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Mitz Vah



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

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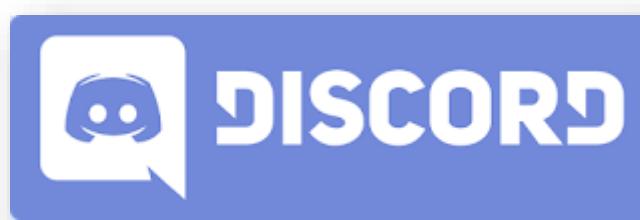
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Reincarnated  
as a SLIME

4

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Illustration by Mitz Vah



# That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME



(4)

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## Copyright

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 4  
FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford  
Cover art by Mitz Vah

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TENSEI SHITARA SLIME DATTA KEN volume 4

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*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

PROLOGUE

BEAUTY  
IN ACTION

# **PROLOGUE**

## **BEAUTY IN ACTION**

Hinata Sakaguchi was bored as she sat in her personal room, assigned to her within the Holy Empire of Lubelius's main palace. This world was just so boring.

\*

She was still fifteen when she fell into this world. It was her first day of high school, the date of the official entrance ceremony, and the only reason she attended was because she didn't want to be at home. On the way back, passing by the temple she passed by every other day of the week, a sudden gale slashed across her body, so powerful she couldn't keep her eyes open. When she did finally pry her eyelids apart, she saw a new and unfamiliar landscape before her.

Hinata liked it.

Now, she thought, she was finally free of her mother, who had gotten into religion and never gave a second thought to her family since. Her father had long ago disappeared, so sure it was only a matter of time before he'd hit it big at the horse races, only to find nothing but massive debt at the end. Unable to bear the violent episodes that inevitably followed, her mother escaped into her faith.

All this after Hinata tried so hard to kill her father so her mother could enjoy the life insurance payoff. Just a little while longer, and it would've all been in the family bank account. She made sure nobody would suspect a thing. All she needed was for her father to disappear.

Thinking about it, though, she came to the realization that pulling this off *right* would require her to commit other murders.

She'd have to kill the religious officials who associated with her mother, and sooner or later, she'd likely have to take her own mother's life. That was the result of Hinata's cool-headed analysis—and that, more than anything, was why she didn't want to be home.

Here, at least, she wouldn't have to kill anyone else. Or so she thought, before some men surrounded her.

“Hey, there’s another one here!”

“Whoa! Another young girl, eh? Sweet!”

“Hey, nobody’s gonna know if we have a li’l taste before sellin’ her, will they?”

*Oh... So it's the same thing here.* To her, the world was filled with nothing but despair. A world filled with the ugly, the repulsive. A world that should just be destroyed already.

—*I will take from them. I will let them take nothing from me.*

Confirmed. Unique skill Usurper... successfully obtained.

—*I am in the right. My calculations are flawless, for the world is eternally unchanging.*

Confirmed. Unique skill Measurer... successfully obtained.

Suddenly, her vantage point was clear. The fog lifted from her heart, sharpening her mind.

*If the men in front of me want to take from me, let me take from them first.*

—*Take their lives.*

Then the massacre began. Hinata didn't even need five whole minutes to kill three men with her own two hands. She was freshly awakened to her skills and not exceptionally gifted with muscular strength, but that was all it took.

Those were the first murders she committed in this world.

Hinata did have people close to her, but she could never believe in them. They were too weak to trust. She felt she might kill them with her own hands sometime. So she left their side.

The killings continued, and with them came knowledge and technical skill. She used those newfound talents as a foundation to become a strongman, one of the rulers of the world.

Days passed...

And then Hinata found him.

The one god she was truly qualified to serve.

Gods actually exist in this world.

She could no longer remember how many she'd killed. Good people, bad people—it didn't matter to Hinata, for everyone was equal before her god. She continued to fight, never questioning the orders of the one she served. Monsters, too. The orders were absolute, and her god refused to tolerate the monsters' existence. Thus, with her unchallenged force, she eliminated her god's enemies.

The little girl was no longer there. Now, she was the right hand of her god. She held the title of paladin—chief knight of the Imperial Guard, answering directly to the Holy Emperor—and she bore beauty worthy of the title.

A title that made her the nemesis of all monsters.

\*

Then she was visited by terrible news. Shizue Izawa, her teacher and mentor, was dead. The only person in this world who showed Hinata any kindness.

There were no sentimental memories, no hatred. No name for the emotions that flew in and out of her soul.

*—I can't forgive this. How could some monster do that...?*

Her boring days at the palace were over. An icy smile cracked across her beautiful, almost saintly face, and she sprang into action.

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
1

# TRADING WITH THE BEAST KINGDOM

# CHAPTER 1

## TRADING WITH THE BEAST KINGDOM

I could see a bunch of children playing around outside. Three boys and two girls. They ran up to me at first sight, overjoyed to see me.

“Teacher! What’re we gonna do today?” they all asked, their eyes shining—a determined-looking boy; a timid-looking boy; a reticent-looking boy; a lively looking girl; and a wise-looking girl.

They were all my students, and I doted upon them. Today, however, my emotions were a churning mix of happiness, sadness, and loneliness.

“Well,” I said to them, “that’s a good question. What *should* we do?”

This was my regular life until a bit ago. A life I myself threw away, one that would never return.

—*But these are her memories, aren’t they? Not mine.*

The lingering attachments of Shizu, back during her instructor days. I could tell, from my viewpoint, that she didn’t want these kids to be involved in her strife. But perhaps they felt abandoned. Perhaps they cried. But even if they didn’t, it was all so...

Hmm? All so what? What was I trying to...?

And then my eyes opened.

—*Please. Those children...*

Those children? The ones in the dream?

—*Please, rescue those children.*

Rescue...? What on earth from?

There was nobody to answer. She wanted to have me do something. That much was clear. But that was it. No more words, as her voice plunged into the darkness and disappeared.

The remains of the dream faded away in my mind—the plaintive request left deserted and unnoticed.

\*

This felt like the first dream I had in a while.

Ever since I became a slime, which by definition never slept, the only chance for dreams was during emergencies like exhausting my magical force. It didn't feel right to me at all, so I forced myself to engage in periods of inactivity on a daily basis—working hard to laze around, in a way.

If it sounds like a contradiction, it isn't. Giving oneself time to relax is never a bad thing, and there's no pain in working hard for some goal you have. And all that effort paid off. For short periods of time, at least, I could let go of my consciousness and achieve a state of sheer serenity. The experiment worked, in other words. I forgot what the dream was *about*, but that wasn't important. That's kind of what dreams are anyway.

"Ahh, now I can live my days in sheer laziness..."

"What sort of nonsense are you going on about, Sir Rimuru?"

She was angry. Shuna's smile never faltered when she was angry. That's what made it so terrifying.

Blithely following Shuna's lead, I crawled out of bed, grumbling to myself. I'd be busy during the day—battle training with Hakuro was on the schedule, as was an inspection trip to see how construction was proceeding. You'd think there was no harm in kicking back a little at night. I had just wrapped up analyzing and assessing the skills I took from Charybdis, so there were no major unaddressed issues left to tackle.

By the way, Charybdis gave me Magic Interference and Control Gravity, both extra skills. Magic Interference, paired with Control Particles, resulted in the new extra skill Control Magic—which,

when associated with Multilayer Barrier, gave a pretty hefty boost to my defenses. Magical attacks were nothing to worry about now—that, along with the Resist Magic skill I picked up from Gabil and the rest of the freshly evolved dragonewts, meant I could withstand well near any direct magical strike. Of course, I had Glutton on me, so I could already consume and neutralize any magic attack I could identify—but still, this new stuff could protect me from ambushes and surprise attacks, and that was huge.

As for Control Gravity—well, my research into it certainly paid off. I had always felt it a pity I couldn't capture Gel mud's flight magic, but Control Gravity very elegantly solved that problem. I didn't even need to chant a spell in advance—high-speed flight was now mine, in any shape or form I wanted it.

This time, I didn't rush things. I hadn't forgotten the failures I ran into on the way to stumbling upon Water Pressure Propulsion. Trying out whatever jumped into your imagination was a surefire ticket to some seriously unfunny situations. So I took it easy, spending every evening examining my skills. I started by lifting myself into the air and practicing some low-speed flight. I could control my trajectory with my wings to some extent, which helped me pick up the knack more easily than I thought.

Now, I didn't even need the wings. Multilayer Barrier even protected me against wind resistance; I bet I could break the sound barrier before long with this. But no rush. I'd just keep up the slow, steady practice.

As I thought all this over, Shuna gave me an exasperated sigh.

"Sir Rimuru, you're being inattentive again. You will be seeing off my brother Benimaru and Sir Rigur today. I want you to focus on being the most majestic figure you can for the big farewell."

"Oh yeah, that was today. Sure thing."

Ah, yes. Benimaru and crew were heading off today.

\*

Several months had passed after Milim's departure. Several calm, chill, and very peaceful months. I was busy as always, but still, *extremely* chill.

One day, though, a messenger appeared from Carillon, the Beast Master and one of the land's demon lords. I hadn't forged an official agreement with him on paper, but it appeared Carillon was a man true to his word. As the messenger put it: "Let us send envoys to our respective nations, so they may see for themselves whether forging trade relations would be beneficial to both sides."

I gave my immediate approval, and Carillon had already given his. Which brings us to today, the historical day of departure for our envoy mission to the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania.

Benimaru, a gifted warrior and my right-hand man, would lead the envoys. For his assistant, I appointed Rigur, son of Rigurd. Their mission: to travel to other nations and report what they observed, so I could figure out how to run my own country. They were accompanied by a small group of other hobgoblins, all candidates for future leadership roles in my government.

They would be representatives for the Jura-Tempest Federation, Tempest for short. Our nation. A brand-new one, and thus, inexperienced in almost every way. We needed to compensate for that, and toward that end, we were all working together, putting in the maximum effort on a daily basis. It's thanks to that work ethic that I think this envoy mission to Eurazania should bear some serious fruit for us.

We were also fully prepared to receive the Beast Master's own team. They'd come here, look around our nation, and (hopefully) come back with some complimentary things to say. If all goes well, we'll stay on good terms and (again, hopefully) begin formal trade—and from there, formal diplomatic relations. It shouldn't take long.

But that was still ahead. One step at a time. For now, I needed to focus on seeing everybody off.

Awakening my conscious, I assumed human form. There was a ceremony scheduled, so I changed to some suitable formal wear.

Looking back, I sort of miss the days when we had almost nothing to wear. Now, we've got almost every type of clothing you could think of. A much better selection than I ever had in my closet back in Japan.

And really, in terms of the conveniences we now enjoyed in life, it was just incomparable to the early days. We solved the sugar problem, for one, so we currently had a steady supply. It helped us add stews to our cooking repertoire, and there was even a selection of candy available, albeit not a big one. At this point, now that I had mastered the art of taking short naps, I figured the next question to tackle was entertainment.

But I still had a long road to travel. All these ideas kept storming into my mind, one after the other, and it made things tough. No matter how hard I worked, I never seemed to run out of new wishes and desires. There was no telling when I'd be able to sit back with a big bag of potato chips and veg out in front of my game console all day.

I wasn't willing to give up on any of these goals, though. And that's why I needed this envoy team to do their best and make international trade a reality.

So there I was, in our city's main square, standing in front of the crowd in my finest attire. It triggered a small, excited uproar among the monsters, in all their many species. I didn't make a habit of addressing them in human form. The cheers and shouting seemed like they'd go on forever, but a single "Silence!" from Shion shushed them all in an instant. *Nice one, Shion.* She was so good at handling these kinds of rowdy scenes.

With the monsters calmed down, I decided to give my team a few encouraging words.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you will do your best for me!"

"...Is that it?" the perplexed Shuna asked.

Hmm... Was that too short, maybe? My high-school principal droned on so long that nobody listened to him, so I figured shorter is better for speeches like this...but maybe this crowd was more excited about what I had to say.

"Yeah, maybe that wasn't enough? I'll give them a little more..."

With that, I decided to run down the list of things I wanted my envoys to watch out for. The Beast Master Carillon was a demon lord and certainly one of the more warlike ones. I couldn't be certain the rule of law even existed in his domain.

"Right, listen up. You're about to travel to a nation of magic-born who never believed in anything besides 'Might makes right.' Underestimate them at your own peril. If you let up, they'll make you do whatever they say. You might lose to them in a fight, but I want you to make damn sure you don't lose to them in heart! Remember: Your companions and I are behind you all the way. Keep that in mind as you tell them about what we're seeking. If you think a fight is brewing, run away and come back. One mission here is to see if we can remain on good terms with these guys going forward. I don't need a relationship where we have to hold our noses and merely *tolerate* them. I want you to see matters with your own eyes and make sure we can maintain a kind, friendly rapport. I'm counting on you!"

The moment I wrapped it up, the square was filled with wild cheering. It was like being in some pop idol's concert. *What I said probably didn't matter.* They were just *really* keen on listening to me. I'm sure the envoys themselves were paying attention, but the rest were just treating this like a big festival. Ah well. The fact they listened at all indicated a pretty well-disciplined set of monsters. That's a pretty big step for them.

Might as well take this opportunity, I suppose, to give them another important warning.

"Let's see, what else...? Well, I don't mind a mistake or two, but *please* don't start a fight yourselves, all right? I'm looking at *you*, Benimaru. Think you're up to that?"

My speech made the assumption that any hostilities would come from the Eurazanian side. If *my* team started anything, this whole expedition would be worthless. I had to hammer into them that I'd accept no mistakes along those lines.

"Heh! You are in good hands with us," Benimaru barked back, supremely (almost scarily) confident. "I have learned quite a few lessons myself. After the days we spent with Lady Milim, any fool could understand that impudence leads to disaster!"

The comparisons to Milim set off alarm bells, too. Using her as a standard for building your own confidence didn't give me any sense of security at all. At least it beat Shion, though. Watching her eagerly nod at Benimaru's words made me sigh. Really, I was hoping Shion could watch the town as I joined this envoy, but that was just far too risky. Although... Thinking about it, Benimaru was a pretty thoughtful man, despite appearances. I guess it was rude of me to compare him to Milim and Shion.

"Good to hear. I wish I could have joined you there myself..."

"Not at all, my lord. I think it best you do not travel to a demon lord's domain until we can confirm it is safe."

It was clear from that denial that Benimaru wished to gauge Carillon's trustworthiness with his own eyes. Not just Carillon, but every other magic-born who called his lands home. Would working with them benefit Tempest? Or would they cause untold harm for me? Really, I was glad to see his initiative, even though it only added to my worries.

Imagining Rigur and the rest alone in a magic-born nation was a bit frightening. I needed to have some strong fighters in the group, at least to serve as bodyguards. Soei was already protecting our nation from the shadows, and Hakuro was busy with military training. Geld couldn't be wrested away from his construction work, and Gabil was working hard to extract High Potions and produce Low Potions from them. Shion, of course, was out of the question, and thinking along those lines, Benimaru was the sole remaining candidate.

"All right. Do your best."

"Yes, my lord!"

"And you, too, Rigur, and all the rest! I'd like to see good things come to our nation."

"Absolutely," a starry-eyed Rigur replied. "We will spread the word far and wide!" Those eyes told me he couldn't wait to head off; he was really leaping at the chance to try something new. *He'll be fine*, I figured.

"Ranga, I want you to stay in Benimaru's shadow and accompany him. Keep them safe, but do not let your presence be known."

“I will not let you down, my master!”

Immediately following my orders, Ranga slipped right into Benimaru’s shadow. Benimaru’s own aura was hiding him, and hopefully that’d be enough to keep him invisible on the road.

“Great! Now, let’s give them all a big hand as they set off on their journey!”

On my cue, Shuna gave a signal with her eyes. It was picked up by our band of specially selected musicians, ready to strike up a great, lively tune. The envoy made their way through the watchful crowd, traveling toward a future full of hope—the hope that this stream of cultural exchange would help plant the seeds for future diplomatic ties. Our first government envoy set off with a flourish.

\*

Benimaru’s team was gone, but I still had a pile of things to do. I had plans to visit human lands sooner or later, but with one job coming right after the other, there was no time for that. With anything you do, that first step you take is so incredibly essential. Cut corners at the start, and you’ll often pay dearly for it later. That applies not just to work but to life itself and *certainly* to kick-starting a new nation. Just because I wanted to hang with humans didn’t mean I could throw everything else off for now.

My top security and military leaders were gone for the time being, and I had to fill in those gaps. Soei could handle security, and I appointed Hakuro as the head of our military for now. *That’ll leave things in good hands.*

Next was making arrangements to receive the contingent from Eurazania.

One thing I did *not* want them seeing was our hipokute grow-setup and potion-manufacturing plant. Everything else was safe enough for public viewing, so I decided to prioritize keeping the Sealed Cave just that—sealed off. There was only the one entrance, and a heavy boulder or the like would close it just fine. Gabil and the rest still had the magical transport circles to travel to and fro with, so physically hiding the entrance seemed the best option.

I worried that sealing it off might affect the cave's oxygen content, but there were so many ventilation holes lining the cave walls that it didn't seem like an issue. Plus, Vester had a pretty handy piece of magic to contribute.

"There is magic to detect changes in the air...or in the environment in general, one could say. There is also magic that alerts the caster to any threats to their lives, so I see little to worry about."

*There's one concern knocked down.* Vester was so incredibly talented. If he didn't have such a demented personality, he'd still be using those talents as King Gazel's most trusted adviser, no doubt...but, hey, if it means he's working for *me* now, then I'll take it—definitely.

So it was settled—no more Sealed Cave entrance for now. And that reminded me of something else about Vester. Besides our potion factory, I was willing to let the envoys see whatever they wanted, so I went over our assorted preparations with a fine-tooth comb. We had just constructed a guesthouse to receive special visitors with—a fancy, luxurious hotel of sorts, not the simpler lodgings Kabal's and Yohm's crews were assigned.

And we weren't just building fancy new boxes—we were building people, too. Shuna's apprentices were growing into talented chefs. At this point, they had gained a natural instinct for just the right amount of seasoning to add. They were fully versed in managing cooking fires and chopping up ingredients. I wouldn't be embarrassed to have 'em handle any event at all.

The goblinas, for their part, had learned the fine art of hospitality through their practice with Kabal's and Yohm's teams. Handling nobility would still be a tall order for them, but they were more than educated enough to take care of regular people or adventurers.

For the finishing touch, I selected the best-performing ones out of the lot and had them personally treat me as a guest. Given the boorish crowds we usually got around town, I wasn't too sure whether we could really provide "luxe" service if we tried. Vester, once more, helped a lot—as nobility himself, I figured he could school me on things I never would've thought about. His

knowledge rubbed off on my selected team, who put in some of the most beautiful work you ever saw.

"You are doing quite well, indeed! Stay diligent, and you all will certainly grow talented enough to receive royalty from any nation without causing offense. I look forward to seeing how you advance!"

"""Thank you for your instruction, my lord!"""  
the goblina hospitality crew said as they bowed to him. *If they kept someone as high-strung as Vester happy, I thought, they must've been good.*

"Sure am glad I asked you for help, Vester!"

"No, no," he replied with a cheerful laugh. "This has been quite the added benefit for me! I would be happy to help anytime."

I presented him with a free lodging pass in exchange. He could stay whenever he liked—both enjoying the guesthouse and observing the staff to make sure they weren't slacking off. Two birds with one stone.

With that, I figured we were all set to keep our visitors happy.

There was one more big event left. In fact, if anything, *this* was my favorite one of all—my official visit to the Armed Nation of Dwargon, the Dwarven Kingdom.

My schedule was already set in stone, thanks to a couple messenger exchanges. It would be one of the most auspicious events our nation's enjoyed so far, a chance to prove to both Dwargon and the world at large that we, Tempest, were an officially recognized, independent country. Having agreements signed on paper was one thing, but being physically welcomed by foreign lands like this was something I wanted to leverage for our future plans.

Were people willing to accept a new nation founded by monsters? That was our biggest ongoing issue. But building up Yohm to be a hero—and having Fuze spread all the right kinds of rumors about it—was starting to establish us in the public eye as friendly monsters, willing to lend a claw to the good guys.

And now, we had an invite from a full-fledged superpower. This was the perfect opportunity to earn ourselves a ton more trust, and I couldn't let it pass. No way I could let up until this visit was

successful. Visiting human realms could wait until I was sure our government was on the right track.

“We’ve got to make this succeed!”

Shuna and Shion nodded.

“Of course.”

“You are in good hands, my lord. As your secretary, I will make every effort I possibly can!”

Time to get to work. Summoning up all my energy, I strove to cut down every issue I could think of, waiting for the fateful day to arrive.

\*

We received a sign that our envoys were back. A sign, that is, in the form of Treyni. Kneeling before me, she reported our team was near the Forest of Jura the moment she spotted them.

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“Not at all.” She smiled. “It is no hardship for me.”

She was beautiful as always, what with that translucent, mystical air she had. It let her capture the heart of anyone she saw. If I weren’t a slime, I’d easily fall for her, too.

...Oops. Staring at her too long would only make Shuna and Shion all snippy. I’m a slime, totally eyeless, and they *still* seemed to know where I was looking. Was it some supernatural power or just their womanly intuition? Anyway, better not set off any needless conflict.

“Let me know if anything else comes up.”

“Certainly. I had best be off, then.”

With another smile, Treyni disappeared. Here one moment, gone the next—truly one of the most mysterious women I know. Regardless, I relayed the news to everyone else that we should expect the envoy team back in a few days.

Just then, Yohm and his companions paid a visit to town. As I hoped, our little intrigue had established Yohm as a top-of-the-heap champion around the kingdom of Farmus. That put him in demand over there, so he was back for a chance to let his hair down

for a change. He had the lofty-sounding excuse of getting a little training from Hakuro, but what he *really* wanted was some decent grub and a soak in the hot spring. I knew because I could tell—and since he was staying for several days this time, I didn't forget to keep an eye out for any trouble he might cause.

"Listen, we're gonna have a party of envoys representing the demon lord Carillon soon. Can you guys promise me you won't pick any fights with them?"

"Aw, c'mon, pal, who d'you think you're talking to? You think I'm the sort of fool who'll get in a brawl with a demon lord's underlings?"

Yohm slumped. He was right. But there was never accounting for some of the idiots running around out there. It could boggle the imagination.

"But why are demon lord folk coming here in the first place?" he asked before I could answer his first question.

One of Carillon's top officers had been instilled into the core of Charybdis, a monster who was demon lord-class in itself. After an extended battle, I separated the guy from the core and saved his life, which led to this new thaw in Eurazanian relations...but Yohm and his crew weren't around to see that, so they still had no idea. I hadn't gone out of my way to tell them. I wasn't sure it'd be the best thing.

"Ah, yes, I'd better explain. Come to my reception room once you're out of the bath."

"Sure thing!"

I suggested a time, and Shion marked it down with a skillful hand. She hadn't exactly been my first choice for the position, but she was shaping up to be a half-decent secretary, after all.

So how should I put it to Yohm? It seemed like a good idea to give him, and him alone, the whole story. In my mind, I reasoned that I ought to give him a few choice details—the basic tale of my origins and how I'm interacting with the demon lords. Exactly how much I should divulge, I wasn't sure, but it didn't seem wise to trumpet it around to the general population. Most people would never believe I was an ex-human in the first place.

In fact, maybe now would be a good chance to tell him *everything*. It was going to be an intense conversation, I thought, not the sort of thing you wanted to do in the middle of the street. I wanted a relaxing atmosphere for it. So that's why I told Yohm to come—alone—to my room afterward.

Now he was here—out of his traveling clothes and fresh from the bath. It was just after dinner, and he was right on time.

“So what’s the story, pal?”

“Hey, hold your horses,” I said as I offered Yohm a chair—a plush leather sofa with a back and armrests. I slouched over near a chair that faced it.

“First off, I want to tell you something, but promise me you won’t be surprised?”

“Surprised? Why would I be...?”

Ignoring him, I transformed into my human shape. It takes a lot less time than any explanation would.

“Wha—?!”

Yeesh. I warned him and everything. It didn’t help much.

“I told you not to be surprised,” I said as I sat on the chair. As if waiting for her cue, Shuna entered the room—just as planned. She politely bowed and provided Yohm and me with some drinks—a colorless liquid in a pair of glasses, both exquisitely blown from real glass by Dold, the middle of the dwarven brothers.

With another bow, she took position behind me. That was my signal to raise my glass. With a sniff to ensure it was up to my standards, I addressed Yohm.

“So how about a drink?”

Shocked at my metamorphosis and swooning at Shuna’s touching manners, Yohm was frozen in his seat. The offer of something alcoholic helped him snap out of it.

“Uh...yeah. Sure,” he said before downing the entire glass in one go. It immediately triggered a coughing fit.

“...Haghh! Kaff-kaff-kaff... Uggghh, what *is* that?!”

Shuna hurried over with some water. Yohm drained that glass just as quickly. After a bit more sputtering, he finally regained his composure enough to ask what the hell I just gave him.

"Not used to drinking spirits too often? We held a feast here a bit ago with some folks from the Dwarven Kingdom, but they were kind of disappointed at the lack of booze around this city. We had some beer and wine brought over, and they could pretty much drink that stuff like water—they never get drunk off it, they said. So I figured I'd surprise 'em with a little concoction I'm familiar with. That's our first test batch."

And he was my first impartial test subject. Yohm had bragged to me about how strong a drinker he was, so I made him my guinea pig. He had just consumed brandy, a spirit produced by distilling wine, and while I knew it was cheating, I used Analyze and Assess to reproduce the best-tasting brandy I could recall in my mind.

The Glutton unique skill was coming in handy in all kinds of ways. There exists a fine line between fermentation, which is usually a good thing, and spoilage, which isn't. With Glutton's food-corrosion properties under the expert control of the Great Sage, I could "corrode" food and drink without producing any harmful materials—in other words, ferment it. This would make producing things like yeast and *koji* starter a breeze. I had already left yeast production to Shuna, so we had all the bread we wanted, not to mention a few alcoholic beverages. Making *koji* from scratch was a bigger challenge, and one we were experimenting with, but it would hopefully not be long before I could enjoy some "real" Japanese sake again. I could make soy sauce, too, if I could get my hands on some soybeans.

Such a great skill. I can't stop dreaming up new uses for it. I wasn't sure if using these jaw-dropping powers to satisfy my personal cravings was such a great idea, but who cares? A tool's at its best only when you use it to the hilt.

Once I'd advanced to the point of manufacturing fermented beverages, the rest came easy. We had brandy on hand as well as whiskey from applying distillation to the beer process. They were both high in alcohol, enough to burn the throat of someone not used to it, but an aficionado would definitely love how they tasted.

I explained all this to Yohm, showing him how to best enjoy it. My body no longer allowed me to get drunk, sadly, but the

sensation was still nostalgic enough that I imagined I felt a tad tipsy regardless.

“Huh. I see. Yeah, you know, this *is* pretty good, pal!”

“Yeah, isn’t it?”

“Though, personally, I think I prefer putting ice right into the glass instead of just watering down this stuff.”

“You’re a man of good taste, Yohm.”

Now that the tension had dissipated, I moved on to the main topic.

“So...”

I gave a broad, sketchy account of my adventures so far. This included my reincarnation and a lot of other details, but it was a toss-up whether he understood much of it. Which was fine. That’s why I offered the drink first. It just wasn’t the kind of tale you could convincingly tell stone-cold sober. If I was gonna go on about how I was chummy with demon lords and such, I had to do it with a smile and a wink.

But Yohm surprised me. “Oh, I believe you,” he said without prompting. “I mean, monsters building an entire city? That’s unthinkable enough right there.”

I’m glad he adapted so easily. He was taking to the brandy like a champ, too, delicately sipping it without hacking his lungs out.

“You believe all that?”

“Ey, I just said I did, didn’t I? Man, demon lords, though... I bet Carillon has some mean fighters working under ‘im.”

“Hmm. Hard to say, actually. They aren’t here to fight us. They’re just coming to see if we’re worth building diplomatic ties with.”

“Yeah, but didn’t you send Benimaru over there? You wanted ’em to be prepared for anything in that domain, didn’t ya? I’ll betcha *they’re* thinkin’ the same thing. I’d expect some fairly strong magic-born if I were you.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t think it really matters. If we provoke ’em with a fight, it’s over anyway. Getting all hostile with Carillon won’t earn anything for us. So what I’m trying to tell you is this: Like I said this afternoon, don’t start any arguments with the envoys. And make sure your posse *fully* understands that, too. I want things to go a little more peacefully this time!”

"You got it, pal. And like I told you, we ain't stupid enough to pick a fight with folks *that* dangerous!"

Yeah, I'll bet.

He had convinced me enough that I dropped the topic. The brandy was a big success; I was sure it'd make an excellent gift on my trip to the Dwarven Kingdom. Yohm and I wound up chitchatting about far less important affairs well into the night.

\*

Several days later, right on time, the envoys from the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania arrived. I greeted them in my slime form with Shuna and Shion behind me, along with Rigurd and the other hob-gob bureaucrats. Then there was Soei, keeping tabs on things undercover. If something happened, I was sure he'd hop right out. Yohm's group was there was well, and by their standards, they were acting downright somber.

The envoys made their way through our ranks in a luxuriant line of gilded wagons. They were pulled by a streak of Thunder Tigers, large magical beasts crackling with lightning that ran across their frame—a potent symbol of military force, one easily visible from long distances. In terms of armor, these tiger wagons of sorts—if you took all the fancy gold and such off them—would probably work as tanks.

"Yep, this is sure a demon lord envoy," I marveled.

"Ah, it is nothing impressive," Shion replied, shooting me down. "Compared to the glorious light you bring us every day, Sir Rimuru, taming these beasts is nothing but a bluff."

Um, Shion? It's gotta be more impressive than *that*, isn't it?

"They're clearly trying to demonstrate their power to us. You think all this dazzle is 'nothing impressive'? You sure you aren't being too pretentious for your own good? 'Cause that ain't cool."

"You think? All those needless cosmetics would be meaningless in battle."

"But we're not in battle here..."

There's Shion for you. Her mind never leaves the war zone. Dismissing what was likely Carillon's handpicked battle lineup just

because they weren't prepared for melee combat right this minute struck me as ridiculous.

"Of course, the artistry of all this decor could use some work. Nothing that Dold couldn't run laps around—plus, he's got Kaijin and Garm helping him out. We're really blessed with good talent that way."

"Thanks for sayin' so, Boss!"

"Makes us proud to hear."

Kaijin and the three dwarf brothers appreciated the compliment, rewarding me with smiles. But I meant it. They had fulfilled all my crazy orders this entire time, and it had really been a huge help. I figured they could use some more recognition.

The procession of tiger wagons continued solemnly forward as we spoke. The lead one was the most ostentatiously decorated of all, and when it came to a halt, two women emerged from the door.

The first one had long, shiny white hair that was slick and straight. She was a beauty with a supple body and catlike eyes, but the aura around her was ferocious, suggesting she was a battle-hardened leader. The second woman was just as head turning—this one bewitching with her black-and-gold hair and jewellike snake eyes. She seemed graceful at first, but she practically froze the air with her coldhearted gaze, repelling most who dared to approach her.

They were both magic-born, and not the garden-variety sort. The sheer quantity of magicules they held rivaled that of Phobio at his last visit. If I had to guess...



"A pleasure to meet you, lord of the Great Forest of Jura. I am Alvis, the Golden Snakehorn and one of the Three Lycanthropeers serving the demon lord Carillon."

I knew it. A real big shot. I wasn't expecting a top-level officer, but there you go. Which meant the other was—

"Hmph! I see no need to offer any formal greeting to this crowd, Alvis. After all these days of journeying, wondering what sort of monster might rule over Jura, I come here to find a puny slime to greet us? This is an outrage!"

"Enough, Sufia. Such behavior brings nothing but disgrace to the face of Lord Carillon—"

"Enough from *you*, Alvis! How dare you order me around! And look! They associate not only with dwarves but with humans—those stunted, conniving, cowardly humans. They are a disgrace to all the monster races!"

Whoever this magic-born Sufia was, she had a bone to pick with human beings. I intended to be patient as long as she kept the name-calling focused on me, but if that extended to humans—Yohm and his cohorts, in this case—I couldn't let it slide. *Besides, I'm an ex-human myself.*

Yohm, for his part, stayed silent for me, afraid of triggering a breakdown in relations before they even began. Good to see him living up to his word. Plus, looking back, his skills had grown immensely over the past few months. He had no obligation to put up with such a barrage of one-sided insults.

He was being patient with them. *I* no longer could.

"Whoa there, don't you think you're pickin' on those humans a little too much? Knock it off, man. Right, Yohm? I know you hate being treated like a fool. Why don't you show off some of your skills? You've got my permission."

I mean, what do you want? Yohm was, more or less, our friend—a devoted trainee of Hakuro's. Sure, he was on a different training regimen, and no way could he dream of taking on me or Benimaru. But he was so brazen, such a tenacious fighter, that he put up with Hakuro's gauntlet without a single complaint. He kind of reminded me of Tamura, this guy who worked under me at the office back in Japan. He was cocky, but I liked him—just like I liked Yohm, with

his calling me “pal” and so on. And I guess he wasn’t “under me,” exactly...more like an equal, a fellow student working under the tutelage of Hakuro. Seeing his good name so thoroughly trashed like this angered me more than it would if it had happened to me. I kind of understood how King Gazel felt.

“Huh? Me!?” the shocked Yohm fired back at my tirade. *What’s he so surprised about? It’s got everything to do with him, doesn’t it? I want him to put on a little show for me.*

“Yeah. I’ll heal you as long as you don’t die, so show ‘em how strong you are!”

“Whoa, whoa, pal... I thought we were keeping things nice ‘n’ peaceful? Like, no starting fights?”

“Shut up, fool! Quit playing dumb! I wasn’t planning to start anything, but if *they* are, we gotta answer up to that!”

Exactly. If someone gives you a shove, you gotta shove ‘em right back.

Something else began to grab my attention.

“Yeah, go for it, Boss!”

“You’d look like an old fool if you don’t get ‘er back, sir!”

The assorted hoodlums and petty criminals in Yohm’s crew were raring for a brawl.

“Heh. Guess I’ve got no choice. Promise you’ll look after my team, pal?”

With a grin, he unsheathed his beloved Dragonslayer sword. My words had triggered something in him, igniting his lust for battle.

“No problem. I’ve got tons of healing potion, so don’t let up!”

“Sure thing!”

Yohm took a step forward. Sufia answered this with a jubilant laugh.

“Haaaaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well played, human. Think you can satisfy *me*?”

As I watched her gloriously overacted performance, Shion handed me over to Shuna. Uh-oh. Does she have ideas of her own? Just as the thought occurred to me, Shion did exactly what I expected.

“Not so fast. I have stood here patiently and let you have your say, but the sheer brazenness of your insults toward Sir Rimuru... I

have held my tongue for this long only because Sir Rimuru instructed me to, but it would appear I no longer have a need to. I shall be your opponent!"

Shion's eyes grew bloodshot as she sprang into action.

I was willing to let Yohm join in on this, but Shion's self-insertion was no longer a joke. Ah well. Not like I could stop her if I tried. I would just have to leave things to her now—and with such an eager opponent, now was no time to try to stop the bout.

"How *niiiiice!*!" Sufia howled, her ferocious feline nature coming to the fore. "I—Sufia, the Snowy Tigerclaw—am ready and willing to test out these would-be minions of the high-and-mighty slime lord!"

Then she and Shion clashed, driven purely by their war instincts. In an instant, the place turned into a battlefield.

Yohm, meanwhile...

"...Oh dear. There is just no dealing with you, Sufia. In that case—Gruecith! Provide an opponent for the human."

To the side of Shion and Sufia's duel, the Golden Snakehorn, Alvis, gently slipped an order to one of her magic-born.

"Me? Take on a human?" sneered the gallant-looking young creature who stepped forward. "I know I am a low-ranked member of the Beast Master's Warrior Alliance, but... Well, so be it. Let me be your playmate, human!"

His hair was gray, matching his eyes, and his skin was a dark shade of brown. He was as muscular as he was flexible, and the large knives he held danced in his hands while he glared sharply at Yohm. This human was less than nothing to him, but his eyes were still focused, like a hunter steeling himself against their prey. Despite the insulting words, he was clearly not going easy.

I should've expected nothing less of Carillon's servants. Say what you will about them, but they were first-class warriors. It was the lycanthrope races, I believe, that Carillon ruled over. Milim had taught me a thing or two about them—hesitantly, at first, but the moment I dangled a few more of my sugary sweets over her head, she said "I shouldn't tell you, but I will" and then talked my ear off for the rest of the day about them.

Lycanthropes were, as the name suggested, the family of demi-humans who could transform themselves into beasts. These chiefly encompassed dogs, cats, monkeys, bears, snakes, and birds; larger species like elephants also existed but were rare. Lower-level monsters, like orcs and kobolds, were said to be devolved versions of these lycanthropes, no longer able to transform—which, in turn, suggested that these lycans were pretty upper-tier as far as monsters went. If anything, having both human- and monster-type powers from birth made it fair to call them low-level magic-born. Once a lycanthrope transformed, they would gain new abilities based on their unique characteristics. They were born soldiers, ready with battle skills from a young age, and even in this dog-eat-dog world, they were widely acknowledged as superior to the rabble in many ways.

If I was to believe all this, then lycanthropes exhibited their true strengths only when “transformed” into the beast they were derived from. This suggested that, even if I didn’t think these guys were just playing around, they weren’t *truly* fighting just yet. Sufia was still in human form, just like Gruecith. Could Shion defeat her? Regardless, the two battles between Shion and Sufia, and Yohm and Gruecith, were already under way. I watched from my safe spot nestled against Shuna’s chest.

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In a word, the Shion-Sufia bout was intense.

They were both the type who derived joy from battle—true berserkers. Their surroundings no longer mattered as they immersed themselves in the fight. For now, they were equals in speed and strength, a very well-matched pair. From what I could tell, however, Sufia had a far vaster cache of magicules to draw from. As it was now, Shion had a disadvantage—or should have.

But she was grappling with Sufia with her massive sword still in its sheath. Was it because she didn’t want to kill? Or just an expression that this wasn’t *everything* she had? Not a very smart way to approach a higher-ranked magic-born, I thought. I hadn’t

expected Shion to join the fray, but if she was going to, I really wanted her to give her all.

“Will Shion be all right? She’s fighting on her opponent’s terms, not drawing her sword...”

“She will be quite fine, Sir Rimuru. It may not seem so at the moment, but the only person stronger than her is my older brother.”

In Shuna’s eyes, at least, Shion was number two among the ogre mages. I was impressed she was able to grasp how they were fighting. Her own Analysis unique skill was nothing to sniff at, either. She must’ve seen how powerful Sufia was, but she seemed wholly unperturbed by that. A sign of trust, maybe?

“True,” added Soei, lurking within my shadow. “In full-frontal combat like this, Shion probably outclasses me, as much as I hate to admit it.”

I guess she was more than a barely qualified secretary, after all.

We continued to watch as we spoke. Shion and Sufia were entirely occupied by their combat, testing their skills and might against each other, attempting to gradually break out their full potential. It continued apace, remaining evenly matched to a surprising level.

Yohm’s battle, meanwhile, was a showcase of advanced techniques being thrown against one another. He really *had* grown stronger. Several months have made him almost a different person, as he went on monster-slaying journeys between here and the towns and villages of Farmus, his home kingdom. It had built his name as a champion, and it had also earned him a bounty of experience. No doubt, he had been leveling up a ton. I’d have no problem giving him a solid A rank.

The casual spectator could be forgiven for thinking he was just slashing his heavy Dragonslayer downward from the air, letting his brute strength win the day. But he wasn’t. That attack was merely the first of a series of well-calculated moves. He waited for his foe to dodge it, putting him off guard just enough to raise his blade upward and connect it to a multilevel attack. He wielded that Dragonslayer like it was made of cardboard, his superhuman skills

and strength keeping him in constant pursuit of his magic-born opponent.

But Gruecith wasn't here to lose. He continually dodged the barrage of killer strikes from Yohm's sword by a mere hairbreadth. The cleavers in his hands allowed him to unleash a flurry of quick combos, like a beautiful dance that effortlessly but inevitably cornered his enemy. You could tell he was supremely confident in his speed.

Being faced with such a talented magic-born didn't faze Yohm. He smiled, obviously enjoying himself. Being able to fight a magic-born who let him exercise all his powers allowed him to feel exactly how far he progressed.

Attack followed parry, and parry followed attack, all mere instants from one another. Gruecith threw a knife at Yohm; Yohm easily avoided it, slamming his Dragonslayer down in a classic finisher move. But Gruecith lunged forward, tumbling to the ground to deflect the blow and slipping right between his legs.

As Yohm twirled around to pursue him, Gruecith's cleaver returned to him, spinning back to his hand like a boomerang. He crossed both blades in front of his chest, taking the full brunt of his adversary's gigantic blade. It was an even match, the kind of epic battle that makes one sigh in admiration.

"Yohm's not too shabby," I remarked. "He's fighting on an even keel with that magic-born..."

"Indeed," Shuna agreed, "it is a remarkable effort."

It was starting to look like Yohm had advanced even further than I thought. It was like that with Gobta, too—Hakuro's instruction put speed above everything else. If your reaction time lagged even a little, you could expect some seriously painful retribution from him. Don't like it? Then pick yourself back up and work on your intuition skills. That, if anything, was the key to Yohm's astonishing reaction speed.



That and something else. There was a secret to the Exo-Armor I gave him. It was noted for its light weight and remarkable protective ability, but that wasn't all—it also assisted the wearer's movements, boosting their reflexes. Weapons and armor infused with magicules modified themselves based on how compatible they were with their owner—the more you use them, the better they'll become in your hands. His Exo-Armor was no exception, and it was now fully used to Yohm's battle style. It proved that, in several months of battle experience, he had made the Exo-Armor something truly his own.

These two factors were what gave Yohm the strength to not only take on the magic-born Gruecith but fight as his equal.

The two bouts grew more and more intense. The attacks Shion and Sufia exchanged were white-hot with intensity, as if they were each measuring how far the other would go.

"Ha-ha-ha! I was not expecting to have this much fun."

"Hmph! Ridicule me at your peril, lycanthrope! Let me show you the sky-rending, earth-crushing power of an ogre mage!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Go right ahead! Make this even more exciting!"

The decisive moment was drawing near. Still laughing, Sufia slashed at Shion with her long, extended claws. They glowed a pale white, unleashing electricity—the kind of ability you'd expect from someone who can tame Thunder Tigers, I suppose.

Shion was ready for this. Her sword still sheathed, she stopped the lightning-infused claws with her bare hands. The moment she did, bolts of electricity coursed across her body like a lightning rod. Her thick skin fully absorbed them, preventing any cuts or burns, and the current surged into the earth without seriously damaging her.

Seeing this, Sufia hardened her gaze in reluctant admiration. Her foe had just used Diamond Path, one of the ogre mages' Battlewill skills. It let her control her mind and solidify her body, almost to the consistency of metal. Her fighting force protected her skin, dissipating any enemy attack. Not exactly entry-level stuff, it

goes without saying, and Shion executed it perfectly in battle, like an instructor schooling her opponent.

“Prepare yourself! It’s my turn now—”

“Bring it on! My blood is on fire!”

After Sufia came Shion—whether Sufia agreed to that or not. Shion readied herself, still weaponless. Hakuro had been teaching us barehanded martial arts—but nothing like this. It looked like she was about to launch a massive bolt of magic from her hands, focusing all her authoritative might on the effort. She devoted her entire half-crazed will to drumming up her aura, spreading it around her. If this was a Hakuro skill, it’d be a natural part of his in-combat repertoire, not this showy full-on blast that ran on every fiber of his being.

Leave yourself *that* open in combat, and it’d just be giving your opponent a chance to strike. But Sufia merely stood there, arms open, as if it were a perfectly normal thing to do. I could never figure out what these battle-crazed maniacs would do next.

Now Shion was ready. To us in the audience, only a short time had passed; to the competitors, it would have been a fatal delay. One that Sufia had just spent standing there, smiling like she couldn’t get enough. Shion smiled back.

“Sorry for the wait. Now, take some of *this!*”

The aura that had wended its way around her hands formed a ball of fearsome, destructive energy, one that she was just about to launch—

“Enough!”

—when a voice informed us all that the battle was over. A golden staff was suddenly thrust before Shion. Alvis had stepped in.

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Her tail was pointed straight toward Sufia as well; she apparently had an energy bolt of her own to unleash. Alvis was, indeed, half human and half snake, her upper body an attractive woman, the lower half transformed into a large, ebony-colored reptile.

This “transformation” into her beastly form had taken place without anyone noticing. Neither, it seemed, did her slipping between them attract anyone’s attention until the moment she spoke. Not even I could fully block the aura I’d sensed before, and yet none of it exuded from her body. It was impressive. The Three Lycanthropeers absolutely deserved the reputation they enjoyed.

Hearing Alvis’s shout, Gruecith immediately ceased all hostilities. Yohm joined him, giving me a confused glance. I raised a hand and nodded at him.

“Is that enough for you? Should I take it to mean we’ve passed?”

“Yes. You have certainly demonstrated your skills to us. Haven’t they, Sufia? Are you willing to recognize them for who they are now?”

“I am,” she replied with a clear, cloudless smile on her face. “No complaints here. They seem more than worthy of being treated as equals, that much I firmly believe now.” She turned to the other lycanthropes in their entourage. “I trust they have convinced you as well? I will not allow any of you to complain about them and their humanness any longer!”

Gruecith nodded. “Right you are, Lady Sufia. Rare are the humans who can fight with me on such an advanced level. Pay these people the respect they deserve!”

He let out a loud, hearty laugh, then extended a hand to Yohm. His opponent accepted it with a wry grin—and at that moment, everything was resolved.

Alvis’s actions just now confirmed it to me—I had been right about their motivations. They were testing us, deliberately greeting us with hostility to gauge our reaction. I began to suspect as much when Sufia started giving me guff for being a slime. Carillon, her direct boss, already knew who, or what, I was. He had talked with most of my monster officials, and he had already sworn to me (by his own name, even) that he’d work on friendly terms with us. It seemed unlikely that he’d instruct his representatives to start picking on my sliminess all of a sudden.

Sufia, I could tell, was just using me as a way to provoke us all into action. She must’ve thought at least one of us would go berserk when she started berating their master.

I also had another reason to suspect their behavior. They were, in a way, revealing a lot about themselves, amid all that huffing and puffing.

Take their nicknames. Alvis referred to herself as the Golden Snakehorn, and now I could tell that was a pretty literal way of putting it. Snake on the bottom, two sparkling gold horns coming out of her head, branching out like those of a dragon and suggesting all manner of untold secrets. Sufia, for her part, was the Snowy Tigerclaw, which suggested something feline about her transformation. She used claws charged with electricity during the fight, so it made sense. Phobio, the Black Leopard Fang, presumably excelled at using his long, sharp fangs in combat. Or maybe he had some dark weapon modeled after a black fang. Who knows.

Regardless, it all meant that lycanthropes were remarkably honest with their opponents, using their nicknames to reveal the sorts of abilities they'd really be better off hiding from foes. I guess you could say they were proud of keeping things fair and square in the ring—and there was no way they'd defy the orders of their master, the demon lord. Lucky for me that both my hunches turned out to be correct.

That left one more group to handle.

“Are you all right with that, Shion?”

There was still a gigantic ball of pure magic hovering above Shion's outstretched hands. She looked at me, troubled.

“It is not a problem for me, Sir Rimuru...but what should I do with this?”

*This* meaning the ball, I assumed.

“You can't banish it?”

“...I can't. Or I should say, my magical force is at its limits.”

Looking closely, I could see Shion's entire body starting to quiver. She looked ready to unleash that time bomb of a magic bolt at any moment. There were tears in her eyes. She wasn't lying—something everyone else could tell, too, judging by how they were suddenly keeping their distance.

The most panicked of all about it, of course, was the ball's target.

"Wh-whoa, calm down. Slowly... Slowly point it upward."

Alvis had already put her staff away and wasted no time sprinting—or more accurately, slithering—outta there. Sufia had tried to edge back herself, but the high-voltage electricity zapping to and fro between her and Shion made it impossible. The lightning infused in Sufia's body was reacting with Shion's own aura, creating a sort of energy field that both had trouble escaping.

"Come on! Put your heart into it!"

This ball was putting the fear of God into Sufia. I could tell by the way she shouted at Shion at the top of her lungs. *I swear, there's just nothing I can do about her. Condensing all that power into a ball so tightly wound, not even she could control it...*

Jumping out from Shuna's arms, I nimbly maneuvered in front of Shion, going into human mode and pointing my left hand at her.

"Shion! Fire it!"

"But..."

"It's all right! Trust me!"

"Y-yes sir," she warbled, confused. But she was already at the end of her rope. The vast ball of magic unfurled itself—then, leaving just a short afterglow, was absorbed into me. The unique skill Glutton in action, once more.

This utterly shocked the lycanthropes as much as it relieved Shion, who fell to the ground exhausted. Cheers erupted around us as peace finally returned to the battlefield.

As I guided Carillon's officers around, I decided to ask a question that had been weighing on my mind for a bit.

"Say, what were you intending to do if we didn't take you up on your little challenge?"

"Mm? That would have been trouble for us, yes...but if you were the sorts of cowards who couldn't even fight us, we'd have no reason to recognize you as friends. We would have called everything off, I imagine, and I am sure Lord Carillon would have completely understood."

Talk about an open book. No ulterior motives with *these* guys at all. I was starting to think we'd get along pretty darn well in our exchanges. It certainly cheered me up to think that.

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We held a welcoming feast for them that evening. Shuna was putting all her efforts into cooking for it, and I could hardly wait for night to fall. We were cracking open all the alcohol we had, too.

Once all the dishes were laid out, the party began. Gobta, fresh from patrol duty, did a funny little dance, provoking raucous laughter. Hakuro provided a more serious demonstration of his sword skills, earning him the respect of the lycanthropes in the audience. The dwarves all tried their hand wooing Shuna, only to be shot down one by one. It goes without saying they proceeded right to drowning their sorrows after that.

Yohm and his men, meanwhile, were already at the gambling table. I had taken to propagating the game of mahjong around town as a way to kill time, and the magic-born Gruecith, fresh from fighting my champion, was joining the match out of curiosity.

I wanted to hop in myself, but Shuna stopped me. "Sir Rimuru," she angrily intoned, "you know you don't have a good mind for gambling." She had me there, I have to admit. Whenever I get really passionate about something, I get too reckless for my own good. I could have the Sage advise "There is a ninety-nine percent chance the south player is waiting to snatch that tile if you play it" in my mind, but it'd toss it in anyway. "I'm a man!" I'd reason. "Screw the percentages! I gotta push through!" And I'd pay for it every time.

An all-too-common story—loving a hobby, even when you suck at it. You'd think I would be smart enough to rely on the Great Sage to sail me to victory every time. If you don't keep a cool head when gambling, you're bound to lose big. I *know* that, but I can't stop. Happens every time.

Tonight, at least, my main responsibility was to be an amiable host. Best heed Shuna's advice and provide someone for the lycans to talk to. So I turned to Alvis and Sufia...only to be greeted with two utterly sloshed beasts. Their attendants were urging them to stop, but they had no interest in listening. Alvis had her tail wrapped around a barrel, dunking her head in to drink mouthfuls

at a time. This was apple brandy—sweet and mellow but definitely strong stuff. I had been planning to save it for a more refined tasting session later, given its premium quality.

“Who the hell gave her the whole barrel?” I whined to myself as I turned my eyes to her drinking companion. There I found, to be as succinct as possible, a large white tiger. Not a metaphor. It wasn’t some half creature, but Sufia in full animal form, lapping eagerly away at some mead from one of our large drinking cups. *This is going nowhere*, I thought.

There were ten or so empty barrels casually discarded next to her, which made it simple to calculate just how much they had drunk. But that didn’t matter. The honey wasn’t the primo stuff I had Apito harvest for us; we just used honey picked up from a giant-honeybee nest. Being all-natural ingredients, we didn’t have a lot of it, but there was always more available.

The issue here—for them more than me, maybe—was these two lycanthropes revealing their full, true selves, something I imagined was better off hidden.

“Hey, hey,” I asked in a panic, “do you think you should be showing your transformation around other people so much?”

Milim had shared her own observations of these lycans to me, so I was pretty sure of the answer. I was quickly proven wrong.

“Ah, Sir Rimuru, I am sorry you have to see this embarrassing state of affairs...”

The meek young lycanthrope who answered was named Enrio, a close confidant of Phobio, who had come on this journey to offer me his thanks. Enrio had bowed his head deeply to me multiple times, singing my praises to the high heavens for retrieving Phobio alive from the massive *thing* that took him.

“Indeed,” he continued, “we lycanthropes vary in the forms and styles our transformations take. There is no law that says we must not show them, but...certainly, we do not often reveal them to others, except those whom we fully trust.”

This was even more detail than what Milim had offered.

“Whoa, you sure that’s not classified lycanthrope information or something?”

"No, nothing like that. It's no great secret to speak of. Any upper-level magic-born would be aware of it. Besides," he laughed, "we never were very good at keeping secrets."

He seemed truthful enough to me. Which meant—crap, Milim tricked me, didn't she? It was no big deal, but she acted like she was imparting the great secrets of the world when she started blabbing. She cheated those sweets from me, plain and simple. I thought I was pulling the wool over her eyes, but she was one step ahead of me. *Better keep my guard up more*, I thought.

I had the lycanthropes brought into their rooms, each furnished with full barrels of their own. Whether it was a secret or not, I still felt a bit squeamish about the females "exposing themselves" in public at my party, and I wanted to show a little hospitality to the rest of the gang, too.

The event ended without a hitch, and the next morning, the two beauties arrived at the breakfast table looking incredibly refreshed. Not even a little bit hungover. *There ain't a creature in the world they can't drink under the table*, I mused.

"Ah," Alvis began, "last night was like a dream! Such a wonderful welcome. I cannot wait to tell my master all about this excitement."

"Ooh, I've never had such pleasant drink before. Simply learning such a thing *exists* makes me confident we are right to build relations with your land."

"Oh, Sufia, stop being so uncouth! ...I will admit, though, it was quite pleasant on the tongue. I don't recall tasting anything so strong in my life. The dinner itself was wonderful as well, of course, but ah, that liquor..."

My booze wowed them both, far more than Shuna's food.

As we spoke, the topic turned toward our issues with fruit, and our inability to find enough people to cultivate them and make larger harvests.

By this point, our food situation had undergone some major improvement, but our focus was still on growing things like wheat and barley—not to mention potatoes, which formed a very effective side dish. We were experimenting with rice-plant cultivation as well, with an eye toward crafting a rice grain

palatable to us all. Fuze and his men had told me they weren't aware of anywhere in the land that raised rice in an agricultural environment, so we'd have to build all that from scratch. Once we reached our goal, I was planning to turn some of our wheat fields into rice paddies and ramp ourselves up into full production.

It should be noted that I wasn't focused on rice for purely selfish reasons. It's an incredibly nutritious staple, and mixing it with wheat would improve the balance of our food supply. I knew now that flesh-and-blood monsters weren't constructed much differently from humans, so I wanted to keep our food production as balanced as I could. (Having rice also meant we could make rice wine or sake in large quantities, so I'll admit to having *that* little dream in mind.)

Between this, that, and the other thing, growing fruit had fallen on the back burner. There just was no time to develop new farmland for it. Our construction schedule was packed to the gills; I was already asking Geld for too much. I wanted the sweetness fruit would bring to our diet, but we couldn't ask for such luxuries until we were more fully prepared for future famines. Thus, I had given up on it for now.

And with that, I finished giving them the rundown.

"I see," Alvis remarked. "That does sound like an issue. Perhaps I could arrange matters so the fruits offered to Eurazania are passed over to your nation? With that, you could—"

*You could use that to make more fancy liquor for us,* I could practically hear her say between the lines.

"...What percentages are we talking?" I asked.

"Oh, you can handle the details," Sufia fired back with a smile. "As long as I have something good to drink, I am satisfied. Our lord's domain enjoys a great deal of high-quality fruit, so I do look forward to what you could make with it!"

So the ball was back in our court. Which I was glad for, since I was in no position to give out numbers right now anyway. Even if they just wanted a supply for themselves, not to sell across the land, transporting such a huge amount of liquor was a logistics issue I didn't want to think about.

It'd be nice if we could get a monetary system in place already, so I wouldn't have to sweat the details on every single barter we worked out. But even if the Beast Kingdom understood the concept, I doubted they would see any need for it. What a pain, though.

Then I remembered—I had experts in that sort of issue, didn't I? The kobold merchants—I had come to name their leader Koby, for simplicity's sake—mentioned they plied their trade all over Carillon's domain. They'd be good folks to bring up the topic with. *No time to waste. Let's get 'em over here right now.*

Koby was usually stationed at the merchant's office in the city of Tempest, so he came right over upon my summons.

"S-Sir Rimuru, what is the—?"

"Right, so Koby here's gonna send a team of kobold merchants to pick up the fruit, so make sure they've got permission to travel through your lands."

"Excellent," Sufia said. "I shall guarantee their safety in Eurazania."

"Ah, um, what?! And—ahhh, Lady Lycanthropeer?!"

"Great, thanks. Oh, and if there's anything besides our beverages that strikes your fancy, we'll be glad to sell it to you. What do you think?"

