

CHAPTER 4

THE ADVANCING MALICE

The magic-born Mjurran pushed her emotions deep inside as she walked across the forest.

Mjurran was once a witch, living in this forest. Persecuted by others, she had fled here three hundred years ago—quietly researching her magic, interacting with no human or magic-born. But those days were nearing their end. Extending one’s life with magic only worked for so long.

Facing death, Mjurran had some slight sense of regret. She had yet to even peer into the great, dark crevice that was the world of magic, and she had no successor to take on the knowledge she gained. She couldn’t help but ask herself what her life was even for.

In the midst of this impasse, she was greeted by the demon lord Clayman. He had been at that post for about three hundred years, and he was negotiating with the more well-known monsters and magic-born in the area at the time—or smashing them to bits, one or the other. He was building an army of subordinates at an astonishingly rapid pace, and that was what brought him to meet Mjurran today.

Seeking the witch’s magic, he made her this offer: “Let me grant you eternal time and a young body that will never age. In exchange, I ask you to swear your allegiance to me.”

Mjurran accepted it, and right now, she thought it was a mistake. She did indeed grow younger, earning the gift of eternal life—but in the process, she lost her freedom. It was a terribly unfair, uneven bargain. For the demon lord, swindling someone with as much magic knowledge and as little experience with the outside world as Mjurran was like taking candy from a baby.

The moment she made the oath, a cursed seal was carved into her heart. The so-called Marionette Heart was one of Clayman’s most secret of mystic abilities, allowing him to use a mix of fabulously expensive magical media with the magicules of the target to turn the receiver into a magic-born.

This skill was pulled off successfully, and Mjurran was reborn—and became a marionette, unable to defy the will of Clayman.

With the magical skill she already bore, Mjurran proved to be a fairly high-level magic-born. It was nothing that made the now-captive witch content. Ever since that moment, she was Clayman’s eternal puppet.

She could not understand people like Gelmud: magic-born who willfully wanted to be ruled over. She was always looking for a gap, a loophole she could use to free herself from the curse and strike back at Clayman. But her knowledge told her this was all but impossible. The moment she broke through Marionette Heart, the demon lord told her, she would revert to human form. Frozen time would start to flow for her again, and there would be little, if any, of it left to her natural life span. And there was another reason: Clayman was just so much more powerful than she was—enough to make her writhe in disgust.

So Mjurran continued to serve the demon lord, knowing she would never find it in herself to defy him and dreaming of the day she might be released from this detestable curse.

And now…

Clayman’s latest assignment for her was an investigation.

“I’m not sure I am suited for battle…”

“No. You aren’t, regardless of how high-level you are. So I want you to observe how those who serve another demon lord fight, and then record it for me. You won’t be in direct contact with them. I am sure you’re capable of that, yes?”

Mjurran was hoping she’d be asked to scout for new members of their fighting force. She was disappointed. Instead, the demon lord flashed a serene smile and gave her his orders.

The demon lord Clayman, the Marionette Master himself, could manipulate his underlings like puppets and grab the very hearts of those he encountered.

Only a very small subsection of people could call themselves his friend. The rest of his force were mere tools, incapable of resisting until they were worn to nothing. If they wanted to live, their only choice was to carry out the jobs they were given. This mission, too, was already set in stone, as far as Clayman was concerned. If Mjurran said anything else, it would just anger him.

“I understand,” she said, suppressing her own emotions. She had to follow him. All she could do was nod.

Such a regret, she whispered. Some memories of her past, when she was free, were making her sentimental.

Snapping herself out of it, she refocused on her mission, spreading the illusory skill Detect Magic around the local area. The magic was used to sense the magicules around her, but when combined with the extra skill Magic Sense, she could read information from an even broader radius.

Mjurran’s centuries-long life span was not the result of good luck. It was built on the back of sheer ability. She was, indeed, weak at direct combat, but not because she was powerless. She was a wizard, a master of three different systems of magic. While none of it was suited for battle, in terms of usefulness, she was at a far higher level than Gelmud could ever hope to be. Clayman understood that all too well, making sure to assign her the exact jobs she was suited for.

Any reaction…?

With the spell came a vast amount of data that streamed into her mind. She had examined it all from moment to moment, and now she detected the presence of another magic-born—one with a vast store of magical energy.

She braced herself. She must have been near the territory she was asked to observe. Focusing her mind as intensely as she could, she turned her eyes toward her target…

She was greeted with a strange sight.

A large number of monsters were chopping down trees, then processing them in assorted ways. The larger trees were transported away, the smaller ones disappearing into thin air—some spatial skill, she thought.

They appeared to be building a road. Behind this crew was a well-built path which, from her viewpoint, seemed to extend to the far horizon. Some on this team were digging up large boulders buried in the earth and pulverizing them into pebbles; others would then take these away and blanket them along the ground. These were then further crushed and distributed evenly by large, heavy-looking cylinders, like logs made of iron.

These iron logs were a type of road roller that Rimuru had ordered. It was being pulled by man power—well, monster power—but there were handles on the front and back, with three crewmembers assigned to each end. It was heavy work, but with a steady stream of heave-hos, the crew easily pulled the roller forward—and behind it, they left a well-tended path of crushed gravel.

A higher-level monster served as foreman for this crew, and everyone appeared to be working together to lay this road out. It was like nothing Mjurran had seen before.

All this was being carried out by high orcs, one of them higher level and emitting an unusual aura from under its full-plate armor. This must have been the mass of magicules she detected earlier.

So the orc lord won … and he evolved.

That was Mjurran’s judgment, but it was not her role to draw conclusions, so she abandoned the thought. All an observer was tasked to do was watch and record something she continued to do over the next few days as the crew rolled on.

As she observed and chronicled what she saw, she began to wonder what lay at the end of the completed road.

Hmm … It might be best to continue observing the targeted monster, but I suppose I should broaden my information gathering a little.

Clayman was a wary, worrisome demon lord. He would no doubt ask. Knowing him as long as she did, Mjurran could easily imagine it—though she couldn’t deny that she also wanted to flee the stress of continually observing a magic-born stronger than her without being detected.

So she stepped away from her assigned job and began to move. Taking a detour through the forest, she stealthily traveled away from the crew and onto the gravel road. Then, seeing it unfold before her, she dashed along it in the opposite direction from the construction team. She was invisible thanks to perception-blocking magic, and she stayed that way as she ran uninterrupted for several hours.

Now Magic Sense was telling her something else.

This is … a pretty high-level presence coming up. Is that … Phobio, the Black Leopard Fang?! Carillon must be serious, if he’s sent one of the Three Lycanthropeers …

This was a massively powerful magic-born, one Mjurran would have no chance against. Not even the orc lord would give it much of a workout. But what was odder was Phobio’s movements—he was traveling right past the orc lord’s position and toward somewhere else. The place Mjurran was going. The roads must have been connected.

She began to wonder what was so important on the other end of this road.

Her intel-gathering mission meant she wasn’t allowed to come too close to her target. With her magic eyes, however, she didn’t need to. She could see them well enough from far away, and her curiosity was driving her to track Phobio now. She continued doing so for a while, until she finally caught sight of a large, open area up ahead. It was still too far to be seen without magical support, but apparently that was where Phobio landed.

