermes and I exchanged glances, Middray was finishing off the bowl of stew. “If you understand now,” a much sunnier Shuna told him, “then very well. But please remember this: Cuisine is about far more than this single bowl.”

After that stew, Middray seemed much more receptive to her words. “What do you mean?” he asked back, face serious and thoughtful.

“If this stew,” she replied, “is like the land Lady Milim rules over, then this loaf of bread is the Kingdom of Blumund. This steak is the new land of Farminus. If this foie gras terrine is the Dwarven Kingdom, I suppose that makes the seafood here Thalion. You can combine them in many ways—but no cuisine can survive on a single plate. And nations are the same way. It’s the broad, deep connections among them that make them more bountiful and satisfying. That is the world Sir Rimuru seeks.”

The smile on Shuna’s face came from the heart. Middray must have felt something from it, because now his eyes turned to the other dishes on the table. He thought for a moment in silence—not just him but everyone watching from afar.

“It… It is…?”

“Sure, diplomatic relations certainly are important,” I replied.

“Indeed. But I did not know that His Majesty, the Demon Lord Rimuru, had such thoughts…”

“How wonderful! And even the best of cuisine can be ruined with the wrong amount of salt. Instead he’s bringing different dishes together to form a complete full course, then? A truly fascinating concept!”

Now the crowd excitedly talked among themselves. I, um, couldn’t say I thought about it that way, no—but Shuna’s forceful persuasion must have spoken to their hearts in grand fashion. Considering the total lack of theme to the buffet food, it was really a stretch, but it worked.

Honestly, Shuna had impressed me just now. Not only her speech but the glorious food that did so much of the talking for her. People like Middray, afraid of values different from their own, now found it in themselves to dream of a future where humans and monsters worked together—all thanks to the example of “harmony” within cuisine.

“Also,” Shuna added, “note that it takes more than simply tossing everything into a bowl and mixing it up.” Her eyes turned on Shion behind me for just a moment, and I’ll just pretend I didn’t notice that, thanks. “So now that we’ve convinced you, bear in mind that most food’s best while it’s warm. Lady Milim, Lord Carillon, Lady Frey, and all their attendants—please enjoy it before it gets cold.”

Her words were like a starter pistol to Milim’s ears. She immediately dove in.

“Yes! This is great!!”

That, plus her wide grin, was the answer she had for us, loud and clear. No need for grandiose vocabulary with her. One look at that face, and it was easy to understand.

“I…see. I have been mistaken…and Lady Milim waited so patiently for me to realize it…”

The message came across to Middray, too. After far too long, he had finally seen the light.

“Now, Sir Middray, no need to feel depressed. You’ll just make things gloomy for the whole table. Let’s enjoy it while it’s hot!”

Hermes’s advice—not advised for the current situation, although he likely knew that full well and said it anyway—made a vein throb on Middray’s head once more.

“Youuuu…”

“Um, what? Why is your head looking like a melon…?”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Why be angry, Middray? Hermes is right. Besides, if you don’t chow down soon, I’m gonna eat it all instead!”

“Pffft. Count yourself lucky today, Hermes. On behalf of Lady Milim and this fine food before me, I will forgive this affront!”

Smiles and laughter filled the scene, as if everyone—man and monster alike—shared in the same heart.

“You’ve got some little sister,” I remarked to Benimaru when we happened to make eye contact.

“Don’t I, though? I’m so proud of her.” He nodded back, like this was a given. Shuna, who must’ve overheard us, blushed a little and headed to the back room.

The feast was set to run from six to nine p.m. that evening, but we wound up extending it another two hours. One reason was all the latecomers—the VIPs and such who had snubbed the event at first but ran over once news of Elmesia’s appearance spread. The other was the, shall we say, excessively healthy appetites of Middray and Carillon’s band. It was a long time before they finally said “no more,” for sure.

But the reasons don’t matter. In the end, it was a huge success. And so the preopening feast, despite a few unexpected bumps along the way, came to a close after providing results beyond what even I expected.