

CHAPTER 4

THE AUDIENCES

With everything running on schedule (to some extent), I returned to town. Veldora and Ramiris stayed in the labyrinth, and Milim was helping them out now that her dragon-wrangling work was done. The thought struck me that Milim might have to, like, go back and run her domain sometime, but I let her be. She was the one who’d get chewed out over it, not me.

Looking at the traps I laid, the three of them apparently had some complaints about the areas they were allowed to work out their final touches in. Until Floor 30, I really didn’t want a lot of traps. It’d be pointless to sprinkle a bunch of dinky ones around, and if they got too sadistic too fast, adventurers would just give up. If they gave up too early, of course, they’d stop coming.

That’s why I personally laid out the traps for everywhere between Floors 1 and 50. Ramiris and Veldora were allowed to handle only the deeper levels. I suppose, though, that witnessing my cruelest traps mainly inspired them to come up with even more insidious ones.

“Y’know, Rimuru, I think I had the wrong idea,” said Ramiris. “Traps aren’t meant to be installed one at a time, are they?”

“No fair! Let me invent some!!” whined Milim.

“Yes, perhaps I was so focused on my overall might that I overlooked how best to install these traps,” said Veldora. “Let’s approach this a little more seriously, then.”

I mostly let them be. I didn’t have the time to deal with all this selfishness. Ramiris was allowed to do whatever she wanted with Floors 51 to 60; Veldora, Floors 61 to 70; and Milim, the trickiest part of the labyrinth—the dragon chambers on Floors 96 to 99. The floors might turn out ridiculous, I knew, but I doubted any adventurer would make it past Floor 50 for a while to come, so I didn’t see the problem.

Floor 95, by the way, was where we decided to place the beastman refugee camp. I’d been considering putting some (very expensive) lodging down there for rest purposes as well—another idea I filed away for the future, after I saw how things went. As for the remainder—Floors 71 to 94—I left those in their default, untouched state for future purposes. They were fully infused with magicules, so you might see monsters show up down there, but otherwise, nothing of note. Everything else, the three had free rein over.

A few days passed. While I was scanning the buzzing city streets, I spotted Mjöllmile and his entourage heading this way. That was quicker than I had expected. He must’ve packed up and come over in a hurry.

“Sir Rimuru! I do apologize we didn’t make it here sooner. I’m ready to begin at once!”

“Ah, Mjöllmile, thanks so much for coming! Let me guide you over to your home here.”

I took him over to a residence we had only just recently built. I had asked Rigurd to get it done for him in advance, advising him to make sure it was move-in ready. I loved that guy. So well put together. Ask him to do something, and he’ll never let you down. I also wanted Rigurd and Mjöllmile to say hello to each other, although Mjöllmile already knew Rigurd from their healing potion business. Leaving the guide goblins and Mjöllmile’s servants to the house, I went with him over to Rigurd’s office.

“Excuse me, Rigurd.”

“Oh, Sir Rimuru! And Sir Mjöllmile as well. What brings you here today?”

He must have been busy, but Rigurd warmly greeted us nonetheless.

“Ah, I’m sorry it’s been so long, Sir Rigurd! Your boss— Er, Sir Rimuru here has always been kind to me in our business ventures, but today—”

Before I could explain matters, Mjöllmile skillfully took over the role. We moved over to the parlor, quickly getting down to business—the state of arena construction, the lodging on the southwest side, the stalls we’d build around the arena site, and more. We also talked about the freshly built Dungeon and using it to attract adventurers to town.

“…So the Dungeon is all ready to go. It’s not complete yet, but I think we can run it right now without any problem. The coliseum’s going to need some more time as well, but the main stage is complete. The VIP seating’s done, too, all fancy and stuff, so I figure we can have the regular audience sit on sheets in the grandstand for now. Or make it standing room only if need be.”

We were short on time, so I had been procrastinating on that issue. The arena structure was still bare-bones, but I figured that could wait until Mildo returned. Even incomplete, I think it had style, and I was also making sure it was safe to use.

Rigurd and Mjöllmile listened to my explanation with rapt attention, and we quickly lost ourselves in discussion. Rigurd accepted the job of educating our citizens, ensuring they were fully able and ready to handle the people who’d be coming in soon; meanwhile, Mjöllmile had his own ideas for the arena and dungeon we had planned out, as evidenced by his commendably confident smile. We discussed it all, pointing out flaws and trying to correct them, figuring out what we needed and what had to be on-site.

“It’s a tremendous relief to see Sir Mjöllmile with us on this,” a smiling Rigurd said.

“Yeah, isn’t it? He’s a pretty useful guy, you know. If this Founder’s Festival ends well, I’m thinking about making him into our nation’s chief financial manager.”

This was important to me. I wanted him in charge of our country’s finances, and I also wanted him running our new commerce and publicity departments, doing all he could for Tempest. Rigurd nodded at this, promising to personally select the staff who’d work under him. We had been asking the inns along the highway and such to keep track of their own accounts, but this was still an uphill process. Literacy rates had gone up thanks to Vester, but not everyone could read, write, and do sums yet. If we wanted to keep this nation going, we’d really need people like Mjöllmile. Rigurd, to his credit, seemed to understand that and was accepting to Mjöllmile joining my administration—and not just because I wanted him there. Maybe he knew that numbers were a weakness of ours. He seemed to welcome him, even, outside of our current festival plans.

“…I see. That sounds like a splendid idea!”

“No, no, I still have much to learn. But I promise you that I will tackle our issues with every bit of strength I have!”

He was sounding modest, but I knew he had his heart set on this post from the outset. He had ambition, and as long as the Founder’s Festival worked out well, I’d have no qualms about appointing him to the roles I had laid out.

“However,” I said, “you’ll still need to perform well for us. The others won’t accept you otherwise.”

“Indeed,” replied Rigurd, “although I am sure one word from you would be enough to convince them all…”

“I’d like to avoid that. Honestly, if anything, I feel like I’m too involved in this stuff right now.”

“Maybe so. And the very fact that noncitizens of Tempest can take top administrative roles will serve as fine advertising. To achieve that, however, Sir Mjöllmile will need to put up results that everyone can appreciate.”

“You said it. Sorry to put all this pressure on you, but can I count on you for that, Mollie?”

That would be the tricky part. If this was just about strength, or something similarly easy to grasp, the monsters would easily be convinced. Diablo was a prime example; when I appointed him my second secretary, nobody complained about that at all. (Okay, Shion did, but that’s because she can’t take a hint.) Diablo’s strength was undoubtedly second only to mine; you’d have to be silly to pick a fight with someone like that.

In other words, when it came to military roles or the like, pretty much anyone could become an officer if I recognized their talents. If they’re strong enough for the post, we’re all good.

That wouldn’t work with the more bureaucrat-type positions. I imagine most governments have examinations and stuff for those posts, but sadly, we hadn’t reached that point yet.

I’d gladly welcome experienced people like Vester, but again, they needed to put up achievements. Even Vester was still technically just a consultant—a visitor, if you will. I wanted to give him a promotion to an administrative job, but first I wanted Mjöllmile to prove himself at his. If possible, I’d like them both to play a simultaneous role in our new system of government, bringing them on as ministers.

But Mjöllmile’s confident smile banished my concerns. “Heh-heh-heh… Sir Rimuru, I hope you won’t underestimate me that much. Just watch as I satisfy your expectations and make this into a massive success!”

Glad I could rely on him. He didn’t run the underground scene in his hometown with his mouth alone. That brazen attitude put my mind at ease.

“Heh-heh-heh… Mollie, you have earned my trust. Make me proud!”

“And even if you do make a mistake or two, I’ll make sure it becomes a success in the public eye. Anyone who defies Sir Rimuru’s will shall face the might of my iron fists!”

“Um, Rigurd, you can’t do that. That’s why I want Mjöllmile to do well for us, all right?”

“Never fear. I will leave no evidence—”

“You are quite an impressive official, Sir Rigurd,” murmured Mjöllmile.

“No, please, I mean it. If you do anything, you’re on your own, all right?”

Still, we exchanged dark smiles with each other. Rigurd and Mjöllmile weren’t unfamiliar with each other; I trusted they were comfortable with this relationship. Knowing that helped me relax. And really, I didn’t care why people decided to accept Mjöllmile’s presence, as long as they did.

Now, to go back to our respective groups and prepare for the Founder’s Festival. Things were humming along now.

That night:

“This is insanity… This must be insanity! This is far posher than even the grandest lodging in Englesia!”

Mjöllmile began shouting the moment he entered his new residence. He must have liked the place. I was happy.

“There is running water, magic-driven burners, baths, and these toilets. Every advanced piece of equipment this town has to offer is available to us.”

The elated servant’s report almost made Mjöllmile faint on the spot.

“R-Rimuru… Er, Sir Rimuru? Are you sure all this luxury is suitable for me?”

Hey, man, this all comes standard in Tempest.

Of course, given the servants he brought along, Mjöllmile was living in a larger mansion, not your normal kind of place. I had taken note of his residence in Blumund and made sure we had something similar for him here. There were ten individual apartments, rooms with small kitchens and toilets. These were linked by a large shared bath and a dining hall, allowing Mjöllmile to share this home with a decent number of servants.

“You needed this, right? This was cheaper than building separate homes for each of them, too. If anyone wants their own house, they’re free to save up for one.”

I couldn’t build homes for them all, so I kind of reused a building we had set up for an administrator-level resident, but everyone seemed happy enough with it. The house came at no charge, too—I mean, with all the money I had made off Mjöllmile, I really couldn’t charge him. And that money was gonna keep flowing, too. This was a necessary expense, you could say—a steal, even.

“Y-yes, true… But this is the standard you enjoy here? Then what about the more economical lodgings in the southwest?”

“Yeah, they don’t get individual baths in the rooms, but they do get toilets. There’s a low-cost public bath nearby, and some of the inns have their own baths for free.”

“I see… Yes, you did talk about making this town into a kind of health resort, didn’t you? Now it makes sense to me. So you offer this level of services to even the commoners, not just the nobility or well-funded areas? Yes, we certainly can expect some adventurers here!”

“Pretty easy living, huh?”

“Not just ‘pretty easy.’ This is the best you’d find all around the West. If adventurers can find a steady income in this town, we’re gonna have a lot of excitement pretty soon.”

“Hmm…”

“…?! Ah! Right! Yes, Sir Rimuru!”

Er, what? Mjöllmile was shouting at me again. I had no idea about what.

“That’s what the Dungeon is for! Well done, Sir Rimuru! I couldn’t be more in awe of you right now!”

“Oh. Um, yeah. Definitely.”

What’s he talking about?

“The adventurers can hunt the monsters in the labyrinth. I thought this was a bit of charity for adventurers short on work, now that the Forest of Jura is more stable…but heavens, you had thought that far ahead?”

Ch-charity?!

I mean, yeah, there aren’t as many wild monsters around Jura as there used to be, but…like, the Dungeon’s just a fun attraction, so…

“This can work. This can really work! We’re seeing more adventurers out of a job, what with monster counts dwindling and all. Perhaps some can use the Dungeon as their workplace. Plus, we’ll be selling healing potions and adventuring gear nearby, right? Picture this: What if this town isn’t just a tourist site or health spa, but someplace where they can permanently reside? With all these inns providing fantastic service, a coliseum attracting tourists, and a dungeon providing thrills and a potentially decent wage…”

Um…was that what we built the Dungeon for?

I did intend to offer money for whatever the adventurers earned in there, but that was kind of like offering buybacks on carnival prizes. But was Mjöllmile’s line of thinking worth hearing out?

“Wow, Mollie. You only just came here today, and you already worked it out?”