So that’s where he went. The orc lord’s stronghold, perhaps? Perhaps he wanted to smash their headquarters first.

Mjurran wasn’t sure what to make of it—until she turned her “gaze” toward Phobio’s landing point. She immediately regretted it.

The … The demon lord Milim?!

It was an absolute wave of violence, unleashed by that girl with the platinum-pink hair.

The girl was grinning, this infallible presence that dominated the other demon lords.

Milim, the Destroyer herself, was there—and despite the distant point Mjurran was observing her from, Milim still noticed her. With a smile, she rolled her eyes toward the faraway spy. Mjurran hurriedly turned off the spell, even as fear shook her, even though she knew it was likely too late.

Her position was known, and she had to flee, no matter how futile she felt it was. If there was any silver lining to this, it was that Milim was in no hurry to take action. She was willing to let this “observer” go.

“‘Don’t interfere with anyone’—that was the deal, right? I suppose I owe my life to that,” she said to herself.

Slowly, Mjurran stood up. Locking eyes with Milim came as a shock, but they had both seemed to tacitly agree not to interfere. Very well, then.

Some of the mystery magic-born she was shown in the images were near Milim as well—they must have survived, too, along with the orc lord.

How should I report this to Clayman…?

Wondering to herself, she left the site.

After finishing her report to the demon lord, Mjurran hefted a deep, depressed sigh. His first response to it was harsh—“Spotted by your observation target? That’s far too sloppy for you.” Just recalling it disgusted her.

“If you can’t even perform the job I assign you, you really have no value to me. I can’t have you just up and dying on me, so please, try to be more careful in the future. Continue observing and wait for your next orders,” Clayman spitefully continued.

To him, Mjurran had no value, just like Gelmud. That was the kind of man he was. The Marionette Master was, as his nickname suggested, an excellent commander of other people’s work—but he never treated his servants as anything special. It was a master-slave relationship.

I failed. I completely failed … Why did I have to pledge my faith to a man like that…?

Pushing her emotions back, Mjurran turned her focus elsewhere. If she wanted to live, she couldn’t afford to fail next time. She had only been tasked with intel gathering, but against the demon lord Milim, that was a tall order. Continual observation of her would be suicide. She knew Milim was not at all unintelligent—her temper often made people misjudge that, but it was true. What’s more, her instinct for picking up on other people’s thoughts made it all but impossible to hide things from her.

Another concern for Mjurran were the “next orders” Clayman had for her. Something told her that continuing to follow his commands would be far from a good idea. Forget about following in Gelmud’s footsteps, she thought. Her situation wasn’t good. If she continued to stand by idly, she feared it would be the end of her.

This is awful. But—

She was prepared for what might come. She had no hope, but in some way, Mjurran thought this could also be her big chance. Serving the demon lord as long as she did, she felt she could read his thoughts a little by now. She was aware that Clayman was planning some kind of new, large-scale operation—one that, she predicted, she’d have to serve as a sacrificial lamb for.

If she couldn’t escape from Clayman’s rule, then death was waiting for her. Maybe she could fake her death and beat him to the punch…or maybe she could free herself from the Marionette Heart and regain her freedom. Those were the hopes Mjurran was betting her life on.

If she could find some piece of information that would please Clayman, that would be perfect. If it was juicy enough to earn her freedom, even better.

Regardless, she wanted to make it look like she died, as in her initial thought. Doing so might arouse suspicion, but having the demon lord Milim around actually made it more convenient. If Milim decided to kick up some dust, it’d attract attention from all corners. It’d be more than enough to attract Clayman’s eye, and after that, Mjurran would mean little to nothing to him.

She had made up her mind.

She couldn’t read what Milim might do. But if the Destroyer was on the move, that would be one large stone she was throwing into the pond. The more ripples that resulted, the less Mjurran’s presence would stand out.

There was no need to hurry on this. Clayman was not a demon lord to trifle with. He would see through a half-baked plan of action. For now, she needed to remain in obscurity, faithfully carrying out her orders.

So Mjurran sat there quietly, waiting for time to continue onward.

The demon lord Clayman closed his connection to Mjurran and sneered.

He had been a bit harsh with the witch, but so far, everything was still according to plan. Given Milim’s behavior at their summit, he presumed that she would head right into the forest. Based on that, it wouldn’t be good for her to think that he was uninterested in these mystery monsters. He was the one who hatched and supported this plot in the first place.

What Clayman wanted was a demon lord who’d serve as his faithful puppet—and now that some uncertainties were making themselves known, supporting whoever survived as a future demon lord seemed dangerous to him. They would be too hot to handle, much less make into one of his underlings. If he could grasp some kind of weakness inherent to his target, that was one thing, but Clayman had no intention of dominating with sheer force, the way Carillon would.

But there was no need to spell all of that out. Just indicating that he was interested, or making Milim think as much, would work fine without planting any seeds of doubt in her mind. Plus, his true mission was to entice Frey to join his side, and as long as that was so, keeping Milim’s attention focused on the mystery magic-born freed up his own movements a little.

He was sure Milim was gloating right now, laughing about how much of a head start she had on him. Thanks to her keen sense of intuition, any attempt at deceiving her usually ended in failure. That’s why he needed Mjurran to take her assignment as seriously as possible—and if Milim took care of her in the process, that was no great issue, either. The moment Milim spotted her, Mjurran’s role in his life was over. Having Milim rub her out wouldn’t hurt Clayman at all.

“By this point, Mjurran’s a pawn I can stand to get rid of. I’ve obtained all her knowledge. She’s largely useless in battle. It was about time to dispose of her anyway. This works well for me,” he mused coldly.

Just then…

“Just as terrible as always, aren’t you, Clayman? Sad to hear. You need to treat your tools right, or else they’ll fall apart. Didn’t Laplace tell you that?”

The apparent response to Clayman’s whispers came from a hazy presence in a corner of the room. It revealed a young girl wearing the mask of a clown, one with tear marks running from its eyes.

Her voice was equally forlorn. It didn’t bother the demon lord, who leisurely turned around to face the girl.

“Oh, you’re back, Teare? That was fast.”

He addressed her with a deep sort of affection, despite her entering the room unannounced. That was rare for Clayman but nonetheless to be expected. This was one of the demon lord’s very few true friends. Teare, the Teardrop Jester—much like Laplace, the Wonder Jester, her coworker and vice president of the Moderate Jesters—was an old companion of Clayman’s.

“Uh-huh. It was pretty tough this time. I couldn’t move around too freely in Frey’s territory. She is a demon lord, after all.”

“I could imagine. You weren’t noticed, were you?”

“No problems there. Mission complete! I am part of the Moderate Jesters—you could learn to trust me a little more!”

Clayman flashed her a contented smile. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, I do, I do, Teare. I just worry you’re putting your neck on the line too much.”

The concern he had for Teare was evident in his voice. It was a much different tone from what he used with Mjurran a moment ago. Anyone could see that any worry he had for Teare was the genuine article.