"In *that* case," Alvis interjected, waiting for this moment, "I do have something in mind. The clothing you all wear is made of very fine cloth. The bedding I enjoyed last night was of a similar quality; it felt so smooth against my skin. I absolutely loved it. If we might be able to discuss that..."

We had just recently perfected the mass production of magical silk from hellmoth cocoons, and it looked like it had gained a few ardent fans. We gave them a couple yards of fabric, their eyes gleaming as they examined it.

"Please, by all means, then!"

It was not only pretty and soft to the touch, but it was also made of rather protective material. I wasn't about to give permission that readily...but then, this *was* a negotiation.

"So I guess they need some of this, Koby. As beautiful as they are, it's no wonder these fine women have such good taste in fabric!"

"N-no, please, wait just a moment, sir! What is the meaning of—?"

"Yep! Just like Koby said, this is one of my nation's specialties. Both rare and quite valuable. Would you have some product of your own that would provide a worthy exchange?"

I was willing to part with a suitable amount of booze and just a bit of hellmoth fabric for the fruit supply. But I didn't want to fold that easily. Someone as on the ball as Koby would immediately see the benefits of this, no doubt.

"Well," Alvis said, "about all we can offer you right now are these decorative stones." She pointed to a small collection of stones that shone a dazzling array of colors. They resembled the magic crystals dwarves could refine from magical ore, but it couldn't have been that—it wasn't dark in color, for one.

I picked one up and ran Analyze and Assess on it. It came back as a gemstone—which shouldn't have surprised me. I guess this world had gems in it, too.

"Ah, a jewel, eh? I was hoping for some gold, personally..."

"S-Sir... Sir Rimuru, these are Lycanthropeers you are—"

"Gold? We got that, right, Alvis?"

"We do, yes, locked in our storage rooms. We have little use for what is offered to us, apart from decorating our palace."

"Ah! Could I ask you for that?"

There were tons of uses for gold. Decor, yes, but—hell, we could just ferry that stuff right to the Dwarven Kingdom to feed their mint, for example. Koby seemed just as excited about that; hopefully he was happier with this exchange now. He was wagging his tail to and fro, so I knew he was eager to lunge at the opportunity.

"Hang in there, Koby! This is gonna be a big job for you guys!"

"But please, Sir Rimuru! This is *too* big a job!!"

His shout echoed across the chamber. I brushed it off with a laugh.

\*

Koby soon grew quiet, perhaps resigned to his fate. He realized this was all decided upon, and now he was ready to be a little forward-thinking about it. The classic merchant—everything's flexible with him!

We quickly moved on to the smaller details. These were matters that the lycan officers here preferred to leave to their attendants; the magic-born Enrio would be handling them. Koby, once he finally grew serious about this and acted like the merchant he was, soon threw himself headlong into negotiations. We took a whiff of the roasted tea Shuna made for us as she did.

Unbeknownst to me, it turned out that kobold merchants technically weren't allowed to enter the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania. Not just kobolds, either, but the domain was known as a place of great trial upon its people, especially the weak.

Every inch of land the demon lord Carillon ruled over was obliged to provide its assorted bounties to the main government. This meant the central lands of the domain took it as a given that it received anything it could possibly want. The kobold merchants, in turn, would travel around the towns and villages ruled by the central forces, picking up any necessities they required. If this new agreement meant the kobolds went from bottom-feeders to a full-fledged merchant class in Carillon's eyes, no wonder Koby's head was about to explode.

It was the same case, more or less, in the other demon lord domains. With the Winged Nation of Fulbrosia—land of Frey, the Sky Queen—peon-level monsters wouldn't be allowed in the cities to start with, not unless they bore wings themselves. Rumor had it the city space was formed in layers carved into a mountain range, climbing its way to the very heavens. As someone who used to work in construction, I'd love to check that out sometime, but it didn't sound like permission would come too easily.

Doing business with Milim's domain was a bit impractical, given how far away it was from us. That left the demon lord Clayman, the Marionette Master himself. He was the exception among his kin, allowing free and legal commerce across all his lands. The economy was a pressing concern for him, and his domain had a working

monetary system in operation. There were stories about them trading with the Eastern Empire, even.

He struck me as a very refined thinker by this world's standards. Then again, if the nearby demon lords could be trusted, Clayman was about the only one among them who could engineer something like that orc lord. The only one with the financial clout to outfit a horde that size with weapons and armor, as they put it.

But there was no concrete evidence, and I couldn't deny that human hands seemed to be involved as well. The question would have to be addressed later.

I discussed all this with Alvis and Sufia over tea. As we did, our respective underlings wrapped up their own negotiations.

"Sir Rimuru, I must admit that I, your humble servant Koby, cannot thank you enough. To a band of itinerant merchants such as ourselves, the chance to receive a job of such enormity is so...so..."

He looked about ready to cry as he took a knee before me, tail whipping back and forth so rapidly I was afraid it'd rip off his body.

"Hey, anytime, Koby. Good luck with it. It's sadly gonna be a while before we can complete a road, I imagine, so transport's gonna be rough going to start with."

In addition to preparing a highway to the Dwarven Kingdom, I was having Geld work on a similar path to the kingdom of Blumund. Asking any more of him would be too much on his plate.

"Not a problem, sir! This is where we come in!"

Koby dispelled my worries with a smile. Despite his doglike face, I could tell from the aura of joy he emitted that he was really smiling. They were used to peddling their wares along marginal roads; travel conditions didn't seem to concern them much.

"Will you have enough people?" I thought to ask, though it was a bit late to turn back now.

"That will not be a problem, either, Sir Rimuru. Thanks to you permitting us to build a base of operations in this town, our business has been proceeding along quite smoothly in the Forest of Jura. We have ample personnel for the job, I believe."

"Ah. Well, great. We'll just provide your guard escort, then."

"Thank you very much. That will help us greatly!"

He gave me a resolute look, eyes narrowed, then scampered back to his office. This new client of his had filled him with an all-encompassing desire to get the job done. Which was great—really great. We could've just used teleports, at least with the quantity of goods we were talking, but that had its limits and only worked with predecided amounts. If this was just a small gift exchange now and again, that'd be one thing, but physical transport would be the name of the game with this job.

If we didn't get down to brass tacks on goods and equivalent values right now, it could lead to trouble later. I wanted to be sure I had someone trustworthy in the mix first thing, and for that purpose, the kobolds and their long, long relationships with our goblins were a more than capable partner. I couldn't ask for a better one, in fact.

This all put my mind tremendously at ease, free of the pains of bartering by myself. It also marked the beginning of official trade relations between Tempest and Eurazania.

\*

After staying on for several more days, the Lycanthropeers Sufia and Alvis headed back home. Enrio, the magic-born serving them, remained in town with the other attendants.

They had apparently been instructed to learn about the assorted technology we enjoyed here, and they were already beavering away at their studies. Kaijin and the dwarf brothers' workshop wowed them; when they visited one of our new construction sites, they assiduously took measurements of the framework's strength and stability. On a day trip to see our highways, they were shocked to see how effective our building crews were.

Soon, they wanted to get to grips with this stuff themselves. "If you are willing," they asked, "we would be delighted to work with your teams."

They weren't beholden to any particular schedule but wanted to stay on hand until replacements arrived for them. After discussing matters with Rigurd, I decided to give them my permission. Before a month had passed, they were fully part of our work operation, far

more serious-minded and good-natured than I gave them credit for.

One of the lycanthropes was involved with other business. That was Gruecith. Enrio and the others were ordered to polish their technical knowledge here, but not Gruecith.

“While my master, Phobio the Black Leopard Fang, is serving his penance, I was ordered to provide whatever aid I could to you, Sir Rimuru. I am hoping I could return the favor, in some way.”

Thus, he agreed to help patrol the city—although between him doing ride alongs with Gobta and training with Hakuro alongside Yohm, it seemed to me he was just doing whatever he felt like around town. Ah well. If he was having fun, it was no skin off my nose.

—And so, the envoys sent from the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania shortly found themselves naturally becoming friends of the citizens of Tempest.

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
2

# KING GAZEL'S INVITATION

## CHAPTER 2

# KING GAZEL'S INVITATION

I could see a child suffering from an intense fever—a cold, damp cloth upon his forehead. Before it reached room temperature, a new cloth was immersed in water and wrung out. It was a valiant effort. It wasn't even her own child, either.

"It's all right," she said, smiling at the child as he groggily forced his eyes open before closing them again, relieved.

The dream kept coming and coming. The fade to black, and then with each scene, the child would change out, each one looking in terrible pain.

—It was supposed to just be a dream, but somehow, it weighed all too heavily upon my soul.

Hmm...

After all that work practicing how to sleep and rewarding myself with the occasional nap, the dreams I had were starting to get pretty intense. *Am I being punished for something?*

I doubted it. *No point in being pessimistic. Let's keep our eyes forward.* I make people worry whenever I act all gloomy. Gotta keep things bright.

\*

The day of the promised meeting with King Gazel drew near. Benimaru was finally back after his extended absence, so now I could head over to the Dwarven Kingdom with some peace of mind. If he had been delayed, I was planning to delay my own trip as well, fretting that our simultaneous absences would leave my own nation wide open for attack.

Benimaru and Rigur briefed me on what they saw over in Eurazania—Benimaru first.

"Their warrior alliance is just as formidable as I expected. They are a thoroughly trained fighting team, down to the last soldier. Without factoring Carillon or yourself into the equation, Sir Rimuru, I am unsure if we would emerge victorious with our own troops alone."

He had mostly focused on observing the domain's military situation, and judging by his assessment, they were a force to be reckoned with.

"Yeah, their envoys had a lot of good things to say about our battle training, too."

"I am sure, my lord, and we have Hakuro to thank for that. In terms of battle readiness, we are fully in step with them, but they have the advantage in numbers and core ability. To be frank, an army of two hundred thousand orcs would pose less of a threat than a lycanthrope force a quarter that size. Avoiding war with them is undoubtedly the right choice."

Considering the supreme confidence he normally exuded from every pore, it was odd to see Benimaru provide no guarantee of victory this time. In any case, an all-out war was our very last resort. That's why negotiating to avoid that was the smart thing with diplomacy like this.

"Well, speaking in smaller scales for the moment, d'you think we should develop some tactics for dealing with them that don't involve a full-frontal assault?"

"Tactics, sir?"

"Yeah. I mean, with a military battle, if you defeat the main guy in charge, you win, right? Don't try to wipe out the entire force attacking you. Just take down their commander, and it's all good. That'll mess up the chain of command and make it impossible for the force to communicate with one another, won't it?"

"Strike the commander... I see..."

"It's nothing *that* complicated, dude. Remember the orc lord? We didn't kill all two hundred thousand of those guys, did we? We just decapitated 'em at the top. I'm just saying, we can do that at the force level with other opponents, too. I think training ourselves to

take down enemy commanders will let us enjoy a pretty big advantage in battle.”

“Indeed. Without commanders to lead them, they will descend into a simple, unruly mob.”

“Right, right. And it’d suck if the enemy did that to *us*, too, yeah? So before we have to deal with that, I’m saying let’s grab an advantageous position for ourselves. It’s not easy to build up individual soldier skills, but what we *can* do is train ‘em on that kind of teamwork. Then, we can use Thought Communication or whatever to confuse our enemy and make ‘em lose track of who’s commanding our own forces. That’d help us be a better army, wouldn’t it?”

“Very interesting, sir. And I think I have just the method to train for that. Our fighters have been much better at keeping up with Hakuro’s training as of late. Now would be the perfect time to proceed to the next level.”

“Great. Let’s see what we can do with that.”

Benimaru grinned with excitement. The sight of Carillon’s proud forces unnerved him, but my suggestion seemed to ignite something within him that dispelled any uneasiness. So he promised to work with Hakuro to train our monster soldiers while keeping watch over the city. Good on him.

Next was Rigur.

“The buildings in Eurazania were a measure cruder than ours, my lord. However, the royal palace in the middle of the domain boasted the very heights of extravagance, striking a noticeable difference from the rest of the lands. The domain’s riches seem centered upon this palace, but not, perhaps, in an ill way—it seems to be what Carillon’s people want for their leader. The demon lord wields tremendous influence over his Warrior Alliance squadrons, and he seems committed to making life safe and peaceful for all his citizens.”

I had to hand it to the guy. His domain seemed an incredibly safe place to live. Simply recalling the sheer ambition he showed during his visit made me shudder, so I expected Rigur’s glowing report.

"Not just with the buildings, either," Rigur continued. "Their overall industrial craftsmanship demonstrates technical skill notably below our own."

"Oh? Yeah, I'll bet, given that we got Kaijin and his men, plus Kurobe and Shuna and all. Guess we really *do* have it pretty good over here. I'm happy to hear that."

"Rigur is right," chimed in Benimaru. "From what I saw, the lycanthropes, along with the assorted races under their protection, lived in rather modest circumstances."

Hmmmm. So they both felt that way. I suppose that meant our creature-comfort level had improved a fair bit, if it compared well with a demon lord's personal domain.

"However," Rigur interrupted, "there was one rather impressive thing that caught my attention."

"What's that?"

"Their agriculture. In Carillon's domain, the fields are spread farther and wider than any of ours could hope to, packed with a wide variety of bountiful crops. The land is fertile indeed over there, sir, and they are highly skilled at managing their agricultural efforts."

I see. Fertile land, huh? I was fresh from agreeing to accept some of those crops in exchange for finished goods...but could we wrest some farming know-how from them as well?

"Are any of these skills obtainable for us?"

"...I believe it is possible, sir."

"Great! In that case, I'd like to have Lilina recommend a few members from our land managers for our next envoy trip. I want them to study the system they have over here in-depth and see if we can adapt any of it for our own lands."

"A fine idea," Rigurd said. "Our food situation has improved greatly, but we are still taking a trial-and-error approach with many of our issues. Perhaps that would help us speed things along."

Now we knew what to have the next expedition focus their attention on.

Leaving Rigurd and the other elders to work out the details, I left our meeting hall. The Dwarven Kingdom awaited, and it was time to address all the little things I needed to cover before then.

Between selecting a gift or two for King Gazel, building a portfolio of everything we had under development, and working out what I'd wear for my visit, there was a lot of annoying...or should I say, *thorny* issues to tackle.

Benimaru, of course, joined me.

"Hmm? Shouldn't you stay in that meeting? You'll be leading the next team over there, won't you?"

"On that question, sir, I believe we are in good hands. We found the demon lord Carillon to be completely trustworthy. We may need bodyguards along the way, but with the relationship we have, I see no reason at all to worry about sudden ambushes. Sir Rigur and I were in agreement in that regard, so we have already decided to have him lead the next mission."

"Oh? Well, sounds good, then. Guess Carillon's not just some fool relying on his power, then."

"Not at all, no. I did try picking a quarrel with him, but he merely laughed it off."

*Whoaaaaaa* there! What's with *that* out of nowhere?!

"Um, you sure that was a good idea? He wasn't *really* angry, was he?"

"No, sir. I couldn't exactly unleash Hellflare, so he beat me pretty soundly. I still have much to learn. It reminded me of Hakuro's familiar refrain: Never rely on sheer strength to direct your moves. I had thought Lady Milim's training had improved my technique to some extent, but..."

He gave me this story as nonchalantly as if he were reporting the weather. Ugh. Maybe I shouldn't allow Benimaru outside our borders, after all. If Rigur was leading future envoys, at least I wouldn't have to worry about *that*. Maybe that's why Rigur volunteered for the position, actually.

Regardless, I needed Benimaru to keep our own domain safe in my absence—a task he was already aware of.

"I'll be counting on you for that."

"Understood, sir. I have already defeated Phobio, the Black Leopard Fang. Unless a demon lord-caliber foe rears its ugly head, I promise I will keep us all safe!"

Yeah... I didn't want to give him too much praise after he admitted to picking a fight with a "demon lord-caliber foe" just now, but whipping Phobio like that was pretty kick-ass, I had to admit. Having a higher-level opponent like Milim train us in battle must've helped.

Benimaru was really growing with the rest of us. His unfettered aggression made me nervous about him representing us in foreign lands, but he should keep my own lands safe in my absence. I'd be making more and more foreign trips going forward, and Benimaru would need to become the keystone to our own defenses.

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The big day was here. Changing into my travel clothes, I headed outside. Everyone was in a huge tizzy with departure prep; I was the only one without much to do. Well, myself, Kaijin, and the three dwarf brothers, that is. They were all milling around outside, dressed in fancy formal attire they'd normally never be caught dead in and looking all tense about it. They were so nervous, I almost had to laugh.

"Good morning, gentlemen!"

"Whoa! Hey, Boss!"

"Good morning!"

"..."

Mildo was his usual taciturn self. It was always odd how I understood what he meant to say despite that. The four would be heading back home for the first time in a while; there was little wonder, then, that they all had a lot to think about.

"We really gotta thank you, Boss," Kaijin added. "If it hadn't been for you, I don't think we'd ever see our homeland again."

"You said it! Didn't he, guys?"

"Dang right, he did."

"..."

Mildo's reaction made me chuckle. They were being far too complimentary, but if they were excited for the trip, all was well, I thought. I did, after all, force them to leave the only home they knew. That was always a concern of mine.

"Well, I'm glad for you guys, too. And that I came to know you all. Kaijin, you've done wonders for us, both as a weaponsmith and as the manager of all our production efforts. Garm's workshop is responsible for all our nation's armor; Dold is handling everything from handicrafts to magical tools. And Mildo, with your assistance in running our construction department, you've got a hand in designing every building around us. You've all been a big help to me."

"Heh-heh-heh! As craftsmen, we couldn't ask for higher praise from ya!"

The three brothers nodded their agreement with Kaijin. Yeah, you really *are* craftsmen, guys. It made me so happy, I couldn't help but laugh along with them.

After a little bit more waiting, we were all ready to go. That conversation with the dwarves helped me completely forget about that gloomy dream I had earlier. It's always nice to kick off a journey on a high note like that.

Things proceeded smoothly en route. Geld's efforts had paid off—we now had a beautifully laid road to travel on. It had been widened to a comfortable size, making it easy for wagons to traverse. Taking advantage of this, we were now traveling in style with two horse wagons in our party.

Well, not horse wagons. The Eurazanian envoys had tiger wagons; I suppose this means we were rolling with wolf wagons. They were being pulled by starwolves under Ranga's leadership, and having such fine beasts leading the way made for an easy ride for all of us.

There were a little under ten people joining the dwarves and me on this trip. First, Shion, my main assistant, and Shuna, my deputy secretary. Shuna was more my personal cook than deputy, maybe, but I figured she could help introduce things like our fabric-making operation to the dwarves.

I was actually intending to have Shion stay behind and help Hakuro hold down the fort, but she put up such intense resistance

that I let her come along. All “It’s not fair!” this and “It can’t be!” that and “Just Shuna alone...on a solo journey with you, Sir Rimuru...” and so on, with bouts of sobbing and violence in between. Quite an ordeal. I tried explaining to her that this was serious business, not a fun summer road trip, but she wasn’t listening, and in the end, it just wasn’t worth the time to try to make her.

She was, of course, all smiles as she held me close to her chest, enjoying the ride aboard one of the wolf wagons. We were on the lead one, alongside Shuna, which meant I’d be gently cradled by one or the other, in turns, the entire way. The second wagon was occupied by the four dwarves, and compared to *that*, I couldn’t complain about riding with a couple of beautiful women.

Ranga himself was with us, although out of sight and guarding me from the shadows. Thanks to Shadow Motion, he was literally shadowing me nearly all the time these days. I could feel him shutting his eyes in sheer bliss as he basked in my aura. I asked him whether he felt cramped, holed up in my shadow, and he said “Not at all, master! It is quite comfortable!” So I let him. Having him on call for emergencies made me feel better, besides, and everyone else agreed with me on this, so he’d be lurking around in that shadow for a while to come.

Finally, Gobta was shoring up our guard with several hobgoblins—patrolmen under his direct control.

One of the hob-gobs—a trainee named Gobzo—struck me as especially dim. I came up with the name on a whim, and he just...I dunno, *looked* stupid.

“You think that guy’s okay?”

“Who, Gobzo? You bet, sir!”

Gobta swore the guy was all right, just a little lunkheaded. A hobgoblin described as “a little lunkheaded” by Gobta, who’s a little lunkheaded himself. Hoo boy. He had a tendency to stare blankly into space, mouth agape, which made me worry. He didn’t seem too “with it” to me, but he *did* seem handy enough atop a starwolf’s back, so I figured it’d be just as lunkheaded of me to lose any sleep over it.

So we proceeded down the highway, guarded by Gobta and the other six goblin riders. The wagon was sturdy enough to make the ride acceptably comfortable—especially considering we were doing around twenty-five miles an hour, which your typical horse wagon just wasn't made to handle.

The exclusive shock-absorber tech we developed was the secret behind the wagon's sturdiness, allowing the axles to move independently without being hammered into the carriage. It did wonders to cancel out the bumps along the way, another hallmark of the precision quality being cranked out by our dwarf-driven forge. And it didn't end there—our tires were cutting-edge, too. Normally, they were made for little more than reinforcing the wheel, which meant they quickly got scratched up and damaged beyond use. *These* tires were made of a special hardened resin that provided an additional shock-absorbing effect. The resin was more flexible and sturdy than I thought—a pretty good match for the tires from my world, even.

Gobta was taking a keen interest in these axles and wheels, curiously examining them up close. He had made a cart for himself long ago, and he must've been comparing these to his previous effort. "Wow!" He sighed in amazement. "I knew I should've built mine like this!"

*I should help him build a second one later on, I thought.*

But I digress. The point is, these innovations were making this journey go rather swimmingly. Maybe it was less because of our wagon's suspension and more thanks to the flat, obstacle-free road Geld's crew made for us, but it was still true.

We spied the faraway Canaat Mountains on the second day of travel.

Things had gone exceedingly smoothly along this well-maintained road so far. The trip was a bit over six hundred miles one-way, but traveling through uncleared forest ate up dizzying amounts of time. Spending the same amount of time on a road like this made for a much easier experience. I was a state guest this time, and showing up a dirty mess from the journey wouldn't be too befitting, I thought.

We had made an effort to give ourselves plenty of time. Unlike before, there were sleeping houses put in place at regular intervals along the way. They served as workers' quarters during construction, the idea being they could become simple inns once this became a public trade route. Thus, we were all squared away for night lodging.

Along the way, we also ran into a few high orcs in the middle of road-surfacing work. They worked as a unified team, under the command of a smug-looking foreman. Like a well-oiled machine, they skillfully carried out the job. Hell, they could teach a few of the construction crews I dealt with in my previous life a thing or two.

It was really an ideal environment. I gave them a "Good work, guys!" as I passed by, and they all kneeled and waved at me.

"S-Sir Rimuru! Our work is progressing on schedule. We've prepared the soil we're using without a hitch, and right now we're finishing up the surface. We're making our way back from the Dwarven Kingdom right now, so the roadway ahead for you is fully complete!"

I shot a glance forward. The foreman was right—I saw a well-crafted road waiting for us. It was a simple one, yes—covered in gravel, with crushed stone laid out evenly above it. That was all we really needed, but above that, the crew had placed freshly extracted stone material to make a sort of paved surface.

Procuring all this stone and laying it out evenly across such a wide expanse of road would be all but impossible in my previous world. Here, meanwhile, our workmen had a wealth of helpful skills to assist the effort. The Stomach that Geld maintained with his Gourmet skill made small-scale transport (teleportation, really) between high orcs a snap, allowing them to ship processed stone from the quarries straight to the construction site as is. Talk about efficient. My job would've been *so* easy in my previous life with that stuff. No worries about material storage, no shipping hassles; just a few extraordinary skills used to maximum effect. A very monster-like approach.

It was clear, however, that the high orcs weren't just letting their skills do all the work. They were giving 110 percent the whole way. That's why I wanted to thank them for their efforts.

"Look at this! You've all done a great job for us. Feel free to knock off early and take it easy the rest of the day!"

I took several barrels of drink out from my Stomach, plopping each one on the ground.

"Don't overdo it, now!"

Cheers erupted up and down the road. And with all the thanks I was showered with, we decided to stay there for the night.

The next day:

""Good morning, Sir Rimuru!""

The moment Shion carried me out from the hut, we were greeted by several hundred orcs standing in neat lines. "Whoa!" I shouted. All the workmen I couldn't greet personally yesterday must've assembled here in the early morning.

"Good job, everyone!" Shion nodded, trying to sound as self-important as possible. Shuna giggled at this as she greeted them all. The hobgoblins whispered among themselves, amazed at the spectacle.

Ranga, meanwhile, stayed curled up in my shadow—this was no concern to him, since road conditions didn't really matter to his species. Unlike Ranga, I had a keen interest in how the completed road ahead looked. I had to give these high orcs my thanks.

"I'm glad to see the magnificent work you're all doing. Keep it up!"

A simple sentiment, but still a major morale boost. I followed it by going up and down the ranks, offering my personal appreciation as they greeted me. They all smiled at me from start to finish, which did a lot to lift my spirits as well. The beer I provided last night was apparently a big hit, so I gave the foreman a few more barrels before we left. It was key for a leader to show proper appreciation when the times called for it. I felt there'd be few better ways to provide that than with some fancy alcohol when visiting the front lines like this.

We rounded out the stop by watching the crews as they got back to work. Before long, we were on the road once again.

\*

Riding on the completed road made the wolf wagon ride smoother than ever. It felt like we were going a bit faster. This construction effort was starting to feel worth it. The stones lining the highway were rough to the touch, meshing well with the resin tires on our wagons and also preventing slippage. They were designed this way to provide traction in rainy weather; I wasn't expecting it to smooth out the ride as well, but I was sure the merchants who'd ply their trade along the highway would appreciate it.

I observed all this, satisfied with myself, as the wolf wagon sped along. It would be the afternoon of the fourth day by the time we reached our destination.

### The Armed Nation of Dwargon.

Last time I was here, they made us line up in front of the gate. Looking up at that large, oppressive entrance, I shut my eyes and reflected on the past—or I would have, if I had eyes. Instead, I assumed human form inside my wagon and changed into my ceremonial attire.

As I stepped out of the wagon, I found a small furor erupting in front of the gate. *Oh, crap, not Gobta again?!* I reflexively thought, but I was wrong. It turned out the dwarves had already run out of their wagon, trying to get the gate open by themselves, much to the chagrin of the other merchants and adventurers nearby.

"Hey, bro. Glad to see you're well."

This was Kaido, head of the local guard and Kaijin's younger brother.

"Ah, Kaido! How long has it been? Life's been a blast working for my ol' boss Rimuru, lemme tell ya!"

"I'm sure. It's written all over your face. Where is Sir Rimuru, by the way? He may be your 'boss,' but he's also our state guest. We'll need to give him a warm greeting first..."

They were having this conversation right next to me. Come *on*, guys. Why are you ignoring me? ...Oh, right, I'm in human form, aren't I?

"Kaido, Kaido! It's me! Rimuru! That cute li'l girl genius who's got the magic to transform into anything she wants! Eeeek!"

I couldn't help but join in the fun, as much as it made me hate myself. Thanks to Kaido's *extremely* leading questioning at my last visit, it had somehow come about that I was a fetching young woman with magical skills—and while it was Shizu who granted me this particular form, it was a shockingly perfect match for my cover story in Dwargon.

"...What?! That couldn't be! Er... Sir Rimuru? Do you mean to say...you actually *were* cursed by an evil wizard?!"

"Of *course* not! Enough with the formalities! This is Rimuru, Captain Kaido!"

He stared glassy-eyed at me, unable to form a response. I must have thrown him into utter confusion, and I could understand why. I'd probably be pretty freaked out if a slime turned into a pretty girl, too.

"I—I am glad you are well, er... Sir Rimuru..."

It wasn't until long after the gate was fully opened that he managed to croak out a response.

We passed through the gate, guided by Kaido and his guardsmen. Normally, wagons and vehicles would be directed through another entrance, where they'd be parked in a holding area for unloading. As state guests, though, we were allowed to prance right in on our wolf wagons. We had starwolves pulling us—dazzling, muscly beasts—and that was attention-grabbing alone. But the simple fact the government opened the main gate for us was enough to attract a crowd on the other side.

I could hear the comments thrown from either side as we rode along.

"Taming such magnificent magical beasts... A powerful group, indeed!"

"Are those magical? I've never seen the likes of them before..."

"What strange wagons, too. The wheels move independently of one another! See how they bob up and down along the pathway, even as the wagon itself remains steady? A magnificent piece of smithery, there."

"But who *are* they? And why do they deserve the full front-gate treatment? We don't even do this for royalty from the smaller kingdoms, do we?"

"No. Maybe from one of the larger powers? Pretty small guard contingent, if so."

"Also, with all this kindness we're giving 'em, I was expecting a king or the like...but they sent a princess instead?"

"Ooh yeah! She's pretty cute, isn't she?"

Oh, crap. I was still in human form, since I was too lazy to switch back, but I really should've tried looking more *male*, at least. Doing that would mean expending a continuous stream of magicules, which was a pain. But it was too late now, and I was an honored guest of Dwargon and all, so better just keep it natural, I guess. Let's go with that.

As I listened to the crowd's commentary, I noticed Kaido nod gravely in my wagon, helping us lead the procession. "You know, I have to say, coming here with such a small group in response to a royal invite is a little careless of you, isn't it? I know I'm being rude, but I'm afraid you'll have to accept a few doubtful glances in response."

"Oh, no, I appreciate the advice. I gotta admit, I'm kind of new at this sort of thing. Does this look like *that* tiny a contingent, though?"

"Fairly so, yes. Normally, you'd expect a large, ostentatious parade going through here, an awe-inspiring show of force. The yearly visit from the nobility over in Farmus, let me tell you... It's nothin' short of gorgeous."

"Is it...?"

International relations were starting to sound like much more of a pain than I had guessed.

"Perhaps," Shion resentfully remarked, "we should have brought the entire goblin rider force with us. With them, and with a dragonewt team patrolling the skies, we would've been able to express the fullness of your majesty, Sir Rimuru."

"No, I rejected that idea because it'd leave our own lands vulnerable. Don't you remember us deciding on all that in the meeting?"

I had thought Shion was going too far with that idea she floated at the meeting, but she might've been right all along.

"Still," intervened Shuna with a smile, "I don't think we are underselling ourselves with our procession. Gobta and his force are equipped with a full array of the latest in magic weapons. The trained eye would recognize their value and strength in a moment's notice."

She was right. It was all Unique equipment of exceptional make. As they were prototypes, there were very few of them around. The weapons were from Kurobe, the armor from Garm, and both were fortified with Dold's magical carvings. Part of our mission here was to show off our technology to the world, so it was important they all bore the latest and greatest for us.

Such inscription magic still had very low success rates. It'd be a while before we could outfit all our fighters with Uniques. But we didn't need to, either, and I was satisfied enough with what we accomplished already.

"Certainly," Kaido said with a smile and a nod, "I couldn't help but notice myself. I can't say what other nations would think about it, but our comrades, at least, are pretty awestruck right now."

Arriving with such a small group was a misstep, but in terms of quality, I think we were right up there with any other nation.

"Well," I said with a satisfied grin, "no worries, then."

\*

We proceeded along the wide street as Kaido guided us to the palace. He would not be joining us inside.

"See you soon, brother."

"You got it. I'll see you."

The two brothers said their good-byes, and Kaido saluted me before leaving. Picking up from Kaido's lead was Dolph, captain of the Pegasus Knights, clad in his fanciest attire. He was wearing a civil officer's uniform, but that was likely just a front. The Knights he led were a covert team reporting directly to the king, and if I didn't recognize the outfit, I definitely recognized his sharp eyes.

"It is good to see you again, Sir Rimuru. It pleases me to see you in good health," he said in greeting, a smile softening his stony face.

"And the same to you, Sir Dolph. Thank you for inviting me today."

"Sir'? Ah-ha-ha! No need for that with me! I'm just here to guide you to His Majesty. But before that..."

Dolph flashed a sign to his men. Most appeared to be real, non-covert bureaucrats, but I spotted a few Pegasus Knights among them.

"My apologies, but may I ask to hold your weapons for you during your visit?"

"Oh, sure." I nodded as I gave him the straight sword dangling from my hip. He accepted it with a polite pair of arms and placed it in a storage box. Shuna handed him a magisteel-crafted folding fan, which I wasn't entirely sure was a weapon per se, although it sure as hell wasn't a regular old fan.

Shion also removed her own longsword, but instead of surrendering it, she just glared at the attendant handling her. "This is Goriki-maru. It is extremely valuable. Treat it roughly, and you *will* pay for it," she said, giving it a tender look in lieu of caressing it against her face. Once she'd said her piece, she handed it over.

*Just how important is that thing to her?* I thought. *Geez, giving it a name and everything. Talk about beloved.* The attendant struggled with it a bit before applying a steadier grip. Had he dropped it, Shion would've completely lost it. I figured the attendant was a covert Pegasus Knight, because the average person wouldn't have any hope of lugging that thing around.

The weapon handover went pretty smoothly for all of us. Not so for the hob-gobs. Gobta and his crew all had armor on, and so they had to be escorted out of the chamber to change.

"See you guys later."

"Roger that, sir!"

Gobta wouldn't be entering the king's receiving room anyway. Our guard contingent would be waiting in the next room over, up front. It would just be us and the king's attendants in there, and I was fine with that. I was just happy they let Shuna and Shion in as government officials. Shion was my secretary, but the way she

looked and acted just screamed “military.” If they decided that only I could come in, I knew she’d raise holy hell over it. Good thing the dwarves were open-minded about this.

Once that was all taken care of, Dolph escorted us inside the royal palace. We headed straight for the dungeon last time I visited, so I took my time to gawk as we moved along. Magic Sense was convenient at times like these. It let me do all that looking without having to swivel my head all over the place, allowing me to retain a (hopefully) regally authoritative air along the way.

So on we went down the long corridor before arriving at a large, ostentatious-looking door. “His Majesty Rimuru,” shouted one of the guards as it opened from the inside, “sovereign of the Jura-Tempest Federation!”

“Follow me,” a female dwarven attendant said as she approached. “King Gazel is waiting for you.” This was the end of Dolph’s duties, so he gave me a salute and stood bolt upright at the side of the door. It was all so stiffly formal to me. There were so many little rules I had no chance of knowing, I grew anxious that I was bound to screw something up.

“How nice to see you again, Rimuru!”

But I shouldn’t have worried, because once Gazel spoke to me, things started moving so fast I didn’t have any time to think.

I sat down on a seat offered to me, facing the king, as Shuna delivered a formal greeting. I could still feel the nerves as she provided a royal attendant a list of the gifts we had brought along. *Man, Shuna rocks!*

I had absolutely no idea what I should have been doing there, so I just remained seated, smiling, like we said I should beforehand. “Just act relaxed, in control,” she had suggested to me, “and I will find a way to take care of the rest.”

I trusted her to do that, so I remained seated, trying to look as elegant and unaffected as I could. Shuna was doing all the heavy lifting, for sure—she *was* an ogre princess, after all, and she demonstrated stateliness and dignity that I couldn’t help but admire.

The initial exchanges seemed like they took forever, but really, it wasn't long at all. I was too out of it to pay much attention to what was being said. The Great Sage was automatically memorizing everything for me, I figured, and I could refer to that later.

Soon, Shuna and the attendants had wrapped up their back-and-forth. It sounded like they were preparing a royal dinner in our honor this evening. They say it takes several days to prep for that kind of event; I was sure glad we weren't late.

We had some time before evening came, and they took this opportunity to show us to our rooms, figuring we would be tired from the journey. Only then did I dare breathe a sigh of relief.

"Oh, man, I was *such* a bundle of nerves."

"Hee-hee-hee-hee! Were you? You seemed very dignified to me, Sir Rimuru."

"Oh, absolutely! You cut a gallant figure in the royal chamber. I was in awe."

"It seems to me that Shion could use more instruction as a secretary, however..."

"Hee-hee! My, Shuna, cutting it rather harsh with the jokes today, are we?"

"I wasn't joking..."

Listening to Shuna and Shion carry on as usual helped me calm down a little.

"Yeah, well, I'm glad they're treating me like royalty and all, but I really hope I don't have to go through that again."

"I'm afraid you may have to get used to it, Sir Rimuru. More of these opportunities will arrive in the future, no doubt."

"Perhaps, yes. As you build your political and military might, little matters like these will be unavoidable."

*Wait a sec, Shion.* I wasn't thinking of this as some kind of world conquest; I don't know where she got that idea. I just wanted to get along with my neighbors, if I could.

"Um, just so we're clear, I'm not trying to rule the world here, y'know?"

"What? You aren't...?"

Shion's obvious surprise was a shock to me. "That's what he has said from the very beginning," commented Shuna with a sigh. At least nobody else was working under that assumption.

Our banter continued along these lines until it was time for the banquet.

Gobta's team would be in another room, eating separately, and after meeting with King Gazel, Kaijin, Garm, and the other dwarves asked for permission to explore their old stomping grounds again; undoubtedly they were seeing friends and family right now. Thus, it was only me, Shuna, and Shion present with the king. I was a tad nervous about Shion coming along, but the dinner ended uneventfully enough.

"Now," Gazel asked softly, "do you have a little time to spare after dinner?"

I nodded. "Good," he said.

Events like these were no place for frank conversation. It was all just a bunch of pleasantries exchanged back and forth. It was hard to truly speak one's mind with all the compliments and roundabout speeches the atmosphere demanded. Nobody wanted to shoot their mouth off and have promises extracted from them, so that naturally limited the topics of discussion a bit. In my case, too, I was so focused on King Gazel's mannerisms and my own table manners that there wasn't room in my brain to think about any of that. The king must've spotted it, which was why he offered some extra time to speak more confidentially.

I was finally able to relax once we moved to another room.

"That was a good meal," I said to Shuna, "but I sure didn't have much time to savor it."

"Oh, no? I was quite pleased! All those uncommon things on offer..."

"I think Shion could stand to learn some manners—follow your example some more, if you will."

"Oh, maybe. I think she's fine, though. With manners, as long as you aren't actively offending someone, then it doesn't really matter."

Etiquette changes with every situation, after all. Something that was completely wrong in one scenario could be perfectly acceptable in another. I didn't see any need to try to memorize everything. It's worth noting that in Tempest, where we're still striving to improve our food situation, it was considered impolite to leave any part of a meal uneaten. That was a rule I enacted, no doubt affected by my past experience as a Japanese person, but that only applied to us, not the rest of the world. Those things change from nation to nation. Other countries saw virtue in providing the most extravagant experience possible for visitors; I heard that, in some, leaving some food behind was seen as a nice gesture, a symbol that you've been so well taken care of that you couldn't possibly eat another bite. Some people did that in my previous life, too, so it sounded acceptable enough to me.

Fortunately, the Dwarven Kingdom worked like Tempest in this regard. Vester had schooled me on that beforehand, and it turned out the advice he gave was spot-on. His instructional briefing covered everything from polite greetings to proper manners around the royal court—but even then, I was so anxious around the king that I mostly just copied whatever he did. Hopefully, the experience would help me get more comfortable for next time. Shion was the same, too, but we had both performed above the minimum expected of us, so there was no issue.

We certainly did sprint through each of the courses, though. "It was all so delicious," Shion said, "I just couldn't help myself..."

"Ahh, it's nothing to worry about. I'm sure the cooks would prefer this to having any leftovers."

"You are spoiling her," Shuna said with a cheerful look in her eyes.

After a few more minutes:

"Sorry to make you wait."

King Gazel arrived, ready to have a frank discussion about the most important issues facing our two countries.

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The king and I were seated in two padded chairs facing each other. Vaughn and Dolph stood guard behind him, Shion was behind me, and Shuna was off to fetch some drinks.

He was much more informal than before, which was a relief. It'd make talking things over a lot easier. I thanked him for the banquet; he replied with a hearty laugh.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! You were probably so nervous, you could barely even taste what you were eating, right? Let me tell you something: Diplomacy is all just one big bluff. If you act like that, don't complain if people feel they have the right to run you over."

"You say that, but Vester gave me his personal seal of approval."

"Hmph. As skittish as he is, I'm sure he was simply going easy on the master he serves."

The king was hurling a lot of criticism my way, but if anything, it made me all the more comfortable.

"Well, I'll do better next time."

"Heh-heh-heh... I'm much more comfortable wielding a sword than navigating these types of negotiations, too."

As he put it, Gazel wished for nothing more than the ability to freely and aimlessly wander the land. Perhaps he would have been able to if his father hadn't died so unexpectedly. But before the topic got too gloomy, he changed the subject.

"So! Down to business, then?"

I nodded. "Certainly. First, thank you for pardoning Kaijin and the others. I know they appreciate it a great deal, too."

"Hah! That was the best way to earn the approval of my cabinet members. I was planning to forgive them from the very beginning. Plus, with someone as strange as you involved, I didn't want you running around my kingdom *too* freely," he bashfully admitted with a grin.

"Wow, that's a pretty mean way to describe me. Of course, I would've had the exact same thought, but..."

"Would you?"

We faced each other and smiled.

"It really *was* a hard decision for me, you realize. Letting go of Kaijin and Garm was heart-wrenching. I'm glad it's proven to be the correct answer, at least."

"Yeah, they're really working hard for me. We have a steady supply of armor thanks to Garm, and Dold and Mildo are a huge help in our construction efforts. And with Kaijin handling all sorts of things I couldn't, we're still able to function as a coherent group right now."

"Is that so...? Well, perhaps it was all for the better, then. I thought they'd be better off exercising their skills in a freer environment, rather than toil in obscurity over here. And how *has* Vester been, by the way? He didn't join you on this visit?"

"Well, I invited him, but..."

I did invite him, but he refused.

"He was all 'Oh, I *do* appreciate it, but I could never show my face to King Gazel until I can offer him some real accomplishments!' and so on. If you ask me, I think he just wanted to stay focused on his research."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Now *that's* the Vester I know. So he has an environment where he can put his genius to work now, eh? Wonderful to hear," the king said with a smile.

Deep down, he must have truly worried about his old staff. It wasn't something he could publicly express, which no doubt led to all sorts of dilemmas. I was the same way.

Shuna came back with drinks just as I finished offering my thanks. She had brought in some of the whiskey I tested on Yohm before.

"Help yourself."

"Hmm, is this...one of Dold's creations?"

Gazel picked up his glass in wonder. It was almost crystalline in appearance, and it gave off a pale gleam in the light. The glass bore an intricate pattern, and it didn't take an expert to see its value. This was also a magitool with a magical inscription lurking under the artistry to apply an antidote effect on anything poured inside. You'd need to be a magic user to trigger that, of course, but...

"Ah, this has an antidote magic inscribed in it? Very thoughtful."

The king spotted it in an instant. Then he activated it.

"You can use that to check for poison," I said, "but I'm a monster, so I'm too resistant to have much use for it myself."

It was true. Alcohol isn't exactly poison, but too much of it can lead to unpleasant experiences. Some people had trouble digesting it, leading to acute alcohol poisoning if they weren't careful. I doubted the dwarves would have a problem with that, but just in case, I figured.

Gazel brought the glass to his lips. The smell instantly registered in a look of surprise.

"Hoh! A very elegant aroma."

He took a couple moments to savor it. I, on the other hand, took an immediate gulp. I could feel something hot burn through my throat as I imagined my head catching on fire. Sadly, it lasted for a mere instant.

*Report. Poison resistance... successful.*

*Don't succeed on that, man! Alcohol isn't poison. Why doesn't the Sage get that? I've made this lovely indulgence for myself, and I can't even enjoy it.* It was very depressing, but I'd just have to be content with seeing others cherish it instead. Nothing's sadder than an exquisite liquor you can't even get drunk off of.

"My, my, my!"

Watching me take a swig, King Gazel tried a sip of his own. I'm sure the ensuing sensations that ran down his mouth, throat, and stomach were like nothing he had experienced before. But he *was* a dwarf. He didn't gag on it like Yohm did.

"I like it," he said before asking Shuna for another glass. Dolph watched on behind him, no doubt a bit jealous. *He* probably had a sip earlier to test it for poison, so now he'd know what it tastes like. Vaughn, left out of the party, simply gave his lord a perplexed look.

"Would you like some as well?" Shuna offered, reading the atmosphere.

"Ah, yes! Just one glass, then."

Dolph greedily accepted his cup, as if he'd been waiting for the invitation all his life.

"It may not be right to drink during guard duty," Vaughn dutifully stated as he took his own, "but to us, a good drink affects us no more than breathing the air."

They took their respective swigs.

“Mm, mmmmm?!”

Vaughn did a poor job hiding his reaction to the alcohol burn.

“There is no need to be modest.” The king laughed with a fiendish grin. “We are the only ones here. Let’s drink together, as we did in the past!”

“Y-Your, Majesty, I’m not sure we should—”

“All right! Let us, then!”

Despite his grizzled, battle-worn features, Vaughn wasted no time shouting over Dolph as he took a seat to Gazel’s right and thrust his glass in Shuna’s direction.

“If that’s what His Majesty wants, that’s what His Majesty gets. Let’s have it!”

The king gave another laugh as he slapped Vaughn on the back, making him wince and cough a bit. “Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! What has gotten into you today, Vaughn? You’re so open to suggestion, for a change!”

“Ahh, enough silliness! We have a platoon of elite forces on standby beyond that door. There is nothing to worry about. Plus... I doubt these visitors of ours could possibly mean us any harm. They would achieve nothing from it. If they intended to, they would’ve taken action the last time we shared a drink together,” Vaughn said, taking another swig.

This was enough to either make Dolph’s concerns go away or just make him give up entirely. Either way, he plopped down to the left of King Gazel. “Let me have some, too, then!” he said, presenting an empty glass to Shuna. I wasn’t sure exactly when he emptied it, but I suppose it was too tempting for him to resist.

After we enjoyed this bender for a little bit:

“So, Rimuru! Before I become too inebriated, I wanted to ask: That potent magical weapon you used to defeat Charybdis; what *is* it, exactly? I am told you unleashed a force unlike anything seen before, more powerful than even the most fearsome of tactical-level magic attacks.”

“Ah...that...”

Yes, that. The thing I already explained to them but failed to get anyone to believe. That crazy-powerful attack from the demon lord

Milim, the one that indirectly led to this state visit. Ah well. Let's try giving them the truth one more time.

"Hmm... Well, nobody believed me when I told them, y'know. I don't think you quite understood what I was talking about, Dolph..."

"I didn't?"

"No. That wasn't any secret weapon of ours or anything. It was really just the power of the demon lord Milim."

"Ah, Sir Rimuru, you and your jests again..."

"Well, hear him out, Dolph." Vaughn stroked the hairs on his chin. "I'm rather curious about that question myself. As commander in chief of our armies, I know that if a hundred Pegasus Knights working in tandem can't take down a threat, the only thing left to turn to is tactical-level magic. The most effective approach would be to neutralize the enemy's magic defenses and deliver constant damage without giving them a moment's rest to heal themselves. But Jaine told me herself—in her eyes, not even a nuclear-level magic strike could defeat the likes of Charybdis. The power levels needed would bend the rules of magic themselves, leading to heat-transfer problems or something—the exact details are beyond my understanding, admittedly, but in short, magic wouldn't work, would it? So neither would magic weapons, I imagine?"

Jaine was the arch-wizard of the Dwarven Kingdom, an expert in all forms of magic and someone smart enough to notice that her skills didn't work on Charybdis. Magic, in this world, gained its energy through magicules, unique particles that floated around in the atmosphere. Charybdis had the power of Magic Interference, letting it dispel those magicules and render all magic useless. I only discovered that because I possessed that skill myself.

Let's say, for example, that a fireball attack works by heating up magicules in the air and directing that ball of heat toward your target. If I can dispel the magicules around me, that drastically reduces the transfer rate of that heat through the air. It's possible to shut down slashing-, freezing-, and lightning-based attacks in similar ways. Pretty useful stuff.

If you wanted to break through that, it'd have to be via something besides magicules. Instead of aiming right at Charybdis, perhaps we could've triggered a shock-wave blast that heated up the air and sent that wave hurtling toward it. Maybe we could've damaged it more then.

We were flying by the seat of our pants out there, too focused on the fight to really notice any of this. It was too late to quibble about it now. But what *was* Milim's attack, really?

*Understood. Two possibilities are available. Either the Magic Interference was obliterated by an even larger force, or some simpler attack was used that did not work via magicules. Due to data collection errors, the exact attack cannot be identified. However, there is a high chance that the former possibility is correct.*

That was the Sage's guess. As it saw things, the presence of that unknown material it couldn't detect the nature of indicated the second scenario was unlikely. Plus, logically speaking, it was totally possible for someone with the magical strength and energy of Milim to simply overwhelm Charybdis in a magical arm-wrestling match.

Dolph shrugged. "Indeed, magic was wholly useless. But pinning everything on the demon lord Milim just seems too convenient an excuse to me. If you had a previously unknown weapon you wished to keep a secret, though, that makes it more understandable."

He was more willing to believe we had a secret doomsday bomb of some kind than that Milim actually agreed to join in combat. King Gazel gave him a thoughtful look.

"But, Dolph, do you think that's possible? Even if we made our tactical magic ten times more powerful, do you think that would have defeated the opponent? We are talking about a monster that annulled the almighty force of a high-level dryad-driven spirit. Any magical force capable of defeating it would be beyond anything I could imagine. But with Milim, the dragon princess herself, we should expect the unexpected, to be sure."

Gazel, at least, seemed familiar with her. I didn't even know if Milim's attack was magical or not, but either way, it obliterated

Charybdis. The king was right; it really was beyond anything I could imagine.

"So you think that really was Milim?" asked an excited-looking Vaughn.

"Yes, well... That would explain a number of things. But why would a demon lord like her be there...? That I cannot say. If you claim Milim was with you, could you explain exactly what led to that?"

Now the king had pointed the argument back at me. Dolph and Vaughn followed his gaze.

"Yes, well...it'll be a bit of a long story. But let me begin with what happened after I last took leave of this kingdom."

So I did, telling them about everything following my unceremonious removal from Dwargon. The rest listened on, consuming our brandy and finger food in silence. By the time I was done, a third of the barrel was gone. Talk about maintaining a pace. The barrel would've been bone-dry by now if it was beer I'd provided, no doubt.

"That does seem to make sense, but..."

"The very idea of taming that demon lord... Imagine!"

"Hard to believe, indeed...but we do have reports of a young girl taking a central role in the battle..."

The three looked at one another, exchanging their own takes. "Hmph!" Shion snorted next to them. "Sir Rimuru would never lie to anyone!" I supposed she must have been sampling some of the wares in the barrel with the rest of them. Shuna was the sole attendant responsible for keeping our cups full and our stomachs filled with something to absorb all the liquor. It certainly kept her on her feet. Very thoughtful of her. *I wish Shion could learn from that a little.*

As I thought about that, King Gazel and his men made their conclusions.

"I believe your tale, Rimuru."

"My apologies for mistrusting you. It was just rather difficult to wrap one's mind around..."

"Wah-ha-ha-ha! You are a mysterious one indeed, Sir Rimuru! Making acquaintances with the oldest demon lord in the land—and in such a short time, too!"

Finally, they were seeing things my way. Which was better for me, I suppose, but either way, I was glad we were on the same page. I figured that was the end of the night's serious discussions, but I was wrong—if anything, our summit conference disguised as a domestic drinking party was only getting started.

\*

Our conversation turned to recent events in our respective kingdoms as well as our latest research results. I also heard about an event planned for tomorrow, where we'd go before the public and formally declare friendly relations between our two countries.

As the night wore on, the topic drifted over to the whiskey I'd brought.

"This is *such* a wonderful drink. I have never tasted anything so intense before. What is it exactly?"

The barrel was now less than half full, which I probably should've expected. This was some heavy drink, and we were having it straight on the rocks, so a little drunkenness at this point was unavoidable.

"This is called whiskey. It's made by distilling beer."

"Oh? What is this 'distilling'?"

Hoo boy. This was gonna get thorny.

"Well, you're a researcher, so I'm sure you know it's the alcohol in beverages like these that makes you feel drunk. Alcohol has a lower boiling point than water, so if you boil a fermented compound like beer and collect the steam that results, you'll wind up with a higher-alcohol beverage. That's what a distilled spirit is, basically."

Gazel nodded at my executive summary. "I see. Perhaps that high-grade liquor made by the otherworlder was crafted in the same way."

"An otherworlder?!"

Oooh, now *this* sounded like some useful information. I'd love to meet them, if we're all from the same country.

"Yes. In the capital of the Empire, there was a beverage created by an otherworlder who was presented to the emperor. Some of it was put up for sale, and given the limited supply, it's being traded for exorbitant prices. It seems it cannot be made in large quantities; does the same apply to this whiskey?"

Ah. Too bad. I wanted to check out the Eastern Empire, but they were a full-on military state, and they ran their borders pretty tightly. It'd be harder to pay a casual visit than it'd be with the Western Nations. Plus, they even had a specialized force devoted to monster slaying—not to mention monster-specific fighters in the west as well, something else I'd have to watch out for. No need to rush it—best to wait for the right opportunity to meet this Empire otherworlder.

If I had to guess, the short supply was more an excuse than anything. Perhaps they didn't have facilities large enough for mass manufacture, but money could do a lot to fix that. They probably just restricted production to retain its premium value.

"Well, this *is* a luxury item of sorts, so we can't make massive quantities. It's not a technological problem, though; more of an issue with my nation's food situation. Remember how we didn't even have beer to offer you at your visit? We've finally finished growing some test samples for the wheat and barley we'd need for that. We'll begin brewing in earnest starting next year, but depending on how much grain we harvest, there's only so much we can devote to high-end distillation like this."

So as I told them, we can only make enough to enjoy for ourselves.

"Ah, is that so? Yes, we rely on Farmus or the Empire for much of the food we import as well..."

"Indeed. Our low food self-sufficiency is our kingdom's single weakness."

"And you can't use magic teleportation to send food long distances, unlike weapons and armor. You're forced to work through merchant middlemen. Which is partly why we've made ourselves into a successful free-trade city, but..."

Hmm. Interesting. Their nation was built from the ground up for self-defense, but large-scale crop production couldn't be very easy in underground caverns. It wasn't completely shut off from sunlight, but it wasn't really suited for food production, either. That's why they decided to tackle that obstacle by polishing their tech skills and encouraging trade. Being a free-trade city pushes more merchants to stop by, strengthens economic bonds with other countries, and makes them a more valuable asset to the world at large—hence why the Dwarven Kingdom was such a force in this land by now. I'd love to learn from that and build our own economic links.

But something else about that grabbed my attention.

"Hey, can I ask a question?"

"Mm?"

"When you said you can't use magic to transport food—?"

"Ah, yes, about that—"

Dolph explained it all in King Gazel's stead. As he put it, transportation magic wasn't a cure-all—using it to teleport organic matter could transform it, due to all the magicules it'd get exposed to. Things like fur pelts might just have their quality affected a little bit, but food would be mutated into something wholly inedible. Gobta had mentioned to me that the Dwarven Kingdom had transport offices in place; I was hoping to research them a bit to see if they could help with our own logistics. Hearing about *this* issue sounded like a big setback.

"But you can transport people all day with teleport magic," I mused. Dolph and Vaughn immediately seized on that point.

"Exactly. Jaine tells us that teleportation works on wholly different principles and levels of magical force consumed. She mentioned it during a military conference where we discussed more effective methods of troop transport."

"Ha-ha-ha! I thought it'd be nice if we could teleport an army division directly behind the enemy with magic. But apparently another nation tried that once and wound up killing several thousand soldiers in the blink of an eye. It was meant to be a last-ditch tactical maneuver, but it wound up wiping the nation off the map."

"Hold it there, you!" King Gazel bellowed. "Are you drunk? That is confidential military intelligence...!"

"Ah! I—I apologize, Your Majesty!"

"Aye, shouldn't have let that one slip. Sorry, sorry. Forget about it."

"Normally, I'd court-martial you for that one. Honestly..."

The king was forceful in his words, but his demeanor didn't indicate much offense. Dolph and Vaughn just smiled and expressed their regret, no doubt recognizing this.

"I see, though," I ventured. "I suppose we'll need to build our trade routes the old-fashioned way. We're on our way to procuring an import source for fruit, too..."

"Oh? Somebody besides us has tried to build ties with you?"

"More or less. Not a humanoid kingdom anyway."

"What? Which country, then?"

"We've only exchanged envoys at this point, but the Beast Kingdom of—"

"No! Eurazania?!"

"Ridiculous! That domineering Beast Master, reasoning peacefully with other nations?!"

"I find that very, *very* hard to believe..."

This came as more of a shock than I expected. I felt a little proud at so thoroughly flooring them like that. I gave them a grin, basking in it.

"Oh, believe it! I had the chance to get acquainted with the demon lord Carillon. He kind of owed me a favor, so I suggested we open up some trade ties, and he gladly agreed to it. So we sent teams of envoys to each other."

"So not just Milim but the Beast Master as well, you...? If that's a lie, then you're the greatest impostor this century has ever known. But..."

"It doesn't seem like one to me."

"If so, then Tempest is suddenly more important than ever. You may be sitting right at the center of world trade before long!"

"So, Rimuru, what do you intend to trade with each other?"

Despite their surprise, King Gazel and his team had opted to believe me. I suppose they analyzed it in their heads and decided it

must've been the truth. Gazel's eyes were back in "king" mode now, searching for ways his nation might profit from this. I was ready for it.