“Ah, of course, sir. If there’s money to be sniffed out, I’d never lose a single coin to you!”

“Heh-heh-heh… You’re incorrigible.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Ah, don’t be silly. It wouldn’t be possible without you!”

“But thinking and doing are different things, of course. I was hoping I could leave you to work out the rest of the plan…”

“Oh, would you? I’d be glad to help!”

I guess the plan was now to let adventurers “work” in the Dungeon, and Mjöllmile was kind enough to accept the job. He already had a ton on his plate, I knew. Talk about energetic.

But… Hmm. I didn’t think that far, but I totally overlooked the idea of adventurers living here. To me, the dungeon attraction was kind of a gamble—maybe some customers would make money off it, but the majority would leave with their wallets pretty thoroughly emptied. But have a permanent group of adventurers hunt monsters in there? There’s no stopping Mjöllmile’s imagination, huh? I love getting his insights.

Unlike forest creatures, there was no chance of overhunting and wrecking the ecosystem. Much better, really, to have the hunters cull the monsters’ numbers before they multiplied too much, then buy the materials they harvested from them. With Veldora around, there was no need to worry about where the magicules would come from—the monsters would be constantly replenished.

This actually might be a brilliant idea! It’d give adventurers money to go spend around the city and help fill Tempest’s coffers, which would allow us to provide more support to them. We could process the materials they hunted for us, and I suppose we could even export them to other countries. Magic crystals could be shipped off as is, although we wouldn’t export them all—we had our own uses for them.

Maybe this would be the tipping point that made the Free Guild build a post in town, too. We could give them exclusive rights to the dungeon business, so we weren’t in competition. And if they paid the adventurers directly, I thought, that would also open access to foreign capital for us—capital we could use to import goods from other nations. With imports cut off from Eurazania at the moment, I wasn’t sure the produce and grains we farmed would be enough to keep the adventurers full, so some imports might become necessary.

Besides, I wanted Tempest to become a trade hub; that was part of the idea from the start, and I needed to think of ways to move larger amounts of goods and money around. There were plans in my mind. That was why I made sure the highways were designed to be pretty wide, after all. We’d paved only half the width of the roads; the other half was bare earth. I planned to put rails down on that land someday, and with the rails would come freight trains.

“After that, I suppose it all comes down to advertising.”

Mjöllmile pulled me back down to earth before I floated off too much into fantasizing about my dreams. No, no need to go too crazy yet. It’d take time to develop rails, much less the trains that’d run on them. First, we needed to pull off this massive party without a hitch and make a good impression on the world.

“You’re right. This isn’t advertising, exactly, but I’ve sent out invitations to world leaders. Journalists from several nations are working with me as well, so I think we should see a pretty decent turnout.”

“Oh? Good to hear, Sir Rimuru. I was just thinking that we’d best start negotiating with royalty and nobility before the winter thaw if we want them to join in, but you’ve already planned ahead, eh? In that case, I’ll contact the larger merchant operations I work with and let them know about the festival.”

“Could you do that?”

“Certainly. I’m already prepared to, in fact. I intended to send out messengers once I scoped out how things were in Tempest.”

Mjöllmile grinned at me. He was so useful.

“Ah, my hat goes off to you, Mollie. You never leave a single stone unturned, do you?”

“I could say the same of you, Sir Rimuru! The foresight you’ve shown with all this is a far cry from anything I could ever manage.”

Another exchange of knowing smiles. I think Mjöllmile’s far more of a schemer than I ever was, but I’ll take the compliment.

“Sir Rimuru,” he continued, turning more serious as he stood up, “there is no way this plan of yours could possibly fail. If you have what it takes to build a nation up this far, I’m sure you could guide just about anyone to success!”

I’m not sure about “anyone,” but he did help put my mind at ease. I suppose Mjöllmile was impressed enough by our town’s food, environment, and creature comforts. That’s why he was reacting that way, and perhaps it was a sign of our future promised success, even.

I stood up and extended a hand to him. “I’m counting on you, Mollie!”

“Certainly,” he replied, gripping it in a handshake. From that moment, I was sure we had it in the bag.

That night, we held a big dinner at Mjöllmile’s mansion. Afterward, he and I were relaxing together over some tea when he whispered something to a servant and had him go fetch someone. This someone, or rather someones, turned out to be Bydd and Gob’emon.

I had thought Gob’emon was staying undercover as he kept watch over Mjöllmile. If he was here, had he introduced himself to the guy or something? And that wasn’t even my main concern.

“Sir Rimuru, I understand that kind Gob’emon here was sent to protect me?”

I thought about playing dumb for a moment, but I guess Mjöllmile already knew he was here on my orders. No point trying to hide it.

“Well, yeah— But, Gob’emon, uh, what’s up with your arm?”

I kinda had to ask. Half of his right one was missing, ending at the elbow.

“S-Sir Rimuru! My—my sincerest apologies!” He kneeled down, head virtually to the floor. “I made a terrible mistake and exposed my identity to Mjöllmile. This arm was my punishment, you see.”

I turned to Mjöllmile for some kind of explanation.

“Now, now, Gob’emon. Go on, lift your head up. Have some tea to calm you down.”

He sat Gob’emon on a seat and offered him tea from a servant. Once we were all in place, he turned to me and went into the story.

It turned out that Mjöllmile had, indeed, been attacked several times since our meeting. Mjöllmile, being no fool, ordered Bydd and the rest of his security detail to redouble their efforts, but there were a few close scrapes that were foiled thanks to the assistance of an anonymous bystander—Gob’emon, in other words. There were considerably more assaults than I had planned for, and I guess that’s how he got spotted. Mjöllmile apparently figured he must’ve been with me and kept pretending not to notice out of politeness.

And then it happened. Viscount Cazac, whether he lost his temper or whatever, decided to get serious.

“So I left my business to a trusted associate and left for this country. Once I reached the highway, I assumed I was safe and nobody would try to touch me. But…”

The highway was full of adventurers, traveling merchants, and patrolmen. I had teams clear the roads daily to keep them free of snow, so the winter hadn’t slowed the flow of people much. An attack in such a well-traversed area was unthinkable, and even if it happened, our security team would be right on the scene. Someone like Mjöllmile, who traveled the highways frequently, was fully aware of that.

But as if to prove his confidence was misplaced, his party came under attack at a village near the far end of the highway.

“A village? You mean the one where Bydd tried to rip— Um, where Bydd and I first met?”

“Yes! The very same, Sir Rimuru!”

Bydd might have been Mjöllmile’s bodyguard now, but when I first met him, he was a pretty low-end swindler. It wasn’t worth bringing up past drama, though, so I glossed over it. He had shown up to help defend Gob’emon, and now they were both behind Mjöllmile as he explained matters.

As Bydd then explained, they were accosted by a wagon painted black, out of which popped monsters—several of them, all ranked B. As an ex–C fighter, Bydd and his team couldn’t do much, and they were all about to say their prayers but still did their best to evacuate the villagers and buy some time. Then Gob’emon showed up.

“Yeah, that Gob’emon guy saved all our lives, man!”

“That he did,” Mjöllmile added. “Not just me, but everyone who was there owes him a word of thanks.”

“But I still failed…”

Gob’emon didn’t seem interested in the compliment. He wasn’t the sort to lose out to this monster band, and apparently he had dispatched them in short order. He then attempted to capture the criminal leading them, only to go eye-to-eye with a basilisk, a B-plus threat. It spewed petrifying gas at Gob’emon’s right arm, and he hurriedly amputated it himself before it spread any further. That bought the black wagon enough time to speed off.

“Failed? Meaning you didn’t catch the guy behind it?”

“Yes, but I let Mjöllmile notice me…”

That’s what he’s talking about?!

“I don’t really care about that. Your bodyguard duty was the more important thing. Plus, like, fix that thing, dude!”

I extracted a potion from my Stomach and attempted to hand it to Gob’emon. He bit his lip, refusing to take it.

“No, this injury is the result of my inexperience. I was unable to defeat the basilisk by myself and compelled to seek the aid of Bydd and his team. It was terrible of me, and while missing an arm presents its difficulties, it will grow back over time…”

What a stubborn goblin. Or proud, I guess you could say, but he was trying to do way too much by himself.

“Gob’emon, are you embarrassed that you needed Bydd’s help?”

“Well…my job was to guard Mjöllmile, but I exposed him to danger instead…”

“Hang on, Gob’emon. You’re misunderstanding this.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah. You’re trying to do everything alone. That’s the difference between you and Gobta.”

That summed it up, really—the ability to work with the people underneath them. Gobta never tried to do all the work himself. Even when fighting powerful monsters, he was always issuing commands to his team. For the easier jobs, he barely even lifted a finger—or maybe he was just deliberately being lazy, much of the time—but in terms of encouraging growth among his team, Benimaru called Gobta a better commander.

With Gob’emon, if a strong monster reared its ugly head, he’d leap right in front and try to fight it. I could understand his line of thinking—he was talented, so this would make things faster—but doing that accomplished nothing for the rest of his team. And what if Gob’emon fell? It’d leave his troop defenseless. I’d be deeply concerned about their chances of surviving the encounter.

That was the reasoning behind Benimaru’s evaluation, and that’s why I wanted Gob’emon to learn how to rely on others. Mjöllmile was great at handling his people, and I thought using him as an example would help Gob’emon grow a little.

“…That’s exactly why you need to learn how to trust in your friends more. I’m not saying to throw them recklessly into danger. I’m saying that you need to conserve a little bit of your strength and give them a hand if things get hairy.”

“I—I…”

“Everybody knows how strong you are. But that’s not enough to lead a unit.”

“......”

Gob’emon hung his head, and I took the opportunity to throw the healing potion at him.

“Ah?!”

The fluid spilled all over his right arm, which visibly regenerated before us.

“Gob’emon, I want you to stay with Mjöllmile for a while. You can train Bydd and his men if you like, or just chill out and relax for a bit. I doubt Mollie needs anyone to guard him in town, so take a moment to reevaluate yourself a little, all right?”

“L-Lord Rimuru…”

“Because, I mean, none of us can really do anything by ourselves, okay? I think you learned that with your mistake there. Just think about what you should do next time, and you’ll find the answer, okay?”

I smiled at him, took the katana off my belt, and presented it to him. He froze, eyes wide open in surprise.

“Take it.”

“B-but… My mission…”

“Look, you got Mollie here in one piece, right? I’ll be expecting even bigger things from you now. Treat this sword as a mirror into your heart, and use it every night to try looking into yourself.”

If Gob’emon could get over his arrogance and pride, we’d be able to rely on him more than ever.

“Yes sir! Your loyal servant Gob’emon shall live up to your expectations!”

There was fire in his eyes. He always was a goblin of ambition—giving him a goal to strive for should make the growth process go faster. I was sure he’d live up to every bit of my expectations.

“All right, Mollie, you mind taking care of Gob’emon for me?”

“Ha-ha-ha! I don’t mind one bit. I was just about to ask you the very same favor! Bydd, we’ve got Sir Rimuru’s permission. I hope you’re ready for some training from Gob’emon!”

Looks like he was already welcome on the team. Gob’emon was now a sort of houseguest of Mjöllmile’s, free to do whatever he wanted.

Once I left the mansion, I looked at the night sky. The assorted constellations up there were twinkling bright, although none looked like what I saw on Earth.

I wondered about that attacker, though. Was it really Cazac behind that? I doubted a nobleman on the level of a viscount had the resources to stage an assassination attempt with multiple monsters. And B rankers were one thing, but B-plus? It’d be impossible to tame one of those guys unless you were some kind of tycoon from a wealthy nation…

…Wait a second. If you wanted to tame a B-plus monster, would money be enough to achieve that?

