

CHAPTER 2

THE FOUNDER’S FESTIVAL

Following my audiences with the monster leaders of the Forest of Jura, my discussions with Western Nations representatives proceeded without a hitch. We’d talk details with them at a later date, but for now, all signs looked pretty good.

The rather bizarre banquet we’d held the previous night also went smoothly, even with the movers and shakers from all over the world attending. Really, it was a coup for us. But for the most part, I spoke only with people I already knew beforehand—Rigurd and Mjöllmile were handling the more practical side of things, talking to people and summarizing what they said for me. They also made it known that visitors shouldn’t try indiscreetly talking to me while I went about my business.

Great job, guys. Talk about capable. Because, honestly, if someone went right up to me with an offer, I might very well just say all right, sure to them, and who knows what kinds of commitments I’d be beholden to then. Having a cushion against that was extremely helpful. I mean, if it’d help build relationships with other countries, I wouldn’t hesitate to offer as much support as I could…but it was safer to be conservative until we had a better gauge of the other party. Basically, stop being such a yes-man to everyone I see.

Besides, the facts were that we had a personnel shortage. Once the excitement from the festival died down, we had a mountain of projects to tackle and a herd of issues screaming to be addressed. Whether we could cover them all or not, we lacked the government infrastructure needed to fine-tune and execute on them. If I threw even more work on everyone’s laps right now, we’d just drown in it all.

Rigurd and Mjöllmile were even better at processing this than I was. Their expert handling of any issue I ordered them to look at was making me complacent, despite myself. I even kept them up late for last night’s meeting. From now on, I resolved to myself after the emergency conference ended late, I couldn’t let them spoil me.

Today, then, my mission was to act like the national leader I was and give our visitors the best service I possibly could.

So here we are now, a bright, sunny day. The Tempest Founder’s Festival was here. If it was raining, I would’ve blown the clouds away and held it regardless, but…

This was Rimuru, capital of Tempest. The northern zone of the city named after me was where most of our government agencies were located, and atop the balcony of the main assembly hall in the middle, I looked down at the people below. Ahead was the main street, extending out from this building and across the whole of town, and today it was completely full of people. There were my people—former monsters, more appropriately called demi-humans these days. There were magic-born gathered from all across the Forest of Jura. There were merchants from nearby nations, along with the adventurers serving as their bodyguards. There were even farmers stopping in, hoping for a taste of the excitement.

They were a melting pot of races and species, numbering over a hundred thousand—and right now, they were all spread out before me. Slowly, gradually, it made me truly feel I had done it—I had created a nation where man and monster could coexist without conflict. The feeling filled my heart, piece by piece. It comforted me.

Now it was almost time. I stood up and placed a hand on the mic.

“Ladies and gents—er, gentlemen, I am the, um, almighty demon lord…”

Ugh. Screw this. A formal policy speech was asking a little (actually, a lot) too much from me. Instead, I opted to wing it and give the crowd my honest feelings.

“I’m the demon lord Rimuru. Good to see you all. So, um, I’m glad you all accepted the invitation to my country here. Some of you are visiting for the first time, but I don’t want any of you to be anxious. It’s true—I am a demon lord, but I have no intention of being hostile toward any human. My hope is that I can build a nation where all of us can get along together. I believe that, instead of people and monsters fighting, if we join hands and work together, a better future is waiting for all of us.”

I gauged the reaction as I spoke. They all seemed to be lending an attentive ear—my own subjects, of course, but also the peasants just here for fun. Sensing I had some momentum, I continued.

“I am sure some of you are wary of me because I’ve become a demon lord. That’s only natural, of course, but I honestly want you to believe in what you’re feeling. I have no interest in forcing my will upon any of you. If you think you can believe in me, I’d be happy to hear that. But if you don’t, I’m not going to dwell on it. Trust isn’t created overnight. I’m not going to press you for a conclusion on that, because I feel trust is something we earn by building it up over the course of our relationships.”

Rome wasn’t built in a day, as they say. Trust is a gradual process, and that’s fine. It’ll depend on them, I suppose, to accept me for what I really am.

Next, I wanted to reveal my true intentions to my fellow rulers, the royalty and nobility in the audience.

“To all the nobles here, when you return to your homelands, I ask you to be honest and relate everything you see to your countrymen. We have already established friendly relations with several countries. Even if you don’t trust us, are those other nations worthy of your trust? If you are biased against me because I am a slime or a demon lord, I hope that you cast that aside.”

That, of course, would be up to the nation in question, not the individuals who make it up. The feelings of the people in the audience may not be the real issue…but I’d still like to believe that what I said had value.

But I also needed to give a warning, just to prevent a second Farmus from happening.

“Personally, I have no intention whatsoever of waging war simply because someone will not join hands with us. However, if you try to push unequal treatment on us because we are monsters or attempt to wage a war in order to eradicate us, we will not show you any mercy. I think all of you can understand that much looking at the recently destroyed Kingdom of Farmus.”

Those, too, were my thoughts on the matter. It could be construed as a threat, but it was how I honestly felt. I didn’t like war, but I had no qualms about waging it. If a ruler ever shows indecision, it’s their defenseless civilians who wind up getting dragged into it. The entire role of a nation is to protect the lives and fortunes of its citizens. I had monsters gathering here because they relied on me, to say nothing of the people who’d be moving in before long. Keeping them safe was the most important job I had.

A world without military power would be an ideal one, but that was an impossible fairy tale. People are free to dream about it during peaceful times, but rulers don’t get that luxury. At a bare minimum, a nation is expected to be prepared to deal with any situation that could arise. That was why I wanted to address the ruling class listening to me, while I had the chance.

To wrap up:

“And to all the merchants, adventurers, and regular peasantry gathered here: I swear to you that I will not lay a hand on any of you. I mean, unless you commit a crime or something, but otherwise, no. My nation is facing a lack of workers. We have many jobs that need to be filled, so if you seek work, I would like all of you to consider moving here. Wherever people gather, new opportunities, and new chances, are bound to follow. As a rule, we guarantee your right to free expression. This includes free speech, as well as the right to choose the job you want. You do, of course, still have responsibility for your words and actions, but regardless, it holds true. If this sounds like a nation you’d be interested in, then by all means, give some thought to what I just said. Going forward, our nation is planning a multitude of events. The Tempest Founder’s Festival starting today is only the beginning—and I hope all of you enjoy it!”

After that appeal to the common man, I ended my speech. Was I being a little too honest? Ah well. I’m just an ex-employee at a contractor anyway. Getting this promotion out of the blue doesn’t mean I’m suddenly capable of looking and talking like nobility.

But despite that, the crowd listening to me erupted in applause. Not only my citizens, but I could see visitors from other nations, too, whooping and hollering. A few of them looked pretty unconvinced still, but by the looks of things, I’d say a solid majority believed in me—and, by extension, my country. For now, I was happy with that. It’d be creepy if I received 100 percent support from the start.

I had given them my honest feelings. Now I’d have to wait and see how people reacted to them. But either way, the speech was a signal that the Tempest Founder’s Festival was underway.

My speech wrapped up, I went down to the first-floor hall. There, I was greeted by my kids, dressed in a new change of clothes.

“Hey, Mr. Tempest, you’re the king of this country?!”

Oh, um, didn’t I tell them?

“You didn’t know that, Kenya? Well, it’s not too late to realize how great a person I am. How about treating me with a little more respect?”

“Why would I—?”

“Okay, Mr. Tempest! Lots of respect!”

As I prodded Kenya a bit, Alice gave me a big hug. “Me too!!” Chloe shouted, adding herself to the pile. I laughed, patting their heads as I gently peeled them off me. Alice and the others weren’t pleased, but I had only one body. They’d need to realize that before they started fighting over me.