“Ugh! Can you stop treating me like a child already?!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes, of course, Teare. But did you hear the news? Milim seems to have taken quite the liking to those magic-born. This is turning out even more interesting than I had thought it would. Who could have imagined that Milim herself would seek out one of Carillon’s Three Lycanthropeers? Such a pleasure to see unfold.”

“Well, fair enough,” Teare replied quizzically. “But how do you think it’s going, though? I haven’t seen your crystal-ball recordings yet, but are these magic-born really amazing enough to keep Milim’s interest?”

Clayman could sense her curiosity. He made no attempt to hide his own heart from her. “Well, to be honest, I suppose they cannot go on ignored. In terms of strength alone, I would easily be able to dispatch them…” He paused to think for a moment, carefully choosing his words. “But Laplace was…unnerved by them. He ‘felt’ something, is how he put it. I thought he was overthinking matters, but if both the orc lord and these mysterious magic-born survived, it does give me pause.”

“Hmm… Really?” Teare sounded convinced by this assessment. “Well,” she continued, “if it was enough to unnerve that little sneak Laplace, there’s got to be something to it, doesn’t there? Either them and the orc lord made peace, or one side’s subjugating the other…or something else? It’s hard to judge their value, I think, as long as we don’t know. We at least need to know what the demon lord Milim finds so fascinating about them.”

“Certainly… I can’t disagree with that.”

“Right? You aren’t acting like yourself, Clayman. You’re usually a lot more cautious about these things.”

Such a scathing comment forced Clayman to reconsider his approach. If some monster under his control made this statement, he wouldn’t have given it any kind of sincere thought. It might’ve enraged him into killing the poor creature.

“Perhaps I might be a little too hasty here. I suppose I’d best collect more information from a variety of angles before I debate it any further.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right!”

So following Teare’s feedback, Clayman decided to investigate the magic-born a little more. He had no interest in recruiting them; his objectives were still the same.

The only question he wanted to tackle: What was Milim so interested in with them? That was a major concern for him, and he thought learning more about the magic-born might lead to an answer.

Otherwise, to a demon lord like Clayman, high-level magic-borns hardly mattered at all.

Recomposing himself, Clayman decided to listen to Teare’s report.

“So how did your investigation turn out?”

“Well, it looks like Frey has no intention of getting involved in the Forest of Jura.”

“Ah… So she won’t make a move, then? Did you get a grasp of what was going on over there?”

“Oh, absolutely!” Teare grinned.

She had taken on this job because Laplace was busy with another assignment.

Her mission was to investigate the demon lord Frey and collect intel on any potential weakness they could take advantage of. That was what brought Teare into Frey’s territory.

Teare might have looked like a little girl, but much like the demon lord she served, she was a first-class superpower.

“So, um, my impression was that Frey was kind of on high alert about something or other. She had harpies flying around all over her realm, like she was preparing for war or something.”

“Ah. It figures. Did you find out why?”

Teare snickered a little. “I did. And guess what?! She’s freaked out because Charybdis might resurrect itself!” she reported cheerily.

It made perfect sense to Clayman. “I see, I see… Well, Teare, I’d like to make another request of you, but how’s your schedule looking?”

“Eee-hee-hee! I thought you might say that. I have Footman on standby, too, so if it involves some rough stuff, we can handle it!”

“Heh-heh… Well done, Teare. But I’d like you to keep this from turning violent. First, I’d like you to travel to where this Charybdis is sealed away and see if it’s possible to win this creature over to our side.”

“Sure thing! Leave it all to me, Clayman!”

“I believe the location is—”

“I said, leave it all to me! I gotta get going, okay?”

With that, Teare once more sank into the muddy darkness. Watching her leave, Clayman exhibited a twinge of worry in his eyes—an extraordinarily rare thing for him. In an instant, they were back to their bold, fearless shine.

“Well… Charybdis, eh? Very good. If its power is truly up to demon lord standards, I can hardly wait to see what it packs.”

The whisper was delivered with a joyful smile as he descended into his own thoughts.

Carillon, king of the lycanthropes, first declared himself demon lord four hundred years ago in his thirst for more power. The world was in a great era of upheaval back then, with demon lords stepping in and out of the picture at a dizzying rate, and he made the move near the end of a great world war, one fabled to take place every five hundred years.

Frey was one of the other survivors of that era to join the demon lord club, with Clayman staking his claim a century later. Leon Cromwell, meanwhile, assumed the title two hundred years ago, with his defeat of the Accursed Lord under his belt.

Together, the four young demon lords were known as the New Generation.

The older ones, meanwhile, were wizened generals by comparison, all surviving at least two world wars, and their strength was on a completely different level from the new gang. That led many in the New Generation to strive to expand their own forces, and Carillon was one of them.

It was little wonder, then, that he was now attempting to recruit some more brawn for his side.

Phobio, the Black Leopard Fang and one of Carillon’s Three Lycanthropeers, understood his master’s feelings better than anyone else. That was why, even after being trounced to a terrifying degree by the demon lord Milim, he was still hiding himself deep in the forest.

There was no way he could do something as utterly shameless as returning home right now. If he explained everything to Carillon, he would no doubt laugh it off and forgive him. But Phobio’s pride refused to allow that. Failing to live up to the expectations of Carillon, the man who saved his life, would be unbearable.

“I can’t let that happen!” he half howled into the air.

“Please, calm yourself, Sir Phobio!”

“That defeat was unavoidable. Not even Lord Carillon could quell the rage of Milim—”

“Shut up! Lord Carillon would never show his ugly face again if it happened to him. I was just too inexperienced for the job…but my pride forbids me from returning without anything to show for it.”

The anger in Phobio’s embittered reply made his men fall silent.

They had been hiding out for a week, taking shifts as they kept watch over the town. The demon lord Milim had stayed there the entire time—and they had also seen monsters engaged in a variety of tasks, from building construction to road expansion. There were also monsters tasked with procuring food and patrolling the area—the order preserved around town was amazing to see. Not even Phobio could hide his shock.

“Just look at those bastards. Up and building a town for themselves… I dismissed them as lowly monsters, but they’ve got technology that not even I am aware of…”

“You certainly said it. I wouldn’t want to subjugate them so much as open formal relations with their leader.”

This was Enrio, a monkey lycanthrope, taking an intellectual approach to the question. He had a point. These monsters were working in orderly crews, under the command of their leaders. This was clearly some state-of-the-art engineering. It was incomparable with what Enrio knew in his homeland, the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania, with its crude stone houses and roads of bare, flattened earth.

“Yeah. Even if Milim wasn’t here, we’ve taken the wrong approach. We tried to conquer them without any chance for them to counter us—and that cost us the opportunity to earn their trust. But what’s done is done. And even if I’m all healed up, my humiliation at the hands of Milim hasn’t disappeared. I have to find a way to get back at her! Some way that won’t put any trouble on Lord Carillon. I know in my brain that it’s impossible, but this is about my heart.” Phobio’s voice was dark, ghostlike, and bereft of its usual cheerfulness.

