

CHAPTER 3

THE CONGREGATION

The Kingdom of Farmus was a vast nation, a sort of front door leading to the assorted nations to the west.

These nations had no direct ties to the Eastern Empire. Instead of official relations, they had powerful merchants who took it personally upon themselves to distribute in-demand goods between the two lands. Most of this informal trade went through the Armed Nation of Dwargon, which (publicly, at least) was neutral and thus gave their tacit consent to the goods going to and fro between them.

Part of Farmus’s territory was adjacent to the Dwarven Kingdom, meaning that anyone who lived in one of the so-called Western Nations would have to go through Farmus to reach Dwargon. That is, unless they were willing to brave a path through the Forest of Jura. The Farmus path was far safer and more monster-free, and even with the tariffs and fees applied, it still resulted in a more profitable journey. No merchant in their right mind would opt out of it.

This all meant that not only rare Eastern Empire goods but also high-quality dwarven weapons and armor could be obtained by the Western Nations through the informal trade market with Farmus. It had made Farmus’s capital of Marris a well-funded and burgeoning trade city, home to people from all over the world, and earned it the nickname of the “front door” to the west. It also meant the kingdom’s coffers were full to overflowing, both from the taxes charged to traders and the revenues from the more well-heeled merchants, paid in exchange for assorted services.

Among the nations of the west, it was certainly either the richest or very close to it.

Nidol Migam, Earl of Migam, was indignant.

Farmus was, indeed, a rich kingdom, but so much power was tipped toward its central government that practically none of those riches reached the nobility tasked with running its more remote regions. Redistribution of wealth was an alien concept around here, and the earldom of Migam never seemed to see any relief from the taxes they were expected to collect from their citizens.

As with other nations, they were taxed based on their agricultural harvests—and yet, they were also charged with defending their borders against the threats posted by the forest. That was the current source of the Earl of Migam’s indignation.

“Have you ever heard something so ridiculous?” he spat out, recalling what the finance minister had just told him. Simply remembering it made his blood boil: The Storm Dragon has vanished, and thus, the central government’s special support payments will be ending, as of today. And that was that—no back talk allowed. After being summoned to the capital. After being forced to wait for three hours.

That stipend had been a huge aid to them, certainly. The earl’s lands went right up to the Forest of Jura, making it a keystone of Farmus’s border defense. But that wasn’t just Migam’s problem. It was a problem that loomed over the entire country.

“And yet…of all the patronizing things they could have done…!”

Nidol was so angry, he couldn’t help but verbalize his thoughts. There was too much to consider. He had to think about how he would keep the earldom going.

Sealed away or not, Veldora the Storm Dragon was a special S-ranked monster and thus ignored at one’s own peril. With the disappearance now public knowledge, it was perhaps understandable that such “special”—i.e., provisional—support payments no longer made sense.

But the timing couldn’t have been worse. The Storm Dragon was just as much a threat to the monsters, too—and no more dragon meant no more overlord to keep them in check. They needed to strengthen their border forces, if anything, for all the new monster activity—and then they lost their budget for it.

That, in a nutshell, was what angered Nidol at the moment.

The government might have a point, but to the Earl of Migam, that didn’t matter.

How do I protect my land now…?

Mercenaries cost money. Adventurers from the Free Guild couldn’t be trusted, when push came to shove. Now was exactly when the government should be extending a lifeline to him. They were talentless fools, completely failing to grasp the situation.

If, heaven forbid, Nidol Migam’s lands were swallowed up by hordes of monsters, it’d cost Farmus all the trust placed upon it by neighboring countries and large-scale merchants. It would be the government that would pay the price for that, and right this minute, it was setting itself up for doom.

The earl continued to curse his superiors under his breath. None of this was his own responsibility. He knew that, but still…

He sighed in his wagon, his mind a tad more settled. No one left but the royal family to press upon … He recalled the face of the king. It filled him with despair. The sheer avarice of that man would never allow him to care about the fate of some patch of frontier land. It would be blasphemy to say that out loud, but those were Nidol’s honest feelings.

Without the pretext of the Storm Dragon to prop him up, the Earl of Migam might be forced to raise taxes, even.

His territory bordered only two other areas: Central Farmus and the forest. There was no reason to prepare for invasion from other countries, and thus no need for a permanent standing army. The earl’s territorial force, tasked with driving off monsters and magical beasts, numbered no more than a hundred or so knights.

The number made Nidol wince.

Technically speaking, the earl had been taking the special stipend and pocketing it. The payments were meant to keep up strict patrols across the border with the Forest of Jura, but in this far-off region with no need for a large army, all they had to worry about was handling monsters. With the rise of the Free Guild over the past decade or so, too, the costs of dispatching monsters had gone down a great deal.

Thus, this whole disaster was something of a comeuppance for the earl himself, payback for failing to enact the measures he should have. He was aware of that, but it was still a bitter pill for Nidol to swallow.

It all began with a missive from the Western Holy Church. The official announcement that the Storm Dragon had vanished came via magic courier, and it forced the Earl of Migam to take action.

The Western Holy Church was the state religion of the Holy Empire of Lubelius. It worshipped a single god, Luminus, as its absolute deity, and served as the headquarters of what was generally the largest religion practiced across the Western Nations. This broad faith was for good reason—there were paladins within their armies, holy knights who each boasted A-ranked powers and beyond, and they were trusted and revered as reliable experts in the slaying of monsters.

The Church’s central creed revolved around eradicating monsters from the world, and thus whenever a smaller nation had an issue with such creatures it couldn’t handle alone, the Church would send Crusader paladin forces to aid them.

Such a virtuous organization, working for the good of the faithful, would never send false information to its people. The Church was already alerting him about monsters growing more active in the forest—it had to be true, Nidol concluded. So he reluctantly sought to reinforce his own force of knights. A hundred would be enough to simply patrol the forest, but should the monsters fall out of control, being unprepared for it would be a problem. His knights needed to stay in place—that was his conclusion.

So citing emergency provisions, he called in retired knights and the like, successfully beefing up his force to three times its original size. But that still didn’t quell his fears. It would take at least ten years, he thought, for a new pecking order to make itself known among the monsters. Relying on retired knights to weather that long, long decade would be tough.

Requisitioning Free Guild adventurers would place pressure on his financial affairs. Calling for an emergency draft was a last resort. For now, he would have to hope for a healthy crew of volunteers.

The adventurers would gladly take up a monster-slaying role around the forest, but that came at a price—a price that ballooned depending on the danger rank awarded. Having them permanently stationed in Migam was out of the question, but if the worst happened, he still needed to consider tapping their resources. He had already used up most of the government’s special stipend, but his earldom was not facing a financial crisis yet—for the most part, those funds went toward his personal entertainment anyway.

Right now, while the retirees were back on the force, Nidol figured he needed to raise a new generation of young knights at once. It was, he imagined, the best measure he could take at the moment. So he funneled all future special stipend funds into the force, along with some of his own money—no point scrimping now.

And it seemed to work. Over time, it seemed like it would all come together. And then the central government summoned him and took his funding away. Who could blame Nidol for losing his temper? Not that being a lazy, embezzling ruler would earn him much sympathy…

In his wagon, as he returned home, Nidol continuously racked his brain, figuring out what he should do next. His mind was full of financial issues. There was no more space in it for the even thornier problems awaiting him soon enough.

Upon arriving back at his own earldom, the Earl of Migam was greeted by a request from Franz, the local guild master, for a meeting. The earl agreed to it, wanting to discuss how to defend the land going forward, and they arranged a conference the following day.

The guild master was practically breathing down his neck, pleading that now was no time to act slowly. Franz was usually a calm, even-minded leader, and seeing him in such a lather was a concern. It made Nidol fear the worst, so he ignored the usual procedure and immediately gave permission for the meeting.

“This is an unverified report, but it is said that an orc lord has appeared.” The next day, Franz offered only a brief hello and told him.

“…What did you say? An orc lord?! And what do you mean, unverified?”

It almost made the good earl faint on the spot. This was a serious crisis, and only his rage kept him going as he confronted Franz.

Unperturbed, Franz continued his report, stating that adventurers from the kingdom of Blumund had heard rumors of the orc lord.

“I would like your help in gauging the nature of this threat. To be exact, I would like you to send out an exploratory force for us.”

There was nothing unusual about this request from the serene guild master to the half-hysterical earl. The Free Guild was not a charity, and it was unaffiliated with any government. They existed in cooperation with, but not within the framework of, the earldom.

“If you would like us to handle this investigation, we could accept that, at a special emergency price…”

“Silence! You money-grubbing weasel!!”

Look who’s talking, Franz thought, remaining silently composed. He knew the matter needed looking into either way. Franz had a duty to keep his guild members safe; he wasn’t going to expose them to dangerous missions without a suitable reward.

Normally, monster-hunting requests like this would need to follow a certain procedure. A town or village would file an official request, providing all the relevant information to the Free Guild. The guild would then use eyewitness accounts and the like to assign a danger level to the monster (or monsters) in question, sometimes sending appropriate personnel to further examine the issue.

Guild regulations dictated that for particularly dicey jobs, pre-evaluation was even more vital to ensure the right rank was assigned. If you wanted a monster slain, you needed several adventurers (guild rules stated three or more) of similar level or higher to tackle it.

Promotions were awarded to members based on their ability to defeat a given target one-on-one, but based on safety considerations, such duels were not the norm during guild business. This was because even if a group of adventurers went against a monster, if the level disparity was significant, they would most likely be wiped out—or at best, eke out a victory at the cost of several deaths and severe injuries to the survivors.

This all meant that Franz couldn’t just throw a posse of brave men and women at a monster the moment it was spotted.

Normally, they’d have the time to take a more gradual approach—but they were being swamped. Monsters were showing up more and more frequently lately. The time lag between taking a request, sending people out to handle it, and coming back was turning into a problem. There were starting not to be enough adventurers to go around.

They needed some kind of organization that could patrol the villages, tasked with handling monster duties without having to file a formal request. And they didn’t have that, so instead, Franz asked the earl for more intel. It was all perfectly normal.

Having this situation so politely and thoroughly laid out for him made the earl fall into silence.

He didn’t want to deploy his own knights to keep his own town safe, but he couldn’t just leave the countryside villages to fend for themselves. As long as they paid taxes, the earl had a duty to protect them all—even as it squeezed the noose tighter around his neck. Franz’s guidance was perfectly logical, and Nidol could mount no objections to it. This lack of guild personnel was likely the reason Franz requested this meeting in the first place.

And what about that orc lord? This beast of a monster that consumes everything it comes across? That was nothing to ignore, either. He would have to file a full report with the central government and ask for reinforcements—and as a result, gathering more information was job one. Reliable intelligence was the only thing that would make that bureaucracy take action.

So an investigation was a must—and an urgent one.

“And another thing, I have another unidentified report, and one I find rather difficult to relay to you…” Franz’s voice was grave as the Earl of Migam fretted over what to do with the expeditionary force.

His face was embittered enough to make the earl fear the worst.

“Enough bluster. Give it to me.”

“My pardons, sir. The orc lord’s armies reportedly—”

“His armies?! He’s already built up that much of a force?!”

“Yes, I am sad to say. And they are reported to number…approximately two hundred thousand.”

“…What? Can you truly be serious?!”