"Well, they have a good supply of fruit and other luxury goods—befitting the magic-driven country they are, I suppose. A far cry from a nation like ours, still scrambling to feed ourselves. There's only enough fruit and such from the forests to keep our own plates full. If we can get enough trade going with that, we'll be able to shift more supply over to our liquor manufacturing efforts."

"Ah! Fruit? Could you distill some of that as well?!"

"Of course we could. Shuna?"

"Yes, Sir Rimuru?"

Right on cue, Shuna presented a different bottle, this one filled with our scarce secret stash of apple brandy.

"Try some."

She passed out new glasses to everyone—her elegant hands filling each one halfway with a clear liquid. Shion had been silent for much of the past while, focused wholly on the drinking effort. I worried a little about her.

"Hohh! What a sweet-smelling concoction *this* is!"

The scent was thicker and mellower than the whiskey from before. King Gazel was immediately in love with it, letting just a few drops fall upon his tongue to sample it before proceeding.

"I...cannot believe this. This is even better than that drink from the Empire I mentioned..."

He's *had* some of that?! I resisted the urge to ask. Unlike that otherworlder's liquor, I had the Sage's Analyze and Assess skills to help me craft the best distillation process possible. It was then aged in barrels made from magical trees harvested from the treants' village, ensuring all the beneficial traits of the original ingredients were matured to their fullest. Keeping the latent flavors, in other words, while imparting aromas from the barrel itself created exquisite harmonies that only deepened the final flavor.

The result was this transparent liquor here—aging didn't give it a whiskey-like amber hue; it remained crystal clear. Amber would make it *look* more like fancy liquor, but that was really a matter of personal preference. *This* tasted a hell of a lot better. If I had started

from scratch on this, I would've had to spend years sifting through and selecting the finest ingredients. Relying on my magic skills instead felt a bit like cheating, but nobody could say that the final product loses out at all.

"I do hope your overtures with him succeed," King Gazel whispered to me. I could tell there was a flood of emotions behind that statement. Dolph and Vaughn both eagerly nodded their agreement—everyone must've really liked that brandy.

Suddenly, Shion stood up. "No need to worry about that!" she shouted. "Sir Rimuru is bound to solve all our problems. It is now a given that we enjoy a wealth of delicious food on our tables on a daily basis. Having it be joined by good drink is all but promised to us!"

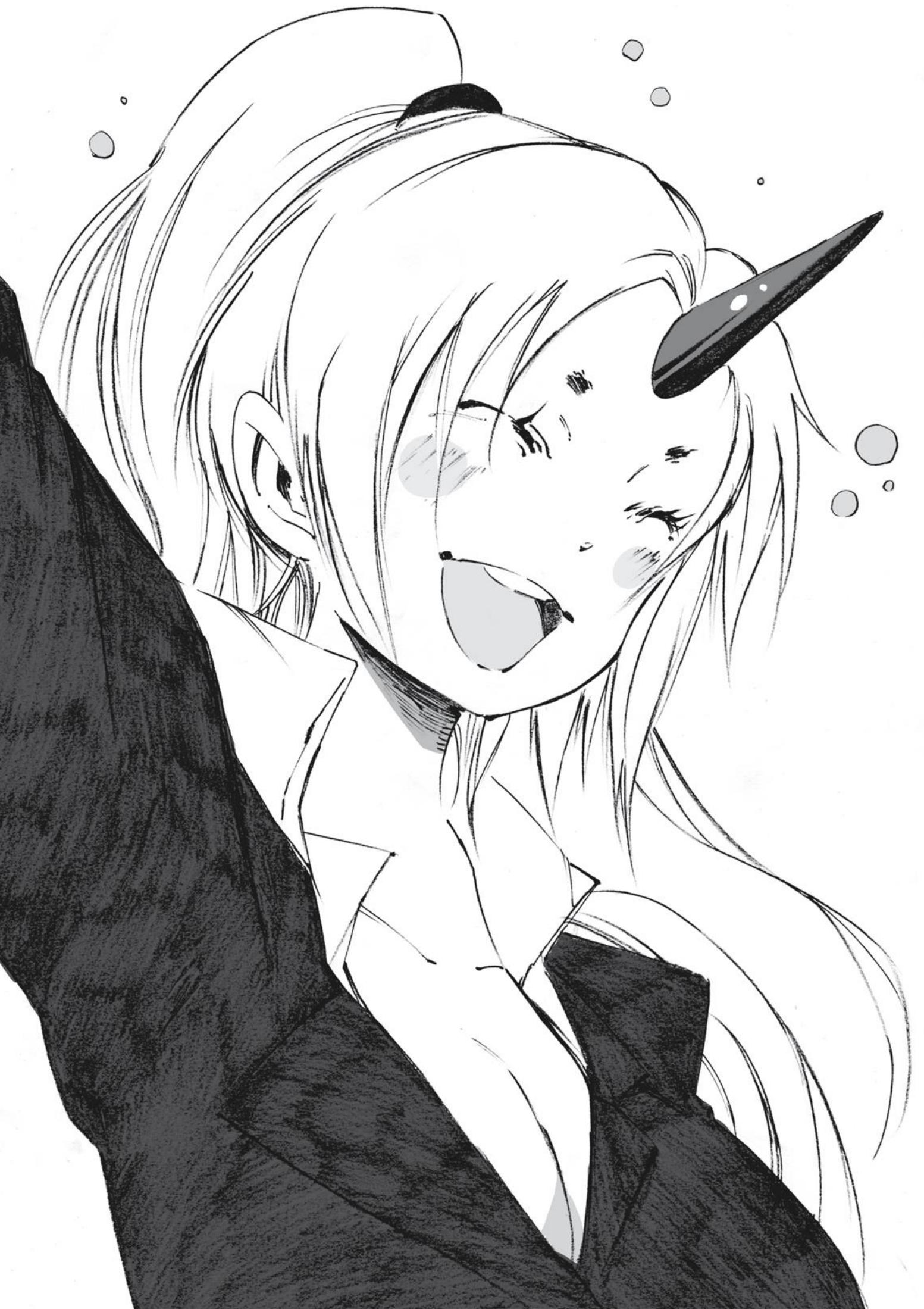
She accentuated her point by draining her glass, settling back down, and immediately falling into a pleasant, self-satisfied sleep.

"....."

I found myself at a loss. "You're making *me* handle all this now?" I wanted to yell at her, but she was already far off into dreamland. *It's just every time with you, isn't it, Shion? Geez.* Still, it was weird. Whenever I had Shion avowing her trust in me, I felt like I could do pretty much anything. I'd bitch and moan about it, but I'd always try to make her wishes come true.

"Well," I offered, "if that's what Shion here's expecting, I'll do my best, I suppose."





"Hee-hee! How reassuring to hear," Gazel said. "I'd expect nothing less from a fellow pupil of Hakuro like yourself, Rimuru. I hope you will be generous with this when the time comes."

Hakuro doesn't have anything to do with this, man. And I know I readily agreed to it, but the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania wasn't exactly right next door. Maybe we could blaze a rough track, but paved-over gravel was out of the question for a while.

"We'll need to build some kind of transport path first, of course."

"Ah, about that... The hard work your crew has been putting in is nothing short of astonishing. They work several times faster than the best of our engineer corps, and seeing them build a road practically before my eyes sends shivers down my spine."

"Yeah, I'm pretty impressed, too."

"But are you sure you are content with this? We are providing you with no support at all. I didn't expect you to come up with such a splendid highway for us..."

"Hey, don't worry about it. That's what we promised you. And actually, I have another offer for you, so if you'd be willing to give it some thought going forward..."

I gave him a satisfied grin.

Step one, put your partner in a good mood. Step two, move on to the main issue. All according to plan. It was now time for me to sell the king on our Low Potions and procure a doctor or two from them—my two biggest goals here. The result: a total success, as I extracted a promise that he would give both offers ample thought.

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With the night now behind us, today was the big day of our friendly bilateral relations pact.

I felt fine, of course, but King Gazel seemed totally unaffected by all the whiskey he drank. Dolph, on the other hand, was looking a bit green around the gills, and I heard Vaughn was still sleeping it off in his room. Wasn't he supposed to be an admiral paladin in the Dwargon force? Could he get away with that? It wasn't my place to criticize how they do things in foreign lands, but come on.

Gazel whispered at me to keep smiling, so I did. The ceremony came and went, and while I was still nervous throughout, nothing terrible happened. Not until just before the end of it, when I was expected to say a few words.

I pored over the speech in my brain before my turn came up. Rigurd and Kaijin had offered some feedback before I left, so after several rewrites, I had it memorized. *I can do this. Let's rock!*

In another few moments, King Gazel wrapped up. I was in slime form now, and Shion held me up to the skies in front of the lectern.

“Umm, hello, everyone. I am Rimuru Tempest, lord and overseer of the Jura-Tempest Federation, or just Tempest for short. To tell the truth, I am, as you see, a slime, and one who was actually born rather recently. Through various twists and turns of circumstance, I came to know and foster a close relationship with Yohm, the champion. When the orc lord threatened to conquer the Forest of Jura, we both worked together to fight off and defeat this menace. Here, in this wonderful land called the Armed Kingdom of Dwargon, man and monster work together to create what is truly an ideal and prosperous coexistence. It is an ideal I wish to pursue for ourselves, as we attempt to build a nation in the Forest of Jura that serves as a bridge between the human and monster races. King Gazel has given his stamp of approval to my dream, which I cannot thank him enough for. Going forward, I want to maintain the mutually beneficial relationship we have. In order to do that, we will need help from each and every one of you. There are a great number of monsters in my nation, myself included. In fact, it would be fair to call ourselves a land of monsters. However, at our core, we are no different from any of you. Instead of fearing us as monsters, I hope you will accept us as new friends. I hereby swear to you that everything I have said is the unvarnished truth, and with that, I conclude my address to you.”

It was short, but I still put as much firm emotion behind it as I could, hoping it would reach the hearts of Dwargon’s people. I was trying to be honest; it wasn’t like I was capable of pulling a bunch of crap out of nowhere for a speech like this. I also didn’t forget to casually note my relationship with Yohm, who was starting to become a legend in his own time.

To me, the speech was pretty well perfect...but King Gazel still gave me an earful about it afterward. One, it was too short; two, it was too self-effacing; three, it was too much of an emotional appeal. To him, it was a near-perfect zero, but it's not like I would get Gazel-style feedback from the likes of Rigurd or Kaijin. *I'll let it slide and tackle things in earnest next time.*

A leader was someone who governed his country; it therefore wasn't advisable for one to depreciate himself in public, it seemed. That was all the more applicable when addressing a foreign audience, since that could lead to them writing you off as a pushover.

Most important of all, however, was that ruling a nation under the concept of "Wouldn't it be nice if..." was strictly prohibited. As Gazel put it: "I won't ask you not to expect great things from your people. But if you speak like that, could you blame them if they betray you later? A leader is treated as a leader because he *leads*. He'd be wholly unsuited for government if he can't even believe what he's thinking. Truly wonderful happenings won't simply come running up to you. You need to grab them for yourself."

I suppose that advice came from the heart; he'd never need to say it otherwise. I accepted it with my utmost appreciation. I had lived wholly outside the realm of politics, but now I had (somehow or other) become the head of a nation. I had to stop crying about things and start *doing* things.

In a way, building the kind of relationship with King Gazel where he kept looking out for me like this... Could I have asked for a better stroke of luck? I wanted to harness that luck as much as I could, no matter how much our personal interests got involved.

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That wrapped up all the major events at Dwargon. Beyond a few casual meetings, I'd be devoting the next few days to tourism and the like.

Dolph would be leading me around. He headed the Pegasus Knights, but that job was classified; officially, he led the civil

servants who filled the government's bureaucracy, which chiefly meant he was King Gazel's assistant.

"So was there someplace you wanted to see? I'll be happy to fill your requests to the best of my ability."

I didn't hold anything back. I wanted to check out every facility here in Dwargon that could teach me something to improve on back home. Dolph was accommodating to it all, thankfully, and we spent several days going through all the Dwarven Kingdom's most famous spots. Production workshops, large-scale transport facilities, even cavern air-purification setups—the works. A lot of it would be helpful to us later, I was sure, especially the air-conditioning facilities and such. I definitely wanted to get something like that set up for Vester and the rest of the gang conducting research underground.

"Regular people aren't allowed inside here, though, are they?" I asked Dolph.

"Ha-ha-ha! Not normally, no, but we have a technology-sharing agreement with you. You already know about things even more classified than this; there's no point hiding anything more from you."

That was a relief. It also showed exactly how much Gazel trusted me.

We finished up most of the touring over the next few days. But of course, there was one place in the Dwarven Kingdom I'd never want to omit. That's right—the Night Butterfly.

Ah, nightlife! I was rudely interrupted by a highly agitated Vester last time I paid a visit, but that was no worry this time.

"Gobta."

"Yes sir!"

"You sure you're fully prepared?"

"Of course, sir!"

"Well, then...in that case, shall we head over to the place I promised you?"

"Ooh, finally, sir! Can't wait!"

We smiled and chuckled at each other.

Gobta and I had been discussing things in great depth to prepare. I would retire early to bed, use Replication to keep a version of myself in there, then head back out to rendezvous with Gobta so we could hit the club together. Kaijin and the others were aware of our plans and would meet us there. There was no need to worry about unwelcome visitors since we had reserved the entire place for ourselves tonight. I was covering all the expenses; I'd been saving up for it, and I still had some of the gold from last time, so I doubted I'd get cleaned out.

It was gonna rock.

I mean, I wasn't anticipating much, but Gobta and the rest of the gang were so excited, I didn't want them to be a pain on the staff or anything. I was...*chaperoning*, that's it! A grown-up conscience for the rest of the crew. Convincing myself this was true, I waited for the night.

Once night finally came, I snuck out of my room, beside myself with anticipation. My body double was in bed, and I knew what Shuna and Shion were doing. They, of course, were my biggest obstacles to enjoying my night. Shion was engaging in some night training with Dolph and Vaughn, with whom she had hit it off, and luckily, the session was set to run exactly as long as our reserved time at the Butterfly. Shuna, meanwhile, was meeting with the palace cooks to organize the going-away banquet tomorrow night.

God had truly blessed us with perfect timing. Without this opportunity, I'd never have had a moment to myself. It was little wonder that I couldn't wait for night to fall.

"Gobta, you there?" I whispered.

"Yes sir! Right here, sir!" he whispered back.

I gave him a nod of approval—a spring in our step as we walked.

"Sure gonna be fun, huh?" Gobta asked for the millionth time. He was really attached to this place; he'd been bugging me about coming there for ages. He probably couldn't be happier now, as his massive smile suggested.

Our preparations fully complete, we followed the familiar path without fail to the club. The moment we opened the door, we were eagerly greeted.

"Oh! Hello! It's the big slime himself! Hey, everybody, he's here!"

“““Good evening!!”””

“Eeeee! I’ve been waiting forever for you!”

“Wait! I get to hold him this time!”

“What?! Since when do we have a rule like that?”

“Welcome back!” the owner shouted. “Everything been good with you?”

“You bet, sir! How ‘bout all of you?”

Oops. I let a little bit of Gobta slip in there.

“Oh, of course! The rest of your friends are already here.”

We had the whole place to ourselves, so my “friends” meant Kaijin and the dwarves. Led inside, we saw them in the main lounge, each with a female companion and in their own respective states of bliss.

“Rimuru! Hey, Boss, this place is spectacular!”

“Yeah, thanks for inviting me today, too, Sir Rimuru!”

“Why wouldn’t I, Kaido? You’ve been a lot of help to me—at least let me spot this for ya. We’re outta here in two days, and you probably won’t see Kaijin too often after that, either. So let’s kick back and chat, okay?”

“Sounds good to me!”

“Hah! What’re you, crazy? A club like this, and you wanna chat with other guys?! C’mon, we got all these fine ladies here—let’s have some fun, too!”

“Yeah, Kaido! Kaijin’s right!”

“Right. Tonight I brought along some necklaces I made for you ladies as souvenirs. Take whichever ones you like!”

“...!!”

Good to see Kaijin was being Kaijin. The three brothers seemed to enjoy themselves well enough, too. But yeesh, Dold, when did you make those necklaces for these ladies? Trying to earn some brownie points? I can’t take my eye off this guy for a single moment.

“Hey! No fair! You’re tryin’ to get a head start on us!”

“What? This is a battlefield, man. Only the strong survive!”

It was an incredibly cool way for Dold to fend off the accusation, I thought, although other people’s mileage may vary. The women seemed to enjoy the presents well enough, though, so Dold’s tactics certainly won out tonight.

At the moment, I was on the knees of the owner, a familiar boinging sensation making itself known behind me. Yes. *This* is it. *This* is it! This is what men go wandering in the vast wastelands for—this oasis, this fleeting sanctuary.

It filled me with such deep emotion that I offered her a drink. The club had all the usual items—beer, wine, milk, assorted fruity things—but I had a sneaking suspicion it'd be offering more mature selections—say, whiskey and brandy before long.

“Ooh, what’s this?”

“Ah, a new product we’re planning to make. We’ll be providing King Gazel with a supply, but we’ll let you guys have a bit as well, so offer it to your regulars and see what they think. I’d love to hear whatever feedback you get.”

“My! Are you sure it’s all right?”

“Oh, no problem. We can’t make very much, though, so it’s not the kinda thing we can ramp up production on for money. Maybe if you could comp your regulars one glass each, then see how much they’re willing to pay after that? I’d like to do some test marketing.”

“Well, aren’t *you* a shrewd little rascal, Sir Slime! I can’t believe this is the same slime who gave that stiff speech in the main plaza earlier!”

The owner smiled warmly and laughed. Realizing she was in the audience filled me with embarrassment. And here I thought she’d be asleep during the day since she works the night shift.

“Yeah, well, that...was kind of an act, you know? I probably looked like a total amateur, didn’t I?”

“Hee-hee-hee! Yes, let’s just go with that.” She smiled at my bashfulness. “But you know, I really liked it! You sounded really sincere. That’s the kind of thing that attracts people, I think. In that respect, you were a perfect ten. I was like ‘I can *totally* trust this slime!’ And I’d just love to see a nation like that—people and monsters living in peaceful harmony.”

This made me happy. Now I knew there was someone out there who took my heartfelt speech seriously and didn’t just laugh it off as a delusion.

“Well, thanks.”

That was about all the reply I could muster, though.

The night was an enjoyable one for everyone involved. Gobta was all nerves at first, but now they were all egging him on to perform some acrobatics for their entertainment. The ladies had him wrapped around their fingers, but he seemed to be basking in it, so I didn't intervene.

Soon, our reserved time slot was almost up.

"Well, time to head out pretty soon."

"Yeah. I wouldn't wanna bother these girls all night."

"Oh, you're not a bother!"

"Aww, you're leaving now?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Sorry, ma'am! I promise we'll be back!"

I was reluctant to go; still, I had to get back. My Replication double was still active, but if *they* found out about this, I'd be in deep crap.

Kaido had cleaned up the home Kaijin and the dwarves used to live in, so they'd be staying there for the night. It'd be ready for use whenever they came back, too. Gobta and I, meanwhile, were headed back to our staterooms in the palace.

"Now listen, guys, make sure nobody sees you on the way back home, all right? This whole night's my little secret!"

No point hammering the point home yet again, but I did so anyway. Just to make sure we all had operational security in mind. But then, one of the hob-gobs sitting on the far end of the lounge spoke up.

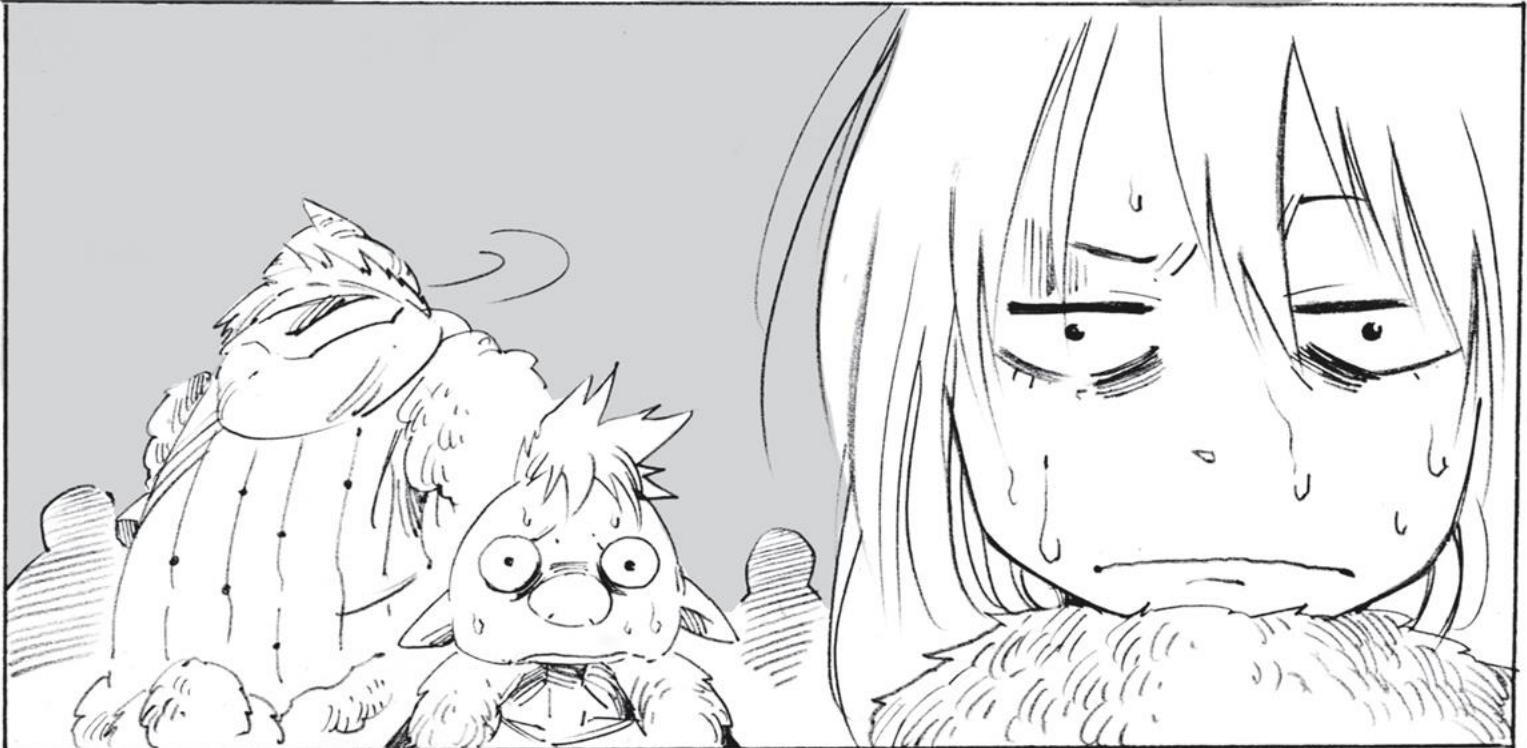
"Oh? Um, Lady Shuna asked me where I was goin', so I told 'er everything, sir, but..."

*Wh-what?!*

The rest of the group stared at him. Gobta went pale and clammy, and the rest of his team was unable to hide their agitation.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, you told her *everything*?"

"Seriously?! Gobzo, what have you done?!"



“That, um. Yikes.”

“W-well, Boss,” Kaijin said, already stone-cold sober, “we, um, we’re going home. Best of luck with today and, y’know, Shuna and things...”

He headed for the door with the other dwarves, leaving us to pick up the pieces.

“Gobtaaaaa!! What kind of training have you been giving these idiots?!?”

“I-I’m sorry, sir!”

With tears in his eyes, Gobta apologized profusely. But this wasn’t the kind of problem a bit of sobbing could solve—and losing my temper would help even less.

Then I heard it.

“You look like you’ve been enjoying yourselves tonight.”

“You were so late coming back, we came to pick you up, Sir Rimuru!”

Shuna’s frigid voice and Shion’s resentful one.

*It’s all over.* The dwarves sat themselves meekly on the floor, preparing for the end. They didn’t quite make it out in time.

Time for me to give up all resistance, I suppose.

“W-we’re so sorry!!”

“Hmm? There’s nothing to apologize about.”

“Exactly. We certainly aren’t angry that you didn’t invite us!”

Their hatred ran *deep* this time. And thus, like perhaps a lot of evenings here at the Night Butterfly, ours ended with us wailing and apologizing to the most fearsome women in our lives.

\*

Gobzo, one of Gobta’s Goblin Riders, had put all of us in the doghouse. I thought Gobta was enough of a lost cause, but Gobzo was even worse. Better keep an eye on him.

The next day, after wrapping up our final dinner banquet, I was called into King Gazel’s personal chamber.

“Rimuru,” he said, “I have decided to accept your offer.” He handed me a stack of documents outlining a potential transfer of

medical staff to our city. "This is just a draft, so I'd like word on how much you're willing to accept as soon as possible."

"All right. I'll bring this home with me and discuss it with my team."

Fortunately for us, he seemed willing to take on what I had offered him. It was a nice way to end our stay in Dwargon, not to mention begin our journey back.

## ROUGH SKETCHES



*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
3

TO HUMAN  
LANDS

# CHAPTER 3

## TO HUMAN LANDS

I had a dream.

A dream that had grown more and more vivid over time.

—*Hurry.*

Again.

—*Please...the children...*

Not this dream again.

—*Please, save the children...*

All right, all right, I promise.

—*Please. The children are in the royal capital.*

The what?

—*The capital of the Kingdom of Englesia. Please, save them before it's too late—*

—And that's when I woke up.

I woke up and then realized I was crying. This was no longer something I could just dismiss as a mere dream. I suppose I needed to head to Englesia—to human-governed lands—as soon as possible. There wasn't a single moment to lose.

\*

For the first time in several weeks, I was back in Tempest. Benimaru and Rigurd had worked together to keep things running smoothly in my absence.

“No fights or thefts to speak of, my lord,” Benimaru reported. “Things couldn’t have proceeded more smoothly. Of course, if anyone was foolish enough to try any of that, I would’ve taken care of them immediately.”

"We've already received a shipment of fruit from the demon lord Carillon," added Rigurd. "They were delivered by air, on the backs of these large avian monsters, so I'm afraid there is just a limited quantity for now."

The monsters who called Tempest home got along pretty well by default, so I wasn't expecting a sudden crime surge. If anything, I felt like my presence attracted the kind of attention this country really didn't need.

Our people had already performed quality checks on Carillon's shipment and divided it into supplies for food and ingredients for future distillation. *Very well done*, I thought.

Things seemed to operate without a hitch whether I was around or not. Yohm and his men were getting along well with the hobgoblins, high orcs, and other local monsters. It was more than my presence that kept Yohm from starting street fights. The monsters, abiding by my rules, were quite a bit friendlier toward them than I thought they'd be—and nobody in Yohm's crew was bigoted enough to look down on them. It was really chill.

They might've been a rabble of hoodlums and pickpockets when I met them, but maybe they weren't so bad at heart. Plus, I really think Yohm's got this inscrutable magnetism, the kind of charisma money just can't buy. And perhaps because both he and the monsters wanted to work together, they were dividing up their roles with surprising ease.

Using Tempest as their base of operations, the team was conducting regular patrols around the villages that dotted the forest. If everything was normal, they trained daily under Hakuro's instruction. The frontier villages now had a firm support system backing them up.

Before, if someone discovered a dangerous monster or herd, they'd have to contact the guild, select a team to dispatch them, and occasionally send out an investigation party first. Without a communication crystal (an expensive magic item), it'd take at least a week for a village to receive any support at all. Unicorns rode *damn* fast, though, so if they got an emergency message from a faraway village, they could head to the rescue within two days.

They could just go on and on without eating or drinking. In terms of all-out speed, they could even beat the starwolves.

That's what being ranked B-plus gets you, I guess. Good thing they weren't all snobby or only allowed virgins to ride them or whatever. That was a relief.

The Goblin Riders were handling security duties around the main city, but if anything, our capital was almost too well defended. As a result, we agreed to have around five Goblin Riders join Yohm's team to handle sudden alerts. They had the free hob-gobs for it, so they were happy to work together. It also helped spread the word about our nation to the more remote villages, so I was all in favor. Yohm appreciated it most of all, and it never hurt for me to be on his good side.

Perhaps he felt a bit guilty about me doing all this stuff for him, so they provided us some instruction of their own on topics like group combat, sword skills, man-to-man martial arts, and so forth. I learned a lot from them about survival techniques and the way they kept themselves fed out on the field.

Our relationship of trust had grown to the point that it wouldn't be ruined if I was out of town for a little bit. And if that's where it was at, that made me feel all the safer about journeying to human lands.

That night, I gathered my officials and talked things over.

"...So I would like to spend some time traveling around human towns and nations. I want to keep it under wraps, too. No need to make a big deal about it."

I told them all about the dreams I'd been having. Dreams I suspected were being shown to me by Shizue Izawa, the woman I consumed. I believed they revealed some of the reasons why she was so intent on confronting the demon lord Leon, despite all her internal conflict. And I unlocked access to them simply because I trained myself to nap a bit, out of sheer laziness. You never know what life will throw your way.

But did that mean when I ate Shizu, I took in her very soul as well? I was starting to think so, but the Great Sage provided no answer. It's always lecturing me on things I didn't ask it about but

keeps its mouth shut in times like these. I imagine it'd answer if I deliberately thought the question, but nebulous queries like these were its main weakness. The Sage, which always sought to be as accurate as possible with its replies, probably didn't want to admit it could be wrong about something. What *is* a soul? Not even it knew.

Once I was done, I gauged the faces around me.

"I understand," a sullen Rigurd began, "but the idea of you setting off alone, Sir Rimuru, is not one we can accept very easily..."

"Indeed," added Hakuro, "if something were to happen to you, it could upset the very foundation of the Jura alliance, and just when it's beginning to take form."

"Well, if we don't want Sir Rimuru to go alone, perhaps we could provide him with protection?"

It was Benimaru who extended that lifeline out to me. As long as I could be kept safe, in other words, he wasn't going to chide me too much.

Then Shion raised a hand.

"It would be all right for me to accompany him, then?"

I'm sure she hadn't been listening. There wouldn't be anything "covert" about my trip if she was with me.

"No, I... I don't want to cause any trouble this time, so I'm planning to do my travels in human form, not as a monster. Soei tells me there are assorted magical barriers covering many of the towns, so if a bunch of super-A ranks like you come with me, we're gonna get spotted immediately. Plus... I mean, look at you, you've all got horns on your heads."

"Our horns are purely decoration! And I'll work to hold my aura back; I promise you!"

"Okay, try it right now."

I laid down the gauntlet, having had enough of Shion's selfishness. If she really *could* dispel her aura, then sure, that'd work. We could conceal her horns some other way.

"Haaaaahhh!!"

Instead, her aura just expanded. Wrong way, dumbass!

"Stop, stop! You're gonna take this building down!"

Shion gave me a glum look of disappointment as I scolded her. I needed to. If I went easy here, I'd wind up bringing nothing but trouble along with me.

"Look, you're a strong woman; I want you to keep order around this town for me. I'm counting on you!"

"Y-yes, sir! I will not let you down, Sir Rimuru!"

Giving Shion a compliment and some work responsibility helped bring her motivation back from the brink—even as her abject failure brought a pained look to Benimaru's face. "So I'm holding down the fort again," he whispered, clearly disappointed. He was probably going to offer himself as a substitute, but if Shion couldn't hide her aura, he didn't have a chance yet, either. Not with the massive amount of magicule energy he carried around, easily the most among the ogre mages. There was no one else I'd want to keep watch over things while I was gone, regardless. He was the only one who could retain authority over all the different monster species here. Shion and Soei, meanwhile, weren't as deft at inter-monster politics.

"Well," Shuna retorted with a prim smile, "I suppose it'll come down to me to join you, then." But that was a problem in itself. Yes, Shuna's aura wasn't as in your face as Benimaru's or Shion's, but she was still nearly an A-ranked monster. There was no talking her way out of that. Plus:

"Actually, I've got a job for you, Shuna. While I'm gone, I want you to keep watch over the town gates to make sure we don't have anyone suspicious coming or going."

If I were there, I'd immediately know if any shady characters showed up. The Analyze and Assess skill kept a constant vigil over what happened in town. Soei could do that on a physical level, but not even he could do much about a magic-born who hid their aura well enough to avoid detection. The demon lords were aware of us now; we had to stay on alert. I was friends with Milim and had at least a working relationship with Carillon, so I didn't think anyone would pick a fight by now, but... I mean, these are *demon lords*. You gotta stay vigilant. So I thought it best to have Shuna stick around and keep tabs on our visitors. The Analysis unique skill she had was at least as good an investigatory tool as mine.

Geld remained silent. He was heading up our road works leading to surrounding nations, which one could say was the biggest civic-works project attempted in Tempest so far, and he wasn't about to abandon his duty that readily. He was too responsible for that, and he knew what his role was.

Hakuro and Kurobe felt similarly. "I could join you, perhaps," the former said, "but I imagine you'd rather have me continue training our troops, Sir Rimuru."

"Yeah, me too! I still got weapons to make with Kaijin!"

They looked despondent about it but relented.

That being said, I wasn't about to go traipsing off totally unaccompanied. From what Kabal's band told me, and from the dangers I'd overcome so far, I had the impression that I was pretty damn strong by this point. But when faced with a threat as overwhelming and hopeless as, say, Milim, I clearly couldn't afford to let my guard down yet. I could always run if I felt there was no chance to win, but for all I knew, something like her could kill me on first sight. I needed some protection.

"Do not worry. I will always be alongside my master. You may all have peace of mind as you carry out your tasks."

Ranga seemed a little too eager to say this, with his tail wagging so hard I thought it'd propel him into the air.

"Plus," Soei added, "I can use Replication to send a body double to maintain contact with Sir Rimuru, informing him immediately if anything should happen. I do not think we need to be that wary."

As a magic-born with some expertise in traversing human cities, I appreciated the experience he'd have in this endeavor. Having them both nearby did a lot to calm my own anxieties, too.

I also had the perfect guides in mind.

"Yeah, guys, quit worrying about me. I made nice with Kabal and his friends just for this kind of occasion. I was thinking they could help guide me."

"I see. In that case, I have no qualms left about this. Sir Ranga, Sir Soei, I leave Sir Rimuru in your hands."

With Rigurd's concerns apparently addressed, he gave me his formal permission to head off. Plus:

"In that case, I had best have Gobta alert Kabal at once. I will get their things ready."

He was already helping me prepare. That's Rigurd for you. Always reliable. And with everyone else nodding their approval, I could embark on this journey without any unfinished business.



The three adventurers walked through the forest—Kabal, Elen, and Gido.

Their job was to explore these woods, handling any monster-slaying and resource-gathering duties that fell on their shoulders. It was tough work that sometimes required them to sleep outdoors for days at a time, but it was getting to be a lot easier than it used to be. That was thanks to the birth of Tempest, the nation of monsters who called the Forest of Jura home.

By this point, they had visited the town of Rimuru several times. They couldn't ask for a better spot for their adventures. The place seemed to change every time they showed up, growing and expanding. It gave them access to artisans who could fix their weapons and armor, and to be honest, all three wouldn't mind having a dedicated adventurer's station of some sort to call home.

Whenever they showed up, they would bring along the assorted fragrant herbs and fruits they found in the forest. Anything rare they presented was welcomed with open arms, and before they knew it, they had adopted a habit of keeping an eye out for anything harvestable Tempest might like. It helped them, too, especially since Tempest had succeeded in cultivating and producing some of the plants they brought back in quantity. That let them use it in food and such, and that directly contributed to the adventurers' general level of satisfaction in their lives.

"Man," Kabal noted, "the food over there gets better and better every time, huh? Shuna's got to be up there with the cooks in the royal capital by now!"

"Nah, better than that! I mean, her stuff would beat any fancy-pants joint back home."

"You said it. I'm a good judge of food, you know, and Shuna's is top-of-the-line. And some of the team under her are nobody to sniff at, either."

"True. But remember, guys, we aren't here just to eat other people's food, got it?"

Kabal gave his companions a stern look before they got too carried away. The quality of Tempest cuisine went without saying, but they stood to earn far more than that.

"You guys haven't gotten so focused on eating that you're forgetting our *real* mission, have you?"

"Oh, don't be so silly, Kabal."

"Yeah! We got Rimuru relyin' on us out here. Better pay him back, eh?"

Kabal nodded.

Rimuru—the monster who had suddenly appeared in the Forest of Jura and started practically ruling the roost in the blink of an eye—had called them to his chamber earlier. The familiar sight of Gobta the hobgoblin flagging them down in the forest was a surprise, but it wasn't the first time, so they managed to keep their cool.

"Um, I guess Sir Rimuru had a request from you guys?"

They weren't bothered to hear this from Gobta—they were pleased, even, as they volunteered their time. Rimuru had treated them well, letting them roam freely around town and even having his underlings help them out of a bad scrape. He had done wonderful things not just for these adventurers but for the human race at large. The berserk Ifrit, the orc lord and his massive horde, the nation-consuming Charybdis: All were unprecedented threats to the small kingdom of Blumund, and Rimuru the slime briskly handled each one. They honestly couldn't thank him enough.

Not that this was their *only* motivation.

"But—hey, hey," insisted Kabal, "they got their patrols lockin' down the forest so tight these days, it'd be a waste of time for us to take any guild monster-slayin' work, wouldn't it?"

"You probably got a point," replied Gido. "All the monster-based materials we need, and we don't even needa break a sweat!"

"Yeah, exactly. And we couldn't have upped our rank to B-plus without him, either!"

"That was kind of cheating, though, wasn't it?"

"Ahh, don't be stupid, Elen! It's just a li'l inside advantage, is all!"

"Yeah! You know what they say 'bout looking gift horses in the mouth, right?"

"I'm not saying you're wrong, guys," countered Elen, "but we have practically a whole stud farm's worth of gift horses from him by now, no? We spent a while explaining how things worked in our town and with the Free Guild, but still, we haven't given him much else!"

"Maybe so." Gido nodded. "I've been trying to get some inside info to pay ol' Rimuru back, but..."

"Ah, you know him; he ain't the kind of guy to sweat the details too much. He said intelligence gathering was important, too, remember?"

Tempest did indeed have regular patrols navigating the areas around the main town—Goblin Riders, composed of hobgoblins and their starwolf mounts. They moved nimbly and quickly to keep the region secure, and it was thanks to them that law and order mostly reigned around the forest. One consequence was all the monster-derived materials and ingredients that now made their way into Rimuru's town—a cache that was being channeled partly to Kabal's team in exchange for new intelligence. Tempest itself wasn't squeamish about using these materials. Much to the adventurers' shock, Tempest was home to several well-known dwarven artisans, but not even they could use all the stuff they had access to. So whatever couldn't be harnessed for weapons, armor, or food, they treated as scrap and let the adventurers have for free.

This was, to put it lightly, a windfall. Horned Hare horns, Poison Frog flippers, Giant Bear ears...even things like armorsaur horns, if they were lucky. Bringing this stuff to the guild was treated as them completing their mission—proof that they'd slain some of the dangerous creatures threatening the towns. This earned them points, and points meant rank upgrades. They couldn't sell these parts for money, but to the adventurers, they were still eminently valuable.

Was it cheating? Oh, absolutely, but cheating was fine in this business if nobody finds out. That, at least, was the attitude Kabal approached this arrangement with as they sifted through Tempest's refuse on a regular basis.

It was true that Fuze, guild master of the Kingdom of Blumund and head of the Free Guild they were affiliated with, was totally aware of all this. He had spoken with Rimuru himself, had seen the town he built, and knew exactly what Kabal's gang was up to. The fact that he simply sighed at them and said "Don't let this make your training go to pot, all right?" was because the trio were an important link between himself and Rimuru. He knew Hakuro, an ogre mage who offered military instruction to the town's monsters, was training them as well. Thus, he reasoned, even with the way they gamed the system, their skills weren't suffering for it.

Fuze was one thing. Others around them were less appreciative. *Anyone* shooting up the point rankings as fast as them was bound to be suspected of treachery. Taking it too far could blow the whole arrangement open, so the guild master called them in one day to advise them to exercise a little restraint.

Now, however, Gobta had brought them much more exciting news.

"But I guess ol' Rimuru's got a direct request for us today, for a change?"

"Yeah! Kinda feels nice to know he's relying on us!"

"Mm-hmm. Time to flex our muscles a little bit!"

Thus, with exceptionally high spirits, they made their way back to Rimuru's town.



According to Gobta's report, the Kabal trio were on their way here right then, likely arriving in two or three days. They were reportedly more than a bit jealous of Gobta just hopping on his starwolf and using Shadow Motion to zip back to town. Elen apparently had the elemental magic Warp Portal in her repertory, but it was only practical for short-range emergency jumps; a very

long distance required a massive amount of catalyst energy to work.

Vester's own warp points needed none of this because they were made out of incredibly valuable magisteel. Perhaps we could provide Elen with one to eliminate the hassle, but they were so large and heavy that delivery would take major effort. Using a catalyst was the easier-to-employ solution, and given the choice, an adventurer would choose the quick-and-dirty method almost every time.

But anyway. Rigurd was handling my travel preparations, so for now, I decided to let Vester and Gabil know about the terms of my contract with King Gazel.

I had gone over the working papers Gazel provided me while on the wolf wagon that took me home. It included the names of dwarves currently working as doctors and the minimum conditions required for their acceptance. I looked all of this over and pondered whether I was willing to sign on, discussing matters with Kaijin along the way. As I did, I came to a mental conclusion, one I now wanted to run past Gabil and Vester, since they'd be working with the guys the most.

Vester was so devoted to his research that he refused an opportunity to return home. *Either it's going really well*, I mused as I teleported into the cave, *or really poorly*.

Gabil greeted me on the other side. "Ah, Sir Rimuru!" he bellowed. "We've been waiting for you. What a wonderful environment this is!" He directed me over to Vester, who was deep in the middle of work but scrambled to his feet upon noticing me.

"Good to see you again, Vester. I'm glad you're doing well, but...is it my imagination or have you gotten thinner? Are you eating all right? Or sleeping?"

"I am quite fine, sir. The food here is simply wonderful, and our menus are growing by the day, no less. I am eating very well. As for my sleep schedule...well, yes, my work might be affecting that, but I do have a cot here I can use. And besides, it's rather nice to sleep only the barest amount that you need!"

So not much sleep, then. Letting him work himself to death would be no laughing matter. As much as he liked it, it was still possible for him to take things too far. But he seemed to enjoy it so much that I simply left it at cautioning him to keep it in moderation. If he didn't heed that, I could always force the issue later. Unlike Kaijin, who had to supervise and direct pretty much everything in his job, Vester was devoted to pure research—something which I'm sure felt like heaven to him.

"So how are things developing? Have you succeeded in stabilizing the extraction process?"

"Oh, it's perfect now, Sir Rimuru." He smiled. "The problem did indeed turn out to be interaction with particles in the atmosphere. Performing the extraction in a vacuum environment now allows us to create Full Potions on a consistent basis. We should be able to produce medicine in quantity regularly."

"And how's our hipokute cultivation efforts?"

"No problems there, sir!" chirped Gabil. "I'm putting diligent effort into raising them!"

"He sure is. At this point, Sir Gabil is something of an authority in pharmaceuticals."

So now we had a manufacturing facility on our hands.

At first, I was going to ask Kurobe to use his Researcher unique skill to produce a ton of copied potions for us. However, that presented problems for the future. Relying on some special, secret ability like that created a weak link that'd knock us out if we lost the person in question. We needed an environment that allowed continual work to be done. Nurturing the right technical staff would make us more powerful as a country later. *That* was the whole intention behind forging a pact with the Dwarven Kingdom.

"Great. So following discussions with King Gazel, I think we're going to see some more personnel in here soon."

"Oh...?"

"Heavens..."

Gabil and Vester both swallowed nervously as they waited for me to continue.

"First, I want both of you to take a look at this."

I handed them the list of doctors, along with their conditions.

"Hoh." Vester marveled as he read over them. "I see Johann and Marchet on this list. With *these* conditions, I don't see a problem with employing all of them..."

His eyes, burning with a new passion, turned to me.

"They're each talented?"

"They're all personnel I'd like to have assisting me. If I can train them here right now, I can have at least one train the next generation of researchers, too."

"And you can trust in these people?"

"Of course. I stake it on my dwarven pride!"

He certainly acted proud. I wanted to know whether these people would live up to the trust required to live in a place like this, and judging by Vester's reaction, it was worth betting on. They were already worthy of assisting him, he said—and he was already thinking, like I was, about how this lab would develop in the future.

"What about you, Gabil? You think you can work with the new people we have in here?"

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Not to worry, sir! I have trained my underlings to be as good a guard unit as you've ever seen. Goodness me, if Sir Vester can vouch for them, I could hardly think of a better team to rely on and work with!"

Gabil certainly didn't mind more people around, which meant my answer was clear.

"Great! In that case, I'll accept these conditions and take in all these dwarven doctors. Vester, you said you're happy with these skills and conditions, but I'd still like you to examine these documents in detail, if you don't mind. Gabil, you inform the other dragonewts and make sure this cave's safe for them all!"

"Absolutely, Sir Rimuru!"

"Yes, my lord! I, Gabil, will sacrifice every bone in his body to serve you!"

"Oh, also, Gabil...?"

"Yes, my lord!"

"Do a good job on this, and I'll appoint you to my executive team. I'll expect you to give it your best."

"Ah... Me, an executive...? In your cabinet?!"

"Um, yeah. And that applies even if Abil decides to welcome you back and appoint you chief of the lizardmen. You're one of *my* people now, and I'd like to treat you as one. Do you think that'll bother you?"

"Not—not a single bit, sir! Nothing would bother me about that at all! I—I am so overwhelmingly happy that I...*sniff*..."

So overcome with emotion was Gabil that he burst into sobs, shedding a steady stream of manly tears. "Wonderful, Sir Gabil, wonderful," Vester said as he patted him on the shoulder.

"Whoa. Not so fast. That *assumes* this is all successful. Don't pretend it's proven fact yet, or else it's gonna blow up in all our faces. I want to see serious effort, okay?"

"Yes, sir! Never have I been so inspired!!"

Gabil had managed to calm down enough to choke out the words. Which was good, because if we were going to bring our recovery potion business (one of Tempest's new specialties) to the next level, I needed him with a cool head.

\*

Vester filled me in on the details later.

At the current rate of manufacture, we could produce a single dose of Full Potion, the highest-quality healing medicine out there, in a full day of work. This included harvesting the hipokute herbs, magically conjuring an air-free vacuum, and operating the extraction equipment. It was a job that ran from morning till evening, followed by another ten hours for the herbal essences to be fully extracted within the potion. It took this long for said essences to make the required magicule fusions in the solution; there was no way to speed up that process.

It all happened instantaneously when I made it inside my own body, but pointing that out wouldn't help matters. Kurobe could harness his own skills to make one in about three hours, apparently, but like I said earlier, this wasn't for Kurobe to get involved with—I wanted him to focus on weapons production. But back to the first topic.

A completed Full Potion could be diluted to create a hundred Low Potions. We were using water from an underground lake infused with magicules, so it was pretty powerful stuff. This dilution works via a magic known as Build Membrane, which was Vester's job, but apparently Gabil had taken it upon himself to learn it and help out as well. They had now divided work duties evenly among themselves—the dragonewts picked the hipokute herbs, Vester mixed them, and Gabil diluted them into a hundred doses each.

In other words, we could now potentially manufacture a hundred Low Potions a day. For sake of comparison, one Full Potion could be diluted to 5 percent strength to craft a High Potion, as produced in the Dwarven Kingdom.

What does this mean, exactly? Here's a quick rundown:

Full Potion: Equivalent to my own self-made healing potion. A de facto cure-all, capable of everything up to and including reconstructing missing body parts.

High Potion: Fully heals even serious injuries. Cannot handle missing body parts.

Low Potion: Heals injury to a certain extent.

By "body parts," I'm talking full-size limbs and such, which ought to give an idea of how potent it was. The magicules inside the medicine crafted temporary limbs; then, over time, the actual flesh and blood would regrow itself, just as it was before.

This was all great, but it led to a thorny issue. What kinds of potions should we be producing? We could only make one Full Potion a day, which meant twenty High Potions and a hundred Low Potions were our production limit. With those research doctors helping out, however, it felt like we could up our daily output to three times that. It took time to grow hipokute, though, so there was no pressing need to speed it up.

"All right. Once we have a steady manufacturing process in place, let's keep a single Full Potion for safekeeping. After that, we'll make a hundred Low Potions to satisfy the terms of King Gazel's contract. Then we'll spend a day making twenty High Potions—that'll be kind of a Tempest specialty, and it'll help us target a

broader audience. So what I'm suggesting is we'll cycle through making a little bit of each. That sound doable to you?"

"Hmm. I imagine so, Sir Rimuru, once Johann and his colleagues arrive. I should be able to devote myself entirely to supervising the effort by then."

If we could make this much happen, I'd say that was enough. It was important, going forward, to have Vester serve as a teacher for our future employees, as much as I was sure he'd want to shove the grunt work on the new guys and focus on research again. If we wanted to have it easy, we'd need to have a fully trained staff working under him first.

"Sounds great, then. I'll be expecting hard work from you two!"

"Yes, sir!"

"I promise I will!"

With those firm promises, I took my leave.

\*

Now we had our general direction in place.

For the time being, I took ten samples of each potion type from our storage and placed them in my Stomach. I thought they'd be nice to show off to any merchants I passed, especially if I wanted to make these into trademark Tempest goods. Better talk with Kaijin to figure out what I should be charging for them, though.

Currency in this world mainly took the form of coins, or metal pieces. There were no paper bills—paper had only just become a commodity, and it was still too costly. I was surprised to find out that the coinage circulated around the Western Nations was actually minted in the Dwarven Kingdom—which made no sense to me, but that's what it was. The conventional wisdom back in my own world was that the value of a currency was directly proportional to the power of the nation that made it, and that rule largely applied here, too. Some of the individual nations to the west minted their own, yes, but Dwarven coinage and its guaranteed quality were treated as the official standard across most of the land.

To put it another way, it was a key currency around here, the coinage of a superpower. If you wanted to use some other money from a smaller, less powerful land, it'd be subject to careful scrutiny from a money exchanger—with high fees, of course. The money I had was the gold coins Kaido gave me, so at least I didn't have to worry about that.

This world's economy was still in its early stages, in that money was really nothing much beyond a substitute for bartering. I figured there was nobody issuing government bonds, no futures trading, no systems that helped back people's trust in currencies. It was all based on solid, real-life exchanges, for better or worse. All this was instead made possible in the Western Nations by a regulatory system run by an outfit called the Council—but it was all starting to become too much to wrap my head around, and it wasn't like it involved me at all, so I resolved to check that out later.

There were generally three types of coins in circulation: bronze, silver, and gold. To me, one bronze coin was equivalent to around ten cents. Anything below one cent in value was considered small change. Their usage depended on each individual nation's currency, but I doubted I'd be dealing much with anything like that. Silver coins were pegged at one hundred bronze coins, which made them kind of like a ten-dollar bill. Two of these coins were the going rate for a night at the inn of a rural farming village—which, hey, twenty dollars for a hotel room *sounds* great, but don't expect the quality of a modern Earth hotel or even a hot meal. If anything, two silver seemed a little pricey.

Finally, gold coins could be traded for a hundred silver pieces, making them the equivalent of around a thousand bucks. This world was based on the gold standard, meaning the metal had inherent value in itself, so this made sense. Some of the peasantry might go their whole lives without handling a single gold coin, which made it easy to gauge what kind of economic prosperity much of the people enjoyed.

Speaking of things you may never see, there was also something called stellar gold coins, or just stellars for short. These were produced with a specialized dwarven process and instilled with a compressed supply of magicules, giving them an artistic value

beyond their monetary one. One of these was worth a hundred gold coins, making them chiefly reserved for large business transactions and payments between nation-states. Which made sense—being worth around a hundred thousand dollars, it was really more like a security certificate.

Our extravagant evening at the dwarven nightclub a while back still left me with fifteen gold coins to work with—in other words, about fifteen thousand dollars, which meant I was carrying some pretty serious bank around. Not sure I want to think what that night cost me, though...

To sum up: one hundred bronze equals one silver; one hundred silver equals one gold. Easy. So what to charge for those potions? The main reference I had were the Low Potions on sale now in the Dwarven Kingdom, which went for three silver coins a pop. More than I thought! That could be an entire day's wages for someone. However, an adventurer's main asset was their physical health. It was considered far wiser to shell out for some potion than risk losing a few days or weeks of salary due to injury.

Trying to skimp on your healing tools on a monster-slaying job, where your life was constantly on the line, would be silly. Even if you had a sorcerer on hand for healing, you still needed to take care of yourself—the delay before healing magic takes effect could easily spell your doom. Some sorcerers were better than others, of course, but either way, having an emergency potion in hand was quicker and much more reliable.

With that in mind, it was time to think about High Potions. The level of healing they provided was on a scale far beyond Low Potions—which made sense, given they had five times more hipokute extract in them. Thus, they needed to be at least five times the price, or they wouldn't be worth crafting.

“Listen, Boss,” Kaijin said when I asked him about it, “those things would be a steal even at quintuple the price. I’d say at *least* twenty silver. This isn’t some toy an idiot out on their first errand would purchase. You’d be targeting at least B-rated adventurers with ‘em. Don’t be afraid to charge a premium, either—let’s try for twenty-five, maybe.”

All right. Fair enough. It *was* pretty useful stuff, and I didn't want to be overwhelmed with orders anyway. Twenty-five silver coins seemed like a fair target, too—I wasn't running a charity.

We'd already decided to supply Low Potions to King Gazel for two silver each. A stock of one hundred would go for two gold coins, then, which meant we'd be grossing the equivalent of about two thousand bucks per day...? They'd be a regular customer, too, and it seemed like decent remuneration for the efforts of Gabil and crew. Better to save the higher profit margins for those Tempest-exclusive High Potions, I thought—sell those wholesale for twenty silver, and that'd be four gold per day; twenty-five silver, and that was five gold. But that was all up to my negotiation skills going forward.

"All right. I'll put the prices up high to start and earn as much profit for us as possible. And in the future, when our operation's ten, twenty, a hundred times bigger, I'll do my best to make sure our treasury gets the maximum out of that!"

"That's the spirit, Boss!"

Now I was all ready to go.

\*

*Woo-hooooo!*

There was something about hitting the big cities that always got my adrenaline pumping. Getting to embark on a trip solo like this, unbothered by any other obligations, made me feel free for the first time in a while. I liked it. I couldn't afford to let this opportunity go to waste.

Of course, there was one goal I didn't want to forget as I forged my way into human lands. There were those dreams with the children, yes, and trying to secure some new sales routes for our potions, but I hadn't forgotten my original objective—to meet one or two people from my original world. People like Shizu and her two apprentices—both "otherworlders," as she put it. When I showed her a little bit of what Japan looked like these days, she also gave me some insight into her own memories.

Yuuki Kagurazaka and Hinata Sakaguchi. I wanted to see them both, but honestly, that Hinata Sakaguchi lady kind of freaked me out. She was the kind of person who's relied on nothing but her own powers to survive. Even ten years ago, she was either equal to Shizu or above her power-wise, which unnerved me.

Might be better to save her for later and hit up Yuuki first. He was said to be the Free Guild's grand master, the highest position in the organization, so he had to be pretty capable, too. If I had his support as a monster, I couldn't ask for someone better to rely on.

I ticked off all the things I wanted to do as my mind raced with thoughts of the human towns I had yet to see. It had been nearly two years since I was reincarnated in this world, and now, I could finally interact with *their* nations a little.

Our own stronghold was deep in the forest, behind the mountain with the cave Veldora was sealed in. The Dwarven Kingdom was northeast of us, Carillon's Beast Kingdom southeast, and Blumund to the west.

Right now, three highways were in the works leading out from Tempest. One, linking it to the Dwarven Kingdom, was nearly complete. The second, leading to Eurazania, had only just begun construction. The third, headed for the Kingdom of Blumund, would begin to proceed in short time, I imagined. There were (generally speaking) two paths between us and Blumund—a trail that plunged straight through forest land, and another that circled over to Farmus before hitting Jura. That path took longer, but with all the dangers in the forest, the Farmus route was the safer one, if you had the time for it.

Kabal's party usually took that one; it involved beginning on one of the highways from Farmus or the Dwarven Kingdom and taking a turnoff for the forest midway. These were rough walking trails, of course, originally blazed by animals. Thus, taking a round trip from Blumund to Tempest was a daunting task—you could pick up a stagecoach on your way here, as Kabal put it, but you might not be so lucky on the way back, especially if you're trying to cram in three people.

As a result, even a one-way run took anywhere between two and four weeks, which just shows how impossible it was to schedule one with any accuracy. Bad weather or the wrong kind of monster encounter could further delay things. You really did stake your life on the journey; Kabal took his familiarity with it as a source of pride.

So he and I discussed all this as we prepared to leave. To them, hearing about a new highway opening a formal route from Tempest to Blumund was a real eye-opener.

“What kind of trail’re you talkin’ about...?”

“Hmm? Didn’t I promise you I’d build a highway to Blumund?”

“N-no, you did, but... It’s going rather fast, isn’t it?!?”

Hmm. Is it? It *was* an ambitious schedule by my old construction company’s standards, but with the monster crews I had at my fingertips, it seemed doable enough to me. I must be getting too used to this world.