“But it’s still a huge surprise,” said Gail, Ryota nodding with him. “I mean, I was kinda suspicious yesterday, but…”

“Oh, don’t worry. I didn’t become ‘king’ until after I left you anyway. See why I was so busy now?”

“Well, yeah… That’s a pretty good excuse, but…”

Kenya still wasn’t too satisfied with this, but at least he was thinking a little about it.

“So I guess we still won’t see a lot of each other, Mr. Tempest?”

“Ohhh, I’ll come over when I’m free. Really, despite the looks of it, I’m more decoration here than anything.”

“What’s that mean? Are you a big shot or not, man?”

I tried to smooth things over with Kenya as much as I could as I went over our rules for this event.

“Okay, listen, guys. At a festival like this, it’s easy to get excited and cut loose a little too much. So don’t get carried away, and don’t get in a fight with anyone, all right?”

“““Okay!!”””

That’s the spirit.

“Do you have your handkerchiefs, your tissues, and your pendant?”

“““Of course!!”””

Their responses, at least, were always snappy.

I could’ve asked someone to chaperone them around, but my own staff members were already busy. Diablo was at the coliseum handling referee duty, Hakuro was having some family time with Momiji, and Benimaru was guarding me.

“You sure you don’t want Momiji spending time with you instead of her dad?”

“Please, sir. It’s still too early for that…”

Benimaru seemed eager to run away from that question, didn’t he? Ahhh, I guess we’d just have to wait for time to sort it out.

Anyway, Shuna was running a café for the festival, and Shion must’ve had some business as well because I hadn’t seen her since morning. That, in itself, was cause for concern, but I wanted to believe she was fine.

Soei was running town security undercover, though, and I was sure he’d alert me if any trouble happened. His team was keeping an eye on the kids as well, so I didn’t see too much need for worry—

“Hey, what’s up? Something bothering you?”

Just when I thought there wasn’t much need for worry, someone came up to me. It was Hinata, in street clothes and standing there with her rapier by her hip. She had a sleeveless dress on, in a navy-blue color that ventured close to black, and her armpits and chest lurked just barely out of sight, giving her an inexplicable sort of attraction. The belt her sword hung from accentuated just how narrow her waist was.

Yep. A sight for sore eyes. I wanted to stare at her some more, but then she flashed an icy look at me, so I coughed and looked away.

“Hey, Mr. Tempest!!”

“Who’s that woman?”

Alice and Chloe shouted at me, both a little put off.

“This is Hinata. She’s really strong, you know. We fought to a tie once.”

“Huhhhh? A tie against that old—?”

Before Kenya could finish, the tip of her rapier was against his throat. I didn’t even see her draw it, and there it was, maybe a millimeter away from bare skin. The slightest movement from Kenya would skewer him.

“What were you about to say?”

“Um, uh, I just meant you were really beautiful,” he managed to blurt out as he shivered, tears in his eyes.

“Ken…”

Ryota wanted to help him but couldn’t even move. A mere look from Hinata planted his feet to the ground. Gail, too, was frozen solid, boundlessly fascinated as he was. I could imagine why. Even I was scared of her, so Ryota’s and Gail’s reactions were completely understandable.

“Don’t be rude to her, okay, Kenya? She was an apprentice to Shizu, too, you know. That makes her your senior, like with Yuuki.”

Kenya gave me a “I wish you told me sooner” look. I understood how he felt, but really, this was his fault. It happened right after I told him not to get carried away or start fights, so really, I have to say he deserved it.

“Shizu’s apprentice… Wait, no way!”

“The girl who got stronger than Shizu in just one month…?!”

“Hinata Sakaguchi, captain of the Lubelius Crusaders?!”

“Wow! But is it really you…?”

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner? Come on…”

With a light ching, Hinata put her sword away. Kenya promptly fell to the ground, too unnerved to get back up.

“I thought I was gonna pee my pants,” he said, a little pale.

“Gross,” retorted Alice.

“Look, I was scared, all right?!”

“But I think that was your fault, Kenya.”

Kenya fell silent. He knew Chloe was right.

“But did you really fight to a tie with Hinata, Mr. Tempest?”

I gave Gail the honest answer. “Pretty much. One side ran off before the battle could be decided, so definitely a draw.”

“Wait, you ran, Mr. Tempest?”

Did I say who?! Damn, they’re sharp.

“I’ll leave that to your imagination,” I replied, trying to salvage my image. It wasn’t a lie, and I think I had revealed enough of the truth anyway.

The children looked like they had more questions, but Hinata cut them off.

“So what were you concerned about just now?”

I recalled thinking about who I might be able to leave the kids to.

“Well, these kids are about to hit the town, but you see how crowded it is. I need someone to watch them…”

“Oh? Well, I can babysit them.”

“…so I was just figuring out who to— Huh?”

What did she just say? Hinata would watch the children? If that was a joke, it wasn’t funny.

“What, are you saying I’m not good enough for that?”

“No, no, not at all…”

She was staring at me. So scary. Now I was impressed Kenya didn’t piss himself. He deserved more praise.

“And you won’t say no to me, either, will you?”

“No, of course not!”

“Ken…”

“Absolutely! By all means!”

“You too, Gail…? Well, all right.”

Kenya and Gail immediately fell to her will. Ryota, seeing their reaction, didn’t hold out much longer.

“I can’t believe I’m getting to be with you, Hinata! I look up to you so much!!”

Alice was fangirling out, too. She looked up to Masayuki, too, she’d mentioned earlier, and I suppose Hinata was like a pop star to her. And no complaints from Hinata—she was already getting attached.

As for Chloe:

“I like you! You kind of remind me of Shizu!”

She gave Hinata a hug, all smiles. If Chloe liked Hinata, she must really be a good person inside, huh? A little scary around the eyes, but that didn’t affect Chloe much. And unless I imagined it, I thought I saw a bit of a smile on Hinata’s face as well. In the blink of an eye, she had captured their hearts.

“Right, let’s go. Why don’t we check out the food stalls first? I heard they have yakisoba noodles and grilled corn.”

“““Okay!!”””

What leadership. It was astounding.

I could only assume the children would be fine under Hinata’s care. It filled me with relief, even as Hinata came up and whispered in my ear.

“I’ll watch them for you, but you handle Lady Luminus, all right?”

Huh?

I hadn’t seen her last night, but Luminus was here after all?

“Oh, did she decide to pay a visit?”

“You invited her, didn’t you? I saw her gleefully preparing a maid outfit for the occasion.”

Amazingly, Luminus had disguised herself as a paladin alongside Arnaud and Bacchus to partake in the festivities. For the first day, she’d be joining the group of royalty and nobility on the tour of the premises I’d be giving. Paladins qualified as nobility, as the rule went, so she was perfectly fine being mixed in with the tour.

Very shrewd of her, I guess you could say. She even stayed last night in the brand-new church I had built in this nation. I had no idea at all, which just shows how well she had concealed herself.



“Thanks in advance,” Hinata said as she went off with the children. Suddenly, I felt like I had much more to worry about. Hinata was practically skipping down the street, meanwhile. She got me again, didn’t she? I knew it.

The moment Hinata was out of sight, I felt a light slap on my shoulder.

“Well, well, Rimuru! I don’t think I’ve ever seen Hinata smile before.”

It was a smiling Yuuki standing there, dressed not in a fancy suit but in a uniform that looked like a modified school outfit. He was here to take me to our designated meeting point for the tour.

“Yeah, I never would’ve guessed she’d be interested in watching the kids. I figured she’d tell me to shut up and storm off.”