Nidol was shouting at the top of his lungs. It did nothing to affect Franz’s facial expression. He was not one to make jokes, and the earl knew this was the truth. But it was tough to take. It was just too far separated from reality.

“And how sure are you about this?” he asked, silently praising himself for not fainting on the spot.

“Based on circumstantial evidence, we believe it is quite likely to be the truth.”

“Any suggestions on how to deal with it?”

“Our only option is to ascertain which direction their armies are going and enact swift evacuation measures—”

“You want me to abandon this town?”

“If you believe you have a chance at victory for yourself, then we will not stop you from pursuing that. But if you ask us to participate in the effort, then I’m afraid we cannot accept that without hearing some concrete operational plans.”

“…All right,” Nidol whispered, head hung down. “You know there’d be no chance anyway.”

“In that case, I will leave the expeditionary force deployment in your hands.”

With that final reminder, Franz quickly left the room.

The Earl of Migam thought for a moment.

Whether the town would have to be abandoned or not, he had to consider the worst-case scenario. Which meant his knights had to stay put. But they needed that expedition to take place.

What should I do?

It was like all his neglect and mismanagement was coming back to him like a roaring tidal wave. But was there no point complaining about it.

After pondering a few moments, Nidol came up with what he thought was an excellent idea. All he really needed was intelligence on the threat. Perhaps he could deploy a magician versed in teleportation magic, one who could return to town the moment he was finished with his investigation. This sorcerer’s escort team wouldn’t know about their own mission; all they had to do was protect him until they reached the forest. And if he just cobbled together a few of the expendable knights to build this expedition, he should be able to keep the salaries he paid to a minimum.

And if they did manage to come back alive, he could deal with it then. The vital thing was to figure out where the orc lord was going.

The group that Earl Nidol Migam put together in response to this was called the Frontier Expedition Force. It was composed of thirty members.

Inside town was a correctional facility that housed Migam’s petty criminals—villagers who went into debt and attempted to rob travelers from out of town; rowdies brought into custody for picking fights on the streets. They were usually put to work assisting the knight corps, at times even serving as opponents for the knights’ combat drills as part of their “corrections.” One of these inmates was appointed the leader of the expedition force.

Nidol wouldn’t lose a minute’s worth of sleep over their deaths. They were light on his finances, too, as an added bonus.

That was about all the thought Nidol put into their selection. But the group did not share the earl’s motives.

“Pfft. That greedy old coot. If it’s freedom he’s giving us, let’s accept it with good cheer, eh?”

Such were the feelings of Yohm, the man assigned to lead the thirty miscreants of the Frontier Expedition Force as a coherent unit. His skin was darkly tanned and supple, stretched tightly over his muscles. He was not notably tall, but facing him would still intimidate the casual observer into fearing for his safety. Often, that was all Yohm needed to win the mental battle. This was backed up by his face, which wasn’t unattractive, but his guttural, sneering smile made him difficult for anyone to dare approach.

His talents would seem to indicate a quick promotion from street tough to the boss of one alley gang or another. Instead, Yohm was now leading a force of thirty deep into the Forest of Jura.

It had been a week since they replenished their supplies at the last village bordering the forest. Rommel, magician and the earl’s protégé, could feel himself wither around Yohm, as if he had been placed in front of a ferocious man-eating tiger. He could almost feel his knees knocking.

“So what kind of expedition’re we on?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you. It is a secret mission.”

“Oh-hohh? What kinda nonsense is that yer spoutin’, eh? I think you better tell me while I’m still askin’ nicely, know what I mean?”

“I’m telling the truth! They haven’t given me any details either, believe me.”

“Hmm! I see, I see. Well, fine. They used contractual magic on us to make us follow your orders, but once this is done, we’ve all been promised our freedom. Right?”

“Yes, precisely. The contract that was signed with my client, the Earl of Migam, said exactly that.”

“Yeah, and I’m tellin’ ya, man, that’s BS! How the hell’re we supposed to finish this mission if we don’t even know what it is, huh? Bumpin’ around in the middle of this evil forest… You screwed in the head, or what?”

Facing the full brunt of Yohm’s anger made Rommel feel like he’d faint from fear. He understood that his explanation made little sense, but no way could he give them the truth. If he did, he’d find it perfectly logical if they killed him where he stood.

“L-listen, we… We received a report from the Free Guild that something strange is happening in the forest. So like I told you, our mission is to use this image-capturing magitool to record what’s going on, then bring it back to town—”

“Oh-hohh! So you wanna die, huh? Now I get it. Or do you think some sorcerer off the street like you can take on a pack of natural-born fighters? You don’t believe that contract means you get the right to treat us like crap ’cause we can’t do anything, do ya?”

Rommel’s heart was struck with the distinct sense that this man was serious. The contractual magic meant that he had to follow Rommel’s orders, but now he was starting to wonder how well that stuff even worked.

“Ah, ahh…”

He took a fearful step back, only to suddenly feel something cold upon his neck.

“’Ey, boss, wouldn’t it be quicker to just kill ’im?”

A man dressed in black appeared, as if oozing out from the darkness. He held a knife, completely black in color, and it was now squarely against Rommel’s jugular.

“Not so fast. I wasn’t planning to, if he was willing to talk, but—”

“No! No, wait! I’ll tell you everything! Just don’t kill me…”

“Oh yeah? You willing to admit that we’re here to investigate that orc lord yet?”

“Huh?! How did you know that?!”

“Ha! What, you think I’m an infant or somethin’? I got thirty people here—you thought I didn’t have any guild insiders I could swap someone out for? I left you alive so you could undo that contract on us, that’s all. So… What happens next is up to you, I guess. What’ll it be?”

Rommel, without hesitation, decided to release the contractual magic. He clearly didn’t have long to live right now, and Yohm’s tone of voice indicated that it was best not to defy him too much. Terror gripped Rommel’s heart to the point that he was willing to do anything Yohm told him.

“Good thing we got a guy here who listens to reason, huh, bro? Forget about being used and abused to death! Now we finally got some real freedom!”

“So what’re we gonna do with him?”

“Please! Spare me my life, at least!”

Rommel’s voice was shaky, his face wet with tears, as Yohm’s men approached him.

“Well, hang on, now. I’m sure he’s at least got Life Search cast on him. We can’t let this magician die without being able to report his mission results.”

“Okay, so…what? If you’re sayin’ we gotta keep watch on ’im all hours of the day, I’d rather just kill the man.”

Rommel barely felt alive as he listened to Yohm argue with his crew.

“Yeah, yeah, hang on. He’s a sorcerer, remember? Maybe he’ll be able to do a thing or two for us, eh?”

“Yes! Yes, I will! Anything!!”

“Yep, you hear that? ’Sides, he did free us from that contract and all. I wouldn’t feel all that right about killing ’im, but whaddaya think?”

“Well, still…”

“I won’t tell anyone! I swear I won’t tell anyone, believe me! Please!”

Being employed by nobility ever since he graduated from his magic academy, Rommel was not exactly worldly-wise. Yohm never intended to kill him; he just wanted to put him to work. Rommel was too naive to see through that. All he could do was beg Yohm for any type of help he could offer.

“Hey, how ’bout this, boss? Jagi’s a mysticist; maybe he could conjure up a spell to put ’im under our thrall?”

“Dahh, no way! At my level, Rommel’s gonna Resist it for sure.”

“I won’t! I promise I won’t put up any resistance! Please, do it!”

“Great. Anyone got any objection to that? ’Cause personally, I wouldn’t mind having him around as our adviser, sort of thing.”

“We’ll do whatever you say, boss!”

“If that’s what you want, bro, I ain’t got no complaints.”

Yohm’s men said their lines, exactly like they worked it out beforehand. Rommel completely fell for it, accepting the mystic binding spell in an effort to make Yohm believe in him. The ruse fell apart immediately afterward when they all started laughing at him, but for the sorcerer, it was a moot point.

A moot point, but Rommel still had no issue with it. This street punk, Yohm, exuded a sort of evil magnetism that was hard to put into words. One that could make any innocent, open-minded young man lose his footing along the way.

This was the beginning of a truly free Frontier Expedition Force—one free of the Earl of Migam’s leash and one sporting a sorcerer who would meekly follow Yohm wherever he went.

Around the time when Rimuru first encountered Benimaru and his clan—back when they were still merely ogres—Fuze was sighing as loudly as he could at the three adventurers in front of him. He had sent this trio to figure out what was happening in the Forest of Jura, and the moment they got back, they began telling him the most astounding of tall tales.

They were Kabal, Elen, and Gido—three talented guild members, all worthy of Fuze’s trust. Their ranks were all B, and Fuze knew they were more than up to the challenge that letter came with.

The first story they had for him was about their final moments with Shizue Izawa—a woman Fuze, as well, felt he owed his life to.

“…And that’s how she summoned Ifrit, only to get swallowed up by the raging beast!”

“She probably traveled out of town because she knew that would happen… I think she realized she didn’t have much time left.”

“You said it. And who knows if she ever recovered… My guess is that she would’ve been a lot happier with just lying down ’n’ dying in her sleep.”

Shizu had been ordered by Heinz, Fuze’s father, to accompany them on the expedition. She was a hero in Fuze’s eyes, as well as a friend he had hunted monsters with, and he was willing to do anything for her. If anything, giving her the ending she wanted filled him with happiness.

After the expedition was over, Shizu said she intended to travel to the demon lord’s territory. She had some unfinished business there, apparently, and she insisted upon attending to it. Fuze knew there was no convincing her otherwise. So he decided to help her from behind the scenes, pairing her with three adventurers he planned to send into the forest.

A pity, then, that they weren’t with her to the very end. Fuze had no right to criticize them for that. Their mission came first, and Fuze himself had kept her true nature a secret from them.

But did they really have to leave her under the care of monsters?!

He had no right to criticize them, but it still left a bad taste in his mouth. Plus, there was so much of their story that he just couldn’t accept.

Shizu was one thing, but their briefing was entirely based on monsters building a town for themselves. A single slime was at the top of the food chain, gathering hobgoblins to construct this town—a full-on, sturdily made municipality, just like any human settlement.

Some of the more intelligent monsters did build small communities. Even goblins and other low-end creatures could slap together shelters for themselves. So having a settlement or whatnot was nothing to shout about. But this trio was talking about a bunch of monsters clearing land in the forest, chopping down trees, and using the wood to build homes. They even divided the town into distinct zones, crafting intricate plans about what would be built where.

The more Fuze heard about it, the more it sounded like a real, full-on town. But it was hard to accept monsters pulling a trick like that. And that slime made him wonder. This creature, apparently named Rimuru, didn’t seem like your typical named monster. In fact, all the monsters in this town were named, a situation that turned common sense on its ear.

All this apparently happened after this Rimuru monster appeared. It was too shocking a tale to ignore.

“So after these monsters rescued you, this is the town you were taken to?”

“Right. And we’re talking, you know, several hundred C-ranked monsters living together? There was really nothing we could’ve done. I thought I was a goner for sure. And then, they fed us actual cooked meat!”