Understood. Thegis, a summoner rated A-minus, once summoned a B-plus Lesser Demon. It is not out of the question for someone to tame a basilisk.

Ahhh, summon magic could do the trick, huh? That’d sure be quicker than carting the monster around on a wagon. But while Shuna’s barrier kept external magic from entering town, the highways were wholly unprotected.

“Better beef up our security,” I whispered to myself as I set off.

Mjöllmile had been gracefully accepted by the residents of Tempest. I introduced him to my administration, and Rigurd relayed word of him to the others, but really, it all went surprisingly smoothly. Looking at the way he worked for me after that, I could see why nobody was complaining. In no time at all, he had a firm grasp of the people and resources he had at hand, delegating duties to both man and monster. Between them and the servants he had brought along, he had a full organization set up in no time whatsoever. Capable people are just different like that.

As he managed this new company of his, Mjöllmile used his connections to send out invitations to VIPs worldwide. Powerful nobility from the inner countries, the wealthier merchants from each key city, the movers and shakers over in the Englesian capital, that kind of thing. Once the snow melted, the Founder’s Festival was going to be even larger in scale than I had first envisioned.

Of course, his organizational skills were also pointed in other directions: the performances for our new theater; the format and rules for our arena battles; the admission fee to the Dungeon, along with prices for the items we sold there; inventory and sales approaches for the stalls around the arena site. I was shocked this was a first for him; he seemed completely in his element as he arranged all this. I introduced him to Veldora, too, and he agreed to work out the guy’s hibachi-grill concept with him.

I definitely made the right choice. Out of all my crazy ideas, hiring him was probably the smartest one. Without his talents, there was a pretty high chance the whole thing would’ve crashed and burned. No way I’d ever be this nimble with things. I was lucky to run into this guy, and as I watched him do his magic, I couldn’t help but feel exhilarated.

Time sure flies sometimes, doesn’t it? The whole town was in a festive mood now, the streets alive with energy and enthusiasm.

Arena construction was proceeding well. Gobkyuu was proving an excellent foreman, and everything was still on schedule. Mildo, youngest of the three dwarven brothers, was also back from his break and adding his own touches to my blueprints. Now there was an aesthetic, even artistic value, to the structure. He was a real artist, indeed, and I sure wasn’t, so this was a huge help. I was sure it’d be more than enough to wow those jaded nobles. Plus, Mildo’s touches even looked like they’d be done in time for the first battle tournament.

Mjöllmile’s staff also had their stalls open, selling to the workers in the area for practice. This was going well, too, generating business at a pretty decent clip. Neither of us anticipated any problems, which was a relief. The Dungeon, meanwhile, was in Ramiris’s and Veldora’s hands—I wanted to be more involved, but I was rapidly running short of free time.

Now the various leaders of the Forest of Jura’s monster races were assembling in town to celebrate (or maybe probe into) my new title. We had a series of audiences with each contingent scheduled across several days.

They wanted to declare their fealty to the demon lord in hopes of obtaining protection in return—but if they saw that the demon lord didn’t have that kind of power, they’d no doubt bare their fangs at once and start rebelling. Under a powerless demon lord, there’d be no prosperity, only a straight, downhill road to oblivion, and they knew it. Taking action to avoid such a fate was a matter of course.

Until fairly recently, the whole of Jura had been protected under Veldora’s absolute, irresistible power. That made the Forest an impregnable fortress, but now it was under the rule of a new demon lord—a freshly ordained one, whose priorities and policies were still a question mark. That’d unnerve any of the monster leaders, I was sure.

…So. Here I was, in the audience chamber we set up, being enshrined on my little platform, in full dress. As a slime. It made me feel like some kind of table decoration, a conversation piece laid out on a divine altar.

I suggested just putting one of my Replications up there, but my team of advisers just smiled and said no. They had a knack for working together against me at times like this. My only guess was that they were using Thought Communication to talk to each other behind my back.

So I let them do what they wanted with me, and they dolled me up so much that I couldn’t even move. They even prepared special slime clothes for this day. It was exhausting. Several outfits, changed daily for me—or maybe even morning, afternoon, and evening; I stopped paying attention. I wished they’d knock it off, but they kept talking about how I had to strike a dignified pose—which indicated to me that my slime form didn’t look dignified at all.

Ah well.

Everyone participating in this “presentation ceremony” was dressed like they were members of a military honor guard. Every button was polished, not a wrinkle in sight. The pressure was intense, and in the midst of this oppressive atmosphere, Rigurd and Rigur—just as smartly dressed—were dealing with the envoys. I looked down at them, as instructed to do, without saying a word. Me speaking would ruin the effect anyway, so I was glad I didn’t have to.

Benimaru and Shuna stood guard over me on both sides. Behind me was Shion, Soei, and Gabil, in a neat little line. Ranga, as always, was holed up inside my shadow.

Over to the right was Gobwa and another hundred-odd members of Team Kurenai; the other two hundred were patrolling the city streets. They were all more powerful than our normal security team, so I took this measure so they could quickly handle any weirdos who showed up during the event. Shion’s Team Reborn in plainclothes, meanwhile, was also keeping an eye on the town, ready to address any flare-ups before they got out of control.



Diablo and Hakuro, by the way, still weren’t back from Farmus. According to Gobta, Ranga, and Gabil (who came home before them), they said they’d wrap everything up before the Founder’s Festival. Apparently, they were pretty disappointed that they couldn’t see me make my royal debut like this—but they had Yohm’s own coronation to handle over there. With it, Farmus would be reborn as a new country, and I’m sure they had a million things to do, so I couldn’t blame them for missing out. Even Diablo was showing up here only on rare occasions, and Hakuro didn’t have access to Spatial Motion, so I hadn’t seen him at all lately. I’d definitely need to thank them once they’re back.

I wasn’t the only one suffering right now. It was all so tremendously embarrassing, but I resolved to put up with it and get this stupid, exaggerated, bombastic presentation ceremony over with.

What was funny was how each of the monster races reacted to me. I had nothing to do, so I sat there like the conversation piece I was and looked down at the assorted monsters giving speeches.

Generally, the monster reactions were divided into three camps—worship, observation, or fear. On the observation side were a few people who openly looked down on me. The new guys from the other side of the Great Ameld River were particularly notable on this front. But it was no big problem. Show off some of my strength, and I’m sure they’ll acquiesce to me.

The monsters who feared me, however, were the real issue…

Here, for example, was a contingent of rabbitfolk in front of me right now, a race of demi-humans who were honestly pretty cute—human, basically, but with long, pointy rabbitlike ears. Unlike lycanthropes, they were degraded beastmen, unable to transform and possessing the same amount of strength as an average human. The equipment they had on didn’t look too sturdy, either, but they were all gifted in the Detect Danger skill, which I’m sure was a must to survive in the Forest of Jura. My own cutesy exterior must not have fooled them at all.

“Um, tha-thank you for i-inviting us here today…”

Dealing with someone who was petrified of you was kind of tough. Some of the rabbitfolk were visibly quaking, so we had to calm them down before they could begin.

“Very well,” echoed Rigurd’s voice. “You are hereby granted an audience with our ruler, the great demon lord Rimuru. Lift your head up!”

The rabbitfolk leader didn’t move. Or maybe he couldn’t. This darling little slime was simply too much of a threatening presence to look in the eye—not that I had eyes. But that wasn’t the issue. I didn’t want to oversee a reign of terror with these guys; I wanted a frank and open relationship…but to races like this, a demon lord who looked wimpy on the outside was nothing short of horrifying. Too much of a gap, I suppose. We had worked hard with guys like these, earning their support for our transportation and logistical efforts all over the forest. Maybe it wasn’t possible from the outset, but I really wished I could interact normally with them sometime.

The halflings and kobolds were like this when I first launched the federation, although the kobolds started trusting us once we agreed to let them continue their merchant trade. Koby, their representative, and I were old war buddies by now, constantly sharing potential business leads with each other.

These rabbitfolk were equals to me, and so was every other weaker race in the forest. I’d just have to stick to my guns and try to explain that I didn’t value my citizenry strictly on their ability to fight. Maybe they wouldn’t believe me at first, but we could work it out. So I sat, looking at the twitching ears of the rabbitfolk kowtowing to me.

“There is nothing to fear. Sir Rimuru is a fair, generous leader, one who says he will treat everyone in his domain as equal. Please, feel free to share a few words with him,” intoned Rigurd.

The representative finally held his head up. He was young and fairly handsome, but there were deep rings under his eyes. Out of overwork or nervousness?

“O—O great demon lord Rimuru, please accept the sincere loyalty of the rabbitfolk…”

I gave him a firm nod. It seemed to relieve the guy. I could practically see a literal weight lift from his shoulders.

“See?” Rigurd beamed. “I told you. There is no need to be nervous!”

“Ha…ha-ha…! Um, I’ve actually brought my daughter along, but she got so restless once we entered town, I’m afraid I’ve lost sight of her…”

“Ha-ha-ha! Yes, the whole town’s in a festival frenzy right now. I can imagine a young girl would let her curiosity get the best of her!”

“Ah, this is so embarrassing… I let her out of my sight for a single moment, and she runs away to who knows where. I had wanted to leave her behind in the village, lest she offend Lord Rimuru, but she insisted…”

This leader must’ve been panicking about his daughter causing some kind of ruckus in town. So all those nerves weren’t just from being in awe of me? That’s good to know. I didn’t want the weaker races any more scared of me than they already were. But a young rabbitfolk girl, huh…? A pretty lass with rabbit ears would be a sight to see, I bet. Hopefully I’d get a chance.

As I thought over it, I began speaking a bit more honestly than I perhaps should have.

“If she’s that curious, then she must be taking in all the trends and different things around here, isn’t she? I bet she’ll make a wonderfully reliable successor to you.”

The direct compliment from me visibly moved the leader.

“Such…such kind words, my lord! If I have the chance, I would be delighted to introduce my daughter Framea to you.”

He bowed to me. It seemed like we had broken the ice a little. Rigurd then briefed him on political matters a bit, and they agreed on the spot that the rabbitfolk were officially part of my domain. He bowed several times again before finally leaving the altar. Hopefully, I thought as the next visitor was brought to me, this’ll show people that I’m not such a scary guy.

This visitor kneeled before me, turning an eye toward the other monsters seeking an audience. I knew this guy—it was Abil, Gabil’s father and chief of the lizardmen. Seeing him reminded me of the good old days—or it would have, if he didn’t look virtually like another person by now. He had transformed into a square-jawed warrior in the prime of his life. Giving him a name must’ve evolved him to this point—to a dragonewt, one far closer to humanoid than before. Gabil sure didn’t change that much, but Soka had gone almost entirely human, so maybe it depended on what the individual wanted.

“It has been far too long since we last spoke, Sir Rimuru. It pleases me greatly that you have risen to demon lord, er, the status of demon lord, and all of us er, are…”

Abil was acting oddly stiff. He was probably more on the “worship” side of matters. Gabil himself said demon lords weren’t that worth freaking out about. He already should’ve known what I was like, so why all the nerves?

I tried to be informal with my response. “Hey, Chief. Good to see you again. No need for the formalities here. We’re all part of the same federation, right? Keep up the good work.”

Benimaru snickered, and Shuna sighed at me, but I didn’t care.

“It is not that simple, Sir Rimuru. As a demon lord, you have grown into something extraordinary. You are not only our lord, but the de facto ruler of the entire Forest of Jura…”

As always, Abil was too serious for his own good. But that’s what I liked about him.

“All right, all right. There aren’t any other races in this chamber we’re in right now. You don’t have to be all nervous. Your son, Gabil, is working hard under my leadership. He’s become a full-fledged part of my administration. I couldn’t have done this without him.”