“Oh, I dunno about that! You might not guess it, but Hinata’s pretty good at taking care of people. It is a surprise, though. And she looks really great in that dress. Apparently, she bought it in town here. She looks kind of like a pretty, fashion-conscious college student, huh?”

So that was from Tempest? I thought I was mistaken, but I guess I wasn’t.

“In that case, Hinata’s gotta be loaded, ’cause lemme tell you, that dress doesn’t come cheap.”

It was made from hellmoth silk, comfortable against the skin and granting the wearer the effects of Cancel Temperature. It also offered pretty decent defense, reducing damage better than your bog-standard leather armor. But it was lavishly expensive. We had a steady supply of silk fabric, but it still wasn’t nearly enough, and each piece had to be handmade. Between the scarcity and labor involved, we all but had to charge an arm and a leg for it. It was boutique shopping for nobles, not the girl on the street—and Hinata had bought it at first sight yesterday without hesitating. If she’d already had it tailored to her size, then clearly money was no object with her.

Not that I’m complaining. Always nice to have a free-spending customer.

“Well, it’s a big party right now, so maybe she’s loosening the purse strings a little? She was looking around town all excited yesterday, too.”

She was?! Maybe I was even more mistaken than I thought. She was really looking forward to the Founder’s Festival, wasn’t she?

…Oh. And that’s why she was palming Luminus off on me. So she could really cut loose, huh?

“What was she looking for yesterday?”

“Oh, just checking out what stalls you had, I suppose. She went on and on to me about how you had yakisoba and roasted corn, for one.”

“She did? Um…”

So Hinata had been casing the festival grounds yesterday. She certainly wasn’t messing around, was she? To her, this event was like a battle she wanted to plunge right into the middle of, heart and soul.

Indeed, we had all kinds of stalls lined up in rows around the coliseum. The fast-food outlet (or what you’d call “fast food” in my previous world) was part of that. Mjöllmile had made all the arrangements for it, and we had the whole menu ready for today—burgers, hot dogs, fries, and a selection of juices.

And that was far from all. Yes, there was yakisoba and corn, but also cowdeer kebabs and other local favorites. We even had shaved ice on offer, although it was still a little too early season-wise. Come summer, that’d probably become a top seller. I made sure the ice was shaved into thin, tiny strips so they gently melted in your mouth, and there were gobs of sweet syrup poured over every bowl. It was truly a treat that reigned supreme—and I know, because I tried it myself.

Take a walk down there, and you were greeted with the fragrant aromas of cooking soy sauce and sugary fruit flavors. Lots of people were working hard for this day, and it showed. I’d used Thought Communication to send images of the food I had in mind to everyone involved, and the able hands of Shuna and her staff had made most of my suggestions a reality. Then Mjöllmile worked out all the logistics for the food stalls—and, for some reason, Veldora was opening a grilled-food joint of his own.

Hinata, according to Yuuki, had checked out the whole scene yesterday, deciding exactly where she wanted to visit.

“Wow. Hey, maybe Hinata’s a bigger fan of junk food than she looks, huh?”

“Hey, join the club,” he replied. “You’re right, though. It’s kind of surprising.”

Learning this unexpected fact about Hinata was a welcome surprise…I think. At the very least, I knew now she wasn’t afraid to toss big money around on a whim, so she’d definitely be a favored customer of ours. I was a bit worried, though. Hopefully she doesn’t set a bad example for the kids…

So I headed to the reception hall with Benimaru and Yuuki. By the time we did, Rigurd was already going over today’s schedule with the large noble contingent on hand.

“Ah, Sir Rimuru! That was an excellent speech earlier!”

Um, was it? Seeing Rigurd look so happy about it warmed me up. Guess it didn’t go so badly after all. Good, good. I returned Rigurd’s smile.

“Now, everybody, let me guide you to our first attraction of the day!”

He began to walk off, leading the group to our first stop—a building right nearby the reception hall. This was our concert hall, its interior remodeled at breakneck speed, but the results looked better than I expected. The high-quality seats were lined up in rows oriented based on our acoustic calculations. Our visitors each sat at their assigned chairs without complaint.

Compared to Japan, I couldn’t help but be biased against this world’s level of culture. I’m sure people on the other side would think the same of me, but regardless, those were my feelings. There was a robust art scene, and this world didn’t lose out to my old one much in terms of painting or music—but that applied only to the noble ranks. It served as a diversion for them, something on which to lavish money and time. Whenever a city developed itself to an advanced enough level, the angels would start attacking it—and thanks to that, the ruling classes tended to isolate and conceal scientific research to some extent. Art was the same way, and generally, patrons of the arts saw such work as something to commission and enjoy strictly for themselves.

Personally, I think culture is something nurtured by all of society. There’s genius lurking all over the world, and in such a close-knit art scene, that genius is not only hard to dig up but may likely not be discovered at all. Art, and creative activity, can be enjoyed only when one has room for it in their lives. It’s almost too extravagant to expect that much from this world, but I wasn’t willing to give up. I wanted to search far and wide for that hidden genius, and to achieve that, I needed to start by spreading culture from my own nation. This concert event today was our first step.

A lot of musical instruments in this world resembled the ones I was familiar with. We even had a piano, surprisingly enough—found in Clayman’s mansion, of course. That demon lord was living a stereotypical life of nobility, and we uncovered a large cache of instruments in one of the many ornately decorated rooms in his manor.

There were many among the monster races with an ear for music. There was a tradition for yearly festivals, for one, featuring flute- and drum-based rhythms. And thanks to lending those instruments to the more musically inclined among my people, we were starting to see some budding prodigies.

I had given some practice instruments to those interested, teaching the basics of reading sheet music. That was about as far as my own expertise went, but then my good friend Raphael stepped up. Between the music textbooks I had in Japan and the instrument-related knowledge from the library in this world, Raphael was able to collate all those data and put them together in a single volume. The guy was even able to rebuild knowledge I had long forgotten. I couldn’t be more grateful.

After that, of course, it’d all come down to the monsters’ own efforts. It’s really true—if you like something, you get better at it. And in a flash, we had monsters picking the instruments of their choice and improving at them by leaps and bounds. I also had some sheet music re-created from what I remembered from my past—I don’t have perfect pitch or anything, but it didn’t matter to Raphael, who edited and arranged everything just right. I’d worry about infringing on someone’s rights, but copyright organizations—and the concept of copyrights, for that matter—didn’t exist in this world. If someone finds out, hopefully they’ll turn the other cheek for the sake of our cultural expansion.

Violins formed our main inventory, accompanied by trumpets, kettle drums, and so forth. Finding a piano was itself a surprise, but seeing monsters play it like it was the easiest thing in the world was positively moving. I suppose you could debate whether a piano belongs in an orchestra or not, but I didn’t lose sleep over the question. If there was demand for the piano as a way to express yourself, no need to deny it.

I personally had no musical talent, so I just let the monsters do what they wanted. The results had been personally guaranteed by Mjöllmile, and today, I’d be hearing them for the first time. Excitedly, nervously, I waited for things to begin.

Once everyone was in their seats, the lights slowly began to dim as the curtain rose. It revealed a group of performers, all dressed in the same formal wear—a hodgepodge of races and species, each with the instrument of their calling; some humanlike, others closer to animals, but all brimming with confidence and pride in their instruments. A halfling, apparently the conductor, advanced to the front of the stage, giving the audience a deep bow.

That, I think, was the boy who had come wailing at me once, crying about how there was no work he could do. “No,” I said, “of course that’s not true”—but he was too weak for construction work, he wasn’t good at math, and he tried farming but didn’t last long. He then volunteered for our armed forces, but he wasn’t very good in a fight, either.

The thing about him was, he was great at motivating other people to perform. He had a repertoire of songs he’d sing to help people unify and come together. I think I wound up recommending him to the military band…and while I was at it, I gave him the name of Baton.

