

CHAPTER 3

THROUGH THE DWARVEN KINGDOM

As he’d so boldly proclaimed a day earlier, Rigurd had everything I needed that afternoon. He had even chosen the team members for my expedition into the Dwarven Kingdom already.

By the way, did Rigur really have to be our expedition leader, too? I was a little concerned about that, but he seemed to be all for it.

Well, his father did recover his youthful looks and the enthusiasm to go with it. Maybe I was worrying too much.

Once I picked up my luggage, Ranga eagerly allowed me onto his back. I boinged myself up and nestled into his fur. There was a lot more fuzz than I’d thought, and it sure did wonders for comfort.

I braced my body with Sticky Thread to keep from falling. Not having any arms or legs was a real pain at times like these, but at least I had the skills to do something about it. Gotta use the tools you have on hand.

I had actually been practicing a bit with my silk during the off-hours. What red-blooded hero hasn’t wanted to slap his enemies down with a lightning-quick whip strike? I didn’t know if I could yet, exactly, but I had time. Practice makes perfect.

My luggage primarily consisted of money and food, three days’ worth. If we took longer than that, we’d have to forage a bit. We could’ve brought along some hardier rations that’d keep over longer periods of time, but I wanted to travel light, if I could.

Not that I couldn’t just swallow whatever up and bring it along…but I didn’t want to get soft. I didn’t need food anyway.

On the monetary side, we had seven silver pieces and twenty-four bronze pieces. Even I could tell that wasn’t much. My expectations weren’t high, though, so that was fine. We’d just figure out what to do once we showed up.

For a goblin on foot, it would apparently take around two months to walk to the Dwarven Kingdom. We would be largely following the Great Ameld River, which flowed through the forest, up to its source in a mountain range that held the settlement we sought.

These were the Canaat Mountains, which neatly separated the Empire to the east and the small litter of nations here and there around the Forest of Jura. There were, by and large, three trade routes that ran between the two pockets of civilization. One put you right through the forest; another was a more treacherous route through the mountains; the third was by sea. The Jura route would normally be the shortest and safest, but for some reason, it was only rarely taken advantage of—most travelers challenged the mountains instead, what with the travel costs and potential sea-monster interference a ship route presented.

In addition to these three routes, there were a handful of other ways to reach the Dwarven Kingdom, but they all charged tolls. This was mandatory, supposedly to keep people from transporting dangerous goods along the paths. It was a decent enough option for small bands, but the larger caravans avoided them for the costs and time involved. They were safe, no doubt, and we’d have to consider one of them later, depending on how our finances held out.

We had no business with the Empire, so there was no point traveling east to leave the woods. It was straight north to the Canaats. We wouldn’t have to go up to any peaks, at least—the kingdom was situated at the base of the mountains, in the upper reaches of the Great Ameld. A beautiful hub of civilization, by the sound of it, built into a gigantic natural cavern.

That was the Dwarven Kingdom.

So we followed the plan, tracing the Great Ameld River’s route northward. It certainly kept us from getting lost. I had a map in my brain anyway, just in case. We had a guide with us—Gobta, who apparently ran a trip of his own to the kingdom once—so we followed his lead, and I took up the rear.

These black wolves are fast! And they never seemed to tire at all. We had been going for about three hours without a single break, and we had to be averaging nearly fifty miles per hour the whole way. We had a few rocky outcroppings to navigate now and then, but they sure didn’t care. And this was all while making sure we stayed balanced on their backs! It made the trip a breeze for us.

At this pace, we might not even need a week for the whole trip. Not that I was in a hurry. I wanted to work out the housing and clothing situation back at the village, but that wasn’t a problem we could solve in a night and a day regardless.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Don’t wear yourself out, now!”

Ranga, for some reason, upped his speed a little.

I had spent the past three or so hours enjoying the wind and the motorcycle-like sense of speed, but I was starting to get a little bored. Trying to converse in these conditions would normally be impossible, but not with the Thought Communication skill I stole from the direwolf boss. Maybe it’d be fun to chat up the gang while I took in the journey.

In my mind, I formed the required network of thought. Right, what to talk about…

“Hey, um, Rigur? By the way…who was it that named your brother, anyway?”

“Ah, thank you for recalling my name, Sir Rimuru! My brother was named by a passing member of the magic-born races.”

“Oh? One of them visited a random goblin village?”

“Indeed, Sir Rimuru, about a decade ago. I was still a child. He spent several days in my village…and he claimed to ‘see something’ in my brother, in his words.”

“Huh. Must’ve been a nice brother.”

“Oh, absolutely! He was my pride and joy. Sir Gelmud, the one who bestowed the name, said it himself. ‘I would love to have you among my men,’ he said!”

“But he didn’t take him along on his journey?”

“No, Sir Rimuru. He was still young at the time. Sir Gelmud said he would return in several years, once he was stronger, and then he set off.”

“Ohh. Bet he’ll be pretty surprised at how much everything’s changed when he gets back!”

“I imagine so, yes. Now, though, we serve you, Sir Rimuru. We may not be able to follow Sir Gelmud to his honorable demon horde, but…”

“Demon horde? Wow, he’s got one of those, huh? You sure he would’ve been willing to invite the rest of you guys, too?”

“I am rather positive, actually. My brother evolved himself as a named monster, but the changes that wrought were nothing compared to what you provided us. Clearly, this evolution was on a different caliber. Heavens, I thought I would never hear the World Language once in my life. Such an honor!”

The hobgobs listening in on us all nodded their earnest agreement. That kind of thing, huh? Naming someone evolves them, but how it turns out depends on the namer…? I’d love to recruit someone to help me experiment on that a bit. We could have a name-off.

But…dang. A real-life demon horde. I knew there had to be one of those around here! Is the king of all demons going to attack us sooner or later? Actually, which side should we be on if that happens? Maybe I should save that question for when it actually comes up, if it ever does.

I already know there’s at least one “hero” out there, besides, so I’m sure that king or whatever’s gonna be mostly focused on whoever that is. Not too sure the one Veldora told me about is alive after three centuries of retirement, but given how easy it apparently is to transmigrate and revive and so on around here, something tells me she’s still up in some mountain shack right now, training away.

Better make a mental note of that Gelmud guy, at least. Now, next question.

“Ranga!” I called out to the black wolf that was suddenly my biggest fan in the universe. “I’m kind of the guy who killed your father, aren’t I? You don’t have any lingering, you know, resentment about that?”

“I do have thoughts about it, my master. But to a monster, victory or defeat in battle is the only absolute in life. No matter how it turns out, we are aware of the fact that might makes right. Win, and the day is yours! Lose, and nothing shall remain! But…not only did my master forgive; he even gave me my once and future name for all time! I am filled with thankfulness, not resentment!”

“Hmm… Well, if you want a rematch, I’m open any time.”

“Heh-heh-heh… But, indeed, my evolution has made it all the clearer in my mind! If you had unleashed your full force in our previous battle, the whole of the pack would have been wiped out. We would have been lost to the winds of time, never able to realize our dreams of evolution! Our loyalty, our devotion, belongs to our one true master alone!”

All…right?

Certainly, in black snake form, I might’ve been able to do ’em all in with one breath. But I didn’t want to have to try anything so risky. He’s really thinking way too highly of me.

Not that I mind him having the wrong idea, but…

“You realized that, eh? Guess you really have grown a little!”

“Ah-hah-hah! It pleases me to hear such words!”

I nodded to myself. I mean, I killed his dad. There’s no way he’s not at least a little miffed about that. If Ranga wanted to exact his revenge someday, I’d gladly hold up my end of the bargain. He could definitely give a black snake a run for his money, at least.

We chatted a bit more as the road wore on. All of us were moving far, far ahead of schedule.

“Hey, you guys aren’t going too fast for your own good, are you?” I asked.

“Not a problem, Sir Rimuru!” Rigur shot back. “Thanks to our evolution, perhaps! We are not terribly fatigued at all!”

“Do not worry, my master!” added Ranga. “We are not wholly freed from the bonds of sleep as you are, but we do not require an extended period of rest! Nor do we need frequent stops for food. It will be no obstacle, even if we fast for several days!”

I scoped out the rest of the crew. They all looked just as gung ho as when we set off. Sheesh, I’m probably the least enthused out of them all. And why shouldn’t I be? I’ve got nothing to do up here.

We wound up running, running, and running some more for around half the day. Talk about tough.

As the group took their evening meal at the end of the second day, I decided to ask Gobta about the Dwarven Kingdom we were headed toward.

“Y-yes, sir! Umm, it is officially known as the Armed Nation of Dwargon! Their leader is known as the Heroic King, and—”

Something about his shouty reply indicated that my speaking to him made him terribly nervous. I was afraid he’d bite his tongue in his panic.

According to Gobta’s account, the current king was Gazel Dwargo, third in his line from the original. A great hero, one whose might and presence made the elder dwarves recall his grandfather in his younger years, but also an intelligent one who ruled his realm with a steady, even hand. A living hero, in a way.

It had been a thousand years since Guran Dwargo, the first Heroic King of the dwarves, established this kingdom. Since then, his descendants had carried on his will, preserving and developing his people’s history, culture, and technical skill.

In a nutshell, that was Dwargon. Given how long its kings apparently lived, it must have been a hell of a place. Hearing about it got me excited.

“In that case,” I asked, “how much longer will it take, Gobta?”

“If I had to guess, we should arrive by the morrow, sir! The mountains are starting to loom high!”

He was right. The peaks weren’t even visible until yesterday. We were advancing at an astounding clip.

“I’ve just thought of something, Gobta—what errand brought you there in the first place? I thought you had merchants visiting the village regularly.”

As far as I had heard from Rigurd, there were bands of kobolds who stopped by on regular occasions. Why would a goblin want to take the two-month journey over here, then?

“Y-yes, sir! The dwarves pay high prices for magical weapons and armor, you see. They paid us with tools and such, but the merchants helped me carry them back, thankfully! None of the monsters around the village could use that magical gear anyway…”

Aha. So they sold the weapons and stuff they found off passing adventurers? No wonder there was nothing decent left at the village. He must’ve carted it all to the Dwarven Kingdom because the kobolds didn’t have any way of appraising it on-site. Of course, any adventurers who’d lose to a bunch of goblins almost certainly must’ve been utter beginners, so inexperienced that they couldn’t even use a compass to keep from stumbling into monster villages. I doubted any of their gear could’ve been worth much.

“Plus,” Rigur added to Gobta’s roundabout reply, “all the goods the dwarves make—the weapons, mainly—it’s top-notch. Even the humans recognize it as the best make in the land, and they gather at the kingdom to seek out the latest works, along with the subraces and intelligent monsters. It’s been tradition for years now, and all conflict between races is prohibited there, in the name of the king.”

So we were traveling there less to sell some junk and more to buy the tools they needed. The fact that they could do so on neutral turf, without getting laughed at by the other monsters, must’ve been another attraction.

“Such an arrangement,” Rigur continued, “is made possible by the Armed Nation’s astonishing military might. As far as the kobold merchants told me, the dwarven armies have not tasted defeat in a full millennium…”

The kingdom enjoyed the defenses of a massive, powerful, magic-driven army corps and a wall of heavily armed infantry. Any would-be attackers would find themselves first blocked by the infantry, then turned into dust by a rain of offensive magic.

