INTERLUDE

THE MIDNIGHT CONFERENCE

I entered the reception room with Benimaru, Shion, and Diablo. Mjöllmile was already there, tension writ upon his face. Shuna was taking care of all of us, preparing some drinks once we arrived. “His Majesty should be arriving soon,” she said—and just as she did, the door opened and Gazel himself appeared.

“Did you wait long?”

“No, we only just arrived, too.”

With a few short greetings, we took our seats.

“So let us begin with my conclusion. I placed a contact early this morning asking my men to assemble all our current surplus coinage. This resulted in just a little over fifteen hundred gold coins. I cannot collect more from these people, so consider that the most I can provide by tomorrow morning.”

Compared to all the gold coins in circulation, this wasn’t very much—but as Gazel put it, that was the most they could provide without affecting the Dwarven Kingdom’s own economy.

I had asked him the previous night for help making change out of our stellar gold coins, and he had agreed to help.

“Thanks a lot. That’s actually more than I expected. Sorry to put you through that.”

“Mm. I’ll have it sent tomorrow morning via Heavenly Transport, so you’ll have it by evening.”

Fifteen hundred gold coins was a nontrivial amount of weight. I hated to put them through the trouble of delivering them, and with my Dominate Space skill, I could always just stop by Dwargon to grab them. That’d be safer and surer, besides.

“You know, I can just go pick them up for you. I’m the one asking for them anyway.”

“…Oh? Ah yes, you have Spatial Motion. That would reduce the chance of a mistake, yes. All right. I will contact them. That leaves the main question to discuss: Will this be enough to pay off your merchants?”

“Hmm, well…”

It was close, very close, but not enough.

This being the first year of the Founder’s Festival, we were sparing no expense to launch the event. This resulted in a need for more gold coins than expected—over 3,000 in all. In my mind, this converted to around 300 million yen. A staggering figure, given the scope of this world’s economy.

We had the money to cover this in our vault—1,500 stellar gold coins. If you exchanged these, they’d break down to 150,000 regular gold coins. This was why I didn’t hesitate to blow 2,000 or 3,000 on this festival. It wasn’t that we lacked the funds; if we could break down the stellars into regular gold coins, payment was easy. But since we were dealing with newer, small-scale tradesmen for many of our services here, that just wasn’t possible.

As a result, we needed regular gold coins in our vault—but Tempest was not at the point where we could institute a currency-based financial system. There just wasn’t much gold coinage floating around yet. Silver coins of all sorts were everywhere, but Dwarven gold coins? We had fewer than a hundred of those.

To this we could add my personal stash of 300, plus the 1,000-ish Mjöllmile managed to put together. Around 1,400 in all. That, plus Gazel’s promised funds, didn’t make it to 3,000.

“Not enough?”

“Based on the accounting in my head, we’ll want a few hundred more.”

“That’s the accounting you ran this festival on? Why, I’m amazed you ever got it off the ground!”

“Yeah, I kinda made things up as we went along. We didn’t have much time to set it up, so what could I do?”

“…I don’t even know how to begin lecturing you.”

Gazel let out a long, theatrical sigh, his eyes despondent. I mean… We were all really into it, you know… Nobody said no to me… Right? But if I told Gazel any of that, I knew he would explode. The king, without some drink in him, could be kind of scary at times. I was intelligent enough to avoid excessive talk when he was like this.

“In that case, perhaps I could make up the difference?”

Suddenly, someone interrupted our conversation. I looked over to see who it was, only to find Elmesia, Emperor of Thalion, with Archduke Erald in tow. She sat next to Gazel, who visibly winced when he saw her—just for a moment, but still enough to give you pause.

Carefully, I turned to Erald. “Um, Duke Erald…and the Heavenly Emperor, too? What brings you both here?”

“Well, Sir Rimuru, when…I spoke about this with Her Excellency, she was kind enough to offer her support to you…”

Erald did all the talking, Elmesia just serenely smiling next to him. The archduke himself looked a bit pained as well, and I could pick up on why. She was making him say it himself, for reasons I better not pry into. Sleeping dogs and all that.

“Oh, no, um, this is a problem we should handle ourselves…”

“Is it? Were you not just wailing a moment ago that you lacked the money? I was only offering our support in light of the friendly relations our two countries will share going forward…?”

Her lips were smiling. Her eyes weren’t. My instincts whispered to me that this was trouble.

“Um, no, as I was saying…”

Trusting in those instincts, I leaned toward turning down the offer. I did need someone to trade us some gold coins, but the idea of owing Elmesia a favor spooked me. We were short only a few hundred, and if it came to it, we could leave a merchant or two in the lurch for the time being. As long as we didn’t lose face from it, and as long as nobody lost money in the end, I didn’t think people would resent us too much.