I decided to name-drop Gabil to ease the tension a bit, reminding Abil of his son and indirectly hinting that he ought to let him back into the family already.

“Ah, there is no fazing you, Sir Rimuru. So that no-good son of mine has been of service to you? He’s such an incorrigible fool, so…”

He must’ve noticed my intentions. The fact of the matter was, Gabil had still been kicked out of Abil’s family, so he must’ve thought it improper to ask how his son was doing without some kind of prompting. Now that I brought him up, that wasn’t an issue. I could already see his usual bold attitude coming back.

“Incorrigible? Hardly! I’m having him lead our research and development department, and he’s doing an excellent job for me. Aren’t you, Gabil?”

“Wha? Ah—yes !!”

Gabil, meanwhile, was frozen solid through all this, blushing all the way back to his ears, and when he was suddenly expected to join the conversation, his voice cracked.

“That stupid kid of mine…”

As Gabil continued to work himself into a panic, I unleashed just a little bit of Lord’s Ambition. That was enough to turn everyone’s attention back to me.

“Abil, chief of the lizardmen… Though I may be demon lord, I request your continued support as a member of my federation.”

“It shall be done! By the name you’ve given me, I will never forget my allegiance to you!”

He bowed down, head nodding deeply at me. He was the classic noble warrior, and he looked the part, even in this strictly formal setting. I nodded back, then glanced at the still-panicking Gabil.

“…?!”

He can be so dense sometimes. I guess he didn’t see what that glance meant. I’m sure it wasn’t because I was in slime mode and didn’t have eyes, either.

Rigur, exasperated, jogged over to Gabil and whispered in his ear. “Sir Rimuru would like you and your father to speak to each other privately. If he doesn’t let you back into the family now, you won’t have another chance for quite some time to come, you realize? And having an estranged son accomplishing so many great things puts Sir Abil in a delicate position, too, no doubt…”

Nice one, Rigur. Way to perfectly understand what I meant, unlike Gabil here.

The step-by-step explanation finally shook the fog out of Gabil’s brain. He saluted me, still a little flustered, and accompanied Abil out of the chamber.

Next up were the assorted high orc tribal chiefs, each with a little entourage along for the ride. They must’ve trusted me enough to not bring guards in; the entourages were composed of children and grandchildren. With their food situation much improved, life had plainly gotten a lot easier for them. They were fathering children now, and these children were themselves high orcs, which surprised and elated them so much that they wanted to show them off to me.

Well, why wouldn’t they be high orcs? Apparently, that wasn’t as much of a given as I thought. Normally, they’d just be regular orcs; the mutation into high orc was seen as a one-and-done kind of thing, generation-wise. With birth rates going down among them, they’d be able to devote more time and effort into raising each one, I imagined. I wanted to be sure of that, so they’d become the next generation of manpower for us. Children really are treasures, thinking of it that way—a fact that remains true no matter what world, or species, you’re talking about.

I was a little concerned about how their names were being passed on, but apparently it was going well. I had given those names almost at random, but I guess they all sounded natural enough to them, so…great? It’s all about getting used to it, I suppose. Call someone anything long enough, and it’s bound to stick. They didn’t really need names anyway, so maybe I was over-worrying it.

Fully reassured, I saw off the high orcs and their entourage.

Next came the final group of the day—the treants, the other major players in the Forest of Jura Alliance after the lizardmen and the high orcs. Actually, the only individuals who made an appearance were the dryads Traya and Doreth, Treyni’s younger sisters. But hey, treants can’t move anyway. No helping that. Besides, the dryads acted as the treants’ representatives, so no issues there.

I had been visiting the treant colony on regular occasions; Zegion and Apito had been keeping it well protected, and we were receiving regular shipments of high-quality honey from them. Thus, the atmosphere at this audience was pretty casual.

“Charmed to see you again, Sir Rimuru. Congratulations on being appointed a demon lord.”

“We hope you will continue to provide us with your benevolent protection.”

They both smiled at me without hesitation. That saved me a lot of trouble.

So we filled each other in on recent happenings. For now, nothing was particularly amiss. The only real concern to report was the thinning out of magicules around the Forest of Jura, which made transport a tad inconvenient.

They both looked exactly like Treyni, and I could feel vast amounts of magical force in them, but apparently they were still affected by the lower magic concentrations around them. In fact, Doreth did look a little thinned out to me.

“Hmm… I didn’t think that far. That’s probably the magic barriers along the highways doing their work. Better think of something for that…”

“Oh, no, it’s not that serious a problem.”

“We sisters use magicules to form the magical bodies you see before you, and they are merely more susceptible to the barriers, is all.”

“But outside of that, Sir Rimuru…”

“We have important matters to discuss!!”

They didn’t see it as important. Very few creatures around Jura would be affected by magicule concentrations like that, dryads and treants among them. Thus, since they were the last people I was seeing today, I offered to continue our talk in a private room that night.

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The moment I entered the room, the two spoke in unison.

“So what we wanted to talk to you about…”

“We wish to serve the beautiful fairy queen just as our great elder sister does.”

You know, now that I think about it, I don’t like that “fairy queen” name. It was overblown, way too fancy for such a teensy little thing. And beautiful? I recalled a smiling Ramiris in my mind. No way. Not beautiful. We were picturing totally different things, I was pretty sure about that. If Ramiris was beautiful, you could describe Shizu, the base for my own looks, as a goddess. I’m used to it now, but even I was a bit taken by my own appearance in the past.

Benimaru and Shion, who joined me in here, seemed to agree with me—but Traya and Doreth paid them no mind.

“This is not just our opinion, but that of all the treants.”

“And we hear that, in this very town…”

“…Lady Ramiris has built her residence.”

“If so, we can only hope to be of some service to her…”

In their uniquely sequential manner of speaking, they begged me to let them serve Ramiris. If they had already requested a different master, that’d make it hard to ask them to serve me, I suppose. Besides, Treyni, their big sister, was already Ramiris’s. I had no real reason to be opposed.

“Um, you wanna ask her?”

“…What?!”

“Is that all right?”

The reaction was swift and forceful.

So off we went to Ramiris’s place, where we found Beretta silently working and Treyni falling over herself to cater to the fairy’s whims. Man, Beretta must have it pretty tough.

But as I thought that:

“Ahhh, Lady Ramiris, you are so ravishing…”

“As beautiful as always—and so elegant! The perfect master for us to serve!”

Just as before, Traya and Doreth were crying their eyes out over her.

Treyni just nodded in response. I wasn’t sure who they were talking about at this point. “Elegant” was one of the last words I’d ever use to describe her.

“Did you hear that?” Ramiris huffed, tossing her head. “Hey—hey, did you hear that? Better not look down on me any longer, you hear?”

Man, shut up. Now she was flying around the room, lording it over us as best she could with her size. Ah well. Everybody likes a compliment. But judging by this, the answer to the dryads’ question seemed pretty clear.

“Well, Ramiris? I think all the treants want to serve you, too, not just these two.”

“Huh? But…”

Ramiris gave me a hesitant look. I suppose she still felt like a freeloader in my city. So I threw her a life preserver.

“How about we have them move into your labyrinth? We moved the beastmen’s camp without breaking a sweat, so could it be much harder to move the treant colony?”

Or did the distance involved create an issue? I felt like she said she could build a corridor into the maze from anywhere she wanted…

“Are you sure?” She beamed, nodding at me. “In that case, I’ll head out as soon as tomorrow! Expanding this labyrinth was a snap when I borrowed some power from my master, and I feel like I’ve gained some power, too. It’d be kind of fun to make some of the empty floors into a jungle section!”

That part about borrowing power from Veldora concerned me a little, but whatever.

“But as creatures who live in the Forest of Jura, shouldn’t they be placed under Sir Rimuru’s rule?” Treyni pointed out.

She must have been worried about that. But there was eager anticipation written all over her face. Clearly she would love to live with her sisters—and like I’ve said before, I had no reason to deny them. Ramiris did rule the labyrinth, a unique space with her living quarters and a zone left to my management. For the parts under her control, perhaps I should recognize them as extraterritorial from Tempest.

I explained this to them, showing how I wouldn’t question their moving here. Her rule over the labyrinth was unstoppable, and besides, it’d be nice for them to be reunited with their original master.

“We, the treants and dryads, wish to reposition ourselves under the blessed protection of Lady Ramiris.”

“We know it is selfish of us, but would we be able to receive permission for this?”

They’d have it, of course.

The treant colony would be placed on Floor 95, the level on which the beastmen camp was located. It was the largest floor in land area, a circle with a radius a bit over three miles, so we had space to work with. I was intending to build the rest stop on that floor, too, so this worked out well for that, too. People talk about how refreshing a walk in the woods is, and I didn’t want our resting post to be this depressing, clinical thing.

Moving day went pretty fast. It was more of a moving moment, really. Ramiris just opened a door to the labyrinth at the treants’ location, then moved them right inside. The actual process took a few hours, but all it took was opening a door next to each treant, so it was pretty straightforward.

Now Ramiris had an even greater domain to rule over, and I had a more stable labyrinth to work with. Managing the magicules was much easier now, to say nothing of the air conditioning, and the treants couldn’t have asked for anything more. Thanks to the high levels of magic concentration in the air, they were all brimming with energy.

None of the beastmen living in their temporary quarters had any complaints, either. Treants are generally pretty chill, usually asleep and looking like plain old trees—and besides, the beastmen would be going back to the Beast Kingdom sooner or later, so they didn’t mind having some neighbors for the time being. If anything, they welcomed them, since it made the whole floor more comfortable to live in.

They had also extracted a promise from the dryads to help maintain the labyrinth—or really, the dryads volunteered to help. “We’ve had a paradise made for us, so that much would be simple,” Treyni said. Her sisters, and the other dryads, all nodded their agreement.

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With that, we had a small forest village in the labyrinth, along with some very unexpected helpers.

Floor 95, being a multiple of five, was a safe zone. Since we had a bunch of extra floors anyway, I decided to use Floors 91 through 94 as a storage site, a greenhouse for gardens, and a processing facility. To be more specific, Floor 91 would contain storage for metal ore; Floor 92, a plant for producing magisteel; Floor 93, a garden; and Floor 94, another facility for producing honey. There was also free passage all the way to Floor 95, which made movement easy, and the save point in the center of 95 included doors back to other floors above and a single, foreboding stairway going down.

This was a pretty convenient setup, one that cheerfully ignored all the laws of physics but still seemed to work just fine.

By the way, defeating the boss at Floor 90 granted you access to stairs down to Floor 95—if you somehow made it this far, I was happy to give you a bit of a shortcut. Your final, hellish challenge would begin on Floor 96, and before journeying onward, you’d naturally want to rest up and inspect all your equipment. I made sure to put up a door before the stairway down, along with a notice explaining the dangers below, and I also planned to provide an inn and weapon/armor shop near the door.

This inn would be connected to the other safe zones in the labyrinth. The doors were all connected, which helped with this setup a lot. The shop, meanwhile, could offer valuable equipment not available anywhere else, all lined up in front for sale. We were unlikely to see much in the way of customers, so I imagined the shop would be more of a hobby of mine than anything else.

I fantasized about putting some of my own creations in the shop down there as I decided to discuss my idea with Mjöllmile.

So after talking to monster species all day in the audience room, I spent much of the evening helping Ramiris and her new subjects with their move.

This new floor we built would eventually blossom into a forested city of its own. We called it Labyrinth City—a final oasis for those who made it through the Dungeon, a fantastic town that granted visitors more power than they ever thought possible…

…but at that time, I hadn’t imagined that far down the line yet.