Up to now, Phobio was an absolute ruler. Nobody could defy his strength—but now his first setback was giving him pause. He had never lost to anyone before, except Carillon. His logical mind told him that losing to Milim was unavoidable, but the flames of humiliation still simmered deep below.

“I know what you mean, sir, but…”

Enrio knew exactly how Phobio felt. But exacting revenge upon Milim was not in the scope of reality. He tried to make Phobio give up on the idea but found himself interrupted.

“Ohhh, I completely understand. All that anger and frustration… I’m an old veteran of those feelings.”

“Who goes there?!”

“Since when were you here?”

Phobio’s troops were far too late to react. The figure had already sidled right up to them as they sat around the campfire—and judging by the way it had avoided detection by an entire group of high-level magic-born, it must have been quite talented indeed.

“Hohhhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! A good day to all of you! I am called Footman, member of the Moderate Jesters. They call me the Angry Jester, and I am delighted to make all of your acquaintances!”

The polite greeting from the rotund figure was marred slightly by the enraged expression on its mask. The gregarious tone of the clown’s voice made its presence seem, in a way, quite surreal.

“Mm-hmm. You don’t have to be so wary of us. My name’s Teare, a fellow Moderate Jester. We’re sort of jacks-of-all-trades, and I promise we’re not fighting against you!”

And then, a female clown stepped out from behind Footman, this one with a tearful mask. The angry man and the sobbing girl—a very strange thing to see beside a peaceful campfire.

Asking Phobio and his cohorts not to be “wary” of them was a tall order. But the way they appeared out of nowhere certainly hinted at their powers. If they weren’t foes, perhaps it was best to believe that.

“Hohh? I’ve never heard of this Moderate Jesters group before. A jack-of-all-trades? Well, whatever. What are you after anyway?” Phobio asked, trying to work out their objectives.

Footman seemed like he couldn’t wait to answer. “Hohh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Well, I was called here by your feelings of anger and disgust. The waves of rage I felt rippling from here were quite noteworthy, indeed! Were you the source of them? I would love to know what makes you so enraged. Would you be so kind as to tell me? Because I’m sure I could offer some assistance!”

He transformed his mask as he spoke, making it erupt into an eerie smile.

“You expect us to talk to someone as creepy as you two?” Enrio countered. “Sir Phobio, there’s no reason to fall for their politeness. May we dispatch them for you?”

“He’s right!” another of Phobio’s men added. “It’s not normal, someone coming here without being asked to. You two look to be high-level magic-born as well, but you picked the wrong group to wrestle with. We belong to the Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance, part of the armies of the demon lord Carillon. Do you think a pair of wandering magic-born like you could defeat us?”



The group had little interest in hearing them out. The strangers were too suspicious-looking, and the way they dared to offer help riled their anger. Phobio’s group were in the elite echelon of Carillon’s forces—they hadn’t fallen to the point where they required the help of random creepsters.

Ignoring them, Footman continued. “You seek power, do you not? Well, power’s just what we have. Quite a bit! It comes with a level of danger, of course, but if you can conquer this danger, the strength you could earn from it is tremendous!”

“…Oh?”

“Yeah! You want to beat the demon lord Milim, don’t you? So why don’t you become a demon lord, too?”

Teare’s question drove the camp to silence. The sound of one lycanthrope swallowing nervously seemed to echo against the trees.

“A…demon lord? Did you think you could trick us with such ridiculous—”

“Charybdis. Have you heard of it?”

The single word from Footman had earth-shattering effects. The moment he uttered it, Phobio froze in place.

And then—

“The evil powers that giant fish holds are incredibly massive! If you don’t need it, well, we can always offer it to someone else. See ya!”

—Teare dealt the next blow.

Gesturing to Footman, she turned and prepared to walk off. This was how the devil tempts you—by making you panic, stealing your decision-making skills, and blocking your ability to think rationally.

“…Wait.”

Phobio stopped her, defeated by his very own ambitions.

“No, Sir Phobio!”

“You can’t listen to these people!”

“Tell me more,” Phobio asked, ignoring his men.

The flames of crazed desire were dancing in his eyes as he turned them toward Footman. Maybe this was his chance to scare the wits out of Milim with all her power. It could even let him rule over the lands as a demon lord himself. None of it was a dream any longer. And imagining it made Phobio fling away all his composure.

No. I never liked this from the start. Why did the demon lord choose me to dispatch a single, wimpy orc lord? I don’t need to take that crap. Yes… If it’s a new demon lord they need, nobody should have any complaints about me taking the helm. If it makes me stronger, I’m sure Carillon will laugh it off anyway!

Phobio, prone to hasty thinking even in the best of times, had been completely hooked by Teare’s and Footman’s sweet words.

“Ooh! A fine decision, Sir Phobio. And the correct one! Who besides you could ever become a demon lord?”

“You’re up for it, then?” Teare added. “Well, it makes sense to me. Someone strong’s gotta be demon lord, or else it’d be a terrible mistake! That’s what I think, too—and you’re just the man for the job, Sir Phobio!”

Yet, Phobio was no fool. He still had ultimate authority over these two flattering him, and he hadn’t forgotten one very pertinent question to ask.

“Knock that crap off! I said, tell me more. If I say yes to that offer, what do you get out of it? You gotta have some kind of endgame! So out with it!”

Teare and Footman had expected this.

“We do get something out of it, yes. If you become a demon lord, Sir Phobio, we’re hoping you can show us a little favor afterward. Hopefully, you’ll be able to accommodate us in a few areas?”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! And we could hardly subdue Charybdis by ourselves. We’ve discovered where it’s been confined and everything, but if we can’t tame it, it’d be such a waste! And just as we were pondering over what to do about that, who should we run into but you, Sir Phobio!”

That was easy enough for Phobio to accept.

“Huh. All right. But how do you know I can tame Charybdis any more than—?”

“Hohhhhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! No worries there! I am positive you will succeed at the task, Sir Phobio! And even if you should fail by some incredibly unlikely event, we will demand no reparations from you. We only charge our clients if they win, win, win! On that score—at the least—you can place your full trust upon the jacks-of-all-trades at the Moderate Jesters!”

Huh, Phobio thought. So when I become demon lord, they want it to be clear who helped me out the most.

In that case, perhaps it was best to leave the demon lord Carillon’s army. That move could do him well, whether he succeeded at this or not.

Phobio had a lust for power. He also felt confident that he could tame Charybdis. Instead of fearing failure, he was already sure of his success, ready to accept the deal. All the extravagant praise from this pair made him feel like he was sitting on a demon lord’s throne even now—or perhaps, Phobio was already caught up in their spell by then.

“All right. I accept your offer!”

Following his instincts, Phobio nodded, signing the papers that Teare handed to him.

Phobio then turned to his troops and gave his final orders.

“I want you to go back to Lord Carillon and tell him what I agreed to.”

“Sir Phobio?!”

“But…”

“Listen, you guys,” he said, stopping them. “I’m not gonna cause any trouble for Sir Carillon, so tell him I’m giving up my post in the Three Lycanthropeers and leaving the force. Nobody’s gonna whine about what I do if I’m just some magic-born unaffiliated with anyone. Besides…I’m going places. I’m going to be stronger. Strong enough to lay waste to the world. And I’ll make Milim recognize that!”