Baton now lifted his head, his face colored with intense passion. He turned to the stage, taking in the curious stares from the upper-crust audience. He was small, but his back seemed to loom large from my vantage point.

There was a pause.

It’s always so fortunate when you can find what you’re truly good at.

The conductor’s baton rose, and then the music began. It started with an easy, gentle melody but then transformed, growing solemn and grave. Under Baton’s conducting, the musicians moved in perfect harmony, each of them having discovered something they could be proud of as well.

The music they played charmed the hearts of listeners, making them wonder if this exact moment was the best in their whole lives. It was classical—in terms of being from olden times—with the nuance of spanning generations to be recognized as a masterpiece. Some pieces soothed the heart; some sent it soaring to grand heights; some stirred up your courage. One masterpiece came after the other, created by this small band of geniuses. This group, some of whom weren’t even literate, worked so hard to study the music—and now the fruits of their labor echoed beautifully across the hall. Nobody would dismiss them as useless now, and if anyone did, I think I’d punch them out. That’s just how wonderful their playing was.

I had gone to classical concerts maybe two or three times in Japan, but these guys didn’t lose out to them at all, no. I never expected to see music played at such a high level over here. Yuuki, too, closed his eyes and listened; I’m sure it was nostalgic for him. I almost wanted to start bragging to him: See? What do you think of that?

As I thought about this, the sound came to a close. Then the next piece began—one of my favorite anime opening songs.

You’re kidding me. They shifted gears from classical to anime? Like it was the most natural thing in the world? And that was followed by a pop tune. Yuuki’s eyes were no longer closed—they were open and staring right at me. Stop that, man. I’m not the culprit here. After all, the guy who read my memories to create that sheet music was…

Understood. My selection prioritized those pieces in my master’s memory data, which provided him with the most psychological satisfaction.

Raphael seemed a little too proud in that reply. But I couldn’t make any excuses. It was going so well, too! Now the effect seemed kind of ruined. I mean, I liked these songs, yes, but hearing them played with such solemn grandeur in a concert hall just didn’t seem right at all. Yuuki, no doubt thinking the same thing, began to snicker a little.

But it was only Yuuki and I who felt jarred by this. It made sense if you thought about it, but everybody else in the audience was listening to this music for the first time. They’d have no idea where it came from—and Raphael’s musical arrangements were a perfect match for the scene. They’d have nothing to be suspicious about. And whether they were used to the classics or not, I could tell they were enrapt with all this new music they were experiencing.

The orchestral pieces dominated the hall, and the crowd was perfectly quiet as they sat there at full attention. The music from Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, and other anonymous geniuses was charming the nobility of this world.

I had to call this concert a great success. Anyone in attendance for this performance had to admit it—even if played by monsters, these tones, these melodies were sheer beauty. Even the anime tracks, in their capable hands, compared favorably with the historical classics—and the pop music grabbed your heart like it’s supposed to; the rock revved you up like it’s meant to.

Thus, with enthusiasm taking hold among the audience, the final selection came to a close.

It’s over?

The concert lasted only sixty minutes, but it felt so packed, like an eternity had passed. We had planned to end things here; Mjöllmile told me he had arranged for an hour-long set in the morning and afternoon. Much of the audience wouldn’t know a great deal about music, so we opted for shorter sets to keep their attention, without an intermission. This was an experiment for all of us, so we put these measures in place to keep the procedure as simple as possible.

I was only briefed on this; the details were all worked out by the people in front of me. I was proud of them. Standing up tall, I was about to celebrate their success with as much applause as I could muster…when Baton bowed and swung his director’s stick.

Instantly, all the lighting was extinguished. The crowd began to nervously murmur—but it lasted only a moment. Then the spotlight was turned on a single onstage figure, a touchingly sweet woman with light-pink hair—Shuna. She was in a sleeveless party dress, bursting with an allure you didn’t often see from her. And there was another with her—a beauty with purple hair, lit by another spotlight. Was that Shion? I didn’t recognize her at first, what with the slip dress she had on instead of her usual business suit.

Shion stood there like a fantastic vision, as if lit by the moon. Her dress took on a transparent feel depending on the light, revealing a sexier side you didn’t often feel from her. She really was a dignified beauty—until she opened her mouth, at least—and this presentation further accentuated that beauty.

They went up to the front, in their respective spotlights, and bowed deeply. That alone captured your attention, like a fine work of art—but seriously, what were they about to do here? I hated to think it, but…

The spotlight moved, and Shuna moved with it to the piano—one that sat in place, untouched, the whole performance. Shion, meanwhile, picked up a violin. There was no longer any doubt. They were about to play a duet. Shuna, maybe I could picture as a pianist—but Shion at the violin? Were we really safe, having her play in front of such an influential audience? I recalled the assorted disasters she had engineered with her food in the past—if her musical skill matched that, it could spell doom for us all…

…Or maybe not? I mean, there was no way Shuna would allow that. And Mjöllmile seemed so confident, too, didn’t he? He was virtually staking his life on this whole event, and I doubted he’d let Shion throw a monkey wrench into the works.

Let’s believe in them. I closed my eyes, still a bit wary as I waited for the performance.

It began with a slow piano tune accompanied by an intense, impassioned violin melody. Then suddenly, the tone changed. In a way, it felt more like a duel than a duet—but the extreme force behind Shion’s melody seemed to reflect her own disposition, and Shuna’s piano playing (much like Shuna herself) gently enveloped it. The intensity and softness intermingled, accentuating each other in impressive harmony.

Ahhh… This was good. I drowned in the waves of profoundly expressive sound, shaken to my soul. This was different. It wasn’t something you could accomplish with stopgaps. This was the result of innate discipline. It made sense, given Shuna’s roots as an oracle and Shion’s role in protecting her. Music is an indispensable part of any religious rite…and maybe that’s why Shuna and Shion’s melodies seemed to hit me right in the heart.

Silence. The dreamlike moment was over—it seemed like forever, but not even five minutes had passed.

When I snapped out of it, I attempted to give them thunderous applause. But before I could, I heard staccato clapping break the quiet. Darn. I was hoping to be first, but I had the rug taken out from under me. I joined the clapping, craning my neck to see whose lead I was following.

Shockingly, it was Luminus, disguised as a maid in the employ of the two paladins in attendance. She heartily applauded the performers, looking gloriously satisfied. I tried to keep up—and soon, other clapping overlapped with ours.

The reaction was cacophonous. Elmesia, Heavenly Emperor of Thalion; Gazel, king of the Dwarven Kingdom; all the nobility of the Western Nations; Milim and Frey… Even Middray, a man I wouldn’t expect to be very cultured. They all stood up and sent out their applause. This tradition of clapping was the same in this world, it seemed; I wasn’t sure if a long-gone otherworlder had brought it in or if it was just always that way.

What I did quickly learn, however, was that this world didn’t have a custom of giving encores. Public artistry in itself wasn’t a common thing, so I suppose that should have been obvious. Thus I assumed we were done here, but apparently not. Darkness fell on the hall once more, before the entire stage was relit and the orchestra—with Shuna’s piano and Shion’s violin this time—played one final song to round things out.

Music, and art in general, has a way of tearing down barriers. Seeing this concert unfold, I wanted to believe, for just a moment, that there’re things out there that everyone in the world truly can find wondrous.

The concert was a monster hit. It was the only topic on visitors’ lips as we retired to the reception for a light lunch.

“Wasn’t that just wonderful?”

“Ah, what can I say…?”

“I had my eyes closed, taking it in from start to finish!”

“Me too. And who cares whether it was man or monster? Those melodies are still in my ears!”

