

CHAPTER 1

TRADING WITH THE BEAST KINGDOM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then my eyes opened.

—Please. Those children…

Those children? The ones in the dream?

—Please, rescue those children.

Rescue…? What on earth from?

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

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

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

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

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

“Ahh, now I can live my days in sheer laziness…”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh yeah, that was today. Sure thing.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Awakening my conscious, I assumed human form. There was a ceremony scheduled, so I changed to some suitable formal wear. Looking back, I sort of miss the days when we had almost nothing to wear. Now, we’ve got almost every type of clothing you could think of. A much better selection than I ever had in my closet back in Japan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“…Is that it?” the perplexed Shuna asked.

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

“Yeah, maybe that wasn’t enough? I’ll give them a little more…”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Good to hear. I wish I could have joined you there myself…”

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

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

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

“All right. Do your best.”

“Yes, my lord!”

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

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

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

“I will not let you down, my master!”

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

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

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

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

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

Next was making arrangements to receive the contingent from Eurazania.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For the finishing touch, I selected the best-performing ones out of the lot and had them personally treat me as a guest. Given the boorish crowds we usually got around town, I wasn’t too sure whether we could really provide “luxe” service if we tried. Vester, once more, helped a lot—as nobility himself, I figured he could school me on things I never would’ve thought about. His knowledge rubbed off on my selected team, who put in some of the most beautiful work you ever saw.

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

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

“Sure am glad I asked you for help, Vester!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

And now, we had an invite from a full-fledged superpower. This was the perfect opportunity to earn ourselves a ton more trust, and I couldn’t let it pass. No way I could let up until this visit was successful. Visiting human realms could wait until I was sure our government was on the right track.

“We’ve got to make this succeed!”

Shuna and Shion nodded.

“Of course.”

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

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

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

“Thanks for letting me know.”

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

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

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

“Let me know if anything else comes up.”

“Certainly. I had best be off, then.”

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

Just then, Yohm and his companions paid a visit to town. As I hoped, our little intrigue had established Yohm as a top-of-the-heap champion around the kingdom of Farmus. That put him in demand over there, so he was back for a chance to let his hair down for a change. He had the lofty-sounding excuse of getting a little training from Hakuro, but what he really wanted was some decent grub and a soak in the hot spring. I knew because I could tell—and since he was staying for several days this time, I didn’t forget to keep an eye out for any trouble he might cause.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sure thing!”

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

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

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

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

“So what’s the story, pal?”

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

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

“Surprised? Why would I be…?”

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

“Wha—?!”

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

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

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

“So how about a drink?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I explained all this to Yohm, showing him how to best enjoy it. My body no longer allowed me to get drunk, sadly, but the sensation was still nostalgic enough that I imagined I felt a tad tipsy regardless.

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

“Yeah, isn’t it?”

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

“You’re a man of good taste, Yohm.”

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

“So…”

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

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

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

“You believe all that?”

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

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

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

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

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

Yeah, I’ll bet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But we’re not in battle here…”

There’s Shion for you. Her mind never leaves the war zone. Dismissing what was likely Carillon’s handpicked battle lineup just because they weren’t prepared for melee combat right this minute struck me as ridiculous.

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

“Thanks for sayin’ so, Boss!”

“Makes us proud to hear.”

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I mean, what do you want? Yohm was, more or less, our friend—a devoted trainee of Hakuro’s. Sure, he was on a different training regimen, and no way could he dream of taking on me or Benimaru. But he was so brazen, such a tenacious fighter, that he put up with Hakuro’s gauntlet without a single complaint. He kind of reminded me of Tamura, this guy who worked under me at the office back in Japan. He was cocky, but I liked him—just like I liked Yohm, with his calling me “pal” and so on. And I guess he wasn’t “under me,” exactly…more like an equal, a fellow student working under the tutelage of Hakuro. Seeing his good name so thoroughly trashed like this angered me more than it would if it had happened to me. I kind of understood how King Gazel felt.

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

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

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

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

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

Something else began to grab my attention.