“Mmm, yeah, that was good. I hadn’t eaten anything for three whole days, so…”

Shocking though their tale was, however, these three buffoons were making it sound like a nice campout in the woods. And after that, Shizu went out of control and Rimuru defeated the magic-born she transformed into. It was all simply beyond belief. Ifrit was a Special A–grade spirit. If something like that went rogue and started attacking, it’d be a calamity-class danger. A nation the size of Blumund would face a truly existential crisis.

And—a slime, the lowest class of monster, defeated this?!

Fuze wanted to shout at them to quit joking, but they all acted dead serious in their report. Between that, the dwarven artisans in town, and the healing potion that took care of even near-lethal injuries, he honestly began to wonder if they had dreamed it all.

He suspected some form of illusory magic, but that was doubtful. Not as long as Elen was there. Magicians like her had high magical resistance, and anyone who could overcome that with their illusions was a Special A grade in themselves.

Plus, the equipment the trio had on was some seriously compelling physical evidence. They had boasted about it to Fuze to no end, but clearly it was of quality make and superior performance—a first-class set. They even possessed an item or two forged by Garm, that most famous of dwarven craftsmen. Fuze could tell they weren’t fakes.

Based on that evidence, the story couldn’t have been a magic-driven fever dream. It was ridiculous, but he had to accept it as the truth. He had to, but the report left him at a loss.

How should he even judge this news?

We had best send someone else to investigate, he decided after a week’s worth of pained deliberation.

By Kabal’s description, his team never felt in danger inside this monster town. They had come home with gifts of equipment and healing potion, so that evaluation made sense. That, and after examining all this equipment, they found no curses applied to it and also potion of a better quality than almost anything the local guild had seen.

Fuze had the equipment returned to them—they’d be constantly complaining to him otherwise, and their original gear was all broken into pieces anyway, apparently, which meant they couldn’t take any more jobs without it. In exchange, he did collect the remaining potion from them, using it to confirm their story.

When a painful burn victim came into the guild, he used the potion on him, wondering if it’d work as well as Kabal claimed it did. In an instant, the blistered skin was healed, without so much as a scar remaining. The sorcerer-doctors at the hospital had seen nothing like it—they swore it was akin to a divine miracle, brought about by the holiest of magic. That bumbling trio wasn’t lying after all.

This town of Rimuru’s was orderly, populated by monsters that followed the slime’s orders. What’s more—although Fuze couldn’t guess at the motive—the slime expressed a desire to visit their own city sometime. Kabal and his friends said he was welcome, and should it ever happen, Fuze had already asked the trio to arrange things with him.

To him, the idea of letting some unknown monster venture into the kingdom of Blumund was outrageous. But defying the will of a monster powerful enough to defeat Ifrit solo would be just as foolish.

Fuze found himself plagued with self-doubt. If I let such a monster into town, I could easily be prosecuted for subversion against the state …

No matter what it took—even if it meant providing his own funds for the job—he really had to investigate this in more detail.

Just as Fuze was fretting over who to select for this new expedition, Kabal and his cohorts came running over with a new problem. He could hear Kabal calling for him in the guild building now. Meeting him without an appointment normally wasn’t allowed, but the panicked tone of his shouting gave Fuze pause.

“What is it this time? Is it something to do with that one?” he asked inside his secret reception room, pointing out a hooded figure among them.

“We got trouble, Fuze! This guy said there’s an orc lord out there!”

“An orc lord?!” Fuze almost spit his tea out. First Veldora blinking out of existence; then this mystery slime; and now this orc lord. Maybe none of it directly affected Blumund much, but he was aware that monster sightings had been going up in some nearby kingdoms. Fuze suspected it might all be connected, and the thought was draining.

But the task at hand was the orc lord. “I’m sorry, but could I ask you who you are?” Fuze queried, recomposing himself.

The hooded figure immediately removed his cloak, as if waiting for his cue. “Sorry ’bout that. My name’s Gobto, and I work under my captain, Gobta. I came here to tell Kabal over there about the orc lord, upon the request of my leader, Sir Rimuru.” Then he put his hood back on and sat down again.

Fuze knew what he saw. That was a monster—a hobgoblin. He might resemble a human from far away, but the green twinge to his skin was unmistakable.

And a named monster, no less … Kabal was telling the truth …

This last bit of evidence finally convinced Fuze to believe fully in him. This orc lord report must have been the unvarnished truth as well, then.

“My name is Fuze. I serve as guild master for the Free Guild here in Blumund. Gobto, do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“What’s that, sir?”

“This Sir Rimuru, your master… Why did he want us to know about this?”

“Ooh, the rank ’n’ file like me don’t get told those kinds of things. But he also told me to tell you this: ‘If worse comes to worst, we might need to have the humans slay the orc lord for us.’”

“I see…”

“That’s what he said before going out to face the orc lord. If y’ask me, I’d say the orc lord’s well ’n’ truly dead already, but so be it. I wanted to go in with Gobta, too, but Sir Rimuru commanded me personally to travel here instead.”

Gobto must have been fairly peeved about that, if he volunteered that information without being asked. He practically grumbled the last few words out. But Fuze was too thrown by the revelation to pay his tone of voice much mind.

Wh-what?! The slime, defeating an orc lord? Are you kidding? Wait … Is this slime treating us as insurance? Is that how far ahead he’s planned his moves? A monster? That’s ridiculous!

Fuze tried to process the news though his extreme confusion.

Kabal’s group watched on blithely, apparently willing to let Fuze decide whatever he wanted. Fuze didn’t appreciate that much, but now was no time to complain. He calmed his troubled mind.

“You ask me, though,” Kabal volunteered, “that orc lord’s gonna be no match for Rimuru.”

“Oh, you said it! He took out Ifrit all by himself. If you let an orc lord mature, it can be pretty bad news, but freshly born? Nah. It’s just not enough of a threat for him!”

“Not that we’ve got much to do with it, though…”

Hearing the trio’s uninvited commentary made Fuze feel like he was about to have a coronary. He summoned up all his spirit, trying his hardest to keep calm as he sized up the situation.

Between them and Gobto, nobody in the room seemed to doubt Rimuru’s ultimate victory. That was…well, whatever. The problem was, what was Rimuru thinking at the moment?

His distinctly unmonsterlike activities stood out in Fuze’s mind. Building a town, leading great crowds of monsters, and yet apparently seeking a cooperative relationship with mankind.

And this latest development seemed to confirm all that. If he was defeated or thought he couldn’t win, Rimuru probably intended to retreat. If the humans weren’t aware of this before that point, they’d be so unprepared that they’d have no chance against the orc lord’s armies—that was the slime’s prediction.

So if he was telling us beforehand to prevent that …

Was Rimuru the slime some kind of special creature? He seemed so to Fuze.

“All right. Thank you for relaying the message. We’ll take action here if it comes to it, so could I ask him for his help at that time if need be?”

“Understood, sir. I’ll be off, then.”

Before anyone could stop him, Gobto was off his seat and out of the room—a dignified, and very unmonsterlike exit. “We gotta go, too,” Kabal said as he herded his gang out behind him.

“What a crazy scene this is turning into,” Fuze whispered as he watched them leave.

I’m not sure I can deal with this guy by myself. Better talk to my friend first …

The image of his good friend, the Baron of Veryard, popped into his mind. This was now a national issue, and Fuze was prepared to tackle it. The expedition he was picturing in his mind would soon be greatly expanded, to the point where it would become a three-month investigation.

Three months later, he had his reports. This was right when the demon lord Milim attacked Rimuru’s city.

Fuze was there, at the usual spot, having a secret meeting with Baron of Veryard.

“So this is the report from your investigation? Based on the evidence from their march, the force numbered several hundred thousand. That suggests beyond a doubt that it was an orc lord, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed, Baron. You would never believe how hard it was to ask the king for permission to deploy his intelligence department… They certainly came through for us, though.”

Fuze’s face contorted in frustration. The conditions required to earn this favor from the king were far from palatable to him.

“Ha-ha-ha, yes, I heard. It seems they have a chair all ready for you in that department, no? I imagine your father would like to hand his position as supervisor over to you sooner rather than later.”

“Don’t remind me. I have enough on my plate dealing with guild master duties here in town.”

“True enough. But that’s a discussion for another time. This is some extremely valuable information—a town of monsters, and a slime living there that can overcome an orc lord by force. An orc lord who may have led an army of up to two hundred thousand, no less. And scariest of all, all those surviving orcs simply settled across the land instead of rioting and running roughshod over it. Is it all really true? I mean, I know it is, but I cannot believe any of it.”

Fuze could understand the baron’s feelings all too well. He felt the same way. He had asked the king to deploy his spies on the assumption that Kabal’s report and the hobgoblin Gobto’s message were entirely true. The resulting intelligence both blew his mind and made him realize Blumund was facing unprecedented danger.

No adventurer in the world could slay an orc lord with an army in the six figures supporting it. Even if they managed some kind of stealth mission to assassinate this nemesis, and even if it worked, that army would go nuts and raze all the nearby villages. There’d be no way to counter that. The national army would be a drop in the bucket, and the knight corps of some tinier kingdom would just be swallowed by the stampeding horde.

“You’re right. It’s simply unbelievable. Would monsters take such an intelligent, considered approach to this? And how did they convince that massive army not to riot in the first place? Did they actually manage to feed that many orcs?”

“They must have. It’s impossible to accept, but we have to. That slime, Rimuru… I think he’s saved all of us.”

“…Yes. Indeed.”

Fuze fell silent for a moment before continuing, trying to gather his thoughts.

“So we have a town of monsters about a two-week journey from Blumund. That much, we’ve confirmed. They said it was an astonishing example of functional beauty, but they only had the chance to view it from afar. They’ve clearly been at work on a wide swath of land around the town, but all of it was still covered under a tight network of patrols. Even our own agents suggested that infiltration would be difficult at best. Doesn’t that tell you a lot about the intelligence level of this town’s monsters? And the real question is: How should we handle our own relationship with them? Should we approach this slime as a benevolent presence or as a potential threat to try to eliminate—”

“Wait. You speak of ‘eliminating’ him like it would be simple, but is such a thing even possible?”

“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Go ahead, but I think I already know the answer.”

“Heh. Well, it’s not. How’d you guess?”

Baron Veryard didn’t raise an eyebrow. To him, as much as it was to Fuze, that was already a given. They had both concluded that Blumund had no chance of victory alone—not unless the Western Holy Church was willing to expend paladins for the job. Each resident of that monster town was at least a C rank in themselves—as expected, since they were all named. Some were reportedly in B or A territory. Their total war power couldn’t even be measured right now.

“Perhaps I should try paying a visit…”

“Are you volunteering for that, Fuze?”

“Sure. I want to measure this Rimuru guy with my own eyes.”

Veryard gave him an approving nod. Hostilities weren’t anyone’s first choice, but this was no potential challenger that could be left ignored any longer. Fuze felt the need to judge for himself. Relying on someone else to make that call wouldn’t work. That was the best choice—and a choice he could only make because the baron respected him so much.

Plus…

Yesterday’s events made Fuze believe all the more that visiting this slime directly was the best solution.

He had asked Kabal’s group to guide him to the monsters’ town on that same day. While they spoke, they were all approached by another stranger with a message.

“You are Kabal, right?” the man asked. “I am here to relay a message from Sir Rimuru. ‘The orc lord issue has been resolved. Sorry I forgot to tell you guys!’ That is all.”