Such were the calculations behind my decision, but:

“Give it up. Once that woman speaks her mind, she won’t relent until she’s had her way. Trust me, you would rather make enemies with every merchant on the continent together than her alone. You are far better off accepting her offer.”

Gazel spat out the words, looking just as pained about it as Erald. It was surprising from him, the Heroic King having so much trouble dealing with a fellow leader.

“My, my, Gazzie. You are taking my side? How wonderful!”

She smiled. It was so transparent. And given that “Gazzie” nickname, I began to understand what their relationship was like.

“Would you mind not calling me that, please? What is it you’re after here?”

“Oh, you’re always so formal! Your grandfather was much more freewheeling than that, you know.”

“If he was, then my father must have led a trying life. Would you mind getting down to business?”

I thought Gazel was pretty uninhibited himself, but for the most part, he played the role of a sober, duteous king. Maybe it was his youth, growing up with such a harried father, that inspired him. When his father ruled, that was Gazel’s last taste of true freedom, and it was then that he first met Erald and Elmesia. I imagine that’s when he trained under Hakuro as well. The way Elmesia talked to him about that era—I could imagine Gazel picturing him like an annoying aunt showing up at every family event just to bug you. No wonder he found her to be trouble.

“My, my, so hasty. Were you always so impatient like that, hmm?”

He was doing a good job hiding it—it didn’t look that way at all—but I was sure Gazel was intensely irritated. He might’ve fooled me, but Elmesia could see it bright as day. Reading someone’s subtle body language was a piece of cake for nobility. What I was witnessing was an intense, high-stakes game of wits…and Gazel, something of a mentor to me, was like a deer in the headlights to Elmesia. Now I could see why he was wincing so much.

The emperor asked Shuna for a cup of wine. She was settled in her new seat now; there would be no shooing her away. Gazel and Erald exchanged glances and simultaneously sighed. Those two acted like they disliked each other, but they were in total sync here. In terms of Elmesia treating them both like children, they shared a lot in common.

With my lack of experience, I doubted I could ever out-negotiate Elmesia. Gazel’s advising me to give in made sense.

“Oh, this is good!”

“Thank you.”

Elmesia smiled broadly at the wine Shuna had poured for her. It was one of Shuna’s treasured varietals, a drink that seemed to change in taste with every sip. If the emperor didn’t like this, it’d be hard to find anything better for her. That was a relief.

“Right, then,” Gazel said, trying to shift the conversation. “Our time is valuable. We can’t afford to consume it with your caprices. All right?”

“Yes,” Elmesia said, finally yielding to Gazel’s demands. “In exchange for providing my support, I have one condition to ask. Whenever you organize a festival as grand as this, I want you to invite me. If you promise me an invitation for your events going forward, I would be happy to help with your monetary exchange. Because, goodness me, why would you ever stage such a wondrous event and not let me know about it?”

Erald turned his eyes skyward, hand against his temple. Gazel looked like he’d just swallowed a bug.

“I’d be glad to,” I casually replied.

Elmesia smiled at me, elated. The difference in enthusiasm between us was palpable. Maybe that was the wrong thing to do. But if she liked this kind of excitement and wanted to be part of the action going forward, I couldn’t ask for anything more.

“Royalty aren’t the slaves of the people, you know,” she said. “If they can live freely, that makes their citizens happy as well—as it does me. I think it could help bring joy to everyone!”

“There is truth to that. I agree with you. It’s reassuring to see people on my side…and I look forward to it staying that way.”

We shook hands with a smile. Now she was part of the team—a team consisting of me, Mjöllmile, and her. Call us the Three Pranksters, I suppose. Gazel and Erald shivered a bit as they looked on, fearing the worst, but they didn’t matter to us.

Elmesia promptly took out what I could only describe as her magic purse.

“This is just my pocket money in here, so I only have around a thousand gold coins at the moment. If you need more, I can arrange for that, but…?”

“No, that alone will be more than enough,” I replied, not skipping a beat. “Could we exchange those for ten stellar golds, then?”

What was this emperor thinking? Just carrying around 1,000 gold like it was spare change under her sofa? She was living on another planet from the rest of us, as close to an A-list celebrity as you got in this world. Gazel was right—I did not want to cross her.

“That’s quite fine. Don’t forget our promise, all right?”

“Of course not!”

I smiled and nodded at her—and right there and then, we made the exchange. Now, if I could get that 1,500 gold exchanged over at the Dwarven Kingdom tomorrow morning, we had the money we needed. I sighed, relieved. The problem was behind us.