My itinerary for the following day involved meeting with the relatively stronger species, including the biggest factions in my recently conquered territory. Guess most of ’em will be in the “observing” camp again, I thought, only to notice a commotion in front of my audience chamber.

A couple of different factions were having a verbal argument. Shuna was staring at them, scowling, while Shion’s eyes were flashing with barely repressed rage. Hoo boy. Hopefully this all works out…

These were the bovoids and equinoids. They had each brought along about a dozen warriors, currently attempting to intimidate one another. It turns out they didn’t get along too well—in fact, they had been at war for over a century. They were fighting to see who would get an audience with me first. I guess they thought being granted my protection ahead of their rival would give them a leg up, but I really didn’t want to get involved. It was all just an annoyance to me.

The two races stood by the door, keeping each other at bay. The situation looked ready to devolve into physical combat at any moment—and given their positions high up the Forest of Jura food chain, they were both intimidating presences.

A magic-born with bullhorns spoke to me first. “Ah, the demon lord! If you want a stout ally in battle, turn to us first! Let the bovoids join your side, and you’ll get to strut around the forest with authority! And once we wipe out those wimpy equinoids once and for all, you won’t find any race in the forest to defy us!”

He certainly was bold, making this proclamation to me without a hint of fear, and he had the strength to back it up. He had more magical energy to him than the ogres and lizardmen I first ran into, that’s for sure. Conservatively, I’d say there were a few A rankers in the group. You’d need that kind of force to wage a hundred-year war, and in terms of pure fighting ability, they may have been the best the Forest of Jura had to offer.

But before I could answer, one of the equinoids erupted in anger. “Hmph! Fool! Any demon lord would have the perception to see that pairing with the equinoids is clearly the decision to make. We’ll destroy any race who dares to claim otherwise, from those bovoids on down!”

Pretty harsh words. These guys sure were hotheaded…and exhausting. At least the rabbitfolk were smart enough not to be fooled by my slime exterior.

But…hold on. Yes, they were exhausting, but the moment I laid eyes upon them, I came up with an idea. What labyrinth was complete, after all, without a minotaur or two?

Those creatures were celebrated in Greek mythology, hailed as the stuff of legend—but in the early twentieth century, when people discovered the ancient temple of Knossos in Crete, they found a complex maze of passages, along with an underground section that suggested the labyrinth really existed. Maybe there wasn’t a bullheaded maze guardian inside, but there were many bull-themed frescoes and such inside. Even back then, labyrinths and minotaurs went hand in hand with each other.

And…I had to say, the bovoids before me appeared exactly how you’d expect a minotaur to look in real life. Their leader, a measure larger than the others, practically oozed with evil energy. Our labyrinth was a little sparse when it came to bosses. I only had creatures selected for Floors 10, 20, and 30—but this leader guy, I thought, had what it took to occupy Floor 40 or 50. I wanted him, no matter what. I just couldn’t fight the feeling.

Unfortunately, these monsters didn’t seem like they’d be too loyal to me. They probably just thought of me as a nice patron, or employer, to have. It was clear they wanted to leverage this relationship so they could annihilate their current foes. If I was honest with myself, that was the only conclusion to make.

So I busted out just a little Lord’s Ambition on them. If they saw how awesome I was, maybe they’d get in line and— Whoa. They didn’t seem to notice at all. I was right in front of them, and they’re still glaring and yelling at each other. Should I take more drastic measures and “tame” them down?

But as I weighed my options, a clearly miffed Rigurd stepped forward. “How dare you show such rudeness before our lord! I see that I, Rigurd, need to show all of you your place!”

He was normally quite gentle, doggedly pursuing administrative tasks around town, but I knew Rigurd had secretly been working out. He was stronger than the younger guys, at least, like Gobta and Rigur—and given his performance against the paladins when they attacked, he definitely had something of a warrior inside him. The way I saw it, he was stronger than the leaders of both factions here.

“What? Look at this bureaucrat who thinks he’s the lord of all things!”

“We don’t need some demon lord flunky to bad-mouth us!”

The leaders quickly barked back, while their younger hangers-on bleated their agreement.

I’ve had people look down on me before, but I don’t think I’ve ever been treated this badly. Just a little Lord’s Ambition was enough to humble everybody before these guys. They were just so worked up, oblivious to what was going on around them. I thought being dissed was better than being feared, but if it gets this bad, I might have to reconsider.

Still, a little lesson ought to help them see the light. Rigurd looked at me. I nodded, just about ready to give permission, when:

“Wha?!”

“…What on…?”

“…Oh dear, some trouble?”

“Hmph. Not a problem.”

We felt a tremendous wave of pressure from outside town. Someone had broken through Shuna’s barrier around it, and soon we felt the massive aura and vast magical energy of a monster— No, likely a magic-born. Judging by this act, we doubted this guy was here to make any friends. The bovoids and equinoids might not have noticed my Lord’s Ambition, but they sure noticed this, judging by their panicked gasps.

“Such power…”

“Wh-whoa, Demon Lord, are you getting attacked by another of your kind?”

Up until now, the Forest of Jura had been protected by a pact between the demon lords. These guys here talked a big game, but they were in way over their heads. Against a real threat, they had to face up and admit how powerless they really were.

I no longer had time to deal with them. I hated to throw out the idea of having them serve as bosses—it just felt so epic to me—but there were other things to do. Instantly, I transformed into my human form and shouted “Let’s go!” to Benimaru and the rest.

“Yes sir!”

“As you say.”

I ran toward the source of the disturbance.

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Upon reaching the site, I saw ten or so members of Team Kurenai surrounding three men. Several security guards, gatekeepers, and Team Reborn troops were on the ground.

…Oops, I saw Gobzo among them. I was sure he gave them a fight, but it was crazy to even fight them at all. Meanwhile, the survivors were busy directing the townspeople and visitors to evacuation sites. They were acting just as they’d been trained to, which was nice. Things weren’t too chaotic yet, but I hated to see casualties this early on.

I turned to the three men behind this. One was tall, well-formed, and wore an earring. The second was enormous, a virtual slab of meat, and sported a nose ring. The third was smaller, but his frame going beyond merely “large” and venturing into “heavy” territory, and he had a lip piercing. They sported colorful hair in strange styles, which only added to their stereotypical street-punk look.

“You realize you’ve perpetrated this violence in the domain of the demon lord Rimuru?!” shouted Shion, who had been following behind me.

The earring guy stepped up, grinning fiendishly. “Outta the way. I’m not here to deal with minions. We wanted to rub out Clayman and seize his demon lord spot, but you got in our way, and we’re pissed off about it. I ain’t here to kill for fun, but mess with us, and we ain’t gonna go easy, all right?”

He was being rude and intimidating, but looking around me, I realized nobody was dead. Judging by the difference in magic force, if they hadn’t been going easy, even Team Reborn would’ve been wiped out. He must’ve been telling the truth, kind of.

Maybe they weren’t as bad as they looked—but if they wanted a fight, they’d get one. We were in the middle of my public unveiling as a demon lord. The Founder’s Festival was just around the corner, and we had merchants from all the world over going in and out. It’d be tough to let an incursion like this go without comment.

It was annoying, but so be it. I’ll just have to take them on—

“Wait, Sir Rimuru. Let me handle this.”

Shion stopped me from stepping forward. Benimaru was trying to step up, too, but I guess they had looked at each other and silently decided which would go first. The casualties among Shion’s forces were the likely decider.

“Oh, you one of the demon lord Rimuru’s aides? Dad told me about you—the ogre woman who whipped Clayman’s ass? I like it. Let’s warm up with you first—”

“Wait, Big Bro. Can we take her? You can have the demon lord.”

“Fwehhhh-heh-heh! Yes, yes! I’m getting hungry, you know. I could use a girl or two right now!”

Sounded like they were all brothers. The earring guy must’ve been the eldest, and their dad told them about not just me, but Shion and Clayman’s battle. Their father must’ve been either a demon lord or a close associate, but judging by their energy levels—each equivalent to a pre-awakened Clayman—I assumed the former.

But who? I immediately crossed Guy, Milim, Ramiris, and Luminus off the list. That left Daggrull, Deeno, or Leon…but the last two seemed pretty unlikely. Was Daggrull my prime suspect?

Shion, meanwhile, took a step forward. “Silence. Sir Rimuru is busy with his audiences right now. To save on time, I will handle all three of you at once.”

“Huh?”

“Whoa, are you picking on us?”

“I wanted to go easy on a girl, but forget it. I’m gonna make you cry, I swear.”

“Fweh-heh-heh, that sass is like a punch in the gut. I bet you’re gonna make me feel the fullest I’ve been in a while!”

I groaned. Taking on three foes more powerful than you at the same time was insanely reckless, even by Shion’s standards. I tried to stop her, but this trio was already far too worked up to call time-out. Why does Shion always get so freaked out like this…?

“B-Benimaru?”

“Just let Shion do what she wants. If we’re going easy on them, Shion is more suited to that than I am.”

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His casual response stunned me into silence. Guess I’d just have to give up. I decided to believe she’d win and just let her have her fun.

That said, I didn’t want my town wrecked. I suggested that we all move elsewhere, and surprisingly, the trio agreed to it and followed me, curiously checking out their surroundings as I led them into our freshly built battle arena.

“Whoa, lady,” earring guy said. “You got guts, I’ll admit that, but if you wanna take back what you said, now’s the time.”

“Let me show you magicules aren’t the only deciding factor in a battle!” she snorted back.

I remember a certain red-colored ogre saying something similar a while back. But regardless, we now had an audience of rubberneckers here in this arena, ready to watch Shion fight off these three would-be pretenders coming for my throne.

Shion wiped the floor with them.

The fat guy with the lip piercing moved far more nimbly than looks would suggest, charging at Shion like a cannonball. Shion just kicked him away and sent him flying straight into the earring dude. Then, seizing that single open moment, she plunged her fist into the stomach of the nose-ring man, too stunned to react in time. Grabbing earring man by the arm and collar, she executed a perfect judo throw on him, smashing his head against the stone floor. He lay there, motionless.

“Arrrgh! What did you do to my brother?!”

The fat man with the lip piercing grabbed Shion from behind, attempting to lift her up. Shion’s brute strength stymied him.

“Wh-what the—?! But I’m so much stronger than you…!”

Shion glared at the man and snickered. Shifting position, she locked arms with him, and the test of strength began.

“Hnn…nnnnggghh…”

Snap!

Sadly, it wasn’t long before the fat man’s arms both bent in ways they shouldn’t have. They were all magic-born, so I figured they’d be all right, but judging by the way he was screaming and writhing around, it must’ve done a lot of damage.

But Shion didn’t even take a moment to marvel at her work before another pistonlike fist slammed home. Before the fat man could shout anything else, she landed a one-two finish on him like none other. The earring guy attempted a screamer of a kick on her body, but Shion simply bent backward and let it whiz past her. But the guy was smiling. His leg, still in the air, came down like a vicious battle ax, aimed squarely at Shion’s head.

There was a loud, dull thuddd! Shion’s stonelike head had just shattered the man’s leg. She executed a low kick to shatter the other one and sent him crashing to the ground. Without missing a beat, Shion straddled him, landing a flurry of punches on his head and body.

That sealed the deal.

Without even needing to take out her enhanced Goriki-maru sword, Shion had beaten the crap out of those three guys. Clearly, she had grown stronger. Smashing these opponents, all of whom equaled or beat her in magic force, didn’t even quicken her breathing. And she took all three down at the same time, no less.

“B-Benimaru?! Shion’s…?”

“Yes, this is quite a surprise. I see she went quite easy on them after all.”

That’s not what I’m talking about! This isn’t Milim there, on the arena stage! Benimaru clearly had a different definition of “going easy” than me. That wasn’t at all what I meant, but…ah well. No point wasting my breath.