Nobody in the group was more surprised by this sudden intrusion than Fuze. They were all seated in a space inside the Free Guild, a room that took every measure possible against people sneaking in. If this stranger was invited in, that was one thing, but it would have taken unbelievable skill to make one’s own way inside.

“Wait! Who are you?”

The blue-haired intruder turned his cold eyes toward Fuze. “I am called Soei. Sir Rimuru has appointed me his Covert Agent.” He gave the reply softly and steadily, completely unfazed by the Coercion from Fuze, an A-minus fighter himself.

Fuze may have felt overwhelmed by this all-powerful presence before him, but he still had the kingdom’s intelligence force at his fingertips, and he knew how to use those skills of his. So he decided to gather as much information as he could from Soei.

“Rimuru… The leader of the monster town? Why are a bunch of monsters worried about us?”

“Heh… Haven’t your friends already told you? Sir Rimuru is exploring ways to live in peace and prosperity with the human race. I am unsure why you are so wary of us, but I would suggest that selecting reconciliation over rejection would be the smarter decision.”

Not even Fuze could hide his surprise at the statement. It meant that his attempts at intelligence gathering were completely exposed.

Hoo boy … If this is the level of monster Rimuru has recruited, I simply must meet him soon.

He could tell that Soei was a monster. Even without the horn on his forehead, the aura was as clear as day. He had no intention of hiding it, but it emitted only a slight amount of magicules. It didn’t suggest this creature was anything special, but Fuze’s sixth sense was still ringing alarm bells. He decided to trust in it.

“I see. So you’re on to the fact that we’ve been investigating you. Well, before that, there’s something I’d like to ask… How did a magic-born of your level infiltrate this town? Because I believe we’re protected by a barrier that blocks out all monsters ranked A or higher. A high-level magic-born like you shouldn’t be anywhere near here.”

As guild master, this was a point Fuze couldn’t let slide. Even though it was a short meeting, he was sure this Soei before him was a high-level magic-born, and thus he needed to know how he got past the kingdom’s defenses.

“Hmm. Ah yes. I did notice the presence of that barrier, but that’s what it was meant for, then? Perhaps Sir Rimuru or Lady Shuna could have identified it as such, but I wasn’t able to see quite so much. Thank you for telling me—in exchange, I will answer your question. This body is generated by my Replication skill, and thus retains only a tenth of my magical energy. In your ranking system, I imagine it would only manage a B or so. Do you see what I mean? This kingdom truly does have a splendid defense network, but if it is willing to let low-level monsters slide that easily, I can see it still has its holes.”

Fuze listened slack-jawed at Soei’s explanation, feeling the cold eyes on him. It sounded true enough to him, and his point was totally valid. With all the effort they expended dealing with hazard-class A ranks, they had overlooked some of the most basic threats—and it was a monster, a potential target of this system, who had pointed it out to him. A small wonder that it turned Fuze’s world upside down.

“Well, if you will excuse me—”

“Wait!”

As Soei turned to go, Fuze shouted and stopped him. He had just enough time to explain to the monster that he wanted an audience with Rimuru, in the town that he ran.

“I will inform Sir Rimuru, in that case,” he said, bringing a close to the day’s events.

This was why Fuze was making the journey. He laughed a bit at the position he was in—dragging the kingdom into this, then dragging himself into the kingdom’s work all over again.

Damn. I didn’t intend to serve my kingdom doing this, but …

He might have complained about it, but he liked life in Blumund. He couldn’t just abandon it and flee. So he hired Kabal’s trio as his guides, and they quickly planned the journey to Rimuru, capital of the Jura-Tempest Federation.

Yohm and his men proceeded through the forest.

Several days had passed since they had cowed Rommel into submission. They had no need to heed Nidol’s orders any longer, and yet Yohm insisted on plunging farther into the wood. He had no intention of returning to Migam territory—instead, he had a different destination in mind.

“Boss, why ain’t we goin’ back to town?”

“Yeah, I’d kinda like to find a girl to sleep with sooner or later…”

“Shut up, you fools! I don’t trust that crafty ol’ Nidol, but he’s still nobility, y’see? We can’t beat ’im in a head-on scuffle. It’d be easy enough to off the bastard, but then we’ll be wanted by all o’ Farmus. You want the royal knights breathin’ down our necks? They’ll kill the whole group of us!”

“Yeahhh, but…”

“So where d’you want us to go?”

“Oh, now you’re askin’ me? Use your brains a little, guys—”

None of them had much in the way of brainpower, so Yohm spelled it out.

He had a point—even if they returned to the Earl of Migam’s lands, they couldn’t expect to ever have a decent living there. They’d be imprisoned again—and indentured into work again. So he thought their best chances lay in other nations.

“We’re gonna head for the central part o’ the forest and find out what this orc lord’s up to. Then, we’ll travel in whatever direction’s the safest, and whenever we hit another country, we will settle there.”

“But, boss, why do we have to expose ourselves to danger like that first…?”

“Oh, what, you wussin’ out on me, you imbecile? The orc lord’s grown to the point where he’s already got an army at his beck and call. What do you think’s gonna happen if we stop in some town and they’re headed straight for it? We’ll be dead with all the other townspeople, is what. Yeah, it’s dangerous, but we need more info if we wanna keep ourselves safe, okay?”

“Wow. Smart plan, bro.”

“I got it now, boss!”

“Plus,” added Rommel, “Yohm has no intention of actually engaging in battle. He’ll just have me check on where the orc lord army is, then relay that information to the earl.”

“Whoa, hang on, Rommel. Whaddaya mean by that?”

This was Kazhil, Yohm’s right-hand man, who spoke up.

Rommel was quickly solidifying his position as the group’s chief of staff—and everyone in the band recognized his extensive knowledge of matters.

“I mean, once we take care of the original job assigned to us, we can make the good earl think we were massacred by the orc lord.”

“Wait, so…”

“We make that old coot think we’re all dead, then we ain’t got to worry about his men pursuing us, and if the orc lord decides to hit Migam, Nidol can figure out a way to deal with it himself. I’d hate to just let my homeland burn at the orcs’ hands, so we oughta warn ’em, at least, yeah?” Yohm explained to Kazhil, who was having trouble understanding.

“Quite so. I will tiptoe up to the orcish army and use my magic to detect their activity. Once I’ve confirmed where they are headed, I will teleport myself, and only myself, to the earl and report back to him. This is when I’ll tell him that you were all vanquished, so no need to worry about that. Besides, if we’ve gone this far, I might as well collect our pay from him, yes? Then I’ll make up an excuse to return here, so do make sure to wait for me.”

The spark of understanding finally began to spread around the band as Rommel went more in-depth.

“Ahh. Now I see. Then we can escape to somewhere safe and start a new life, huh?”

“Yep. Exactly.”

Yohm’s intention was to have the entire band join the local Free Guild or whatever, gaining a little security for themselves. Free Guild identification papers were added to a ledger kept by magic, ensuring they were valid in any nation. Criminal records, meanwhile, weren’t. It felt like the perfect plan to Yohm, but any crimes they committed after joining the guild would also be marked on their magical records, so they’d have to be careful about that.

“Well, we can think about our next moves once we reach our new homeland. With our numbers, we oughta be able to take on some decent monster runs and live off o’ that. But before that, we need to make it outta this mess. You hear me? If the orcs stumble upon us all first, we’re gonna be in deep trouble. Y’all keep your eyes open, you got that?” With that, Yohm closed the topic.

First, find the orc lord’s army. Then, get out safe. They could bitch and moan at one another all they wanted, but one thing was for sure: They could absolutely never let their guards down.

Several hours later…

The band was on the move, running regular patrol shifts to stay alert.

They could hear fighting up ahead.

“Boss—”

“Sshhh!”

Yohm quieted his men down, gesturing them to group together and get into military formation. When they were ready, he waved a hand forward, and they all began to quietly march, weapons in hand and ready for battle.

Already, they could hear voices from up ahead.

“Whoa! Stop, stop, stop! We go there, we’re walking right into its trap!”

“But…but I don’t think we can win if we keep fighting like this!”

“Guys, I can only keep our position here for so—whoa! Look out!”

They could hear all the shrill complaints above the Ting! Ka-shing! of solid metal clashing against metal.

“I swear, you guys… Why do you do all this dangerous crap every single time?! How do you even survive, performing all this utter nonsense? I knew I was putting too much faith in you… Dah! Elen! Look out! It’s headed over there!”

The noise grew louder. They could hear the entire conversation now. They were humans, apparently ambushed by monsters. Several of them, Yohm figured, based on how the sounds of battle never halted for a moment.

“What now, bro?”

Yohm wasn’t sure. He didn’t answer, instead carefully eyeing the woods ahead.

He had thirty men under his command, but by adventurer standards, they’d be a C rank at best. Maybe Kazhil, his partner in crime, could manage a B—and Yohm himself, while confident in his strength, didn’t have that much experience against monsters. Thinking rationally, they were better off letting them be.

What a pain in the ass… Well, sorry, you guys, but we’re outta here— Wait. That girl?!

Just was he was prepared to give the order, Yohm spotted a woman running at them from ahead. There was the sound of a female among the voices he heard; it must have been one of the fighters.

“Dehh! All of you, prepare for battle. That bitch spotted us!”

Yohm’s Farsight skill let him see the situation clearly. A large male fighter was using his shield to fend off an attack from a spider, but it got sent flying after one strike made it through his parrying.

The spider, opting not to pursue its opponent, changed its focus to the woman some distance behind. It must have been intelligent enough to leave the tougher, dicier foes for later. And indeed, the woman was quick and unerring in her moves—the moment the spider was upon her, she was already fleeing.

Truly, a seasoned adventurer. Yohm took a moment to marvel at the sight—long enough for one of the spider’s eyes to focus squarely upon his group. This spider chasing the girl was a true monster, its body protected by an exoskeleton harder than steel that defended almost everything except its joints. It could move all those many joints freely and easily, making it far quicker than any human. Each leg was as sharp as the keenest of blades, ready to slice through any tree trunk or human torso. They weren’t swords so much as retractable spears.

It was likely the “boss” of the local territory, and between its foreboding appearance and its apparent strength, it was a far cry from any monster Yohm’s band had defeated before.

Those adventurers look pretty expert, so they’ll probably hold out for now, but attrition’s gonna kill ’em in the end … That swordsman’s still keeping things pretty even, but …

All the same, Yohm didn’t expect this to end well for any of them.

“That… That’s a knight spider! An A-minus monster! Oh no… Yohm, there’s no way we can defeat it. Let’s go! We’re just no match for it!!”

Rommel, using the elemental magic spell Clairvoyance, was already looking pallid as he gave the report to his boss.

Yohm wasn’t interested in listening. “Forget it. Look at that monster move. It can use the trees to go wherever it wants. Once that party’s annihilated, we’re gonna be next—it’ll hunt us down in an instant and kill us all. Running at full speed ain’t gonna save us now, huh?”

He had no knowledge about knight spiders, but Yohm was still coolheaded enough to instinctively feel what this monster meant. Those instincts told him that fleeing was not in the cards. So he decided to fight back.

They were surrounded by trees—trees that the spider could cross more quickly than skittering across the ground to catch its prey. Once it caught sight of you, it was all but hopeless. These were the knight spider’s hunting grounds, and Yohm’s men were the hapless prey. The only way to survive was to slay the foe—that offered the only potential for survival they had.