The equipment that backed up such an offensive juggernaut must have been very high-tech indeed, for this world. As Rigur put it, it was overwhelmingly superior to any human-made weapons or armor. I doubted anyone had the guts to mess with them at this point. It’d be the intelligent thing for a nearby nation to try to stay on their friendly side. No wonder none of their visitors were stupid enough to squabble with any other monsters within their territory.

Still, dealing with any species, regardless of what they look like? The dwarves must be pretty chill dudes. Maybe I could make a few connections myself. In fact, I’d better.

This was a realm where people intermingled freely with monsters. A land that began with the surface city and extended down, down, down. A kingdom armed to the hilt that walked the path of peace. No place in the world boasted as many weaponsmiths and merchants, and yet it sounded like the farthest point in the universe from any kind of conflict. A bit ironic, maybe.

The way the Dwarven Kingdom was starting to sound from these conversations, I couldn’t wait to arrive.

Exactly three days after we began our journey, we reached the grasslands at the foot of the Canaats. The city truly was beautiful—chiseled into the vast mountain cavern, a natural fortress created by nature.

It was the Armed Nation of Dwargon in all its mighty glory.

And, of course, there was a line to get in.

The front gate was enormous, built to block free entry into the vast cave opening.

This gate opened only whenever the army went inside or out, and that, I heard, happened just once a month. Today it was firmly closed, but at the bottom of the great doors were two small entryways meant for regular traffic. The right-hand one had nobody in front of it—probably meant for the nobility or any other lofty figures who showed up. The door we were waiting for was on the left, and while some people bore passes that allowed them free entry, others had to undergo luggage checks in a separate chamber. All of this, of course, was guarded by a security detail whose equipment certainly reminded you that this was the Armed Nation. They weren’t clowning around.

Once you were through security, you were pretty free to do what you wanted around the city, it seemed…but man, what a line. We were bound to spend more time waiting than traveling at this rate.

“Guess we’re really here, huh?” a nearby traveler ventured as I scanned the line of people down the corridor. “That’s a fancy gate.”

“Look at the armor on that soldier!” his companion exclaimed. “We probably couldn’t afford gear like that after ten years on my salary.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet! Even the Eastern Empire tries to keep things peaceful with these guys—in public, at least. With that kind of equipment, I see why.”

“You said it. They sure ain’t gonna give you a second chance if you try anything. The blowback would be one hell of a headache for any nation that tried it!”

Maybe the dwarves of this world weren’t the kind, gentle, almost lovable beings I was picturing. They could be a lot more violent than that, for all I knew. Still, as a free city and a hub of trade across races and species, it maintained at least a public face of neutrality. The fact that the Heroic King never allowed combat inside the city was fairly common knowledge among adventurers. I supposed that even in this world, you could afford to be neutral only if you had the muscle to back it up.

As I mused over this, I began hearing some more sinister voices.

“Hey! Hey, check it out, there’re monsters out here! We can kill ’em, right? We aren’t inside yet.”

“Yeah, what the hell’re you guys standing in line for? You think we’re gonna letcha do that, you little runts? Gimme your spot before we kill you! And leave your crap there, too, all right? Then we’ll letcha go!”

I figured they had to be out of their minds, but then again, it was just me and Gobta.

A bunch of loinclothed goblins riding gigantic wolves would have been bound to stir up at least a little attention, and not the good kind, so I’d decided to go in solo with my guide. Rigur had wanted to join me, but I’d turned him down.

They were all camped out at the forest entrance now, waiting for our return. Which left the two of us. I’m sure we looked as if we had giant targets painted on our asses. Now this pair of adventurers was accosting us, whining about not liking our faces or whatever.

“Hey, did you hear something, Gobta?”

“Yes, I did…”

“Did you run into any trouble last time you were here?”

“Of course I did, sir! Ooh, they beat me silly! The kobold merchants had to pick me up off the ground! Might’ve died if they didn’t, eh?”

“…They did, huh? So we can’t avoid this?”

“It is, uhh, the fate of the weak…?”

He’d all but expected it. Sheesh, could’ve told me beforehand. Gobta hung his head, realizing what was in store for him. He was finally getting comfortable talking to me. I was a bit worried this threat would make him flee back into his shell again.

“Yo! You think you runts got a right to ignore us?!”

“Hey, isn’t a talking slime pretty rare? Maybe we could get some money outta selling it.”

The adventurers kept yapping at us. People (maybe could have) said I had the patience of a saint back home, but this was starting to irk me.

“Gobta… You remember the rules I gave you all before?”

“Y-yes, sir! Absolutely!”

“Good. In that case, could you close your eyes and cover your ears for me? No peeking!”

“Um…? All right, but…!”

Right. Laying out some simple rules for my people, then promptly violating every single one of them three days later wouldn’t exactly make me a role model. But with Gobta out of my hair, I was free once more to take out the garbage.

Just then, the hostile adventurer on the right shifted his gaze, and I followed it. It led to another group, a trio, grinning as they watched the spectacle unfold.

One of my adversaries carried a sword; the other was clad in light armor. Bandits, I figured. The other three consisted of two robed figures—wizards or monks or something—and a big, brawny fighter. If I had to guess, they were all in the same party, and these two were sent over to chase us out and nab our position in line while the other three finished us off and joined the others as if nothing had happened. That kind of thing.

A neat and easy way to pick off the weaker monsters and take their possessions. Nicely planned. Too bad they picked the wrong target!

“Whoa, whoa, back of the line!” I said to rile them up. “I’m feeling generous today, so I’ll let all that slide if you line up out back!”

The duo looked stupefied for a moment. Then their faces turned bright red.

Didn’t take much to tick them off.

“What the hell’re you talking about, you little pissant?” one of them bellowed in his best evil-underling voice. “You wanna start something with us?!”

“You’re dead! I promised you’d live if you just left all your stuff there, but you know what? Now that you’ve pissed me off, that’s off the table.”

Heh. Back in my contractor gig, I pushed people around that looked a hell of a lot scarier than these guys. I had to if I wanted to get any work done. Some of the old rascals even had tattoos all over them. Compared to that, this barely made me break a sweat.

“Little pissant, huh? You mean me?”

“Who the hell else am I talkin’ to? A slime’s the pissiest out of ’em all, man!”

“Get over here! If you’re so eloquent, we’ll make you into our slave instead!”

A monster slave? Do those even exist? Let’s look into that later. The merchants and apparent adventurers around us had started to notice the shouting. Better keep their eyes on me, for starters. I don’t know if the concept of justified self-defense exists in this world…but it wouldn’t hurt to have as much eyewitness testimony as possible.

Too bad it didn’t look as if any of the humans were interested in lending me a hand. Really? If I were a little girl, I bet it’d be a different story.

“Think you can call me a pissant and get away with it, huh? And you just called me a slime, too…?”

“Well, duh! What else are you?”

“Piece of shit… You think I’m gonna let you treat me like an idiot? You’re dead! Too late to beg for your life now, man!”

The two of them drew their weapons. Oop! Off they go.

Man. Talk about a stroke of bad luck, having these guys be the first humans to ever talk to me. Can’t believe how much friendlier the monsters were.

The people around us began edging away to safety. I supposed they wanted to keep from getting involved. The gate guards must have noticed as well, because they were starting to hurry over.

Keeping my eye on them, I casually rolled myself forward.

“Heh-heh-heh… A piece of shit, huh? A slime? Where’d you get the idea that I was a slime, huh?”

I let them fill in the rest themselves.

Of course I was a slime. Anyone would’ve said so.

“What? Cut the crap, man!”

“Yeah! If you ain’t a slime, show me what you really are! It’s gonna be tough to make excuses once you’re dead!”

They were practically waiting for me to transform. Just like I’d hoped! I was sure I could win as a slime, but it was kind of hard to hold back my skills. I’d be liable to slice each of them into two neat pieces with my Water Blades. Toning it down and just knocking them out was harder.

“All right!” I shouted, keeping up the performance. “Allow me to show you my true form!” Then I released the mystical aura I had been covering up. Just a little, of course.

I looked around, seeing whether the audience had picked up on it. A few among the handful of people around us had. The two idiots in front of me, meanwhile, seemed oblivious.

All bark and no bite, I suppose. Enough sizing them up. Now, what to transform into…?

A black mist sprayed out from my body, shrouding it completely. When it cleared, a different monster stood there instead. A black wolf.

Um, hang on, wasn’t I a direwolf when I absorbed the boss and transformed right after? Now I was just as dark as Ranga and his pack. If anything, I was actually larger than Ranga.

That, and I had two horns on my head.

Form: Tempest Starwolf.

…Well. I guessed if a monster type I consumed evolved, my mimic form evolved with it. I was one level ahead of the evolved Ranga, even. After all, he had only one horn.

Less trivially, I felt a terrific amount of power well within me. I was sure the sight would make these fools drop their swords and instantly run away.

But they didn’t.

“Hah! I don’t care how badass you look! You’re still a runty goddamn piss-slime to me!”

“You think that was enough to freak us out? Come on, man!”

They aren’t picking up on this at all! You’re really supposed to by now, guys… I mean, don’t I look threatening enough? And even if you think it’s just an illusion, shouldn’t a shape-shifting slime give you at least a little pause?

And yet it didn’t faze them at all. Maybe they figured they still had their three friends for backup.

I had a few more skills on hand, too. Five, according to the Sage. Keen Smell, Thought Communication, Coercion, Shadow Motion, and Dark Lightning.

Shadow Motion was something Ranga and his pack were actually practicing at the moment. They could hide inside the shadow of their partner, then reappear on the spot whenever they were called. They were still getting the hang of the “get inside a shadow” bit, so it’d likely be a while to come.

Dark Lightning, meanwhile… That, I didn’t even have to test. If I tried it out now, my adversaries would be charbroiled, I was sure. I had underestimated the stupidity of them both, so things could get ugly around here. Either way, Dark Lightning was out of the question.

Sure would have been nice if Coercion actually worked on them! Talk about being too stupid to find your ass on the bottom of you. The audience, meanwhile, were clearly quaking in their boots. Some had already lost their footing.

“Sheesh… Well, whatever. I’ve had enough of this. Take me on!”

I gave them a free swipe to start.

Speaking of, what would happen to the form I was mimicking if I was damaged? I did actually test that once—I deliberately kept getting myself attacked in armorsaurus lizard form. What I found was that once I took enough damage, I automatically reverted back to slime form—although the damage would be applied only to the mimic, not to my slime body. I supposed the magicules forming the mimicry also protected my body from the blows.

The restrictions I had to work with were the three-ish minutes I had to wait before switching to another form, and the magic I had to consume for each mimic type. But the magic wasn’t a problem, really, considering the amount I could work with.

In other words, I could let these guys flail at me all they wanted. Even if they were a hell of a lot stronger than they appeared, I’d just revert to slime form and scoot off. Simple.

“Hah! Prepare to die!”

Answering my call, the swordsman lunged at me with a shout.

“Hrahh! Windbreaker Slash!”

Is that a swordsman skill? The blade of his sword started glowing green. But it didn’t hurt me, sad to say… My hide snapped his mighty blade cleanly in half.

As he attacked, his partner threw a set of three daggers at me. I appreciated the gesture—three at once had to be tricky to pull off—but none of them had enough force to even split a tempest starwolf’s hair.

“What was that?” I sneered at them, trying my best to play the villain figure. Really, though, what was that? I was completely undamaged. Was that skill name just for show?

“N-no! That pelt of yours… It’s too tough!”

“It can’t be… I…I… It can’t be! My sword is crafted from silver! It’s supposed to hurt monsters more!”