“It is not too fast, no,” Geld advised. (He would be leaving town with us, so he could rejoin his work crews out on the field.) “I’m working hard here, but there’s still room for more. I need to do everything I can to earn my keep with you, Sir Rimuru.”

Gido, Elen, and Kabal looked stunned.

“Yeah, um, Geld might say that, but to me, this kind of construction speed is crazy! I mean, even with a nationally funded highway like the one we’re taking, this level of quality in such a short time couldn’t possibly be real...”

“No, not at this speed. Not even if you had a team of wizard-class magicians working for you.”

*I don’t know what’s with these guys, really. They’re so amazed by the tiniest of things. But I’m sure Kabal and his gang will get used to things shortly.*

“Well, no need to worry about it,” I said, trying to shift the topic toward more positive things. “Boy, this is gonna be one hell of a trip! I hope you’ll have fun guiding me, Kabal.”

The mention of his name made Kabal snap out of the weird sort of daze he was in. He gave me a half-panicked nod and boarded our wolf wagon.

We traveled for a little while after that, but for some reason, our human companions didn't seem very cheerful. They stared at me, looking a bit dubious of the whole thing. Maybe they were hoping to spend more than a single night in Tempest before getting back on the road. They had actually arrived right on schedule, the evening after I had completed all my preparations. I felt a little bad about it, but we left early the following morning, as planned.

"Hey, that'll be no problem."

"Yep! You've been real kind to us, Boss."

"Ooh, sure, that's what we're here for!"

They all seemed accepting enough earlier, but... I decided to come out with it.

"Hmm, maybe I should've had you guys stay in town a little bit and rest up first?"

"Oh, no, Boss!" Kabal vigorously shook his head. "This wagon's almost too well-built, so I was just kicking myself for all the pain we had to go through by comparison to get here!"

"You sure said it!" Elen exclaimed, clearly waiting for this. "I mean, what kind of horse—I mean, wolf wagon *is* this? I haven't felt a single bump this whole time!"

"Yeah, exactly! This is so comfy, it barely even feels like a journey to me!"

"Well, hang on, hang on!" I had to stop Elen and Gido before they got any redder in the face. "What do you mean, you haven't felt a bump? It's been springin' around all over the place!"

On roads like this one, laid out but still unpaved, the wheels bounced with every small pebble they ran over. Running paths like these at twenty, twenty-five miles an hour made for a lot of shaking. It really made me wish these roads would get *done* already. But Elen just laughed the idea off.

"Hah! This barely even counts as bumpy in my book! Regular horse wagons can't run this fast in the first place, and if they did, they'd put the passengers through all kinds of hell!"

"Damn right," echoed Gido. "With a *real* horse wagon, it's a given that your ass is gonna have a bad time. Ride in one for long enough, and you'll have aches and pains up and down your whole body! If

you think a little *tink!* here 'n' there counts as bumpy, a real horse wagon's gonna reduce you to tears!"

"He's right, Boss. Being in a smooth ride like this and having someone be all like 'Man, this sucks' or 'You guys tired out yet?' ...I mean, it makes me wonder why we went through all that crap up to now, is all. Especially if you're all set to explore these unknown lands, watching out for monsters that might leap on ya at any time—something as easy as *this* doesn't count as a journey at all!"

*Well, what do you want from me, guys? It's still a journey either way, isn't it?*

"Yeah, well anyway, just relax. Kaijin didn't say anything along those lines when we went to the Dwarven Kingdom in it. Don't you think you're playing this up a little too much?"

"No."

"No!"

"I sure don't, no..."

*Ugh. Like I said, what do you want from me?*

"Well, look, this is reality, you know? Just another way of traveling."

"No, Boss," Gido lashed back, "what I'm telling *you* is that you're crazy to think that."

"Yeah! I mean, the easier the better, but..."

"That, and Kaijin didn't say anything like that because *his* guys built this. He's happy with it because he's got *your* approval on it, Rimuru. That's probably why it didn't feel right to state the obvious. Plus, hell, why are Kaijin and Garm even living with you guys anyway, Boss? Isn't that weird?!"

It seemed they couldn't hide their shock at having some of the best dwarven artisans in the land living alongside monsters like us.

"What's the big deal with that? They're friends of ours. And if you don't like having a nice, easy journey, we could always walk instead."

"Well, no, um..."

"I just said, the easier the better!"

"I wouldn't want anything else, Boss!"

If they were *that* dissatisfied with traveling in comfort, I figured they would've been a lot more eager about my suggestion. Guess not. What a pain.

"Okay, then the topic's over, guys! How 'bout we talk some more about the city you live in?"

They muttered a few *but*s and *awwws* about this, but even they had to admit that a wolf wagon was a pretty awesome ride, so they dropped the subject. Nobody gave me this kind of feedback during my last journey. It was funny to see these kinds of differences in common sense among my friends. I was planning to purchase a horse and wagon once we hit Blumund, but if they were *that* keen on walking, maybe I shouldn't bother.

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So the journey continued on without incident. We had left at sunrise, and it was already past noon.

"I can't believe this," Kabal muttered. "That mountain looks so *small* now..."

Gido and Elen nodded their agreement. Well, yeah, guys. A starwolf's a B-ranked monster by itself, and unlike a horse, it didn't need to rest after this much distance. If anything, this was a mild jog to that species' standard. It could keep on going practically forever at this rate.

I gave Kabal a wry grin as Geld turned to me. "Sir Rimuru, what will we do for lunch? There's a resting house a ways ahead."

Ever prepared, he had set up food for us in a nearby waypoint.

"Nice one, Geld. Let's take a break and have ourselves a meal in there!"

That lit up the mood across the wagon. Despite their initial complaints, the adventurers were well used to traveling in wolf-wagon luxury by now, even enjoying the view out the windows. Talk about self-absorbed.

Once we reached the hut, Geld hopped off the coachman's seat. The starwolf pulling us was a body double of sorts provided by Ranga, so there was no particular need to attend to it. It was simply being run down the road at the equivalent of cruise control. Geld,

however, volunteered to take the seat anyway, claiming he'd take up too much space. I loved how serious-minded he always was, and it reflected clearly in his work. The perfect picture of an artisan, I suppose.

As we ate, we discussed our future plans.

At the moment, we had only blazed about half the trail to Blumund. Over a third of it was still untouched forest. We had kicked things off by having me examine the forest from above, picking the route with the fewest obstacles. We drew up a plan for building the most suitable highway possible after we took height measurements at regular intervals to figure out how the path sloped.

Geld's crew was now in the midst of following that plan and constructing the road itself. The crew was divided into three teams—one to cut down and transport trees; one to level and improve the road surface; and one to lay down the paving and finish it off. Such was the general division of labor. The route we picked didn't require any wide detours and extended a little bit under two hundred miles, with Blumund being a measure nearer to us than the Dwarven Kingdom.

On the way was a lush forest, rugged mountains and valleys, and a wealth of native creatures. With this highway, however, merchants could complete a full one-way walk in under a week. They'd need to deal with monsters, granted, but it'd still be an enticing route to take.

A regular wagon sans wolf could finish the journey from Blumund to Tempest in three days, as opposed to ten between us and Dwargon. Depending on conditions, this meant a trip from human to dwarven kingdoms could be completed in around two weeks. The current Farmus route apparently took at least three, and while monsters weren't a major threat there, bandits and the like were, so security costs often ate up any potential monetary savings. It could make our nation an even more important hub in the local infrastructure.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. For now, after another hour or so's journey by wolf wagon, we'd reach the edge of current construction. From there, I imagine we'd switch to walking.

"Ah, so *that's* where we'll be coming in," Kabal eagerly commented. He was right.

"You certainly will. Make me proud!"

"Sure thing."

"Absolutely!"

"About time I had something to do, Boss!"

They were all raring to go, so I imagined I was fine. Soon, our lunch was complete, and it was back on the road.

Two hours later, Geld and his crew of high orcs waved their good-byes as we set foot in the deep forest ahead.

"Heh-heh-heh! Better be careful, Boss! This is already the Forest of Jura here! The den of monsters itself!"

"But don't worry! You're with us, so...!"

"Leave the heavy lifting to us, Boss!"

They were certainly enthusiastic now. I was glad. Trying to convince a Jura resident like me that this was a den of monsters would be an uphill battle, however.

Kabal quickly took out a dagger and began swiping at the coiled vines ahead, carving out a gap just large enough for a person to squeeze through. Gido, meanwhile, put an ear to the ground, checking for any violent monsters in the area, as Elen ran around and cast spells to grant everyone things like insect repellence, poison detection, and some light bodily defense. A forest like this was laden with potential danger, from stings by poisonous bugs to the thorns on hanging vines.

I was impressed—this certainly wasn't their first rodeo. I was in human form, wearing my mask. Nobody would ever mistake me for a monster now. I was just the weird little companion of a bunch of equally weird adventurers.

"Hey," Gido asked, "why'd you bother putting that mask on?"

"I can't fully hide my aura yet, actually. It'd be bad if I got caught in some magic barrier, and people found out I was a monster, so this is a just-in-case kind of thing."

"Ahh, you sure don't look like one to me," he muttered back, but he didn't press me any further.

We continued in this vein for three hours. It was already evening, about time to set up for dinner, but the three didn't show any sign of resting. Instead, they were discussing something, cold sweat dripping down their foreheads. We were on a path that, for some reason, I remembered being on before. What were they doing? I figured I could leave things to them, being veterans and all. One of 'em looked ready to cry, even. *Better butt in.*

"Hey, hey, you guys aren't lost, are you?"

"N-nnnnno, of course not, I don't imagine!"

Kabal was talking funny. I didn't like that. Are we okay? I brought up a map in my mind; this was definitely a path we traversed earlier. Maybe I was just imagining it...wait, I *couldn't* be!

"Quit screwing with me, guys! You're lost, aren't you?!"

The three shivered.

"""I'm sorry!""""

They shouted their apology in unison, bowing their heads at me. They *were* lost. Are these guys really professionals or what? Ah well... We weren't in that big of a hurry, and I didn't feel like setting up camp. There'd be huts set up in the construction zone; we could rest up over there.

We made it back in about an hour, following the trail we blazed. I used Thought Communication to warn Geld, so they had food ready for us upon arrival. My three companions couldn't have looked more sheepish.

"How could we have gotten lost in a place like that...?"

"Kind of hurts my confidence..."

"Yeah, and I'm supposed to be a pro at forest trails, so this is even worse for me!"

Gido seemed to take it the hardest, but it hurt them all, given how much they wanted to show off around me. Geld responded by showing them all a single flower.

"Maybe this was the cause?"

Hmm? What's that?

"Ah!" Elen exclaimed. "That's a baffledil, isn't it? They're a collection target for B-ranked guild quests. Not exactly easy to track down!"

This flower, which has a hallucinatory effect on its environs, was both rare and sought after for use in magical items.

"Yep. This guy's been delaying our own work effort today, too." He bowed to the trio. "Sorry I didn't warn you about it earlier."

He hadn't bothered, he explained, because he figured we couldn't be lost with my Magic Sense ability. He had a point. Given that I flew right over this patch of forest to help plan out the route, the idea that I'd get lost walking much more slowly through it must never have occurred to him. It was hardly Geld's fault. If anything, it was mine, for wanting to have an Authentic Adventurer Experience without any cheats.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry for being negligent myself. I'll help 'em out more tomorrow!"

Geld had already had his crew track down and uproot the baffledils in the area, lest they interfere with work any further. There were over a hundred stuffed into a bag inside their storehouse. It seemed like a neat opportunity, so I swallowed them into my Stomach and had them analyzed. They were glad for it, too—burning them would just release the hallucinogens into the air, and burying them could make them take root and threaten passersby again later. If they were useful enough for the guild to assign quests about them, then win-win, I guess.

That was our first day on the road. The next morning, as promised, I planned to provide my adventuring team with my full assistance.

*Time to shine, Glutton!* I thought as I pointed my right hand forward. In an instant, the trees and growth in front of us disappeared.

"Hey, Geld, I'd like to eat up enough width for you to build the road on, but that's gonna take too much time, sadly. I'll just eat what's in the way of us and put it in a big pile, so can you clean up for me?"

"Yes, sir. No need to worry about that. That's our job."

With his agreement, I breezily ate up the trees and vegetation in our way as I walked. It went much more quickly than yesterday.

“...Are you kidding me?”

“This is crazy. I’m telling you, this is crazy!”

“I know Rimuru’s not, like, *normal*, but this is just...”

I seemed to be scaring my companions a little, but I wasn’t worried.

“Hey! Quit staring and start following me!”

We were back on the trail.

After about a week of this and that, we finally reached the edge of the forest. It was mostly along the trail I originally surveyed from the air, and we didn’t waste much time along the way. I was in no hurry, though. I’d been enjoying the sights and wonders along the journey.

I never tired in slime form, really, and by definition I never got “dirty” per se, so I admittedly had an easier time of it than others. Elen’s cleaning magic—or whatever she had—helped a lot, though. I tried it out, and my version was more powerful anyway, so I cast it on the rest. The results reportedly made the journey quite a bit more pleasant for them.

Building a campfire was a snap, and we had a lot of food along with us. More than anything, though, the wolf wagon in my Stomach, complete with long, sofa-like seating and a solid roof, was excellent. There were sofas in the front and back, facing each other, letting two people use them as beds. I didn’t need to sleep and thus could keep watch every night, but they were too polite to let me. So two of us took turns keeping watch while two rested inside.

It was much more relaxing than a lot of inns out there, so the other three loved it. “Rimuru,” Elen said, beaming at me, “let’s be adventuring partners forever!!” I couldn’t say yes to that, but I’m glad she enjoyed my digs, at least.

Maybe life would’ve been a lot different if I wasn’t leader of the Forest of Jura, huh? I could probably leave most operations to Rigurd and the rest of my bureaucracy by now, but I couldn’t go AWOL forever.

...In the *future*, though, maybe. Once I wasn't so needed any longer, perhaps it'd be fun to be a freelance adventurer for a while. *Too bad you guys will probably be dead of old age by then...*

Well, *that* thought came out of nowhere.

Now part of me wondered if Milim had similar feelings. Maybe it'd be better to be a lone wolf, after all, instead of making lifelong friends who I'm doomed to outlive. I dunno. I didn't have enough experience to answer that question right now.

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
4

## THE KINGDOM OF BLUMUND

# CHAPTER 4

## THE KINGDOM OF BLUMUND

Blumund. A smaller kingdom, population under a million. It consisted mainly of little villages, collected into regions ruled by noble lords. The only big settlement to speak of was the capital. It was seriously a *super-tiny* country.

Guided by my trio of friends, we proceeded to a rural village. The tranquil sight of it, surrounded by fenced-in fields, greeted us past the forest.

Our first mission was to reach the Blumund office of the Free Guild in the capital. There, I planned to meet up with Fuze and have him write an invitation to see grand master Yuuki Kagurazaka. No way would they let me just walk up and see the man; I figured I'd need some kind of reference. Fuze had already sent word that he'd be okay with this, so presumably, he'd get that thing written up once I arrived.

There was a regular passenger route from this village to the city, serviced by two stagecoaches a day. It took less than three hours to reach our destination. It was a small kingdom and thankfully one with a pretty decent road infrastructure. Transport didn't seem to be a problem.

Reaching the village just before noon, we had lunch at the local inn and tavern. As we relaxed in there, I suddenly heard someone bragging in a loud voice.

“So y’know what I did? I took my Great Axe and— *Fwam!* I smashed that sucker to the ground! And *here’s* what I got t’show for it!”

“Wow! That’s incredible, Bydd!”

“This’s a pretty strong monster, ain’t it, Bydd? You beat it all by yourself?”

"Yeahhh, you could say that. After all, the likes of a Horned Bear ain't no threat to me!"

It sounded like he had whipped some powerful monster pretty well. Curious, I took a glance in their direction—only to find the massive corpse of...*something* sprawled out on a table, almost wholly covering it.

I thought I was going to spit out a mouthful of food right there. I was expecting the Horned Bear of the story—this wasn't it. A total fake; a regular bear with the horn from a Horned Hare lodged in its skull.

It could admittedly be tricky to tell the difference between regular animals and monsters. Throw in creatures that're mystic or magical in nature, and they get even trickier to categorize. Ranga, for example, would probably be classified as demonic, since he relied mainly on magicules for sustenance—if he were carnivorous or herbivorous, that'd be more in the realm of magical. But then, of course, he'd been known to chow down on some prey now and then, too. The whole exercise gets a little meaningless after a certain point.

There was, however, one pointed difference between animals and monsters: strength. Technically speaking, magical beasts become magical in the first place once an animal is infused with magicules; it was a given that this led to certain physical boosts. As a result, it's actually quite easy to classify a cadaver as magical or not—just examine its musculature and the composition thereof. My magic-driven analysis skills made it simple, although maybe not quite as much for the average village bumpkin. Not unless the corpse coughs up a magic crystal for them.

"Hey, he's trying to pass off a fake Horned Bear on those guys. Is that, like, okay?"

"Hmm?" Kabal took a peek. "Ooh, you're right. Well spotted, Boss."

Elen had to stifle a laugh. "Ahh, they stuck a Horned Hare one on it! Anyone who's had more than half an hour's magic practice could tell that right off."

"Wow, it's that obvious to you guys? So what's the point of doing that? If you saw right through it, I'm sure the guild would, too."

"Nah, Boss, I think he's got different motives. He'd get branded a charlatan the moment he dragged that thing to the capital, but in a village like this? He's the hero of the day! So in a few seconds, I'm sure he'll be all like 'I'll guard this village for ya, so how 'bout some room and board?'"

Aha. Gido's theory made sense. So this was just a swindler, then. You never know what kind you'll run into.

I was prepared to leave the guy alone, chalking it up as a learning moment for me, when:

"Whoa, whoa, hang on a minute. You think I can't hear you bastards mumblin' about how you think this's a fake? You wanna mess with me, you better be prepared to pay for it!"

Bydd, the swindling braggart, stood up and walked our way. Why is it always the guys like *these* who have excellent hearing? It's like they're just itching to cause trouble. Plus, there was another side effect to this—it drew the attention of the entire tavern to our table.

"Hey, isn't that Kabal...?"

"Elen's there, too!"

"And that's gotta be Gido, then!"

In a few moments, we were surrounded by well-wishers. It was enough to make Bydd hesitate, his face growing visibly paler by the moment.

"What...? Ahh, you three are so mean! If you've come back home, you should've at least said as much!"

He sidled up to Kabal, so close that I thought he'd shortly be giving him a backrub, and launched a flurry of polite bows at him. It was quite the flip-flop.

"Sorry, you were...?"

"Aw, c'mon, it's Bydd! The guy you beat up over in the capital a while back? I sure learned a lot from that session, Kabal!"

Their last encounter reportedly involved Bydd trying to steal some of their possessions. Now he'd changed professions from thief to con man. He never quits, I suppose—or never learns.

*Still... Whoa, Kabal and his friends are pretty famous around here, huh? This swindler isn't exactly on a first-name basis with Kabal, but*

*he definitely knows and respects this trio.* The rest of the tavern stared at them, positively dazzled.

I was sure Kabal didn't appreciate being respected by underworld elements like *this guy*, but this kind of notoriety was a surprise to me. It sounded like their recent rise through the adventuring ranks had earned them some fame. Which meant... *Ooh, that's not entirely thanks to me letting them bring back monster parts we didn't need around town, is it?*

I gave the three of them judgmental stares, and they hurriedly turned their eyes elsewhere. Ah well—better not pursue it right now. Everyone has little nits they'd prefer people didn't pick at.

*So I won't get into it. Not right now.*

"You guys... You know why I'm looking at you?"

"""Y-yes, sir!"""

All three responded in unison, of course. *Well, good. Now, if I ever need some help, I'm guaranteed to have them at my beck and call. Next, let's tackle Bydd.*

"And you, too—if you want people to think you're cool or whatever, then why don't you actually help them out when they need you? I think you'll find people will treat you a lot differently once you do."

"...Yeah, I'll try."

I let him go with just that warning. I was technically Kabal's guest here, so I didn't want to make things awkward for his band later. Bydd *did* seem genuinely sorry, so there was no need to go beyond that.

Apart from that run-in, the journey was going pretty smoothly.

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Soon, we were walking down the street in the capital of Blumund. To me, the buildings seemed old-fashioned but solidly made. A throwback to the good old days—I couldn't say how good they actually were, but definitely that romantic sort of medieval-European feel. Kind of a neat contrast to our own city, which boasted a great deal of Japanese-style homes.

Everyone we passed by seemed bright and cheerful. The atmosphere certainly wasn't gloomy or downtrodden. According to Kabal, the government had sent out an alert previously to prepare for a large influx of monsters, but that was now lifted, which meant nobody had to worry about their homes being wrecked.

Regardless, this was still a largish city in an otherwise rural nation, and even here on the streets, I couldn't help but notice how many passersby were armed. Many were also rather, shall we say, *suspect* in appearance. Even with my mask on, I still felt like just part of the crowd, which I was glad for. It's all very, well, *fantasy*.

One thing did stick out, though. As I Analyzed and Assessed my surroundings, I noticed that much of the weapons and armor I spotted were in very poor condition. In that way, it seemed fitting for the people around us, none of whom seemed capable of putting up a decent fight. The adventurers I saw in the Dwarven Kingdom seemed a lot better equipped than this.

"Well, that goes without sayin', Boss," Kabal explained. "We don't have too many talented blacksmiths in this city, y'see."

"Yeah, it can be a pain for us to assemble a full set of battle gear in this joint. It's not the sort of thing money can even buy sometimes."

"Ooh yeah, I'd like to get a new magical staff, but I just can't find the right one..."

No wonder the three were so shocked to find dwarven artisans working with us. It might've seemed natural to me, but it must've bowled over those guys.

Still, experiencing my first taste of an established town in a while was supremely exciting. I brought a grilled skewer of meat from a roadside stand, taking bites from it as we walked. Even the presence of stalls like that filled me with nostalgia for my old daily grind. I couldn't tell what kind of meat it was, but I liked it. I could Assess it, I suppose, but I won't.

Instead, I turned my magical eye to the sauce, Analyzing the recipe as I tasted it on my tongue. Now Shuna had something else to add to her cookbook.

In the midst of our walk, we arrived at the Blumund office of the Free Guild, a solemn-looking stone building. It was five whole stories tall, a rarity given that the highest structure I'd seen so far was two.

Being constructed in a great hollow underneath a mountain, the Dwarven Kingdom had certain height limits you could build up to. That applied as much to the royal palace as it did to some low-rent hovel. The idea of building vertically didn't really exist over there.

They *did* have an astonishing amount of sunlight, powered by magic-driven daylight windows dotted throughout the kingdom. But I had thought the whole concept of multi-floor buildings didn't really exist here yet.

The building seemed to be temperature-controlled somehow, as it was quite pleasant inside. I wasn't affected by temperature myself, but with Sense Heat Source, I could tell the ambient temps were markedly lower than outside. There must have been some sort of magic climate-control feature in this building.

*Maybe this world's more high tech than I've given it credit for. Maybe the presence of magic has just made it advance and progress in a different direction from my old one. If it weren't for things like monsters or demon lords, maybe we'd have an even loftier magic-driven civilization around here. Though, to put it another way, all the developmental energy they could use for that is instead being consumed by handling the monster threat, I suppose.* That's how much it took to stay alive in this world. Harsh place.

Right now, the demon lords were granted fairly bountiful tracts of land in order to avoid riling them, but who knows? Maybe the humans around here would decide to invade the more monster-laden realms before long. And maybe monsters had the strength advantage for now, but there was no telling what the future held. Human desires can be limitless, and we'd need to address that back home if I wanted my own nation to keep its privileges.

Now, I was glad I came here. I wasn't planning to antagonize my neighbors, but if relations ever *did* sour between us, it was important that I know how the other side lives. Seeing human towns and knowing how their inhabitants lived would have a

major impact on our future direction. I wanted to see and learn from as much as I could.

But no point just standing here. I let the trio guide me farther inside into a chamber that looked a bit like the front lobby at city hall. I spotted a long counter, like the luggage drop-off at the airport, with SALES written above it. I couldn't read it myself; it was the Great Sage who made me literate around here. Good thing for that.

This counter was divided into three sections. There was the sales department, like I said; the general-affairs department, accessible to all guild members; and then an "expert" window accessible only to guild adventurers.

Sales, as the name implied, was where they picked up and processed anything earned from quests or otherwise meant for guild delivery. The general counter was largely for beginners or guild members who lived in town; it was where you went to join or leave the guild as well. The final "expert" section was only for guild-accredited adventurers, which were in turn divided by specialty—retrieval, exploration, or monster slaying. This was mainly for members engaged in out-of-town activities, who were generally all referred to as "adventurers." This meant that if you wanted to be an adventurer, you had to at least be able to defend yourself.

How did all this work in practice? Well, for example, there was a department of the guild that specialized in magic. This was open to anyone who could handle magic spells, but that alone only granted you access to general-affairs services. It took more than just magic to reach the expert tier; you also needed to belong to a retrieval, exploration, or monster-slaying department and have actual field experience doing one of those three. *That* made you an adventurer.

Kabal, Elen, and Gido were each a member of a different department—monster slaying, retrieval, and exploration, respectively. That made it easier to divide up duties among them. Maybe they were a lot more talented than I thought, actually. The way it's been described to me, only a select few out there can earn that adventurer title and keep it.

What were the merits of that title? Above anything else, freedom—part of the origin of the Free Guild's title. All Free Guild members had to declare which country they belonged to, but adventurers were free to switch whenever they wanted. Changing your residence to a different town, or a different country for that matter, was allowed with relative ease if you liked. There were restrictions, of course, such as during times of war, but as long as you went through a third nation for the move, it was all good.

Traveling between nations always leads to hassles with identification and the like. For an adventurer, though, that was all covered as long as the nation in question had agreements with the guild, making it a snap. Adventurers could act freely without ever being bound by borders, a sign of the respect given to them as protectors against the threat of monsters.

Of course, I say all this, but it wasn't like adventurers changed their declared home nation very often. If they did, it was more frequently so they could choose the country where they were obligated to pay taxes. Freedom comes with responsibility, so I suppose if everyone had the chance, they'd prefer to set up shop someplace where they had it easiest.

This was the rundown they gave me.

I had to head for the kingdom of Englesia after this, so I was definitely hoping I could gain some guild accreditation instead of having to deal with a bunch of immigration nonsense. With that in mind, the trio took me to the general-affairs counter.

"Registration's right over there, Boss."

"Ooh, I'm sure they'll put you in the adventurer ranks in no time flat, Rimuru!"

"I don't even think they'd make you take the test, for that matter."

It was just before evening by the time we got in line. Apparently, the front lobby would soon be swarming with people. It was pretty chill in the afternoons, but at night, it'd get packed with people returning from the field. If we wanted to get this done soon, we had to hurry.

"I'd like to register as an adventurer, please."

"...How old are you?" the woman on the other side gently asked. "Being a general member's one thing, but aren't you a little young to be an adventurer?"

"Hey, hey, no need for that," Kabal said as he stepped in. "This guy here, Rimuru... Lemme tell ya, he's *way* more of a performer than he looks. Is my word good enough for ya?"

I was expecting this, given my looks. Kabal's team and I had discussed this in advance, and they had agreed to help me with whatever it took to get added.

"He performs enough to impress you, Kabal? Well, the test can be quite a dangerous thing, however..."

"Not a problem. I don't mind."

With the three begging her in stereo, the counter clerk finally (if reluctantly) agreed to run through the registration paperwork. I filled out the sheet handed to me—name, age, special skills, birthplace, and so on. Just whatever I could fill out was fine, she said, so I simply wrote my name and SWORDSMANSHIP under the skills section.

That was all it took for a general-purpose membership. Now I needed to decide which department to join. In terms of my achievements, I was qualified for all three, which made the selection process tough. I decided to start out with monster slaying. Retrieval would require me to head into the forest and search for a given target item to fetch; exploration required me to take a test in a man-made ruin in Englesia to assess my investigational skills. Monster slaying was the only test I could do right there.

As I filled all this out, I heard people shouting at us.

"Hey! Lookin' good, Kabal!"

"Elen's looking just as beautiful today as always!"

"What are you, blind? Anyone who isn't amazed at Gido's pure manliness is just an idiot!"

None of that made sense to me. *Why are Kabal and his friends so revered? They're just as much celebrities here as they were back at the village.* I pondered that as I wrapped up the entry sheet.

"Are you sure about this? Monster slaying might be the most accessible, but it's also the most dangerous department."

"Oh, he's fine!" Elen insisted. "Honestly, we couldn't defeat him even if all three of us took him on at once!"

"Very true," added Gido. "We couldn't hold a candle to 'im."

This made everybody in the lobby stare at me, sizing me up. And while I hadn't paid them much attention as I filled out the sheet, they had been talking about me for long before now.

"Whoa, that little kid wants to take the exam?"

"He's crazy! He's gonna be way over his head."

"You'd have to be messed up in the head to take those odds!"

"I haven't seen a katana like the one on his belt before, though. Must be pretty rare..."

"Hey, you never know, maybe he's capable, after all!"

"Maybe. Those three are sure treating him nice anyway."

They certainly weren't shy in their assessments. But when Elen declared to the world that I could whip my friends soundly, that only added to the crowd's running commentary.

"Are you kidding me? That kid's stronger than Kabal?"

"I can't believe it, but...if they're treating him the way they are, then it's gotta be true."

"Enough! Settle down, you guys! I'm sorry, Boss, this ain't exactly a polite bunch..."

"Oh, it's fine, Kabal. So how do we get this test under way?"

The counter lady, stunned into silence at all this, briskly nodded. "Umm... Yes, well, I hereby grant you permission to take the examination. You must attain a rank of at least D in order to become an adventurer, so I do not recommend this exam for anyone not specialized in combat. The monster-slaying department's exam is particularly trying, so it's not recommended unless you're at least a D-plus, preferably a C. Are you sure you wish to take it?"

I nodded my approval. It took real strength to cut it outside of town, I suppose. But even that swindler Bydd was an adventurer with a D-plus rank, I heard. It couldn't have been *that* hard.

This ranking system, by the way, was also devised by Yuuki Kagurazaka. You were assigned the rank of F the moment you joined the guild and upgraded to E once you gained some battle experience. After enough time on the field, you were assigned rank

D and gained the ability to call yourself an adventurer. Different guild jobs were assigned different ranks that corresponded to this, and you were also allowed to take a quest one rank higher than yours, as long as you banded with a team of several people. This was all set up in detail to prevent accidents and provide for an ample safety margin.

“I’m ready when you are.”

So I was all set for the test. As long as it wasn’t written, I wasn’t worried at all.

The woman stood up, went into her office, and brought back a man who I assumed was the examiner.

“Hmmm! You, taking the test? And stronger than Kabal, even? Well, all right. Follow me.”

He certainly acted full of himself. He gave my friends a mean-looking glare on the way, too. Was there some history between them?

“Hey, why’s he sneering at you?”

“Ahh...” Kabal paused. “Thegis has been acting all jealous ever since we got famous. He’s retired from the field and all, so...”

His eyes were turned toward the legs of Thegis the examiner. One was a prosthetic. Retired was right.

“Quit gabbing and follow along,” Thegis rumbled. I followed his instructions, exiting out the back door toward another building.

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The test site was in a building best described as a gymnasium. There was me, Thegis, Kabal and team, and a few guild members looking to kill time by watching us. The lack of entertainment options in this world must have made something like this seem like an epic occasion.

This was where the guild also held examinations to decide whether to boost a member’s rank or not. The jobs you were offered were strictly based on your rank, so the results of these tests directly connected to your wages. They were thus offered six days a week, whenever the test takers were ready for it.

Examiners were assigned to each guild branch to allow for this. These examiners needed the ability to step in and provide assistance if needed, so their ranks were mostly filled with ex-adventurers who made it to A-minus rank or so. Thegis must have joined them once he lost his leg.

"Let me say this first," he briskly began. "Once you earn an E rank, you'll have the chance to immediately try passing the D, then the C-ranked exam as well. If you fail, however, you will not be able to take another rank-upgrade challenge until you regain your current rank and earn enough points in your work to do so. Do you understand?"

In other words, if I failed a ranking test, I'd have to start over from one rank below that. I appreciated how better ranks offered a better range of jobs, but this struck me as kind of a pain. They probably set this up to keep would-be adventurers from bothering the examiners all day with tests they couldn't possibly pass.

"Sounds good," I replied. Thegis nodded, then turned to Kabal.

"Hmph. I look forward to seeing exactly *how* you're more powerful than Kabal and his team. Let's just hope you don't wind up being a sheep in wolf's clothing, hmm?"

I couldn't blame him for doubting them, what with the monster-parts racket they were pursuing with me at the moment. Padding your point tally as quickly as they had would make anyone the target of haters. It was their fault, too.

Then Thegis pointed toward the floor. "We will hold the examination inside this magic circle. We have a safety barrier over it, but don't rely on that *too* much, all right? If you're willing to risk your life for this, step inside and give me a signal when you're ready."

I looked where he pointed. There was a broad circle drawn on the floor, maybe sixty or seventy feet across. The geometric shapes stacked atop one another inside it indicated this was a magic circle. A semicircle-shaped barrier materialized the moment I walked in. The audience watched carefully, waiting for my response.

"All right!" I said, trying not to sound too worked up.

"Right. Defeat the enemy before you!"

Thegis released the magic he had previously chanted. The test had begun.

He was using summon magic to stage this exam. As Elen mentioned to me, he was a summoner by trade, calling forth monsters to fight the enemy in his place. If I recalled correctly, summoning monsters stronger than yourself could only be done under a number of conditions, so one could guess at what'd come out based on the level of the caller.

The first monster Thegis brought out was a Hunter Hound, a low-ranked monster I had never seen before. It was well trained, but that was about it. Before it could even let out a yelp—or even feel any fear, I suppose—I lopped its head off with a slash of my katana. That awarded me rank E. Super-easy.

“Kay, all done. Next, please.”

The room fell silent. “Whoa,” I could hear someone whisper. Thegis was less than impressed.

“Oh-ho? Well, you handled that, at least. Let your guard down, though, and you’ll pay dearly for it later. You’re ready to take the next challenge?”

“Mm-hmm. I kinda wish we could skip to rank A, really.”

“A? You think you can get away with being *that* cocky? Just because you can beat a party like Kabal’s doesn’t mean you can act like you’re king of the world. Here we go!”

I started to feel like he was angry at me now. *I was just trying to be honest, but... Ah well. Let’s just get this over with.*

Even as Thegis seethed, he summoned my next opponent—a jet-black Dark Goblin, fully armed and ripped with muscles.

“Ummm... Isn’t that Thegis’s main servant?”

“He’s got full armor on! I think that’d be tough for even a C rank to beat...”

Before I could process these audience whispers, the examiner’s bellowing silenced them all.

“Begin!!”

*They said this would challenge a C rank, but this is the D-ranked exam, right? Ah well. No challenge for me, either way.*

“And there you go. Next, please.”

I had slashed the goblin to a heap with a single strike. It made Thegis quiver in anger.

“Oh-hohhh! Not bad. All right—next it is, then!”

The air fell silent once more—the audience being much more gripped with tension than I was.

“You’ll need experience in group combat as well. Are you ready for that?”

He summoned three Giant Bats. *Ooh, they sure bring me back. When was the last time one of those attacked me?* It seemed like ages ago.

“Sure, sure, just get it started.”

Our small clutch of onlookers looked like they wanted to comment on this, but they were drowned out by Thegis’s signal. Not that it mattered to me. I swiped the bats down from the air, one after another. There wasn’t even any need to rev up my perception for this, like before—they appeared frozen in the air to me anyway.

The audience watched this wordlessly, enraptured by the performance. I doubted they could even follow it with their eyes. The moment the Giant Bats approached, a single flash of my blade downed them.

“Okay, so there’s rank C wrapped up. Next, please.”

My request brought Thegis back to his senses.

“Not even my *own* eyes could see it...?!” Now he was starting to lose his composure. “Heh-heh-heh-heh... Well done. There is no doubt in my mind that you could defeat Kabal’s band now. Very well. I challenge you to face the trial of the B-ranked challenge!”

Oh, so now it’s a trial, not an exam? I could see the veins in Thegis’s eyes bulging as he began chanting once more, this time with clear rays of magic shooting up and down his arms. The observers looked on silently. “I, uh, I’m gonna get the guild master,” shouted one before running off—but before anyone took notice, Thegis’s summon was complete.

An evil creature appeared before me. It was a Lesser Demon, a monster with four wriggling arms. I hadn’t seen a demon-type creature like this before. My impulse was to consume it and take its skills.

And for that matter, that wasn't a Summon Monster spell just now, was it? It was Summon Demon. *That'd* come in helpful, too...

Report. *The summoning magic Summon Demon... successfully earned.*

Oh, whoops. That wound up being easier than I thought. It was funny how arts took forever and a day to master, but magic was just a quick snap of the fingers. It came that easy because he unleashed it right in front of me, yes, but it hardly seemed real sometimes.

So I had that in hand, but now was no time to think about it.

"This monster is a Lesser Demon! It has the ability to nullify simple melee strikes. Now what will you do? If you want to give up, better say so soon!"

Thegis was getting excited now, even as I was musing about how unfair this easy magic access was. His objectives were completely changed. He hated Kabal and his friends, and he wanted to take it out on me. This was definitely *not* the kind of monster you carted out for a B-ranked exam.

Someone had just run out to fetch the guild master, which I assumed to be Fuze. Hopefully, I could get a retest without having to defeat this guy, but...well, I was pretty sure I'd win anyway.

In the midst of this, I started to overhear the audience again.

"...Hey, isn't that kind of a team-based exam subject?"

"You know, I was just thinking the exact same thing, actually."

"Whoa, he wants him to beat that dude single-handed? That'd be rough even for a B-plusser."

Even they could see this was a tad unusual. And if *they* could, Kabal and friends knew way before now.

"Um, Thegis, isn't this going a little too far? Not to brag, but with a Lesser Demon, it'd take all three of us to finally knock 'im out for good, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah!" Elen chimed in. "You can't even damage demon-type monsters with regular weapons!"

"Exactly. I hate to admit, but I'd be useless against one. All I could really do is distract it and try to earn the front lines some more healing time!"

Thegis had no time for any of this griping. "Hmph! I believe it's the little one in that mask taking the exam? If he's going to play chicken just because things are a little dangerous, he was never suited for adventuring work in the first place! Well? Do you want me to cancel it?"

He was acting all tough, but take another look, and you'd realize something was off. He was sweating bullets, doing everything he could to focus himself. Turning my eye toward the Lesser Demon, it looked ready to escape its restraints and take off at any moment. Thegis was starting to lose control—which made sense, if you think about it. He'd been using his magic nonstop for several summons in a row. It would be hard for anyone to concentrate that long, especially when it required so much physical force.

Let's make things a little easier for him.

"I see a few problems, but I'll work them out. Let's go."

Thegis opened his eyes wide, looking like he wanted to say something but stopping himself just before. He had already dived into the deep end. He poured even more magical force into the demon before shouting bombastically at me.

"Well said, you! Let me see you survive this one final trial!"

*Huh? Final trial?*

The moment the thought popped into my head, the Lesser Demon was unleashed. The "trial" for rank B had begun.

*What should I do, though?* I didn't want to show off too much of my magic or skill arsenal.

As I worried over this, the Lesser Demon's eyes flickered a bright red as it began to intone a magic spell.

Four fireballs flew toward me. That's a demon for you. Magic's their bread and butter. I could just eat them with Glutton, and that'd be it, but I didn't want to bust that out in front of an audience.

Instead, I dodged all four. They exploded against the barrier behind me in spectacular fashion. I had Cancel Flame Attack on me, so it wasn't much of a threat, but emerging *completely* unscathed

would've looked fishy, too. I tried to flail around a little, acting like I was panicking as I began casting a spell of my own.

"Icicle Lance!"

The freezing magic I launched neutralized part of the flames that now burned within the barrier, creating a safe zone. The screams around me turned into cheers, but I paid it no mind as I readied my sword. A flash of light. I guess demons really *are* pretty resistant to melee damage. The strike felt a little strange to me as I carried it out.

*Report. Melee attacks are ineffective against spiritual life-forms.*

*I'd best remember this feeling. Whenever I get this odd bit of feedback from my blade, that means I'm not damaging anything.*

To sum it up, this Lesser Demon had what's called a fully formed magical corpus, a form made completely of magicules. As opposed to the replicated versions of ourselves Soei and I could construct, this could immediately regenerate itself from most physical damage since its "creator" was right there. I hadn't injured it in the first place, and I wasn't going to this way.

It was said that a spiritual life-form like this became a full-fledged demon with intelligence upon receiving a physical body to inhabit. *That* would make it more melee susceptible...but that didn't really apply right now.

The Lesser Demon, perhaps huffy about me dodging its fireballs, began attacking with all four arms at once. Solid as steel, each one swung downward over and over. Its speed was nothing to sniff at, but the limbs still looked frozen in time to me.

This would end *so* much quicker if I could just eat this guy. What should I do? Icicle Lance seemed like it'd damage the demon but not decisively so, I didn't think. *Demons have a lot of magical resistance, too...*

*Oh, hang on.* Magic was simply the embodiment of whatever you pictured in your mind. If the Icicle Lance was the embodiment of taking heat from the body, fireballs had to be all about burning something. Meanwhile, Modelwill—one of the arts I'd learned—

took your aura (your fighting force) and converted it directly into offensive power.

That ought to work against a spiritual life-form—and since I knew how to lodge magical projectiles by now, it was just as easy for me to control my aura. *But ooh, if I start busting out my aura, everyone would know I was a monster. Which means...*

*...Well, let's test something out.* Carefully summoning a bit of my aura, I converted it back into magical force, combining it with the magicule energy one normally uses to launch magic. For a human being with few magicules flowing through their veins, they would need to gather the required energy from the atmosphere at this point. As a monster, though, I could skip that. I had a supply I could tap at any time.

So I took this fresh quantity of pure magical force and applied it directly to my sword, as if wrapping it in paper. In my mind, I pictured strengthening, slicing, destroying. It began to emit a faint light, telling my instincts that it was set to go.

*Report. Extra skill Magic Aura obtained.*

That turned out to provide even more than I had pictured. Basically, Magic Aura was a skill that let me easily add magical effects to attacks with my own aura. A sort of combination of magic and arts. Now all I have to do is get slashin'.

The moment my sword touched the Lesser Demon, it split completely in half, dissipating into dust and disappearing.

*“And there you have it. Did I pass the B-ranked exam?”*

The onlookers snapped out of their trance.



“Wowwwwww!! That was *soooo* cool!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! That dude’s just too damn strong!!”

“Are you kidding me?! He ripped a Lesser Demon apart all by himself...?”

“Hey, take that mask off a sec! I wanna see your face!”

“Oh, what’s the matter?! Hey, ignore that idiot! Let’s party it up later tonight, okay?”

It was quite an uproar.

\*

One quickly silenced by the appearance of a single person.

“Enough of this, all of you!!”

One shout from Fuze was enough to halt the ruckus. He ignored the crowd as he walked up to me.

“Sir Rimuru, you are...all right, I take it? If something happened to you, it would portend terrible things for us all.”

He looked at me for just a moment, relieved, before bottling that up and turning to Kabal.

“And *what* are you people doing...? I told you a million times, didn’t I, to just bring Sir Rimuru directly to me? Not to make any side trips? So why do I find him in *this* state of affairs, hmm?”

Blue veins appeared to pop above his forehead as he scowled at the trio. It was quite impressive, and it made the three freeze in place, giving excuses like “Um” and “Well, you know” and “I tried to stop them...” He wasn’t buying it.

“Silence, you fools! From this moment forward, you will hereby be referred to as the Three Fools of Blumund!!”

“Well, wait a second...”

“That’s just mean! Rimuru said he wanted to become an adventurer, so...”

“...Could we maybe get a better name, please?”

The plaintive request was turned down.

“You idiots! I could have used my guild master privileges to simply award Sir Rimuru a B-ranked license without going through any of this!!”

This was turning into a good scolding. It also told the crowd I was Fuze's personal guest and a pretty powerful dude.

It wasn't long before I was back in Fuze's office. The Three Fools kneeled meekly on the floor as Fuze sat there, running a hand up and down his forehead in agony. Thegis was standing right next to him, looking incredibly awkward.

"...I have to say, Sir Rimuru, you really could have done better than to stick out like a sore thumb immediately upon your arrival. There can't be more than a handful of people in this world who can defeat a Lesser Demon with a single sword strike. Was that some kind of magical weapon? An enchantment or the Aura Sword art wouldn't produce *that* much force in one blow. Ah, I imagine the rumor mill will be working overtime in the taverns tonight..."

"...Was it that bad an idea? Like, if you were watching, you could've stopped me..."

"I wasn't exactly provided the *time* for that, Sir Rimuru!" Fuze sighed. "But what's done is done. An art that applies magic itself to a weapon is a high-level ability indeed, but I understand that paladins are capable of such a feat. A few A-ranked adventurers in the Free Guild headquarters have unique skills of their own along those lines—such things are not unheard of. But being able to slay demons with it? Unless you want a crowd of people harassing you wherever you go, I would recommend being careful with that move. You may regret being known for it."

It was Fuze's opinion that this was all the result of Kabal's trio failing to follow his orders. But as he put it, there was one silver lining: "The crowd was all a bunch of C ranks and below, so I'm sure they didn't even realize what they were seeing."

Magical swords—or in my case, Magic Aura-infused swords—were best used where there weren't any eyewitnesses, it seemed. Good thing I found that out sooner than later.

"Well, thanks. I'll watch myself with that."

Kind of a pity, though. One more test, and I could've been in the A ranks. If Fuze was going to make me an honorary B-grade adventurer, I would've loved a shot at going all the way. There were

also Special A and S ranks, but being an A alone made people treat you quite a bit differently.

"Too bad I was so close to the A rank, though," I muttered.

"Ahh, that wouldn't have been possible," Thegis replied. "Not because you weren't strong enough for it, Sir Rimuru, but because regulations state a guild branch can only award ranks up to B. You'll need to take on work and achieve a rank of B-plus before you have the right to tackle that."

When going from E to D to C to B, you were free to skip ranks and take on a higher one if you're up for it. Fail that exam, though, and you'll need to build up enough points before tackling it again. However, qualifying for the A exam required having an established portfolio of work on the field, and it was only offered at the Free Guild HQ in Englesia. Examiners up to A-minus could handle any test up to rank B, but when it came to an A-ranked test, that needed to be held by someone ranked A or higher. Which made sense. *I'll just have to follow Thegis's guidance and build up my score.*

"Still," Thegis said, head bowed, "your strength is nothing short of exemplary, Sir Rimuru. I thought this was all a trick, given it was Kabal referring you to me...but I see I was very wrong about you."

"Aw, don't be so mean, Thegis!"

"You really don't trust us that much?"

"Cut me a break, sir!"

So Thegis and I came to know each other better, regardless of how much the trio over there whined about it. Hopefully, they'll be driven to restore their good name by looking out for me a bit more during the rest of our journey.

So that night, we set out to devise our future plans. It was me, my adventuring friends, Fuze, and Thegis. My main mission, of course, was to meet with Yuuki Kagurazaka, whom I believed I shared a homeland with. Fuze had already written the letter of introduction I asked for via Kabal; I gratefully accepted it and placed it in my Stomach, lest I lose it somewhere. If they could just produce some ID documentation for me, I'd be all set.

"I think your papers will be ready for you tomorrow morning. Tell the person at the counter that I know you, and I'm sure they'll expedite it."

"That lady at the counter was in the crowd, too, Boss, I think. I bet she's a total fan by now!"

"Ooh, could be. Who wouldn't be after *that* kind of performance?"

"Yep. It was a treat to watch."

"It chagrins me as an examiner, but that was some masterful fighting."

All this praise from Thegis and Kabal's crew was starting to embarrass me.

"And *that*," Fuze mentioned, "is why I was hoping to preemptively award you your accreditation, so you could keep your strength a secret. You're going to stand out no matter what you do, besides."

Kabal shrugged. "Yeah, uh, sorry about that."

"We're sorry!"" Elen and Gido shouted in unison.

But really, I should have been more considerate myself. Being in a big human town got me so excited, I must have lost my head a little.

"I'll try not to be so rash next time, either, so hopefully, you'll forgive them for all this, Fuze."

For now, the guild master seemed willing to let it slide in the long run.

Our plan, then, was to finish up the prep work by the end of tomorrow and get moving as soon as possible...but Fuze had other ideas. "Actually," he told us, "the king of Blumund wanted to have a confidential talk with you."

My arrival must have already reached his ears. Apparently, he was interested in holding a conference in three days. I readily agreed to this. Before that, we planned to have a chat with a well-placed nobleman Fuze knew, in order to discuss the practical issues around our nations' relationship. The royal summit would then focus on these issues—this would keep it from being "bogged down and rudderless," as Fuze put it, since meeting the king with no itinerary at all would be a waste of our time. Royal decrees

would occasionally come down directly from the king when time was of the essence, but this was rare, and we were in no hurry, so the king just wanted to discuss the more big-picture stuff.

I had no problem with that. If I had three days to kill before the king, I needed to fill that up with something anyway. Plus, I probably would've been an unprepared ball of nerves anyway, so knowing what to expect in advance helped me out a lot.

So that took care of tomorrow and three days from now. Our talks continued well into the night, so late we wound up staying in the guest room of Fuze's guild branch.

One more thing I should add: Despite the novelty of being in a human town and all the experiences I'd already had inside, I sadly did not explore any new frontiers with my dreams that night.

\*

This well-placed noble was a man named Veryard, a baron. He lived in a quiet, unassuming manor in the middle of a neighborhood lined with fancy buildings; apparently, he was too low-level of a noble to have an entire domain to rule over. He thus spent his days working within his house, or castle, or whatever.

"Let me tell you—and promise me you won't go telling him this—but the man practically lives and breathes his work."

That was Fuze's assessment, and I intended to keep my promise. It would apparently be uncomfortable for the guild and nobility if people found out they had underground connections to one another.

So I followed Fuze to the manor. We passed through the eye-catching and well-kept front gardens before entering the foyer, where an old man who looked every bit like your stereotypical butler type greeted us. Maids stood by on each side of the chamber, their heads politely bowed. This was a *low-level* noble's house? I worried that this meeting would be a lot more formal than I had planned.

I went to a maid café once in my old world, but these were *real* maids. It was deeply moving, somehow. Funny that it took me

going to another world to discover this air of elegance, this graceful demeanor. The real thing sure is different. Watching them had the odd effect of calming my nerves.

Refreshed, I followed the butler down the hall. He took us to a room on the other end and stopped in front of an ornate-looking door. There was a moment of tension as he knocked on it. "Come in," said someone on the other side. Kind of an annoying procedure, I thought, but as someone who successfully navigated etiquette in the Dwarven Kingdom's palace, I was prepared for anything. Whatever I didn't know about politeness or procedure, I could overcome with pure attitude.

Going in, I was greeted by a very intellectual-looking gentleman with thin, sort of Asian-style eyes. He certainly lived up to the description Fuze gave me.

"Thank you so much for coming," he said before I could start. "I am the Baron of Veryard, one of the ministers of the Kingdom of Blumund."

"Many thanks to you as well. My name is Rimuru Tempest, and as I imagine you're already aware, I am a slime monster. I'm not really well versed on etiquette in this country, so I apologize in advance if I mess something up."

We shook each other's hand. Something like this reminded me a lot of my old life.

"Oh, there's no need to be concerned about such stuffy affairs. Feel free to approach me as you would anyone else."

The Baron must have seen just how concerned I was about it. He showed me to a seat, being very careful never to let his guard down around me. A shrewd negotiator, no doubt.

"Well!" he said as a maid came in with some tea. He took a sip. "We have only so much time. Let's begin."

Fuze, my fellow witness, straightened up. I followed his act, bracing myself and preparing to listen.

\*

Our negotiations with Veryard went on into the night. The gist of it was twofold:

- A joint security agreement between Tempest and Blumund.
- Mutual permission to travel freely within each of our nations.

First order of business: The Kingdom of Blumund was, frankly, not very big. It was a relatively weak nation, one that even had issues dealing with the monsters that marauded it. Their relationship with the guild shored up a lot of that, but the government just wasn't up to the task alone.

Thus, after feeling around to figure out their position, the kingdom had decided to largely subcontract out monster control to the Free Guild in exchange for a boost in funding, allowing the government to focus on intelligence gathering. This let them promptly detect dangers and think of ways to deal with them, allowing them to stave off potential disasters before they happened.

Fortunately, this strategy had kept them from dealing with any major damage so far, but as the Baron put it, there was no such thing as having too many seawalls, so they hoped to build a cooperative relationship with my nation as well. And that was all it was: a promise that, should one nation fall into danger, the other would provide as much support as possible. This included supporting the adventurers working in the Forest of Jura, but didn't imply anything *that* special—just an agreement that we'd provide supplies for them in our town.

That much—supporting Free Guild members—Fuze had already asked me for previously. Providing accommodation and materials for people working in the forest would help them cover a broader range, which naturally meant they'd be able to address more threats around the area. It also meant that these guys trusted us, which I liked.

So I happily agreed to this, but—

"Of course, I am sure they'll be happy to pay a fair price for what you provide. You could perhaps use the inns in our city as a reference for how much to charge—"

"Well, hold on, Baron," interrupted Fuze. "The accommodations in Sir Rimuru's town are easily on the same level as the highest-

quality inns in this one. Compared to what passes for the norm here, I would call it fair to even charge more.”

“Would you? Well...”

“To be honest, I would call what they offered me more akin to a health spa than an inn.”

“All right. We can think about that later. In terms of weapon and armor maintenance, however—”

“Well, again, sir, their workshops are overseen by Sir Kaijin and his close confidant, Garm, two of the most talented metalworkers in the entire dwarven race. Would you really ask them to handle such rote maintenance work?”

“They work *there*? Is there anything they could sell us, then, that may...?”

“I’m afraid not, Baron. I saw a great deal of weaponry there I have not seen anywhere else. I am talking *very* high-quality goods—things I never even saw in Englesia’s best forges. I was too cowed to ask whether it was for sale, but by my estimation, one would have to be at least a B-ranked adventurer to consider them. It makes one laugh, doesn’t it?”

Fuze was certainly doing a good job at shooting down Baron Veryard’s suggestions. He had a point. The inn we stayed at in that farming village was *not* very posh. The guild branch here in town wasn’t bad, but in little details like the toilets and baths, our town certainly offered far more comfort.

And those weapons Fuze mentioned weren’t for sale—they were test samples. At this point, we now had a steady supply of assorted raw materials. Gabil was killing off monsters in the caves, Gobta and his crew were doing the same in the forest, and they were transporting anything useful back to town. This occasionally included items from high-ranked monsters, allowing us to craft rarer weaponry. Some great stuff, and I was sure finding a buyer wouldn’t be hard, but we weren’t selling. We need to beef up our own war power first.

Which meant it was time for me to compromise a little.

“All right. I’ll set up a long row house for basic lodging purposes. And as for weapons, I could have our craftsmen take on some

apprentices to build up. They should be able to handle basic weapon maintenance within a month or two, I think.”

We could provide the row house by expanding the building we lent Yohm’s men. Those new craftsmen, however, were a more complex issue. Kurobe was toiling away right now, single-handedly building weapons for everybody in the nation. Kaijin was helping craft new ones, using his Researcher unique skill to copy them, but Kurobe didn’t have any Great Sage-type skills like that, so it took time. Not as much as hand forging them all, but...

I couldn’t have him be the only one working that hard, so I had already employed a few enthusiastic young men to be his apprentices. They were proving to be quick learners, and it might not be long before they were full-fledged craftsmen of their own.

That’s why I made that offer to the Baron, and it was clearly welcomed. I agreed to discuss the details with Rigurd and the elders, so we could decide on it later.

Now, travel permissions. *That* was a bit of a thorny path.

When I asked Fuze for his support, I promised to waive customs tariffs for any merchants belonging to the Free Guild. This meant that I *would* need to collect them from sellers affiliated with the Kingdom of Blumund itself. This was inherently unfair, but I couldn’t renege on my previous promise; at least not for a few years to come.

You might say “What’s the big deal? Why not waive the fees for Blumund merchants, too?” That was something I absolutely couldn’t allow to pass. I couldn’t just fritter away our rights as a sovereign nation without any compensation to show for it. It’d also impugn on any profits guild-affiliated merchants would enjoy, which would be rude to Fuze.

Thus, even as it grew darker outside, the talks between me, Fuze, and the Baron fell into further and further of an impasse. We were all working with certain stakes, which no doubt contributed to how heated things got. Ultimately, though, it was Veryard who blinked first.

“All right. To our kingdom, the most important issues relate to our security agreement. For the tariffs, let us establish a given

grace period, during which our government will cover any fees incurred by our merchants."

So we went with that. All merchants were allowed to enter and leave Tempest free of charge, regardless of who they worked under. Whenever we put formal customs charges in place, we would confer once more to decide on matters.

As I confirmed during our discussions, Veryard was fully aware of the importance of Tempest. He understood it at a more thorough level than I did, even. Traveling to the Dwarven Kingdom via Tempest, as opposed to the Kingdom of Farmus, would be both cheaper and safer to them. The highways weren't done yet, but once they were, and we had regular traffic going back and forth, the difference would no doubt be dramatic. And once it was all in place, those highways were going to see heavy use, even if Tempest charged a bit of a premium at the borders.

"Hopefully," the Baron said with a smile, "we will both be on beneficial terms with each other by that time."