“Yeah, go for it, Boss!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Sure thing!”

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

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

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

“Not so fast. I have stood here patiently and let you have your say, but the sheer brazenness of your insults toward Sir Rimuru… I have held my tongue for this long only because Sir Rimuru instructed me to, but it would appear I no longer have a need to. I shall be your opponent!”

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

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

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

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

Yohm, meanwhile…

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But she was grappling with Sufia with her massive sword still in its sheath. Was it because she didn’t want to kill? Or just an expression that this wasn’t everything she had? Not a very smart way to approach a higher-ranked magic-born, I thought. I hadn’t expected Shion to join the fray, but if she was going to, I really wanted her to give her all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yohm’s not too shabby,” I remarked. “He’s fighting on an even keel with that magic-born…”

“Indeed,” Shuna agreed, “it is a remarkable effort.”

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seeing this, Sufia hardened her gaze in reluctant admiration. Her foe had just used Diamond Path, one of the ogre mages’ Battlewill skills. It let her control her mind and solidify her body, almost to the consistency of metal. Her fighting force protected her skin, dissipating any enemy attack. Not exactly entry-level stuff, it goes without saying, and Shion executed it perfectly in battle, like an instructor schooling her opponent.

“Prepare yourself! It’s my turn now—”

“Bring it on! My blood is on fire!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Enough!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That left one more group to handle.

“Are you all right with that, Shion?”

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

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

This meaning the ball, I assumed.

“You can’t banish it?”

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

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

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

“Wh-whoa, calm down. Slowly… Slowly point it upward.”

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

“Come on! Put your heart into it!”

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

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

“Shion! Fire it!”

“But…”

“It’s all right! Trust me!”

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

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

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

“Say, what were you intending to do if we didn’t take you up on your little challenge?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tonight, at least, my main responsibility was to be an amiable host. Best heed Shuna’s advice and provide someone for the lycans to talk to. So I turned to Alvis and Sufia…only to be greeted with two utterly sloshed beasts. Their attendants were urging them to stop, but they had no interest in listening. Alvis had her tail wrapped around a barrel, dunking her head in to drink mouthfuls at a time. This was apple brandy—sweet and mellow but definitely strong stuff. I had been planning to save it for a more refined tasting session later, given its premium quality.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was even more detail than what Milim had offered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By this point, our food situation had undergone some major improvement, but our focus was still on growing things like wheat and barley—not to mention potatoes, which formed a very effective side dish. We were experimenting with rice-plant cultivation as well, with an eye toward crafting a rice grain palatable to us all. Fuze and his men had told me they weren’t aware of anywhere in the land that raised rice in an agricultural environment, so we’d have to build all that from scratch. Once we reached our goal, I was planning to turn some of our wheat fields into rice paddies and ramp ourselves up into full production.

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

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

And with that, I finished giving them the rundown.

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

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

“…What percentages are we talking?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

“S-Sir Rimuru, what is the—?”

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

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

“Ah, um, what?! And—ahhh, Lady Lycanthropeer?!”

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

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

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

“Please, by all means, then!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah, a jewel, eh? I was hoping for some gold, personally…”

“S-Sir… Sir Rimuru, these are Lycanthropeers you are—”

“Gold? We got that, right, Alvis?”

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

“Ah! Could I ask you for that?”

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

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

“But please, Sir Rimuru! This is too big a job!!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Doing business with Milim’s domain was a bit impractical, given how far away it was from us. That left the demon lord Clayman, the Marionette Master himself. He was the exception among his kin, allowing free and legal commerce across all his lands. The economy was a pressing concern for him, and his domain had a working monetary system in operation. There were stories about them trading with the Eastern Empire, even.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah. Well, great. We’ll just provide your guard escort, then.”

“Thank you very much. That will help us greatly!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

They weren’t beholden to any particular schedule but wanted to stay on hand until replacements arrived for them. After discussing matters with Rigurd, I decided to give them my permission. Before a month had passed, they were fully part of our work operation, far more serious-minded and good-natured than I gave them credit for.

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

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

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

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