…Silver’s a relatively weak metal, isn’t it? Brother.

“H-hey! Help me, you guys!”

Apparently the swordsman didn’t care about saving face any longer. I guessed that other trio was with him after all.

“Hah! It’s over for you now!”

“Oh, man… I really didn’t think we’d have to wade into this, man.”

“A transforming slime, huh? Interesting. Think I’ll dissect it once it’s dead.”

“You haven’t moved this whole battle, have you? Bet that magic fades away the moment you do, huh? Am I right, or what?”

The three of them prattled on as they joined their friends, making for a total of five surrounding me, and went on the attack. The swordsman summoned magic blades of wind, his companion producing a shortsword to swipe at me with. Their heavy fighter shouted “Grandbreaker Slash!” as he hefted up a great ax and slammed it down. The wizard tossed a few fireballs my way, and his monk friend built a magical defense for himself, expecting me to target him first.

As parties went, it was rather well balanced. The only problem they had was that none of their attacks did a thing against me.

Once the dust settled, the group lifted their eyes, daring to take a look at me. They were too shocked to speak. Maybe Coercion would work now.

With an earth-shaking roar, I invoked it…but, alas, I screwed it up. I didn’t mean for the audience to faint to the ground, too, with assorted substances welling up around their pants.

What a disaster. Now what? This’ll be such a pain to deal with. Hmm? The party? Well, they had just taken a Coercion blow at point-blank range. I doubt I need to go into detail on what happened to them.

My Magic Sense skill started picking up on the dwarven security force running our way.

“It’s over,” I whispered. Over, indeed. I looked down at them, wondering how they were ever going to clean up their undergarments after this—trying to keep my new reality at bay for just a few more moments.

“I’m really sorry about this!!”

I bowed deeply—or intended to, anyway—inside the guardroom.

After the ruckus we had caused, there was no way security was going to let the lot of us off with a slap on the wrist. After only a few moments, a squadron of guards was surrounding us. Well, me, really, given how unconscious the other five were.

I know! I thought. I’ll just turn into a slime and slink off! And I tried to. But before I could move, they grabbed me en masse and—squish—lifted me up. So much for that.

The soldiers flashed me their best “no struggling, now” smiles. The sweat running down their foreheads, however, indicated the effort they had to expend to make this arrest.

“W-wait!” I shouted, doing my best frenzied-Gobta impression. “We didn’t do anything! We’re the victims here!”

“All right, all right,” came the smiling reply. “We’ll hear you out in the guardroom. Can’t expect to run off after that, now can you?”

Not much else I can do, I guess. What’s Gobta doing? I glanced back, only to find he still had his eyes closed and his hands over his ears. Oh, for… What is he thinking? He’s not, clearly. He’s too stupid to. At least he takes orders well.

Luckily, I managed to shout loudly enough to attract his attention. Before long, we were all on our merry way to the security guards’ office.

So here’s what happened!

1. I got accosted!

2. I turned into a wolf!

3. I kind of howled a little.

Whatcha think? Not my fault, right? I thought as I glanced at the soldier standing above me.

He was still smiling at me—the expression suited this gruff, friendly-looking dwarf and his long, bushy beard. Except for those unfortunate veins popping out of his forehead.

“Umm, why did you take me along with you, officer?”

“You damned fool! What do you think you’re saying? Our chiefs are yelling at us because you were accosted.”

“What?! Really? I’m sorry… I’ve messed up again, haven’t I…?”

“Well, there’s nothing to be done about it this time, but try to be a bit more careful, all right?”

Whew. Guess they finally saw the light. Good thing my “Blame Everyone Else” skill from my human years was still going strong. It was an advanced ability, earned only after years of life experience. The key was to never give your foe a single moment to doubt you. It was hard!

And maybe I phrased it a bit jokily, but my account pretty well summarized the whole thing. It sounded as though the witnesses they talked to said the same thing.

“So what was that wolf, then?” the soldier watching over me asked. What’s he mean, “What is it?”

“Um, the species, you mean? It’s a—”

“No, not the name. What I mean is, why did that kind of monster show up around here? Where’d it come from, where’d it go… I wanna hear everything you know!”

Mmm? I’d told him that was just mimicry. He didn’t believe me? I thought I was pretty open with him. I knew it was standard procedure for a hero to hide his secret identity, but I wasn’t exactly a hero anyway.

“Well, I told you… That was just me transformed!”

“Huh? Look, it’s already rare for a slime to talk, and you want me to add shape-shifting to the package, too?”

“No, I mean… Look, would you like me to show you?”

“Hmph. Nah, it’s fine. But if you can shape-shift, how is that possible? You’re a slime, aren’t you?”

That… Wait. How should I answer that? I don’t think he’d buy it if I just said “It’s an intrinsic!” or whatever. That’d just put me on the same level as Gobta. Think, man. You gotta come up with a decent excuse, now!

“Well… I was actually cursed. My talents must have sparked some jealously, I guess… I’m capable of wielding illusory magic.”

“Oh, really? A curse, is it? Then what?”

“Then, um… Well, I know a few illusory spells, but I was still just a student at the time, so this evil mage turned me into a slime… I’m on a journey to find a way to undo the curse, and, um, that’s pretty much it!”

“Why’d you run into an evil wizard, then? Why’d he curse you instead of just killing you?”

Nnngh… This would go a lot easier if you’d just believe me, man. You don’t have to be so obstinate about it. Though I guess I’d be, too. If he actually bought my story, that’d make him more gullible than a goblin.

This little back-and-forth between me and the soldier went on for another two hours or so.

………

……

…

By the end of our intensive debate, I had just about an entire novel’s worth of backstory. A story about a forlorn young (and beautiful) girl, brutally transformed into a slime by an evil mage.

In the midst of our tit for tat, if you want to call it that, the soldier’s questions helped me weave a grand story of heroic tragedy in my mind. I was a young prodigy, a girl inherently gifted in the arts of transformation and illusory magic. A cruel witch had cast a terrible spell on me, and I was traveling to rid myself of the curse.

Why did this have to happen? And why did I turn myself into a magical girl along the way?! And the worst part of it was, whenever I said something that wandered off-script, the soldier’s next question would help me fix the mistake. Oh, right! I’d say to myself as the tale meandered its merry way down the path.

By the end of it, both myself and the soldier were enthralled, hoping against hope that the girl would somehow succeed on her quest. Our eyes burned with passion—at least, his did. Truly, we had a connection that went beyond mere words.

“All right! That’s it for the report. Thank you for your cooperation! But we’re going to need to—”

Slam!

Before the soldier could finish, the large door behind him opened. Another soldier rushed in.

“S-sir! An armorsaurus just showed up in the mines! It’s already injured several miners at their posts!”

“What?! Well, did you defeat it?”

“We’re good there! A suppression force is on its way. But some of the miners are fairly roughed up. I don’t know if there’s a war under way or something, but the city shops are out of medicine, and the castle won’t let us access their stockpile…”

“What about our healers?”

“That’s the thing, sir… The injured were deep inside, mining magic ore. The healers at the guardhouse are all out handling other calls, so all we have left is a single novice!”

“Ah, damn it all!”

Sounds rough. Not that I care. Just take some from the castle, if it’s that important! I thought, but…

I do have a few potions on me, though. What should I do?

It wasn’t as if I expected the gesture to testify to my character and get me off the hook. We just need to make the world a better place is all. I know it sounds fishy coming from me, but… Compassion is its own best reward, and all that. I’ll get karma back for it someday.

“Um, sir! Sir!”

“What? I’m busy. I’m done with you for now, but I can’t let you go yet. Stay in this room until things calm down a little!”

“No, not that, um… I’ve got this.”

I took a recovery potion out. Or spat it out, is the way he probably saw it.

“…Um, what’s that?”

“A recovery potion. Drink it, rub it in—it’s high quality!”

“Eh? What’s a slime like you doing with that?”

Oh, come on. What happened to my story? Why’s he treating me like a slime again? He was egging me on during that entire interrogation, wasn’t he? Not that I wasn’t an eager participant, but…

“That kind of doesn’t matter right now, does it? Go ahead, try it. How many do you need?”

“We’ve got six men down…but are you sure?”

The soldier who’d just stormed in gave me a quizzical stare. If I were him, I probably wouldn’t take a potion from a monster, either.

“Tch… Stay here, all right? Let’s go!”

“Um? But, Captain, that’s a monster…?”

“Enough from you! Just take me over to them!”

The bushy-bearded captain snatched up the six recovery potions I provided and ran off. What with the grand fantasy tale we’d just woven, I supposed I had gained his trust somewhat. Maybe he was a nice guy after all. Didn’t expect him to be a full-fledged captain, though.

“Is it over?” Gobta asked after silently nodding at everything I’d said before now.

“No, but I guess we’ll sit here and see what happens.”

“Got it, sir!”

Then we stared into space. The soldiers who peeked in on occasion would give us confused looks, but otherwise, not much happened for an hour. I was practicing my Sticky Thread moves a bit when I heard the captain’s heavy footsteps. The silken whip zipped back into my body as I waited for him to come in. Gobta was asleep, proving that maybe he was smarter than I was all along.

“Thank you, sir!” the bearded captain thundered as he stormed into the room, head bowed. The miners filed in behind him.

“You’re the one with the potions? Thanks a ton!”

“My arm was pretty torn up. I didn’t think I’d ever work again, even if I survived… Thank you!”

“……”

The last guy didn’t say anything before they all left, but I was fairly sure he was thankful, too. Glad to see the potions worked.

By this time, it was past sunset. It was almost fully dark outside when the captain started talking with me again—seriously, this time.

It turned out the quintet who’d tried taking me on were members of this nation’s Free Guild. They had talent, but they also had a prior reputation as rabble-rousers. “That oughta teach ’em a lesson!” the captain said with a roaring laugh.

The guard was already certain that we were guilty of nothing, but I was still being detained out of respect for the other “victims” I had inadvertently inconvenienced with my actions. Nobody was pressing charges, though—I suppose they figured asking restitution for crapping their pants wasn’t the shrewdest of social moves.

So I told him the truth. I was helping rebuild a goblin village, and we needed arms and clothing, as well as someone who could provide a little on-site guidance. The captain listened intently, some of his men chiming in on occasion. They even asked Gobta a few questions, despite his darting eyes and bewildered expression.

The next day…

We were still in the guardroom. Gobta had borrowed another cell to sleep in, which I assumed he was still using. Having nothing better to do, I was watching some dwarven personnel run through morning training in the field behind the guardhouse. Swinging heavy wooden swords around to work on their speed, sparring a bit in simulated combat, running a few laps, the usual.

I sat there, taking it all in and imagining how they’d fare against the assorted creatures I had Predated by this point. It was a bit like a game to me…but would the Sage mind if I used it like this? Seems like kind of a waste of talent—but what the hell? It’ll be fun.

Turned out, the guards barely stood a chance. Even if I gave myself a handicap, there were only just a few of them who could beat the bat and the lizard.

In a one-on-one matchup, the scales tipped pretty heavily toward the monsters, but since the dwarves always seemed to operate in teams of four to six, a few of the combined parties could take on the spider fairly well. Even all twenty of them out in the field couldn’t take on the centipede, though. I wasn’t expecting these guys to be Special Forces types, of course, so the results made sense to me.

They were just about wrapped up by the time Gobta awoke. The captain checked in at around the same time.

“All right,” he said, “you’re free to go. Sorry I kept you in here for so long—I was beholden to keep you overnight, at least. Apologies!”