“Indeed. Quality is quality. That’s all there is to it.”

Based on my eavesdropping, it sounded like high praise. And at least one member of the crowd was going up to me now.

“Um… Sir Rimuru, I would very much like to hear this performance again. What can I do to gain such an opportunity, if I could?”

“We’ll be holding the concert regularly over the next three days,” I told him, but I suppose we should consider a more regular performing schedule. Our song repertoire wasn’t that vast yet, but I was sure it’d grow going forward. Having more chances to show it off would provide more practice motivation, besides.

“That was a fine performance,” Luminus whispered to me as we passed by in the hall. “I enjoyed it more than I expected to.”

Quite a compliment, I thought; she didn’t strike me as the sort to offer praise freely. I should probably consider that a five-star review.

“Shion was certainly a surprise,” I commented to Benimaru.

“I’m sure she was. But… Well, despite all appearances, Shion has always had a good sense of rhythm. She certainly seemed extraordinarily compatible with that ‘violin’ instrument as well. And Shuna, too… I didn’t know she could play piano, but she always did enjoy singing. It does not surprise me.”

It all made sense to him. He apparently knew they were good singers, and come to think of it, I remember them breaking out a happy tune or two as they went about their business. It made me realize, despite my intentions, that I still didn’t really know everyone very well.

After lunch, we had our science presentation scheduled for the afternoon. I followed Rigurd as he guided the crowd of nobility, still keyed up from the morning’s events. We passed by the concert hall from before, this time heading straight for the museum. Our destination was the historical archives inside, as much as it seemed odd for nobility to be in there.

Gabil and Vester awaited us at the entrance. Being a former Dwargon minister, Vester was immediately recognizable to a few in the crowd, eliciting murmurs of surprise. Vester himself paid it no mind, flashing a smile as he greeted the tour.

The two of them guided us into the building.

“Inside this case is the first healing potion that Sir Rimuru ever created. It is a complete extraction from hipokute herbs with all impurities removed. It boasts ninety-nine percent purity, and while it is not quite up to the level of a Revival Elixir, its healing qualities are equivalent to a Full Potion.”

I listened to Vester talk as we went along. Then I realized we had made a mistake. Vester was offering valid, thorough guidance, yes, but to those without scientific knowledge, it must’ve been incredibly boring. I could already see a few people tuning him out, staring at the ceiling.

That, and we had scheduled this all wrong. If we held the tech demo in the morning, everyone would be awake, refreshed, and perhaps more open to this guided tour. I didn’t think we’d have so much disengagement anyway. But thanks to the thrill of that morning concert, all this scientific mumbo-jumbo must seem like such a letdown. Besides, think about it. We were entertaining people from royal courts and noble mansions. They might care about the things we produced, but with most of them, they couldn’t care less about how they were made.

Vester must’ve picked up on this. He snickered a bit.

“Ah, but I see I am bogging all of you down in needless detail. Let’s turn our attention elsewhere, then, and stage a scientific experiment.”

He exchanged a look with Gabil, who nodded back.

“In this experiment, we will pursue what healing potion is, exactly, as much as we can. Diluting this Full Potion to twenty percent strength creates High Potion, used to treat serious injuries. Dilute this further, and you create twenty doses of Low Potions. That should show you just how effective a Full Potion can be.”

Gabil lined up bottles of all three potions on a table. “If any of us is currently dealing with an injury,” he said, “we would be able to test out the effectiveness of each potion, but it would be barbaric to hurt ourselves for the sake of experimentation. Thus we have come up with rather an interesting experiment.”

As he spoke, Vester brought in a broken sword.

“So will a potion fix this sword?” asked Gabil. “Does one of you have the answer to that question?”

“Rubbish! Hipokute herbs only work on living things!”

The shouted reply came from a man dressed in magician’s garb—perhaps the court sorcerer for one kingdom or another. He totally dismissed the idea, and it looked like he had the intelligence to back up that answer.

Gabil laughed and nodded. “Yes, of course. At the very least, there is no way this Low or High Potion could ever be effective against a sword.”

That much was obvious. There wasn’t much need to stage an experiment. What was Gabil—and Vester, for that matter—getting at with this question?

“So the question is, how far does that rule apply? What do all of you think?”

More protests from the crowd. They must have thought Gabil and Vester were treating them like idiots. Things were even getting a little raucous—I know this wasn’t what they were expecting, but sheesh, pipe down.

But how far could you apply healing potions, huh? Well, they worked on people, of course, as well as animals, plants, and monsters. Where’s the threshold, then, the boundary between effective and ineffective? This was actually kind of fascinating. Is being “alive” or not the main thing? Probably not. It was the presence of a consciousness that likely made the difference.

Report. Plants have a consciousness as well. A consciousness has its roots in the soul, a collection of the spiritual particles that form magicules. Its presence, or lack thereof, is thought to be the difference.

Right. Plants have wills—maybe they’re not fully sentient, but they have a desire to keep living. But swords don’t have “souls,” and therefore no wills. They’re just things, so obviously…

…But hang on. Something just occurred to me. Didn’t Kaijin say that swords do have wills of their own? No way…?!

“Heh-heh-heh… I would like to know as well. And the desire to know provides the entryway to new discoveries.”

“Indeed. And trust me, I ordered him to not conduct this ridiculous experiment at first. I called him a fool in my mind, for that matter. But I was the only fool in the room. I was so bound by the laws of common sense, I forgot my original drives as a researcher.”

Vester smiled warmly as he sprinkled some Full Potion on the broken sword. Then—just a little, but enough so that everyone could see—the sword reacted.

“““…?!”””

“And here is the answer. While it does not fully rebuild the sword, we are clearly seeing the early signs of repair here.”

“R-ridiculous…”

“I can’t believe it. Healing potion could be used for this…?”

The tour group couldn’t hide their astonishment. I could see why. It flew in the face of common sense; you’d have a hard time not being surprised—and that included me. I had no idea they were conducting experiments not even I could anticipate the results of. They didn’t give me any report on this, which only added to the shock.

“Of course, you will only see these effects on arms and armor that matured past a certain level. The weapon must be made of magisteel, at the very least—and it will not give a reaction unless it has been used regularly by its owner.”

Ah. So it’d have no effect unless the sword had a will instilled in it.

“…Why,” Gazel asked Gabil in his low, stentorian voice, “did you want to know something like that?”

“It’s simple, my lord. I found it difficult to believe that plants and vegetation growing in the wild have wills of their own—but after experimentation, we found that healing potions work perfectly fine on them.”

Now that we had Full Potion mass manufacturing underway, there was a decent quantity to work with. Thus they had been trying it on all sorts of things. Certainly, the desire to learn was the first step toward new discoveries. I recalled the experiments we did in grade school science class, challenging ourselves to do things that seemed pointless at first. Gabil had that same spirit—the first thing’s to just try it out.

So it worked on plants, restoring damaged tree bark and producing new buds from broken branches.

“I then remembered the existence of dryads,” Gabil said. “Vegetation may have only a weak consciousness at first, but over many months and years of life, they can evolve into powerful monsters, can they not? But as I thought, this may only happen under certain conditions.”

Around half the audience was taking a keen interest in this explanation. I’d expect the more quick-witted among them to be fascinated, yes. This was the kind of research I’d normally want to keep confidential, after all. Should I let Gabil keep going? The thought, as mean-spirited as it felt, crossed my mind, but I hurriedly brushed it away as I listened on.

“The only things that react to healing potion are those already intertwined with magicules. Things with no magicules to them at all show no reaction in our testing. What this means is that magicules house consciousness itself—or, at least, the two are deeply related.”

“Yes. And when Sir Gabil presented these data, it led me to reconsider my thoughts as well. Soon, a question arose in my mind: What are magicules?”