Seriously, though, Shion’s amazing. No joke. She just proved that you can easily overwhelm an opponent otherwise your equal through prudent use of your magical force. Whipping Clayman must’ve helped her grow a lot. Benimaru’s non-reaction to it indicated he was expecting this all along, too.

I didn’t like it much, but Shion was now as powerful as an ex–demon lord—and by definition, Benimaru as well. Hell, maybe even Soei and Geld. Or maybe I’m overthinking it? Watching Shion grow must be wrecking my mind or something. Or not. Better stop thinking too much about it.

“I’m sorry, was that not enough?”

Shion must have been taking my disturbed look wrong, as she eyed the three heaps sprawled on the ground.

“No, no, that’s fine!” I hurriedly shouted. That was more than enough, yes. “And if you guys have had enough, then stop getting in our way! Also, the other demon lords are even worse than that, so try not to fall out of line again, okay?”

The earring guy (the first to regain consciousness) rapidly nodded. That advice was for their own good, really. I guess they got cocky enough to think they could take on a demon lord, but good thing they picked me first. If they went to someone else, their punishment would’ve been a lot harsher than Shion’s.

“You guys are even stronger than Dad said,” the earring guy muttered.

“So Rimuru himself is…?”

“Yeah… He’s even better.”

“Fwehhh-heh-heh! I’m getting hungry.”

Now all three beheld me with respect. One of them was still acting a little strange, but no point worrying about it. I really didn’t want to bother with them any longer, but I felt it prudent to at least look into their backgrounds.

“So who pointed you here?”

I hoped they would be honest with me. I didn’t have to hope for long.

“Ah yes! We’re the sons of the demon lord Daggrull. I am Daggra, the eldest.”

“I am Liura, the second oldest.”

“And I’m Chonkra, the youngest!”

Just as I thought.

“Um, you sure you want to be so open with your identities like that?”

“Sure,” Daggra replied. “Dad actually ordered us to go train under you, the demon lord Rimuru.”

“We kind of caused a ruckus back home, and he got royally mad…”

“Fweh-heh! So he kicked us out!”

That was…refreshingly honest of them. So basically, Daggrull had had it up to here with his problem children, so he was forcing them on me. What the hell? It’s not like we knew each other that well or anything. Where did he get off?

…But maybe I could make him owe me a favor now, huh? It’s not like we were that stable of a presence yet—I didn’t think it wise to make an enemy out of one of the strongest people in the world. Plus, while I didn’t want to spend another minute with these guys, I had the perfect drill sergeant in Shion right here. I’d seen her train Gobzo and the others, but she was so mean to those guys (way worse than Hakuro, even) that it had taken me aback a bit. If I left them to her, I figured they’d get sick of it and run away—and if they did, hey, I’d held up my end of the deal. Daggrull would have no right to complain.

“All right. Let’s have you train under Shion, then.”

I gave Shion a glance, knowing she’d probably hate it but hoping she would take this ticking time bomb off my hands. But Shion nodded back at me with an evil grin. Wait a minute. This wasn’t what I expected.

“Hee-hee-hee… I have received my orders from Sir Rimuru. And trust me—I, Shion, can even take a pack of weaklings like you and build you into first-rate warriors. You may follow me with confidence!”

“I-I’d hope for nothing else!”

“Yeah! We’re gonna do our best for you, lady!”

“Me too! But can you give me something to eat first?!”

I was expecting some sass back, but Shion was pretty up for it. Which, okay, if she’s cool, I’m cool. I decided to head back to the audience chamber, hearing cries like “Let us call you our teacher… No, our master!” and “I’ll expect all of you to follow my commands to the letter!” behind me. I figured I’d just ignore them for now.

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Back at the chamber, the bovoids and equinoids were now kneeling before me, visibly quivering. The younger fighters were following their leaders’ example, prostrating themselves as well. The high-and-mighty attitudes of the past were gone; now they reminded me of some of the weaker races I saw the previous day.

“We—we were awaiting your return!”

“Our loyalty shall forever be with you, Sir Rimuru!!”

I wondered what made them have a change of heart like that. It’s certainly a new attitude, coming from them. I climbed up to my throne, reverting to slime form and expecting them to get huffy with me again, but they didn’t.

“Do you mean it?”

“Of—of course, my lord!”

“Please, use our powers however you like!”

I guess this was a sincere change of heart. Judging by how frantic they looked, they really were trying to curry as much favor as possible with me. That little bout just now must’ve shown them how scary Shion can be, huh? In that case, no need to hold back. I’d have no qualms with taking advantage of these guys. They had been fighting for a century, which was really something I didn’t need in my domain, but I suppose that meant they loved combat. Would anyone complain if I just moved their battlefield into the labyrinth?

“Well, by the looks of things, you guys have more power than you know what to do with. How about I prepare an arena for you guys to duke it out in?”

“Y-you’re going to forgive them?” a saddened Rigurd asked. “I was thinking I could provide them with their divine punishment for you, Sir Rimuru…”

Yeahhh… I had forgotten, what with all this nonsense going on, but both races had pissed off Rigurd pretty good. But I thought it better to give them a chance and see if they could be useful.

“Now, now, Rigurd. They were just ignorant of us, I think, so why not forgive them just this once? If they try that stuff again, though, go right ahead.”

“If you say so, sir, I have no complaints. How good for all of you, hmm? If Sir Rimuru wasn’t such a forgiving lord, you may all have breathed your last just now. If you dare to defy us a second time, all that awaits is your final destruction. Give up your resistance and know your place!”

I was glad Rigurd got me, at least.

“Yeah, you guys are lucky,” chimed in Shion, who was already back from the arena. “If it wasn’t for those unwelcome visitors just now, I would’ve joined with Rigurd to do you all in. Why, for all the unbearable things you said, I would have plucked your tongues out so you could never speak again! So thank Sir Rimuru for his mercy, and try to show some obedience from now on!”

The bovoids and equinoids all nodded, shaking uncontrollably. “We—we promise we’ll live up to your expectations! Please forgive our disrespect!” And given how they were acting, I could believe they wouldn’t try it again.

“If you swear loyalty to me, I will consider it. First, though, stop your fighting and be quiet until you hear from me.”

I didn’t need to speak to them directly, but I thought it best to be doubly sure. I wanted to invite the bovoid leader over later under one pretense or another, so I could negotiate with him about working in the labyrinth. Given the (unintentional) fright we gave them, he ought to be cooperative.

Really, the chance at getting such a great boss for my project made all the stress of the day just fly out of my mind.

The audiences went smoothly after that. Rumors of Shion taking control of Daggrull’s sons spread like wildfire, enough to make even the powerful bovoids and equinoids lie low, so nobody was looking down on me now.

I was hoping things would end on a high note, but…

Soon after, an elder from the elven race and a few of his men arrived. I say elder, but he looked like a regular young man to me. No women were among them, which was kind of a shame, given how gorgeous lady elves tend to be.

Elves, of course, had a reputation for living practically forever. Both they and dwarves were originally spirits brought to physical life (or fallen from higher planes of existence), who became fairies and were eventually granted material bodies. Apparently, you could trace the genealogy of goblins back to the fairies, too: Fairies bearing the earth element eventually became dwarves; those with the water element became merfolk; fire became goblins; and wind became elves. Their ancestors were the results of fairies intermingling with creatures from other races long ago.

Apparently, goblins had little in the way of fairy blood left, which made their lives comparatively short. Even ogres, the next evolution up from them, only made it up to a hundred or so. When you got to ogre mage level, that reenergized the power from your spiritual ancestors, giving you skills that bordered on the divine.

But back to elves. Their lives were said to span between five and eight hundred years. Even elves with human blood mixed in could make it up to almost three hundred. This could vary a lot, though, since the more fairy blood you had in you, the longer you tended to live. Elves grew into maturity around the age of twenty, and beyond that, the passage of time simply did nothing to them. Only when on death’s door did they suddenly begin to rapidly age, and in about twenty years, infirmity would finally take their lives.

Staying young for a few centuries might sound like a dream to most humans. But another trait of theirs was how you never really saw them produce a lot of children. Living such long lives, they didn’t have much of a natural inclination to keep their bloodline going. That’s why they still numbered relatively few. (Bear in mind, of course, that I learned all this from the ladies at the Night Butterfly, a nightclub in the Dwarven Kingdom I was well familiar with, so I couldn’t say how much of it was true.)

By the way, fairies themselves still existed—they were pretty common monsters, actually. These were smaller spirits given monster form by the effects of magicules around them; they were about the size of Ramiris and had a reputation as pranksters. They had intelligence, but they couldn’t procreate and didn’t live long. The personification of a major spirit was a far cry from them, enough so to be classified as a different monster entirely.

Ramiris tended to be bunched in with these fairies, but she was actually something different. She was fallen from an upper-level existence known as a spirit queen, which meant she may’ve been higher up the evolutionary ladder than the ancestors of elves or dwarves. It sounded like she went through an eternal pattern of reincarnation, although it didn’t seem like she understood the process herself too much…

…But I’ve gotten way off track. I lent an ear to the elder.

“It is an honor to lay eyes upon you,” he said with a salute. “We have come here today to celebrate you and offer our heartfelt gratitude…”

Normally, this would be the time when they’d offer their loyalty to me. Some of the races—the initial entries into the Federation—even expressed their thanks at their safety being guaranteed. But this was the first time I had ever met this elder. I wasn’t sure what he had to thank me for, so I had Rigurd ask for me.

“Ah, that would be—”

As the elder put it, it had to do with the bad blood between the bovoids and equinoids. It turned out the biggest victims of their hundred-year war were the elves.

According to him, elves, a race that lives off the blessings of the forest, fear the expansion of war zones more than anything else. To protect their hidden enclaves from outside enemies, the elves install “barriers” that scramble one’s sense of direction, but these barriers had fallen with the trees in the midst of the wars. Directional confusion didn’t mean much, after all, if the enclaves were in plain sight.

They tried to move their settlements, keeping casualties as low as they could, but the war kept growing bigger and bigger. It made the forest’s animals and monsters flee for their lives, it razed the local fruits and vegetables before they could be harvested, and some elves even resorted to taking work in the Dwarven Kingdom. (I guess that was what the ladies at the Night Butterfly were up to.)

Over time, the loss of population grew to become a crisis, making it hard to keep the enclaves going. Some of the elves considered making yet another move elsewhere, but as large as the Forest of Jura is, it wasn’t that easy to find a suitable destination.

“Thus,” the elder continued, “we considered appealing to those violent thugs to see if we could reach some kind of agreement. But before we could, my lord, the events of just now transpired. Now all we need is somewhere to move to…”

Hopefully, as he said, that would convince the elves who left to come back.

This gave me an idea. Someplace to move to? Yeah, I got that. Right here in town.

There were fewer than three hundred elves in the forest. At one point, there was a lot more, enough to build a prosperous kingdom in ancient times, but those glory years were long past. The elves were forced to turn nomadic, spreading to the four corners of the world—but regardless, I knew a place that could fit three hundred just fine. Remember that little forest I had just built down in Floor 95 of the Dungeon? There you go.

I could even put them to work—helping Apito run our honey operations, cultivating rare plants that only grew in magicule-rich forests, maybe running the inn I planned to open on Floor 95. They could run the weapon shop down there, and if any monsters appeared on that floor (not that I expected it), it’d be great for this town to have a little elven protection. I heard that elves and treants got along well, so I doubted Treyni or the others would be against this.

Plus, with all the jobs on offer, I figured it’d help attract the more distant elves back here. Maybe the ladies from that nightclub would venture back, too—and then I could build an elf-run VIP room down there, maybe…?!