Yohm steeled himself. “Dammit, I’ll make you pay for dragging us into this, ya bastards! Rommel, cast some strengthening magic on me! Kazhil, you direct our men! Form a circle, and if anyone’s hurt, change ’em out. You’re all gonna survive! That’s an order!”

Following his command, the band formed a circle formation. In the middle were healers and scouts—men not suited for battle—and Rommel. The rest were forming a shield to protect them. Their orders were to focus exclusively on defense and not launch any attack. Instead, they would let the fighters in the safe zone deal damage with arrows and magic.

The scouts readied their bows, waiting for the knight spider’s advance, as Rommel began to cast a spell. It involved several inscription magics, something he normally never used, as he set about boosting Yohm’s strength. There was the supplemental magic spell Strength, along with Agility, Protection, and Reinforce Weapon—all serving to power up every aspect of his weapons and armor, granting him a great deal more force. It didn’t make them any less anxious about his chances against a knight spider, but it helped.

Still, Yohm’s heart was serene as he stared the spider down. In a moment, the battle was under way.

The woman truly had no shame, showing zero hesitation as she made a beeline straight for Yohm’s band.

“Excuse meeee!” she shouted as she wriggled her way inside the circle, not bothering to ask for permission. The moment she was safe, she took a moment to catch her breath.

She’s got a lot of nerve, Yohm thought.

“Whoa! Lady! That’s not fair, going in alone!”

Somewhere amid the chaos, another man—a thief, by the looks of it—had made his way inside as well. Not a moment off their guard, Yohm thought as he rolled his eyes, but he had other things to attend to.

“Oh, come on… Are you in any position to whine at me?” the woman said.

“Whaddaya want from me? There’s nothing I can do against that guy! How am I supposed to strike any kind of lethal blow with a dagger, I ask you?”

This pair, at least, didn’t seem too concerned about the danger.

“Geh. I’ll settle things with you later,” Yohm said as turned toward the spider and swung his greatsword at it. He preferred wielding a two-handed weapon like this in place of carrying a shield. It was a good six and a half feet long, bladed on both sides, and the force behind its weight made it a fearsome slashing weapon. That weight also made it extremely hard to handle, but even without magical enhancements, he had the brute strength and ability to easily heft the greatsword to and fro.

Now he was using that magic support to whip the giant hunk of iron around like a steel demon.

Hard, solid noise surrounded him, and the tortuous clanggggg irritated his nerves. It was the sound of Yohm’s sword smashing against the knight spider’s leg. It should have been cut cleanly in half, but the exoskeleton was more than capable of resisting this force.

He groaned. Geh. Damn, it’s tough. Is that what all that sound was before? Then he changed position, hoping to divert the spider from his party’s circle formation. The spider followed, predictably enough, then attempted to spear Yohm with several legs at once. Unfazed, he danced his way through the attacks—the same ones the large fighter parried with his shield earlier. Without any kind of shield, Yohm opted to wend his way through the stabbing legs instead.

For what seemed like forever, Yohm continually deflected the knight spider’s strikes. It was never-ending for Yohm but a mere instant in reality. Several legs grazed past his cheek, dug into his side, pricked at his legs, but none of the strikes affected the battle.

He had dodged them all—and as he had the spider’s attention, the man with the shield, along with a lightly equipped swordsman, were back in the battle, equipped with a new set of magical enhancements and ready to fight again.

“Sorry we got you into this. I’m Kabal. You can whine at me later.”

“No time for details. Just call me Fuze for now.”

“Yohm. My band’s nothing but a drag on us, I guess. We’ll have to take care of this ourselves.”

“Got it.”

With that short conversation, the three refocused on the attack. They each moved to surround the knight spider, restricting its movements, taking turns to attract its attention while the others hit at it.

Faced with this steel-like exoskeleton, no pedestrian attack would cut it. Yohm’s men understood that; none dared any foolish moves. If they failed and a pincer felled one of them, the results would be too terrible to look at.

They knew their role was not to drag down their leader. They believed Yohm could win, and in the meantime, they reinforced their defenses.

The magicians Elen and Rommel were each preparing their trademark spells.

As a sorcerer, Elen’s specialty was elemental magic, granting her access to a large swath of damage-dealing offensive spells. But she was positioned poorly for that. All the trees surrounding them made the most powerful of her flame-based magic out of the question. Magic was all about picturing what you wanted to happen, allowing the caster to change the nature of their spells to some extent…but attempting to corral white-hot flame was a tall order.

But right now…

“Let’s see how you like one of my strongest moves! Stone Shot!!”

In a moment, Elen had converted the stones on the ground into lethal bullets, infusing them with yet more magic force to summon a punishing, coordinated rain of ammunition upon the knight spider. Every magic-enhanced stone bullet was the size of a human fist, and based on its speed and mass, each one delivered several tons’ worth of force. It was a merciless, punishing magical rain.

Meanwhile, the three fighters were still taking turns to confront the knight spider—Yohm deflecting its strikes with his greatsword, Fuze with his smaller, nimbler sword, and Kabal with his shield. This is what the spider had to deal with as it was pelted by magical bullets from all directions—but none even dented its exoskeleton. They all bounced harmlessly off, knocking the creature slightly off-balance for an instant but doing little else.

“Awwww… That was my killer move, toooo…”

The sight of her killer move failing after she used most of her remaining magic force on it astounded Elen. She had already tried out Icicle Lance and Windcutter, and the results were similarly pitiful. Really, the last finisher she had left was also her strongest— Fireball.

“It’s hardly a surprise,” Rommel commented. “This knight spider is a local boss-class monster, rank A-minus. We can expect it to have a lot of magical resistance. Given how it’s the apex predator around this area, you’d have to expect at least this much strength. It’ll be hard for any of us to land a convincing blow at our levels…”

“Okay, so now what do we do?”

Rommel shrugged at Elen. “Nothing left but to help them with support magic, I suppose.”

Elen tried to counter this brief assessment. But faced with the reality that none of her magic worked, she gave up. She had a feeling, without even trying it out, that Fireball would meet the same fate.

“Oh, all riiiight! I hate not being in the spotlight and using stuff like this…but I’ve got Magic Barrier on me.”

Rommel nodded. As a sorcerer himself, he had several inscription magics at his disposal. Those were what he had used on Yohm, and the other two fighters were already enhanced enough.

“The enemy’s offense is so strong that it just peels away any magic effects on them. It’s over if they break their weapons, so it’s all I can do to keep just Reinforce Weapon going. If you can fully focus on building that Magic Barrier at all times, that’ll help us out.”

“All right!”

Elen adjusted her outlook on the battle. She couldn’t deal magic damage, so she was stuck with a support role instead—a role she happened to be first-class at. Calculating her remaining magical force and recovery skills, she distributed her magic as needed for the battle at hand, and Rommel did the same by her side.

It wasn’t flashy, but it was a consistent approach to magical support as they concentrated on keeping the aid flowing to Yohm, Fuze, and Kabal. He may have said “just” Reinforce Weapon, but he still managed to keep his other spells going as well without interruption.

It was an impressive, top-level feat from Rommel, the result of him perhaps toughening up a bit and sowing the seeds of his own magical talents during the past few days with Yohm.

The performance lit a fire in Elen. Not bad. Better not lose the spotlight to him! Now, she didn’t mind the role so much. Not flashy, but absolutely important.

Meanwhile, the knight spider and its opponents continued to trade blows with one another, the sheer, wearying intensity of the confrontation not allowing them rest for a single moment. Even in such extreme conditions, the three were still flashing bold, intrepid smiles.

“Yo…Kabal, yeah? That armor of yours sure is tougher’n my cheap piece of junk.”

“Heh-heh! Yeah, I’ll bet, huh? This was crafted by Garm himself, you know! It ain’t no ordinary piece of scale mail!”

“Huh. Garm the dwarven armorsmith? Dang, no wonder. It looked like you took a couple direct stabs, and yer none the worse for it!”

“Oof, you saw that? That’s embarrassing. Well, I may not look it, but—”

“Will you two take this more seriously, please?! Stop chatting while it’s my turn to distract him!”

Fuze couldn’t help but lecture the other two as they enjoyed a lively bragging contest better suited for a tavern. They both grinned, like students being admonished by their teacher.

“I’m up next, old man.”

With an exaggerated slash, Yohm tagged in for Fuze. The magical light surrounding him, slightly dimmed just a moment ago, was now bright once more. He was ready.

The rotation of magical support was being timed perfectly with their own juggling act, as if all five had been working together for years. Very few could have guessed they were fighting in this group for the first time.

“Thanks,” Fuze shouted, leaving the heavy lifting to Yohm. Dodging his way through the knight spider’s string of stabs, he felt exhausted, his very nerves worn to the core. But he never griped about it. He was the oldest and most experienced man in the circle.

By the guild’s rankings, he was an A-minus adventurer. His position as Blumund’s guild master meant he was no longer on the front lines, but he never stopped honing himself—the reason he was still able to keep up with this spider’s movements.

But I’m definitely losing my edge. I could’ve taken this guy solo way back when, but not now. All I’m doing is buying us just a small sliver of time …

Still, he was the great natural talent among the trio surrounding his foe right now.

And because of that, Fuze could predict how this would turn out.

This isn’t good …

Sooner or later, they would falter.

With the right magic, tackling a monster stronger than you would be feasible enough. Here, that wasn’t working out. Knight spiders were too resistant to magic, requiring punishing physical damage instead. Fuze understood that, out of this group, only the three of them were gifted enough melee fighters to deal out that kind of damage. Yohm’s men weren’t up to snuff.

So it was all up to these three men, but after ten or so minutes of battle, they had hurt the spider only a tiny amount. None were seriously injured yet, but they couldn’t hide their accumulated fatigue. Gaining another fighter in Yohm, along with some much-needed magical support, was what allowed them to even tread water.

“Oh, man, I dunno…”

“Pfft! Quit your cryin’! You’re the ones who roped me into this! We’re all gonna get killed if we can’t do this guy in, so if you got breath left to bitch at me, move yourself!”

When Kabal muttered to himself, Yohm launched into a tirade.

They all understood that perfectly well. Without any really decisive magic that worked, they knew that beating it with their own muscle was next to impossible.

But giving up was a one-way ticket to death.

They all drummed up as much courage as they could, continually throwing themselves into the all-but-desperate battle.

Then they heard another voice. One much more relaxed.

“Huh? Ooh! Hey, is that you, Kabal? Whoa, long time no see! And you’re fighting a monster like always, too, huh? You sure must like fighting.”



They were being greeted by five monsters riding wolf-type creatures—a platoon of goblin riders, led by Gobta.

Just as they were about to return from their usual patrol, they heard the sounds of battle from before. Gobchi, the eye-patch-wearing assistant to Gobta, noticed first.

“Gobta, I can hear fighting from somewhere.”

The platoon captain was pretending to ignore the noise, hoping for a nice, chill ride back to town, but his team was having none of it.

“I guess so, huh? Should we go check it out?”

“Ooh, well, I’d say that’s a good idea, yes. Don’t want to be yelled at later, do ya?”

“Yeah, yeah… Let’s just check up on it, then.”

Following Gobchi’s advice, the platoon headed toward the sounds.