“Oh, no, no. It saved me one night’s hotel cost, at least.”

“Glad you see it that way. Here, let me make it up to you. I can introduce you to a talented blacksmith I know!”

“That would be perfect. Thank you!”

Things were looking up, finally. We just got priority entry, one—inspection, schminspection—and we had some extra money to spend. I thought finding a weaponsmith who wouldn’t rip me off at first sight would be a chore, too, but a military referral was about the best I could ask for! Maybe I can afford to be a bit optimistic after all!

“In exchange for that…”

Mmm? A catch? The only “catches” I ever liked were the ones on porn sites.

“If you have any of those recovery potions left, would you be interested in letting go of them?”

Aha. They must really be short on them, huh? That soldier mentioned that yesterday. Well, I’ve got a ton I could sell you guys…but I don’t really know the going rate.

Now what?

…Ah, why not? I had a manufacturing cost of exactly zero on those things anyway. If he wanted some, he could have some.

“All right,” I replied. “It’ll depend on how many, though. I need to keep a few for myself, too.”

“Any extras you’re willing to part with are fine by me. Even if it’s just one.”

Mm? Rather odd way of putting it, isn’t it? I thought he was trying to rebuild the guard’s stockpile. One’s not going to be enough in a pinch, is it? …Well, whatever. Maybe times were just that tough.

“Okay, um, well, how about five, then?”

“Five! Ah, that’d be wonderful!”

“Sure. Oh, also, I’m pretty sure they’ll still work even if you dilute them a little bit, all right? If it’s just a regular slash wound, ten parts water to one part potion oughta do the trick.”

The captain nodded eagerly, fully convinced. I spat out my five potions, and he responded by giving me a small pouch. Inside I could see a selection of gold coins. “I know it’s not much,” he explained, “but I hope you’ll accept this. I’ll give you five gold pieces for each one of these!”

Twenty-five gold, then? Fine by me. I don’t know if I’m undercutting myself or not, but I’m not in a position to haggle. Better figure out how much that is, though, exactly.

“Uhmm, if I could…”

“Not enough? I’m doing my best here, sir…”

“No, no, the price is perfectly fine, but I needed to ask you…”

“Huh? It is? So… So what did you need?”

Ooh. Mmmm, that’s not a good reaction. So I’m being ripped off after all? I knew I should’ve started higher. Oh well. The captain seems like a nice enough guy. I doubt he’s fleecing me that badly.

“I’m sorry to admit it, but I’m not exactly sure what this money is worth, or what prices are even like around here… If you could give me some guidance, that would really help! I’m just a slime, besides!”

Way to contradict yesterday’s magical-girl saga, man. Good thing he apparently never bought it in the first place.

We wound up having a long conversation before Gobta and I set off. Soon, I was out in the fresh air of freedom again…but not before lunch. The captain insisted. I couldn’t taste anything, but the appreciation was sweet, I guess.

For the first time in a while, I enjoyed a meal.

Ugh… Why do I have to be so busy…? Kaijin the dwarf grumbled to himself. What do they mean, the Eastern Empire might be on the move? That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard!

He had reason to doubt it. Peace had reigned over the kingdom for three hundred years. The Empire had all the riches it could ever want—what motivation could it possibly have to stage an invasion? That was what he didn’t understand.

Of course, Kaijin added to himself, I doubt the weaponsmiths of this city would mind a good war to fill their coffers. But…arrgh, why is my work so busy all of a sudden?!

And that wasn’t his only problem.

He scowled. Curse that damned minister! He rubbed his forehead as he imagined himself taking a hammer to the man and sighed. A lot of sighing lately.

There wasn’t much time left. A refusal would damage his reputation. “I can’t do it” wouldn’t be an excuse. He was waiting for some of his friends to get back to him, and depending on their reports, all could be lost.

He had built a decent name for himself as a weaponsmith, but he wasn’t omnipotent. What kind of smith could craft weapons without any raw materials to work with?

Finally, he heard the news he had been waiting for.

“Sorry,” one said as he came through the door. “We wanted to contact you yesterday, but we ran into one heck of a distraction…”

They were three men—dwarves, all brothers, the trio Kaijin had assigned mining duties to. The eldest was Garm, an armor crafter with long, muscular arms. The middle child was Dold, who was known around the kingdom for his intricate handiwork. The youngest, Mildo, rarely spoke but was skillful at almost anything he did—architecture, art, you name it. A sort of savant.

Any one of them could’ve been talented enough to run a successful business by himself—but they all had a critical disadvantage. Outside of their individual God-given talents, they were utterly hopeless, barely capable of dressing themselves without an instruction manual. None of them had a head for business or laying the groundwork for a successful career. They seemed to prefer letting other people use them instead.

That was how they wound up entrusting their shop to someone who stole it from them, falling into the trap of an apprentice jealous of their natural talent, getting bullied by the government after they botched a ministerial request… In the end, with nowhere else to go, they turned to Kaijin, an old friend and practically a fourth brother to them in their youth. He wished they had called on him sooner, but that was neither here nor there—they needed someplace to lie low, and he could use some help around the shop.

The only problem was that Kaijin had no work for them. He was a merchant dealing in battle gear, and he already had steady connections for all his merchandise except the weapons. Those he made himself, and he figured he could keep the trio busy making the rest of his lineup…but he couldn’t have them start immediately. Telling his armor and accessory contacts out of the blue that their services were no longer needed would lead to easily avoidable trouble. Until things settled down a little, he would have to continue with business as usual.

Instead, with few other options available, Kaijin was having them direct a team of laborers as they mined for ore and other materials.

The brothers had arrived in Kaijin’s shop with a wild story about a monster. It was the last thing he wanted to hear. He rubbed his forehead.

“Well, at least you’re all fine,” he told them. “Glad you got away before you were hurt at all!”

And he was. If they weren’t injured, they could go right back to ore collecting. His friends’ safety was naturally important, but…still.

The three bothers gave each other awkward looks.

“Well…we didn’t get away, exactly.”

“No. In fact, we can still hardly believe what happened to us yesterday!”

“………”

They moved on with the story—a tale of a mysterious slime who provided them life-saving medicine. It seemed like a bunch of ridiculous ravings, but these people weren’t ones to make up stories. They didn’t have the talent for it.

So did the whole affair really happen? Perhaps it didn’t matter. It was true enough, he knew, that people had been attacked in the mines. And that meant no mining for a while. The workmen he had hired all quit yesterday and headed for the hills the moment the monster news broke. And why wouldn’t they? Their brethren were injured, no doubt.

Now would be the perfect time to call on the services of the Free Guild, but that was probably equally impossible. He had filed a mining request long ago, to deafening silence. He knew he wasn’t the only one, either. A shortage was starting to rear its ugly head.

Hiring guild members as mine guards wouldn’t accomplish much, either. They weren’t cheap, and even then, they didn’t lift a finger beyond what the guild paid them for. Guild guards did just that—guard—and nothing else. And if this was the kind of monster that could take out a B-minus-graded adventurer…

It was hopeless! There was no way to turn a profit. In fact, this would bankrupt him. Bah! Why did such a powerful monster have to show up in such a damned shallow part of the mine?!

Kaijin let out a deep sigh. Now what? There wasn’t much time left. Maybe he’d have to just go down there and grab the ore himself. No better ideas were springing to mind. All that filled it right now was the passing ticktock of his destiny.

The four of them exchanged glances, all at a complete loss. That was right about when a set of rather odd-looking customers showed up.

“Yo! You in there?!” shouted the captain—Kaido, as it happened.

As we had conversed, we’d grown friendlier and friendlier with each other. We were on a first-name basis now, and it turned out his older brother was in charge of the shop we were visiting.

It was a cozy place, the kind where you’d expect the owner to be a gruff old man behind the counter.

“Hello!”

“Excuse us,” I said as I followed Kaido in. The moment we entered, we felt several dubious gazes upon us.

“““Ah!!”””

The three miners who had thanked me for saving them yesterday lifted their eyebrows high. They looked right as rain, but their expressions weren’t exactly jubilant.

Just as expected, the man behind them was a perfect image of the grizzled, grouchy old civil-works guys I once had to deal with. He was the proprietor, no doubt. Didn’t look much like Kaido.

“Whadda you want? You know these guys?”

“Kaijin, this is it! The slime! The one who saved us…”

“Yeah! It sure is! And you’re our boss’s brother, aren’t you, Captain?”

“………”

“Oh-ho! The slime, you say? We were just talking about you! Thanks for getting these guys out of a bad way yesterday.”

“Oh, no, it was nothing… Okay, it was something, but, ah, you know. Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

It should be against the law to compliment me. I always let it go to my head, until I finally float up into outer space. I probably wouldn’t be coming back down for a while.

“So,” the old guy said, rearing back a bit, “what brings you here today?”

I decided to go into full detail. We all piled into seats situated deeper inside, and Kaido was kind enough to provide a quick recap for me. I added a few choice details, and things moved along at a good pace.

That younger one, though… Mildo, was it? I wish he’d say something. Like, how’s he managed to stay in conversations by saying nothing at all? It floored me.

“All right,” the old guy answered. “I understand. But what do you want? I can’t do anything for you. I’ve got a job from a certain country I gotta deal with, too. None of this leaves the room, but…”

Then it was his turn to talk, deliberately leaving out some of the finer details, as it was all classified. Basically, a number of countries were sending out orders for weapons and armor, spooked that a certain “idiot nation” might be trying to hatch a war on them all. It connected to why the guard was out of medicine yesterday, as well as the lack of raw materials plaguing the shops.

“So,” he continued, tapping at his head, “I managed to pull an all-nighter to get an order for two hundred steel spears squared away…but I gotta come up with twenty swords, too, and I ain’t even got one yet. There’s just no material!”

“Why don’t you just say you can’t fill the order?” Kaido asked.

“Fool! You think I didn’t, at first? But that damned minister Vester told me, ‘So you’re saying the great Kaijin, renowned across the entire kingdom, can’t even fill a simple order like this one? Is that it?’ In front of the king himself, no less! Can you believe that damned idiot?!”

In between the cursing and the screaming, I learned that Mildo, the taciturn third brother, had denied a request from Vester to build a house for him. The minister had taken it personally, badgering him about it to the point that Mildo had had to go into exile with Kaijin. Sounded like a stupid grudge to have.

So is this guy maybe buying up all the kingdom’s raw materials so the shops can’t sell anything? It sounds plausible to me.

“What’s the difference between lances and swords?” I asked.

“I need special ore for the swords,” the old guy spat out. “Magic ore. The spears are just simple steel spikes.”

Without the right materials to work with, even a master artisan is merely a man. It must have been incredibly frustrating. The minister must’ve been waiting for him to show up, hat in hand, begging for mercy.

“And that’s not the half of it. It takes a full day to complete even one of those swords. Even if I built an assembly line and streamlined everything I could, it’d still take me two weeks to make twenty…”

I thought to ask about the deadline but stopped. I could read the answer in his face anyway.

“I have until the end of this week.” He groaned. “First thing next week, I’m charged with delivering them to the king. It’s a task for the kingdom, and every shop has been asked to do the same. If I can’t, they could strip my artisan’s license from me…”

So five days left, it sounded like. And it seemed doubtful that much work would happen today, so four, basically? What a tough situation… Wait, why am I here? None of this has anything to do with me.