Yes. This was excellent. There was already a tavern in town, but that was more of a gastropub geared for adventurers. If you wanted someplace for a quiet drink and relaxation, you’d have to go to our administration-exclusive dining halls. I’m sure Shuna would be glad to serve me in my own room, but I didn’t need alcohol that badly. I’m just talking about, you know, taking a breather. It’s not that having Shuna around would make it impossible to relax or anything—or impossible to BS with Gobta, or have private discussions with Mjöllmile, or whatever.

…No, really!

I’m just saying, if we had something like the Night Butterfly on the ninety-fifth floor, it’d be useful for a lot of different situations.

I decided to offer this idea to the elder at once. “Elder, I think I know someplace that’d be able to accept you…”

When Rigurd realized I was speaking, he took a step back and listened. I don’t how he got trained to do it, but he could calmly handle just about any situation by this point. If I ever went off script during an event like this, he could keep up without any blank stares. I loved that.

“Ah! You do, Lord Rimuru?”

“Mm-hmm. If it’s about three hundred of you, we’d be able to fit you all in…”

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“…Thank you so much! I will inform my people of this the moment I return.”

“Great. I’ll get it all set up so it’s available for move-in when you’re ready. But do you mind if I ask a favor in return?”

“Of course not, my lord. If our powers can be of help to you, nothing could make us happier!”

The elven elder was even happier about it than I thought. It’d save them from having to wander the forest in search of a safe haven, which I’m sure came as a relief. It sounded like he was sending an envoy over right now to get people ready.

So now we had elves moving into our labyrinth.

I figured that was the end of the conversation, but one thing did concern me. The elder mentioned that elves had been leaving their enclave to work and not coming back. With a race as tightly knit as the elves, it seemed odd to me that any of them would abandon their homeland. Some elves even reportedly went out hunting and never returned, which disturbed me.

Elves could be very individualistic by nature, the elder said, so perhaps a passing whim drove them away from home. But then I remembered what I heard in Mjöllmile’s shop—the proposal from Viscount Cazac of Englesia. A place that dealt in elven slaves, wasn’t it?

Maybe it wasn’t a matter of these younger elves choosing not to go back. If my hunch about the criminal group Cazac was fronting turned out to be true… Well, hopefully it wasn’t, but if it was, that would be a big problem.

My dream of launching an elf nightclub was so close at hand. Seeing the elder off after we said our goodbyes, I thought that I’d better investigate this thoroughly.

Thus, I gave Soei behind me a Thought Communication message.

(Soei, I want you to investigate a man named Viscount Cazac in Blumund.)

(Yes, my lord!)

In a moment, he sent out a Replication of himself, beginning his work at once. That should be enough. He’d probably find something out before my audiences were over.

I’ll probably want to ask Mjöllmile what he knows about criminal slave merchants, too. If it turns out Cazac’s involved, there’d be no mercy for him. It was an affront to the deep love I had for elves—a love that drove me to open my very own elven nightclub. I wasn’t about to let anyone keep me from that dream.

The long, long audience period was finally in its last day. Once I was through this, I’d kick off the Founder’s Festival in three days.

No problems of note occurred after the elven contingent. It was going smooth as silk, and there were no major issues among the monsters staying in town. The little scuffle with Daggrull’s kids was the talk of the town in pretty short order, which probably kept anyone who wanted to show off their strength in line.

Geld had taken some time off, which let him return to Tempest a few days ago, and Diablo and Hakuro also arrived back the previous day.

“Ah, Sir Rimuru! You are as stately and dignified as always. My heart bursts with joy at being able to see you again!”

Diablo was buttering me up once more, punctuating the flattery with his usual ominous snickering. There was nothing “dignified” about a slime, so I reasoned that he probably needed glasses or something. I wanted a report from him, but that could wait—which disappointed him, but I needed to keep today free for an important discussion.

That was how major today’s visitor was to me. No letting my guard down around them, that’s for sure. As I saw it, it’d be my toughest audience yet. That was why I had my whole crew in attendance for today’s sessions.

Right now, this entourage was being welcomed into town by Benimaru, my right-hand man. (This should also say something about how crucial this was to me.) Already, on the other side of the door, I could sense a violent force approaching like a tidal wave. The rumors, I realized, were true.

The door opened, revealing a posse clad in full armor. These were the tengu, an independent force residing in the Khusha Mountains on the horizon of the Forest of Jura—outside my jurisdiction. While Benimaru had met with them once before, this was less of an audience and more of a summit between two factions.

Standing in front of this armored crew was a beautiful young woman. The tengu were humanoids known for their almost comically long noses, but this girl looked like any normal human. Tengu, bearing the same name as the figures of Japanese mythology, were apparently a hybrid species between angels and wolfmen—

Report. To be more accurate, they are not a hybrid. They are angels incarnated into the bodies of wolfmen.

Right—a type of incarnation. That.

Wolfmen were a type of beastman—a proud, isolated race who held an almost divine presence in people’s minds. Thus, calling the tengu long-nosed was often more a metaphor than anything else, a way of referring to the supernatural sense of smell they boasted.

Now then, for this species worshipped as the gods of the mountains—

Report. To be more accurate, they are not a species. They are a group born from a single individual, much like the subject Ranga.

Um, sure. Right. Honestly, I don’t really follow it all, but anyway, a bunch of crazy-powerful gods decided to create a bunch of crazy-powerful wolfmen, and then an angel incarnated themself in one, creating a new sentient species. The single individual that led to this species was the tengu elder—the mother of the girl before me. And since creating all these children apparently weakened the elder to the point of powerlessness, this girl was essentially the tengu leader.

This is why it’s more accurate to call this a summit. And not even that fully described how important this meeting was.

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Benimaru had come to the tengu’s domain once. They had been kind to us at times, permitting the migration of high orcs through their territory, but they were also proud, and if I floated the idea of enforcing my rule over the mountains to them, it’d almost certainly result in war.

I, of course, didn’t want that. I didn’t see any need to fight this race revered as mountain gods. Benimaru understood that, so he was on strict instructions to just get their permission to build a highway on their lands between Tempest and Thalion.

“The negotiations went successfully,” Benimaru had said when he later reported back. “Everything went well with them. Not even the tengu can afford to ignore you, Sir Rimuru, so they mentioned plans to come see you sometime.”

The news sounded good, but Benimaru looked exhausted.

“You sure there weren’t any problems?”

“No, not exactly, but…”

He was dodging the question. And Alvis, whom I sent along with him, had seemed off her game—or at the very least, miffed about something—ever since she got back. It seemed like something I was better off not asking about.

So I decided to force it out of Benimaru anyway—in private, over a few drinks, since he didn’t seem interested in telling the rest of our administration about it. The way he described it…

Benimaru had headed over to the tengu’s hidden homeland with Alvis and a dozen or so members of Team Kurenai. The journey over went smoothly, but in front of a cave near the peak of the Khusha Mountains, they were stopped by a young tengu warrior, dressed in white with a katana on his belt. On his back were two white wings, and he also bore a tail and doglike triangular ears.

Based on the refinement of his posture, he was clearly trained in battle, Benimaru thought. Speaking with him, they asked for permission to go through the “barrier” placed within the cave. The warrior agreed but allowed only Benimaru and Alvis to follow him inside.

On the other side, they found a flowery paradise. It was neither hot nor cold, the temperature always pleasant—a beautiful land, befitting the powerful race who called it home. In the courtyard they were taken to, Benimaru was greeted by a beautiful woman—one who looked human, unlike any of the other tengu. Her hair came down to her shoulders, pure white at the roots and fading into a crimson red around her ears. Her small, soft lips were the color of cherry blossoms, but her long, sharp eyes were the eyes of a wolf, watching Benimaru like a beast sizing up its prey.

Benimaru realized he couldn’t let his guard down. The commanding presence she had over the room was reminiscent of the demon lord Carillon—or perhaps even stronger than that.

“My name is Benimaru. I come on behalf of the demon lord Rimuru.”

“Welcome, kind messenger. I am Momiji, daughter of the tengu elder. What brings you to us? Are you aiming to take over this land?” the girl asked with a beguiling smile.

Her words were poison-tipped. Benimaru could tell he wasn’t welcome at all. But he didn’t let that bother him.

“I have no such intentions. What we seek is permission to venture over the Khusha Mountains along the border with the Forest of Jura. And, if possible, we’d like to request permission to dig a tunnel into this mountain.”

“Hmph. No ambitions of a land grab, then? You may pass through the mountains all you like…but what is this tunnel you speak of?” Momiji seemed less than enthusiastic about this conversation, but the word tunnel piqued her interest.

Benimaru didn’t know a great deal about it, either, apart from my vague description of boring a hole into the mountain. In fact, the idea had already been shot down by my team. A tunnel would be the shortest route between Tempest and the Thalion capital, but the highway would only lead to the nearest large town on the Thalion border, so no tunnel was strictly needed. Benimaru knew that, but he wanted to bring up the concept in his negotiations regardless.

“A tunnel involves digging a hole in the mountain to allow passage through to the other side. If you do not wish to permit this, we will not—”

“Wait. Dig a hole in the mountain? Are you quite serious?”

“I am. That’s what the project plan called for. But no tunnel is necessary for the route we have now, so I only wanted to ask in case it does become necessary in the future. If you don’t like it, I will not force the question.”

To a race who treats the mountains as divinity, digging a hole through one was seen as anathema.

“That is very ill-advised. You are free to let a slime become a demon lord, but as long as you do not interfere with us, I see no harm. I am even willing to shut my eyes to that slavering half-snake you’ve brought along with you. But if you wish to make a mockery of our glorious mountains—that I cannot abide.”

As if to prove the point, Momiji stood up.

Benimaru had no intention of making an issue out of this, but now it seemed like the discussion was over. Had he failed? He stayed in his seat, reasoning that any reaction would force the other side to up the ante—but not everyone was willing to remain silent.

“A slavering half-snake? Are you talking about me?”

A fuming Alvis leaped out of her chair instead, staring Momiji down. The two seemed ready to come to blows at any moment.

“Whoa, stop—”

Just as Benimaru spoke, Alvis’s eyes met Momiji’s. Her extra skill Snake Eyes could cause paralysis, poison, insanity, and many other ailments. But none of that fazed Momiji.

“Such a silly move,” she said as she took out a folding fan with both hands. “Mere status ailments won’t work on the daughter of the tengu elder.”

Tengu are half-spiritual life-forms and as such bear a high resistance to status ailments. In addition, Momiji had the extra skill Godwolf Sense on at all times, giving her information beyond what her five senses provided—a sort of powered-up version of Magic Sense that picked up on illusions and illusory magic. Thus, sneak attacks like that didn’t work on her.

Then it was Momiji’s turn. She brought her fan down on Alvis in a sort of dance. Alvis blocked the first blow with her golden staff, but the second one hit her on the side and sent her flying to the far end of the open-air courtyard.

“Kffhh…?!”

Momiji’s moves were simple but refined. The blow had shut the fan; now she reopened it, elegantly hiding her lips with it.

“Are you done? I see the Lycanthropeers are all bark and no bite.”

“You better not rile me, country girl. I went easy on you because we were here to negotiate, but perhaps I didn’t need to?” replied Alvis, her pride hurt.



She stood back up, her wound already healed, and glared coldly at Momiji. Her presence was formidable indeed, as befitting one of the most powerful magic-born in Eurazania.

“Went easy? I was going easy on you. It’s taken quite an effort to avoid killing an envoy like yourself, I’ll have you know. Or do you want to make me truly angry?”

It felt like their face-off was literally freezing the air around them. The younger tengu warriors at the side of the courtyard tensed up as the concentrated auras filled the area. And in the midst of it, Benimaru sat drinking his tea, musing about how this had gone beyond the realm of a gaffe and into truly painful territory.