And then…

Gobta found a couple of familiar-looking faces fighting a knight spider.

“Whoa! Damn, it’s you, Gobta! Don’t just stand there like an ass; help us out! We’re running out of time!”

Kabal sounded quite a bit more harried than Gobta, dodging the spider’s sharp barrage of strikes as he shouted. He was plainly near the end of his rope, simply letting the multi-leg attacks he couldn’t fully parry bash against his armor. It wouldn’t be long before that armor gave way—and with it, his life, perhaps.

“Ooh, that’s Fuze, isn’t it? Hey! Fuze! It’s me, Gobto!”

“You too, Gobto?! Hurry up and take my place!!”

Just as Gobto spotted Fuze and called out in greeting, Kabal was the one who shouted back as the spider flicked his helmet off his head for him.

“Well, all right. I’ll take over for Kabal. Gobchi, you get everyone else to distract the spider!”

At Gobta’s orders, the platoon began to move.

Nimbly dismounting his starwolf, Gobta strode over to follow Kabal’s lead as the other goblin riders directed their partners to divert their foe’s attention. The wolves attacked with their sharp fangs and their claws, and while neither found any play on its hard exoskeleton, their speed outclassed the spider’s, letting them take a secure stick-and-move approach.

The B-ranked starwolves couldn’t scratch a knight spider, but in terms of agility, they were an even match. So giving up on the direct approach, they shifted styles so their hobgoblin partners would take over on offense. Thanks to the able hands of Gobchi and the rest of Gobta’s crew, this let them slowly pile on damage.

“Dang, those spears of theirs are sharp. It looks like they can lengthen and shorten them at will, too.”

“They are. And they’re a measure sharper’n my greatsword, even. Maybe we coulda had a fightin’ chance if I had somethin’ like that, eh?”

Kabal muttered in wonder as he took a break to heal himself, and Yohm appeared beside him to take a break as well.

“I just can’t believe this. What are those wolves? Some kinda mutant from black wolves or gray wolves? And why do a bunch of hobgoblins have such incredible weapons, too? And why’re they so strong?!”

Fuze picked this moment to join them, still panting for breath and taken aback. Neither of his companions had a ready answer, so they settled down and began to watch.

Considering the brutal battle they’d just waged, it was hard to imagine what they were seeing now. The goblin riders were boldly attacking, or seemed to be anyway—although they appeared to be giving themselves a fairly large safety margin. None of them were damaged. Meanwhile, Gobta was the only one confronting the knight spider on foot, leaping this way and that to attract his foe’s attention. He didn’t have to fight for it. It seemed like he had a full grasp on every twitch of the spider’s legs.

“Man… That hobgoblin— Gobta, he said? Who the hell’s he, huh? And, like, even before that…” Yohm cut himself off.

There was a lot he wanted to ask, but he resisted. Now wasn’t the time. He wanted to catch every moment of this battle while it lasted.

Gobta busied himself with twisting, bounding, and dodging the spider’s attack. Hmm. Kinda slow. Compared to the wringer Hakuro puts me through, this is easy peasy.

Taking a closer look at the spider, he realized that it always stopped moving for a moment before unleashing one of its leg-pincer combos. The multi-leg attacks followed a set rhythm as well, making it simple to predict where they would stab next.

“Okay, let’s get this over ’n’ done with!”

With a single, spirited shout, he removed the shortsword from his waist and, with pinpoint accuracy, slashed at a small wound made by one of his goblin riders. One of the spider’s long, spear-like legs arced through the sky. It was sliced cleanly from its body.

“Dang!”

“Whoa, Gobta! That’s incredible!”

“Now that’s a shortsword. I think I’m in love with how it cuts!”

Gobta wasn’t one to ignore all the praise from his friends. It was forged by Kurobe for him, thanks to Rimuru’s promise. It was certainly no bargain-basement item from the local weapon shop—it was a masterpiece of a blade, crafted to be as sharp as possible.

It was also magic, imbued with a certain extra-effect thanks to Rimuru’s Deviant unique skill. When Gobta willed it in his mind, the blade would encase itself in ice, turning it into a jagged, frigid blade that could also be launched as an Icicle Lance. Gobta didn’t invoke it here; using magic took up a massive amount of his own magicules, so he couldn’t just whip it out on a whim. Kurobe had reminded him time and time again about how his ace in the hole should only be used when the time was right, and he followed that advice faithfully, never wasting his arsenal.

Besides, now he had a weapon even more effective than an Icicle Lance.

“This is even better!”

He held the sheath for the blade up high, still clenched in his left hand. He didn’t mean to sound like a braggart, but he undoubtedly looked it.

“A sheath…?”

Instead of answering Gido’s question, Gobta made his move. He pointed the sheath at the spider, hole first. The next moment, it emitted a sort of blackish-red glow.

The entire inside of the scabbard was lined with magisteel, with insulated electric wire wrapped around it like a solenoid. Energizing this wire with Dark Thunder—the skill that Deviant had granted it—created a powerful magnetic field, which then launched the bullet at the bottom of the scabbard out of the hole. A sort of coilgun, in other words.

It was called the Case Cannon, and while Rimuru had made it mostly for fun, Gobta was a huge fan.

The scabbard ejected a hunk of iron around two centimeters across. It made no sound, but the effects were dramatic. The spider writhed in intense pain, its mouth shivering and gnashing. The resulting otherworldly noises sounded like pure anguish. And why not? The shot had gouged out or flattened several of its eyes, which were now spurting out jets of blue liquid.

“Yow! That was great, Gobta!” one of the other goblins whooped.

The humans, meanwhile, had nothing to say. Not even Fuze could fully parse what had happened.

“—What the hell was that?!” he stammered out.

Gobta had other things on his mind.

“Well, we’re gonna have one heck of a feast today! There’s gotta be some great eatin’ on this spider!”

His eyes were on the knight spider—not as a foe but as a yummy piece of prey.

“Whoa, whoa, that’s an A-minus area boss! And you’re worried about eating it?!”

Fuze was ignored once more, his voice rapidly losing its strength. His mind had trouble keeping up with the sights before him. All he could do was sit there and watch absentmindedly.

Yohm and his men were just the same, gazing at this former clear and present danger to their lives that had been swatted down like a bug. Yohm didn’t like that much, although he couldn’t articulate why. A natural sort of disappointment spread across his face as the five goblin riders ignored him and kept toying with the spider.

A few minutes later, the humans were presented with a dissected knight spider.

Gobta was next to it, looking incredibly pleased with himself and chatting with someone via Thought Communication.

“They’ll have a recovery team here before too long. You leave three of us here to stand guard. I’ll guide Kabal and his friends back to town.”

“Got it. Be careful.”

After finishing the conversation, he briefly discussed with his right-hand man, Gobchi.

“Well, ready to go?”

And with that cheery question, Kabal and the others set off.

Fuze was too flabbergasted, Kabal’s gang too overjoyed, and Yohm too annoyed to formulate any answers.

It was up to Yohm’s band to shout their approval instead. They weren’t quite sure how it all worked out, but regardless, they were all on their way to Tempest, the land of monsters.

Gobta certainly sounded triumphant in his briefing.

We were at the usual meeting hall, Milim seated next to me like she had somehow earned the right. Shion and Soei were behind us, with Rigurd and Benimaru seated ahead.

Next to Gobta were Kabal, his two friends, and an unfamiliar middle-aged guy. He was joined by a tanned, rugged-looking man and a fairly nervous-looking magician type. Shuna had just taken her own seat, ordering one of her assistants to bring out tea for the group, and then Gobta began talking.

Once he finished, we all decided to introduce one another. The middle-aged guy was Fuze, the top guy at the guild in the kingdom of Blumund. Must’ve been the dude who told Soei he wanted an audience with me.

The tanned guy was…well, pretty handsome. Not as much as Benimaru or Soei, but he had smooth, taut muscles and a wild look about him that must’ve floored ’em at the tavern. His name was Yohm, and he called himself the captain of the Frontier Expedition Force, sent out by one of the earls in the kingdom of Farmus. The thin, flinchy guy next to him really was a magician, as it turned out—Rommel was his name, and judging by the looks of things, he was the brains to Yohm’s brawn.

Once they all gave their names, I decided to give mine.

“Guess I better speak up, too. My name is Rimuru Tempest, and I’m the leader of this town, or nation, or whatever you wanna call it. The Jura-Tempest Federation is the official name for it. And as you can see, I’m totally a slime!”

It felt necessary to mention that, given how I was the only nonhuman in the room. It made the older guy—Fuze, I mean—open his eyes wide.

“Truly, a slime…?”

He seemed to know at least a bit about me, but I guess I should’ve expected him to be a little shocked. If it didn’t personally happen to me, I guess I’d have trouble believing that a slime was going around acting like the king of his little nation of monsters.

“So, uh, Rimuru,” Kabal asked, “who’re all the new faces in the room?” He must’ve meant the ogre mages. I gave them all an intro. That just left Milim, who spoke up before I had a chance to point her out.

“And I’m Milim. Good to meet ya!”

A pretty casual intro, especially for a demon lord prone to bouts of cruelty like she was. Hopefully nobody was fooled by the pretty face.

Fuze was the only one to respond to the name “Milim” with any sort of suspicion; maybe he knew about her demon lord side. Kabal and Gido, meanwhile, were alternating their gazes between Shuna and Shion. Milim might’ve been cute, but they must’ve already dismissed her as too much of a child. They certainly are honest to themselves, at least.

Yohm and Fuze must not have been too interested in potential romance—or maybe they were just nervous, having to deal with monsters like this. Their faces remained stony serious. I wish Kabal and his gang could learn from them a bit. I can understand how they feel.

It was odd, though. Gobta ran down the whole story for me, but I still didn’t understand anything about what went on. Why were Fuze and Yohm fighting together?

Just as I thought it, Fuze opened his mouth.

“Allow me to explain, perhaps…”

He must have noticed that Gobta’s report wasn’t quite enough. Glad to see someone has some tact around here. Witnessing my slime form must’ve thrown him off a bit, but he was still being remarkably polite with me. Better hear him out.

………

……

…

Once he was done, I think I began to get the idea. I guess the orc lord news had sparked so much chaos that he decided to have Kabal guide him here to check things out for himself.

Rommel provided some supplementary info of his own, too. He was largely in the same boat, driven by the guild in Earl Nidol Migam’s fief in response to the rumors spreading across Blumund. The magician told me everything he seemed to know about Nidol’s thoughts on the matter, and judging by that, he had a pretty accurate grasp of what was going on.

“Why are you being so honest with me?” I asked.

To which he replied, “Well, to be frank, I’m really not sure what I should be doing here, right now. I just figured, you know, honesty would be the best policy, as we try to move things forward.”

I solemnly nodded at him. That sure helps me, too.

Suddenly, the previously silent and sullen Yohm shouted out, like someone had flipped a switch. “That crap doesn’t matter! What I’m wonderin’ is: Why is this slime actin’ like he’s king of the world around here? I mean, y’all realize this is insane, don’t you? And how do slimes even talk anyway? I mean, what the hell? Why’s he got all you guys under his spell or whatever?”

“How dare you be so rude!” Shion roared.

“You shut up, woman!” Yohm shouted back.