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After confirming our stances on both issues, I spent the next day casually perusing the capital's markets. I also stopped by the guild branch again to pick up my ID papers. The woman at the front counter was eyeing me up and down, but I had no time to ask her out on a date.

Kabal and his friends guided me around the whole time, allowing me to enjoy myself thoroughly without getting too lost. We had all the supplies we needed for our journey, too.

Then came day three, the day of the royal summit. If we could get a treaty signed here, it would mark a second stamp of approval for our nation after Dwargon's. A nation of monsters, receiving the formal nod from a nation of humans. The implications were huge. It meant we could interact in peace and even be friendly with regular people.

The security agreement really didn't offer much benefit to Tempest. In fact, it had many downsides. But the potential revenue

we stood to gain from that travel agreement was enormous—and since it was a mutual agreement, it allowed monsters to travel to human towns, which was a pretty major step. I wanted to work on amicable terms with mankind, and I was hopeful we could get something signed during my time here.

So I was pretty excited when we kicked off the summit. There, at the palace, I was greeted by the king, a kind-looking fellow with a round face and a slightly pudgy figure, and the queen, whose sheer beauty made for a shocking imbalance.

Fuze was there to serve as a third-party witness—he was already very familiar with all manners of government affairs, but having a third party in on this implied a sense of fairness to neighboring nations, and Fuze wouldn't go blabbing about top-secret stuff regardless. He looked uncomfortable in his formal garb—and being in human form all this time was getting a little oppressive for me, too. *Better put up with it for now. It's tough on both of us.*

The summit proceeded without a hitch, and once assorted ministers had wrapped up their reports to the king, it was over.

"I *do* look forward to working with you in the future, Sir Rimuru," said the king in his receiving room as he shook both my hands. He was a lot more sociable than I gave him credit for; I felt a natural liking toward him. But this room was also where I learned that Baron Veryard had deceived us.

"Well," as the king put it, "if some kind of force should ever come out of the forest and threaten to invade us, let us set out to work with each other at once! And we, of course, would be happy to work together with you as well."

Smiling with his wife, the king left the room just as I realized what he meant by it. I was no longer in any mood to wish him farewell. *Some kind of force...?* What an odd turn of phrase. It didn't sound like he was talking about monsters.

I was so focused on those guys, but that certainly wasn't the *only* danger out there. Look at Farmus, right next door. If a new trade route was opened to the Dwarven Kingdom, they might see Tempest and Blumund in a negative light for that. And that's not

all! The Eastern Empire, too! They had eyes on being the sole superpower in the land, didn't they?

*Oh, crap, I've been tricked!!*

It didn't take a genius to see that an invasion by some foreign country would be a huge danger to Blumund. I just wanted to scream, right on the spot. If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is, huh? Now I recalled Baron Veryard's smile. He said it himself: "The most important issues relate to our security agreement." Customs revenue would be chump change compared to a nation's entire defense budget.

What Blumund was *really* afraid of was a foreign power invading it through the forest. The Eastern Empire probably had them on constant high alert, and they wanted a bulwark against them. They didn't lie to me—if *we* ever got in danger, I bet they *would* come to help. It'd be our turn next, after all.

They got me good.

The Baron chose this moment to address me. "It would appear you have noticed? Your mind certainly works quicker than I gave you credit for, earlier. However, the treaty has already been signed. I *do* hope we will continue to have a fruitful relationship."

He gave me the biggest cheese-eating grin I ever saw. He performed his duties flawlessly, no doubt about it. A sly old noble who found tricking me as easy as taking candy from a baby. *Pfft. Ah well. Not much I can do about it here...*

But despite all this, I felt oddly serene about it all. It was more frustration at my shallowness and admiration for my opponent than anything. All a learning experience. *If the Empire makes a move, I'll think matters over then.*

It did tell me one thing, though: I couldn't let my guard down around human beings. Monsters were so unexpectedly straightforward with everything, which created an opening large enough for humans and their cunning to drive a truck through. I swore to myself that I'd think things over more deeply and carefully when negotiating with them from now on.

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*But it's no fun to just sit here and be treated like a fool. I've got a decent opportunity here, still, to engage in some discussion that'll be a lot more helpful for my side.* I took a High Potion out from my pocket and placed it on the desk.

"And what's this?"

"With that treaty in place," I said, "could I ask you a favor?"

"...Hohhh, a favor? Well, as your partner in diplomacy, I could hardly refuse to hear you out."

The Baron flashed me another perfect smile. He's definitely a pro at this.

"This is a healing potion that we made over in our town. I was thinking we could sell this in your marketplace..."

"What?! The potion that Kabal brought back, some time ago? Was this the 'specialty' you were proposing earlier?"

It was Fuze instead of Veryard who latched on to the offer.

"Oh, um, yeah. I *did* give him some, didn't I?" I gave Kabal some of the medicine I had crafted myself, the equivalent of a Full Potion. "But this is different from that. Not quite as potent, but I promise you it's a much better product than anything you'll find on sale now. What *he* had is more of a rarity—something we can craft perhaps every two days. *These*, meanwhile, we can manufacture more readily, so I thought about putting these up on the market. The only real difference from what you saw, Fuze, is that this can't regenerate missing limbs."

I had meant that as a bombshell, making sure to lowball our production capabilities while I was at it. The effect was dramatic. "Regenerate missing limbs?" the Baron parroted back. "You mean, if you lose an arm in battle or an accident, *his* potion can grow a completely new one out of thin air?"

"Not really 'grow,' so much as...like, it gathers magicules from the air to create a replacement, you could say? But over time, once blood starts circulating through it, and your body metabolism goes back to normal, it'll look and act just like the old limb."

"What nonsense!"

Now the cool, collected Baron looked like he was in a panic. Looks like I scored a hit with him. This was exactly why I kept telling Kaijin to keep quiet about it.

"If what you say is true, that is equivalent to *holy* magic, the exclusive secret of the Western Holy Church! In fact, it is the holy spell Regeneration itself, the product of a pact with the spirits above us! A divine miracle! Only those ranked bishop or higher are capable of harnessing it!"

He paused a moment, regaining his composure, then looked around. His outburst had attracted some attention, but no one had overheard the conversation. The moment he sensed this, he had said "Let us discuss this elsewhere" and began walking off. Fuze and I had no issue with this, so we wound up settling down in the Baron's study once again.

The moment Fuze and Veryard entered the manor, they looked at each other and sighed. "Well, well," the Baron sighed, "what shall we do with *this*, then?"

"Is it all right for you if we appraise its value?" Fuze asked.

"Go right ahead."

He chanted a spell to gauge the potion's contents.

"Hmm... I really can't tell the difference between this and what Kabal's party was carrying." Fuze scratched his head. "We tested out that previous potion as well, but I never dreamed it could replace entire limbs. They said it was equivalent to magical medicine or holy magic, but I was certainly *not* expecting Regeneration-class performance..."

By that, I doubted he meant they tested it out on someone who'd just had an arm chopped off. It wasn't the kind of thing one would volunteer for. If I didn't bring up the High Potion's limits, I doubt he would have ever noticed the difference.

"Do you have any of those remaining?" Veryard asked.

"Yes, one—for safekeeping."

They must have used up the rest for their experimentation.

"Bring it here at once."

Fuze nodded. "The only way to prove this," he muttered as he sent a magical message out into the ether, "is with Thegis."

My former test examiner was with us in a moment—a small safe under his arm.

"What is the meaning of this, Fuze?" he bellowed as he walked in, but he fell silent as he realized Veryard and I were there.

"I want you to promise," the Baron said, "that you will keep everything you see and hear in this room a secret."

He described himself as a minor bureaucrat in this kingdom, but the dignity and presence he exuded was enough to put even a prince in his place.

"I promise you, sir," Thegis hurriedly replied with a confused nod as the Baron took the safe from him.

"So this is the item...?" He took out the contents—one of the potions I had made—and carefully observed it. "I have little knowledge of magic, but this one shines true, that much I can tell. Certainly, I feel this is no ordinary medicine. Let's test the potion you have first, Fuze."

To my great surprise, he intended to have Thegis remove his leg prosthesis and test the potion's effects on that. Would it work on a wound that old? It'd be interesting to see, actually. Following his instructions, we first tried the High Potion on the stump. As expected, there was no external change.

Next up, my self-crafted potion. The moment we sprinkled it on, a pale, shining light covered the site, transforming itself into the shape of a leg before our eyes. It proved, once and for all, that the age of the wound didn't matter. Maybe a Full Potion could read information from the body's DNA or something to do its work. Whatever it did, it sure wasn't simple—but either way, it meant I had a medicine that outclassed just about anything modern science in my world could come up with.

"Wha...?! My—my leg...?!"

"This... This is astounding..."

"Good heavens. Another amazing secret you bear, is it not?"

The three gave me looks of blank surprise.

I'd let this doozy slip mostly just to get back at Veryard a bit, but it only served to further damage my stance—perhaps even severely. Loose lips really *do* sink ships. I had hoped to gain a new advantage in our negotiations, but things had now grown much larger than that.

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In the end, we agreed to frame it so Thegis's leg was healed by a mysterious robed bishop for a king's ransom in money. Thegis sure wasn't complaining—it let him get out from behind his desk at the branch office and get back to adventuring. He profusely thanked us all as he agreed to the backstory.

As far as my sales pitch went, Blumund agreed to purchase a set quantity of High Potions from us on regular occasions. They would also select preferred merchants of their choice to spread the word about this medicine to the Western Nations. We still weren't making mass quantities, so hopefully, they could keep a damper on customer growth for the time being. If adventurers started hearing the stories and coming to Blumund to find out more, that'd help spread the word about Tempest right nearby, too.

For now, I just wanted to build a trustworthy name for ourselves. Pitching it as medicine made by monsters didn't sound like effective ad copy to me, but once people saw for themselves what this stuff could do, I doubted it'd keep them from becoming regular customers. At the moment, getting it into their hands and letting them see how useful it was took first priority.

So there's another regular purchase base, then. A good first step, I thought. I really didn't want to be hostile with human beings; I'd have to work harder to build friendly relationships with the other human nations of the world.

It was time to say good-bye to Fuze.

"I do hope you'll remain careful on the trail, Sir Rimuru."

"I'm telling you, I'll be fine. Just make sure nobody goes into that room, all right?"

"Nothing to worry about there. You can only access it through my office, the branch manager's chamber."

That was a relief. I had a magisteel teleportation circle installed in "that room," about three feet across. When I showed it to him, he was agog. "Teleportation, even...?" he marveled. "But then, I suppose nothing should surprise me by now, Sir Rimuru..."

I set this up so people could come visit Tempest whenever they wanted. We had agreed to the outlines of the treaty, but we hadn't designated any merchants yet, and I'd need an easier way to access the Kingdom of Englesia, besides. Thus, I asked to borrow a room from Fuze for use as a Warp Portal.

I should note, by the way, that once the Great Sage analyzed the Warp Portal elemental magic, it arranged things so I could manage multiple entry and exit points at once. I still needed a physical magic circle at each site, but they could now open paths to multiple exits at once, which was extremely convenient. We'd need to make sure nobody could steal those magisteel portals, though... Hopefully we could find a way to eliminate that worry sometime. Not that I'd tell *these* guys if we did.

As I was dreaming about future advancements in teleportation tech, Fuze was saying good-bye to Kabal as well.

"And you guys keep Sir Rimuru safe, all right, Kabal?"

"Of course!"

"You got it!"

"The road to Englesia's safe enough. It'll be a cinch for us!"

"Do *not* treat this as easy," Thegis bellowed again. "I am willing to forgive your behavior as long as you keep Sir Rimuru guarded. I will not allow you to shirk your duty!"

His new leg had revitalized him in many ways. He was just as strong as he used to be, and his presence loomed larger than ever. But he wouldn't be hitting the road just yet—it sounded like he'd agreed to become the palace magician for the kingdom, although he'd still run guild testing until they found a replacement. That came at the Baron's suggestion, no doubt—he never kept anyone who knew his secrets *too* far out of reach.

So I had my guild paper, along with a new wholesale client. And not only that—I had built formal relations with one of the Western Nations, albeit a small one. It was nothing to sniff at achievement-wise as I left the Kingdom of Blumund behind me. A good start, I felt.

Next up was the Kingdom of Englesia, home of the Free Guild headquarters. I still had those children from my dreams in mind,

and I wanted to gather some intel on Hinata Sakaguchi as well. But before that, let's try meeting with guild master Yuuki Kagurazaka first. I had my intro papers, so it shouldn't be a problem.

Time to get back on the road.

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
5

## THE SUMMONED CHILDREN

# CHAPTER 5

## THE SUMMONED CHILDREN

He gave his visitor a warm smile, deftly showing him to a seat.

“Ay, what a pain! Our strategy ended in a complete failure. It might be a little while longer before Clayman awakens to become the first *true* demon lord, sadly.”

Laplace, the visitor in question, sat down and gave him the news. Failure, after years of effort. He didn’t sound too broken up about it.

“Hmm. And here I thought an orc lord on the rampage would guarantee us at least ten thousand or so deaths.”

The master of the room seemed to take the news pretty lightly.

“But I suppose obtaining the power needed won’t come that easily to us. There are other conditions to worry about.”

“Yeah. *He’s* strong enough, though, without having to dabble in any crazy stuff. Although I think he has it in for Leon, a bit...”

“He still has much to learn, that Clayman. So—was that all you came here to say?”

Laplace defiantly grinned at the room’s owner. “Oh, of course not! That was just a side note. I bet you heard all about it from Clayman already, hmm? All I did was help out a bit, so I don’t know the whole story myself. But enough about that—I’ve been going undercover to keep tabs on the paladins’ movements lately. They’re really out to start something, y’know that? Now that they’re pretty sure Veldora’s gone for good.”

“Hmm? You think so? Do you know what they’re after?”

“It’d be a hell of a lot easier for us if I did, huh? I tell you, the Western Holy Church is one mean group to get involved with.”

Laplace shrugged. The mask hid his expression, but despite his pessimism, his attitude was just as bold and invincible as ever.

"You sure are right. Passing themselves off as righteous guardians of the weak or whatnot. I highly doubt they're acting out of sheer goodwill. They're an enigma to me."

"Yeah, aren't they? But if they're starting to get more active, y'know, that's our chance to catch 'em by the tail, too, yeah? They've been around since time immemorial, so I can't wriggle my way into the upper management. But in their *current* operations, I might have a way in, y'know?"

He smiled once again.

"So I'm thinkin' it's time for me to get a bit more serious about infiltrating the operation. That'll probably put me out of contact for a while, but you okay with that?"

"No, fine by me. Oh, but if you *do* find out what's behind the Holy Church, I'll be glad to grant you a wish."

Laplace greeted this news with a hearty laugh. "Really?! Well, *that's* a nice little motivation!"

"I'll bet. But don't overdo it. I don't want you messing *this* up."

"No need to remind me! In that case..." Laplace stood up, preparing to leave.

"Oh, one more thing," a relaxed voice said behind him. "The main cause behind your most recent failures is traveling in the Western Nations right now. Things are about to become rather interesting, I'd say."

"Wh-whaaaaa—? What the heck for? That dopey-looking slime's supposed to be the grand pooh-bah of the Forest of Jura! What's it doing bumping around human lands?!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! It surprises you that much? You really *are* a unique little monster, aren't you...er, what was his name again?"

"Umm... It was Rimuru, I believe."

"Ah, right. Well, no doubt about it, then. He entered the Kingdom of Blumund several days ago."

This stunned Laplace into silence.

"...Well, fine. Ain't got a thing to do with me. I mean, I haven't seen a monster who posed *less* of a threat to me in my life."

With that, Laplace left the room.

The master of the room gave a contented smile.

"Given his strange behavior...he's no normal monster, that much is for sure. Which means...maybe he's got memories of his *past* life? Perhaps I can take advantage of that. It'd be worth testing out a little, at least..."



The Forest of Jura was surrounded by a number of nations. There was the Kingdom of Blumund, which I just left. There was Farmus, the much larger kingdom adjacent to it. Then there was Englesia and a number of other smaller countries.

All these nations came together to form what was known as the Council, which consisted of representatives elected by each country. Most important decisions affecting the region were managed by this Council. Each nation had its own methods for electing representatives, but for the most part, the seats were taken by lower-level nobility without much in the way of inheritance rights.

The Council of the West (as it was formally called) was originally founded as a sort of monster-fighting co-op, before growing into a force devised to keep the Eastern Empire in check. Not every nation in the area was part of it—the powerful Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion was one of the exceptions, for example—but this was rare. In a world this brutal to its inhabitants, you had to pool your resources for a chance at survival, I suppose.

The Kingdom of Englesia lay at the core of this Council—and for good reason. Geographically, Englesia was the easiest central point for Council members to assemble at. It naturally followed that the Free Guild would set up its headquarters here as well. You could say that the most powerful Council member nation was the Kingdom of Farmus, but in order to prevent any one nation from having too much clout over the assembly, the nations agreed to set up in Englesia for logistical reasons.

Partly because of this, relations between Farmus and Englesia were apparently frosty at best. And there was another reason: Englesia was the only Council member nation that didn't share a border with the Forest of Jura, giving it an extra measure of

stability and protection from monsters. That was another factor that led to its selection as Council HQ.

But what does the Council *do*, exactly? To put it broadly, it acted as a mediator between nations, weighing each member's interests against the others' and managing them to prevent conflict. It held power in both economic and political circles, making it a strikingly influential group in this region—sort of like the United Nations of my old world, with a lot more force to take action.

Much like the United Nations, the Council had no standing military force. It didn't need one. That's because, in a way, the Council formed the higher bureaucracy of the Free Guild itself. The money paid to adventurers for slaying monsters came from Council funding—and in exchange, the Council had the right to give orders to the guild.

This funding came from contributions provided by each member nation, which varied depending on how much speaking rights each one had. Refusing to pay these meant leaving the Council. It was a way for the Council to gain a louder voice in local affairs, using the shield of security it offered members. Many nations relied almost wholly upon the guild for monster management, and that meant there was no choice for them but to support the Council.

Speaking of security, I heard another interesting story: The main thing that kept the Western Nations strongly connected to one another was religion.

In this world, where monsters were a real, tangible threat, religion provided more than just spiritual support—it was a sort of last bastion for survival. Thus, you had the Western Holy Church, the font of all regional religious activity, with Luminus as its sole and absolute deity. To put it another way, the Western Nations were the Church's main sphere of influence, and the Holy Empire of Lubelius the "holy land" of the Church.

Confusingly, this didn't necessarily mean the Western Holy Church ran Lubelius. It was an independent religious organization. However, the leader of Lubelius *was* called the Holy Emperor,

defined to be the pope-like mortal spokesperson of divinity whose orders had to be followed without fail.

So was Lubelius a kind of puppet state for the Church? Yes and no. It was too complex for me to really get from what Fuze told me, and I'm not sure he really knew, either. "It's just, you know, that sort of thing," as he put it, and I guess he's right.

The Western Holy Church wasn't the only religion in this world. There were other indigenous ones that worshipped a variety of different gods and goddesses. But in terms of followers, Luminus had the overwhelming majority. And that's simply because this particular deity had the paladins, the most powerful knightly warriors on this planet.

These formed the so-called Crusader groups, armies of knights whose strength went beyond A rank, and their numbers totaled over three hundred. They were considered the saviors of mankind, monster-slaying experts tasked with eradicating them all from the landscape. I was told they were formed by "virtuous" inspiration to protect the Western Nations, although I don't know how true that is. Some people even gave them enough respect to call them defenders of righteousness.

The thing was, though, this Luminus apparently didn't accept any other gods. The One God Luminus, as the full name went. As a result, practitioners of other religions were not qualified to receive his salvation. There were several Council nations that didn't designate Luminism as their national religion, and paladins were never deployed over there. I guess I can't blame them—if you think someone's unworthy of salvation, then of course you aren't gonna risk your life for them—but that didn't sound too "righteous" to me. Just my take, though.

The Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, by the way, had no state religion. Its imperial family claimed to be the descendants of gods, so no other religion was officially designated. On the other hand, its people enjoyed full freedom of religion, making it a pretty unique nation in its approach. They also steadfastly refused to join the Council, making it a fully independent force in the region. Their borders weren't *entirely* shut, but they had no interest in playing nice with others. It was really interesting; I wanted to check it out

sometime, especially since it sounded a little bit like the Japan of my old life.

That rounded out the new knowledge I had gained from my time in Blumund. The Western Nations were propped up by the economy on one side, religion on the other, helping it form strong bonds from country to country. A pretty neat setup, I thought. In a world with so many things trying to kill you, I didn't think you saw too many wars between human nations, though.

Oh, and I learned something rather surprising about Hinata Sakaguchi. It turned out she was the chief of the paladins, the main officer running the Crusaders.

I think Veldora mentioned that otherworlders often tended to gain special abilities when they came to this world. Maybe that power let her lead the greatest knight force known in the land? She was already a pretty tough cookie when she left Shizu—I couldn't guess how strong she was now.

Thinking about it, I was a monster presently. If I just casually strode up to her, she might decide to target me. Better not try anything too untoward. *I'll just keep my distance, I think, until I gain a better grasp of who exactly this Hinata person is.*

And to that end, I needed to gather some more information.

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The journey to Englesia went smoothly. It was time to bust out the wolf wagon again. There was a road set up, although it wasn't paved. Of course it wasn't. It'd take a huge amount of time and money to pave every road around here...via *normal* means, that is.

I had Ranga pulling the wagon in slightly shrunken form. He didn't look much different from a regular old black wolf, so I figured it wouldn't be a problem. Having him sprint at full speed would break the wagon apart, so he was going at a light jog at the moment. Doing around twenty-five, maybe? We couldn't risk going much faster on these unfinished roads. As Kabal and his gang put it, though, it couldn't have been a more comfortable ride.

We encountered several mounted soldiers on patrol along the path. They all claimed that I wouldn't expect to see much in the way of strong monsters around here. There *were* robbers and brigands to content with, but we never got involved with any. Which, I mean, twenty-five didn't seem *that* fast to us, but it's not like they could have caught up to us on foot. A horse could, but not for the long distances Ranga could pull off on a lark.

So things went well for the mere three days it took to reach the capital of Englesia.

The gate had an even stricter entry process than the Dwarven Kingdom's. There were three levels of inspections, the first of which required identification. Anyone who couldn't produce papers on the spot was forced to the back of a ponderously long line for level two; mess *that* up and you were on to level three, where you were all but treated as a criminal. By that point, once they were done with you, you'd *seriously* begin to wonder why you tried to enter in the first place. But a lot of people were willing to risk it. That's how attractive this nation was.

Thanks to my guild papers, I didn't have to care about any of that. Good thing, too. If I didn't have them, I'd be waiting in line longer than I did for the dwarves.

My only complaint:

"Whoa, whoa, you're an adventurer, li'l lady? This isn't some kind of joke you're playing on us, is it?"

The guards treated me like some spoiled girl.

"I'm not a lady, thanks. Just check the papers."

"Heh. Guess you're about the age when you wanna act all grown-up, huh? You got that cute voice, but between that mask and the way you talk..."

The griping continued as they ran the papers through some kind of magical device. Then their attitude changed.

"Oh, my apologies! Sir Rimuru, adventurer rank B? Welcome to the Kingdom of Englesia!!"

Well, that was easy. It sure didn't seem so from the way Kabal's party bumbled around, but being ranked B earned you a lot of social status, I guess.

"Don't let it bother you, Boss," commented Kabal once he was through. "The guards didn't mean anything personal by it."

I wasn't angry in particular, but getting the "li'l lady" treatment struck me as needlessly cruel. But... My voice, huh? No wonder everybody mistook me for a girl. I didn't expect that, given the mask covering my face and all, but my voice made me out to be a child, huh? It didn't bother me at all before—although, come to think of it, I got similar treatment in Blumund, didn't I? Maybe I should try altering the pitch on it to sound more mature? *A bit too late for that*, I thought.

*Let's just stick with the current one.* My body was maybe four foot three anyway, so I'd try passing myself off as kind of a stunted young man. I was innocent at heart, after all, so it's fine. A Masked Boy of Mystery would work just fine in this world. It's already filled with demon lords and Heroes; why not toss in another fantasy trope while I'm at it?

The first thing that surprised me about the city was how advanced it was. It was fairly large in size, yes, but it was also surrounded by outer walls that seemed to extend to the horizon, with entry provided by only two gates. I couldn't imagine how much time and cash it took to build a wall covering this much terrain.

Going inside, however, the view was even more stunning. There weren't skyscrapers lining the streets, exactly, but the buildings were much higher than anything Blumund had to offer. I spotted five-story stone buildings all over the place, along with a variety of brick and wood structures. But more impressive than anything was the chalky-white castle that loomed in the center, easily visible from each of the city's well-planned neighborhoods. Basking in its majesty made it clear that the capital had a legion of talented architects. That's how beautiful it was.

Another thing that caught my eye was the castle's location. There was a large lake in the middle of the city, and the edifice was built right in the center, making it appear to rise straight up from the waters. It certainly wowed visitors. Four roads spread out from it in each direction, connecting it to the rest of town. During

emergencies, these roads could have their bridges removed to prevent outside forces from invading. It was an impressive sight, an ostentatious display of Englesia's power. I had to hand it to them; it was awesome.

Security around the capital was handled by knights stationed at important points. You'd have to be pretty desperate to attempt a crime around here. I'd expect nothing less from the home of the Council, really. Any issues involving representatives would spark an international incident, so they couldn't be lazy about that.

I had Ranga dive into my shadow before we approached the capital, sticking the wagon back into my Stomach. Something told me the guards wouldn't like wolves running around the streets—I wasn't *that* crazy, so I didn't want to push it.

Thus, nobody bothered us as we walked around, taking in all the sights. It was our first leisurely stroll in a while—and as I discovered, the most amazing thing wasn't the city views, but its culture. We discovered a large sports arena, next to what looked like an outdoor amphitheater. There was artwork prominently displayed throughout town—posters, apparently, for stage plays. Paper was relatively cheap around here, and I even saw people handing out flyers advertising this or that product or event.

The *big city*. I could taste it in the air, for the first time in ages. But the thing that *really* made me think "Are you kidding me?" were the glass-lined buildings I saw. Merchandise was lined up inside, a bit like a department store's display windows. In fact, they *were* display windows—the only difference being the weapons and armor on the shelves inside.

In a fancier city block near the castle, I found a shop featuring dresses and other clothing. It sure wasn't a place for the masses. Simply living inside the city walls probably meant you were at least somewhat well-off, but owning a house close to the castle was apparently a right reserved exclusively for the nobility. The disparity was like night and day. The more you paid in taxes, I suppose, the better treatment you got. Plus, being nobility usually meant a job inside the castle, so it was probably a given that you could enjoy first-class housing within walking distance.

Once we made our initial rounds, we looked for an inn to spend the night. Broadly speaking, the city was divided into four sections—commercial, tourist, industrial, and residential quarters. The castle was at the nexus of all four, with the rest of the city radiating out from it, and the closer you were to the center, the more upscale it got. Pretty easy to figure out.

Following Kabal's lead, we quickly made our way to the tourist quarter, finding a wealth of inns (and alleyways full of taverns in the rear) to serve us. I could feel my heart soar, but sadly, we weren't there to drink that day. I frowned a bit at that as we worked out room arrangements.

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We set out the next morning for the Free Guild headquarters.

The closer you got to the city walls in the tourist quarter, the more tiny shops and public performances you ran into. There was a wide selection of food stalls on offer, too. Toward the center, however, you saw more diplomatic residences, conference centers, schools, and other municipal buildings. It was the most well policed of the four quarters, and toward dead center, we found the Free Guild HQ.

“Right this way, Boss.”

“Boy, there sure are a lot of people, huh? It’s like a real city.”

“Hey, watch out for pickpockets, all right? This place is crawlin’ with guards, but that’s how a lot of people get lulled into a false sense of security.”

Gido had a point, but all my important stuff was in my Stomach, so I was fine. If anyone needed to worry, it was Elen.

Kabal guided us closer to the center. The ivory castle's overbearing presence made it impossible to get lost.

The HQ building was a large, grand, modern-looking structure, a far cry from the medieval norm. The US had steel skyscrapers with a dozen or so floors in the nineteenth century, back when Japan was still mostly single-story wood structures. That was how powerful a nation it was by comparison, and the Kingdom of Englesia started looking similar to me.

Adjacent to the guild was a tall building that had just as grandiose a presence, adorned with a statue of a goddess and a large holy cross on the roof.

“Is that the Church?”

“Sure is,” replied Gido. “The Englesia branch of the Western Holy Church—well, the headquarters of the whole thing, really.”

Ah, the Church—the one thing I had to be the most careful with around here.

“The headquarters?”

“Well, it’s a bit of a story, actually...”

As Gido put it, the official Church headquarters were located over in the Holy Empire of Lubelius. However, it was chiefly used for religious ceremonies and the like, with most of the actual work taking place here in the Englesian capital. “They don’t allow regular folks in here,” he said, “and I’m sure that’s the way the Church wants it in this city.”

I didn’t have any business with the Church—I’m an atheist, if anything—so I sincerely hoped I wouldn’t get involved with them during my life. They see monsters as *the enemy*, after all. And no matter how I wanted to approach Hinata, I couldn’t risk any moves that would attract their attention.

Kind of funny to see them right next door to the Free Guild, though. The mask was hiding my aura; I didn’t think I’d get spotted. No point worrying about it. If I *did*, I’d figure something out.

The guild HQ entrance was protected by a pair of glass doors that must’ve cost a fortune to install. Now that’s something I *never* expected to see in this world. The otherworlders around here must have been quite an influence—I bet they went out of their way to get these made, too. Where there’s a will, there’s a way, I guess. I still had a while to go. Instead of worrying about “can,” I should just “do.”

*Something to learn from*, I thought as I stood before the doors. As I did, I felt something searching about my body. At the same time, the doors opened. Holy crap, *really*? There’s some kind of sensor that automatically opens the doors? Talk about high tech being used for the most trivial things! Seeing this piece of Earth

tech replicated here was a shock, especially compared to the wooden Church building next door with its plain old push handles. It felt like the architect just wanted something as *different* from the neighbors as possible.

"It sure has changed in two years," Elen remarked. Well, I wasn't gonna lose out. If *this* is what I'm batting against, I better start planning out a high-rise or two when I get home.

Stepping inside, we felt several pairs of eyes upon us. They all appeared fairly high-level at a glance. It was only natural that the HQ would be full of the best people they've got.

"Welcome! How can I help you today?" said a woman stationed by the door. Her greeting, perfectly timed between breaths, made it feel like the lobby of a five-star hotel. Not to be rude, but it was a *far* cry from the Blumund capital branch.

"Yeah, we're here to see the grand master. Here's our letter of introduction."

I handed it to her.

"Certainly. Please give me one moment while we confirm."

She stepped away as another man approached us.

*Uh-oh...*

"Hey, hey, what's a kid like you doin' in here?"

*I knew it!* Someone wanting to start trouble. First impressions were everything here. If I let them screw with me, I was done. But just as I was set to fire back—

"Whoa! Hey, Grassé! You reach rank B, too?"

Kabal spoke up, tossing him a few kind words. It made Grassé freeze in place.

"Ahh! Well, look at you, Kabal! Sure haven't seen *you* lately!"

What a letdown. I was all ready to make him see how powerful I was, too. Of course, I had a tendency to screw that up anyway, so maybe it's for the better.

A few other guild members were starting to notice my friends. Soon, they were all trading nostalgic banter with one another, which segued into retelling stories of past glories on the field, *blah, blah, blah*. I sat down on a sofa and waited. An attendant brought me some tea. It was all just *too* perfect.

Enjoying the aroma, I decided to ask about something bothering me.

"Hey, Kabal, how'd you know Grassé was a B-ranked adventurer?"

"Whoa, whoa," Grassé shot back, "watch your manners! That's *Sir* Kabal to you, li'l lady! You must be a beginner if you don't know how things work around here, huh? How 'bout you show some respect to your elders?"

"Hey, I wouldn't mouth off at Sir Rimuru like that—"

"You should really show some more discipline to that kid, Kabal. You know we don't allow any guild members under rank B in here, and look at the attitude she's giving off! If you keep spoiling her like that, what's she gonna do when she has to fend for herself?"

"Knock it off! This guy's here on his own merits! ...I'm sorry, I'll fill him in later, so..."

Kabal gave me a regretful bow. I didn't mind as long as people stopped picking on me, but this "li'l lady" stuff was starting to get old. Ah well. This particular form of mine, magic-free and carried out strictly by my own body, was the most comfortable thing for me anyway.

"I'm not a kid, all right? Or a lady. Try to remember that."

Still, Grassé did answer a few questions for me. Our IDs were all checked at the door to confirm our qualifications. Not good enough? Then you didn't get in. I suppose that was why the HQ didn't seem all that heavily guarded. As Elen explained, members below B rank used a branch office near the main entrance, which offered cheaper lodging and was more convenient for day-to-day activity. Good thing I went through all that effort to earn a B, then.

As all this unfolded in my mind, the woman from before returned. "Thanks for waiting," she said with a smile. "I was told that only you were allowed in, Sir Rimuru, so if you would follow me, please..."

This sent a jolt of tension across the lobby.

"The grand master's gonna see 'im...?!"

"So that letter was real...?"

"Real or not, how often does the grand master give an audience to some guy off the street?"

"That's why I'm *telling* you guys, Sir Rimuru's not some guy off the street!"

Kabal proudly boasted about me to the suddenly interested audience. *I wish he'd stop that; it's embarrassing.*

"I'll be back in a bit," I said as we walked off.

The woman directed me down a deeper hallway before knocking on a certain door. There was no response, but she opened it and went in anyway, inviting me to follow.

Going inside, I immediately noticed a magic circle drawn on the floor, much like the one Vester had drawn. Probably from the same family. Invited to step inside, I stood alongside the woman, feeling her activate the magic behind it for just a single moment. We must not have been teleported very far.

This new room, a sort of informal reception chamber, felt airtight to me—that circle might have taken us somewhere underground. These were probably all anti-spy measures, I figured, and the thoroughness of it all left me with a lot to learn from.

The woman, well used to this procedure, gave me a bow before teleporting herself back. Left alone, I sat on a chair and waited. After a couple minutes, a door opened, revealing a single young man. He was fairly handsome, with black hair and black eyes, but there was still more than a trace of youth to his countenance—young enough that I'd believe him if he said he was in high school.

"Welcome," he began, smiling. "I am grand master Yuuki Kagurazaka. It's nice to meet you, Rimuru. I've heard quite a lot about you! Feel free to call me Yuuki."

"It's good to meet you, too. My name's Rimuru Tempest, and I am the leader of the newly established nation of Tempest in the Forest of Jura. Just *Rimuru* is fine with me, too."

Thus, I had my first encounter with Yuuki Kagurazaka.

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After introducing ourselves, we settled down to a little Q&A session. It began with a bit of idle chitchat as we probed each

other's motivations and such, but it wasn't long before I was totally at ease with Yuuki.

He was just a kind, good-natured guy, supposedly in his late twenties but not even looking out of his late teens. I asked him why; he said it was a type of curse. He didn't obtain any special or unique skills on the way to this world, apparently, but the journey did grant him massively upgraded physical abilities.

"It was really just, like..." He scratched his head. "Like, what should I do? And really, it took me about five years until I realized that something weird was going on with me."

His eternally boyish looks, among other things, meant he had never been in a relationship. I couldn't help but laugh and cheer him up. I was starting to like the guy.

"Wow, really? Ooh, that's too bad, ha-ha-ha! But, hey, you'll get luck on your side eventually!"

"That's really not helping..."

Yuuki sounded a little huffy about it, but I'm sure I was just imagining it.

Either way, we quickly broke the ice.

"Still, I have to hand it to you... A monster building an entire city?"

"Oh? It's not that rare of a thing, is it?"

"Well, I mean, I sure haven't heard of it...and I kinda doubt I will again, after you."

"You think?"

"Yeah..."

We stared at each other for a bit. *What's the big deal with monsters building cities? Yuuki's getting too bogged down in the little things.* I let it slide as the topic turned to our current situations, and once that conversation ran its course, Yuuki brought up his main concern.

"So, Rimuru... You're a monster, right? That's how Fuze described you to me, but I'm pretty surprised that you went right through the barrier we have over the headquarters building. How did you transform yourself like that?"

“Mm? Oh. Yeah, I’m a monster. A slime, to be exact. Keep this between us, but I’ve got a skill called Universal Shapeshift that does this for me. I can imitate any monster I’ve consumed. That, and this mask contributes a lot, too.”

I removed the mask. I knew I’d be dealing with the grand master for a while to come. If we ever got hostile, I’d have a hell of a time getting accepted by people in this nation. This was a do-or-die moment. I couldn’t let him think my city was some house of horrors. Let’s just go out with the whole truth, right now.

“Imitate monsters you’ve... Wait. Is that Miss Shizu?!”

A murderous look crossed Yuuki’s face. A beat—and then he disappeared from the opposite side of the table. We exchanged a pair of kicks. The resulting shock wave split the table in two. It was a tremendous blow—heavy, furious, like nothing a human could launch. I might not ever feel pain, but for just a moment, my leg felt too numb to move.

“Calm down, kid—” I said, cool as a cucumber.

Looking back, Shizu managed to spot me purely on the atmosphere I exuded around her. A pretty amazing feat, now that I think about it. It took a lot of imagination to picture an otherworlder who wound up turning into a slime.

The rage was gone from Yuuki’s eyes, but he was still on his feet, ready to continue. “Could you explain this to me in detail?” he asked, his gaze fixed upon me.

We sat across from each other once more, leaving the broken table where it was.

“Well, all right. Look, to be honest with you, I’m an alien from a faraway planet—”



“What are you talking about? I want you to be serious with me! Honestly, I’m impressed you think this is a great time to goof off!”

Yikes. Yuuki looked pretty pissed. I figured a little joke would help ease the tension, but maybe not...

“All right, all right. I’ll be serious now, so just chill out a little...”

“You come all the way here, and that’s the joke you go for? That’s the first time I’ve heard *that* one. Are you by any chance...?”

Yuuki guessed it before I could even say it. I decided to start from the beginning.

“So...I was attacked by this guy on the street...”

I spent the next while going into minute detail about what happened.

“Ah... So you *are* Japanese, huh, Rimuru...?”

*Heh-heh. Just as planned.* I make a joke that only someone with my background would understand, and he was instantly on my side. It made him angry at first, but, hey, it worked! The quickest way to make him realize who I really was! (Whether he believed that was my intention is another issue, but, um, it worked!)

Once we got through with that, we talked about all kinds of things. What we’d been up to in this world. Our trials and tribulations. Shizu’s final moments.

“That’s how she decided to go...? I have to admit, she often told me about how much she didn’t like this world...”

Yuuki closed his eyes.

No point dwelling on dreary topics. I brought up other things from our old world. He demonstrated a particularly keen interest in how his favorite manga and anime wound up ending.

“Aw, come on! You gotta tell me what happened after that!”

“Hee-hee-hee! You wanna know? Well, guess what—? Pretty much all the manga and anime you mentioned ended by the time I left! And you *know* I kept up with all of it. A true gentleman always makes sure to cover all the bases!”

“That’s amazing! Please, sir! Please, give me your knowledge!”

He was starting to sound frantic. It made the woman from before almost drop her tray of tea and snacks when she teleported back in. Maybe I took it a little too far.

“Well, here, I’ll show you, then. Do you have a piece of paper?”

“Paper?”

“Yeah.”

Yuuki gave me a doubtful look as he provided me with one. I swallowed it into my stomach—

“There, all set.”

—and took out my finished work, handing it to Yuuki.

“Wh-whoaaaaaaaa!! What kind of magic trick is this, sir?!”

I couldn’t blame him for his surprise. I had just handed him a neatly bound volume of manga.

This was the result of me wringing everything I could out of the Great Sage. I basically took the paper and copied the images I replayed from my memory upon it. Talk about a waste of a great talent. Real effective, though.

“Right! If you want to read more, I’ll need some more paper to work with!”

Without a word, Yuuki stood up and ordered another woman to bring some paper. His face was dead serious, so the woman quickly stepped up to bring a few reams down. I spent the next little bit burning all my memories upon them, making sure to keep the extra sheets for myself. Paper was still a high-end product—what I took was worth a small fortune. Never hurts to have some. I had some actual, non-stupid uses for it, too.

Plus, Yuuki sure wasn’t complaining. I bet not being able to catch up on his favorite series was a big disappointment for him. Getting that chance in *this* world, he had nothing to complain about.

“Thank you so much, sir!”

Of course, some of the series he requested hadn’t gone much of anywhere plot-wise, much less wrapped up publication. It sucks how *those* are often the most engaging series. I wanted to know how some of those turned out, too. Hopefully another Japanese otherworlder will show up in, like, ten years or so to fill me in.

“You know, Rimuru, I wanted to ask you...”

“Oh? What’s that?”

"When you signed on for the guild, how did you fill out the entry form? You didn't have any time to learn the language in this world, did you?"

Oof. Talk about hitting you where it hurts.

"Hee-hee-hee! Well, about that. It's because I studied this language, of course! After days of unbending effort, I should add!"

The Sage was deciphering and copying everything I needed for me, actually. But Kabal and the gang *did* teach me the basic alphabet, and the rest came quickly after that.

"Really? You didn't use some magic cheat or anything...? Because learning the language was one of the toughest things I dealt with, coming here."

"Oh, um, ummm, don't be silly! No matter how old you get, studying never stops being important!"

I wavered a bit, but I think I managed to keep the facade going. It hurt a little, seeing Yuuki show me such respect, but I wasn't strictly lying, so it's all good. The Sage was what let me read and understand things, but, hey—that's my ability. Just because I omitted that fact didn't make it any less true.

\*

Over dinner, our conversation drifted back toward more serious topics—in particular, about what we'd both do next.

"So you risked your life to travel here, Rimuru, because Miss Shizu said we're both from Japan? I mean, I'd love to keep helping you going forward, but was that your only motive?"

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, I just thought you might have some other reason. Like, maybe you're trying to find a way back home or something?"

Back home.

Yes, I had thought about it. But I gave up on it. I was already dead over there; I was sure they'd cremated my body long ago. There wasn't really anyplace for me to return to. I'd just make everyone's lives chaotic. If they thought about me now and then, reflecting on the good old days, I was okay with that. To younger otherworlders,

however, I'm sure getting back home was their number-one priority.

"Do you think it's possible?" I asked. I was greeted with silence. Not that easy, I guess. He would've done it already if it was. That's about what I figured.

"Well," Yuuki said, "it kinda looks like a one-way street. That's because this world is...I guess you could call it semi-physical."

He went into detail on what he knew so far. Essentially, our old planet was a purely physical world—a world free of magicules. The opposite of that is a purely spiritual world—one teeming with spirits, demons, angels, and other mystic life-forms; one full of mysterious and astonishing energy. The two were polar opposites but still retained some deep, important connections.

Which led to this world—a world of chaos. An extremely unique entity—one that shared properties from both the physical and spiritual worlds. Its atmosphere was packed with magicules, allowing fairies, ghouls, and other spiritual life-forms to manifest themselves—something Yuuki figured out via his own experimentation.

Traveling from a physical world to this one meant that our own bodies had to be broken down once, then rebuilt in semi-physical form. That, he explained, was likely why we couldn't go back to a purely physical world again.

"However," he added, "I don't think it's a zero-chance possibility. Japan's full of stories about demons and monsters and things, and you see the same kinds of tales and myths all over the world. So if we're able to get the conditions just right, I'm thinking that maybe we can, you know?"

He sounded right to me. I had my own thoughts about it, too. It all felt like a vague fever dream at this point, but I definitely remembered hearing the World Language from pretty much the moment I was stabbed. There was definitely *some* kind of connection between Earth and this world it had to ride on.

"Plus... You can cast magic, can't you, Rimuru?"

"Yeah," I replied to the sudden topic change, "I had a spell or two taught to me."

Yuuki squinted at me, jealous. “That sure is nice... I was really excited about magic, too, at first...”

As he put it, when he first came to this world, he both lamented his plight and fostered a deep fascination for the unknown force of magic. I was the same way. Anyone who’s a fan of manga and anime must have wished they could toss around magic at least once in their lives.

“I wanted to learn some, but for some reason, I just couldn’t do it. I think it’s because of the way my body changed. It felt so, like, *romantic*, too, but no...”

Yep. Something adventurous to it, isn’t there? If something’s right there at your fingertips, of course you’ll wanna try it out. But Yuuki just didn’t have the right characteristics for it. Reality sucks sometimes.

“Still, I can perform research into it. And what I found was that in this world, magic is the power to interfere with the laws of nature. There’s a mysterious set of laws to this world—people call them the World Language—and when you earn a new power, or the value of your life rises in some way, like when you evolve, then that’s how nature tells you about it. Magic runs under the same rules as this World Language; when you cast the spell, it turns that nonphysical phenomenon into real life. And if you look at it the other way...”

Yuuki paused. I tried to guess where this was going. Look at it the other way...

“Everything has a cause and an effect, and if you figure out the laws behind all that, you might even be able to find a way home...is what you’re saying?”

I was familiar with the World Language. My skill, the Great Sage, used the term when talking to me. It was my familiarity with it that led me to that conclusion.

“...Right. That’s very good, Rimuru. I’m surprised... You understood a concept that I had to spend years researching.”

Take the concept of “returning home,” render it into a set of laws, and translate it into the World Language. Easy for *me* to say, but trying to discover those laws would take a lifetime of research. Even with that much effort, it may not be possible at all.

But if you were able to interfere with the World Language on a deeper level...

.....

The Sage was silent. No, a skill like that's just a fairy tale. Guess we'd just have to keep plugging away on that research.

Yuuki gave me a wry grin. "Of course, I'd never have enough time to uncover all of it, I guess. I'd have to decipher and evaluate each of the laws, one by one."

*And that's probably his main goal. I'm sure he'll keep up his research.*

"Well, I'll definitely help you with whatever I can, and I'll try doing a little research on my side, too."

I had to volunteer to pitch in. I just had to give a shout-out to his spirit.

"But anyway, if you aren't trying to return home, what brought you here, Rimuru?"

Now he was getting back on topic. I figured he deserved a full answer.

"Well, if I can kick back and chill out a little in this life, that's all I really want. I've got a town pretty well built up, and basically, I'm just in this to have fun with my friends. But there's something that's been bothering me lately..."

My other mission. I needed to purchase magic stones and check out the cities, figuring out how advanced their civilization was—that was important. But I hadn't forgotten the biggest one. The children I saw in my dreams.

"...I see. Miss Shizu must have been really worried for them. But those kids are... Well, if that's what she wants you to do, then I trust you are up to it."

He then dived into a long story, telling me about the children I saw in detail.

\*

After the end of our long conversation, I walked out of the guild headquarters, offering to treat my friends to dinner for making them wait so long. “Oh, don’t worry about it,” they all said, but it was already early evening—Yuuki and I had been talking practically from dawn till dusk. I wasn’t expecting the meeting to go on for so long, so I felt bad for them.

We went to a restaurant with a famed reputation across the city, a far cry from our lodging. As we greedily tucked into the gourmet dishes ferried to us, I went over everything Yuuki and I had agreed to.

“So yeah, starting a week from now, I’ve agreed to become a schoolteacher.”

“Huh?”

“Where did *that* come from?”

“You sure are a joker, Boss!”

Neither Kabal nor his cohorts were ready to believe it at first. Sheesh. Better start from the beginning.

“Basically, I’m gonna be living in an empty room in the school dorm starting tomorrow. I told you about the dreams I’ve been having, right? Yuuki thinks he knows them, so he’s setting me up to work as their teacher.”

They responded with several questions, which I answered in order. I had succeeded in convincing them by the time we finished dinner, although they still couldn’t hide their exasperation.

“Wow, Boss. A teacher, though, huh...?”

“Pretty hard to imagine...”

“I’m worried for those kids.”

*What’re you looking at me like that for, Gido?*

“Yeah, so as far as it goes for you guys, today marks the end of you guiding me around on this journey.”

“...Kinda sudden, Boss.”

“I thought we were contracted to stick with you until we were back?”

“Oh, I’ll be fine! That’s why I set up that teleportation circle, right? Because I figured something like this might happen. This way, I can go back to Tempest or Blumund in the blink of an eye.”

Gonna be a bit harder for you guys, though, huh? Good luck out there!"

"Whoa, whoa, are you serious? I thought we'd be taking that wolf wagon back, man..."

"Yeah, really! Ugh, just *thinking* about the journey now makes me so depressed!"

"Aw, c'mon, Kabal," chided Gido. "And you, too, Elen. You guys are getting too used to life on easy street, aren'tcha? Not that I'm lookin' forward to getting battered and bruised on a regular wagon again, but..."

These guys... One moment, they're going on about how they'll take responsibility and keep me guarded till the bitter end; the next, they're whining about losing their luxury travel. It was certainly in character for them all, but still.

So the four of us proceeded to drink away the loneliness and regret until late that night. The next morning, just outside the city gates, I said my final good-byes to the extremely hungover trio.

"Drop us a line if anything happens, Boss!"

"Are you sure you'll be fine without us...?"

"We'll miss havin' you around, but take care! Let us know when you're back in town!"

"Sure thing," I said. "I'll let you know if something comes up."

I whipped our wagon out of my Stomach. A merchant was already approaching us, two horses in tow.

"Uh, Boss... Aw, man, why?"

"You—you aren't...?"

"Are you serious?!"

Ignoring their pleas, I ordered the seller to hitch his horses to the wagon. "All right, thanks for delivering 'em," I said as I signed his payment form. Kabal and company had finally accepted the bitter truth by then.

"Yeah, so consider this wagon a parting gift for you guys, okay? Give it back to Rigurd if you don't need it."

"Uh, I think we're gonna need it a lot, Boss!"

"You're so nice to us, Sir Rimuru!"

"Whew! What a man. I wish Fuze could learn to be this nice to his people."

They were all touched by the gift. I'm glad the surprise was a success. One more thing—

“Your payment's inside the wagon, too. Check it out later—”

—*later, if you like*, is what I meant to say, but they were already scrambling to climb in before I could finish.

“Whooooaaa! Lookit this shield!!”

“Aaaaahhhh! This staff is incredible!!”

“Well, look at this! That's one *damn* sharp-looking dagger. Wait, is this a magic weapon?!?”

*Man, they're like hyenas.* I was hoping they'd open up the boxes while I wasn't around, but *that* idea sure went to waste.

“Sheesh, you guys... Ah well. That's your payment. One Scale Shield for Kabal, one Dryad's Staff for Elen, and one Tempest Dagger for Gido. Take care of 'em for me, okay?”

“Of course, Boss!”

“We'd be crazy not to! How did you know I was in the market for a new staff...? Thank you so much, Sir Rimuru!”

“But, um...these are all Uniques, aren't they?! I don't think I've ever seen a weapon as amazing as this one. Are you *sure* about this, Boss?”

“Sure, I'm sure. We didn't pay anything for the materials. The staff's a gift that Treyni was nice enough to supply, so treat it with care, got it?”

“Oh, yes, yes!”

Elen lovingly rubbed the side of her face against the staff. I was sure she'd treat it just fine without me harping on it. Kabal's and Gido's weapons were manufactured goods, but the Dryad's Staff really *was* one of a kind, so. If she lost or broke it, Treyni would probably have my head for it—and I told her it was for Elen, too, so I was more worried than I should be, probably.

Kabal's Scale Shield was another product from the mind of Garm, crafted from scales taken from the Charybdis—the same scales forged by Kurobe to make Gido's Tempest Dagger, which was infused with wind magic to boost the holder's physical speed. We still retained a rather large cache of those scales from the battle—I had given several hundred to King Gazel as a thank-you gift. The ones I had personally consumed were still in practically

mint condition. We had researched putting them to use in battle equipment, and these two items were the first complete test samples. As Gido said, they were Unique-caliber weapons.

Thanks to the three of them ripping open their presents early, this was no longer any kind of lonesome, depressing good-bye for us. They were all in high spirits as I saw them off—which is fine. Nobody likes sad farewells. Besides, all the excitement seemed to cure their hangovers. And this is Kabal's gang we're talking about—they'd no doubt come groveling to me for help with some other crisis soon.

Thus, it was with an odd sense of satisfaction that I sent them on their way.

\*

Once they were gone, it was time to kick off my big move.

All it really entailed, of course, was heading to the dorm and picking up my key. Once I filled out all the paperwork, I told the manager that I'd be moving in that night. As Yuuki excitedly put it to me, I'd get to enjoy "a dedicated staff dormitory, plus three meals and ten silver coins per day!" The manager confirmed that with me, stating they'd get the place cleaned up before the day was through.

The average salary in the capital, by the way, was seven silver a day. Educators were treated a lot better around here than I would've guessed. A night at our inn cost four silver, not including meals, and while it was nice inside, it still felt pricey compared to that joint in the farming village. It'd be much more economical to move into the dorm Yuuki had for me.

I also took a quick peek inside while I was there. It wasn't a major step down from last night's inn. I was happy with it.

Like I told Kabal and the gang, I'd begin teaching in seven days, although I'd need to report to school in six to manage the handover. Thus, I had five days to use however I wanted, although this particular day was mostly spent purchasing assorted household goods. I had the budget to purchase most of what I wanted and have it carted back to the dorm, touring around the city a little more as I shopped the day away.

I occupied most of the next day unpacking and organizing all the stuff I purchased. I *knew* I shouldn't have sent those guys off so early. I regretted that now.

On day three, I decided to hit the library. I still hadn't heard anything about, like, what I'd be teaching at school. Yuuki was working that out for me right now, but in the meantime, I figured I should brush up a bit on my core knowledge.

That and fulfill one of my other important goals—learning magic. I wanted to take this opportunity to read through as many magic tomes as I could in there. Access to the room with said tomes was restricted, but you could get in if you showed ID proving you were a B-ranked adventurer or higher. You couldn't take any of the books out, either, and I wanted to read 'em all while I was in the capital, so that was job one for me.

This was the largest library in the city, but it wasn't affiliated with the government. The full-on Royal Library was inside the castle, available only to nobility and court-appointed magicians. A-ranked adventurers who were official guests of the state could request access, perhaps, but that didn't apply to me right now. Certain magic was treated as classified information by particular nations, so it wasn't just a matter of walking up and asking for a library card.

For now, I'd have to be happy with this regular library. Besides, there were a lot of valuable books in there, filled with tales of forbidden skills and techniques collected by adventurers worldwide. Some of the more ancient tomes discovered during Free Guild work were gathered here, too. *The collection is easily as valuable as anything the Royal Library might have*, I thought.

It was wonderful. I felt lucky to be blessed with such fortune, so soon after arriving. I'm sure it was karmic repayment for all my good deeds.

I quickly began browsing through the magic tomes. There were so many here, you could never finish them in a lifetime if you read them any normal way. So, um, apologies to the diligent scholars out there putting in all that time in reading rooms, but I'm using the Great Sage to read these suckers.

If someone watched me in there, it'd probably look like I was just running a hand over a book, then meekly returning it to the shelf. But my hand was taking in the entirety of each book, recording it fully and accurately. Running the Sage and Glutton skills in parallel, I copied each magic tome into my mind at breakneck speed. I could take the time to pore over the contents later—or really, I could let the Sage do that. All I had to do here was pluck a book from the shelves, then put it back.

Would that be enough to let me harness the magic inside, though...?

*Received. It is possible to thoroughly examine the contents with Analyze and Assess, then comprehend it with the All of Creation skill. Once comprehended and stored within memory space, the magic may be executed with Cast Cancel.*

Really? Whoa. So all I gotta do is *think* about what kinda magic I want? What a crazy set of skills. There's just no end to the wonders the Sage brings me.

In that case, it's settled. I'm not even gonna bother reading the *titles* of these books. Just in and out, shelve and unshelve, over and over. Each volume converts itself into knowledge for me. The mere thought made me want to do this more than ever.

So over the next two days, I read those books until I was blue in the face, successfully memorizing every one in the magic-tome stacks. That was how I rounded out my little vacation. The other librarians and visitors gave me passing stares, like I was some kind of wacko, but I had no regrets. Before my lofty goal of learning more magic, that was just a trivial detail.

\*

It was now my first day of work. After a few greetings, I was given a word or two of advice from the academy's vice principal.

Yuuki had already warned me it would be hard work—in addition to being guild master, he was also chairman of this school's board of directors. He called it more of an honorary title

than anything, but I was still impressed. In the ten or so years he had been there, he not only built up the entire Free Guild but even set up an affiliated school for the outfit. In a way, he was the ideal all adventurers should aspire to.

This school was, indeed, a sort of training ground for would-be guild members. Like the guild itself, you decided on a department to specialize in—beyond the common courses shared by all students, there were also classroom-based lectures in magical and monster sciences, as well as on-the-field training in battle and survival. You were free to devise your own curriculum, not unlike the universities of my previous life.

*My job, however, would be running a special class that was a tad different from what most students had access to. The S-Class, as they put it, was a group of students deemed to be problematic in one way or another. Ever since their previous adviser, the notoriously hard-line Shizue Izawa, left her post due to personal issues, the class had been left teacherless and free to wreak havoc however it liked. She was a Hero, the Conqueror of Flames, and I definitely had some big shoes to fill. I suppose I should get used to being compared to her all the time around here.*

It seems this class was wild enough that it had already driven off several would-be teachers in the meantime, including a few B-ranked adventurers. The administrators were at their wit's end trying to figure out what to do with them. The vice principal told me all this, much as Yuuki did before. It was composed of five students, as he put it a few days back—

.....