Magicules were one of this world’s unique substances, freely spread around the atmosphere like oxygen. They were the engine for all kinds of mysterious forces, and people could wield them to do their bidding, to some extent.

“So we have a sample from a certain plant here… And over in this other room, I can show you an enlarged picture of it.”

We followed Vester to another room, a large, spacious chamber with chairs lined up in rows—something like an AV-equipped college lecture hall. It had a projector, still in the trial testing phases, and there was a stretched-out white sheet on the wall to serve as a screen. Gazel curiously observed the projector but remained politely quiet about it, realizing now was not the time. That’s Gazel for you—mature enough to pick the right time and place.

Once everyone was seated, Gabil turned on the projector, a device with light-based magic inscriptions that let it project color images on the screen. The chamber’s lights dimmed as the image appeared, surprising a few in the audience.

“Take a look at this image,” Vester said, ignoring the chatter. “It shows the structure of the plant sample you saw before. And this is the structure of some grass, the type you see growing anywhere…”

He placed the enlarged images next to each other. I didn’t get why Vester was acting so haughty here—“a certain plant” and so on. What’s his aim?

“…Are they not the same? I don’t see any difference…”

“No, me neither. Why aren’t they the same?”

The voices in the crowd were met with wide agreement. A few of them weren’t as sure—“that part is different”; “no, that part is”—but I doubted any of them were on the mark. So what was the answer?

“Now, let’s enlarge these further.”

“What do you think? They look just the same, don’t they?”

Vester and Gabil flashed villainous smiles—and then they revealed the trick.

“The plant in the first picture is hipokute herb. The second one is a simple weed we picked from a lawn in town. Do they look the same to you?”

Vester’s question made things begin to dawn on some of the audience. What they saw unnerved them. Hurriedly, they spoke up.

“They aren’t the same. The difference is clear if you look closer!”

“That’s mean of you, Sir Vester. How can we tell the difference just from those images?”

Hipokute was a rare herb. I’d dined on quite a bit of it in the cave Veldora was sealed in; it’s famously the core ingredient of healing potion. Most would assume it’s structured far differently from the grass you step on every day. But a few people, myself included, found Vester’s question very disturbing. Gazel was one of them; I could see the blood drain from his face.

We were showing that hipokute and regular grass were both structured in the same way—proof that, essentially, they were the same. It begged the question of what, exactly, constituted a rare herb—which, in turn, had the potential to overturn common sense itself.

Vester lifted his arms up high, that sinister smile still on his face.

“Quiet! Quiet, please!”

He and Gabil waited for things to settle down. When they did, he placed a series of images on the projector.

“Squeezing the extract from hipokute and combining its magicules together creates healing potion. The level of this fusion process, as you all know, depends on the properties of the extract produced—and while we cannot go into details, we have successfully refined this extraction process to a purity level of ninety-nine percent. That is how a Full Potion is made.”

Through a variety of images (while still hiding the core technology), Vester explained the potion-making process.

“Now we move on to hipokute leaves. Grinding these leaves and combining their magicules produces a salve that can close wounds, although the effect is not dramatic. This makes sense, since these ground leaves are simply the leavings from the extraction process.”

An image of a leaf filled the screen. The leaf was shown being ground, then mixed with the extract from before to create an ointment—the basic process behind it. Nothing unnatural. I didn’t get where Vester was going with it.

“Now, everyone, look at this image.”

On one side, you had leaves from hipokute herbs grown in our cave; on the other was regular grass. They looked totally different. There was no way they’d have the same organic structure…but as the images flashed by, changes began to occur on the hipokute side.

“Do you see? I only came to notice out of sheer coincidence. Sir Rimuru has ordered me to work on our hipokute cultivation project, but one day, I took an interest in the strained leaves from our extraction process. Making ointment from it is well and good, but it has to be kept under exacting conditions or it quickly loses its effect. Plus, compared to the liquid extract used to make potions, its effect is extremely weak. I didn’t give it much thought, since we had other uses for the extract, but if you think about it, do we really need this ointment? So as I said, I began to look at the strained leaves…”

…And then Gabil realized that the shape of these post-extraction leaves, now free of magicules, was different from the hipokute currently growing in the cave. Shocked, Gabil decided to take more detailed records, resulting in the images he was showing us now.

“So at the conclusion of all this, we’ve found that, technically speaking, there is no such thing as a hipokute plant. The plants we call hipokute are actually mutations…”

“Yes!” exclaimed an excited Vester. “And it’s not that hipokute grows in magicule-rich areas—it’s the magicule concentration itself that causes this mutation and creates hipokute from simple grass!”

I could see why he was excited. Everyone who heard him immediately began talking.

“That… That’s a major discovery!”

“S-Sir Vester, this is not the type of thing to announce in a place like this! There could have been some more appropriate occasion… You must contact a scientific society or the like at once and follow the proper announcement procedure!”

It was chaos inside the room. Even those who didn’t take much interest before couldn’t stay silent now—and the audience members who had been paying attention from the start were even more astounded. It was beyond anything they imagined, and the “not the type of thing to announce” remark symbolized just how much it roiled the crowd. Gazel, too, had his eyes wide open, and even Elmesia and Erald were discussing matters with each other.

I was surprised, too. I never gave it much thought before, but the way they put it, it made sense. It was pretty obvious, in fact. I doubted Veldora just happened to be sealed off in a cave full of hipokute herbs. If that was the result of a mutation—or a plant evolution—that was more convincing. And once all the magicules were extracted from this plant during processing, its shape went back to the plain old grass it once was. The dried, strained samples projected on the screen made it obvious that they shared the same organic structure as regular grass.

In which case, no wonder Gabil thought potions could heal swords. Metal might mutate into magisteel ore, just like grass mutated into hipokute, and it was that ore that was processed to make magisteel weapons. Put the pieces together, and anyone would wonder if healing potion could work on magisteel as well. The result: the experiment we saw earlier.

“My original question,” Vester continued, “of the exact nature of magicules remains unanswered. Monsters, and magic-born, are exposed to the effects of these magicules—that much is evident. But what about demi-humans? If you took all the magicules out of their body, would they go back to being humans? I have boundless questions along these lines, but investigating them could prove fiendishly difficult.”

“Despite this, we intend to continue our research. And in this land, where some of the world’s greatest minds are gathering, we promise to keep pursuing the answers…and with that, we close our science presentation.”

“To everyone who came out to attend—”

““Thank you very much!””

Gabil and Vester bowed and spoke in perfect sync. They must’ve worked the presentation out in pretty deep detail; I don’t think this was the first time they’d run through this lecture.

The content, however, was excellent. I had left it all to them, but it really grabbed your attention—and what’s more, it spread the word about great discoveries while keeping all the key parts a secret. Most important of all—we didn’t have to worry about anyone copying our technology with what we revealed. Changing the nature of plants with magicules was a grand discovery, but it wasn’t something other nations could easily replicate. They could experiment with it, but it wouldn’t let them mass-produce hipokute or anything.

Our position of superiority remained firm—and our research continued. As Gabil said, great minds were gathering here, and we’d have more before long. In a land so blessed with magicules as this one, we could do all the experimentation we wanted.

Overall, this scientific presentation was a major shock to the attendees. After a morning spent enjoying fine music, this afternoon stimulated their intellectual curiosities. I’d leave it to the audience to decide which was more enriching, but given how much interest both events generated, I’d definitely call them a success.



A lot of the audience seemed bored at first. I worried that we should have swapped the order out, in retrospect…but it appeared I was worried over nothing. In fact, maybe this was the right order after all. We certainly fulfilled our main goal of making the movers and shakers in the audience interested in us. I internally resolved to give Gabil and Vester unbridled praise the next time I had a chance.