Ooh. Bad move, I thought—but before I could even finish that thought, there was a dull thud as Shion used her sheathed longsword to send Yohm crashing to the ground.

“Ah! I’m sorry, I just…”

“You just what?!”

I should have expected it, but I really need to do something about Shion’s temper. Yohm may have been out of line, but this instantaneous resorting to violence had to be addressed sooner or later. I immediately had her look after Yohm—she hadn’t put much force into it, so at least he wasn’t dead. A few shakes of healing potion, and he woke right back up.

He winced at the sight of Shion looking right down at him, but otherwise returned without a word to his seat. I had to hand it to him. It took a lot of guts to pull that off.

“Sorry about Shion there. She tends to lose her patience a lot. I hope you’ll forgive her.”

Yohm nodded—I’m sure very reluctantly.

“But that was so terrible! I’m known for my endurance under fire, you know!” That was news to me. I figured it was safe to ignore her babbling.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Losing your patience, huh? I see you’ve got a lot to learn, Shion. You need to broaden your horizons, like I have! No wonder you’re so hot-tempered!”

I felt like I could hear Milim happily blurting out something like that, but I’m sure I was imagining it. No doubt it was the last thing Shion wanted to hear from her.

But anyway.

It was time to put all these reports together.

Fuze was here because he heard about this mystery slime—i.e., me—and wanted to get to the bottom of it. Figuring out whether I was friend or foe was his main priority.

“The very idea of monsters creating towns— Ah, pardon me. I can understand demi-humans building settlements well enough, but a town where multiple races live together? I’ve never heard of such a thing. I have a habit of not fully believing something unless I witness it with my own eyes, you see. And if this whole story was true, I wanted to figure out how we would interact with it, and how much. The reports I received told me this land wasn’t a threat…but I thought ascertaining for myself would be the best move. So that’s what brings me here. I was hoping you’ll permit me to stay a while so I can survey the entirety of your operations.”

It made sense to me. I’d hate to be feared as a potential threat, so I readily gave him permission.

I also gave him my own outlook. Being guild master suggested Fuze was in a fairly high position—a man of influence, perhaps, in Blumund. Being able to speak frankly with someone like him, and request their cooperation, sounded like a good idea to me.

“You might not believe it,” I explained, “but I’d really like to be friends with the humans. I already told Kabal and his friends about that. I’m not asking for it immediately, but you know, I think it’d be nice if we could start engaging in trade or some other kind of interaction. We’ve already opened formal relations with the Dwarven Kingdom along those lines, which you’re free to confirm for yourself. I think your merchants would find it pretty convenient if they could run caravans through this area, but what do you think?”

“Hang on— I mean, please, just one moment. You mean the Armed Nation of Dwargon?! I know that is a neutral kingdom, one that had close relations with many demi-human races…but you’re saying it’s recognized this land of monsters as a nation? Because I find that extremely hard to believe…”

I had asked him to trust in me, but he was proving a tough nut to crack. So I called for Vester as a witness. It turns out Fuze was familiar with him.

“Minister Vester! …Or not anymore, I suppose. But regardless, I never imagined meeting someone of your stature here… Is all of this true?”

“Ah, well met, Sir Fuze! It has been quite a while, hasn’t it? Well, you are correct. Through a rather unique turn of events, I am now living quite peacefully in this land. Everything Sir Rimuru has told you is the truth—King Gazel and Sir Rimuru signed the covenant themselves.”

The conversation wended its way across a few other topics, but I still had the impression Fuze thought he was dreaming all of it. Maybe the idea of monsters banding together and establishing a nation was a little too wild for just anyone in this world to start believing yet.

Yohm’s motives, meanwhile, were a bit more complex.

He and his band of men intended to fake their own deaths in order to gain their freedom. They were seeking asylum in some safer country than their own, where they intended to join the local Free Guild. They also intended to inform Earl Nidol Migam—the greedy old fox, as they called him—about what they found in here. This wasn’t out of any love for the earl, but so they could potentially save as many of their fellow countrymen as they could. A man of honor, certainly, no matter what his looks and attitude suggested. Rommel had grown to like him, plainly—to the point that he betrayed Nidol, his benefactor, to become Yohm’s top aide.

Hearing all this made me think a bit.

“All right, so…Fuze, people already know around your kingdom that the orc lord was defeated, right?”

“No… Only the king and a few select people are aware.”

And that meant—

“Okay. So, Yohm, wanna forge a contract with me?”

“Huh? What the hell’re you—erm, how do you mean, sir?”

Now both Shion and Shuna were glaring at him. They must not have liked that tone of voice. Maybe it’d be kinder of me to pretend not to notice.

“Well, to put it simply…”

To put it simply, Yohm and his band of thirty men would become the saviors of the day, the slayers of the orc lord.

That monster was well and truly defeated, and yet Fuze still eyed me with suspicion—because I was a slime, a monster. In that case, why don’t we frame the rumors we’d spread so that I merely cooperated with Yohm, and he was the one who pulled off the feat?

There’d be a few unnatural time-related contradictions to that story, but the general public didn’t need to know all the details. If the top brass who did know the truth were willing to keep mum, the regular Joes out there could work out the rest of the tale for themselves. As for the surviving orcs, we could say that there was a mutiny in the army, and there you go. A nice, simple story—and easy to believe, as long as that two-hundred-thousand figure didn’t get mentioned.

Meanwhile, I could’ve helped Yohm with supplies, armor, what have you, instead of directly participating in combat. That way, I could establish myself as this really helpful, trustworthy slime who gave our man of the hour material support, right? That, I figured, would paint me in a better light than being this mystery threat of a monster to everyone.

“…That’s the basic idea of it, but what do you think?”

Our guests were dead silent. Too frozen to react. Kabal and his friends, meanwhile, were so lost in this conversation that they had decided to sit there and enjoy their tea instead.

Compared to that, Benimaru and Shuna were thoughtfully nodding, impressed at the idea. Milim and Shion were all smiles and puffed-out chests, but I’m not so sure they understood me.

Milim had nothing to do with this anyway. She’s behaving, at least, but maybe I should give her some honey before she gets bored and starts wreaking havoc somewhere else.

“Who do you think I am? …Well, all right. I’ll take this.”

She gladly accepted the jar of honey I presented to her. Shion flashed a jealous look at her, but…well, sorry, none for you.

“Wait… Wait, wait, wait—what kind of idea is that?! What do you mean, ‘what do you think’?!”

“Come on. Me, beating that guy? You want me to be some fairy-tale hero or somethin’?”

Fuze and Yohm were protesting in stereo. I didn’t expect them to be very amenable to it at first. That reaction was a given.

“Whoa! No ‘hero’ stuff. That’s someone special, so you can’t just call anyone that. Being a hero comes with a lot of baggage from the past. Just call yourself a…champion instead,” Milim replied.

Hmm. Interesting. So just like with demon lords, people didn’t take kindly to guys declaring themselves heroes with a capital H. Hero, champion, whatever—I wanted Yohm to be that for me.

“That’s not the problem, you little brat! Besides—”

Thud!!

A cold wind drifted across the hall.

“Hey!!” I shouted.

“Lady Milim…” Shion seemed like she wanted to say something.

“W-wait! No! This isn’t my fault!”

Milim was already in a panic. I hadn’t said anything yet, but already she was nearly in tears.

“I don’t want to hear any excuses, Milim. But this is your last chance, all right?”

“All right. Believe in me, Rimuru!” Milim swore to behave, nodding fervently.

I felt kind of bad for our new champion here, but really, this was Milim’s fault. Spoiling her would do nothing good for me, so I gave her the scolding she deserved. Shion, for her part, smiled a little—just deserts for what happened to her earlier, maybe. I resisted the urge to remind her she was in the same boat. Hopefully she got the message well enough without that.

“Milim…? I feel like I’ve heard that name before.”

Uh-oh. Fuze’s eyebrows furrowed at the mention of Milim’s name. He hadn’t identified her yet, but I needed to stay on guard. This demon lord was a lot more famous than I gave her credit for, I guess.

Let’s, um, dodge that question for now.

“Well, uh, is Yohm all right?”

I was worried. That was quite a thud I’d heard.

“Yes, Sir Rimuru. I’ve already administered the potion,” Shuna reported with a smile, just as Yohm himself woke up.

“Nngh… What… What just…?”

He was still a bit confused, but nothing was wrong with him. Getting beaten by Shion and Milim in rapid succession like that made me marvel at his natural toughness. That potion’s some hot stuff, but he deserved credit for surviving at all.

“Um, Rimuru…yeah? Well, all right. I’ll do whatcha say. All these menaces to society you got servin’ ya, I gotta admit—you’re one hell of a slime. From now on, as far as I’m concerned, I’m all yours, pal. Tell me whatcha want.”

It was a surprise, hearing that the moment he got his marbles together. I didn’t like how we more or less had to beat it out of him, but if that convinced him, there was no need to browbeat him about it.

“Yeah, sure thing. And thanks.” I nodded at him in agreement.

We were now together, and the whole event was enough to make Fuze forget all about Milim. “In that case, I have no objections about working with you on this, too. However, would you mind if I made absolutely sure, first, that you are on the side of the human race?”

“Mm? Okay. That’s fair enough.”

And now Fuze was with me, too.

Fuze was kind enough to work with a friend of his, the Baron of Veryard, to smooth things over with the king of Blumund. As he did, I worked out the exact sort of rumors we needed to spread around the local nations, adjusting the little details to match with the plotline I came up with. Soon, we were in contact with every Free Guild in the area.

In exchange, I offered Fuze preferential treatment for some of the merchants coming from Blumund. Any merchants affiliated with the Free Guild there would be allowed to stay at Rimuru, capital of the Jura-Tempest Federation. For now, we weren’t charging any tariffs—that could be discussed among us once they trusted us well enough and we opened a bit more formal diplomacy. I had no idea what we should charge anyway. I’m not a politician; I can’t calculate stuff like that. I may have acted all kingly and magnanimous about it, but seriously, I was sweating bullets inside.

This meant that any merchants who work through the Blumund guild would get a pretty damn good deal until I worked all of that out—and part of that consideration would go back to Fuze’s pocket.

How long would it take for Blumund to trust in us as a fellow nation, though? Not very long, perhaps, or maybe never, even after several decades. I was prepared to wait them out, and in the meantime, I could at least prepare to enact some official ties.

We’d need to build that trust first, but at the same time, we’d need to figure out how much of a tax would be appropriate. It’d have to be cheaper than Farmus, of course, and it’d be important to boost our amenities and spread the word on our safety record. We hadn’t finished up our trading roads yet, so any tariffs could probably wait until that was all wrapped up.

There was still a ton of work to do, but at least things were settled between ourselves and Fuze. And Blumund was a small country—the rise of a nation with trade routes and a friendly leader offering them held major meaning. If we could toss guaranteed safety across the entire region into the mix, Blumund could stand to make a major profit from it. If they could trust us enough to commit, that is.

Now, to let Fuze bring that offer home and come back with a more detailed report. I couldn’t say how it would turn out, but I had to hope things would go in a more positive direction from now on.

As for Yohm and his band, they would be staying here for a while.

If he was going to be our orc lord–slaying champion, he needed to look the part. Hakuro was probably training him hard right then.