And…um, hang on, did he say “magic ore”? I have some of that, don’t I? Not that it matters…

The next time I looked up, I realized that everyone was looking at me. I don’t like all these dudes staring at me, you know! Who do they think a slime is, anyway?



Whatever. Time to fling a few serious favors around. They better help me get that goblin village going later!

“Heh-heh-heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha! Haaaaaaah-hah-hah-hah!! What a trivial issue! Old man… You think you could use this?”

Then, with a small thud, I hand-delivered a quantity of extracted ore on top of the work desk in front of me. Then I hopped on the sofa, lay back, and put my legs up (or felt like I did).

“…Wait. Whoaaa! That’s magic ore!! And, my God, look at how pure it is!!”

Heh. Not magic ore, man. Already processed it for ya. That’s a hunk of pure magisteel! “C’mon, old man, your eyes giving out on you?” I asked. If they couldn’t even see what this metal was, they couldn’t have been worth much.

I’ll sell the materials to you, but that’s it. I’m running a business here, sort of.

“What…? No… It can’t be! This entire piece is magisteel?!”

He finally noticed. His shock surprised me a bit.

“You… You’ll let me have this? I mean, I’ll pay the going price for it, of course!”

Heh-heh-heh. Gotcha!

“Oooh, about that…”

“Nggh, what do you want? I’ll do anything I can for this!”

“Now that’s what I wanted to hear! You heard what me and my team are up to, right? I need your help finding someone who’ll travel to the village and give us some technical guidance.”

“What? Is that all you need?”

“Pfft. I need some connections to clothing and weapon suppliers, too. And armor.”

“If that’s all it is, then of course!”

And so old man Kaijin and I forged a verbal contract for the hunk of magisteel. We agreed to iron out the details after his work was done. Judging by his reaction, I probably could’ve wrung him for a little more, but no point being too greedy. Whenever I tried that, it always blew up in my face. Even I learn from my mistakes sometimes.

Kaido took his leave after we all finished with dinner. Guess the captain of the border guard can afford to skip work all afternoon. Nice of him to bring me here, though.

The three dwarf brothers took turns thanking me profusely yet again. They felt a bit out of place, no doubt, and at fault for the government’s toying around with Kaijin.

“So why not come along with us?” I asked. Their jaws dropped. Then they started discussing it with each other. To me, that sounded like the best thing for their predicament.

The next day…

Even though he had all the materials he needed, that deadline still looked impossible to me. Time to come out with it.

“You’ve got four days left, Kaijin. You think you can finish it up?”

“…No, to be honest. But I gotta!”

I didn’t think a can-do attitude was going to help much. What I did know was that if something was impossible, it was simply impossible. It didn’t become doable until all the right elements were in place.

…Sheesh. I already got my foot in the door. Might as well go all in.

“Well, I think I’ve got an idea. For starters, could you make just one sword for me? The best quality you can manage.”

“What? But you’re a complete amateur. What could you do?”

“I can’t tell you. But you gotta believe me! If you don’t, then go ahead. Keep going. You’ll probably lose your license, but…”

“…So I can trust you? Because if I can’t, you better not expect payment for that magisteel. I won’t be able to take care of myself, much less cover you… You keep your promise, though, I swear I’ll keep mine. I’ll give you the best swordsmith this kingdom has!”

We have a deal. And promises are made to be kept.

Off we went into the workshop. I owed Kaijin one for letting me rest in his spare apprentice’s chamber anyway, so I wanted to hold up my end of the bargain.

When we entered, we found the three brothers staring at the hunk of magisteel on the table, sighing to themselves as they turned it over in their hands, scrutinizing every surface. The chunk I’d spat out was about the size of a fist. Was it that rare? They sure acted that way.

“What are you talking about?” Kaijin exclaimed when I asked about it.

And according to his explanation—

Magic ore was a raw material that was refined to make magisteel. Even the base ore could rival gold in value, for a simple reason: It was both rare and useful for a variety of applications.

It all came down to the magicules that seemed to form nearly everything in this world—something that Earth seemed to do just fine without but that played a huge role over here.

On rare occasions, when a monster was defeated, it would drop an entire chunk of magicules, referred to as “magic stone.” This was a sort of portable energy source, and it served as the fuel for something called “spirit engineering,” an invention exclusive to this world. Magic stones came in levels of purity, and the purer ones were used as cores inside assorted products. Even ornaments could harness this energy for special effects. The resulting clothing and accessories could boost the wearer’s abilities, grant them additional effects, and do any number of other things.

Now, the main difference between plain old ore and magical ore was that the latter could be obtained only in areas where higher-level monsters lurked. It required the combination of regular ore, a large concentration of magicules, and eons of time for the ore to absorb the magic and make the transformation—a sort of geological mutation.

Of course, any place with a lot of magic also tended to have a lot of monsters. Not the run-of-the-mill kind adventurers could kill for pocket change—you wouldn’t find any magic ore around them. You’d have to travel to places with at least B-ranked monsters in them.

As a tangent, Kaijin finally gave me a full description of how the ranking system worked for monsters.

“Ohhh!” I said. “So I’d be, like, a B or so, maybe?”

“““……”””

I imagined everyone was thinking the same thing. Except for Gobta, who was a little slow. Let’s leave him alone for now.

Regardless, the point was that magic ore didn’t just pop up out of nowhere. What’s more, the magisteel extracted from it took up 3, maybe 5 percent of its total mass. Even a fist-sized chunk of that steel was worth at least twenty times its weight in gold.

It also appeared that prices, in general, averaged out to near the same as they did in my old world. Gold was used as currency because it was worth a lot, just like back home. As a result, all the countries had adopted gold as a currency standard.

I kept the fact that I had a huge store of these magisteel hunks in my stomach a secret. Honestly, it was getting a little frightening. No way they could’ve known, but…what if they had? Or was that just my paranoid, lower-middle-class upbringing coming out?

Now, on to the real issue.

Magisteel was rare, certainly, but that wasn’t what made it so valuable. That lay in how readily adaptable it was to serving as a conduit for magical force.

One could control magicules through the power of imagination, to some extent. My Magic Sense skill worked that way, but even Control Water worked by manipulating the ambient magic around me. Most monster skills harnessed it one way or another as well. I didn’t know that much about magic spells, really, but I figured they worked on the same premise.

So what happened if a weapon was made of material infused with vast amounts of magic? Amazingly, it became a weapon that could mature!

How classic! Aw, man, now I want one! I almost said so out loud before stopping myself just in time. I mean, think about it—a sword that gradually molded itself to your ideal shape based on what you wanted from it. Depending on your own magical force, you might even be able to transform it midbattle! And since it was so compatible with magic, it’d help boost your skills, too.

Basically, unless you were really handy with a weapon, you were always going to be better off with a magically infused one. But what if—although this would take a lot of skill and money—you made a blade of pure magisteel and inserted a magic stone into it? Could you make, like, flame swords and blizzard swords and stuff?

My creative juices started flowing. My heart sang, demanding Kaijin make one right this minute. But I would have to be patient. The next magic stone I get my hand on, though… For sure.

After that quick lesson, Kaijin buckled down and went to work. I watched him as his would-be young apprentice. Gobta was probably sleeping somewhere, besides…

Swords, of course, came in a wide array of shapes and sizes. I, of course, pictured a Japanese-style katana as the strongest one out there—but even katanas came in all kinds of shapes. That was what made me so curious about the kind of sword he’d make.

Ten hours later, he was finished.

It looked, to me, like a plain old longsword. And—whoa, that was a lot of magisteel left. And here I was worried whether a fist-sized lump would be enough for even one. Turned out Kaijin couldn’t even guess how much it’d cost to use 100 percent magisteel on everything. I suppose not. No wonder nobody’s come up with a flame sword or a blizzard sword or even a thunder sword. It’d cost too much. Makes sense.

Instead, magisteel formed only the core of the weapon, and the rest of the blade was crafted from regular steel instead. That core was all it needed for its magic to work its way into the steel, eventually merging itself with the whole sword. That, he said, was why a weapon grew stronger as it was used over time. The blade would never rust or lose its shape—it could just use ambient magicules to regenerate itself.

Oddly enough, though, even these magic swords had their life spans. If they were bent too far or otherwise warped beyond recognition, the magic would leak out, leading to rapid weathering.

Kaijin showed me his freshly forged sword as he spoke. It was all so interesting to me. I took the weapon in hand as I marveled over it—all right, not in hand, but close enough. It was simple in make, straight as an arrow. No bells or whistles. It wasn’t meant strictly for slicing like a katana, but the blade seemed suited to slashing.

But this was just a base. Over time, I supposed, the sword would adapt itself to whatever its user wanted from it. No wonder the forger kept things simple.

Okay.

So Kaijin and his team had crafted this lovely sword for me, as promised. Now it was my turn.

“Right!” I said. “Time for me to pull a little secret work for you. I’m sorry, but would you all mind leaving me alone here for now?”

There was no way I could let them see this. It would be too hard to explain, for one thing.

“Well, you have everything you need here, I suppose. But are you sure? I would be glad to help.”

“I’ll be fine, thank you! Just promise me you won’t peek into this room for the next three days. Swear it!”

“All right. I’ll trust you and wait…”

With that, Kaijin and his men left. Gobta, too, for some stupid reason. What goes through his mind, day in and day out, that keeps him alive? I’ve got to wring it out of him someday.

So our recipe today’s for a longsword. Couldn’t be simpler! First, take this completed sample…and swallow it up! Next, take the rest of the ingredients lined up here…and swallow them up, too! Munch, munch…gulp! Mix well in your stomach, and…

Notice. Analysis target: “longsword.” Successful. Creating copy… Successful.

Repeat nineteen times. Bon appétit!

Easy, wasn’t it?

Kids, don’t try this at home!

And with that ridiculous mental commentary, I set to work.

Yikes… Each copy was taking, like, ten seconds.

190 seconds—three minutes and change—and I had nineteen swords scattered around the room. It had been maybe five minutes since I shooed Kaijin and the rest out of the room.

I mean, I figured I could do it, but it was just so easy! And people spent entire lifetimes crafting stuff like this. I started to feel as if I had done something shamelessly rude to them. This Predator is such a cheat code.

So now what? I told them not to open the door for three days. Am I supposed to just hole up in here until then? No… I can’t just sit here like the blob that I am. Maybe I should come clean…

So I did. I threw the door open and stepped outside. The four dwarves immediately stood up, giving me worried looks. Gobta was…sleeping.

God, five minutes? Yep. That was when I decided I had to do something about him.

“Wh-what is it? Did something happen?”

“Are you short on something?”

“Or…or it didn’t work, then?”

“Yeah, um…well, actually…” I sized up the dwarves, whose eyes were laden with self-torment. They hurt to look at.

But I just couldn’t resist. I had to put on an act.

Why did I have to be so mean to people all the time? Not even my death and rebirth had cured me of that habit.

“…Ha-ha! Just kidding! They’re all done, actually!”

“““……Whaaaa?!”””

Guess I can’t blame them.

“““…Cheers!!”””

We were at a kind of dwarven nightclub, holding a rather anticlimactic wrap-up party. The weapons were safely in the king’s hands, and it was time to celebrate. I mean, I told them they didn’t have to…

“Aw, come on! There’s lots of beautiful ladies in there!”

“Yeah, yeah! Young ones, and older, too, if you like a little weathering on ’em! It’s the perfect place for any gentleman!”

“……!!”

“C’mon, Rimuru! We can’t go out without the big guy himself!”

It was four against one, so I had no choice.