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...

"All five of these students are otherworlders," he began, "people just like us. Let me ask you, though, Rimuru... Do you know someone named Hinata Sakaguchi?"

Why's *her* name coming up now? I mean, I wanted to ask about her, but...

"I know the name, at least. She's an otherworlder and one of Shizu's old apprentices, right? Also that she's stronger than Shizu and has a really great memory and stuff."

"Stronger than Miss Shizu at her peak, to be exact, yes. And do you have much idea of just how strong Miss Shizu was?"

How strong she was? Well, strong enough to summon a high-level spirit like Ifrit and become "one" with it. The sheer temperatures involved were brutal. Without Cancel Temperature, I would've been a goner, for sure.

"Well, she wielded Ifrit, a monster who goes past A level, so..."

"Right. At her peak, Miss Shizu could bring Ifrit fully under her control. In terms of the scale I implemented for the guild, she'd be in the upper echelon of what we'd call A-plus, even. She was something special—but Hinata, at the age of fifteen, gained strength that even went beyond that. That should give you some idea of what I'm talking about."

I nodded. Hmm. I didn't have any idea at all, but I kept listening.

"You might be wondering why I'm bringing this up...but first and foremost, I wanted you to know what makes us otherworlders different from the people in this world. Some of us are gifted with incredibly powerful battle skills, like Hinata, but some of us, like me, don't have any skills at all. You can't put all otherworlders into the same category; it really runs the gamut. My favorite café in town is run by an otherworlder, and he's powerless, so to speak. Most otherworlders have *some* kind of special ability, usually, but that's not an ironclad rule."

I see. So most, but not all, people gain a skill or two when they make the journey.

"However," Yuuki continued, "the real key here is the difference between naturally traveling over to this world and being *called* over."

*Hmm. Veldora discussed that a little, too, didn't he? Yeah, he did...*

(Many otherworlders come here bearing special powers. Powers that are chiseled into their souls in the midst of their journey. The summoned will always bear one such skill—a unique skill, one exclusive to them and them alone. Unlike the otherworlders who come here by sheer accident, these people bear a soul strong enough to withstand the stress of the summoning process. The fact that said summoning process so rarely succeeds in this world otherwise proves as such.)

I think that's what it was.

In other words, you need a soul strong enough to handle the summon process, or else it won't work. I relayed all this to Yuuki. "I'm impressed you know that," he replied, eyes wide. "That's exactly what I've learned in my research." Wasn't really research for me; I'm just parroting what Veldora said, but oh well.

"As you say, Rimuru, the 'summons' that are called over here for some purpose are always granted powers suited for this purpose—for example, so they can become a Hero to give mankind a decisive edge in battle. During this journey, your body is disassembled and put back together in semi-physical form—in other words, it's rebuilt. Without a strong enough will, I imagine you'd get swallowed up in all that energy and disappear into the black."

Even Hinata, who came here quite by accident, was granted otherworldly powers. If she had been called here for some specific goal, I couldn't imagine how strong she'd be then. I imagine that's what Yuuki was trying to say—but what he said next sent shivers down my spine.

"...Now, what do you think would happen if you are summoned while still in incomplete form?"

"Incomplete form?"

"Exactly..."

What he then explained to me almost made my skin crawl. Normally, performing a summon under a given set of conditions required thirty or more summoners to work as a team. The ceremony took seven whole days to complete—and even then, the success rate was less than 1 percent. Even worse, once a ceremony was complete, the same summoners would need to wait for a certain interval before performing it again—an interval that took something like thirty-three or sixty-six years. The longer you waited, the more you'd be able to narrow down the conditions you wanted.

So what happens if you perform a summon without stipulating any particular conditions? *That* certainly loosened things up quick—there wouldn't be anywhere near as much of an interval required between summonings. The same summoners could try it again and again—but the success rate didn't get any better, and

even if you pulled it off, you often wound up summoning children and the like.

Despite these disadvantages, there were still apparently good reasons for choosing this approach. But what about the children who were summoned? Their wills were quite strong, of course, their bodies now infused with energy in the form of magicules. But they did not obtain any skills to go with that willpower—and all that energy was a severe mismatch for an immature body. So much so, in fact, that given enough time, the energy would literally burn the body away, having no other outlet to release itself with.

“Huh? Wait, so are those five children...?”

“...Yes. As I’m sure you’re imagining, they were summoned.”

“Whoa. Is that, like, okay, or...?”

Yuuki didn’t answer. But his silence provided enough of one.

“Those children,” he continued, “were the ones *not fully* summoned. Attempts at crafting a Hero that failed.”

“A Hero? What do you mean?”

“Remember what I said? A Hero can provide a decisive advantage for the human race in battle. In this world, the monsters are much stronger than us—overwhelmingly so. It’s safe to say we’re under constant threat. The power of mankind around here is pitifully weak. They’re all seeking a Hero they can pin their hopes upon.”

“What, so they’re summoning people willy-nilly to find Heroes to fight ‘em off?”

“Exactly, Rimuru. What this world has decided is that it’s worth sacrificing thousands if it means the birth of a Hero for themselves.”

Yuuki’s voice rang cold in the underground room. It was the world’s choice. I had a hard time coming up with a response to that. Did I have a right to criticize them all for putting their own beloved family above a bunch of alien strangers? If you’re presented with two people in danger and you could only save one, what would you do? If I was friends with one, of course I’d reach out to that guy first.

“These children are the results of failed summonings, conducted by multiple nations under strict secrecy. They were picked up by Miss Shizu, and she wanted to do whatever she could to save them.”

"Multiple nations? There're governments involved in this?"

"Yes. It's what the world has decided to do, like I said. In their eyes, instead of gradually investing in armies to fend off the monsters, it's more efficient to stake it all on one otherworlder who can stand far above everyone else. And if you know how strong Miss Shizu was, you can see why."

I suppose I could. A force in the tens of thousands would mean nothing against something like Ifrit. If an Orc Disaster stepped into town, they could pool Kabal and all the other B-ranked adventurers in the world together, and they'd never land anything close to a serious blow. If those were the odds, then having an otherworlder like Shizu or Hinata could make all the difference, once the people knew about them.

"The other thing is that it's not like a Hero is born every day in this world. How I understand it is that it involves being willing to take on the crimes and sins of all mankind, in a way. Otherwise, you won't be able to overcome the trials placed upon you by the spirits that rule over the land. Of course, there are some Heroes out there who are anything but. They're willing to invite divine wrath upon themselves..."

Huh. The idea of just leaving everything to these Heroes sounded pretty irresponsible to me, but that assumes you had some Heroes to start with. Some *real* ones, with official World Language approval. And that's why all these nations are willing to dabble in the dark magic of summoning, damn the consequences. Any successful ones were lauded as Heroes, and as Yuuki put it, each nation had a few on hand.

The demon lords held so much power in this world that, if you were foolish enough to take one on, you couldn't afford to be picky with your methods. All these human nations scrambling to procure Heroes didn't seem strange at all to me anymore.

"There's that many around, though? I haven't seen any in the smaller towns and villages..."

"That's because these summoned otherworlders are usually ordered to serve as bodyguards for the nobility or people associated with them."

Oh, right. Veldora mentioned that, too.

"So summons that have combat potential are branded with a magical curse in their soul," I blurted out, "preventing them from defying their summoners?"

"You know about that, Rimuru?!"

I *did* know, yes. I knew, but I just kinda forgot. Yeahhh... No wonder Shizu wasn't so crazy about this world.

"So what's gonna happen to these kids?"

"...As far as I know," Yuuki grimly reported, "the longest any has survived is five years. Those are the facts, when it comes to incomplete summons. We haven't found any magic spells that can stave off the bodily collapse. If someone is summoned under the age of ten, they're almost certain to die, being unable to obtain any unique skills."

Then he gave a self-effacing smile.

"But at least each nation was kind enough to hand the children over to us."

*I'll bet. No need to take care of children who're useless in their minds, I'm sure.*

"But the Western Holy Church doesn't have a problem with that? They've got those crazy strong paladins and stuff, right?"

"You could say the Church gives it their tacit consent. To them, the total annihilation of this planet's monsters is the major goal."

"For real? And *they're* the 'defenders of righteousness' or whatever? Gimme a break. And does Hinata think that way? She really doesn't care about all these children from her homeland dying as long as she can beat the monsters?"

"Hinata, I suppose, is a realist. She takes the most rational of approaches to her problems. If something seems the most effective way to her, she'll do it, I guess you could say, but...but it makes no sense to me, no."

He knew for sure, at least, that Hinata wasn't applying pressure internationally to put an end to these summonings.

"All right. So would anyone mind if I did something about these kids?"

"What are you thinking about doing?"

I looked Yuuki in the eye. "If it's what Shizu wants," I declared, "I think I'm ready to take them on."

This must've been the work Shizu left behind. Something she regretted so much, she infiltrated my dreams to beg me for it. I saw no reason not to answer that. Too bad I couldn't tell her "I got this" in real life.

Yuuki nodded. "By all means," he whispered as he bowed his head. "I hope you'll save them, if you can."

Yes. I always do what I can. Always have, always will.

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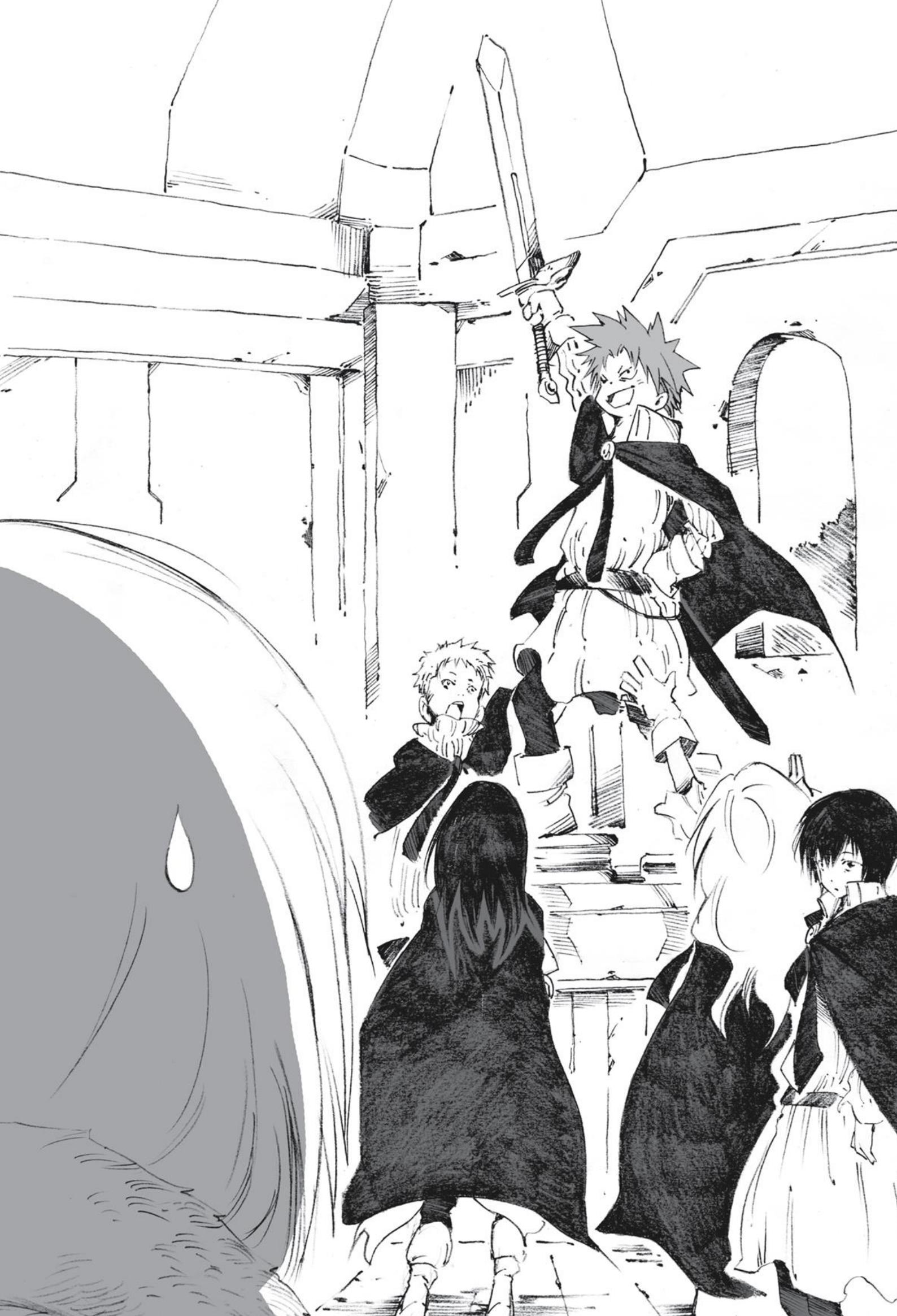
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...

And so, I agreed to take care of these children in the school.

My role was more of an adviser than a traditional teacher. Instead of just teaching coursework to my students, I'd be living with them, enlightening them. In other words, I'd be taking all the same courses they were, in all subjects. I'd be eating with them, too—good thing food was included in the deal. If I could teach them about a subject, I would; if not, I'd help other teachers—but either way, my job was to watch over these special guys.

"...I'd love to put my trust in you," the vice principal commented. "It's not every day that the chairman makes a personal recommendation like this. But those kids were too much even for B-ranked adventurers. Plus, you're practically a child yourself, aren't you? Nobody's going to hold it against you if you decide to turn the offer down."



“Thanks, but I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure? If you find you’re in over your head, be sure to tell me as soon as possible, all right?”

I appreciated the concern, but come on—these are children we’re dealing with.

Such were my thoughts as I kicked off the first day of class.

“Hey, guys! I’m in charge of you all starting today—”

My friendly greeting was immediately countered with the slash of a flaming sword.

“Sweet! Nice one, Ken!”

“Is that your finisher? It’s all done now?!”

“Kinda weak in the end. It didn’t even land!”

Without a shred of concern for me, the children carried on, clearly seeing me as the enemy.

*Um, I thought these kids had, like, barely any time left to live? 'Cause they're looking crazy healthy right now! A little too healthy! The blackboard behind me was now in flames, cut into two pieces. Hoo boy. Kids these days—what's gotten into them? Why, back in my day...*

Already, these kids were making me sound like a crotchety old man. I thought about throwing in the towel right there. *We aren't on Earth, right? Nobody's gonna complain if I toss out a little corporal punishment, will they?*

Before me were five children, the “summons” Yuuki had gathered from assorted nations. They were:

Kenya Misaki: male, age ten

Ryota Sekiguchi: male, age ten

Gail Gibson: male, age eleven

Alice Rondo: female, age nine

Chloe Aubert: female, age ten

They were still grade-school age, but I guess they packed a punch. With Shizu building them up, I was liable to get hurt if I went easy on them.

Honestly, I wasn’t expecting this. I thought they’d be a little more obedient. Watching the children as they returned my gaze

with looks of sheer hostility, I felt my first pangs of depression in a long time.

\*

They were all young, around ten years old. Gail was built enough to pass for middle-school age, but he was still only eleven.

I called each by name, looking over the files I picked up in the staff room. No reply. Um, I really needed some kind of response from these guys if I was gonna do this...

Ah well. Time to call upon my trusty assistant.

"Please give me a reply when I call your name," I gently advised. Kenya was the first to voice his tearful complaints.

"Hey! What's that dog—is that a *wolf*?! Get it out of here!"

"K-Ken, are you okay?"

"G-get away from me! This is crazy!"

"Ahhh! I'll behave, I'll behave!!"

"I am Ranga—neither dog nor wolf. My master demands a reply, child. Will you follow the order, or—?"

Whoa, Ranga's a big hit. Look at him play around with those kids! It really warms the heart, doesn't it?

"All right! Okay!" Kenya shouted, eyes tearing up at Ranga's threat. There's a good boy. He may not have liked it, but I needed some good behavior in here.

"There you go! Children must do as they're told!"

I smiled and conducted my roll call.

Apparently, these kids had hit it off pretty well with Shizu. Apart from her, though, Yuuki was the only person they'd listen to. Given their circumstances, I should have expected that, but that didn't mean I'd let them steamroll over me. I had agreed to be their teacher, and I had better drill *that* much into their heads real quick.

"My name's Rimuru, and I've been appointed to be your adviser starting today. I ain't gonna coddle you the way Shizu did, so you better be *sure* you understand that before anything else!"

I started things off by drilling into them the importance of polite greetings.

Right, then. They were no longer in a state of outright rebellion, but they were hostile as ever. The classroom was bathed in silence; I could literally hear one of them gulp nervously. Ranga loped back up to me, tail wagging.

"All right," I said with a refreshing smile. "Take your seats, everybody." Nobody moved. That sucked. The deep hatred they obviously had for anyone outside their group would make earning their trust a trial. If I were them, my thought process would probably be along the lines of "I'll kill that asshole," but I wasn't. This world was all about survival of the fittest. If they couldn't beat Ranga, their selfishness ended now. *If you wanna hate someone for it, hate yourself for being so weak.*

So—

"Okay, then! I suppose you've all got something you'd like to say to me. So how about we have a little test?"

"Hey!" Alice exclaimed first. "Why's it gotta be *that*!?"

"A test?" Ryota asked the boy next to him.

"Blehhhh!!" replied Kenya.

"*I hate tests*" was the more direct assessment from Chloe.

"This is all too sudden," the more intellectual-sounding Gail added. "I demand an explanation!"

Quite the protest. Children have such a wealth of personalities, don't they? And no matter what world you're in, nobody likes a test.

"Enough back talk. I know what you're all thinking, but listen. What we're about to do is something that's necessary for each of you!"

"Why?! We're all gonna die pretty soon anyway! What's the point of studying 'n' taking tests and stuff!?"

"Y-yeah... Our last teacher just brought in a bunch of toys and books 'n' said we could do whatever we wanted..."

"We haven't done any real classwork since we came here..."

"I wanna read more books!"

"And who do you think *you* are? Just because you've got a big dog doesn't mean you can lord it over us!"

*Ah, they're bursting with energy. That's great.* But I wasn't lying. This was necessary. And sadly, I wasn't willing to compromise.

“All right, all right, just calm down. I called it a test, but really, it’s more of a fun game for you all to play. And if you don’t like it, you can complain about it as much as you want. So what you’ll do is take turns taking me on in mock combat. The rules are simple. Attack me with everything you’ve got. If you can beat me, it’s over. But if I can dodge your attacks for ten minutes, I win. Easy, right?”

“That’s it?”

“Yep. Easy, right?”

“Ten minutes?”

“Hey, I’ll spot you guys an hour each if you want.”

“Ha-ha-ha! If you don’t sic that dog on me, I don’t even need ten!”

“Great! I promise I won’t do that, okay? But it’s one at a time for you guys, too! No helping out your classmates, all right?”

“Okay!”

“Sure.”

“Heh-heh! I’ll totally win if that dog ain’t in it!”

“I just want to read some books...”

“So where’re we doing this?”

“Hmm, the gymnasium ought to work, I suppose. Do you all understand the rules? You can figure out the turn order on the way there.”

With that, I took the kids—my students—over to the gym. A few passersby gave us looks of horror on the way, which I ignored.

This was a simple sparring session. I wasn’t going to lay a hand on them—I just wanted to see what abilities they had. None possessed unique skills, making them unable to expend the magicules that threatened to destroy them from the inside. Would all-out battle be enough to consume them instead? I didn’t know, but I wanted to try. I doubted Shizu and Yuuki hadn’t thought of that, but with Analyze and Assess, at least I could observe them in closer detail than either of those people.

By the way, monsters were generally assigned strength ratings based on the amount of magicules within them. Adventurer ranks, on the other hand, were based on proven strength, meaning a C-ranked adventurer could bear more magical energy than a B rank.

I found that kind of weird, but that testing I went through proved it to be the case.

Monsters, meanwhile, mostly fight based on instinct; there wasn't much difference between individuals of a species in terms of technical level. This meant that magicule count was the handiest way to rank them. (Some individual monsters *did* have special gifts—a lot lived in Tempest—but whatever.)

One other thing I noticed was that, compared to adventurers, monsters often held a *ton* more magicules. That fact made it all the clearer how frail the human race was against them. A human could raise their technical skills only so far, after all. And again, that was the reason why nations were going through with these forbidden summonings. It enraged me; I couldn't believe it was allowed to go on...but I could see the logic to it.

Getting back to these kids—one surprise I got from Analyze and Assess was its magic measurements. In monster terms, each of their magicule counts would rank them as A or higher. Chloe, in particular, had enough energy to put her up there with some high-level elementals.

This *was* weird. They'd be fearsome foes, if they only had a way to harness that force. But we'd see soon enough.

They had worked out the order of taking turns. Kenya stepped up first, all but bursting to go. He was only ten, but he was the most defiant of the group—kind of the boss, maybe?

“Hey, is it cool if I use this sword?”

Impudent little brat.

“Don’t you remember? I said to gimme everything you got. But if you lose, you better start calling me *Professor Rimuru!*”

“Pfft! No grown-up can beat us. We’ve never lost to anyone except Miss Shizu!”

“Oh, really? Why don’t you save your bragging for after you win?”

And so, the test began. I let the kids decide on a signal, providing them with an hourglass I’d bought the previous day and telling them how to use it.

*Shall we, then?*

“Umm, begin!”

With Ryota’s signal, Kenya began to run. For a grade-schooler, he moved well—he’d put most grown-ups to shame, really. But it was no sweat for me.

“You can do it, Ken!!”

“Don’t let ‘im beat ya!”

Kenya strained his body, attempting to live up to the cheers. He tried his hardest to land an attack on me, but I didn’t even need to predict his moves. He was an open book.

He looked about ready to cry by the time the five-minute mark passed. He began shooting fire from his sword, but... *Hmm. This fire’s pretty weak.* The way he launched it without any chanting time was impressive, but it was simple to guess where it’d land. I didn’t bother taking any shots on my body, but the heat waves from the explosions didn’t feel very toasty to me. A notch below, say, the Fireballs a B-ranked adventurer like Elen could conjure. And considering Kenya bore A-level magic energy, his energy was being wasted on a massive scale. He wasn’t going easy on me, but it was probably just a trick he picked up by watching others. He wasn’t taking advantage of his power at all.

“Hey! Quit worrying about shooting fire. Just focus all your energy and try to hit me like normal.”

My advice fell on deaf ears.

“Shut up! Miss Shizu’s skills were awesome! I don’t need to listen to your crap!”

He really *was* an impertinent little bastard. And it cost him—he didn’t take my hint for the rest of the ten minutes. I won.

“And it’s over! Remember, Professor Rimuru from now on. Next up!”

Kenya’s shoulders slumped as he shuffled back to the other children, dejected. Though, really, I’d be far more shocked if I lost to a grade-schooler.

Chloe Aubert came out next—a ten-year-old with an uncommon hair color. Kind of black with silver mixed in—it gave her a bit of an enigmatic feel. Maybe she had some Japanese blood in her.

Off we go, then. If I lost to a girl as clearly mesmerizing as this, I would look *so* lame. Gotta keep my guard up.

“Don’t push yourself, Clo!”

“Yeah, don’t get hurt!”

The children were more focused on Chloe getting injured than winning. She didn’t *look* all that strong, no. In another moment, the hourglass was turned. What kind of attack would she spring on me? I could guess she liked books; she always had one or two in her hands. Was she gonna try to conk me in the head with one or give me a paper cut? Use them as blunt weapons? Seemed like decent grade-school logic to me. Or maybe not.

But as my mind wandered, I heard her chant “Flowing water, confine my enemy! *Water Jail!*” Instantly, a torrent of water pinned my legs to the floor. Sense Heat Source told me it was the real thing.

First Kenya, then this girl—they both had magic-controlled skills. Pretty neat. They might be natural prodigies. But now was no time to marvel.

The water current grew more violent, forming a large sphere that enveloped me. I tapped the outer edge with my finger, only to feel a cutting sensation. Much like my Water Blades, she circulated the water at high speed to make the ball retain its shape. Impressive—but what was she gonna do with it?

“I’ve transformed that magic to have it rain down constantly upon whomever it captures! Admit your defeat, and I’ll release it, but if you don’t, you’re gonna die!”

Damn! Scary little kid! She was all about keeping me in check, unlike Kenya—but sadly, it wouldn’t be enough.

“Pretty impressive, but it won’t work on me. You’re using it really well, though. I hope you keep up practicing!”

Stepping out of the watery dungeon, I patted Chloe on the head. Some dungeon *that* was. I could just use Control Magic to rework it any way I wanted. Seriously, even among my extra skills, it was wicked powerful. You could even get away with calling it a unique. Magic was all about controlling magicules to create phenomena. Interfere with those magicules with a stronger force, and it couldn’t be easier to break it.

Chloe sat on the floor, surprised. Her face reddened as tears came to her eyes. *Sorry, girl. This is me trying to go easy, too. I need to show just how much more powerful I am. You would never listen to me if I didn't lay down the law.*

No longer interested in fighting, Chloe ceded victory. She rubbed her head where I patted her, looking oddly content as she smiled.

Let's keep it going!

My next opponent was Gail Gibson, the oldest of the gang at age eleven. He was a large boy with brown hair and handsome, chiseled features. Give him a few years, and I'm sure his looks would put Hollywood actors to shame. I had no interest in crushing his spirit; I just wanted to show him that the world can be cruel sometimes.

"Don't hate me if this kills you, all right?"

Gail immediately greeted me with an unhesitant, full-force blow. Seeing the previous two rounds must've changed his views about me. It was a fairly fearsome ball of magic, potentially lethal even for a B-ranked adventurer. *Hey, I had a lot of trouble learning that one, too...*

He probably put every ounce of his energy into that blast. It was the right thing to do—but he chose the wrong adversary. Projectile-based moves didn't work on me. I used Glutton to scarf it right down.

"Wh-what was that?! That's *dirty*!"

*Yeah, it sure is. I think so, too.*

"Listen: Grown-ups are dirty people, all right? They'll do anything and everything to beatcha! That's how they work."

Kind of an immature way to put it to a child, I guess, but I didn't want to leave anything off the table. There were other tactics I could've taken, but I wanted to both win this *and* make it look easy. It was actually kind of hard.

Gail bit his lip in frustration, then focused his energy upon his fists to strike out at me. I was impressed he didn't give up, but there was no path to victory left for him. The rest of the battle went just as it did with Kenya.

Ryota seemed like a wimpy kid to me. He was always by Kenya's side, ever cheering him on. Opposites attract, maybe. Beyond that, he seemed like just a regular child.

His *ability*, though...

"Get 'im for me, Ryota!"

His eyes lit up the moment Kenya started egging him on, and he attacked with... Magic? No. It was closer to Shion's Strengthen Body skill. With zero spell casting, he instantly doubled his strength and speed—maybe even more than doubled. His magicules briskly converted themselves into fighting force as he protected himself.

A very impressive power-up move, though I had to take points off since he couldn't activate it by himself. Losing your cool in combat was, nine times out of ten, a net negative. It meant tossing away your intelligence, the one advantage you could rely on over a monster.

Ryota's skill wasn't Strengthen Body so much as a Berserker-style transform. It was useless as is. *I'd better help him hone that.* He *did* move well, though. If he weren't fighting me, he could've fended for himself rather well.

But—oops, too bad! I effortlessly dodged him for the entire ten minutes.

That just left Alice Rondo. Youngest of the group at nine, she had shiny, straight blond hair that ran down her back and made her look just like a doll. Very fetching—but unlike the reserved Chloe, she had a mean tomboyish streak.

"About time my turn came up," she boastfully declared. "You worthless idiots better take a lesson or two from *me!*"

And here I thought Kenya was the boss of the group. It might've been the youngest one, after all. Or maybe she was the secret boss? Whatever she was, I needed to show her who was in charge, or else this whole effort was a failure. Better brace myself for anything. Plus, I couldn't help but notice that we'd been attracting an audience of students and teachers. As much ruckus as we were causing in this gym, it wasn't weird that we were building interest. Well, bring 'em on! It'd be a good chance to show the school that I had this. That I was treating these kids as real students.

*But what's Alice got in store for me?* The girl gave me a bold smile, then tossed the assorted plush toys she carried behind her back up in the air.

"Okay, guys! Take that freak down!!"

I looked up, confused, only to find a small army of living, breathing toys closing in on me—dogs, cats, birds, even bears. They packed a surprisingly heavy punch.

Alice, it turns out, was a Golem Master, something she must've stumbled upon as she saw Shizu and her spirit skills. It was astonishingly creative, especially for a child. If fur and foam produced *this* level of attack, she'd be packing some *serious* heat if someone gave her some steel robots or something. She might be the strongest of the five, even.

But if all I had to do was avoid them for ten minutes, that seemed doable.

"Hey! Quit running away from them, you wimp!!"

I heard her complaint loud and clear but ignored it. I had a passing thought of incinerating them all as I danced around...

*Report. Chances of the individual Alice Rondo bursting into tears... one hundred percent.*

...but resisted. Not with *those* kinds of odds. It'd be even harder to placate her after that, and I'm sure the crowd would think I was a bully. So I kept running and running until the clock ran out.

\*

Well, at least I managed to save face. I had now shown what I could do to all five of my students.

"Wow, that adviser in the mask is amazing! He doesn't look older than ten or so, and he just dominated those little hellions!"

"That was a B-ranked adventurer? No way. Strength like *that* has Shizu written all over it!"

With that kind of commentary from the crowd, I felt safe assuming my reputation around school was now secure.

These kids were powerful, but their skill sets had a sort of patchwork feel. If I had to guess, it wasn't because those were skills they were aiming for—they just tripped over them as they imitated Shizu.

Plus, I had made a vital observation. I theorized that letting them fight all-out would sap their magicule count a bit...but all it did was skim a bit off the top. The energy at the root of their bodies didn't drop at all. That much was clear from the generally weak performance of all their magics.

I guess there was no fixing the imbalance that way. Beyond that, I thought about using my Deviant unique skill to separate the energy from them, then Gluttony to either consume or isolate it. But if I had to guess...

*Received. Energy fused with an entity's soul cannot be separated from it.*

Nope, guess not. I had noticed as much as I observed them in-depth during combat. So I'd have to make them obtain a unique skill—or figure out something else.

There wasn't much time left. If five years was the maximum Yuuki knew about, these children would be lucky to have twelve more months. I had to find a way—any way—to drain the magicules from them before the power destroyed them from the inside.

But while it didn't exactly come by the gentlest of methods, I now had a full grasp of their situation. I weighed my options as we cleaned up the gym and returned to our classroom. Physically exercising their skills didn't solve anything, but helping them release *some* magic would help delay the inevitable, at least a little. We'd need to hold these "treatment sessions" regularly as I worked out a way to address the main issue.

Back in class, I sat the kids down and addressed them.

"Now. As you've all just experienced, I am, um, kind of strong. But I promise you: I am going to help all of you out. I swear it by my mask here."

They sat quietly. I felt like they were paying much closer attention now. *There's one victory for the time being, then.* We needed to connect this way, heart-to-heart, or else they'd just tune me out—but now, as much as I had to force it, we had that connection.

“Um...is that Miss Shizu’s mask?”

“That’s right, Alice. Shizu gave it to me...and when I accepted it, I guess I agreed to take you guys on, too.”

Not until I started dreaming about it recently, technically. But that didn’t matter.

“All right,” Alice said, nodding her satisfaction. “I believe you.”

“Um, m-me too...”

“I believed in you from the beginning, ya know!”

Alice, Ryota, and Chloe were willing to open their hearts to me, at least.

“Oh, come on, guys... In that case, I guess...”

“Yeah, Kenya. I think we can trust in this guy, too.”

Kenya’s and Gail’s consent sealed the deal. I had their trust. They recognized me as a teacher now.

Speaking of that mask, though... I feel like something just jogged my memory. Shizu had tasked me with the mission...of *striking* the demon lord Leon. Not kill or defeat, but *strike*. Did she not really want revenge on him, after all? Maybe not. If she did, she would’ve attacked him back when she was at the pinnacle of her strength.

But...hang on. She said she came here before she was even ten years old, I think. So how did she survive? I needed to think. We didn’t talk for very long, but I felt like she might’ve hidden a hint or two in there. I always found it weird that she’d abandon these children for her own mission. Why did she suddenly see fit to take action on them now, of all times?

—Hurry!

Ah, I see... She headed for Leon because she wanted to help them out. Striking Leon and saving the children—these both connected to the same goal.

*—The demon lord Leon knows how to rescue the children. I know, because he rescued me.*

Was that her line of thinking? But...how?

I hooked myself up to the Great Sage, pondering over this with everything I had. As always, it didn't let me down. Whether Leon deliberately saved Shizu's life didn't matter. The only question was how.

*Received. Inferring the demon lord Leon Cromwell's method for saving Shizue Izawa... Complete. This is an inference based on collected circumstantial evidence, but...*

The Sage's answer rang in my head. It would be a cruelly difficult road for these children—the long bet to end all long bets. To me, though, it was an easy ordeal to accept.

The only issue was...

“Listen. I promise I'll save all of you, but to do that, I need you to trust me and act like good boys and girls. All right? Shizu's entrusted me with you, and I'm not going to abandon any of you!”

Confidence spread within me as I spoke. I couldn't show any anxiety in front of these kids. They rewarded me with their calm, resolute stares.

“““Thank you, Mr. Rimuru!!”””

*Mr. Rimuru.* I liked the sound of that. *Well, you're on.* I was Mr. Rimuru to them, and that meant they were as good as saved. I swore it in my heart now.

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
6

# CONQUERING THE LABYRINTH

# CHAPTER 6

## CONQUERING THE LABYRINTH

It was a tranquil late afternoon as Shuna set to reading in her room. Just as she did, Shion came barging in, like always, begging her for help with one recipe or another. But she keenly noticed the book in Shuna's hand and asked her a question.

"What's that, Lady Shuna?"

"Hee-hee-hee!" Shuna smiled. "This is a book, Shion. A book of magic that Sir Rimuru gave us."

Just when they were getting used to the daily routine of running the place by themselves, Rimuru returned. It had only been last night when he came up to Shuna and dumped a massive pile of magic tomes on the ground. "Oh, are you up, Shuna?" he said casually, like nothing was unusual about this. "Perfect. You wanted to learn magic, right? Here; I got some stuff for you."

One look, and she could tell these were valuable, secret tomes, the sort that humans would cherish as confidential knowledge and store under lock and key. It was a fortune, and she thanked him profusely for it. After that, Rimuru teleported away after waiting only long enough for Shuna to brief him about goings-on around town.

"Wha—?! He only met *you*, Lady Shuna? That's not fair!"

"Oh! I forgot! He had a gift for you as well, Shion."

"You're so mean, Lady Shuna..."

But looking at the sweet-smelling snack presented to her, the anger immediately drained from Shion's face. This was a new sort of sugary sweet, one Rimuru had reportedly discovered in the capital of Englesia. He had purchased a large quantity, enough for everyone in town to share.

Watching Shion happily take more than her fair share, Shuna couldn't help but giggle as Benimaru walked in.

"Mm? Hey, Shion, what're you doing, eating away in here? Plan to share?"

"Oh! Benimaru! Is your work going well?"

"It is. The envoys from the Beast Kingdom are the same as always; the deliveries were just as we agreed to. We provided our own goods, and they left with smiles on their faces. Geld reports in his regular briefings that construction is still going well. The tree-clearing crew has finished their work and should be home soon. But enough of that. Let *me* have one already!"

Before Shuna could stop him, Benimaru reached down and plucked out one of the treats—an otherworld pastry Rimuru had purchased, known as a cream puff—and scarfed it down.

"Ooh!" he shouted, sweets being one of his few weaknesses.  
"This is good!"

"Sir Rimuru purchased it for us," Shuna said with a grin.

"Did he? So he's paid a return visit? I tell you, working in his stead, I had no idea how difficult a task he had. He made it all look so effortless when he was here..."

"That he did. He even had ample time to goof off and do nothing...unlike *you*, not that you let that stop you."

"What? Come on... You know, normally I'd be very angry to hear that," Benimaru countered, although the grin on his face suggested otherwise. They almost always acted like this around each other.

"Sir Rimuru also asked us to construct some more row houses for lodging purposes."

"I see. I will inform Geld at once."

With that business out of the way—

"This is delicious. It's almost *too* delicious! Truly, I can taste the love of Sir Rimuru cooked into each one!!"

Out of nowhere, Shion half shouted her approval of the cream puffs she was eagerly inhaling.

"...Did *you* taste that, Shuna?"

"I don't think so, no..."

Shion was too far into dreamland to hear them. They sighed. This, too, was how she always acted around them.



Hmm. I had the nagging feeling Shion took my visit the wrong way. Better rescue those children and get back there quick.

I focused on what lay ahead of me as I shrugged off the sudden chill tickling the back of my neck. Before me were five children, sitting at their desks and concentrating on their reading and writing lessons.

"You need to be able to do at least that much, or else you're gonna find it hard living in this world. You got me?"

"\"Uh-huh!"" they all replied. Good. Nice to see some enthusiasm. And they had a reason for that, of course. I'd have liked to think it was because they adored me, but I knew that wasn't true. I had a carrot dangling in front of them.

"Ahhh, I wanna read what happens next!"

"Boy, I sure didn't think I'd get to catch up over here!"

"Well, I'm gonna get to it first!"

"I like picture books more, but manga's good, too!"

"I think it's more important to study, of course. But, wow, Mr. Rimuru, I didn't know *you* were an otherworlder, too. I don't know much about Japanese anime or manga, but that's really fascinating."

The carrot—more of that manga I copied—certainly had its effect. Said manga, however, had been translated inside my Stomach into this world's language. You had to learn how to read it to understand anything, but it had already done wonders to improve their academic enthusiasm.

I had been teaching here for a month, guiding the kids through their studies as I worked on my own preparations. I had only one thing to investigate, and until I found my answer, I couldn't go anywhere. I wished it could've gone faster, but I had to be patient. I wanted to do everything I could for these children, instead of letting this time go to waste—and luckily, it turned out I was pretty good at lighting a fire in them.

The days were occupied by classes; the nights by info-gathering sessions. It made me glad I didn't require sleep with this body.

Unfortunately, nobody had the information I wanted—the location of a high-level elemental. Not even Hakuro, the smartest person I knew. I traveled over to Treyni's domain in search of clues and paid another visit to King Gazel. I even tried hitting up Zegion and Apito for some leads, but nothing.

I was searching for elementals high-level enough that they could be imbued into these children's bodies and tasked with controlling their magicule stores. That was the answer the Great Sage came up with for me.

I already had the ability to summon Ifrit, but that alone could let me save only one of them. That wasn't good enough. Treyni and her family could summon similar spirits, but those were bonded with them as part of the summoning contract, and I couldn't ask the dryads to sacrifice themselves for these children's sake.

So I pressed Treyni for something else, and she told me about a Dwelling of the Spirits, a land ruled over by the so-called Spirit Queen. Sadly, it seemed like a dead end. "I apologize," she told me, "but while there are several 'entrances' that lead to the Dwelling, the one I am aware of has already disappeared."

It seems the Spirit Queen that Treyni and her family served had passed away long ago, practically in ancient times. They had no personal connections to the current queen, so not even the dryads knew where this Dwelling was any longer. A royal audience was apparently out of the question—and since the Spirit Queen could reportedly move these "entrances" around whenever she liked, they were difficult to track down. I suppose it made sense. Treyni was slippery enough at times—anyone higher up on the spirit-elemental food chain than her has to be even worse.

Figuring there was no need to hurry things, I decided to take a break and travel back to Tempest the previous night. Shuna caught me up with local news. Nothing too epic—the biggest highlight being a freshly minted sorcerer who had recently joined Yohm's team. I wanted to meet her, but they were already on the trail somewhere, so I decided to pass for now.

That, and there was another piece of good news—a great discovery, in fact. We had been crafting Low Potions, a hundred at a time, by diluting Full Potions with magically treated water, but one day, Gabil decided to try using water directly from the underground lake instead. All the magicules inside that stuff apparently made the resulting medicine quite a bit more potent. Vester, surprised to find this, conducted some more rigorous research—and ultimately found that using this lake water would let us double our manufacturing output. Really good news. These potions were gonna be a huge revenue source before long.

Tempest also recently played host to a merchant from the Kingdom of Blumund, escorted by Kabal and his friends. This merchant, Gard Mjöllmile, made a purchase of one thousand High Potions for the price of two hundred and fifty gold coins—twenty-five silver per potion. That was our asking price, and he accepted it. Gard apparently had a trade route or two in Englesia that he ran as well, so I may actually run into him here sometime soon. I'd have to give my thanks if I did.

So all of that sounded good to me, but I was still pretty much stumped when it came to finding the Dwelling of the Spirits. As I watched the kids fight over the manga I just tossed their way, I resolved to redouble my efforts.

\*

Today, I decided to take them all out on a picnic.

School wasn't in session; it was the equivalent of a Sunday in my old world. Sitting in the same classroom for days on end would take the wind out of any student's sails, and I still needed to work some magicules out of their system on a regular basis.

So we were walking down a street in the capital when I realized that a large crowd had gathered in the center of the city.

"Some kind of event going on?"

"Oh! Right, Mr. Rimuru! The Hero, Sir Masayuki, is holding a fighting demonstration at the arena today!"

"Yeah, they say that Hero's a really strong guy. Who do you think would win if he fought Mr. Rimuru?"

"Oh, come on! It'd totally be the Hero! No way Sir Masayuki would lose to some weird dude with a mask on!"

"Um, well, I'm still on your side, Mr. Rimuru!"

"...Well," Gail intervened, "I'd kinda like to see the Hero, but we're probably way too late to get seats by now. Let's head out of town for that picnic we planned."

The five acted remarkably excited about this, but we stuck with our original idea, resolving to buy advance tickets for the next showing. Gail, in his own inimitable way, was great at keeping his group pointed in the same direction, which was super-helpful to me. Having someone a little older serving as the leader made my job a lot easier.

I seemed to remember Milim telling me that Heroes were special people; simply calling yourself a Hero without the strength to back that up would set you up for a quick and nasty death. As Yuuki put it, "There are two kinds of people who go by the name of Hero—the kind who's willing to shoulder the sins of the entire human race and the kind of fool who never thinks about the consequences."

And then there's this guy, starring in these gladiator shows or whatever in a city like this. Which pool does *he* fall under? Something told me his aims weren't all that lofty. But then again, Milim said simply claiming to be a Hero would invite divine wrath upon you. Maybe this Masayuki guy wasn't an idiot, after all, but just someone unfortunate enough to have a very *interesting* life. As Japanese-sounding as that name was, he might be an otherworlder for all I knew. I kind of wanted to meet him, but for today at least, I skipped out on the chance.

We stopped by a café—the owner greeting us with a hearty laugh as he provided the kids with juice.

"Hey, kids! You guys better sit up straight and listen to your teacher, you got it?"

"Thanks, mister! Can we have some cake, too?"

"Hmph. This juice isn't bad, I guess. That cake over there looks really good, though, doesn't it?"

Kenya and Alice always got straight to the point like that. It annoyed me, but I took out my coin pouch anyway.

"All right, all right. Hey, how 'bout some slices for all of them?"

"Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hey, I heard you made it to B-plus rank? Yuuki sure was surprised to hear that! We oughtta celebrate it! You can eat and drink on the house today, guys!"

He was a big, beefy-looking guy, but the owner was really nice to talk to—well-connected, too, if he already heard about that. I spotted a notice on the guild's bulletin board about a baffledil-collecting job—those flowers that tripped Geld up before. Despite being a collecting job, I was still allowed to accept it—and since I rather fortuitously had a hundred or so blooms in my Stomach, I gave them over to the guild. This, combined with a few other tricky collection missions that I contributed to, made it surprisingly simple to get promoted to B-plus.

Now I had the right to try for rank A. Undertaking that examination several times, proving that you were as close to an A as it gets talent-wise, would earn you a promotion to A-minus. The wall to A itself was pretty darn high, I suppose, and while I planned to take the challenge sooner or later, being a B-plus was no big setback.

*Either way, though, if there's free cake in it for me, I ain't gonna turn that down.*

"Wow! You're really too kind! In that case, I'll get one of those strawberry shortcakes!"

The owner chuckled as he took the children's orders. "Hah! Nothing like free food to pep you up, huh?"

This café was owned by the otherworlder who Yuuki mentioned. I had him mention me to the guy, and he'd been treating me real well ever since. He *looked* tough, but he was really a softy at heart, and the kids loved him (or the cake he was spotting them, at least). I was here just a few days ago, too, buying some cream puffs to give to Shuna as a souvenir. I figured I needed to placate Shion, at least, for being gone for so long—and of course, I was hopeful that they'd reverse engineer the recipe.

The menu had a lot of other things besides cake, so I attempted to convince the owner to open up in Tempest. He turned me down, but I didn't mind that. *Everything's a negotiation. I'll keep up the effort.*

With the cake in our bellies, I picked up the box lunches for that day's picnic from the owner. He had sandwiches for us all, ready for later in the afternoon. The kids were full of energy today, so I figured we could run a few mock combat rounds once we reached the countryside. *I'm sure that'll make their lunches taste all the better, once they're tired out.*

Before long, we were at the city gate.

"Ah! Good day to you, Sir Rimuru," said the guard sentry there, whom I had come to know fairly well. "More training today? I would love to receive some instruction from you someday."

B-plus adventurers definitely enjoyed a lot of preferential treatment around this city. It was like we were champions of the people or something...although, in this world, I suppose we literally were. I was finally starting to understand why Kabal enjoyed de facto celebrity status around Englesia City. He was a man of the people, and they could all see how he protected them. Unlike some high-and-mighty noble kicking back in his castle, adventurers worked on the ground level and earned the common man's near-infinite appreciation for it.

"Keep up the good work, men," I rather haughtily replied, the flattery getting to my head. "Here, I've got something for you. Feel free to pass it around the guardhouse later."

That something was a plate of cookies I baked with the kids. Sugar was a high-priced commodity in Englesia as well, so these things were like gold to anyone with a starved sweet tooth. Even these slightly misshapen amateur-hour cookies would be a cherished treat.

"Well, heavens, thank you so much! And you kids be good around your teacher, all right?"

"Pfft. Not you people, too?! We're *always* good around Mr. Rimuru. Right, Ryota?"

"Yeah. If we weren't, he'd punish us."

“You don’t have to say *that*, stupid!”

“Don’t lump me in with these kids, sir. If you guys keep carrying on like that, they’ll start to think *I’m* just as stupid as you, all right?”

Boisterous as always. We laughed as I waved good-bye to the guard.

So we walked for about another hour, as planned, before reaching a mostly deserted grassy plain. The perfect training ground. There wouldn’t be many people watching us, either, so we could go all-out to some extent. They had matured to the point where going easy on them would actually expose me to danger. Their moves had grown much more refined, thanks in part to the fact they were actually beginning to take my advice.

I fought them one by one, like always, making sure to keep my guard up.

“Shoot! I messed that up today, too...”

“Mr. Rimuru is just way too strong! It’s cheating!”

“Aren’t you supposed to go easier on girls?”

“I better learn more magic...”

“Agh! I was so focused on defending myself better today!”

Perhaps it was immature of me, but I wanted to be like an impenetrable wall to them. On this point, I was acting in stark contrast to Shizu. I had no intention of spoiling them at all.

“Ha-ha-ha! You kids think you could ever beat me? You’re dreaming!”

The kids started complaining back at me. This was a pretty common routine in my class.

Just then—

*Hmm? I feel this weird sense of pressure...*

*Report. Large quantity of magical energy detected. Approaching—this is from a Sky Dragon.*

According to the knowledge I had picked up at the capital library, a Sky Dragon was reminiscent of a wyvern, although pretty different in reality. Wyverns were an airborne offshoot from the Lesser Dragon family, but a Sky Dragon was part of the Arch Dragon group, maintaining a greater amount of original dragon

blood. As a threat, it was ranked at Special A—a calamity-class monster.

It would appear our fun little picnic would have to wait.



“My heavens...”

Gard Mjöllmile fell to the ground, head in his hands.

It was one of the biggest deals he had made in a while, a stroke of good fortune that had come only recently. The Free Guild’s Blumund branch had reached out to him, and the guild master Fuze had discussed things with him personally.

“So the guild is starting to get serious about this potion deal. We’re talking about procuring three hundred per month for the guild’s reserves and two hundred for the royal knight forces. So five hundred, and we’d pay you a hundred fifty gold for them,” Fuze began, regarding Mjöllmile like a mobster shaking down a client. “Now, we got a business partner who’ll sell these to you for twenty-five silver coins each, and that’s probably gonna be the most discounted price you’ll get for the time being. Right? If you went over and bought ‘em without that, they’re gonna ask for thirty each, so... What do you think? It’s not a huge deal money-wise, but this is a government job—it’s gonna be continual, for a long time to come.”

Mjöllmile worked out the arithmetic in his mind. By that arrangement, five hundred potions would earn him a profit of twenty-five hundred silver coins, or twenty-five in gold. Not bad, but not enough to risk one’s life over. This was Gard Mjöllmile, after all. A guy used to working back alleys and arranging loans to low-level street gangs. It would take more than a stern frown from Fuze to make him come to the negotiation table.



"You must be joking with me, sir. Under these conditions, I'm afraid I can't give a yes to that. If those are your final conditions—"

"Oh? You don't like it? Okay. Head back home, then. But if you do, keep in mind that you'll lose any rights you'd have earned for the business deals we'll be making with that country. This is something I wanted to offer you first because I trusted you, you know?"

Mjöllmile's eyebrow twitched.

"...That country?"

"Mm-hmm. But I can't tell you any more if you're heading out—"

"Well, give me just one moment, Sir Fuze. I was never good at this sort of tit-for-tat negotiation. Why don't we just lay it all on the table?"

Now Mjöllmile smelled money. Fuze grinned as he realized this.

"Sure, sure. But before that, I need to show you the goods, don't I? Here's the first of their wares—a High Potion. What do you think? Still not interested?"

On the table, he laid down a High Potion, a special brew that made all potions that came before it seem obsolete. Whatever "country" was behind this, they had technical skills at least on par with the Dwarven Kingdom. That, plus the number values Fuze mentioned earlier, made Mjöllmile shudder.

"You want five hundred of these delivered to the guild? Just to be sure, is there any limit to the quantity I can purchase?"

"That I couldn't tell you." Another grin. "But that's your job as a merchant to find out, isn't it? Why don't you travel over there yourself and ask?"

And Mjöllmile had—and now he was even more surprised. A journey he had expected to take at least two weeks was completed in one, just like his bodyguard Kabal claimed.

"See? I told you, this town is amazing!"

"I... I cannot believe this. Where did this highway come from...? And for that matter, this whole *town*?!"

He was flabbergasted. Hiring a party of three B-plus adventurers for this job meant he was all but guaranteed to lose money. They cost him a hundred silver pieces per day, and even that was a bargain at the B-plus level. A hundred silver made one gold coin; it meant hiring these guys for a month was thirty gold gone. The only assured profit from this journey was twenty-five, and between that and his travel expenses, he figured it'd put him deep in the red—but he still wanted to see this land personally, to see if it could lead to regular business.

Just a little while later, he purchased one thousand High Potions. Half would be delivered posthaste to his client; the other half, he'd see about selling outside Blumund's borders. What he had also gained, however, was the priceless experience of having the monsters know him by name. That and information. These monsters, after all, held usage rights on this new trade route.

*Taking this job couldn't have been a better idea,* Mjöllmile thought, chest practically bursting with joy. One of the leaders of the monsters, a hobgoblin named Rigurd, stated that he believed they would boost their manufacturing output going forward. He was also considering other specialties they could produce, too. He'd become a vital trading partner before long, no doubt.

Thus, Mjöllmile had traveled back to Blumund, successfully delivering five hundred of the monsters' potions. Kabal and his crew took their leave afterward; in their place, Mjöllmile hired a C-ranked adventurer who called himself Bydd and embarked on another journey to Englesia. His wagon, loaded with the remaining five hundred potions, reached the kingdom without incident.

The incident only came after he'd crossed the border.

"What *is* that monster?!" Mjöllmile shouted. Ravaging the landscape in front of him was a glittering white Sky Dragon—a personification of pure destruction that no human could stop. Gate guards, presumably Englesian soldiers, had begun evacuating nearby residents, leaving travelers and merchants from other nations to fend for themselves. There were already casualties.

"Let's get outta here, man!"

He could hear Bydd screaming at him, but Mjöllmile couldn't quite drive himself to run. His wares were in his wagon, but the horses were too spooked to listen to his commands. They would have to abandon their load—which was fine. A major loss, but at least he'd live to make up for it some other day.

No, that wasn't what made Mjöllmile hesitate. It was his lack of running speed. He hadn't cursed his pudgy frame quite like this in a long time.

"Dammit!"

Ever the merchant, Mjöllmile quickly reached a conclusion in his mind.

"Hang it all, Bydd, we're going to pass out these potions to the soldiers!"

"What're you talking about? All we can do at this point is run, man."

"You fool! How are we going to flee from that winged monster on foot? The only way to survive is to reach the other side of the gate! The capital's got a magic barrier over it that blocks out monsters. Better to help out the soldiers and buy ourselves some time!"

"But..."

Even as they bickered, the Sky Dragon sent out bolts of lightning that charred the earth, delivering merciless judgment upon those too late to make their escape.

"Mommy! Mommy!!"

"Elno!!"

The mother had hugged her girl tightly to protect her. Now she was about to breathe her last, burned across practically her entire body.

"Waaaahhhhhh!"

People ran in all directions, shouting. Nobody would be left to give a helping hand to this woman who was on the brink of death—

"Dahh, let me have it! I'll do it!"

"S-Sir?!"

Mjöllmile grabbed a box of High Potions and ran to the field where lightning had just struck—straight for the mother and her

daughter. Lightning scared him, but he still ran, trusting in his good fortune.

*It won't hit me. I'm a luckier man than that!*

He stumbled his way there, sprinkling the medicine on the half-charred woman. That alone was enough to stop her from dying on the spot. He breathed a sigh of relief, bending down to pat the crying daughter on the head—then noticed there was a shadow on the ground. His blood froze in fear; he could feel it drain from his face.

Reluctantly looking upward, Mjöllmile found exactly the kind of horrid sight he expected. It was fifteen or sixteen feet long, small for a dragon, but its strength was unstoppable. And now, the Sky Dragon had descended on the spot, ready to make quick work of them all.

“Dammit, so much for my luck...”

Just when Mjöllmile was ready to give up, something fell near him.

“Hey! Over here, monster! I’ll take you on!”

It was Bydd. He had thrown a rock to divert its attention.

“Y-you fool! Why aren’t you running?!”

“Heh-heh. I ain’t exactly led a clean life, but I had a guy tell me once... He said when people need help, you gotta give it to ‘em! That’ll help people see ya in a better light, y’know? So get those victims up and bring ‘em in the gate!”

Mjöllmile could see soldiers behind Bydd. They were passing around the potions, just as he had instructed them to. “We can buy some time with these!” they marveled once it became clear just how effective they were.

*Maybe this will work,* he thought for a moment. But it was an illusion. The Sky Dragon’s lips curled up, as if sneering at him. The next moment, with a terrific rumble, a rain of lightning fell upon the soldiers.

Now they were all down, a few apparently surviving, but none were able to stand after taking the strike at point-blank range. Bydd alone remained on his feet, arms opened wide to keep Mjöllmile and the others safe.

“H-hey, Bydd...”

"Heh-heh! If I'm gonna die, at least lemme look cool in the process."

"Hah! Ah-ha-ha-ha! You know, I think I had you all wrong, Bydd. You're a true champion, no doubt about it. If we survive this, I'll hire you as my personal bodyguard."

"That better come with a raise!"

They smiled at each other, then stared down the Sky Dragon. The fear was gone, although he regretted they couldn't save that mother and daughter in the end. Mjöllmile knew Bydd felt the same way—but they were able to laugh in the face of death. It reenergized them as they awaited the end to fall upon them.

As if toying with its prey, the Sky Dragon's smile deepened. Now the two were ready. But before the moment could come, someone appeared in front of them. A beautiful person with waist-length, silvery hair tinged with blue and who came quicker than the lightning—and the moment the bolts touched the small figure, they disappeared.

"N-no way... That person brushed away the Sky Dragon's lightning like it was nothing...?!"

"Is... Is that a Hero?!"

Bydd and Mjöllmile reeled back in surprise as the figure spoke to them in his beautiful voice.

"Oh, hey, Bydd! Nice to see you're putting in an effort out here. I'm impressed. But you probably shouldn't take on a foe you could never beat, y'know?"

Bydd's eyes opened wide. He didn't know anyone as beautiful as this. It must've been a case of mistaken identity—but somehow, there was something familiar about his eyes.

"And given that I see our potions strewn all over the place, you must be Mjöllmile, right? Pretty softhearted of you, isn't it, trying to help all these people? That's not the sort of thing that makes for a successful merchant, I don't think. Not that I'm complaining, but..."

Mjöllmile froze in shock. This was definitely a complete stranger—this slim figure dressed in unfamiliar, foreign-looking garb. Something about this person's behavior reminded him of

royalty. He wanted to ask who this newcomer was, but Mjöllmile's mouth was failing to find the words.

"Right. Since you're here and all, you might as well keep helping out the injured with those potions! I'll do something about this monster in the meantime."

Ignoring the frozen duo, the figure set off.