The man had a decent amount of natural talent, but not quite enough strength to become the stuff of legend. Just giving him some big, long weapon to carry turned him into a different man, but we’d need more than that. Instead of just relying on his physical strength and instincts for battle, Hakuro thought, he’d need to have control over some arts as well.

Equipping him wasn’t a problem. We just happened to have raw materials from a recently pummeled knight spider on hand, and I figured we could use those to give him the best weapon and armor he ever saw. Until that was taken care of, his training would focus more on his body and mind.

In battle, there were three things that mattered: speed, offense, and defense. That applied even if you brought magic into the mix—that could always be countered with magic defense—spiritual resistance. The Free Guild based its ranks off the aggregate of those three elements, which meant that simply finding some better weapons and armor would be enough to boost your rating.

In that way of thinking, the materials we used in the completed equipment were top-of-the-line. Knight spiders, at the end of it, were not that terribly fast. It might seem otherwise, given how they could attack with multiple legs at once, but keep your wits about you, and it becomes clear that they aren’t moving too nimbly. That was plain, given how the B-rated Kabal and Gobta more than held their own against it—I was starting to peg Gobta as more of an A-minus, but regardless.

The knight spider earned its own A-minus mainly thanks to its exoskeleton. Its strength came from how incredibly solid that was, as well as its ability to inflict serious damage even by grazing its opponents. Which meant—

“Whoa, Rimuru… You sure yer okay with me havin’ equipment like this, pal?”

Yohm seemed honestly touched as he took in his new exoskeleton-crafted armor. It was a full-plate suit, mottled in three different colors—a dark brown as the base, with a unique pattern of green and red on top. It almost looked like a work of art. I called it the Exo-Armor.

He was surprised all over again when he picked up the chest piece.

“Man. So light, too…”

Of course it was. Compared to regular armor, which took a shirt of chain mail and added metal plating to all the most vulnerable areas, a suit of full-plate armor was ponderously heavy. They defended you well, but at the cost of all mobility, so normally you never saw them in action.

This Exo-Armor, meanwhile, used no metal, making it relatively lighter than steel—the key to its weight advantage. Sticky Steel Thread lined the inside in a mesh formation, keeping the wearer safe against heat or cold. The exoskeleton itself boasted superior defense against magic and physical attack, and with the thread reinforcement, it easily shrugged off your garden-variety magic and melee strikes—something we’d already proven in our experiments.

In a nutshell, it offered more durability than full-plate mail at a third of the weight. I couldn’t say how it felt on a monster whose muscular strength outclassed any human’s, but for Yohm, it was the best armor in the world.

“Yep. Garm put his heart and soul into this. He bragged that it’d fetch a price higher than any Unique piece of gear if we put it on the market.”

“M-more than a Unique?!”

“Like, the kind of thing an adventurer spends ten years or so savin’ up for? How top-end are we talkin’, pal?!”

The news came as a major shock to Yohm.

Just as adventurers were ranked, weapons and armor received their own ratings.

The type of thing you’d find regularly at shops was Normal. If it performed a little better or had magic effects applied, it was rated Special—worth a lot but still relatively accessible to the average consumer. In a world like this, where death was always lurking around the corner, you wanted the best equipment you could afford, so most adventurers hit the road with a full array of Special equipment.

However, even this stuff was still nothing compared to a top-shelf piece of work, crafted by a master forger and priced as such. The kind of broken-stat weapon or armor that boosted the wearer’s rank the moment he or she grabbed it. This kind of first-grade stuff was rated Rare, and amassing a full set of Rare gear was something of a status symbol in adventuring circles. Anyone who managed the feat was revered and respected as a person who could get the job done. The armor Garm crafted was all Rare pieces, and that was why Kabal and his crew were so overjoyed to receive it.

And at the very top, there was a level even above this highest of levels—equipment with world-shattering performance. Exquisite pieces made by old masters from only the best materials, taking no account of matters like production cost and profit. These were called Unique. Weaponsmiths in the larger cities would decorate their shop walls with these for advertising purposes; nobility would store them with tender care as family heirlooms. They were the best of the best, and there weren’t many such pieces around, only adding to their rarity value.

As an example, these sorts of Unique items were equipped by every member of Gazel’s personal friends, along with his Pegasus Knights. The pride of a nation of craftsmen, one could say. Money and materials were no object with their top-caliber equipment, honing an even sharper edge to their world-beating war power. Hell, no wonder they’re so strong, I had thought to myself when I learned about it.

Boosting their talents with weapons and armor were one way humans handled monsters, which I had no complaint about. But it had to suck for the monsters felled by such overpowered equipment.

It follows that we wanted to play that same game with our own stuff.

Based on that, again, Yohm’s shock was understandable. The greatsword he wielded was all scratched up, even chipped in places; it was no longer useful. Kurobe had prepared another weapon in its place, and it was another masterpiece.

This was a Dragonslayer, a type of greatsword that could hold its own against large-size magical creatures. It didn’t have a curve to it, unlike the larger battle swords the ogre mages had; it was more of a Western-style dual-edged blade. One edge was sharpened to a shine, dedicated to slicing and dicing, while the other was solidly reinforced, making it more of a crushing weapon.

Given Yohm’s shield-free fighting approach, I figured he’d find that easier to handle than his last weapon. The way he stared at the Dragonslayer in his hands and murmured “Look at this thing…” suggested he was happy with it. Good.

As a Kurobe creation, the Dragonslayer was another Unique piece. With the right technique, it had the power to slice through even a knight spider’s exoskeleton. If you ask me, those two pieces alone just made Yohm’s power zoom up to A-minus rank.

It sounded a bit like cheating, relying on equipment to boost your strength. But I let it slide. You needed technique to make the most of it anyway.

Yohm, to his credit, had grown strong enough to truly be worthy of owning this stuff. I hadn’t given him anything except food and a place to sleep, and he had no complaint about that. I did hear him scream in pain and call Hakuro a demon and all kinds of other colorful things, but nothing about my treatment, at least.

He was under contract to work with me, after all, and I gave him some pretty nifty equipment, so I figured I was fine.

If I can be honest for a moment, I almost hesitated to let him have it all. Unique items were a rarity in this world, and I wasn’t wholly sure I wanted ours to flow into the hands of outsiders. Ultimately, though, I decided that if he had champion-level equipment, that’d make my story all the more convincing.

He was training hard in this town, his talents now noticeably improved. He didn’t look out of place at all in his Exo-Armor. A little bit more work on him, and nobody would ever doubt for a moment that Yohm slew the orc lord.

The days of training continued for Yohm.

His weapon and armor were complete, but I decided that his band had better get equipped, too. I’d need to invest in them a little if I wanted them to help me out later. Hakuro would hammer them all into shape, too, so it should help them ability-wise. Plus, it’d give even more weight to the tale of this great champion and his stalwart band of supporters.

Of course, they were after more than just nice equipment. Apparently, they were enjoying life here in the city as well. I didn’t mind at all. They were working hard for me.

What I had to offer them was scale armor dyed a fresh, bright-green—the completed version of the test piece I gave to Kabal. For the lighter-equipped thieves and the like in their crew, I had a few sets of red-colored hard-leather armor built. Both colors were a nice match for Yohm’s own Exo-Armor.

“You… You’re even giving this amazing armor to me?”

This armor didn’t offer much against melee attacks, but it was pretty darn resistant to magic. All I wanted was for Rommel not to look out of place as the champion’s personal sorcerer, but I’m glad he apparently liked it so much. Besides, this was about all I could do for him. Magic isn’t something you can “train” your body for the way Yohm trained with Hakuro; the rest would be up to Rommel himself.

I also handed him a copy of our communication crystal. It’d be a pain if we couldn’t stay in contact, and luckily for us, he just happened to be a magic user. That oughta make things easier.

After preparing and presenting this equipment, I had Rommel go back to Blumund. There, I wanted him to spread the word (and exaggerate a bit) about how the mighty Yohm and his men gave the orc lord a swift and fatal whipping. He said he had no interest in living there again, either—as he put it, being the earl’s magician mainly just meant being assigned all kinds of potentially lethal tasks. Once he received his payment, he pledged to stick with Yohm from now on.

This earl, Nidol Migam, sure didn’t sound like he was much good at all. He put his personal fortunes above those of his people, he was greedy, and he treated his own staff poorly. Considering the high taxes he charged the local peasants, he certainly didn’t devote much of it to territorial security. Given he dealt with issues only after they popped up like that, no wonder his people relied so much on the Free Guild.

“He’s the worst bastard you ever did meet. Eh, not that we’re angels ourselves, but he takes the cake!” Yohm practically spat at me.

The trope of a wicked, greedy nobleman was a familiar one in the stories I read, but when one was actively affecting your real life, nothing could be more depressing.

But if anything, that was good for me. I could have Yohm return home a champion, one who protected all of Migam. He’d go from village to village, allowing the locals to skip all the guild bureaucracy. He wouldn’t work for free, of course—the village would simply submit their completed monster-slaying job papers to the guild, and he could get paid through the earl later. No way would he, nor anyone else, want to serve Nidol for free.

The arrangement would benefit us both, but its biggest merit was boosting Yohm’s reputation as a champion. He’d earn the thanks of whomever he saved, and stories of his strength and sincerity would spread across the land. That, in turn, would boost the rep of the monsters who supported him—i.e., us.

Plying his trade across the villages wouldn’t be easy, but keeping his base of operations here, in Rimuru, would simplify a lot of things. A communication crystal could be activated by any of the shamans that every village had at least one or two of, so I decided to pass a whole bunch of copied crystals around. I could essentially duplicate them for free, thanks to the Great Sage’s backup. That was just a matter of processing the magic stones from monsters and crystallizing them to a high enough purity. I kept that a secret, since word going around seemed like it’d come back to bite me.

These crystals could always be stolen, of course, and there wasn’t much I could do about that. That was each village’s problem, and I didn’t see the need to babysit them that much. It’d be part of their normal lives to tackle, so they could handle it for themselves.

So taking in feedback from Rigurd and the ogre mages, we gradually sorted out the details behind Operation: Make Yohm a Champion. We may have had a contract, but he wasn’t exactly my underling—on the surface, we were working cooperatively with each other. Which was great, because it meant I didn’t have to pay him a salary. Really, we still didn’t have any outside currency, so if anything I oughta be charging him rent.

No point being so miserly, though. That was why I gave him room and board for free.

Another motivation of mine, speaking of this town, was that I wanted to advertise this place. I had heard about how people who have it tough in their local village head for the big city to try to make a living. Why not come here instead? I wasn’t expecting humans and monsters to be arm in arm overnight, but again, I was thinking long-term.

Several weeks later, all of Yohm’s equipment was ready. We finally had his horses and his communication crystals. Rounding up thirty-one wild unicorns was a huge ordeal, though. B-plus magical beasts, every one of them. Strong.

But this wasn’t the outlaw band from before. Hakuro had trained Yohm and his men up to the point where they were almost unrecognizable from a few weeks back. None were going to faint at the sight of a magic creature any longer. You could rely on these guys now—and with their brand-new equipment on, they had the air of brave, battle-proven warriors. More than worthy of accompanying a champion.

“Well, it’s been fun, pal. We’ll see you for now, Rimuru!”

And with that, Yohm set off, promising to use this town as a base for their future activities.