Never a dull moment, huh?

The place was called the Night Butterfly.

Were the hosts really butterflies, then? They’d better not turn out to be moths!

…Not that I really cared. I was a gentleman. I’d try anything once, I thought as we strolled in.

“Ooh, welcome!”

“““Welcome, sirs!”””

Phwoaarrrr!! The place was lined up and down with babes!! Whoaaa! Their ears were so long, too! Is it hot in here, or is it just those elves? Dang!

Ohhhh my Godddddd, and their clothes are so thin!! It’s like I can almost see through…but I can’t… Dammit, and I got Magic Sense going at max force, too! They’ve got the boundaries of their clothing down pat, don’t they? Is this meant to be some kind of…challenge? Nnnngh!!

“Oooh, look at you, cutie!”

“Aww, I saw him first!!”

Eeep! Boing! Boiiing!

Th-there it is!!

My entire body is jiggling! And I can feel something soft jiggling against my back, too! Is this paradise, or what?!

“…Umm… I guess all that squirming means you’re enjoying this, huh?”

Agh! Oh, no. I didn’t mean to…

“Huh…? N…no, not that much.”

Guess I shouldn’t have expected the world, then. Nobody believes in me after all. But so be it. What do I care? I’m perched in the lap of a real-life elf! I can’t believe this is actually happening!!

Ahh, I feel so bad for my dear, departed friend down there! If only he were still around! I’d be bouncing off the walls!

However, while we were enjoying ourselves…

“Well! If it isn’t Kaijin! Goodness me, what are you doing, bringing this vulgar monster into a high-class establishment like this?”

Who’s that guy? Looking to start a fight, it sounded like. Things quickly fell silent around us. Even the girls sneered at this visitor—they must not have liked him too much, although they were polite enough to keep the scoffs very discreet.

By dwarf standards, this one was quite tall and thin in stature, making him…well, an average human in size.

“Hey! Boss! You guys allowin’ monsters in here these days?”

“N-no,” an older female manager called out, “but it’s just a little slime, so…”

“Uhh? It’s still a monster! Ain’t it? You sayin’ a slime’s not a monster anymore?!”

“I… No, sir, but…” The manager stuttered noncommittally, trying to calm the man down, but the boor wasn’t even paying attention. Clearly, he was after us.

“Oh, great,” one of the girls sighed. “That’s Vester, the minister.”

Speak of the devil! Well, I’ll be… He did seem like the kinda guy who refuses to let go of a grudge. I could see it on his face.

“Y’know what best suits a monster?” Vester bellowed. “This!” Then he emptied the contents of his water glass over me.

I wasn’t exactly a fan of that kind of provocation, but I kept myself in check. This was a government minister—I couldn’t let my short temper get Kaijin or the manager of this place in trouble. Wouldn’t want them banned from the premises. Just sit tight, let it pass, and—

“Hey… You think you can just pick on us all you want?!”

With an audible kick at the table, Kaijin stood up.

“You think you can run around and make fun of my guest, Vester? You think I’m not gonna mind that? You think?!”

…Um? Hey, Kaijin, this is a top government official and stuff, isn’t it? You sure you’re on good footing here?

Vester, to his credit, was just as startled and stepped back.

I boinged back a bit in surprise, too, cushioned amply by the chest of the elf behind me.

…Not on purpose! I swear!

“How…how dare you speak to me like that, you…!” Vester sputtered, still in shock.

“Will you shut up already?!” Kaijin shouted, accentuating his point by launching a punch at the minister’s face. A few moments later, he asked me, “Hey, Rimuru, you were lookin’ for someone to help you, right? Would I be good enough, maybe?”

Good enough? More than. But…really? I supposed he’d quite literally just punched a one-way ticket out of the Dwarven Kingdom. Now he was making a verbal request.

“That’s what I’ve been wanting to hear. It’ll be great working with you, Kaijin!”

It would be. We could hammer out the details later. If Kaijin was willing to come over, I was more than willing to invite him. We didn’t need no fancy contract! We do what we want, when we want!

Kaijin and I sealed the deal with an emphatic nod.

Just one thing… How were we gonna book it out of here? Maybe a little prudence wasn’t such a bad idea after all. You create a lot of problems for yourself otherwise. All the bravado in the world wasn’t going to solve them, was it?

So.

As anyone could imagine, punching a government minister in the face presented a number of issues.

“My brother, my brother,” muttered Kaido, a few security officers behind him. “What did you do this time?”

He was on duty today—not even he could get away with skipping shifts all the time. Kaijin had given him an invite, but he’d refused…only to come to the nightclub anyway thanks to his brother’s boorishness. Simply running would have been an easy enough plan for us, but chances were it’d be doomed from the start.

“Hmph! That fool!” As four knights dragged Kaijin away, he shouted and pointed a wild finger at the minister. “He practically spat in the face of Rimuru, my client and the best patron I’ve ever had! What’s so bad about putting him in his place a little, huh?!”

Vester, for his part, hadn’t overcome the shock yet. He was simply staring at us, blood still dribbling from his nose. It looked both pathetic and a little comical. Never saw it coming, I guess. The surprise probably kept it from even hurting.

“Brother,” Kaido whispered with a sigh, “you don’t put a government minister ‘in his place’ like that… Either way, you’re all coming with me!” He nodded to his men, then took me aside for a moment. “Just stay calm, all right? I promise we’ll treat you well.”

I wasn’t planning to do anything else, of course. Before I left, though, I sidled up to the manager of the place and tossed five gold pieces into her hand. “There’s some for your trouble in there, too!” I said to the surprised matron. “We’ll be back!”

It seemed like a decent place, after all. Wouldn’t be nice if I never got to see the inside of it again.

So went my second arrest here in the Dwarven Kingdom…but I’m forgetting someone.

Gobta! He wasn’t with us at the club. Instead, he was atoning for his sundry idiotic behavior by undergoing what I liked to call “bagworm hell.” I’d thought about hanging him by his feet at first, but that just seemed like cruelty for cruelty’s sake, so instead I’d tied him up with Sticky Thread and let him hang from the ceiling.

“Wait!” he’d whined. “This is so mean, sir! I want to come with you!”

I’d showed him no mercy this time. “Enough, you fool! I can’t take any more of your blockheaded behavior! If you don’t like it, summon your tempest wolf buddy and have him help you out!”

Not that he could do it, I figured as I shut the door behind me.

A goblin was one thing, but a hobgoblin could probably go without food or drink for about a week straight.

Still, if we were going to be held for a while, I’d have to break out and get him down sooner or later. For now, though, I filed it in the back of my mind.

Was I being mean to him, maybe? I thought I was, for a moment. But it was all right. He could deal.

The five us of were taken to the royal palace. Not that we were under very heavy guard. If anything, it seemed entirely voluntary.

We wound up having to spend around two days in the castle jail room. It wasn’t so bad—the food looked decent, and we had all the comforts we needed in the place. It was less like a jail cell and more like an urban apartment shared by the five of us. We weren’t treated too terribly, either.

“I just had to lose my temper, and now I’ve got all of you in here with me… I’m so sorry, guys!” Kaijin apologized.

But none of his dwarven friends minded too much, either.

“It’s fine, Kaijin! No problem at all!”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it, boss!”

“……”

“Besides, once we’re released, we want to come with you, Kaijin!”

“Yeah, can we come with you, Rimuru?”

“……?”

I wasn’t observant enough to tell what the third one wanted from me, but I got the gist well enough.

“Hah! Sure, we’ll take care of all of you! You better be ready, though… Once we reach the village, you guys’re gonna work!”

“Got it!”

We were already talking about life outside the big house. As prison terms went, it was pretty chill.

It was the night of our second day.

“By the way,” it occurred to me to ask, “why did that minister have it in so badly for you, Kaijin? Was there some reason for it?”

Kaijin’s expression immediately soured. With a sigh, he began to explain. It turned out he used to be a captain in the palace’s royal knight corps—a leader of one of the seven armies making up the whole system. Three corps were devoted to behind-the-scenes work like engineering, supply, and emergency aid. Three more—heavy strikers, magic strikers, and magic support—played more of a starring role. The last one, and the most important, was the king’s personal guard. Kaijin had been head of the engineering corps, and Vester had been his second-in-command.

“He was the son of a marquis,” the dwarf moaned. “A noble title he bought with money. I think he must’ve been jealous of a commoner like me taking the head role. It was complicated, you know? It must’ve been humiliating to him, taking orders from someone below him. And I’ll admit that I didn’t care much about what other people thought about me. I was too busy trying to stay on the king’s good side. That’s when it happened.”

The “magic-armor affair.”

At the time, the engineering corps was seen as the lowest of the army’s seven departments—barely producing any new technology for itself. Vester believed a kingdom rich in technology should have an appropriately famous corps of engineers, while Kaijin was more of a status-quo man when it came to research and development. Despite how intense their arguments got, they never managed to reach an agreement during their countless garrison meetings.

Along the way, the corps launched a so-called magic-armor soldier project with a team of elf engineers. Vester was hell-bent on making this project a success and boosting the corps’s position in the military pecking order. Kaijin warned him that he was proceeding too quickly with it, but even then, Vester had little time for the advice of a common-born man.

In the end, thanks to Vester’s arbitrary whims, an experiment went awry and led to a spirit-magic core running out of control—a very public failure and a bad setback for the project at an early stage.

Thus, despite some of the greatest minds of the world working on it, the magic-armor project ground to a halt. As head of the engineering corps, Kaijin wound up taking the heat for it, resigning from his position in the army. Not only did Vester make Kaijin the scapegoat; he even convinced his friends among the higher-ranked leaders to give false testimony against him. That, according to Kaijin at least, was the truth.

Once he finished, Kaijin let out a tired sigh.

I could understand his perspective. There must’ve been a lot of resentment built up over the years from that.

Still…man, Vester’s just a total storybook villain, isn’t he? They don’t come easier to spot than that. As far as the minister was concerned, Kaijin could make a comeback in the military and threaten his position at any time. That kind of thing.

Didn’t he deserve the death penalty, really? Maybe not, but…

“So,” Kaijin concluded, “maybe he’ll settle down a bit if I leave the country for a while.”

He sounded a bit forlorn about it, but at least he had backup. The three brothers with us were just as aware of the truth, and there was no love lost for Vester among them, either. Hell, even I hated him now.

Still, Kaijin did sock a noble, so I kind of wondered whether they were just gonna release us and wave good-bye.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Kaijin reassured me. “I’m out of the army now, but I did make it up to the corps leader. As far as my social position goes, I’m just below baron. If it were strictly commoner versus nobleman in the courts, well, hanging might’ve entered the picture.”

He accentuated that morbid fact with a hearty laugh.

Meanwhile, I just sat there. If things got rough, I’d hightail it outta here—but otherwise, I was happy being a good little slime until cooler heads prevailed.

Our day in court arrived soon after, and the entire lot of us were brought in front of the monarch.

The Heroic King of the dwarves.

Now that I was seeing him in person, his stately aura was almost awe inspiring.

His Majesty Gazel Dwargo closed his eyes and sat deeply upon his throne. He was stocky, dwarflike in appearance, and his exposed armor-like muscles positively radiated energy. His skin was a deep, dark brown, and his black hair was pulled back on his head.

He exuded pure strength. My fight-or-flight instincts kicked in all the way for the first time in ages.