“How nice, Sir Rimuru,” Diablo said as he refilled my cup of tea. I watched him tend to Gazel’s and Elmesia’s cups as I savored the hot brew.

Benimaru intrepidly smiled. “If someone thought that Sir Rimuru wouldn’t be able to play by the rules, we’re about to prove them very wrong.”

Yes. I was no longer going to be dunked on by someone. No need to kowtow to those tradesmen demanding their money. I had saved face pretty well, I thought; it was a heavy load off my shoulders. But then Elmesia started insinuating something else to me.

“You know, though, I think someone would have offered their help even if you couldn’t prepare the gold coins in time, hmm?”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

I was being honest. I really didn’t know.

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

She smiled warmly at me. That was no doubt the smile of a ruler, and it elicited a swift response from Diablo.

“I see. You think, for example, someone might’ve swooped in at the last minute to mediate for us, uninvited?”

“That might be the case, yes. But if such an interloper did show up, who’s to say that they weren’t being controlled behind the scenes by someone, hmm?”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… An interesting thing to consider. Causing the problem, then alleviating it while creating an obligation for us. That does seem like a viable scheme. But…”

“This interloper, perhaps, would’ve been willing to accept a signed contract allowing payment at a later date, even if you didn’t have the gold coins. It would show world leaders that Tempest could not be trusted, while they could be. You would be quite obligated to them, yes.”

“How greedy. Truly, a very human approach. I’ve learned a lot from this.”

Um, so…? Did this mean someone might be putting the merchants up to this just so they could make us owe a debt to them? And they might be doing someone else’s bidding here? They’d be more disposable that way? I see… If we trusted in this person, they’d reap the benefits; if not, they’d abandon the whole strategy. And maybe they were just doing this to make us look bad…but I felt like Elmesia might be right. I could see Diablo agreed, judging by the evil grin on his face.

“It makes little sense to me,” Benimaru said, “but can you think of anyone who’d want to do that? Is some member of the Council of the West trying to test us or what?”

Elmesia smiled, not taking offense at his tone. “Oh, I wouldn’t know! Thalion isn’t part of the Council. But maybe he would know something?”

She was staring right at a pensive Mjöllmile.

“Um, me?!”

Being fingered like this unnerved him, but he quickly regained his composure.

“I have heard rumors,” he furtively stated. “Rumors of a kind of shadow committee that enjoys de facto control over the Council. It’s composed of the ruling classes, the highest-level leaders from the Council’s nations…but I wouldn’t believe it for a moment. The Council is composed of elected representatives from each country, but royalty’s hereditary. They don’t need to worry about losing their seat.”

So Mjöllmile was familiar with a few rumors going around the merchants—rumors about a cabal of rulers who held the most power among the Western Nations. It smacked of a conspiracy theory, though, and Mjöllmile himself didn’t lend it much credence.

“Well, if someone should appear tomorrow and attempt to mediate with us on this matter…I will give them a thorough examination and fully expose their backgrounds for you.”

Soei was here, kneeling next to me. I never noticed him…but, hiding my surprise, I gave him a cool, composed nod.

“My goodness. What a shock. I hardly even detected his presence.”

“This is why I told you, Your Excellency, the denizens of this domain are like nowhere else. Paying a personal visit is just too dangerous…”

“Tee-hee-hee! But it’s offered such interesting experiences. May I ask you a question, Sir Rimuru?”

Hmm? What’s she want to know now?

“Yes?”

“I am considering enacting a new pact with you, but before I do, I wanted to hear your thoughts.”

Elmesia’s demeanor changed. She was no longer hiding her real face—the face of a ruler, one she’d shown me for a moment earlier. It was turned straight at me. I could feel an overpowering pressure—Heroic Aura, at a level incomparable with Gazel’s.

“Let’s hear it.”

I fought back with my own Heroic Aura. We exchanged stares—or more like fired them at each other like cannonballs. I tried to take the full brunt of hers, not averting my eyes for a moment.

“How do you plan to deal with that demon over there? That incredibly dangerous primal one…”

Primal? I didn’t know what Elmesia meant, but was she talking about Diablo? He’s pretty strong, yeah, but not that dangerous, no…

“Um… Nothing, really? I mean, Diablo’s doing a pretty good job for me, so what’s the problem?”

“…Let me rephrase the question. If that demon were to go out of control, how would you take responsibility for that?”