The decisions came fast once I felt that wave of pressure.

"All right," I said to the children. "I'll go help 'em out. Leave that thing unattended, and it'll lead to a lot of killing. Ranga!"

"Here," he said, emerging soundlessly from the shadows.

"I'm gonna go beat that dragon real quick. You stay here and keep the kids safe."

"Would you like me to go out and give it a taste of my fangs, master?"

"Ummm, I wish I could let you, but I'll handle this. These kids are still treating me like some kinda charlatan anyway."

I wanted Ranga to babysit for me. Plus, it was *highly* debatable whether he could defeat a Sky Dragon or not, although I didn't say that to him.

"Mr. Rimuru! If you're gonna take that monster on, you need to wait until the knights show up!"

"Yeah! Like, you're stronger than us, but no way could you beat that freak!"

"Wait, wait, wait! If you die, who's going to save us then, huh?! I'm *not* gonna let you die!"

*You see? Times like these, it's like there's no trust in me at all.* Chloe and Ryota were giving me concerned looks as well. I really needed to show them my full skills.

"Please, kids, just leave this to me! I'm not stupid enough to take on a fight I can't win."

"Indeed. My master is invincible. Perhaps not the winner of *every* battle, but invincible."

True enough, Ranga. I'd never beat Milim in a million years.

"You heard him. That's a core fundamental you need to learn first, before anything else. How to gauge your opponent."

I began to prepare. If I retained my current childlike form, that opened the possibility that I'd blow my cover. Thus, I thought it best to disguise myself. Transforming using my slime-based cell structure would make me only about a child's size, maybe four and a quarter feet, if that. So I decided to bust out my black mist, for the first time in a while, and take an adult form. It'd make my line of sight higher, but my perceptions were based on Magic Sense anyway, so it wouldn't affect me in battle.

Instantly changing into the fancy kimono Shuna had prepared for me, I completed the transformation on the spot.

"Ah..." Ryota said, stunned into silence.

"No way!" exclaimed Alice.

"Whoaaaa," Kenya shouted, eyes sparkling.

"Wow, Mr. Rimuru, that's so cool!" Chloe concluded.

"You can do *anything*, can't you?" Gail said as he rolled his eyes.

All this assessment helped me remember something.

"Oh, right. Here, hold this for me."

I took off my mask. I'd need it once we got back to the city, but having it on now would be screaming my identity to the general public. The children all gasped as Chloe accepted it from me.

"Hey! No fair, Chloe!"

I took Alice's whining as my cue to sprout wings and fly off to battle.

When I reached the site, I found a familiar-looking face staring down the Sky Dragon. It was Bydd, and I guess he really took my advice to heart, because he was stepping up to protect the wounded strewn around the fields.

Next to him was a fat little man holding a potion bottle with the Tempest seal stamped on it. Presumably, that was the merchant Shuna had mentioned. Considering the money-grubbing qualities of most merchants I knew, I was rather surprised to see him giving up profit to pass this medicine around. I didn't know if that was a good or bad sign, really—but I suppose it was nice of him, even if

his face was kind of weasel-like. If he was doing this for advertising purposes, it was a genius move.

I called out to them, which I really shouldn't have, since I was supposed to be incognito. It was just such a surprise to see them on the battlefield that I couldn't help myself. *Better make sure they don't blab about it later.*

"Right. Since you're here and all, you might as well keep helping out the injured with those potions! I'll do something about this monster in the meantime."

As far as I could tell, there were quite a few wounded, but nobody was dead yet. With enough High Potion, it wouldn't be too late to save them all. The gate guard I knew was among the injured, making me all the happier that we were in time.

The two looked at each other in astonishment, then immediately sprang into action. Nice. Now to tackle that Sky Dragon.

After that, I killed it in quite literally the blink of an eye. It was big, at fifteen or so feet long, but a mere small fry compared to Charybdis. It had lightning and sonic waves and thick skin—but none of the Sky Dragon's attacks worked on me.

So I battered the guy around a bit, then used Glutton to have it for dinner. An easy win.

\*

That night, I took Bydd and Mjöllmile over to a high-end nightclub in the capital. As high-end as it was, the hostesses there sure gave the dwarven gang at the Night Butterfly a run for their money. No elves, disappointingly, but otherwise I had no complaint—the decor, as well as the food and drink, were a lot better than Dwargon's club. Given its location in the very center of human civilization around here, it was about as fancy as this world got. There was little surprise it had all the good stuff.

I was back in my usual, masked human form. Mjöllmile, of course, was paying the tab. When I had a word with him about protecting my identity, he all but dragged me over here. I turned

him down, bringing up the children I had to watch, but he kept insisting.

“So, Mjöllmile. If you have a moment, I’d like to discuss future plans, if you don’t mind?”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee! Absolutely, Sir Rimuru. I promise you by my name as Gard Mjöllmile,” he had said earlier, “that I know the perfect place for such discussion!”

“Oh, do you? I like the sound of that, I do! Are you maybe talking about...?”

“Say no more, say no more! I promise you’ll be *very* happy you joined me!”

That sort of thing. I agreed to it, if not with much enthusiasm.

This Gard Mjöllmile guy was apparently one of the major merchants plying the trade in Blumund. He had full guild accreditation, as well as an official permit from the kingdom’s government. That’s why he got this job, representing both his nation and the guild as he reached out to me.

It was rare for merchants to be licensed both by their local government and the guild, since it meant paying double the fees, but Mjöllmile saw it as a must. “Trust,” he explained, “is the most important thing you have.” He might be a short, fat, ferret-like kind of guy, but he still had it in him to show a little authenticity.

Like any good merchant, nothing escaped his attention, and he seemed to be dealing in quite a wide range of business. He was the president (boss, really) of Blumund’s main marketplace, and he was also something of a loan shark, lending at high interest rates.

Bydd was one of his clients on that front; this bodyguard job was part of paying him back. Being able to boss around someone like Bydd, who had muscle and wasn’t afraid to use it, definitely said something about how in control he always was. Apparently, he even held sway over a few members of the nobility who turned to him for loans when they were down on their luck. It explained why Mjöllmile was known as Emperor of the Alleyways back home. Getting caught up in debt like that is a terrifying thing. Gotta remember to borrow responsibly. We’d be bound to take out some loans as a nation sooner or later, after all.

Regardless, he was a merchant who knew what he wanted, and anything we could both stand to profit on was of keen interest to him. In some ways, I trust that a lot more than some alliance written out on paper. Plus, given his act out in the field this afternoon, I had the impression he was a really good guy, deep down. I love all the colorful characters Fuze introduces me to.

*I think I could use this guy, Mjöllmile. I kinda like him.*

Mjöllmile was now rubbing his hands together as he approached me—all smiles.

“Are you enjoying yourself here, Sir Rimuru?”

“Hey, Mjöllmile. Everything okay with us and the management here?”

“Ah, yes! It certainly did not come easily, but my reputation was enough for them to give the nod!”

“Hoh! Sorry to put you through that.”

“Oh, no, no, it’s all for you, Sir Rimuru. Not a problem at all!”

I had given Mjöllmile kind of a tall order. He had successfully reserved the entire club for us, having anyone we didn’t know kicked out. It turned out that he’s got an investment in this club—he really *does* work in a lot of fields. I was surprised at the kinds of connections he had available to leverage here in the city.

None of the other customers complained; one look from Mjöllmile must’ve been enough to silence them. I guessed he had a fair bit of power in this nation, just like back in Blumund.

I asked him this favor for a reason.

“By the way, Sir Rimuru...I’m sure this will sound rude, asking you...but are you sure it was such a good idea to bring these children to a club like this...?”

He chose his words carefully as he turned his eyes over to one side.

“You were *so cool*, Mr. Rimuru!”

“That was amazing! You just, like, *zoomed* into the air, and you gave that dragon the biggest KO punch ever!”

“Eh, it wasn’t bad. When I grow up, I bet I’ll be able to pull that off easy!”

“Very nice, very nice.”

“But you really *were* that strong, huh? Maybe even stronger than Miss Shizu...”

“Oh, no way!”

“But did you see him transform? That was really awesome.”

“He looked kind of like Miss Shizu. Very nice.”

“Yeah, I’ll grant you that, but...”

“Well, either way, now we know for sure that Mr. Rimuru is super-amazing!”

“Mm-hmm!”

“Yeah, I agree with you.”

“I like Mr. Tempest a lot!”

“Yeah! I wanna be that strong someday, too.”

It wasn’t the usual club crowd, no. They were children—my students, of course—having the time of their lives in here. Bydd was keeping them company, although for the most part, they were recapping today’s battle among themselves. They really shouldn’t have been in there. If someone found out, I’d lose my teaching job, for sure. I wanted to leave them behind, but they moaned about it so much I thought I’d go crazy. So I decided to bring them along. Two things in the world I couldn’t beat: Milim and crying children. Yep.

Still, the sexy hostesses were all smiles around the kids, no doubt recalling their own childhoods. I didn’t think any would complain about this. It wasn’t exactly the way I planned this meeting to work out, but hell, it was good enough for me.

With the other customers gone, I had nothing keeping me from being as frank as possible with Mjöllmile. Of course, we didn’t have anything *that* important to discuss—it was mostly about replacing the High Potions he used up today. I offered him full replacements as long as he kept on advertising them.

“I see... So for you, Sir Rimuru, spreading the word is more of your goal right now than pushing sales? Indeed, once people know about how effective it is, I’m sure we’ll have customers seeking us out before long...”

Mjöllmile, clever man that he was, immediately realized my intentions.

"Exactly. So keep on passing 'em out, all right? Hell, you don't even need to stop with five hundred. Give out one or two thousand if you want."

"Hee-hee-hee! I see, I see. My first impression of you was correct from the very beginning, I see. And I'll gladly pay your fees as well. We have a contract, and I was the one who started providing them to the soldiers."

"C'mon, you really don't need to worry about it! Just because I saved your life and stuff..."

"...Well, no, I do thank you for that, of course. But I'm not going to throw away profits for you just because of that. You've built that highway for us, making the journey safer and more convenient for merchants everywhere. You're the leader of the Jura-Tempest Federation, which is bound to become a major hub among the trade routes. My losses are nothing compared to the chance to build connections with you like this."

Gotta lose a fly to catch a trout, as the saying goes, and *he* certainly believed it.

"All right. Well, I look forward to doing more business with you, then."

"Oh, absolutely! And I with you, too!"

And so, having earned each other's trust, Mjöllmile and I established a new business relationship.

I picked his brain for a while longer, asking about future concerns and his impressions of Tempest. He gave me a lot of useful feedback, and as time went on, the children began to get sleepy.

Just when I was ready to head out, one of the hostesses whispered something I couldn't afford to ignore.

"Ah, may the Spirit Queen bless all these children!"

"Huh? Wussat? Some kinda magic spell?"

"No, it's not! It's a prayer that people from my homeland say all the time. There's a Spirit Queen, you see, who lives in what's called the Dwelling of the Spirits, and she watches over them all!"

Huh? What did she just say? I had to delve into this.

"Hey, ma'am, sorry, you just said the Dwelling of the Spirits, right? Do you know where that is?"

The woman gave me a confused look, perhaps surprised at my sudden curiosity. "Oh, sure I do. I was born in a village right near it!"

Then, with a smile, she told me the location. It was in the Republic of Ur-Gracia, a sparsely populated country unaffiliated with the Western Nations, in a village near Urgr Nature Park in the northern tip of the land. She was born there, and thanks to that, I finally had an in—a clue in the most unexpected of places. No doubt more karma for my good deeds or something.

So I said my good-byes to Mjöllmile and the ladies.

"We'll be back soon!"

"I look forward to entertaining you in Blumund next time, Sir Rimuru. I hope you'll pay a visit to my store there."

"Sure. I'll tell the folks back home to prioritize you for potion replacement. Keep up the good work advertising that stuff!"

"Absolutely!"

"Thanks! Come back soon!"

The club staff all demonstrated visible surprise at Mjöllmile's behavior. *I'll bet they're pretty freaked out.* After all, here was this tycoon, the guy who gave the orders around the joint, bowing profusely at this little kid. I was a B-plus adventurer, so my name was starting to become a bit known around here. They must've been willing to accept that as the cause.

*Now, I just hope no one tattles on me about bringing kids to a nightclub.*

\*

So here I was at the Urgr Nature Park in the Republic of Ur-Gracia, alleged home of the Dwelling of the Spirits.

Two months had passed since I accepted the teaching role at Englesia. It took a fair bit of prep time and about three weeks of traveling, but I finally made it.

I had given my wagon to Kabal as a gift, but I wasn't missing it much. We already had a new, improved version all finished up. I had borrowed it for the trip, Ranga pulling it at full speed the whole time—well, about thirty miles an hour, that is, just to make sure the wagon's occupants didn't get scrambled. Going at *full*-full speed on unpaved roads would have been suicide.

At night, meanwhile, I went back to the dorm. The Warp Portal elemental magic really came in handy here. With my level of magical force, it was no problem for me to make the leap and bring all five children along. I was really tossing around a lot of magic, which seemed kind of like cheating, but I didn't want to put the children through a lot of stress. Using this magic meant I didn't need to buy food or other supplies, too, which made things a lot easier. Whether it was *right* to use it, on the other hand, is another question.

The Republic of Ur-Gracia was far different from the nations that ringed the Forest of Jura. The Western Church had no influence on it, and it wasn't a Council member, either. It didn't even border Jura and had only a scant few connections to the Western Nations. Trade, for the most part, was with the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion.

It was situated on the southern coast of the continent, all but forgotten, but it was a peaceful, democratic nation, one that received the blessings and protection of the elemental spirits. There were no restrictions on entering or leaving, but crime was not exactly an issue. The reason? Simple: Every native of Ur-Gracia was a shaman or shamaness, capable of using elemental magic.

This involved providing some of your magicules in exchange for borrowing the power of the spirits to do things. Such elemental magic required no casting time; forge a pact with a spirit, and anyone could pull it off. That pact, however, required earning the trust of an elemental, and the one you chose could affect the power of the resulting magic. Humans didn't have a lot of magicules by default, so without training, your average person couldn't wield a whole lot of force. Still, even if it was only a bit more powerful than

household magic, it was still magic, and it'd be enough to protect you from criminal activity, I suppose.

Mastering spirit magic like this could reward the user with an offensive arsenal that rivaled any other. After yet more training, one could even summon elementals themselves. Building stronger connections with elementals like this let you take advantage of their powers more fully, ruling over them and controlling them freely. It was certainly a lot more powerful than simply having one lend you a hand.

Ur-Gracia was a nation the spirits seemed to love a lot. As a result, legal custom called for a pact-themed ceremony held for everyone at the end of their tenth year of age. This ceremony, once completed, qualified you as a citizen of the country and was also the reason why literally everyone was a shaman.

Anyone who failed to forge a pact with an elemental was exiled from the nation at the age of twenty, losing all rights as a citizen—but with all the many spirits out there, it was rare to be completely unable to find one to partner with. The hostess I met that night apparently dodged it on purpose so she could see more of the outside world, but apart from exceptions like her, pretty much everyone succeeded.

Elemental spirits tended to dislike people with evil intent, so if you committed a crime in Ur-Gracia, it'd get spotted almost immediately. That was why the people around here were all pretty chill.

Having an entire nation of shamans naturally made it a threat to its neighbors. It was not widely known to the Western Nations, but its next-door neighbors in Thalion were well aware of them. That was why they had formal, equal diplomatic relations, despite Thalion being much larger and masters of its own brand of elemental magic. Thanks to the disposition of most Ur-Gracians, relations were friendly and trustworthy between the two, allowing them both to advance their civilizations and grow.

That was about how the lady at the nightclub described it. Now the kids and I were here, and our mission was clear—summon some elementals.

According to the theory I (really, the Great Sage) came up with, Ifrit fused with Shizu's body to avoid a physical breakdown caused by magical energy gone out of control. A high-level elemental like Ifrit could keep a massive amount of magicules in check—if I could get some to fuse with these kids, that should hopefully solve the problem.

Fortunately, I had the unique skill Deviant, which let me Separate and Synthesize things. I wasn't sure how the fusion process worked, but hopefully I could just smash the two sides together and see what happened. If the demon lord Leon could do it, I probably could, too.

The one problem that cropped up at a time like this was how the elementals feel about it. Few of these spirits had wills of their own. Possessing one at all was enough to deem an elemental as high-level.

In the hostess's village, it was said there were two places to forge pacts with spirits. One was the altar in the main square, where local citizens performed their pact rituals. No high-level elementals had ever been found there. If you wanted to forge a pact with one of those, you needed to go to the *other* place.

*These* spirits often had, shall we say, attitudes; they would never accept you unless you passed a trial of their liking. Such pacts could only be forged in a place called the Dwelling of the Spirits.

The question was, were the hostess and Treyni talking about the same place? As the hostess put it, nobody who ventured forth to find the Dwelling had ever come back. The rumors about it kept circulating, though, which she found strange. They called it a sort of maze that spread out underground, or up in the sky, with the Dwelling itself found only at the other end.

Only the “entrance” existed in Urgr Nature Park—a simple door blocked by a large boulder, as if connected to another dimension. We were here to find some high-level spirits, and that meant we had to go that way.

We spent an evening resting up and preparing. I wasn't wholly sure I could use a Warp Portal to get back outside from whatever was beyond that door. I had a feeling I couldn't, but just in case, I drew a magic circle on the ground in an inconspicuous section of the park. Just a bit of insurance. It'd be nice if it worked.

I sized up the children.

"You guys ready? Once we go in, we might not be able to get back out. Do you think you're prepared for that?"

They all briskly nodded at me.

"Of course!"

"We'll be fine."

And so forth, from one kid to the next. *Good. At least they're not scared. It feels like they've been friendlier with me, trusting in me a lot more lately. That little dragon hunt a while back must've had the intended effect.*

I had earned their trust. It was time to go.

There wasn't any information on this spot in any of the books I scanned at the library. Unfortunately, I had no idea what monsters might be lurking on the other side. It was described as a trial, so it had to be pretty dangerous. But how come nobody ever came back? There were other elementalists out there besides just Shizu, after all, capable of taking full control over high-level spirits. I couldn't make contact with any of them, but Yuuki had said as much to me, so it had to be true.

There was at least a touch of concern in my mind over whether Ranga and I could keep the children protected. If it looked hopeless, I intended to fall back and ask Benimaru and the other ogre mages for backup...assuming, of course, we could get out that easily.

Either way, it was with a sense of firm resolve that I grasped the door handle. Slowly, carefully, I stepped inside. It was strange—the sun shouldn't be able to reach in, but the entire area was bathed in a dim light. I tried it out before letting the kids in, but it was bright enough to keep things visible without using Magic Sense. Nothing bad in the air, either.

At my signal, all five went inside. We had just taken our first steps into the labyrinth.

\*

The moment all of us were in, the door closed. I immediately tried out my Warp Portal. Just as I thought, it failed to activate. I suppose this maze or whatever was set up so spatially oriented magic wouldn't work in it. Ranga's Shadow Motion failed, too, so I was pretty sure that was it.

Better give up on escaping for now and switch gears to solving this trial. We proceeded inside. It wasn't really much of a labyrinth—more of a single corridor. *Nothing you can really get lost in*, I thought as we carefully pressed forward.

.....

.....

...

*Good thing my brain's got a map function.*

It *looked* like a single path, but it was packed with traps designed to throw off your sense of direction. Try to go back, and the light would adjust itself to hide your previous path in the shadows. Even going forward, a path that looked completely plain would be hiding branching paths at the outer edge of the light.

Yep. It sure *was* a labyrinth, one a regular human's directional skills would never work inside. You might not even be able to go back, for that matter. Pretty scary setup they got here.

Just then:

(Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear...)

(He noticed, he noticed.)

(Oh, my, my, my, my...)

(Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee!)

Suddenly, voices echoed in my mind. A very powerful form of telepathy?

(You bore us, guest!)

(Be more scared for us!)

(Be more frightened for us!)

They babbled on at me. I saw Kenya and Ryota look around searchingly; they could all hear the same voices, no doubt. Chloe

hung on to my clothing, refusing to let go. Alice was acting defiant, but she, too, was staying right by me.

Gail had his sword out, seeking to keep everyone safe. His job as the oldest, I suppose. It was the sword I gave him, a child-size one I asked Kurobe to forge for me. Small but made of pure magisteel and capable of changing its shape to match the wielder's habits. I was hoping he wouldn't have to use it, but...

(Good, good!)

(Be more afraid!)

(That's it, that's it! It's too boring otherwise!)

*Hmm. Now I know where it's coming from.* All this selfish chatter was getting on my nerves.

"Hey, do you guys live here? Are you elementals? We're here on a mission. We need to talk to some high-level elementals. If you don't mind, could you lead us forward instead of getting in our way?"

I figured I'd give it a try. How would they respond to it?

(Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!)

(Ee-hee-hee-hee-hee!)

(What a funny thing to say!)

(Interesting. More so than being surprised. More so than being scared.)

(Good, good!)

(Let me tell him.)

(But, but—)

(Before that!!)

Another pathway of light appeared in the corridor in front of us. Apparently, we were being invited. We had to go.

The path of light was no problem to walk on. Proceeding across it, we found ourselves in a large, open chamber that housed a big standing statue, a giant of steel looming over us.

(Let me explain the rules of the trial!!) a telepathic voice boomed. As it did, the eyes on the giant statue glowed red. *What is it with creepy monsters all having eyes that glow red like that?* I don't know why that thought struck me, but it did.

"Whoa, wait. By 'trial,' do you mean I gotta beat this statue thing?"

(Uh-huh!)

(Yep!)

(You got it!)

Well, that's easy.

"Shall I?"

"No, Ranga. I'll do it. You stand guard for them."

I stepped forward. It was my job to deal with the worst. And if we had to run for it, I wanted Ranga in healthy shape.

(Hmm? Hmm? Hmmfffff?)

(Doing this by yourself?)

(Too much confidence is a dangerous thing!)

They were worried about me? I sure wasn't too concerned.

I ran Analyze and Assess on the statue in front of me.

And I almost choked. It was...nuts. A golem, built in magisteel from head to toe, with enough magical energy to put it beyond A rank. Stronger than the Sky Dragon I beat earlier. It was nearly ten feet tall, looking dignified and massive—I'd have to guess it weighed over thirty tons. Simply falling on me would be a strike I'd have trouble dealing with. I had Resist Melee Attack, sure, but it wouldn't help much if I got squashed flat as a pancake.

As I racked my brain figuring out what to do, the statue shuddered. I immediately sped up my thought process, following its moves. It went nimbly, quickly, like a master swordsman. At that size and with this speed, it was an incredibly dangerous foe. It could bump into me, and I'd look like the victim of an especially gruesome highway accident.

*You call this a trial?*

"H-hey! Hey! What's with this guy?! This isn't any kinda trial at all! You're trying to kill me!"

The elementals erupted in laughter.

(Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee!)

(Yes, yes we are, exactly!)

(Think you can win? Think you can win?)

Were these really elementals? Because they seemed downright evil to me. Plus...that attitude, treating me like a baby. They were really starting to piss me off. Like...*really*.

The rage from the pit of my stomach made me start to get for-real serious about this—a rarity for me. *Hoo boy. Can't let that happen. I need to retain my dignity around these kids.* I never got angry about much—something they already knew. I was a role model for them, and I needed to show that losing your cool was a negative.

Right. Deep breaths. I retained my composure and tried to look as casual as possible as I took a battle stance. *No need to go crazy here. Just don't let it hit me, and I'll be fine. The statue's pretty fast, but I'm much faster. I'm a guy who can break the speed of sound, even.*

But just running all day wouldn't get me closer to beating it...

I had a feeling Dark Thunder wouldn't work on it. It was steel, after all. The electricity would just get sent to the ground. A few spells from the magic books I pored through seemed like they had potential, but they were too large-scale in effect to be suitable. Water Blade and magic fireballs wouldn't be enough to break through the statue's armor, either. Hacking at it with a sword would be pointless; I'd chip the blade long before I'd ever cut through. I might even break it, which would suck.

Like, seriously, a giant walking hunk of magisteel? Cut me a break. A golem made out of the hardest metal on the planet, moving this flexibly... There were so few weak points, I didn't know where to begin.

*Only one thing left I can think of. Burn the thing down. Burn it but keep the flames limited to reduce any collateral damage.*

"Hey, if you're gonna apologize to me, better do it soon. If you don't, I'm gonna destroy this thing. You okay with that?"

(Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!)

(That's funny! Very funny!)

(Ooh, a big, strong boy!)

(Good, good. Very good!)

(Let's see if you can!)

*Hnnnnng.*

*Come on. I'm a grown-up. I'm fine. I won't let a bunch of telepathic brats get me angry. I'm sure the way the veins in my forehead felt*

like they would explode was just my imagination. I didn't even have any veins.

Well, at least I had their permission. *Sayonara, golem. I'd love to take you home and use you as a toy...er, I mean as research.*

"Demonwire Bind!"

This was a Soei move, but I was trained in it by now, the result of regular efforts over time. Plus, my Sticky Steel Thread had grown stronger, far more than it was before. It was a cinch to wrap it around the statue and keep it from moving.

(No way?!)

(I cannot believe it!)

(The Elemental Colossus?!)

Then an ebony darkness covered the statue. Ignoring the surprised elementals, I launched a Hellflare at it. Again, a move I mastered from Benimaru. Focusing my concentration to a razor's edge, I kept its range as small as possible. Such focus wasn't necessary if I was just using it normally, but defining a specific range required full control over a massive amount of magicules.

A dome about ten feet in radius, a size so compact not even Benimaru could conjure it, covered the statue. Even this was something I could only pull off with the help of the Great Sage. There was a massive *foom* sound, and when the dark dome disappeared, nothing remained.

According to the Sage's calculations, the temperature inside the dome exceeded several hundred million degrees, enough to create a burning hell that vaporized everything in an instant. Even my own Cancel Temperature would be worthless against that.

It was the strongest attack skill in existence, one nobody could ever resist. Not too useful against oversize monsters like Charybdis, but still. Its main weakness was how easily avoidable it was; it took long enough to create that simply running away worked pretty well. You couldn't just throw around an attack with an inherent weakness like this, or else your opponents would figure out how to deal with them. I had to save the big guns for situations like these.

Of course, binding my foe in advance took care of that weakness pretty handily. Either way, though, this was one of the attack skills I hardly ever wanted to show anyone.

(No!!)

(I don't believe it...)

(In one strike...?!)

Some very flustered-sounding messages rattled in my brain. It would seem they had had absolute confidence in that golem. I couldn't blame them. The children all had their jaws to the floor as well; it must've been quite a shock. Exactly why I didn't want to show them, but ah well.

Those elementals had screwed with me for long enough. *I hope they're ready for me now. It's my turn to hand out some punishment.*

\*

After burning away the Elemental Colossus, I let an evil grin spread across my face. Heh-heh-heh-heh. I think I had a negotiation advantage by this point.

"Right, then. Come on out! Unless you guys wanna be burned to ashes next. I know where you're hiding!"

I didn't, of course. I had a general idea, but the telepathy-based blocks made an exact location hard to pinpoint. It'd save me a lot of trouble if they came out voluntarily.

"Yes! Yes, yes, yes!! I have humbly been called upon!!"

What then flew out was a cute little girl (?), looking a bit like a poseable doll with dragonfly's wings attached. Not a dwarf, but more like a fairy-tale sprite. Her hair, a mix of gold-based green and black, was braided, and she wore a flared dress with white-and-green patterns over a black background. It was a pretty flashy outfit, full of fancy frills and the like, and it was opened in the back to make room for the dragonfly wings. Behind this fairy were several others like her, though dressed much more plainly.

"Ta-daaaaaa! Behold, for I am the mazzh... Ahem!"

It sounded like she just tripped over her words in a script. Should I poke fun at her for that? *I guess they're so used to telepathic speech that her vocal cords are out of practice.*

“...You all right?”

She waved a hand to dismiss the question. “Behold, for I am the majestic Ramiris of the Labyrinth, one of the Ten Great Demon Lords!! Bow down be... Um, before me!!” Then she cocked her head at me, like she was king of the world. I had no idea how she kept pushing my buttons like this. *I think someone here needs a karate chop.*

“Oww! Wh-what was that for? You scared me!!”

*She dodged it. Darn.*

(That's mean, isn't it? Isn't it?)

(Can we beat him up? Can we beat him up?)

(But, but, but, but he beat our Elemental Colossus!)

(We can't. We can't. He'll kill us!)

*Oh, shut up.*

“Besides, you're cheating! Why doesn't Spirit Control work on you?! I haven't seen someone as tuned out as you in ages!!”

They were certainly working themselves into a lather over me. My unconscious resistance to Spirit Control or whatever it was might have been the cause of a lot of their anger right there.

But that's not the only reason. I had the sense they wanted dearly to deceive me about something. No way this little pixie was a demon lord. Why were they telling such an obvious lie to trick me? Or were they still making fun of me?

“If you're gonna lie to my face, you really oughtta come up with a better story. How could a little kid fairy like you be a demon lord?”

“I'm not a kid! You really *are* rude. And what am I, exactly, if I'm *not* a demon lord?!”

“Huh? You're that dumb? I have a real demon lord as a friend, you know. Her name's Milim. That's how I know you're making that up. You're so weak, it's not even worth comparing you two.”

“You're so stuuuuuuupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid!! A big stupid man!!”

Ramiris had to pause a moment to catch her breath after all that shouting. She continued on.

“Listen, you,” she growled. “You know what they call Milim? They call her the most ridiculous demon lord in the universe. She tries to solve every problem she runs into with her fists. It's pretty rude

comparing someone so ridiculous with sweet li'l old me, don't you think? Because if you don't understand that, we're gonna have problems, mister! Besides, aren't you a little messed in the head anyway? Like, what's with that attack? It's crazy! And dangerous, too! Don't you need to combine a bunch of special skills together to create something like that? I wish you wouldn't be so reckless, you!"

She had concerns about how dangerous Hellflare was. *I wish she would stop being so reckless with me, actually.*

"So you really do know Milim?" she asked.

"Uh-huh! We just became friends recently."

"...Oh. Well... Wait a second. Are you, um, that slime who became the new leader of the Forest of Jura?!"

"Yeah, but how do you know about that?"

"Ahhh, I knew it!! She stopped by for the first time in a while and bragged about this new friend she had, so I laughed her right out of this place..."

Ramiris gave me a surprised look, beating her wings in a rhythm in the air. So she wasn't lying. *She's really a demon lord, though...?*

"Well, glad my reputation precedes me. I'm Rimuru, Milim's friend. And I'm here because I had a request."

"Oh, all right. I guess you really *are* someone Milim knows, so I'll believe you. So stop looking at me so suspiciously! I'm a demon lord, I mean it!"

Guess she could tell I didn't believe her. *Ah well. She seems harmless. Might as well accept her story for now.* I decided to relax and hear her out with a calm mind.

For some reason, I was the one providing tea and food. She had been calling me a guest for a while now, but doesn't it usually work the other way around? Whatever. The children made fast friends with the fairies, enjoying a few cookies together in a scene I could only describe as darling.

Ramiris's aim was to try to scare us with that big statue. Once they watched it happen and had a big laugh about it, they would then step in to offer assistance, earning our profound respect and

appreciation. She claimed they had no intention of killing or hurting us.

All those rumors about adventurers and travelers never returning got their start because they usually dumped them into an exit connected to some faraway land. "Maybe they're just taking their time getting home?" she remarked nonchalantly.

This was the reason she was so whiny about me destroying her Elemental Colossus. Really, more vaporized instead of destroyed, I suppose. Sure can't repair it now. Either way, though, she really had it coming.

"Dahh," she said over and over again, "after we spent all that time tinkering with that toy I picked up, we finally got it done, and now..."

*Well, sorry. My take on it was kill or be killed.*

"Besides, you know, that thing had a *lot* of features! It had earth elementals controlling its weight, water elementals working all the joints, fire elementals powering its engines, and wind elementals adjusting its heat level. A big elemental party! All the top names in spirit engineering worked on it, too..."

She just *refused* to drop the damn subject. *Maybe I shouldn't have destroyed it, after all*, I almost caught myself thinking. But then I'd be indulging her too much.

Spirit engineering, though...? I was curious about that. Maybe it was related to the magical soldiers Kaijin discussed?

"Is that like the magic-armor soldier project the dwarves were working on with the elves?"

"*Ding-ding-ding-ding!* I'm impressed you knew that! But that failed because they couldn't make the spirit-magic core that served as its heart. No way you can just make that out of plain steel and expect it to withstand an elemental's force. So thanks to them using a bunch of shoddy parts like that, it went berserk and got all broken up. They just threw out its outer shell, so I brought it back home and fixed it up! I guess you could say I'm kind of a genius, huh? Isn't that great?"

It was, although I didn't care for her boasting. Thinking about it, spirit engineering was based around the power of elemental

spirits, so it made sense that a fairy so intimately familiar with elemental powers would better understand it.

Listening to Ramiris gave me a general outline of that magic-armor soldier project; it was apparently meant as a way to produce so-called “crucial golems,” driven by elemental power and controllable by a regular person. A sort of ultimate weapon in this world, you could say.

It was really crazy, this thing King Gazel was trying to make. Magicules ran up and down its body like blood vessels, working the same way as oil pressure on a car to spring it into motion. Its weight could even be controlled by magic, allowing it to fly—on paper anyway.

Whether the project failed or not, though, were the dwarves really that keen on boosting their military...? Well, maybe so, actually. It was just taking a different approach from the pack. Instead of relying on otherworlders like their rival nations, they were using their technological supremacy to create a would-be death robot. That made sense—and it showed all over again how enormous, and lethal, a threat magic was in this world.

Still, though, she had succeeded where Kaijin and his team failed, in her own way. She looked like an idiot, but this demon lord Ramiris might actually be someone real special. She transformed the concept into a golem that worked on given orders, but it was a fully complete machine.

“All right. I’ll admit it, that golem was pretty impressive. And that’s why I have a request for you!”

“Huhh? Why do I have to listen to...?”

Sensing she was about to turn me down, I stopped her by summoning a little Dark Flame in my right hand.

“...I...could be interested in hearing you out, I think, yes!”

*Right. That’s a good girl.*

“I appreciate that. Thank you. I won’t ask you to do it for free, either. If you’ll help me out, I can have a new golem made for you!”

“Let’s hear it!”

She sure was fickle. Dropping the right bait her way made it easy to change her mind. Which was great. Now I could finally get down to business.

I explained the kids' situation to her. The whole, honest story, not hiding anything. The children meekly listened.

"So that's why we're here. We want to go to the Dwelling of the Spirits that lies beyond here."

"Ah-haaaaa." Ramiris sighed, watching the children as the fairies chased them around. "These kids have been through a lot, huh?"

"They have, haven't they?" I drew closer to drive my point across. "That's why I want to introduce them to the Spirit Queen. We've got to get some high-level elementals on our side."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? The Spirit Queen's me! I'm it!"

"Huh?"

This was rather sudden.

"I'm not really in the mood for jokes..."

"How rude! It's not a joke at all. It's real!!"

So this fairy calling herself a demon lord was now claiming to be the queen of all elementals?

"Um, look, why is a demon lord working as the Spirit Queen?"

"It's the other way *arooooouuund!* I, the Spirit Queen, went to the dark side and got demoted to demon lord!!"

Now *that's* her story? I couldn't expect much from this stupid kid, but if she claimed to be the Spirit Queen, I had to hear her out.

"In that case," I continued, wondering if it was really okay to do this, "I want to summon some high-level elementals. Can you help me with that?"

"Hmm, right, right. Now I remember. Someone else who came here and made it past the trial... Oh! Leon! That was Leon! And *then*, he had the nerve to up and become a demon lord, too. Can you believe that? An ex-human doing that? I could KO him in one punch, you know! Easy! I mean it."

This was obviously a lie. You could see it in the way her eyes darted around. But enough about Ramiris. Let's go back to Leon for a second. *He* was here? She didn't exactly answer my question, but I couldn't let that topic slide, either.

Keeping my cool, I asked her for more details, and here's what she told me: Leon, as a human child, paid a visit. For whatever reason, Ramiris's Spirit Control didn't work on him—in fact, he almost brought her under his thrall, which made her panic. She was

gifted in elemental-oriented illusory magic, but none of it managed to fool Leon. So, her options exhausted, she listened to his tale.

“And like, you were the same, too, but if my illusory magic doesn’t work, I’m done, you know? I don’t have anything else to throw at ‘em, right? It means that sweet, helpless, li’l old me has nothing to defend herself with. That’s why I made that Elemental Colossus for a little extra muscle, right? And here I thought I could get back at all those mean demon lords who laughed at me...”

*Here we go again.*

“I told you, I can make you another one!”

“Hee-hee-hee! I’m looking forward to it!”

Nothing like a little bait to steer this simpleminded girl back on topic.

“So anyway, I wound up helping Leon out a bit.”

Utterly defeated, this non-demon lord Leon forced her to cooperate. He was apparently seeking information on something and asked her to summon an ancient high-level elemental who would know about it. Then, surprisingly enough, he forged a pact with the spirit.

“Now *that* certainly startled me! That was a light elemental, practically my right-hand man around here, and it just sidled right up to Leon. It recognized him as its master and popped right into his body.”

Having little other choice, Ramiris officially named Leon a Hero and offered him the divine protection of the spirits.

“Wait a second. Why did someone who was named a Hero become a demon lord?”

“Who knows? Maybe he fell to the dark side, too. Following in my footsteps, you know?”

I doubted that, but I didn’t mention it. Ramiris apparently didn’t have much idea how Leon became a demon lord; I’d have to ask the man himself about it. This world, though... Heroes could become demon lords, just like that? Heroes here were bound by fate, granted astounding powers in exchange... If anything, it made me worry that Leon was an even more formidable foe than I gave him credit for.

*If you give it a little thought, it looks like I might be the one who pays for it when we ever meet. Maybe I'm lucky I got to learn about this facet of him here. Better brace myself for anything with him. I can't let my guard down.*

Ramiris's story continued. She had hoped that would be the last of Leon she'd see, but it proved not to be the case. Even with the high-level elemental's knowledge, the man still didn't find any of the clues he needed. This angered him so much that, out of spite, he went back here and stripped away a high-level fire elemental.

"That shameless young man was being *so* unreasonable. He wanted me to summon a certain person from another world. He *knows* I can't do that. Like, how stupid can you get? Then he gave me a look like he was about to cry. In fact, he *did* cry! Yeah, it's not lying to say he cried. Not only was he a crybaby, but so self-centered, too! What a doofus!!"

The memory was getting Ramiris worked up. It must've been frustrating for her, but to me, it sounded more like she was just being a sore loser. Milim was a handful herself, but at least she exuded real presence as a demon lord. At first anyway.

*Is this fairy sure she should say all this, though? If certain people find out about her complaints, they could make her disappear, no? If I discovered people were talking about me this way, I could easily vaporize 'em.*

"Hey, you aren't thinking about something really rude right now, are you?"

"No? Not at all."

Her eyes doubted me, but she was too ditzy to see through my ruse. I could see why she was on alert, though. I wanted her to summon some high-level elementals, and she was no doubt worried she'd be repeating mistakes from the past.

"Well, I promise I won't do anything like that to you, so don't worry about that."

"For real? For really real?"

"I promise!"

That was the key that finally made her agree to help out. I wasn't without my concerns about this, but I decided to just believe in her for now.

"All right. Could you take us over to the Dwelling of the Spirits, then?"

Ramiris gave me a serious and thoughtful look. Then she flew over toward the children, peering intently into their faces. I had no idea she could express herself this way, actually—with that kind of real and very non-demon lord affection.

"Mmm. You know, I'm a demon lord, but I'm also a guide for the holy. I am a fairy resident of this labyrinth, and I was also the Spirit Queen. My job is to instill the protection of the spirits into Heroes, just as I did with Leon. So don't worry. I always play it fair with people. Because I—yes, *I!*—am the one who maintains the balance in this world!!"

The other elementals flitted happily around in the air. Blessed light filled the chamber. It was a very solemn, very divine series of events. Her ditziness was now gone and replaced with true dignity.

Ramiris turned to each of us and smiled. "All right. Let me help you with the summoning! Let's see if we can get a buncha nice ones for ya!" she declared.

\*

She began by giving me a crash course on elementals, helping me understand what they were a lot more.

Higher-level spirits had sentience; summoning them successfully was more dependent on their own whims. One way around this, however, was to siphon some energy off one of the greater elementals, creating a new high-level elemental with it.

"So, like, if you can't call for one, you can just have a new one made?"

Ramiris gave me a broad nod. Birthing a new spirit, as she put it, eliminates a lot of unknowns from the equation. She thought she'd be able to pull that off before she ran out of time.

It wouldn't be easy. There was the issue of compatibility with each of the children. Ideally, it'd be better to find elementals that volunteered to join their bodies...but we'd have to do what needed to be done.

I looked at the children. They all returned my gaze with firm looks.

"You guys okay with this?"

""""Yeah!""""

It was a stupid question. Now, we'd just have to try it out and believe.

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
7

## RESCUED SOULS

# CHAPTER 7

## RESCUED SOULS

We changed locations to the Dwelling of the Spirits, located in the deepest part of the labyrinth. No matter how this turned out, my only role in it was keeping the kids safe. We had Ramiris on our side, and for all her weirdness, she was still the ex-Spirit Queen. She was quite a far cry from the stately noblewoman Treyni described her as, but I was sure it'd all work out. Probably.

It turned out Ramiris knew about Treyni, because the fairy's mind was passed down with every incarnation of her body. "Oh, she's still doing good?" she asked. "She was such a cute little spirit, back in the day!" She theorized that when she was demoted to fairy, Treyni was impacted by the fallout and became a dryad. It sounded like a true enough story to me.

As a fairy, Ramiris gave birth to a replicated version of herself whenever her rising magical force reached its limit. This was a new Ramiris of sorts, one who retained all the thoughts of the previous one. Apparently, through this process, the grown children could retain more magic force than their parents—but until fully matured, the child was actually weaker.

This made her the only demon lord with a family tree, one filled with a constant cycle of evolution and retrogression. There was no need for this generational nonsense in the past, but post-demotion, she wound up reborn as a fairy, which (as she whined about at length) was not as useful a body to work with.

Ramiris was still a child at the moment, which was part of why I was so anxious about entrusting her with so much...but it beat nothing.

We reached our destination as we talked this over. On the other side of the door was a large, seemingly empty chamber. This was

the Oracle Chamber, connected directly to the Dwelling itself. A corridor of light extended from it, about three feet wide and sixty or so feet long. At the far end of this was a round platform, around fifteen feet in diameter. I don't know what it was made of, but it appeared to be floating in thin air.

"All right, so listen—I want you to go up on that platform and call for the elementals!"

"What should we say, exactly?"

"Oh, anything's fine. Like, 'Help me!' or 'Let's play a game!' or whatever. If you capture the interest of a spirit, it'll come over, and you'll have succeeded."

"They'll...come for us?"

"Of course they will! You'll join us up there, right, Mr. Rimuru?"

"Yeah, will you?"

They were getting butterflies now, no doubt. *Well, that's fine. If worse comes to worst, I'll make the resulting demon or whatever bow to my will. Mu-ha-ha.*

"...Hey, did you just make a really *eeeeevil* face?"

Ramiris was sharper than I thought. I ignored the question and spurred the children forward.

"It'll be all right, okay? We'll figure it out!"

I needed to go up there, too, just in case no elementals showed up.

"Don't worry. I'll be up there with you."

"...Um, sure? That works for me. You can have as many people as you want up there, but it's a pretty tight space, okay? I'll be there, too, so maybe one kid at a time."

*Makes sense. No need for more than one spirit at a go, either. We may need to negotiate, depending on how this goes. I'd like to avoid letting my skills do the talking.*

"Right! We'll each go in order, then. Who's first?"

We worked out who would go when. Gail, the oldest, would be first up, followed by Alice, Kenya, Ryota, and Chloe last. It took a while to argue it out, but that was what we came up with.

The air in the room was serene. There was no sound and only a dim light. It reminded me of the inside of Veldora's cave, the way it

was bursting with natural energy. Our footsteps seemed to echo forever.

"Mr. Rimuru, if anything happens to me...take care of those guys, okay?"

*Sheesh, Gail, you don't have to be so serious. Chill out.* I said nothing as I patted him on the head.

We were at the disc-shaped platform now. It felt very much like we were floating in space. I set a foot out to walk forward but hurriedly stopped. I couldn't see any floor in front of me, but Magic Sense told me one was there. Was this transparent glass? Some kind of acrylic?

I walked forward, surprised. "It's fine," I told Gail, who was clearly scared. "There's a platform here. No matter what happens, I'll help you out." It was enough to coax him on.

Slowly, carefully, we headed for the center of the disc.

"Okay," Ramiris cheerfully shouted, "you're in position! I can't wait to see what's gonna come out!"

I gave Gail another pat. He closed his eyes and began to pray, taking a knee as he offered what tribute he could to the gods. I crossed my arms and watched.

A little time passed. Eventually, little particles of light began to float down from the heavens, like a light snow. I couldn't feel any sense of strength or will from it. Gail failed to notice any of this and continued praying.

His prayer had been answered not by a high-level elemental but by low-level ones with no sense of self. Fragments of natural energy. Sort of like magicules, but not really.

If you piled enough of these together, would they gain free will and become a high-level spirit? Or even if they didn't will it, they might still spread out, form into a whole again, and turn into some kind of elemental.

Despite the small spirits in the air, we saw no further changes. It seemed no high-level creature was there to answer Gail's call. I knew this wasn't going to be easy. There was no guarantee a great spirit was even present, no matter how much you begged for one.

So we'd just create a new one! If these small spirits were pieces from a bigger one that Gail had snipped off for himself...then

gathering them together should make it evolve into a full elemental.

*Question. Would you like to use Glutton to consume these and synthesize a spirit?*

Yes

No

“Keep praying, Gail!”

I wasted no time consuming the spirits.

“Wh-whoa! What’re you doing up there?!”

“Just shut up and watch me. I’ve got an idea.”

Keeping my mind tranquil, I launched the Great Sage. It accepted my request and began crunching the numbers at high speed, instantly providing the best response and beginning the synthesis.

*Report. The unique skill Deviant has completed synthesizing a high-level spirit. Its element is earth. Analyzing Ifrit’s self-will data and creating an auxiliary pseudo-personality... Successful... Adding. Would you like to synthesize the pseudo-high-level spirit (earth) with Gail Gibson?*

Yes

No

I placed a hand on Gail’s head and thought Yes.

With that order, the pseudo-high-level spirit (earth) the Great Sage created safely merged with Gail, beginning to serve its purpose. I ran Analyze and Assess on him, hopes high. The rampant energy running out of control within him had neatly subsided; the pseudo-spirit had brought it perfectly under control.

It seemed to go very well. Soon, he’d be able to control that berserk energy to some extent—and as he grew, he’d gradually gain new abilities.

*This worked!* I mentally shook hands with the Sage, not that it cared very much about how I pictured it.

“Okay, it’s all over. Great job!”

This had all happened in the space of several seconds. Gail, still nervously praying, didn't seem to feel any different. He looked up at me blankly. Then he gave me a strong nod.

"It's all right now. The destruction's all gone, I promise!"

Tears began to form in his eyes. He might act all tough, but a kid's a kid. The sheer sense of relief made it impossible to hold back, I'm sure.

"Thank you, Mr. Rimuru!!"

"Hey, no problem. It's my job to keep my students safe."

I patted him on the head again, kind of hiding my embarrassment as I took him back down. They all cheered joyfully for us. But it wasn't over. I had to make that work four more times, or else it'd be meaningless.

"It's too early to celebrate yet, guys. Let's save that for when we're all cured!"

They nodded at this, but the concern was starting to clear from their eyes, replaced with the color of hope.

*Time for number two.*

Next up was Alice. Climbing that narrow pathway was too scary for her, so I decided to carry her up myself. She and Chloe had been talking to each other about something—some final words of encouragement? I dropped the thought from my mind as I picked her up and took her to the platform.

*Hopefully this works again... No, I know it will.* As we watched, Alice closed her eyes as if in prayer, clutching at her skirt hard with both hands. The same thing happened as it did with Gail—a few moments, and those particles of light came streaming down once more. Ramiris looked at me, debating whether to say something, but I ignored it. This was the second time, and I was starting to get used to it.

*Report. The unique skill Deviant has completed synthesizing a high-level spirit. Its element is air. Creating pseudo-high-level spirit (air)... Successful. Also, through analysis and assessment of the air element, Shadow Motion has evolved into Spatial Motion. Would you like to synthesize the pseudo-high-level spirit (air) with Alice Rondo?*

Yes

No

Looks like Alice attracted an air elemental. Consuming, analyzing, and assessing it also enhanced one of my own skills. *That* was an unexpected event. Spatial Motion sounded pretty useful, so I was all for this.

The synthesis process finished up without incident. I picked her up off the floor.

"You did great, Alice! It's all right now!"

She gave me a happy smile, then kissed me on the cheek. Talk about precocious. Getting affection from a nine-year-old made me...happy, yeah, but also unhappy. Well, okay, happier than anything. I'm a gentleman, not a perv; let's set the record straight.

"Thanks a bunch!"

I patted her head as I took her back down. She immediately started chatting and carrying on with Chloe again. Nice to see they're good friends, at least.

Now I was back on the disc, with Kenya this time. I was starting to feel more confident. Everything was going great. Three more kids.

I was thinking I'd have to force through a summon, whip whatever spirit showed up, and cram 'em inside each one, but it looked like that wouldn't even be necessary. It might've actually helped, though, because synthesizing all these low-level elementals took up a hell of a lot more magic force than I thought. Still, just three left. Gotta hold out.

The moment Kenya began to pray, light began raining down on the platform, even before he could close his eyes. I felt a pressure upon me like none before in this chamber. *Whoa! This guy's on a whole other level!*

—In another few moments, there it was, on the altar in front of us: a single spirit. A boy, it looked like?

"Hey there! How're you doing? 'Cause I'm doing fine. I figured I'd come on down for some fun today!"

Kind of an informal way to greet us. But there was no doubting this was a high-level spirit.

"Ah, aaaaaaaaa!! What're you here breaking into my house for?!" Ramiris pressed closer to this boy spirit, looking up into his face. Guess they knew each other.

"Um, he is...?" I asked. Before Ramiris could introduce us, the boy answered.

"Oh yeah! Hey! I'm a light elemental! Unlike that evil fairy who let the monsters take her down, I'm a totally pure bastion of light!"

Kenya had summoned a high-level light elemental. That kid had talent. We talked for a while, and as the elemental put it, Kenya had the right attributes he was looking for...

"...So yeah, I figured I'd c'mon down and help Ken here out!"

Light and dark elementals were typically classified as the highest of the high, as top level as spirits got...but having this chill kid here hanging with us certainly made that difficult to picture.

They were also tasked with the important role of selecting Heroes and granting them their protection. It was those Heroic elements inside a person's body that allowed them to serve either a light or dark elemental.

As Milim put it, simply calling yourself a Hero was considered both forbidden and extremely arrogant. Maybe Masayuki, that Hero I heard about in Englesia, went through an "approval process" like this. Or did he? It didn't seem that way to me. I had a hunch he was just trying to look cool...

...but now was no time to be thinking about that. I hadn't even met the dude; no point worrying about him.

"So I'll keep Ken here safe until he's grown. And between you 'n' me, he might even wind up becomin' a Hero someday!"

That observation snapped me out of my reverie. Kenya, a Hero? Wow. Another big surprise. But as I stood there flabbergasted, the light elemental helped himself and whizzed right into Kenya's body. So quickly and easily, the magic within him grew tranquil.

"Mr. Rimuru...?"

"Mm? Oh, um, you're fine. Just like I planned it!"

*Like you planned what, exactly?!*

I couldn't help but scold myself over that. But it'd be silly to dwell on. *Hey, these things happen with elemental summoning. Just gotta accept it and move on.*

Kenya seemed a little dubious, but even he could tell his body was better now. So he accepted it, asking no more questions, then walked back down and told everyone what happened. That kid really has it together.

*So Ryota's up next, I guess.* Since he was a bit of a wimp, I couldn't help but wonder what kind of spirit he'd summon.

He made it up the walkway by himself, albeit quivering a little, so he certainly seemed ready enough for this. This being number four, we were now used to the routine, and I had him start to pray without further comment.

*Let's see what happens.*

This time, the light just didn't seem to wanna come out for us. Growing impatient, I began to consider whether I should summon a high-level spirit for him. But just then, balls of blue and green light began to fall from above, tracing a spiral in the heavens.

I guess two forces were fighting over which one would reach out to him, but neither were high-level, so I immediately consumed them without further deliberation. Time was of the essence. Starting up Analyze and Assess, I found their elements were water and wind. Which would be a better fit for Ryota? Let's ask the Sage.

*Report. The unique skill Deviant has completed synthesizing two high-level spirits. Their elements are water and wind. Creating pseudo-high-level spirit (water/wind)... Successful. Also, analysis and assessment of all five elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and air successful. Obtaining Quantum Control... Failed. Would you like to synthesize the pseudo-high-level spirit (water/wind) with Ryota Sekiguchi?*

Yes

No

Thinking Yes, I executed the synthesis.

Pseudo-high-level spirit (water/wind) meant this had two elements, although the amount of magical energy was the same as Gail's and Alice's. Kenya had actually seen his energy boosted, but thanks to the light elemental's power, it was being controlled perfectly, so it was no problem for him.

Regardless of the results, Ryota was now all fixed up, and that just left the last one. I gotta say, though... I had pretended to not hear that, but what the heck was Quantum Control? That sounded like one mean skill. I couldn't even guess at what I could use it for.

I would think *Maybe I can do this or It'd be nice if I could do that*, then gain effects that sort of did it—and those were my skills, in a way. Whenever I wanted some result, the Sage would make it happen in real space for me. But I had to be able to picture it. If I didn't understand something myself, the Sage had nothing to work with. Maybe that was why the skill evolve failed.

On the other hand, if I really *wanted* something, that meant I always had a chance of making it happen. Hmm.

Chloe, the final child, was a bit scared as well, so I lifted her up onto the disc. She seemed to appreciate it. I couldn't believe she was scared at first, actually.

"Y-you know what, Mr. Rimuru?" she whispered in my ear, cheeks blushing hard. "I... I loooooove you!!"

*Well, me too. But I wish you could've said that at least eight years from now—and preferably more like ten.* Or like, how 'bout telling me that back when I was still a living human being? Man, poor me. A single loner, unable to find a partner before I passed on. But that led directly to me obtaining the Great Sage, the unique skill to end all unique skills. So we're...even, maybe? I had my doubts.

Either way, that was cute of her. Children can be so honest like that. It's too late for me now, but I guess it's true—you need to enjoy love while you're still in school. Don't let those middle-school nerves get in the way.

But this was not the time to talk about this; Chloe's sudden confession threw me off my game a little. So what kind of spirit would be greeting her? *This is it. Brace yourself.*

\*

Just like all the others, Chloe began to pray.

—That's when things changed.

How should I put it? I suppose it was something like the sky falling down.

With an intense gust of air pressure and a strikingly vivid aura, a beautiful woman appeared. Her hair was long, shiny, and a darkish shade of silver, radiating light throughout the chamber. The energy—the sheer force of existence—was like no elemental spirit I knew. But she didn't have a physical form...?

*Received. This is a spiritual body, the same form of existence as a high-level elemental. Unusually high energy levels detected... Maximum limit not calculable.*

There it was again. Not calculable. The second time, after Milim.

As the Great Sage explained, there were three types of topological forms in the world: astral bodies, the weakest form that surrounds the soul; spiritual bodies, which can form a base upon which to build one's internal force; and material bodies, those directly connected with this world. The human body is the combination of all three forms.

A high-level elemental is nothing more than a mass of energy that gains sentience. In other words, it uses the “heart” protected by its astral body to control its spiritual one, you could say.

This also applied to draconic races like Veldora, but in his case, he not only had a spiritual body, but he had a material one made from matter in the local area that he could freely control. High-level elementals didn't have that kind of power, so when they left the spiritual world, their energy would disperse, and they would disappear. This is the fate that awaited any type of spirit-based life-form in the physical world, including angels and demons.

To keep their energy from fading away, they must either find a physical receptacle to form a pact with or a way to physically incarnate themselves. That, in essence, was what made the material body so important in this world.

This silvery-haired woman who appeared before us was clearly not human. She was something like a high-level spirit but with more energy than even the Sage could reckon. She did not, however, have a material body and would normally fade away before too much longer—but the Dwelling of the Spirits was so laden with energy, she didn't have to worry about that. Her sheer force made even high-level spirits look like pushovers.

She eyed me up and down. Then, out of nowhere, she hugged me and gave me a kiss. Unfortunately, I didn't feel it, her being all ghostlike and everything. A major shame. *With a beauty like this, even if she's just a ghost— Wait, that's not the problem! What the heck is she?!*

The pretty woman with the dark-silver hair looked at me, disappointed, then reached out to touch Chloe's body. Before she could—

“Stop!! You can’t do that! I’m not gonna let you do what you want with her!!”

Ramiris, who had been simply watching everything until now, suddenly spoke up. Spreading both hands in the air, she went into an attack stance. The relaxed expression on her face was gone; now she was dead serious.

“Hey! What’re you talking about?”

“Shut up! That woman’s bad news! Can’t you tell?!”

“How should I know?! What’s so bad about her?”