Two knights were stationed near him, one on each side. They were equally muscle-bound, no doubt, but they still looked wispy compared to their ruler. Seriously, this guy was a monster. I’d been planning to beat a hasty retreat if I needed to, but now… Not so much. The moment I was placed in front of him, my every nerve was wound taut.

It might have been the first time in this world that I actually sensed a clear danger to myself.

A man knelt in front of the king, checking over something with him. After receiving permission, he stood up and read the affidavit.

“We will now begin the trial! Silence, everyone!”

For the next hour, both sides presented their cases. As criminal suspects, we weren’t allowed to speak—in the royal court, that right was reserved for those with a rank of earl or greater. Otherwise, you needed the king’s express permission. If you did speak out of turn, that apparently proved your guilt on the spot and earned you a bonus contempt-of-court charge.

Whether you were innocent or not, that was the way this place worked. We were stuck having our representative speak for us. He had paid us a few visits during our two days in custody, discussing the nature of our case. Our kind-of lawyer, basically.

Could we trust him, though? Anxieties like that had a tendency to crop up for a reason…

“So there Sir Vester was,” he continued, “sitting back at this club and enjoying an alcoholic beverage, when this gang pushed their way into the place and exposed him to dreadful violence! This is not the kind of behavior that should ever be forgiven!”

“Is that the truth?”

“It is, my liege! I heard it from Kaijin himself, and I also have written testimony from the owners of the club. There can be no mistaking the course of events that night!”

…Um, what? What did he just say? I thought he was on our side, and it took all of five minutes for him to go turncoat. That can’t be good, can it?

I shot a look at Kaijin—his face turned bright red, then slowly began draining of color.

I’ll bet. Our lawyer wasn’t even bothering to make excuses for us.

It went without saying that representatives for the accused weren’t allowed to lie in court. If they were found out, that would be another hanging. It was impossible to think any would-be lawyer would attempt it, barring extreme circumstances, and yet ours was doing it right in front of us.

“My liege!” Vester exclaimed, egging him on. “You have heard it for yourself! I beg of you to deal with these miscreants harshly!”

He flashed us a smile of supreme confidence.

Bastard. Maybe I should’ve hit him after all.

The king remained motionless, eyes closed. In his place, one of the guards beside him spoke.

“Order! I will now give the verdict! Kaijin, the mastermind behind this crime, is sentenced to twenty years of labor in the mines. His accomplices are sentenced to ten years of labor in the mines. With that, this court is hereby—”

“Wait,” a deep, quiet voice interrupted.

The king opened his eyes and looked at Kaijin.

“It has been a while, Kaijin. Do you remain in good health?”

“…Yes, my liege!” came the instant reply. Presumably he had the right to speak now. “It gladdens me that you remain so as well!”

“Yes. Now, do you and your friends”—looking at us—“have any desire to return to us?”

The audience in the royal court murmured among themselves. It must have been an unusual development. Vester immediately blanched. Our traitorous representative, meanwhile, had developed a deathly pallor.

“I beg your forgiveness, my liege, but I have already found a master to serve! I have made my vow, and it has become my treasure. A treasure so fine that, indeed, not even the direct order of my liege could make me part with it!”

This clearly angered the audience. I could see the guards staring daggers into Kaijin’s forehead. But he stood strong—chest puffed out, the picture of dignity.

The king, seeing this, closed his eyes again. “I…see.”

Silence ruled for another moment.

“I have made my decision. Listen well to my sentence! Kaijin and his friends are hereby exiled from the kingdom. After midnight tonight, when the new day comes, they are officially no longer welcome in my lands. That is all. Begone at once!” Opening his eyes, the king made his proclamation in a loud voice.

Ah, the dignity of a born leader! His overwhelming presence sent shivers through my body. Although, being king around here seemed like a terribly lonely job to have.

So there we were, after the trial, back at Kaijin’s shop. That little celebratory drink we wanted to get sure broke bad, didn’t it? Now we had to pack up and leave for good.

Oh, wait, is Gobta all right? We’re still only at day three with him, right? I was a tad nervous about that as I opened the door to his punishment room.

“Ooh! Welcome back, sir! Did you have fun? Gee, sure hope you take me with you next time!”

There he was, leaping up off the sofa to greet me! How did that happen…? He couldn’t have gotten out of my spider silk that easy!

Taking another look, I realized that the cushion Gobta had been using on the sofa was actually a tempest wolf. Wait, seriously? He actually summoned the guy?

“Uh, Gobta, how’d you get that wolf in here?”

“Oh! Right! That! I just thought to myself, ‘Hey, can you come on over, please?’ And he did, sir!”

He made it sound so easy, the bastard. None of the other hobgoblins had managed the feat from such a long range before. Maybe his brain cells were all devoted to his natural talents instead of, you know, actual intelligence. It seemed crazy to me. I concluded that it must’ve been a coincidence.

I then realized that the sight of the tempest wolf had frozen the dwarves in their tracks. “What’s wrong?” I asked. “We need to start packing, don’t we?”

“W-wait a second!” the panicked Kaijin replied. “What on earth is a black direwolf doing in here?!”

“Yeah! You need to run! That’s a B-ranked monster!”

And now they were panicking.

They looked so ridiculous, I was actually amused.

“Oh, he’s fine! Really! No problem! He’s like a big dog, really! We keep him indoors and everything!”

My attempts at calming everyone’s nerves met stony silence.

Black direwolves, by the way, were a somewhat advanced version of regular direwolves. If they evolved in a more magic-oriented fashion, their fur would turn black. The coats of the tempest direwolves were black as well but with a uniquely colored sheen.

Direwolves weren’t really supposed to evolve toward the “storm” element in the first place—that was just a side effect of the name I gave out.

In volcanic regions, direwolves would evolve with a fire element and become red direwolves. Near bodies of water, you would find blue direwolves. In the forests would be green direwolves. In other words, adopting elements was a fairly common evolutionary pattern for these guys. The magic-infused black ones, meanwhile, were apparently a notorious threat to any nearby humans and humanoids. The tempest element gave our wolf pack an ever-so-slight purplish shine to their black color, something you wouldn’t notice if you weren’t paying attention.

Sorry I spooked the dwarves, I guess. We didn’t have the time for me to explain the whole story. I’ll just call him Gobta’s pet for now and move on.

After hurriedly pressing the dwarves to put on their best traveler’s outfits, I pushed them out of the shop, went back in by myself, and proceeded to swallow up the entire contents of the building. Capacity-wise, I was still A-okay, but swallowing the building whole would probably have drawn a little too much attention, so I kept it at that.

Once our preparations for the journey were complete, we made our way to where Rigur and the other goblins were waiting.

The space was silent, a far cry from the loud arguing of a moment ago.

After the five accused had all but fled from the court, nobody in attendance dared move an inch. Vester nervously swallowed. The persistent silence of the king put both him and everyone else on edge.

Then Gazel shattered the stillness.

“Now, Vester. Do you have anything you wish to say?”

“A—a thousand pardons, my liege, but this is all a misunderstanding! It simply must be a mistake!”

Vester’s voice was a nervous warble as he pleaded his case. The king regarded him coldly, betraying none of his emotions.

“A misunderstanding? If it is, then it has cost me one of my most faithful servants.”

“How can you say such a thing, my liege?! You call what he offered to you ‘faithfulness’? Why, he is simply a man off the street—”

“Vester. I see you are mistaken. Kaijin left my corps on his own volition. When I speak of a faithful servant I have lost…I refer to you.”

The minister’s heart raced. I need to find an excuse… But his mind was blank. The words refused to come to his lips. His thoughts were slow to form. What did he just say? He referred to me? Then…

“Let me ask you once again, Vester. Do you have anything you wish to say?”

Fear, pure fear, dominated Vester’s head. The king had asked him a question. He needed to reply. But all his speech had abandoned him.

“I… My liege, I am afraid…I…”

“I had great expectations for you, Vester. I have been waiting for so long. Even during the magic-armor affair, I waited for you to finally speak the truth. And now I find that, yet again…”

The expression Gazel showed Vester could almost be described as one of kindness. The king’s words pierced through the minister like the sharpest of swords.

“Look at these.”

The king pointed out two items one of his attendants had produced. Vester, eyes hollow, looked at them. One was a sphere filled with a liquid that he had never seen before; the other was a single longsword.

“Do you know what these are?”

The liquid remained a mystery to Vester, but the longsword he remembered. Kaijin had brought it in.

“You may explain to him,” the king ordered his attendant. The following speech took a fairly long time for Vester to fully understand.

The liquid was a life-regenerating elixir, a near-perfect extract of the juices of the hipokute herbs. A so-called “full” potion, named for its miraculous recovery properties.

Even with the best technology the dwarves had at their fingertips, the purest extract they could produce topped off at 98 percent. That made it only as potent as a “high” potion. This liquid, meanwhile, was at 99 percent!

Vester’s face twisted in shock. He had to know! What did they do to produce such a level of—? But before he could ask, the attendant had even more shocking news for him. The longsword had a core of magisteel that was already working its way through the rest of the blade.

Impossible. That process began only after a ten-year adaptation procedure! The shock set Vester’s mind reeling. If this was true…!

“Both of these wonders were brought about by that slime,” the king said. “And thanks to your behavior, we have lost our connection to such a creature. Do you have anything you wish to say?”

Now Vester realized the full extent of his king’s rage. There was truly nothing he could say.

“I… I do not, my liege.”

Tears began welling in his eyes. He knew it all too well now—his lord had abandoned him. All he wanted was to serve his king. To win his approval. That was it. When did I go wrong? When I grew jealous of Kaijin, or before…? He didn’t know. All he knew was that he had betrayed the king’s trust.

“I…see. In that case… Vester! I hereby forbid you from entering the palace. Do not let me see you before me again. I shall leave you with this: I have tired of you!”

Hearing his words, Vester stood up and bowed deeply to his lord. Then he left, setting off to pay his penance for his foolishness.

As he did, a guard ran forward and arrested the representative serving as Vester’s accomplice.

The king watched them out of the corner of his eye. “My dark agent!” he shouted with some urgency. “Track the movements of that slime! Do not let it escape your notice. Ever!”

The emphatic order of the normally taciturn king gave pause to everyone in the chamber.

“By my life, my liege!” the dark agent said before disappearing.

The king thought to himself.

Who was that slime?

A type of monster, no doubt. Was that the level of monster being released, then?

His hero’s instincts were giving him a feeling he couldn’t ignore. Trusting it, he began to take action.

Rigur and gang were all safe at the edge of the forest.

Between this and that, we had spent a total of five days in the city—pretty much what we expected. Things didn’t quite go according to plan, but we largely accomplished what we’d set out to do.

Too bad we didn’t get to hit the Free Guild in town. It sounded kind of like an adventurer’s club to me, the exact kind of place where an otherworlder or two might hang out. It would’ve been nice to check out all the gilt and armor the dwarves were known for, too. But oh well. We had a bunch of master craftsmen with us here. That was enough of a find. That, and I still had twenty gold pieces. Score.

I took the time to introduce Kaijin and his hapless friends to the goblins. We’d all be working together for a while to come, so I wanted to get off on the right foot. Come to think of it, I didn’t see much in the way of casual racism from the dwarves—most of them, anyway. Given the demi-magical origins we all shared, I suppose it made sense. I could imagine us crossing their paths again someday.

We were now more or less ready to roll. The only problem was transport. Ranga, of course, was wagging his tail, as if me hopping on him was the pinnacle of his life. I explained to him that I needed his full fifteen-foot size for a bit so we could fit two out of the three brothers on his back.