After the presentation came some free activity time. A number of our VIPs would relax at our salon, while others would peruse our food stalls incognito. A few would savor the hot-spring bath, and others would enjoy checking out our amusement facilities. Each one of them had their own guide, so they were free to pursue their own interests. They were all abuzz about the concert and science presentation, too, reportedly spreading praise about them to everyone they spoke to around town.

As I watched them take in the festival, I saw Arnaud and Bacchus come up to me, looking concerned. “We need to talk,” Arnaud whispered to me. It sounded like something important, so I brought Benimaru and Shion along and guided them to a room in the reception hall.

There we saw Luminus. I’d suspected we would, given how agitated the paladins seemed, and I was right. She was in her maid dress, seated with her legs crossed. The juxtaposition of her pale skin and the black garter belts and stockings was, frankly, hot. Arnaud and Bacchus stood bolt upright behind her—the sight of them serving this maid was a surreal role reversal, but it actually fit her well. Luminus’s powerful aura at work, I imagine.

“Now,” she began before I could talk or even sit down, “we have a treaty of nonaggression in place…but that will not be enough.”

I always knew she was impatient, but not this impatient. Exasperated, I helped myself to a chair. Something told me I wasn’t about to get invited to a seat.

“Not enough how?”

“How else? It lacks interaction! If we cannot make contact with each other, how will we ever have interaction?”

“Um, I don’t see why we can’t…?”

I organized the situation in my mind as I thought over what Luminus meant.

As she said, there was a nonaggression pact between the Holy Empire of Lubelius and Tempest. The Western Holy Church was a part of Lubelius, which also helped boost our position with the Western Nations. I really appreciated that, but in terms of interaction, she was right—we had virtually no diplomatic relations. We were just too physically distant from each other. There was no national-level trade. Any circulation of goods was left to market principles, with whatever merchants or nations wanted to be involved.

We weren’t completely cut off from trade, though. I had actually asked Mjöllmile to send a few traveling peddlers in their direction. Why wait for Lubelius when we could take action ourselves? We were conducting basic market research, and I had already gotten a report of products and goods that the Holy Empire specialized in.

That report told me that Lubelius was an agricultural giant, producing great quantities of crops (primarily wheat) and exporting much of it to the Western Nations. I looked at a sample, and it was very high-quality—tasty, too. I was hoping to import some, in fact, but as mentioned, the distance involved made it tough. Before we started talking about more formal trade, I wanted to see that problem dealt with first.

So that’s where we were now. I wanted to deepen our relations in the future, but if you asked me what could be done right this minute, I couldn’t give you anything.

“You inconsiderate clod. Or are you toying with me?”

“No, no, that’s not it at all!”

Luminus gave my harried reply an irritated sigh. “When I say interaction, I mean cultural interaction. Frankly, I underestimated all of you. The people under our protection in Lubelius lack a great deal in the way of artistic talent. Meanwhile, although I expected little, your musical presentation earlier was impressive. I have reconsidered my views of you today.”

Whoa. Heaps of praise. She had a few kind words for me as we passed each other earlier, but I guess she really did like the concert. That, and now I understood her. Today’s musical performance finally made her recognize our talents. I imagined Luminus had some kind of musical band, and presumably she was talking about an international exchange with its members, to help improve both of us.

“There are some among the vampires who are artistically inclined. They carry on the heritage of our old music while working on new creative endeavors, but lately they’ve been stuck in a rut. I think some input from visiting creators of your realm would be a fine catalyst.”

I had it right on the mark. And really, I appreciated the request. An experience like this always enriches the heart and mind. And if you want to improve your cultural activity, interacting with other people was the best inspiration you could feed on.

“I like that idea! We couldn’t ask for anything better.”

I had no reason to turn her down, so I readily agreed. Looking at our future relations, besides, it was bound to have more positive impact than bad.

“Very good. I will make sure things proceed along those lines.”

She gave me a satisfied nod. Just as she did, an elderly servant placed some tea in front of us. Gunther, I think his name was—just as strong as Louis Valentine but also one talented servant. Diablo was the same way, come to think of it. Who knew that butlers were such lean, mean fighting machines in this world? And now other servants were bringing drinks to Benimaru and Shion behind me. They weren’t delayed; it was just that the impatient Luminus summoned me so quickly that they couldn’t keep up.

Luminus gave them a cold nod—a sign of a strict master-servant relationship, I thought. But:

“Isn’t that great? Now you can enjoy that music, too, soon.”

It sounded pompous as she spoke to her attendants. But they didn’t take it that way, saying, “Thank you very much” and “I look forward to it!” in return. They looked happy enough to me, so they definitely meant it. Their attitude to Luminus was based on respect, it seemed, not fear. I found it odd at first—and then I looked closer and realized they were all vampires.

Their auras were wholly shut off, their powers restrained to the point that they were indiscernible from regular people. They were high-level vampires, I imagined, given how close they were to Luminus. Just the few of them here alone could easily topple an entire nation, I’m sure, and here they were serving tea to us. The world can be one irrational place sometimes.

“Now, Gunther, carry out the necessary details when we return to Nightgarden.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Luminus nodded and took an elegant, silent sip of tea—a beautiful showcase of manners, one you’d want to teach to a debutante.

“Ah yes,” she brightly said as I stared enrapt at her, “that scientific presentation was quite interesting as well. Dissecting the effects of magicules is quite a fascinating idea to come up with. There are those on my staff with a rather odd interest in research. I was thinking we could send them here, but would you mind that?”

I asked for some more details. The way she put it, there was still little in the way of cultured civilization among the humans who lived on the surface of Lubelius, but the underground mainland boasted a fairly decent level of technology.

“Oh? That’s surprising. I thought you wouldn’t be so secretive with all that.”

“I dislike causing trouble for myself. If we were too conspicuous, we feared that accursed lizard would find us, remember. I hardly want the angels interfering with us, either. That’s why I’ve had all our major research moved underground, until we can fully eradicate them.”

She seemed proud of herself.

The way she framed it, Luminus was the most powerful political ruler among all the demon lords. She was a vampire, so essentially immortal, with a life span transcending even that of elves. The more powerful among her kind didn’t even need to eat, capable of sustaining themselves via minute doses of life energy from human beings. There was no doubting the fact that vampires sat at the top of the food chain.

But even they had their deficiencies. Vampires were called “rulers of the night” for good reason—they could wield untold powers in the darkness, but exposure to sunlight wiped them off the planet. It was a huge weakness, but even with it, they remained incredibly dangerous. But again, the more powerful among this advanced race—some among the noble classes under Luminus—could apparently overcome this weakness against the sun. These were called “overcomers,” and they could pretty much go around by day and do whatever they pleased. There were very few of them, which was a good thing, since a vampire without weaknesses would be a nightmare for humanity. Definitely a Calamity-level threat, if not as much a one as Louis or Gunther.

The servants here were overcomers as well. They served Luminus as a sort of hobby, it seemed—with, of course, a heavy nuance of being her bodyguards. Being an overcomer meant having no weak points and therefore a lot of free time on your hands; that was why so many of them enjoyed making assorted things for fun. They’d craft all sorts of junk, in fact, hoping to win Luminus’s affections.

“To be honest,” she said to me, “it’s dreadfully irritating. I have ordered them to develop something more useful, but they’re too fixated on their own ideas, I suppose. They’ve made no progress whatsoever. I would love for you to take them in and give them a little education.”

“Hmm… I wouldn’t mind that, but…”

But of course I’d have qualms about the whole thing unless I got to meet Luminus’s candidates. Being an overcomer meant enjoying life in the ruling class—someone like them traveling to Tempest for study could lead to problems I had no way of predicting in advance.