Even as we yelled at each other, the woman kept moving—and instilling herself within Chloe. There was simply no time to stop her; even Ramiris, as prepared as she was for battle, could do nothing.

“Aaaaaah! It’s too late. I’m outta here! Don’t blame me for anything that happens!”

Ramiris had her cheeks puffed out in obvious annoyance. In a panic, I ran Analyze and Assess on Chloe—but all that energy there

a moment ago was now completely gone. I didn't see the problem. Her body was stable now, and the threat of magicules going out of control was no more. Simply...gone. She blinked a few times in confusion, equally surprised.

"...What was that just now?"

Ramiris didn't try to answer. Chloe's eyes fully opened; she turned to me, then to her, then to me again. She didn't know what was going on, and I sure as hell didn't.

I asked the fairy once more. "I don't know!" she whined. "I don't know a lot of the details, either, but that woman was probably born in the future. Something kind of like an elemental from the future? I can't really believe it, but finding a home inside that kid maybe ensures it has someplace...for herself to be born...? Ahhhhhh, I just don't know!! But you saw how much power she had. If something like *that* gets born in the future, I think it's gonna be *baaaaaaad* news. Maybe she...she's...being protected by the great spirit of time...?"

Hmmmm. Hearing all this only made it more confusing. I was clueless, so I decided to stop trying to make sense of it. I'm a results-oriented man, and everything turned out all right. If Chloe was okay, it was all good. Who cares about the future? That stuff wasn't set in stone anyway.

"Well, isn't that great, Chloe? Everything went just as planned! Now you aren't in any danger, either!"

I picked her up.

"Did it *really* go as planned?"

*Urg. Hit me where it hurts, why don't you?* Kenya was a lot more cooperative when I tried that on him.

"Y-yeah. Yeah! Of course!"

Chloe finally rewarded me with a smile. Ramiris sighed in resignation as she watched us.

"Well, all right. The moment she went into that girl, it was all out of my hands anyway..." She turned her back to us.

"Hey, what's the big deal?" I asked as we went back down to the others. "That last one was kind of a surprise, but we're all doing just fine. One way or the other, it was a big success for everyone involved. So thanks. You helped save these kids' lives!"

Once they were all back together, I had them all give their thanks to Ramiris.

“““Thank you very much!“““

“Bah! It’s fine, it’s fine!”

She turned red in the face, fanning herself as she flitted around.  
*This is a demon lord? I wonder what’s going on with this world sometimes.*

The other fairies flew around the chamber with her, making for a pretty fantastic sight. Even bratty as she was, that demon lord was still pretty cute when she smiled.

It was, it seemed, a little celebratory dance for the children. And it worked, kindling a warm contentment in all our hearts. Soon, a natural smile spread across the children’s faces. I had promised to save them, and at that very moment, I had fulfilled that oath.

\*

With that relief behind us, we decided to head back to the academy.

“Ramiris, I could never repay you enough. Well, see you ‘round!”

I turned to leave, but before I could...

“Wait, wait, waaaaaaaaait!!”

Ramiris sounded half beside herself with panic as she called after me. She sure could make a racket when she felt like it.

“Wait, you,” she wailed as she tugged at my collar, half strangling me (not that I needed to breathe). “Don’t you think you’re forgetting something?”

“Oh, what? What’re you gonna gripe at me about this time?”

“I’m not griping! Remember? The thing you promised!”

The thing? What’s this girl talking about...?

“...Oh?”

“Don’t tell me you forgot already! You said if I helped you, you’d get a new golem for me—”

“Ah!”

““Ah”? So you really *did* forget?!”

“Oh, no, don’t be silly, Ramiris. Who do you think I am, huh? Of course I remembered my promise!”

*I did! That bait I dangled in front of her while I gave her the hard sell!*

“Well, I helped you out, and I want some help back for it! If positive vibes are all you have for me now, then fine, but you *did* make a promise, and you’ll live up to it, right? Right?”

I let her whine as I crafted some of the magisteel in my Stomach, molding it like clay. It was a tremendous waste of good material, but I didn’t have anything else to work with. Working from memory to re-create the robot’s humanoid form, I wordlessly handed it over to her.

“Ah, yeah, sorry about that. How about this, then?”

It was the magisteel robot I promised her—a golem.

“Hey, wait a...!”

It was just under a foot tall, much like Ramiris herself. Taking it like a little girl with a doll, she wavered in the air, finding it too unwieldy to carry.

“Right, so that’s that!”

My promise fulfilled, I set off to leave—only to be stopped by Ramiris wailing like that same little girl.

“Are you seriously going to break your promise?!”

“What? I gave you that golem you wanted.”

“No, no, no! Not *this*... I mean, it *does* look pretty neat, but not this! You broke my Elemental Colossus, and I don’t have anything to guard this place anymore! Until you make me something that can protect me, I’m never gonna let you out of here!”

She was in tears by the end of it, threatening me with a life spent forever lost in the labyrinth.

“Oh, no worries about that. I just learned Spatial Motion, so I can get out of here anytime I want.”

I was definitely not expecting this end result, but good thing I picked up that skill just now.

“Waaaaaaaahhh! Wait, wait! I mean, really, I’m in big trouble here! I’m still a child, remember? All weak and innocent and stuff? So come on! I’m in deep here! *Do something about it!!*”

Now the tears were pouring out like raindrops. Being around a demon lord like this was making my head hurt.

Hmm, this was trouble, though. I could just tell her “You deserve everything you got!” and teleport off, but I *did* kind of destroy her property. Plus, I was withering under the stares these kids were giving me. I guess they thought I was just bullying this weak little fairy.

Why did I have to vaporize that thing into thin air? I mean, honestly speaking, I didn’t think I applied *that* much force to it. Magisteel was really resistant to magical forces, and it was one of the hardest metals out there. But like any other metal, it had a melting point. One I thought was so high, I kind of overdid it.

The Sage acted like it was no big deal, so I thought it’d be fine, but now look what happened. It was the first time I’d used a shrunken-down version of Hellflare in actual combat, and I failed to adjust it correctly. *I won’t be using that very much at all, really, but I better turn it down a little next time.*

*So how to replace that golem...?*

“Oh, man... Look, it’s gonna be hard to reproduce something that big, all right?”

“I don’t need it to be *that* big! Just something that’s strong enough to protect me! That’s all I need!”

Right. Ramiris was willing to compromise; now we were getting somewhere. I had a fair amount of magisteel left, but I didn’t want to waste a bunch of it in here. The Elemental Colossus was entirely magisteel on the surface, so I’d have to use quite a lot to ever reproduce it. *But...hmm. Strength is all she wants, huh?* Maybe I could make a human-size mannequin, instill a spirit in it, and... Hang on, didn’t I have some magic along those lines?

*Understood. Searched for Creation: Golem magic. It is possible to execute. A golem’s strength is dependent on the strength of its materials and the elemental spirit or demon it is instilled with. Iron, stone, wood, and clay are the most common materials. Its external shape may be changed depending on the image in the caster’s mind. After creating the body form with your materials, the instillation and final forming can begin then. Once your conditions are met, you may activate the process by thinking of it.*

That's the Sage for you. It had discovered creation magic for me, a level above the inscription magic I had before, and instantly retrieved it from the vast archive of magic tomes I had leafed through.

As magic went, it was relatively simple. I learned Summon Demon back at my guild examination, letting me easily conjure up a demon. Let's go with that—even if I called forth an elemental, I figured it'd be a pain to control. An elemental's spiritual connection with its caster was very important, but with a demon, as long as you paid the price, it'd do anything for you. Plus, for a protection job like this, I'd need nothing but high-level elementals, or else it wouldn't work. Nonconscious elementals were no use.

So I decided to instill the golem with a demon. You might think they could rebel against being used like this, but that never really happened. A summoning was a sort of contract, and they never betrayed their summoner—assuming the right circumstances, of course. If you asked for more than you did when you originally forged the pact, it ended right there. That, and if the conditions were too unreasonable, it also automatically canceled the contract. Demons were all business that way, so trust was important. Just because someone was a demon didn't mean they were all evil, after all.

Anyway, I now had a plan in mind. *Let's make the core body with magisteel, install a demon inside, and craft that golem.* I was pretty sure I could build something far stronger than your average run-of-the-mill, A-ranked monster.

\*

“All right. I’ll help you, all right? So stop carrying on like that, Rami. I’m gonna make this crazy-strong guardian for you, so no complaining, okay? In exchange, would you be able to teach me spirit engineering?”

Kaijin and Vester would be interested in that Elemental Colossus as well. We could probably have them work together back in town to reproduce it. *That*, I wouldn’t mind providing the

materials for. In exchange, though, let's get Ramiris the guardian she needs.

"That's fine...but you aren't trying to trick me again, are you...?"

Man, oh man. Her mistrust ran deep. Why couldn't she just believe in people a little more?

"I'm not trying to trick you. I have some dwarven craftsman in my city, you see, and they were involved with that magic-armor soldier project, too. I thought we might be able to conduct some research over there."

"I wanna research that, too, Mr. Rimuru!"

"Me too!"

The kids were certainly enthusiastic about it. *Hmm. Armored soldiers with human pilots inside? Sounds pretty ambitious.*

"Are you gonna make it look like this?" Ramiris asked, thrusting the doll I made at me.

"Well, that'd look pretty cool, don't you think?"

"Let me ride on it first, Mr. Rimuru!"

"I wanna ride, too!"

Even the reserved Ryota was up for the idea. *I'll definitely have to try to make that happen*, I thought as I reached out to take the doll from Ramiris. She whisked it behind her back, handing it over to several servants, who struggled to carry it to parts unknown.

"...Um..."

"That's *mine!* You can't have it back!"

*How selfish can you get? First, she wants a guardian from me, then she won't give me back that doll.* A lot of demon lords, I was starting to realize, were really damn self-centered. I won't name names, but I'm talking *really* self-centered.

"Well, you *will* help me with this, right?"

"Sure! So what kind of guardian will you make for me?"

"Hmm? Oh, I was just thinking of a stronger version of the guy I defeated..."

"Really?! Wow! You're really a super-nice guy, aren't you?!"

And so, I took on the job of making a new, improved protector for Ramiris's domain.

Beginning with the prep work, I burped out some magisteel from my Stomach, lining up the pieces. It was some of the finest quality out there, enriched with magicules to make it easy to apply magic to. The children watched, intensely curious.

"Where...? Hey, where did you get all that stuff?! Oh, just...never mind..."

Ramiris gave me a look of utter exasperation. Whatever she thought about it, she kept to herself, so I got straight to work, processing each piece of magisteel I had taken out. If we were gonna make a humanoid figure, it had to have ball joints. That was nonnegotiable for me—and it actually surprised me how much it turned out the way I pictured it.

Carefully, I put together the movable parts, adding a few original elements of my own. I had a friend back on Earth who was really good at assembling and painting anime figurines. I was so jealous of that, given I was just dexterous enough to maybe put together simpler robot models. Now, things are different! With the Great Sage backing me up, I could craft things exactly the way I imagined them in my mind.

The former Spirit Queen was looking at my work with great skepticism, no doubt wondering what the hell I was doing. Along the way, though, she started to get visibly excited.

"W-wow! Wow, this is amazing! Oh, my goodness! You—this, this is incredible! I can't believe you can make it move so freely like that!"

She couldn't wait for it—and really, I wasn't expecting this to be nearly as precise as it turned out to be. The fact that pure magisteel could bend itself to better meet the maker's intentions helps, no doubt.

Before long, the job was done. It was basically human in shape—slender, a little under six feet, and a facial covering on its head that matched my mask. I felt proud.

"Right! All done! Now I'm gonna summon a demon and put it inside this—but promise me you aren't gonna do anything bad with it, all right? I'm gonna put a master lock on it to make sure it can refuse anything weird you tell it to do!"

"Okay, okay! No problems there! But I can play with it all I want in here, right?"

"Hmm? Sure, yeah, in the labyrinth. Just don't be a bother on other people, okay? Also, I'm guessing that this guy's gonna pack a real punch, so make sure you don't get hurt, either."

With Ramiris's permission, I applied the finishing touches. First, the master lock—a spell with orders from the original maker, outlining a few simple ground rules. Then, the demon. As much trouble as I was going through with this, I was sure the results would be several times stronger than just whipping up a golem with a spell.

Spreading my arms wide, I pretended to chant a spell to that effect. We were still by the altar from before, although I had the children kept away from it in case of danger. Only Ramiris was behind me.

It'd be great if this worked, but if I didn't apply enough force, the demon might fall out of control. Then I'd have to either make it bend to my will in battle or cancel the whole summon. *Let's just pray that doesn't happen. All this continual work has pretty well sapped my physical and magical energy, so I'd really like to avoid any more unforeseen snags.*

As I cast this pretend spell, a magic circle drew itself on the floor. There was no need to cast anything for it, but I thought it'd help create a little atmosphere. I was trying to call forth a Greater Demon, tougher than a Lesser Demon and around an A-minus in rank. Pretty high for a monster, but I didn't want some newborn without any sense of self, so I prayed for an older, more intelligent demon as I carried out the summon.

And the results certainly did produce a Greater Demon for us. Its eyes had the spark of wisdom in them, unlike your typical Lesser Demon who'd go into a murderous rage without the caster magically shackling it. The difference was clear in its behavior from the start. It immediately kneeled before me—its head reverentially bowed down.

"You called for me, master?"

*Looks like I pulled it off.* The Greater Demon was pledging its allegiance.

It was larger and more muscular than its Lesser brethren, its magicule-formed corpus already starting to dissipate over time. Its skin was jet-black, covered in clothing made of a sturdy but torn fabric. Looking at that, I could tell it had been alive for quite a while. Its gender, I couldn't tell you, although the horns that jutted out both sides of its head looked pretty stately to me.

*Do demons have, like, real muscles at all? It probably doesn't matter.* The Greater Demon kneeling before me certainly fulfilled all my conditions anyway.

"Right. I called you here in order to create a golem. I shall grant you this figure of magisteel to serve as your physical body, so I want you to fill it with your spirit. In exchange, I will provide my magical energy. This contract will last for...uh..."

I looked at Ramiris. Hurriedly, she began counting on her fingers. "I—I want a hundred years!" she replied. "I'll be fully mature in a hundred more years!"

"This contract will last for one hundred years. Once it expires, you may retain this figure as your body if you wish. Well?"

Contracts like these that veered off the beaten path were always risky. If it was something like "Beat up that guy in front of you!" it'd be accepted in an instant. Long-term orders like this were harder for demons to swallow. If I simply wanted this demon to stick by Ramiris's side, a regular supply of magicules would do the trick, but without that physical corpus to support it, it'd suck up way too much magical energy. Plus, once you summoned one creature, you couldn't immediately summon another, although there were loopholes around this.

Right now, I wanted this demon to be Ramiris's guardian, and I had to be sure the contract covered all of that.

"I would wish for nothing else, my master! And I have already received your energy as payment."

*Well, glad it's up for the job.* The contract was complete. Honestly, I wasn't expecting the magicules I used for the summon to cover the whole tab. It absorbed a ton, sure, but I still had enough inside me to work with.

Good thing I was clever enough to give it more than I thought I needed. No wonder it was so respectful to me. With the right pact,

it wasn't a problem, but if you summoned someone with a measly pittance of magicules and asked the world of the creature, you might wind up killed on the spot. The only way to play it safe was by summoning the right monster and providing a reasonable pact. Something to keep in mind.

Anyway, we now had an agreement. This guy didn't appear to have a short temper or violent streak; he seemed calm and wise to me. I was just glad I got exactly the kind of demon I ordered. I was sure he wouldn't have a problem with the master lock, either.

Continuing on, I instilled the magisteel figure with the demon's magical corpus—incarnating it, you could say. The figure was actually a step down from the Greater Demon size-wise, but it seemed to fit the guy perfectly. It voluntarily did away with its magic-driven body, fully fusing itself with the new metal one. Then it did a few exercises to get used to the thing. No problems, apparently.

I was the one who designed the mask on the figure, but the moment the demon took over, the expression took on a more, dare I say, *evil* bent. Funny.

"This is wonderful," it said, the mask now betraying surprise and joy. "I would expect nothing less from you, master. I thought that moving this body would require expending magic force to transform the joints themselves, but with this, I am completely free to move. The perfect body for me to occupy!"

*Well, I'm glad it likes it.*

I then proceeded with some minor adjustments to satisfy Ramiris and the Greater Demon's requests. Before long, though, the fairy had its new guardian on watch.

"How does it feel?"

"Yes, it is simply wonderful," it said, moving its limbs around to get used to them. "Its physical intervention levels are showing very high numbers. Compared to incarnating in a human or magical beast, my offensive strength goes without saying, and my physical defense is simply incomparable. Wonderful! This is truly an astounding body!"

In order to have a physical presence in this world, demons needed to incarnate themselves within something else, usually an animal or monster. A magisteel puppet like this, however, worked just as well. Being pure metal—magisteel, for that matter, the toughest in the world—it would naturally be a defensive powerhouse. There were some rare metals out there with a melting point of over nine hundred degrees, but magisteel topped out at upward of eighteen thousand. Between that and its self-healing abilities, there wasn't a better metal out there.

All in all, it'd be a Herculean task to break down this guardian with any physical weapon.

After it stretched its new legs out a little, the Greater Demon turned to me.

"I swear upon this body that I will fulfill my role, master. Once my pact to serve as that fairy's guardian expires in a hundred years, I hope you will let me work under you."

*That's...rather sudden, isn't it? And a hundred years from now... I'm not sure I'll even be alive then. Maybe his loyalties will switch to Ramiris by then; you never know. She is a demon lord, after all.*

"Well, sure, if I'm still around..."

"Ha-ha-ha! Don't be silly. There is no way someone like you, master, will be dead in a century. If you promise me that, I will not demand any further reward."

How long was my life expectancy here anyway? I hadn't thought about it much. *I guess I'll die when I die.* You never know when some random dude will knife you on the street.

*Glad it likes me, though.* I guess I'm just naturally attractive to monsters. In which case, it'd be kind of inconvenient not to give it a name. I had about half my magicules left, and judging by previous naming experience, higher-level monsters would take a massive amount. That would certainly include a Greater Demon at A-minus rank—maybe even A in this new incarnation. Named, it'd surpass even that, no doubt.

Ah well.

"Perfect! In that case, from today forward, you may call yourself Beretta. May you remain ever loyal to Ramiris and myself! I want to see your best effort."

That was a nice bit of inspiration, I thought. Something about the golem's form reminded me of the beautiful lines of that famous family of firearms. And whoop, there's that familiar draining feeling again. I barely held out against it this time; the fuel gauge got dangerously close to E. This bum just made off with nearly a third of my magicules... *Geez. It's gonna be a real powerhouse now.*

With its new name, Beretta began to evolve. Spreading out from each of its ball joints, its chest, head, hips, arms, and legs connected together, the surface now covered by a skin-like membrane. It looked practically human, although the membrane's transparent color made the internal structure look all the more fetching. The face remained the same as my mask; the long, jet-black hair was now a radiant shade of silver. It was a sort of demon golem, with a beauty I could only call bizarre.

Once the transformation ended, the body was fully covered—the eyes in the mask glowing red. It was all over. So what kind of skills did it pick up from me?

Beretta stood up, then bowed deeply.

"I am Beretta, the arch-golem, and I am ready to carry out my received orders."

It was a rather strange figure, with a mask for a face and nothing underneath. A golem of destruction.

It turned to Ramiris, then saluted.

"Lady Ramiris. Your wish is my command. Allow me to protect you."

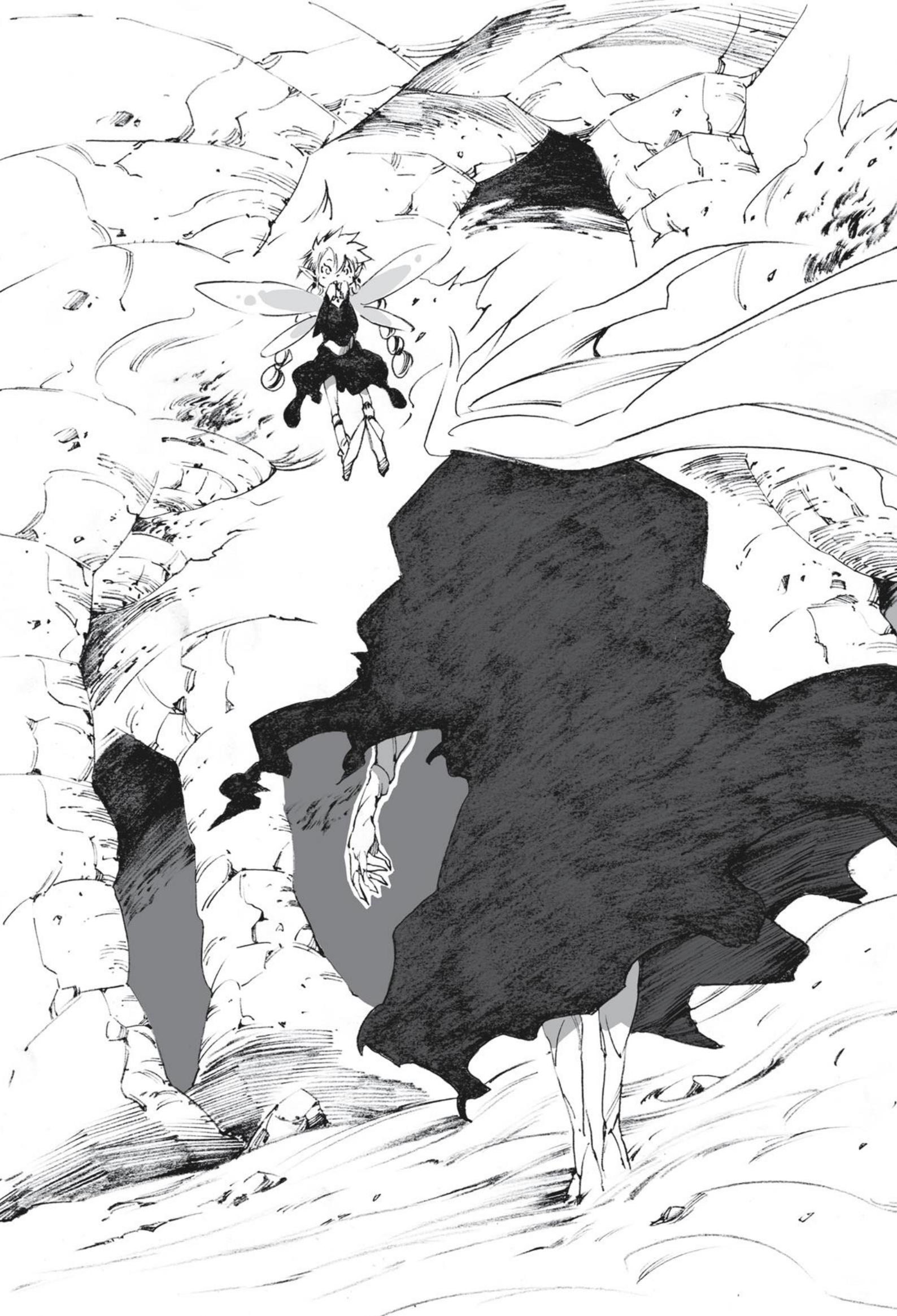
She nodded briskly, almost overcome by it all. "Um, umm, yeah!" she stammered, trying to retain some of her dignity. "Sure thing! I'll be counting on you!"

*Welp. That oughtta suffice as an Elemental Colossus replacement.* Probably about twice as strong in battle, too.

Now I had kept my promise to Ramiris, even if I got a little carried away and made an even stronger guardian than I meant to.

Once I started making the figure, Ramiris kept yapping to me about how I should do *this* and add *that*. It annoyed me so much that I suppose I got a little too heated. Beretta's magic force helped boost its offense a lot as well, though, so in terms of strength, I was sure she's satisfied.

I went through the trouble of crafting it, so I'd like to hope it helps her out a bit. Though, to be honest, I didn't even want to imagine Beretta fighting for keeps in combat.



\* \* \*

The kids wound up falling asleep while I was assembling that golem, finally released from a long period of anxiety and fear. Being freed of all the stress they'd put up with must've made them totally at ease; they were sleeping peacefully, with Ranga serving as a pillow. I didn't need sleep, but with kids, that's part of the job description. *Sleep well and grow up strong.*

*Let's wait for them to wake up,* I thought as I decided to rest a bit myself.

The next morning, once their energy was restored, I took the kids out of the Dwelling of the Spirits. They all had elementals within them; their lives were no longer in danger. I had answered Shizu's wish beyond her death, and all our problems were behind us. Now—I thought, at least—I can go back to Tempest in peace.

\*

Upon leaving the maze, I used my new Spatial Motion extra skill to bring the kids back with me to Englesia. Connecting two fields of physical space together required several minutes of work, but it let you revisit any location you've been to before, making it pretty helpful. I also picked up the magic ring I dropped off outside as an escape route. I didn't need it to execute Spatial Motion, so I stored it in my Stomach, as much as I doubted I'd ever use it again.

Once back at the academy, I immediately made contact with Yuuki, reporting on the results of our journey and going in-depth on the children's futures. I had considered taking them in for good, but I also thought children like them really needed the right learning environment to thrive in. We had this academy here, filled with talented teachers. They could receive both a basic education and magic in the same place.

Thus, we decided they would remain here at the academy to learn. Seeing my magic for themselves must've convinced them how useful it was. They did cry, however, when I told them I was

leaving. I promised I'd attend all their graduations, and of course, they were eager to welcome me.

Really, they'd be fine now. Their magical energy levels were now restricted to a little above the average, allowing them to live normal lives. Even someone with magical Assessment skills wouldn't notice what's going on inside them.

It was a topic I also discussed with Yuuki a bit. "Once a nation's abandoned a child," he reasoned, "I doubt they'll try to take them back again. That's a violation of international law, and it'd also make them enemies of the Free Guild."

"You think maybe we could have them earn their adventurer's cards and become guild members?"

"Hmm... Perhaps we could, yes, if they want to."

"Sure. They'll have time to think about it as students."

"That they will."

They were still children, but in this world, you were considered grown-up at age fifteen. It wouldn't be long until they were all that age, qualified to join the Free Guild. They'd get to do whatever they want, living in pure, unrestricted freedom.

Yuuki also pressed me several times on how I solved their problems, but that was a secret. He assumed the children were just normal kids now, and I was fine with that. Their surging magicules were actually being neutralized by elementals, but I didn't see the need to tell anyone about that. That really *could* make them the targets of rogue players worldwide, setting off wholly new problems for them.

The children had already been assigned new schedules and teachers. My role in their education was more or less over. They had undergone basic combat training, as well as gotten used to speaking with their pseudo-elementals. In between, we went out on picnics, with Kabal's team stopping by for fun sometimes.

Potion sales, meanwhile, were going well. When I finally visited Mjöllmile in Blumund, I received a hero's welcome. He had the profits he wanted, and I was happy with that, too. And every time I came back to Tempest, I saw more and more adventurers taking advantage of our lodging. It was turning into a lively place. I'd

better get back for good soon, before some other huge problem reared its ugly head.

—The time had come to go home.

It was the day of my departure.

“You... You’re leaving, Mr. Rimuru?”

“You can’t make him wait any longer, Clo.”

“No, but I... I mean...”

“But...”

Chloe was about to cry. I wasn’t feeling much better myself...but, you know, I could pop on over anytime I want with Spatial Motion. This wasn’t the end.

“Ha-ha-ha! You’re such a crybaby, Chloe. Here, how about something to cheer you up?”

I removed the mask I had on and gave it to her. The Mask of Magic Resistance, a memento of Shizu’s that was broken once before I repaired it. I wasn’t sure what drove me to give it to her; it just seemed like the natural thing to do. She accepted it without hesitation.

“Awwwww! I wanted it, too...”

“Hee-hee-hee! It’s all mine now!”

It cheered Chloe up, so I was happy. For the crestfallen Alice, meanwhile, I had a school uniform Shuna prepared for her.

“Ah!”

“Are these for us?”

I had outfits for Kenya and Gail—Ryota, too, of course. They looked the same as all the other uniforms in the academy, but they were sewn with sturdier custom cloth. The children all gleefully accepted them.

“Now listen, I want you guys to keep studying, all right? It’s hard to say good-bye like this, but it’s not like I’ll never see you again. Come over to my town once you’re on break, okay?”

“““Okay!“““

The children saw me off, their teary eyes turning into smiles. I left the Englesian capital while the smiles were still fresh on their faces.

\*

It seemed like a short trip to human lands, but it wound up extending for quite a while. It was tough going, but I'd built some bonds I could never replace, not for anything in the world. Getting to interact with children like that again, as a slime, was something I never could've dreamed of.

Everything seemed to be going great.

—Or perhaps, a little *too* great.

In a world like this, negative emotions like jealousy and envy can unknowingly fester in the hearts of your peers. I had intended to be careful in all my actions, lest I become the target of such feelings.

But as they say, garbage in, garbage out. The Great Sage had astounding predictive skills, but if I gave it the wrong questions, it'd give me the wrong answers.

If Tempest grew prosperous, that meant somebody was going to lose out in the backlash. I instinctively knew that, of course, but I didn't think it would happen at a scale or speed beyond my expectations.

During my time as a slime here, I had my own small ambitions. To live among the humans I looked up to. To make contact with otherworlders. I had made that happen, and now, in my new homeland of Tempest, I was building the foundation for even greater developments. In a way, I had already succeeded, and in another, I had failed.

I was just a regular person; I didn't understand much about government or politics. About the cold egoism and Machiavellianism that often reigns. Now, fate was making changes at an ever more rapid pace, forcing me to settle upon my future direction.

The days of peace were drawing to a close; days of war were beginning.

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

EPILOGUE



## A MONSTER'S NATURAL ENEMY

# EPILOGUE

## A MONSTER'S NATURAL ENEMY

Taking my leave of Yuuki and the children, I had reached the outskirts of the city. Away from the gaze of others, I figured I could use Spatial Motion to return home without further delay. I thought so anyway, but for some reason, the skill wouldn't activate.

*What's going on?*

*Report. You are covered in a long-range barrier. Any spatial-intervention skills targeted for beyond the barrier are forbidden.*

*Huh?*

I didn't like the sound of that. In a way, I felt in more danger than I ever had before. When Milim attacked us, she didn't really have any intention of killing anyone. I wasn't overwhelmed with a sense of danger. Now, that sense was sounding its loudest alarms yet.

My suspicions were confirmed when I saw Soei appear before me, badly wounded.

*"Sir—Sir Rimuru, you must flee at once—"*

This Replication of Soei must've expended all its strength coming here. The body was already starting to fade into thin air.

*"What happened?"*

*"Enemies, sir. More powerful than I could ever imagine—"*

And then, he disappeared. I was sure his original body was okay, but these Replications were supposed to be on the same level as the original strength-wise, weren't they? Did he fall into a trap or something?

I called for Ranga from my shadow. No reply. Just as the Great Sage warned, I was so shut away from the outside world that not even Ranga could intervene from beyond. This barrier must have

been the spatial-division type, fully isolating me from beyond its borders. I could neither call for help nor run away from it.

The bad feeling I had was now pushing me into a panic. Just in case, I put out some insurance. Fortunately, there were no restrictions on my skills within the barrier itself, I didn't think...but then I heard another warning.

*Report. You are covered in a long-range barrier. Any skill usage within the barrier is forbidden... Resistance succeeded. However, restrictions are in place on all magic-oriented skills.*

*What? What's going on here?! Magic-oriented kind of describes, like, all my magic and everything that involves controlling magicules!* Things like Dark Flame and Dark Thunder were similarly restricted, as well as control-based skills like Sticky Steel Thread. This kind of barrier wasn't in place even during that Sky Dragon attack before.

If there was someone capable of deploying a barrier like this, there was no way Soei wouldn't have noticed. And if I was caught in this before he could warn me via Thought Communication, it had to be spread out across a vast amount of terrain. It felt safe to assume it wasn't meant for someone else. This was an attack targeted squarely upon me.

For what purpose, though?

I waited for my foe to make itself known, steeling myself against the potentially lethal threat surrounding me. Even if I wanted to release this barrier, the Sage needed time to analyze it. I could begin the process immediately, but with such a broad range to cover, I'd need to wait a while. All I could do right now was wait for the enemy.

This was really bad. For the first time, I thought I felt my heart tremble with anxiety. It wasn't an emotion I had experienced very often since coming to this world.

Becoming a slime had changed the structure of my mind, yes, but the biggest reason for that was because the Great Sage could always predict results for me in advance. Whenever I thought about doing something, it'd give me a general idea of how the plan

would work out. That was what allowed me to fearlessly confront powerful-looking monsters. They might've *looked* strong, but the predictions, the odds, were already in my mind. On the other hand, if I knew for a fact that I couldn't beat a foe, that wasn't anything to strike anxiety in me. If I couldn't win, I could just run. And if I couldn't run, I could at least try for a parting shot before I got struck down.

*This time, though, I was dealing with an unknown. I had nothing to make a prediction on—but I knew the enemy was out for blood. I didn't know if I could win, and I couldn't escape. I had no idea about their numbers. It had to be several people launching this long-range barrier, but Sense Heat Source told me that only one was approaching.*

The magicules had seemed to disappear from within this barrier. Magic Sense wasn't working. If I was booted out of human form, I wouldn't even be able to see. Without that all-purpose vision, it'd be that much harder to grasp the situation around me. From the moment I was caught in here, my chances of winning plummeted.

But sealing away your foe's abilities before the battle even begins... Yeah, that's another way to fight, I guess. Get into range without being noticed, then deploy a barrier before the opponent can recognize it. The work of a professional, one well seasoned in monster combat.

If I had to guess, this barrier extended over at least a mile-long radius. It caught me completely off guard. I had to marvel at how well planned it was.

Time passed slowly...

"Hello. I suppose this is the first time we met? It'll be good-bye before long, though."

With that greeting, a woman appeared—right in front of me, alone. And with enormous self-confidence.

She was maybe twenty, maybe not quite there yet, and her frighteningly cold eyes contained the shine of a deep intelligence. The beauty to her countenance made the ice in her gaze even more striking. I didn't remember meeting her, but there was something familiar about the sight.

Her shiny, beautiful black hair was cut above the shoulders, combed down and back on the right side and flowing down the left, not quite hiding her eyes. On that almost-hidden left eye, there was a monocle—perhaps just a fashion item, because she quickly removed it and put it in a pocket.

Her clothing was chiefly white—loose, easy to move in, and reminiscent of business attire. Her legs, visible underneath her short skirt, were long, thin, and covered in black stockings. The rest of her was covered in a robe of pure white, like something a cleric would wear. There was a cross symbol on the front of her collar, indicating she held a high position in the Western Holy Church.

This was a paladin, a Church-ordained guardian of law and order—and a sworn enemy of all monsters.

“I suppose it is, yes. What is it that you want from me? My name’s Rimuru, but perhaps you have me confused with someone else?”

It was pointless, but I thought I’d check anyway. She was obviously gunning for me. I doubted this was mistaken identity, but if it was, I definitely didn’t want to get killed over it.

“You certainly are polite, for the lord of the monster nation. No, there’s no mistake. Your town, you know... It’s a bother to us. So we’ve decided to crush it. That’s why we can’t have you going home quite yet. Do you understand me?”

There was no evil sneer with these words. It was plain, emotionless fact—just not the kind I was too interested in accepting. Plus, they knew I was running Tempest? What the heck?

“Why are you calling me a monster at all, much less a monster lord? I’m just a regular adventurer, as you can see.”

“Oh, playing dumb? Well, it won’t work. We have an informant. I won’t tell you who, but that’s how we received word. We have ‘eyes,’ you know, all over Englesia. You’d best keep your own eyes open—there’s no telling who may be watching.”

An informant? I couldn’t imagine who. I had an eye out for people tailing me—any skill-based teleport, I executed with the utmost caution. I didn’t get it, but I could tell that *she* was pretty sure about it. And about killing me.

*This is really bad.*

She was armed with nothing but the rapier dangling from her hip. There was no armor, but she seemed totally at ease. No one else was in the area, no indication that the person or persons who built the barrier would be swooping in to assist. They had this perfect trap for killing me, but it was only one of them? Or was that how strong this woman was?

There was no time to think. If she was telling the truth, there was a force out there trying to destroy Tempest. If they'd already started attacking, I didn't have any time to sit here idly.

Which nation was it? Or a demon lord? No, not one of those. The Western Holy Church would never associate with monsters. We were bordered by Dwargon, Farmus, Blumund, and Thalion. I could cut Dwargon and Blumund out of that, which left two countries. Thalion wouldn't make much sense—there wasn't a path built to there yet, so their armies would have to go through another country first. Soei would've spotted that right off.

That made the Kingdom of Farmus my primary suspect. Assuming Farmus had an army raised, it'd take at least two weeks to march to Tempest. They'd need to find roads wide enough for their forces, which meant a long, circuitous route. Even if they advanced without rest, it'd take ten days. However, this world had something called legion magic, which if used efficiently enough, could easily cut that time down.

I couldn't assume anything, but there was no time to waver now.

"So I guess you won't believe me when I say you got the wrong guy."

"No. I already heard the monster lord's name was Rimuru."

"Oh."

Well, great. She knew me by name.

"So are you ready?"

"No," I swiftly replied as the woman motioned to unsheathe her rapier, "but could you at least tell me your name first?"

The stunning woman gave me a bemused look. "Since when were monsters interested in names? It didn't matter to me, so I forgot to tell you." She smiled faintly. "In that case: I am Hinata Sakaguchi, captain of the Chief Knights of the Holy Imperial Guard, the faithful servants of Luminus in the Holy Empire of Lubelius. I

am glad to make your acquaintance, although I fear it will be a very short one."

*Aha. So this is Hinata Sakaguchi.*

"Hinata? I heard you were leader of the paladins, but you're running Lubelis's imperial guard, too?"

"You were aware of that? Not that it pleases me to be known among monsters. But yes, I am the holder of both positions, although it is meaningless. I serve Luminus, not the mortal Holy Emperor."

She then drew her rapier, a clear sign that the conversation was over. The grip was decorated with seven small jewels, its blade a light shade of silver that was covered by the faint, rainbowlike glint of magical force.

I had heard she was kind of an extreme rationalist when it came to reaching her goals, but if so, she was kind of botching the endgame. Going out to defeat her foe single-handed... If she wanted to be sure about this, she should've brought enough manpower to make it a slam dunk. I gotta hand it to her info-gathering skills, though, knowing all about the Jura-Tempest Federation and me.

But I still didn't like this. Hinata was ready to go, but it kinda pained me to fight a former student of Shizu's. Could we talk this out a little, maybe...? I took out my own sword, readying it, but still gave that another shot.

"Wait a minute. There's something I'd like to tell you, and then something I'd like to talk to you about."

"I care not for the words of monsters," she coldly replied as she jabbed at me with lightning-fast force. I could just barely keep up with it. If my nervous system weren't directly connected to my brain, that would've broken skin. *Sucks that they took Magic Sense from me.*

"No, wait! You're Japanese, aren't you? Me too. Shizu asked me to—"

"I'm a little surprised you dodged that. I suppose you really are the monster who killed my teacher...but revenge will be mine soon. And a monster being Japanese? Miss Shizu asking a favor of *you*? How ridiculous. Don't make me laugh."

*Not too interested in believing me, then. Or really, in having any sort of conversation.* But I had one more idea.

“<No, really, I’m from Japan! It’s just that I died over there and got reborn as a slime here—>”

I said this in our native language. *Hinata’s got to believe me.* But her voice sounded colder than ever.

“So you speak Japanese. Just as I thought you would. There is no need for any more of this act.”

Instead of believing me, she acted as if I just added more fuel to her anger. What did she mean “Just as I thought you would”?! Does whoever leaked word about me to Hinata know I was Japanese? Because only a handful of people did— Or did she think I could speak Japanese because I claimed to be from there? Or was she just told that I killed Shizu and inferred that I must’ve known about other worlds and learned Japanese?!

That’s not just blind guesswork. That’s more...*calculated by*—

“—You really want to go through with this?” I asked. “You, by yourself?”

Even if she was an otherworlder and paladin, I still had demon lord-class combat strength. My skills were dulled, but there’s no way I could lose to a human like Hinata. That, at least, was my thought.

“Oh, now you make me laugh. You think you can win? Inside this barrier?”

She smiled a light, bewitching grin as she whispered the question. The next moment, a rainbow of colors shot out from the tip of her rapier—a supersonic slash. The afterimages of the jewels looked like a rainbow. I took evasive action, but my body felt heavy and my physical skills weakened. Too slow to react, I took three or so hits from her slashes.

*Whoa, really?!* I started to worry as searing pain raced across my body.

*Pain? Don’t I have Cancel Pain for that...?*

“Hmm... Just three strikes? Maybe I underestimated you.”

She may have said it, but her expression indicated she was in total control. Perhaps this pause was another part of her plan, because she kept striking, giving me not a single moment of rest.

Holding my katana forward, I attempted to deflect the blows. But it was like she could slip right past it, letting her stabs and slashes work their way toward my body.

Driven by the instinctual realization something *bad* was happening, I reared back. That was the fourth strike. I felt like any more would be dangerous.

"Have you noticed the danger behind this skill?" She gave me another quizzical look. "There are some fools who confidently let themselves be struck, only to die completely helpless. You have some intelligence, I see."

"Thanks for the compliment, but I'd be a lot happier if you'd be willing to hear out my whole story..."

*Understood. This arts-based skill is believed to be a direct attack on one's spiritual body, not the material one.*

So the Sage says it's directly affecting my very spirit...? No wonder it slipped right through my sword. There was no way to defend it at all, and the lack of blood and slash wounds on my skin proved it.

Plus, if what the Great Sage then told me was right, I would lose my life in three more strikes. My body wouldn't die; my spirit would. *Unbelievable*. I didn't know if this was a skill or some effect of that magic sword, but if anyone underestimated their foe here, it was me. I knew Hinata had to have a unique skill or two, but as of right now, she didn't even need to show them off to overwhelm me.

Without knowing any of her skills, and with mine sealed away, I was at more of a disadvantage than I ever imagined. Trying to run would've been the correct answer here, although that was a gamble in itself.

All my initiative was gone. I had been trying for a while, but Dark Flame and Dark Thunder still weren't working. Neither was Universal Shapeshift, not without magicules to drive it. Simply maintaining my *current body* was enough of an ordeal, and with Hellflare similarly offline, I had no ace in the hole to rely on.

But I wasn't helpless.

"Hmm... Trying to buy time, then? Don't bother. You are cornered. This Holy Field prevents monsters ranked below A from even taking action. It is the ultimate anti-monster barrier—the pride of the Western Holy Church."

Not only did she see through my plan; she dropped quite a bombshell. This Holy Field was affecting me, making my body weak and my spirit weaker. If it was slowing me down *this* much, it'd probably kill any monster who didn't merit a C rank. My hobgoblins would hardly be able to move and would become ripe for being mown down. The realization upset me even more.

"Do you understand? All magicules inside this barrier have been purified. Even higher-level monsters like you find most of their energy taken up simply by continuing to exist. Your latent powers have left you."

I didn't need Hinata to spell it out. Experiencing this for myself, I could tell right off how dangerous a barrier this was. If I had to guess, it was crafted to hunt down monsters ranked A or higher—the so-called hazard class. A sort of ultimate weapon for these monster-reviling Crusaders. Simply deploying it made conditions ripe for victory—and I was sure Hinata thought victory was hers. Now she was egging me on, trying to make me panic. Even trying to speak with her could be lethal by now—no way she'd let me buy any time with conversation.

"I suppose you were unhappy I approached you solo, but normally, I wouldn't even need to show up for jobs like these. There is one reason, and one reason alone, why the captain of the paladin corps is personally handling this—"

I kept my distance from Hinata. Trying to gauge that rapier's range was a dangerous game—and the moment I thought that, I felt a pain on my left leg. She got another strike in. Two left.

"—and that's because I heard you killed Miss Shizu. I told you, I want revenge. Revenge, with your death, by my own hand."

"Revenge? I mean, all right, I did sort of kill her *in a way*, but that was—"

"*In a way?* It doesn't matter. The end result is the same. She was the only woman who showed me a shred of kindness in this world,

and now she's gone... I don't really understand this feeling myself..."

Her voice fell to a whisper as she looked at me. Her eyes were emotionless; she saw me as unworthy of even being her prey. She just stood there, showing how little I troubled her.

Hinata had come because she was absolutely confident she could kill me. That confidence didn't stem from the barrier. Was it from her own skill, which I still hadn't plumbed the depths of? Maybe Hinata alone was overkill, even. She was treating me like a total wimp, but I had nothing to counter with. Inside this barrier, my chances at victory were close to nil. If I didn't step up and do something, I was sure to lose.

But who told this woman Shizu was dead? Someone had turned me into the villain of this story. But I couldn't worry about that. My heart went out to the residents of Tempest.

"You worry about your friends? I'm sure you do. If you idle for too long here, you won't have any home to return to, will you? Not that I intend to let you."

*If they use a barrier like this to attack, we'll be wiped out.* I had no time to waste dealing with this woman—but she was *huge* trouble. Major trouble, and the only skills I could count on were those that didn't rely on magicules. Either my sword moves or my own unique skills. Hinata had me beat with her rapier. Even without the damper on my physical abilities, I could tell from the moment we crossed blades that she wasn't giving her full effort yet. It was hardly believable to me, but only Hakuro had this sheer, overpowering force.

So that left unique skills. My secret ones. I hesitated to use them, but ah well. I used Battlewill to improve my physical skills, launching Steel Strength and Strengthen Body alongside it. Just as I thought, skills or magic that activated my own internal magicules were still available to me.

"I think it's a little early to start boasting about that!"

Holding my katana straight forward, I struck down hard with a renewed force. Through my training with Hakuro, I had gained some fairly decent sword skills for myself. If she had assumed this battle was already hers, then maybe this strike would—

Hinata, perhaps surprised by this, immediately took a defensive stance. Or maybe just cautious. And there were those eyes. Those freezing, mathematician's eyes, devoting themselves to pondering over some logical proof.

There was no surprise there; no indication her guard was down. There was also no pride; just a dispassionate woman doing her work. She observed my movements, coldly searching for a weak spot. Her words were driven by the predictions she had calculated for herself. It must've been obvious to her that she didn't need to be here.

She hadn't underestimated me. She was still observing my movements, predicting how I would act next, calculating my increased speed, and replying with suitable speed of her own.

It was like fighting against my own Great Sage...

The moment my powered-up katana strike was deflected by her rapier, it made me fully understand where this overwhelming difference in power came from. My sword strike, its edge traveling at nearly the speed of sound, was softly, lightly deflected, and it didn't damage her own blade at all. She had perfectly read my katana's path, speed, and force. Only someone at Hakuro's level could pull off a feat like that.

Then, as I went off-balance, she added a return blow of her own.

"It's over. I'm impressed you can move that well inside this barrier. To be honest, I underestimated you. But you know, you can't beat me."

"Because it'll take one more blow to kill me?"

"Oh, you know that? This sword is infused with a special ability known as Dead End Rainbow. On the seventh strike, it is guaranteed to leave its opponent dead—even if they only exist in spiritual form. You put in a noble effort, but haven't you had enough yet?"

I had thought I could manage something here, even without my skills. But my opponent was just too much. An opponent with no weak point, no pride, and who always used the best move possible to bring her to victory. With the ability to observe and analyze everything about me. Even though she was absolutely sure of victory, she never stopped analyzing.

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There was nothing I could do. I had nothing to take advantage of. I really didn't think victory would be so hopeless.

"No," I replied, "I'll keep on struggling. I'm not enough of a sucker to just lie back and die, thanks!"

So I tested out everything I could. Recognizing my opponent was above me, I reached out for anything I was capable of. If magicules weren't around, how about spirit magic? That worked on a different type of energy; maybe the Holy Field wouldn't affect it. I couldn't summon elementals, not if I'm separated from the outside world. But I did have a certain deviant spirit inside me.

*Report. Using the unique skill Deviant, the higher-level elemental Ifrit has been separated into a pure elemental.*

Ifrit, transformed into a half monster, returned to full spirit form.

I could use him to harness elemental magic, but I doubted it would work. Besides, a little ruse like that wouldn't save me. I needed something huge, something that'd throw my opponent for a total loop.

"O Ifrit, greatest of elementals, defeat my enemy!!"

Then I released him.

The force of the elemental, going far above A rank, was tremendous, containing a massive amount of heat force. Elementals had to run on the magical force of the summoner, but Ifrit and I had a channel of magic running between us, so that was no problem. My energy converted itself into elemental force, flowing freely into the spirit.

Ifrit began attacking Hinata. She probably assumed this was my last trump card. But—Ifrit was just a plant. My real aim—my winning move—was elsewhere.

Fully preoccupied with fighting off Ifrit, Hinata could no longer fully focus upon me. I could be killed in a single stab. Ifrit was far greater of a threat, and he took priority. Exactly the situation I hoped to make.

Leaping behind her back, I attempted to land an enhanced strike, as punishing as I could possibly make it. But as I did—

“You can harness a high-level elemental while isolated from the outside. I didn’t expect that. But that still isn’t enough to compete against me.”

Whipping around, Hinata turned her sword toward me, completely ignoring Ifrit. He stopped. Not being a monster, the Holy Field didn’t bother him at all—and yet, reality could be cruel.

Before my eyes, Ifrit was curled up into a ball, grabbing his head...as if struggling under the command of two diametrically opposed orders.

“What did you do?”

“I’ll tell you, if you’ll tell me what you were just trying to do.”

*As if. That’s one of the last cards in my hand.*

“Come back, Ifrit!”

Upon my words, Ifrit disappeared back inside me. I immediately launched Analyze and Assess to figure out what happened.

*Understood. Ifrit appears to have fallen under the effects of Force Takeover. It is believed that the magic channel connecting you prevented the takeover from succeeding.*

Force Takeover?! Does it let her seize other people’s skills, or...?! Was *that* her unique skill? This otherworlder, Hinata Sakaguchi, was more of a monster than I had ever guessed...

Apparently, I had the wrong idea all along. My attention was focused on the barrier, the thing I assumed was her ace in the hole. I thought *that* was what made this battle so tough. But I was wrong. That was just a prop to distract my attention.

Looking at Hinata, I saw an affectionate smile on her face. She was one *scary* lady, let me tell you. She must’ve been totally sure of victory, barrier or not.

“...Did you try to take Ifrit from me?”

“I’m shocked. How did you know that? But if you noticed it, I might as well tell you—you’re right. I tried, using my Usurper unique skill.”

Usurper? You can use that to seize servant demons and spirits? Or skills themselves, even?! Sounds a lot like Glutton, then. Talk about the ultimate battle skill. And no wonder nations treated otherworlders as so special, just like Yuuki mentioned. If you're fighting an otherworlder, you have to assume they've got some kind of unique on hand. The way they decide to use it serves as the key to the entire duel.

If I had relied too much on my own force without realizing what my opponent was packing, the results would have absolutely been my fault. Now I saw why Hinata never took pride in herself, constantly observing and analyzing me. It was like a textbook model battle. I could see what the difference in fighting experience in this world had done for her.

I couldn't say exactly how superior her unique skill was, but the difference in sheer power between its wielder and me was blatantly obvious.

I needed to resolve myself to this. If I wasn't prepared to die, I'd never win. But one more strike, and I was dead. I thought I could use Ultraspeed Regeneration to heal most damage—that was a tactical error.

Ifrit, my final weapon, was easily defeated. That just left one more thing to work with. I was hoping I could catch Hinata in a surprise attack, without killing her, but there was no hope for that now.

I didn't know what unleashing this at full force would do. I might not even live long enough to see the results. But I had to do it.

"Hinata... Shizu asked me to look after you, but I don't have time for that. I apologize, but I can't go easy on you anymore. I'm gonna decide this with my next move."

"Hee-hee! Are you telling me you still haven't given your all yet? Well, all right. I'll give *you* some of my all, too, so I hope you're ready. This blow is going to make the pain you've felt before seem like child's play."

We exchanged glances. Then we went on the attack.

"Die! Dead End Rainbow!!"

"Awaken, Glutton!!"

*Understood. Order accepted. Executing at once.*

Just as I gave the order, I felt my consciousness sink into darkness—before losing it entirely, as if drifting off to sleep.

**PRESENT STATUS**

# Ramiris

Race → Pixie

Protection → Unknown

Title → Labyrinth Fairy  
Fairy Queen  
Spirit Queen  
(former)

Magic → Elemental Magic—all types

Intrinsic Skills → Maze Creation

Special Skills → 48 different types—self-reported, unconfirmed

Tolerance → Unknown



Proudly claiming to be the weakest of the Ten Great Demon Lords, she still remains a formidable presence. The liberal application of her Maze Creation skill likely allows her to defeat most foes without having to fight them.

## PRESENT STATUS

# Beretta

Race → Arch-Golem

Protection → Labyrinth's Blessing

Title → Labyrinth Guardian

Magic → Elemental Magic

Spirit Magic

Skills → Unknown

Tolerance → Cancel Status Ailments

Resist Natural Effects

Resist Elemental Attack

Resist Holy-Beast Attack

Resist Melee Attack



Created by a slightly carried-away Rimuru to replace Ramiris's golem that he destroyed. It houses a Greater Demon, giving it mastery over a variety of demonic attacks. Being named by Rimuru also allowed it to evolve as a Greater Demon, granting it advanced intelligence and battle skills.

# AFTERWORD

Nice to see you again.

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime* is now on its fourth volume. I know I say this every time, but I couldn't have done it with all of your support.

Thank you very much!

So I'm here writing another afterword...but writing these causes me a lot of grief each time. To be honest, I don't know what to say. As a result, this time I think I'll share a conversation that I had with Mr. I, my editor back when we agreed to put two of these books out within a month of each other (a lot of you might already know this, but Volume 5 will go on sale in May, a month after this volume comes out in Japan).

※Note that there may be some very mild spoilers ahead.

\*

The time was mid-October of last year, right when we completed the rough draft and revisions to Volume 3. We were all taking a breather.

“Say, Fuse, around when do you think we’ll be able to get Volume 4 on sale?”

“Well, what time frame works for you?”

“Hmm... I’ve already got January and February booked up, so maybe around March?”

“In that case, when should I have a manuscript ready?”

“Umm, the end of December should keep us on schedule.”

“December?!”

My brain made several quick calculations regarding whether or not I could get one volume done between November and December, but...

“Well, I’m also in the middle of writing a spin-off volume that I’d like to prioritize, so that might be a little tricky...”

So I had them wait. At the same time, though, I realized the manga version was set to launch sometime in the spring. If I could get a book out in the same month, that’d help with advertising the series, right? Right!

“Actually, I have an idea. Why don’t we release one volume each in April and May to go with the manga? You mentioned that’s due to start in the spring, so that’d be perfect, right?”

“Huh? One after the other? Hmm...”

“Oh, that’s fine if it’s not plausible. In that case, let’s go with April or later for Volume 4!”

So we left the conversation at that.

A while later...

“By the way, Volume 4’s been scheduled for April, but will that be a problem for you at all?”

“Oh, um, no, April should be fine. I want to extend out the ending scene a little, so if it’s possible for you to slot Volume 5 in the schedule sometime soon, that’d be great!”

“Okay, so how about the following month?”

“Um, are you sure?”

“Well, I guess I should ask: Are you sure, Fuse? That’s gonna be a lot of work for you to handle, isn’t it?”

We were still at the end of October at this point. If Volume 4 was coming out April, my deadline was the end of January. That meant a May release needed to be submitted by the last day of February. November, December, January... *Three whole months is more than enough time!* Or so I thought.

My original story plan called for a fair amount of original content in Volume 4 of the printed novel; meanwhile, I figured Volume 5 would mostly be modified material from the web version. Looking back, this was *foolishly* optimistic.

“April and May’s no problem at all!”

“Great! Let’s do it, then!”

So as in my first idea, we planned to release *Slime* novel volumes in April and May.

*However!*

My side story for the web update took longer than expected. Then I got a cold. Then I got busy with my regular job before New Year's. Then I went over to Tokyo for meetings and other errands...

*I'm out of time!!*

"...Ummmm," I began, realizing what a desperate situation this was all turning out to be, "about that consecutive-month release, I was wondering if Volume 5 could—"

"Oh yeah, yeah! Volume 5's all set to launch in May!"

"Yeah, um, that's not exactly what I meant..."

"I got Mitz Vah all scheduled out for that time frame, and the company's ramping up for it!"

*Oh, crap! This is not the kind of atmosphere I can ask for an extension in!*

"Okay. W-well then! I'll just be hard at work getting that all written up..."

Unable to make the request for an extension, I wound up falling into a daily cycle of frenzied writing. A trap of my own creation, no doubt about it. The lesson I learned this time around: Never make overoptimistic predictions! I swore to myself, right then and there, that I won't create schedules that serve to do nothing but tighten the noose around my neck.

And so, Volume 5 will be coming out next month. Right now, as I write this afterword, we've just wrapped up the first draft, so I think I'll be all right. In that case, I would be delighted if you could all make it to Volume 5 as well.

\*

Changing the subject for a moment, the manga version of *Slime* debuts in the Kodansha magazine *Monthly Shonen Sirius*, the issue going on sale March 26. This'll be last month's issue by the time you read this, but you'll still be able to check out Chapter 1 any time you like on the web. That way, if you read it online and like it, you can

grab the June issue and pick up the story from there. Check it out if you're interested!

Thanks again to all of you for supporting *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*.

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