Ranga was not a fan of this idea. His face instantly turned sullen as he wobbled backward and plopped his ass on the ground. He glowered at the newcomers as if to suggest he could just eat them instead and save everyone a lot of trouble.

The dwarves almost jumped out of their skin. Even when they first saw him, they’d wailed in perfect unison. “““Gaahh! How could you ever…?!””” and so forth.

Either this was a well-practiced routine of theirs, or Ranga really did scare them that much. There had to be something I could do.

“Hang on, Ranga,” I said. “I tried transforming into one of you guys earlier, and I’d like to test out how it works a bit. That’s why I want you to let these dwarves on, all right?”

His head immediately shot up. “I understand, my master!”

Kaijin and Garm, eldest of the three brothers, would go on my back; Ranga would take Dold and Mildo. Once they were on, I’d spin some Sticky Thread to make sure they stayed on. These guys did nearly fifty at their peak. In this motorcycle-free world, the experience would probably make them pass out. Not that I knew whether I could handle that speed or whether I wanted to.

Now for me.

Mimic: Tempest Starwolf.

“Astounding! Your dazzling strength knows no bounds, my master!”

“Hah-hah-hah! Yeah, I’ll bet! And you’ll look like this someday soon, if you keep it up!”

“We will do our best to live up to your lofty expectations, my master!”

Ranga’s eyes sparkled at this new mission in life. The rest of the tempest wolves grew equally excited. Always a good idea to motivate the troops a bit.

So I turned to Kaijin and Gharm to get them to hop on, and…

Well, that’s weird. They’re all unconscious and foaming at the mouth. What’re these guys doing, anyway? Oh well. I knew that practice would come in handy! A little Sticky Thread off my back, and everyone was pulled up and put firmly in place. Success!

Fainted dwarves wouldn’t make great traveling companions, but either way, we were off.

By the way, I intended to start off at a leisurely trot, only to find myself going over sixty miles per hour or so. Maybe it was for the better that my passengers weren’t awake to see this. If they were, our acceleration would’ve made them lose their lunches.

I looked back at Dold and Mildo on Ranga’s back. They had a little more backbone…or I thought they did. Then I realized they were just unconscious with their eyes open. My condolences.

Putting the dwarves in the back of my mind, I proceeded down the path back home. At least they wouldn’t bite their tongues or whatnot if they were unconscious. If I were them, I wouldn’t want to wake up in the middle of this scream machine anyway. It’d be better for everyone if they stayed asleep until it was all over. I’ll feed ’em, of course, but…

I really am mean to people, aren’t I? And speaking of which…

“Rigur! Have you ever successfully summoned one of the black wolves before?”

“…I have not, Sir Rimuru, it embarrasses me to admit.”

Hmm. He hadn’t, and it was a point of frustration for the other goblins, too, not to mention their wolf partners. So why just Gobta?

“Really? Because I guess Gobta managed to.”

“What? Gobta, is that true?”

“Y-yes! I gave the call, and he came over for me!”

There was a fighting spirit in everyone’s (and every dog’s) eyes now.

“…It’s not impossible,” Rigur reflected. “Gobta is strong enough to have done the Dwarven Kingdom journey round-trip on foot once!”

Oh, right… I thought he was a slobbering idiot, but apparently he was good in a pinch. He was an idiot, of course, but not useless. Surviving a four-month journey through the wilderness and foraging off the land wasn’t something any old guy could do. He’d had to deal with monsters along the way, too, weak though they might have been.

I placed Gobta a few rungs higher in my internal totem pole. He’d probably tumble right back down soon enough.

We decided to make camp once night fell. I wasn’t tired at all, but everyone else needed rest—I could test out my abilities in the meantime.

A tempest starwolf, to say the least, was physically gifted. I could practically feel the power pulsing inside me. Just a light jump, and I was way up in the sky; on land, I tore up any path I found with my rapid sprint. Add on some quick reflexes, and it looked like I had what it took to make good use of this form.

Most of my battles so far had involved me busting out a few Water Blades and ending it just like that. I hadn’t thought about it much, but strength—and reflexes—were going to be a lot more important to me if things got hairy. On that front, the tempest starwolf seemed to have nearly everything I could want.

With the Sage’s support, this wolf could probably insta-kill the black snake from back in that cave—no skills required. I’d learned in town that the lizard rated a B-minus in rank, and from there, I used the Sage’s simulation skills to figure out how the rest stacked up against it.

It told me that the black snake wasn’t even an A, and I could win against ten of those centipedes at once, so I’d be an A-minus or so? Sounds about right.

A tempest starwolf not under my control would be stronger than a black snake, though it probably couldn’t take ten at once. Although there was that weird Dark Lightning skill to think about…

My instincts told me that one would pack a punch, so I’d test it out in slime form first. That ought to temper it a little bit so I can observe it.

The Dark Lightning I unleashed was… Let’s call it “beyond belief.” There was a flash, followed by a deafening roar of thunder. The large riverside boulder I chose as a target was gone, crumbled to pebbles. I could see the bolt crashing down faster than light…but witnessing its dreadful force for myself simply amazed me. Way beyond expectations.

Heh-heh-heh… Let’s pretend that didn’t happen! I made my decision instantly.

Right! I wasn’t doing anything! Just a little lightning storm.

Let’s leave it at that. Seal it away for later, like the snake’s Poisonous Breath. It’d be better if I saved it until I knew how to temper the strength of my attacks a little. Besides, with all the internal magic that cost me, I’d better learn how to adjust things soon. No tossing that around willy-nilly. I could wind up running out of magic in the middle of battle.

Given the range of that lightning strike, though, it could make a good ace in the hole someday. The entire twenty-yard radius around the disintegrated boulder was now blazing hot and glassy. Something to think about.

Rigur, of course, had a few hobgobs there in short order to find out what was going on. I told them it was just a rogue thunderbolt. Sorry for interrupting your sleep, guys. I’d need to save the more dangerous experimentation for someplace where I could work in peace. Some soundproofing would be nice, too. Otherwise, it’d be hard to really flex my muscle.

Still, there was some more data to work with. I replayed the simulation in my mind. According to the results, a tempest starwolf out of my control could use Dark Lightning and probably kill ten black snakes at once. Which meant the attack was probably past A rank.

The guidepost for an A rating was being able to destroy a small town—“disaster” level, in other words. Better avoid that transformation around urban areas.

My experiments continued, albeit a lot more quietly, until morning.

The next day…

I let Rigur and his people handle breakfast. Goblin food was, well, pretty simple. Just heat and eat. Haute cuisine it wasn’t, not that I could taste it. If I ever pick up that sense again, I’ll have to teach them the finer points, I guess. Food one can look forward to is one of the first steps toward an advanced culture.

Could these goblins really acclimatize to “culture,” though? I thought so. I had no idea how, but I wanted to test out everything I could. If we got tripped up over cooking, that would be a bad start.

The dwarves were up, still white as sheets.

“You all right?”

“Y…yes… Where are we?”

As they slowly shook out the cobwebs, they realized they were in unfamiliar territory. It unnerved them. I explained we were on our way to the village these goblins called home.

“Wh-what?! That would be a journey of some two months, normally! We won’t have enough food unless we procure a cart at some nearby town!”

It’s a little late to be surprised about that, isn’t it? I wanted to say, but—thinking about it—I hadn’t really explained much to them, had I? Things like how we got here and how fast we were going. We weren’t in a hurry today, so I decided to take the time to explain in detail about what we were doing.

Breakfast happened to be served right then. It was just a few wild hares roasted whole, but it was more than enough stimulus for the dwarves’ stomachs to start rumbling. Guess they can keep food down, at least.

As they ate, I reviewed our future plans. We would be at the village in another two days or so, I explained.

“““No…”””

They whispered in unison, realizing exactly how fast those wolves were taking them.

“Hey, don’t worry!” I replied. “Once you get used to it, it’s a breeze!”

It’d be nice if they could get used to it, but I figured we’d probably reach the end of the journey before then.

We set off back down the road.

Time to build a Thought Communication space for us. Now that I’d done it a few times, it came naturally to me. The dwarves picked up on it, too, which was a relief.

Thought Communication was a sort of high-level version of Telepathy, letting you build links and talk with multiple people at once. It also made things like strategy meetings easier for us. It remained effective across a range of half a mile or so, which was more than enough for my purposes.

On the second day, the dwarves seemed largely capable of remaining on their rides without passing out. The force of the wind kept them from opening their eyes, so I built a sort of visor for them all from silk. Kind of like a helmet replacement, I suppose, and it seemed to do the trick.

I also started noticing that I could control my Sticky Thread to some extent via Telepathy. Once you got used to controlling magicules, it was amazing what you could do with them. Sticky Thread probably wasn’t the only thing I could apply that to, either. These little particles were the essence of magic.

Either way, the dwarves were getting into the swing of things, and their makeshift helmets were having the effect I wanted. I could talk with them now, and they were kind enough to teach me a thing or two about life in their kingdom as we rode on. The goblins were listening in as well, chiming in about their own experiences, and we had a nice, friendly confab for much of the day. This should keep up in the village, too, I hoped.

Dwarves, being partially sprites, were extraordinarily long-lived. Goblins, being partially magic-born, were notoriously short-lived. Evolution—or perhaps living conditions—had created a fairly large difference between the two.

I sometimes wondered if goblins were actually a step down the evolutionary ladder.

Hobgoblins, the next step up, seemed a bit like the monster equivalent of dwarves to me. Like they had gone back to their ancestral roots, in a way, with a lot more magic force at their disposal. I wouldn’t know for sure, but I imagined the evolution did wonders for their life spans as well.

They still weren’t the handiest, though, and there was a stark difference between monsters and fairies, but still…

Dwarves, for their part, were probably more closely related to monsters than, say, elves, another sprite race. Maybe that would help these two species get along, too.

As I suddenly remembered something else, I decided to bring it up.

“Kaijin. I know I’m a little late asking, but are you okay with this? You really respected that king, didn’t you?”

“Oh, that? I did, yes. There isn’t a dwarf alive who doesn’t respect him. Imagine having the hero of your nightly fairy tales serving as your actual king!”

It was an interesting thing to consider—the mythical heroes of the past, still alive and kicking and protecting their people as king. That would help me build a pretty healthy respect, yeah. I’d want to support him—this ideal king, one who always did the right thing and never allowed room for mistakes.

I wondered how much he had to sacrifice to maintain that ideal in reality.

In a way, it was frightening. It took a lot of spirit, I’m sure, to be a leader like that. That was what made people believe in him.

…Was I ready for that? I had become, more or less, the master of this goblin village. But what comes after that?

“Well, let me ask you this, then, Kaijin. Why did you come with me? Wouldn’t it have been the best thing for your life if you rejoined the king?”

“Gah-hah-hah-hah! Well! A lot more sensitive than I thought, eh, Rimuru? I did it because it looked like fun. It was just instinct, you know? Like, ‘Hey, this guy’s gonna go out and do something!’ That’s all the reason I needed, y’know?”

…Yeah. Maybe. Fair enough. He’s right!

“Heh,” I retorted. “Well, don’t come crying to me later if it turns sour. I’m pretty well-known for being mean to people!”

It was true. I did practically nothing by myself. I entrusted everything to others. But I did want to help. To be relied on. I wanted to be the sort of person who could manage that.

“Oh, I know!” Kaijin replied.

I nodded, satisfied.

Two days later, we arrived at the village on time. Mission accomplished.