Nothing could change Phobio’s mind—a mind that was almost unnaturally attuned toward revenge against the demon lord who slighted him. As if his unfading feelings of humiliation and anger were pushing him forward.

Enrio silently watched him, thinking and observing as his companions exhorted Phobio to reconsider. After all the years he had been his closest confidant, he knew well that once he made up his mind, it wasn’t easy to make him reconsider. Phobio’s will was firm, and his heart could not be moved. So…

“Very well, sir. I will report to Lord Carillon first. However, the strength of Charybdis is still an unknown. I would suggest you be careful with it—do not expect it to eat from your hand that easily.”

And with that, he left, taking his companions with him. Considering the nonaggression pact the demon lords had with one another, Phobio picking a fight with Milim could become a serious crisis. Enrio needed to confer with Carillon and take countermeasures before that happened. It was with some reluctance that he left, but he couldn’t afford to do anything as foolish as let his emotions dictate his priorities. It was an order, besides, and one made with whatever reasoning power remained in his mind.

Sir Phobio is not a fool. I cannot think he will be deceived for long by that strange duo. And even if this Charybdis actually exists, Sir Phobio should be able to tame it.

He chose to have faith in Phobio.

With Enrio on his way, the only people left were Teare, Footman, and Phobio.

“Well, shall we be off, then?”

“Yes! I can’t wait to show this Charybdis my power and smash it to the ground. And with our combined forces, we’ll turn that demon lord Milim into a sobbing baby!”

“Yep! You sure will! I’m totally cheering you on, too, so don’t let your guard down! Ready to go?”

Teare and Footman motioned Phobio to follow behind them. After a short journey, they reached a small cave, deep in the very heart of the Forest of Jura.

“Charybdis is here?”

“Sure is!”

“It has not resurrected itself quite yet, you see, but you can still feel its lust for destruction bubble into the air. We love such emotions, so that’s how we found it.”

There was an evil grin on Footman’s face as he spoke. Phobio failed to notice, enraptured as he was by the strange aura he could feel from the cave.

“Now,” the clown continued, “let me explain how this works. Resurrecting Charybdis requires a large number of corpses. Charybdis is a sort of spiritual life-form, essentially like a demon. We have to give it a physical corpus, so it can exercise its power in this world. So…”

He gave Phobio a sidelong glance. Phobio could read what it meant. He gulped nervously.

“Wait. Are you…?”

“Why, yes! We are! To tame Charybdis, you must instill it within your own body. You will become one with it!” Footman’s voice boomed, revealing his obvious excitement.

“Mm-hmm,” Teare added. “If you want to stop, now’s your chance, okay? This seal won’t last for much longer, and when it breaks, Charybdis will wind up resurrected on some battlefield or monster fight or whatever. In fact, it’s probably gonna try using the remaining dregs of its power to cook up the monster corpses it needs to resurrect itself—and if that happens, we’ll have gone through all this trouble for nothing!”

Was that true? It might be. There was a slight twinge of impatience to Teare’s voice.

“If Charybdis automatically resurrects itself, I doubt we’d be able to control it. It’s just a pure drive for destruction, so it won’t take orders from anyone, I don’t think. Not even if we defeat it. So…we have to unseal it before it resurrects and take its powers away, or it won’t work,” she continued, choosing her words carefully.

Her eyes turned straight toward Phobio. They stabbed into him, much as Footman’s had. There would be no more eloquent way to ask the question they were asking.

“All right,” Phobio replied sternly. “I’m already committed to this; I ain’t gonna chicken out now. I am ready to make the power of Charybdis my own!”

“Yeah! That’s the spirit!”

“Hohhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Well said, Lord Phobio. I really must thank you—and toast our good fortune as well for running into such a trustworthy partner!”

So it was decided.

Phobio ventured into the cave alone, eyes filled with the pride he held as a high-level magic-born. A finely purified will that believed in victory without fearing defeat. But sadly, his heart was still filled, deep down, with his grudge against Milim and his buried anger at his own immaturity.

To the spiritual life-form known as Charybdis, nothing could be more delicious.

The moment he fell for Teare’s and Footman’s sweet words, his fate was sealed—a fact he had failed to notice as he plunged into the cave’s darkness.

Time passed.

“He is gone, isn’t he?”

“He certainly is.”

“Hohh-hoh-hoh! Hohhh-hoh-hoh-hoh!”

“Ha-ha-ha… Ahh-ha-ha-ha!!”

The laughter came loud and fast once they were sure Phobio was fully inside.

“Exactly the sort of person one would expect to be serving that blockhead Carillon, eh? And after all the excuses we practiced beforehand, he barely questioned us at all.”

“Totally, totally! That monkey guy looked a lot smarter than him.”

They had contrived a fairly extensive amount of arguments and strategies to convince Phobio to accept the offer from this pair of odd-looking strangers. But Phobio’s eyes were so clouded by rage and greed that it went far easier than predicted. They ridiculed him for it in his absence—so easy, it was almost a disappointment.

“Is that the end of the job, then, Teare?”

“Mm-hmm! All I heard from Clayman was to revive Charybdis and have it head for Milim.”

“And no new business after that?”

“Nope. This job’s all wrapped up! Oh, and how about we just dispose of the lesser-dragon corpses we brought in? We’re not gonna need ’em anymore.”

“Indeed. We go through all the trouble to prepare a temporary body, and then that fool volunteers for the job instead! No need for these corpses, no.”

So they tossed the bodies to the ground.

There were a dozen or so lesser dragons in all; they had killed an entire flock of them for the job. Lesser dragons were not part of the draconic races that Veldora belonged to; there was nothing inherently magical about them. They were unintelligent creatures, incapable of handling magic, but they were protected by a tough body and strong scales, giving them a killer advantage in close-quarters fighting. The human race usually ranked them around a B-plus or A-minus, but not even such a powerful beast was any match for two high-level magic-born.

Their lives were cruelly taken, and now they were being treated like garbage. Bringing them to a human town and selling the assorted parts from them could fetch a small fortune, but to Teare and Footman, they were just an encumbrance.

Once they removed the corpses from their spatial-magic storage and dumped them on the ground, they left the scene, satisfied at a job well done.

It had been several weeks since Milim arrived, and the time really passed by in a flash. Every day was a battle with her.

Some days, she would check out our agricultural operations and even help plow the fields. I was willing to bet that we were tilling the fields created after clearing trees from the forest faster than any modern farming equipment could manage. It was exhilarating, seeing how quickly the job was being done.

Other days, she’d observe our workshops. Watching Kurobe forge a new sword practically made her swoon for the guy—and then she’d immediately get bored and whine about wanting to try doing it herself. He said yes, and of course, her approach was incredibly violent—one strike was all it took to almost destroy the forge space, anvil and all. It taught us all that Milim wasn’t really suited for delicate work.

Chaotic days, to be sure, but at least they were peaceful now.

Not much had changed with life around town after Yohm and his crew left. The only real difference was the guests we were now hosting. Kabal and friends were still staying here, as was Fuze.