Luminus, perhaps seeing my indecision, made another offer. “I’m not asking you to work for free, of course. Perhaps I could offer a skill to you.”

“A skill?”

“Yes. The ‘secret skills of faith and favor.’”

What’s that? Sounds really cool! Or at least cooler than the kinds of skills I came up with for myself, such as relearning how to get drunk.

“What are those?”

“Oh, it’s quite simple.” She gave me an evil, complacent smile. “It allows those faithful to you to harness some of your powers.”

Whoa. That sounds dangerous. If she taught me this around all these people…

Report. Luminus has used Spatial Severance to isolate your location.

Raphael neatly pointed it out, cutting me off before I could get worked up. Ah. That would explain why I couldn’t hear anyone besides ourselves right now. She really was a pillar among the strongest of demon lords; setting off skills just came naturally to her.

“So you’ll teach me this in exchange for allowing your students to come here to live for a while? Am I understanding that right?”

“You are. I would be happy enough to have a cultural exchange with our musicians alone. In a way, this is my token of thanks to you.”

She didn’t appear to be lying.

“All right. I’ll take your offer.”

“Hee-hee! Then we have a deal.”

We did. She’d have her musicians trained here, and I’d have my “secret skills of faith and favor.”

To put it very simply, these skills were the principles behind all holy magic. It involved me using my name as a vessel in order to cast spells. Hinata and the paladins, for example, could wield holy magic by using Luminus’s name as a vessel—borrowing a bit of her power with each use. If I could learn the trick behind it, more of the people under me could gain access to holy magic.

Surprising—it seemed like I was getting a lot out of the bargain. Luminus being Luminus, of course, I knew she had calculated all of this.

“That sounds great to me, but are you sure about this?”

“Oh, I don’t mind. You were likely to discover the truth of it for yourself in a few years’ time anyway. It is best to take advantage of information while it is still valuable, is it not?”

…

Ah, I thought. All right. And judging by Raphael’s pained silence, it wouldn’t have even been a few years. We were researching the nature of magicules, and after Hinata’s battle, we already knew the existence of spiritual particles. Put those together, and the truth would’ve come to us naturally. Well, not to me but to Raphael, certainly. And Luminus, spotting this, simply offered it while she was still able to extract something from me for it.

“Well, even so, I appreciate it, Luminus.”

“As long as you keep your side of the bargain, all is well.”

Attempting negotiation with Luminus was still too heavy a task for me. This time it didn’t hurt me, but I’d have to think things through more carefully from now on. I mused over this as I shook hands with her.

Thus our budding orchestra would be traveling to Nightgarden shortly, while the noble “overcomers” serving Luminus would be coming here for research purposes.

Once Luminus deactivated Spatial Severance, we relaxed a bit, as if nothing had happened. I kicked back and enjoyed my tea, listening as Luminus gave me her review of the morning’s concert. It seemed like she was more enthusiastic about exchanges of the musical, and not scientific, sort. Most of her questions involved our orchestra and when we could get them over to her.

Then, at the end:

“By the way, Rimuru, there were some rather disagreeable people among the dignitaries you invited. Were you aware of them?”

She acted casual about this, her tone unchanged. I wondered what she meant for a moment—but it had to be her way of warning me about something.

I guess it wasn’t my imagination after all.

“Ah yes, that pair?”

“Mm. If you don’t shirk your duty and keep your wits about you with them, then very well. But I do hope you will make efforts not to denigrate the good name of the Octagram.”

That was her way of signaling the end of our conversation. I nodded at her and took my leave.

After my spontaneous conversation with Luminus ended, it was time for dinner.

For whatever reason, Yuuki, Hinata, and I were assigned to the same table. They were all smiles with each other, busily discussing the day’s events and virtually drooling at all the food brought in. I could hardly wait to dig in myself as I listened to their reflections. There were two choices available for the evening’s courses, Japanese and Western; Hinata went for Japanese, while Yuuki and I picked Western.

“I tell you,” Yuuki began, “that was a seriously incredible performance. You really should’ve checked it out, Hinata. The food stalls’ll be open later, you know.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. I achieved what I set out to do today. What’s the problem? Besides, the takoyaki was so good, and…”

Her voice went down to a whisper and she started making excuses.

“…But really, though. You guys went with ‘Alias’?”

I averted my eyes from Hinata, pretending to have no idea what she was talking about.

“But no, I mean it—it’s really worth listening to. I mean, I quite liked that one song already, but hearing it arranged for an orchestra… It just blew me away.”

Nice one, Yuuki. His unbridled praise for Baton and company had successfully diverted Hinata’s attention.

“All right, all right,” she said, not sounding that peeved. “If you’re going on about it that much, I’ll take the kids there tomorrow.”

Hinata, for her part, seemed to make the most of today, throwing her money up and down the festival, much to my appreciation. Clothes, weapons, armor, magic items—she bought it all, and at marked-up festival prices, too. She also made her way up and down the food stalls, and honestly, I think she took the kids just as an excuse to stuff herself. They loved her, though, it sounded like, so I couldn’t complain at all—especially since she’d already volunteered to watch them the next day.

“Personally, I’m more interested in that research into magicules,” Hinata continued, lowering her voice again. “Healing potions don’t really work on me, you know, because my body breaks down the magicules… And actually, there are some healing magics that work on me and some that don’t.”

She had apparently done a bit of research of her own, to see if there was any potion out there that worked on her. Having the ability to annul magic applied to her sounded good on paper, but the more you thought about it, the more inconveniences it created.

“Yeah, you know, I haven’t thought about it, huh? I’m affected by magicules, too, I guess, so…”

“When you jump between worlds, you take in a vast amount of energy. Sometimes these manifest as skills, and sometimes it results in nothing—like with you, Yuuki. But you’re right—you’re still affected by them. You haven’t grown at all, for one—”

“Whoa, whoa, don’t put it that way! I haven’t grown, no, but I’ve done a lot in my years here, you know?”

“I know, I know. You don’t have to get worked up every time I mention it. I’m just picking on you.”

Maybe Hinata was just picking on him…but with those imposing eyes of hers? When she said stuff like that with her sharpened glare and joyless face, it really didn’t sound much like a joke.

“All right. But you know, Rimuru, I’m fascinated by the directions you’re taking your research here.”

I appreciated the compliment, but Yuuki was really thinking too much of me.

“No, no, that was really all Gabil and Vester’s own work. I only learned about it the same time all of you did.”

“Oh?”

“Didn’t you order them to do that research?” Hinata asked. “And you let them announce it to VIPs from around the world without even knowing what it was?”

They both gave me incredulous looks.

“Um, this soup is good, huh?” I ventured, fleeing reality while I fished for an excuse. “But look, what could I do? I want them to be independent!”

Not having any other ideas, I tried being more forceful in my approach. It didn’t work. They just glared back at me.

“…All right, I kind of regret that. I was really busy, but maybe I should’ve at least heard what it was first…”

Too late now, of course.

“Man, Rimuru. You sure are something, you know that?”

“Honestly. Sometimes, I seriously think he’s a real big shot. Sometimes.”

That did not sound like praise to me, but ah well. Even I had to admit, it was kind of a slipup. The presentation’s content was great, but I got a bit nervous in the middle of it and Gazel admonished me about it as well—already, I wanted to be more careful next time. Didn’t think Yuuki and Hinata were gonna rake me over the coals about it, too, though…

Fortunately for me, the conversation drifted back into small talk as the dinner continued.

Thus the first day of the Founder’s Festival closed to largely excellent reviews. It really felt like a strong start to me, and I had no doubt in my mind that it’d end a great success—not knowing, of course, that I’d learn in short order just how naive I was.