Out of control? I…um, could picture that, actually. She must’ve had perfect insight into what I was going through. No, there was no telling when Diablo might decide to go berserk. But did that apply to Diablo alone? It wasn’t a topic I wanted to think about much, but I had another problem child in Shion, too. And while I appreciated Elmesia’s concern, I wasn’t sure what she could do about it.

“Well, I’ll stop him before that happens. That’s all I can really do to prevent any fallout, isn’t it?”

If there was another way, I’d love to hear it. But the only option was to prevent it before it took place. Diablo looked content enough at my response, which I didn’t appreciate much—this is about you, you know.

And I wasn’t the only one perplexed here.

“Huh? Um… Wait a minute. Not to drop the act for a moment, but you’d stop that demon? You’d step up to do that?”

“Yes. I know it’s maybe a likely scenario, but lately he’s started listening to what I’ve told him more. I think he’s much more mature than previously.”

I felt confident about that. If they kept it up, Diablo and Shion wouldn’t cause any problems at all, I didn’t think. I didn’t like how Shion was listening to this like it wasn’t about her, but… Ahhh, it’d be all right.

Hearing my response, Elmesia started giggling like a young girl. “Oh my. Did you hear that, Erald? This demon lord’s an even bigger piece of work than how you described him!”

Archduke Erald found a way to scowl even more than he already was. I pitied him. Speaking of overly freewheeling rulers…

“It is fine, Lady Elmesia. If that is what Rimuru says, then I’ll support it. And should push come to shove, trust me, Gazel Dwargo will come to Rimuru’s aid.”

Gazel stepped up to support me. It seemed like the first time in a little while.

Elmesia gave us a contented look. “All right. I understand your position. If you should ever become an enemy to mankind, I will exercise all my force to stop you. So instead, let us continue to deepen our bonds and maintain our current friendly relations. Erald?”

“Y-yes!”

“I, as representative of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, hereby officially acknowledge the Jura-Tempest Federation as close friends with our nation. Please handle the paperwork for me.”

“Y-yes, Your Excellency!!”

That’s an emperor for you. All that dignity, all that authority, as she ordered Erald around like an errand boy. I could stand to learn from that.

Elmesia turned to me. “Right. Should anything come up, feel free to confer with me or Gazzie. And please don’t let yourself go out of control, am I clear?”

This wasn’t making sense. We were talking about Diablo or Shion, I thought, and now she was referring to me? Since when? And me, going out of control? Man, that was just rude.

“Hey, um, you know, I’m a pretty prudent person. Why’re you talking like I could go crazy someday?”

“Rimuru, who was the leader who decided to hold a Founder’s Festival on a passing whim?”

Gazel’s gaze burned into me. I’d have to say it was me, I suppose.

“Um, Mollie, right?”

“No it wasn’t, Sir Rimuru!”

Mjöllmile didn’t want to play along.

“All right, all right. Yes. I promise I’ll talk things over with you guys in advance next time, okay?”

“Very good. I hope you will.”

“This isn’t the kind of advice I’d normally give to the king of another nation…but this time, we are. Don’t think badly of us for it.”

Griping about this too much, Gazel said, would be meddling with our internal affairs—but since a lot of my ideas often ran counter to commonly accepted norms around here, they wanted me to keep them in the loop a little more. It wasn’t any judgment on how good, or bad, those ideas were—they just needed more warning.

And this wasn’t a bad thing for me, either. In fact, it’d be good fortune for all the countries involved, given that we’d need to prepare for the angels attempting to destroy civilization sooner or later.

So we had gone from solving my gold-coin problem to the leaders of two nations lecturing me at the same time, but I didn’t mind. The tough stuff was over.

I had a promise from Elmesia that we’d work to build good relations. What started as an informal chat turned into a great diplomatic coup for me. I figured things couldn’t get any better, so I was about to end the night when Elmesia brought up another topic. She was staring straight at me, her expression a tad desperate.

“Um, was there something else?” I nervously asked.

“No, no, nothing major. It’s just, um, I have a request… I want you to introduce me to Mr. Yoshida!”

“Y-Your Excellency, what nonsense is this?! How shameless! Sneaking that into these high-level talks!”

I was expecting some other weighty political issue—but this? Erald was freaking out, but no, this was nothing major. Yoshida was cooking for us all through this festival on the invite of Shuna, but I hadn’t heard anything about his future plans. I’d certainly like him to stick around, but that would be up to him. Connecting him to Elmesia, in itself, wasn’t a big deal.

“Oh, that would be simple. But don’t force him into anything, all right?”

“Of course I won’t!”

That seemed to please Elmesia well enough, so we would introduce them to each other after the festival.

And so our impromptu three-way summit among some of the biggest superpowers in the world came to a quiet close.