“Uhh, don’t you kind of need to get back home sooner or later? How long were you planning to stay anyway?”

I decided to bring up the question with Fuze while Kabal and his gang were taking Milim out hunting. They got along pretty well with her, too; by now they were her second favorite after me. I needed to take advantage as much as I could.

“Well, is it all right if I stayed a little bit longer? There’s, you know, a lot of things to tackle.”

He wanted more time. He, too, had been walking around town, observing the assorted goings-on. He wasn’t liable to cause trouble if I took my eyes off him, unlike Milim, but it still made me nervous.

“Oh, come on, you’re still not convinced that we’re not a threat?”

The whole reason for his stay was because he was suspicious of us—or me, really. The longer he stayed here, the more concerned it made me.

“Mmm? Oh no, I’ve long since dropped any worries I had about you, Sir Rimuru. It’s just…”

His voice trailed off.

“Okay, so why are you still here?” I pressed.

Fuze scowled a little, then resigned himself to reveal the truth. “Well, it’s just comfortable living here, you know? Thinking about it, it’s been a long while since I’ve had a chance to rest and take it easy, so…you know, I was thinking this was a good chance to let my hair down for a bit.”

What? Wow, talk about brazen! I’ve been on pins and needles worrying about Fuze, and he was treating this as a resort vacation?!

“Uh, you realize I permitted you to stay here because you were going on about trying to ‘gauge us out’ and so on, right?”

I was truly at a loss for words. All the politeness I extended to him at first now seemed like a truly stupid idea. And that wasn’t all—there was one other thing too important to forget.

“Also, what happened to your promise that you’d help make Yohm and his band into champions?”

“Oh, no need to worry! I’ve decided that I can trust you, Sir Rimuru, so I’ve already instructed my team to finish up the arrangements.”

Apparently, he had already reported to Blumund and gotten everything set up for Yohm over in Farmus. Despite being on vacation, he was still handling his job for me. Shrewd of him, I guess—or maybe, indicative of the fact that I couldn’t let my guard down around him.

“Really? Well, great, then. So you like it here?”

“I should say so! This town is amazing! Having such a fine place to rest and recuperate so near to Blumund is truly welcome. Of course…I can’t help but think about the dangers involved in traveling between here and there.”

I suppose Fuze really did see this town as a kind of health spa. Guess installing that hot-spring bath and working hard to improve our food quality paid off. It was more the work of Shuna and the three dwarven brothers than me, but still.

Our diets, in particular, had dramatically changed over the past few weeks. It still wasn’t all that varied a menu, but each meal had started to taste quite a bit better. We didn’t have much in the way of seasonings, such as mirin or soy sauce, so no really strong flavors yet—but we did have salt, as well as something kind of like pepper and a variety of condiments from the fragrant grasses of the forest.

These ingredients, combined with Shuna’s genius in the kitchen, were producing some pretty high-grade food.

“Ahh, being able to consume such fine cuisine, day in, day out. I am a happy woman indeed!” Milim also approved.

She had made friends with Shuna while I wasn’t paying attention, and the sight of her stealing—er, sampling—tastes of food in the kitchen became a regular occurrence. Shuna was fond of her, too, and sometimes I wondered if anyone saw her as a demon lord any longer. But hey, having friends isn’t a bad thing.

We were also training apprentice cooks for Shuna’s operations. From both genders, too. Shuna didn’t have the analysis and assessment abilities that my unique skills provided; she had to rely on her five senses to make the food she did. The new cooks stuck to Shuna’s advice along those lines, working hard to keep bellies full across town.

With all the different races coming in, our population was starting to swell. This naturally meant we needed to employ a large number of people to cover our food needs, along with keeping the peace, cleaning the rest houses, and doing the laundry. Everyone had their strong and weak points, so we had decided to divide the work into six categories: cooking, cleaning, upkeep, sewing, assistance, and miscellaneous. Rigurd was responsible for taking command and providing assignments. He was good at it, and the job he was doing bringing all the town’s monsters together was a wonder to see.

Yohm’s band also had nothing but good things to say about our food. They liked their living quarters, too, along with the town experience in general. If it wasn’t for that, I’m sure they would’ve fled from Hakuro and his demonic training regimen long ago. Judging by the way monsters around town treated them, they must have enjoyed the work well enough. Once we started hosting merchants in here, I was pretty sure it’d work out just fine.

It’d be great if we could all work together and turn this area into a tourist destination. I had certain plans along those lines, but nothing concrete yet. For now, our first priority was convincing everyone else that we weren’t dangerous.

Danger on the roads, though…?

That was probably a good point. It’d be exceedingly rare to run into something as big as a knight spider, but there certainly were a large number of monsters out there. A forest as deep and thickly vegetated as this one was no place for a human being to live—the monsters posed a danger, but so did getting lost and running out of food. Nobody was around to treat you if you hurt yourself, and the threat of illness on the road was also present. It took nearly two weeks to complete a one-way journey between Blumund and here, but you could expect to tack on a few extra days for all sorts of reasons.

Having Shadow Motion and the like on hand made the distance something we could cover immediately, but that wasn’t available to adventurers. Even seasoned travelers like Kabal’s team needed around ten days to cover it, no matter how quickly they went. If they got in a fight and lost their bearings, it was a given in this world that they’d need to expend a few days getting back on track.

I wanted to use the merchants to spread the word about this town for me. That was my plan, but there were still a few stumbling blocks to cover before we brought it to action.

“Hmm… I see. It’d be quicker to build a new road, wouldn’t it?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Um, well, I’m having a crew pave a road between here and the Dwarven Kingdom, but I’ve also got another team handling building construction. Their work’s settled down lately, but I was thinking maybe they could put in a road to Blumund. It’d keep people from getting lost, at least.”

“Wait, really? That’s kind of a big national operation, isn’t it? You’d need a ton of money to—”

“There you go again, Fuzie.”

“Fuzie? Something about you calling me that really creeps me out.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it, Fuzie. If we can build a road and pave it with gravel, that’d open passage to carriages and wagons and such. It’d save a ton of time, plus, it’d be useful for future relations, right? And we’d be happy to undertake this operation. Just one thing…”

“What’s that?”

“I want you to spread the word, like you promised. Just let everyone know that we aren’t a pack of dangerous monsters. And I’d also appreciate it if you could introduce me to an expert in customs and tariffs and stuff. I want to sell some of the goods we produce, so if I could get in contact with people who can help with all that stuff, that’d be great. How about it?”

Right now, the path between here and Blumund was little more than a rough animal trail, capable of accommodating horses but not full carriages. We had started to build a road to Dwargon, but we hadn’t even gotten around to clearing the trees that dotted the path to Blumund. We hesitated to, because we were afraid of calling too much attention to ourselves, but that was before all the battles and such in the forest.

Things were starting to calm down again, and I wanted to have some highways we could leverage to improve our trading activity. I was prepared to leave that issue alone if we were seen as “the enemy,” but if we were building diplomatic relations with other countries, we needed some real roads, fast. And since I ran things in the forest, it was up to us, I felt, to do all the construction work.

I figured now was a good time to plead my case to Fuze about this, even if it sounded a tad patronizing, and have him do his job for me. It had the intended effect. Fuze looked honestly touched.

“Sir Rimuru, you would really do all that for us? In that case, we’ll do our best to provide any kind of support you need!”

Heh. That was easy. Fuze will probably be singing our praises to anyone who listens to him once he returns home. At the very least, if he didn’t have a narrow, prejudiced view of us, then I’d say I won this battle.

If using some of our idle man power to build a road was enough to earn that much appreciation, it’s a pretty cheap deal for us, I think.

Kabal and his friends were back by the time I had finished cajoling Fuze. Milim came running up to me, a big smile on her face.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Another bumper crop today!”

Behind her, Kabal and Gido were both carrying a huge number of monsters on their backs.

“Boy, that Milim sure is something else! She can spot out monsters in the blink of an eye! She made things so much easier for us.” The empty-handed Elen beamed as she trailed behind the demon lord.

There wasn’t a speck of dirt on Milim at all; I guess she had the men in the party handle all the heavy lifting. She was wearing a new dress from Shuna, and I suppose she didn’t want to splash any blood on it. Not exactly hunting gear, I don’t think…

“Phewww! Finally back!”

“That was a hard day of work, eh? Let’s hit the hot spring and grab a mugful of something.”

“Ooh yeah! The fruit wine here is awesome!”

Kabal and Gido didn’t seem to mind being used and abused, at least, although that probably wasn’t the way they thought about it. The men were spoiling Milim, after all, and it wouldn’t be very nice to gripe about that and stir up conflict. If they had no problem, neither did I.



It did, however, remind me all the more about how, no matter which world you lived in, some men were doomed to have women use them. I, at the very least, could show them a little kindness.

“Hey, good work, guys. Why don’t you get yourselves cleaned up first?”

“Yes, I would hardly want you to remain all dirty like that—”

Shion started to comment, but then—

“Hmm?!”

Suddenly, Milim ran next to me, eyes pointed forward.

“Who’s there?!”

Shion handed me to Milim as she addressed some presence in front of her. I’m not a piece of baggage, you know. I have no idea why they’re ferrying me back and forth, like I’m some fragile work of art.

Benimaru and Soei took position behind Milim as I grumped about this for a moment, Hakuro standing nearby among the trees. I didn’t spot him arriving—he must have been training just now, but his clothing was still in perfect order. Impressive. And with Ranga bursting out from my shadow, we now had the town’s main force gathered together.

Geld was out working on the road project, so he wasn’t here. He had reported to me a few days back about how he sensed something suspicious nearby, but he never actually saw anything, so he chalked it up to his mind playing tricks on him and kept up the road construction. I had a feeling that I was forgetting about someone else, too, but—hey—with all the guys we did have, I didn’t predict any issues.

Besides, the person facing us was familiar to me.

“It has been quite a long time, my leader.”

It was Traya, a dryad and Treyni’s younger sister.

“Sure has. But why are you looking like that? All like you’re about to kill someone?” I said as she kneeled before me.

The seething rage was something you could detect even from far away, sharp enough to make both Milim and Shion react to it. Her semitranslucent body was a bit hazy in places; perhaps she had taken some damage. It was clear that something happened to her.

“…Well, I am afraid it is an emergency. Charybdis, a calamity-class monster, has revived itself. The power wielded by this great spirit is akin to a demon lord’s. My sisters are keeping it immobile for now, but we are hopelessly outclassed. Plus…it appears the great spirit is seeking out this land. Charybdis is a tyrant of the skies; ground-based forces can do little against it. I came here to advise you that you must solidify your defenses and prepare some aerial war power.”

The fatigue was clear on her face as she explained.

Tension quickly filled the air. Surprisingly, Fuze was the first to react—he was stunned to near silence the moment he saw Traya (“A dryad?!” he had shouted), but the mention of Charybdis’s name got his brain in gear again.

The blood drained from his face as he shouted. “Charybdis?! Oh, man, if it’s really revived, that’s a bigger threat than any demon lord. Unlike those guys, you can’t even reason with this thing. It’s classified as a calamity, but I’d say it’s safe to assume it’s a full-on disaster, if anything…”

As he put it, its strength was demon lord–caliber, but instead of leading an army, it just went around by itself wreaking havoc. A sort of unintelligent monster, to put it another way.

However, thanks to its unique Summon Monster skill, it could call out schools of megalodons, a large, shark-type monster, anytime it wanted. The otherworldly creatures dissipated after a period of time, once the magicules giving its body physical form were exhausted, but even so, they were an A-minus force that couldn’t be ignored. What’s more, Charybdis could summon ten or so at once, making even its servant beasts a formidable presence.

If Fuze was right, then I honestly had to agree with him. This was worse than a demon lord.

“I don’t know why we would be targeted, but if we are, this is great for us. We must choose the best fighters we have and prepare to counter this force.”

Benimaru was certainly excited, but we needed people who could fly…

Oh! Wait! I forgot!

“Right. I forgot Gabil. He’s probably doing research in the cave. Can someone get him for me?”

Soei went off to fetch him. In the meantime, I decided to go back to town and hold a prep meeting.

We were back in the now-familiar meeting hall, Traya using Thought Communication to speak with her sisters.

Soei was back with Gabil, with Vester joining him, so we could make contact with King Gazel if need be. On the question of aerial firepower, the first thing that crossed my mind were his Pegasus Knights—each one of them were A-ranked fighters, so if I could gain their support, I couldn’t ask for anyone better to rely on.

Gabil and his fighters could fly as well, but they were no better than B-plus, and taking on someone ranked higher than you was gravely dangerous. I preferred to think of a way we could guarantee victory for ourselves, with minimum damage.

“Things couldn’t be much worse,” Traya began. “For some reason, the summoned megalodons have incarnated themselves in the corpses of some lesser dragons. They’ve manifested to creatures over sixty feet in length, like nothing we have ever seen before, and there are thirteen of them. My sisters estimate that each one is in A-ranked territory.”

“““…”””

Everyone in the room lost their voice at this. A creature as strong as a demon lord, plus thirteen other A-ranked monsters? I wanted to ask if this was some kind of a joke.

“What will we do, Sir Rimuru?” Benimaru asked.

Ugh, that’s what I want to ask…but I’m the leader of this alliance, and it’s my job to make the decisions. Plus, no matter how much I hemmed and hawed about it, there was only one answer to give.

“What’ll we do? Well, we’ll kill it, won’t we?” Reluctant though I was, I presented that conclusion to the others.

The moment I said it, everyone in the room took action.

“Heh. I didn’t need to ask. In that case, I will begin to prepare.”

“Indeed, what else could we do?”

“Exactly! This will be no sweat for Sir Rimuru.”

When it came to this sort of thing, they knew exactly what to do. Nobody voiced any disagreement with me; instead, they sought out their roles and sprang into action. The sight made Fuze lose his head a little.

“Whoa! Is that all? Don’t you understand? This is a demon lord–class enemy…”

“But even if we stalled for time, we can’t expect much support from Blumund, can we, Fuzie?”

“Well, no, but…”

“I’m not fighting to lose this, of course, but if it comes to it, I hope you’ll consider taking in some of our residents.”

“Not fighting to lose…? But even the dryads can’t handle this monster! Now’s no time for this kind of easygoing nonsense. It’s a huge problem! One that requires an international response!”

I wasn’t intending to sound easygoing. I was honestly fairly panicked myself. That’s why Benimaru and the other ogre mages were so quick to begin preparations—and Gabil himself was running off to gather his troops. Hakuro was in contact with Gobta to get the goblin riders assembled.

Each of them was a B-plus threat alone, but working together as a coherent unit, he declared that they could easily have one or two of the megalodons for dinner. They even looked forward to the chance to experience battle against a higher-ranked enemy. Crazy.

Meanwhile, Rigurd was bringing the town leaders together, explaining the situation and ordering Rigur to lead the evacuation. Calling attention from the air would make you a target, so I imagine he’d take them all into the forest.

All of this was done in orderly fashion, without anyone getting too worked up about it. Sadly, with the frequency of the crises we’ve been asked to tackle, I suppose we’ve gotten use to things like this.

Fuze, being unaware, must’ve thought I wasn’t sensing the danger enough, and I can’t blame him for that.

Milim, meanwhile, was going with Shion to the bath.

Some enemy coming to attack the town wasn’t any concern of hers. Her devotion to the routine was at least helping keep everyone around her calm.

After everyone sprang into action, the only people left in the meeting hall besides me were Fuze and Kabal’s trio. We took the opportunity to talk over a few things.

“All right, I’m not gonna tell you guys not to worry about anything, but I intend to do everything I can for this. I’m having Vester make contact with King Gazel for me, so we should expect some more support, too. After that, well, I’ll do what I can,” I said.

Fuze looked less than optimistic. He had a lot of questions, doubts, and other thoughts in his mind, and I got the impression he was having trouble forming them into words. I was in no hurry, so I wanted him to calm down a bit.

“…You aren’t going to run?” he finally asked after a moment of thought, clearly worried for all of us. He was gravely serious, and I thought he deserved a serious reply.

“What would running accomplish? I’m the strongest dude in this nation. I’ve told my people to take refuge if I ever lose, but you know, just because I lose one fight doesn’t mean I’m giving up on the battle. If there’s absolutely no chance of winning, then sure, I’ll run away and think up another plan. If not, though, then it’s important that I go right in front of our foe and gauge how strong he is with my own eyes, isn’t it?”

I need to do that if I want to formulate any kind of strategy. Plus, since I am the strongest in the Alliance, nobody’s running as long as I don’t lose.

I thought about saying that, but I found it a little too embarrassing.

It just felt so lame, telling people that it was a leader’s job to take the loss sometimes. That’s why I tried not to lose, if I could. Until I actually did lose, I had to play the strongman role to live up to everyone’s expectations.

And even if I was defeated, I didn’t have much to worry about—not after telling everyone so many times to take refuge in that case.

“…Ah. That’s what being a leader of monsters means, I suppose.”

“Yeah, well, this isn’t the kind of nation that would crumble after losing its king anyway, so…”

Fuze nodded at me. He looked convinced enough. “Still, it strikes me, Sir Rimuru, that you think quite a bit like we humans do. You don’t seem like a monster at all. Plus, it’s just so strange, having a slime be the most powerful being in the realm,” he said with a chuckle.

He might be right. It didn’t seem like anything unusual to me, since I was a former human, but to Fuze, having a monster think and act so human must have thrown him. Plus…

I’d actually been hiding something from Kabal and his friends. I still hadn’t told them what had happened with Shizu in the end. It was kind of a tough subject to bring up, so I intended to stay mum about it until asked. But if I was ever going to come out with it, now seemed like a good time.

“Hmm… Maybe so. You might find this hard to believe, actually, but I used to be a human being, too. You know Shizu, right? I think I’m probably an otherworlder, just like she is. Though, really, it was more like I died in my old world and got reborn as a slime in this one. And while I’m at it—”

I used my Universal Shapeshift extra skill to transform into a human.

“What on—?!”

Fuze’s eyes lit up as Kabal’s crew audibly yelped in surprise. It was Elen who noticed first.

“Umm, looking at you… That’s like a smaller version of Shizu, isn’t it?” she timidly asked.

“Oh, no way, Elen.”

“Yeah, Shizu was an old lady! She wasn’t anywhere near as cute looking as this.”

Kabal and Gido were quick to protest, but Elen held her ground.

“No, there’s no doubt about it. I mean, I saw her! Like, what she looked like under the mask…”

Oh, she did? It was just for an instant, so I didn’t think any of them caught a glimpse, but… This works well for me, though. I was going to tell them now anyway.

I removed the mask from my pocket and put it on the table.

“That’s Shizu’s mask, right?”

They eyed it, then me.

“Yeah. I wasn’t really hiding it or anything, but I didn’t take this form around you guys because I didn’t want you to get the wrong idea. Elen’s right—I inherited this form from Shizu.”



“…Inherited?”

“Yeah. When I ate her.”

The four of them looked surprised, but none seemed angry. They retained their cool as they waited for me to continue. They had chosen to believe in me, luckily enough.

“Shizu and I came from the same country. When she died, she asked me to take over her mission…and as proof that I’ve taken on her will, I picked up the form you see here. So…I can’t go around acting like an ass while I look like Shizu, you know?” I said quietly.

About half of that was my real feelings. The other half, really, was just an excuse I was using to deceive myself. Guess there’s no helping it if they’re suspicious of me now, I thought, as I turned my eyes to Fuze.

“…Can you tell us what happened?”

There was not a trace of doubt in his voice. So I spent the next few minutes describing Shizu’s final moments, as well as the circumstances behind my death and rebirth.

“I see… So that’s what it was…,” Fuze whispered.

Perhaps Fuze had been spending so much time in this town because he wanted to ask me about Shizu. Just like me, he had trouble finding the right time to bring it up.

“Well,” Kabal said, “I believe in you, pal.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“And me! And me!” Elen insisted. “But… Wow, Shizu really did everything she could to make her dream come true. And now you’re gonna try to make that happen, Rimuru?”

Elen’s question was more to the point than I had anticipated. But there was no need to tiptoe around answering it.

“I am. I promised her as much. I’m going to free up all the emotions that are binding her heart down. Not that I’ve met the guy or anything yet, but as far as I’m concerned, the demon lord Leon is my prey to catch.”

“Wow… I always knew I could believe in you, Rimuru!”

Elen flashed me a friendly smile. As for the other three men:

“Leon? Huh?!”

“You’ve got a death wish, Rimuru. I mean, Charybdis is practically a pushover compared to that guy…”

“Yes! You can’t go around calling someone like that your prey! Don’t blame me if it leads to your death!”

They were, to say the least, a little unnerved. Well, so be it. Wish they could learn a little from Elen, but our little heart-to-heart seemed to have earned me all their trust. They each offered to join in this battle, but I turned them down. If I blew this, as I explained, it’d be up to them to figure out a new plan immediately. They relented pretty quickly.

Charybdis, though, huh…?

Thinking about the battle up ahead was already dampening my spirits.