“Yes, you may be strong, but if you think a little girl as inexperienced as you in battle has a chance, think again.”

“Would you care to try? I was hoping to build some battle experience, as you so kindly pointed out. I think you would make a fine test case!”

The stare down grew ever more heated—and then they both moved at once. The next moment, a flash of light streaked through the air, and the fan flew out of Momiji’s hand. Silence fell over the courtyard. Faster than anyone could have reacted, Benimaru stepped into the fight.

“Enough,” he blankly stated. “I apologize for her offense, but I really can’t have my companion killed.”

“S-Sir Benimaru?! You thought I would lose?!”

“Yes. If I didn’t stop you, you would’ve been cut in two.”

“Nonsense!” Momiji said. “I put none of my force into—”

“No. You’re careless with holding your aura back. You put too much power into it.”

“I—I didn’t…”

“I… I lost…?”

Both Momiji and Alvis fell to their knees. As they did, the doors on one end of the courtyard opened, revealing a large, beautiful, canine-eared woman. The young tengu in the audience kneeled before her.

“M-Mother?!”

The tengu elder smiled at the panicking Momiji, ambling over to her daughter. When she reached her:

“You fool of a daughter!”

The roar echoed like a thunderclap.

In another few moments, the group had relocated themselves to an inner chamber, one in the classic Japanese style with tatami mats and flat floor cushions for kneeling on. A door ahead led to an alcove, allowing the ill tengu elder to take a rest whenever she needed. The elder had seen fit to give Momiji a rap on the head for her insolence; she rubbed it tearfully, dissatisfied with this treatment but unwilling to risk any more disobedience around her mother.

“No, no, there’s no need to go that far. We simply wanted to introduce ourselves…”

Benimaru had yet to accomplish what he set out to do, but this was no longer an atmosphere for casual talk. Plus, with Alvis as dejected as she was, he sensed that overstaying his welcome would be supremely unwise. But the elder had other ideas.

“Hee-hee-hee! Don’t worry about it, boy. That was quite some swordplay you showed off, by the way. That’s the Haze style, ain’t it?”

“How did…? Ah, no, I do have some idea. Momiji’s dancing did resemble my own sword style in parts. Could it be, perhaps…?”

“Yes, I’ve studied Haze as well. From my master, Byakuya Araki.”

“Wha?!”

Benimaru was shocked. The tengu gave him a satisfied smile.

“My name, you see, is Kaede.”

With that, she began telling a story of her past. Over three hundred years ago, she’d been spending her time in the land of the ogres. She had been on a journey, hiding her true powers, but then she encountered Byakuya and became an apprentice on the ways of the sword. But Kaede wasn’t alone. She trained alongside someone else—a born talent, living by the sword, and Byakuya’s own grandchild.

“It pains me so much that I am unable to give you a name,” Byakuya had often said.

Naming monsters willy-nilly, it seemed, could come at the risk of one’s life. As a human, naming this grandchild of his would’ve surely killed him. Kaede didn’t have a name at the time, either, so she didn’t understand what his hang-up was about it, but now she had an inkling. If you love someone, after all, you want to leave something behind for them. It was natural for monsters not to have names, but for humans, it was the opposite.

Time passed, and Byakuya grew old and passed away, leaving behind his ogre grandchild who had become a virtuoso with the sword—enough to challenge even Kaede. In terms of technique, she lost out completely. She was smitten, and underneath a large maple tree, she confessed her love. Then, after a single night spent together in bliss, she left the ogre homeland.

The Forest of Jura had been known for its unstable weather, but this tree was a large, broad maple, one that shone with bright-orange leaves in the fall. It had become a symbol of the ogres’ homeland, and Benimaru knew it well—proving to him that her story was true…

“Wait a minute. Are you saying that Hakuro’s—?”

…and shocking him in the process.

“Hakuro, you said? Ah, so the Sword Ogre I trained with has gained a name? My… I’m surprised to hear he’s even alive.”

She smiled at the thought, shaking Benimaru down to his very core.

Whoa—whoa… Is Hakuro aware of this?!

His mind was swimming with all kinds of questions. But the greatest shock of all was yet to come:

“Well… That is a relief to hear.”

“…?”

“Because the fine young man Sir Hakuro raised is going to be the future groom of my daughter.”

Bppht!!

Benimaru spit out the tea he was drinking to calm his nerves. He was normally cool and composed, but here in the land of the tengu, everything was shaking him to the core. And he wasn’t the only one—Alvis, next to him, was staring blankly into space as the teacup slipped from her hand.

Momiji blushed intensely at the news and looked at Benimaru, then Kaede. “M-Mother…?!”

Flustered, she attempted to shut her mother up, but it was no use. Kaede casually raised an arm to hold her daughter back as she addressed Benimaru.

“Now, Sir Benimaru, regarding your request earlier, I will be happy to accept it. In fact, I am prepared to acknowledge the rule of Sir Rimuru over our lands. However, that comes on the condition that you accept my daughter as your spouse. I doubt you will need much time to think it over, but what do you say?”

Benimaru froze. Such a dramatic question, posed so casually. He did need some time, as it happened. Fortunately, Momiji—the other related party in this question—stepped in to rescue him.

“Wait! Wait! I know you’ve accepted him, Mother, but I haven’t yet! Yes, perhaps he’s stronger than I am…but if so, then I don’t want you to force him into this. I want to win his love first. Don’t you always say, Mother, that a truly good woman is one who makes her sweetheart turn back toward her?”

She hid her reddened face behind her fan and all but ran out of the room, fleeing the scene. Kaede laughed heartily at her behavior.

As Alvis regained her senses, Benimaru could feel embarrassment creeping over him at Momiji’s reaction.

Y’know, Hakuro could stay calm through anything… As sudden as this proposal is, if that’s all it takes to throw me, I still have much to learn…

He took the moment to reflect.

…But still, this is way too sudden…

In the end, it was agreed that he would bring the question of Momiji back home to think over. This was all entirely Kaede’s idea, and she had no interest in forcing anyone into it. It was something she thought it’d be nice to see, and if it actually happened, why, all the better. As for the rest of Tempest’s demands, she largely agreed—the tunnel through the mountain was still an issue, but she gave them permission to construct the highway to Thalion any way they pleased.

But their talks didn’t end there. Apart from potentially marrying Momiji off to Benimaru, Kaede also expressed an interest in building a constructive relationship between the demon lord Rimuru and the tengu race.

It may not have been obvious, but Kaede suffered from an illness. At least, that was the backstory; the truth was a bit different. She did indeed lose the majority of her remaining power bringing Momiji into the world. The birth and the subsequent “naming” of the child took place fifteen years ago, and it consumed nearly all the force of a woman once lauded as the goddess of the mountains. Death would be coming for her sooner rather than later, and that was why she wanted to find someone to back up and support her dear, inexperienced daughter. Benimaru’s visit was a coincidence, but to Kaede, he brought hope—a final hope, gifted to her by her former lover Hakuro.

If he turns me down, so be it, thought Kaede. You’re still there, aren’t you, with Sir Rimuru? I thought you would die before I did, but I see I was very happily mistaken. And won’t seeing Momiji remind you of our own past a little?

After some contemplation, Kaede agreed to postpone any concrete marriage plans. And with that, Momiji herself made her way to meet with the demon lord Rimuru in person.

It was a pretty headache-inducing tale—and one representing the greatest danger Benimaru had experienced in his life. He described it as scarier than the first time he met me, which I wasn’t sure how to take. Maybe that was just his sense of humor.

Regardless, this was why Momiji had been sent here. If she landed such a clean hit on Alvis, you wouldn’t want to underestimate her in battle. Honestly, I was glad she wasn’t hostile to us anymore.

…But really, I couldn’t dodge the real question any longer.

Hakuro had a daughter all this time? No way.

I was in a panic over it, worried that it’d balloon into a huge issue, but there wasn’t much to be done about it until I met her. Besides, this wasn’t something Benimaru and I could solve alone. We needed to hear from Hakuro, who had just as large a stake in this—but I didn’t want to hurry him over here needlessly, either. So I decided to shelve the issue until he came back.

And come back he did, the previous night, after his journey to Farmus. The three of us held a little chat. I had no idea what the tengu would demand from us or what would happen with them at all, so we decided to save their audience for the final day. I was planning to call for Hakuro if he still wasn’t around by then, but fortunately I didn’t need to. Not that his timeliness solved a lot of problems, either.

Benimaru and Momiji marrying was strictly an issue between the two of them. I didn’t mind if they said yes; it didn’t really seem to affect me at all, but…

“Wait just a minute!” Benimaru began. “I—I have my own issues to think about, you realize!”

“What do you mean?” Hakuro countered. “Do you not like my daughter?”

“I am not saying that! Besides, why are you acting like a father now? You’ve never met her in your life. You didn’t even know she existed!”

“Well, now that I do, I have a certain responsibility for her, do I not?”

Hakuro seemed to be relishing Benimaru’s consternation. It only made the problem worse. We kept talking all night, but it never really came to a conclusion—so here, in the audience chamber, I was going to be forced to wing it.

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The beautiful girl sat down on a hastily prepared chair in front of me. The colorful white-to-red gradient of her hair was indeed beautiful. This was the Momiji I had heard so much about, representing the tengu elder here. She gave me a haughty look and began to speak.

“Demon lord Rimuru, it is good to meet you. My name is Momiji, and I have come here on behalf of the elder of the tengu race. I look forward to working with you.”

“You’re very kind. My name’s Rimuru, and I’ve become a demon lord. I’m in human form now, as you can see, but I’m actually a slime. In general, I’m pretty much a pacifist, so if you have any problems, don’t be afraid to hit me up.”

“There is no need for such concern. The way you have conquered the Forest of Jura was breathtaking to witness. We recognize you as the ruler of the forest and look forward to being a good neighbor to you. However, we will not allow you to interfere in our affairs.”

She was saying that in front of all my officials. I could see Shion’s eyebrow twitch a little, but luckily no one reacted further. I hadn’t explained the full story to her yet, so she actually stopped herself that time. That was a new change in her, as of late; she no longer responded to small things in her usual exaggerated fashion. That was a good trend to see, if a little creepy. Hopefully she wasn’t just bottling it all in, only to have it explode later.

Momiji, meanwhile, was waiting with bated breath to see how I’d reply. She put up a bold, dignified act, so you wouldn’t notice unless it was pointed out to you, but I’m sure her nerves were killing her. She must not have been sure whether I was friend or foe yet.

Declaring her allegiance would’ve been fine, I thought, but the pride her race had in themselves must have forbidden that. A young, inexperienced ruler faces doom if people look down on them, after all. I can understand that—even though it seemed like Momiji had the support of the younger tengu warrior classes.

“All right. I understand. Certainly, we don’t have any interest in unduly interfering with you, either. As I think Benimaru here explained to you, we just want to build a highway around the base of the Khusha Mountains. Also, just to be sure, you recognize the rights of the high orcs who have already moved into the mountains, right?”

“Yes, that is not a problem. I make no exclusive claims to the right to enjoy the mountains’ blessings. You may mine the ore as much as you want—we have no need for it. We only wish to be left alone.”

Um…

The mountainous areas were considered part of the Forest of Jura’s territory. I had braced myself for some sort of complaining about that, but I guess it’s not a problem. So what were the tengu so on edge about? She acted pretty prickly toward Alvis; was there a fight between them and Carillon during his demon lord days? I decided it was safest to just ask directly.

“Um, so I don’t know what you’re so on guard about, but we really have no intention of starting a conflict with you, so…?”

“You want me to believe that?”

“Yeah. I mean, have I said or done anything to make you suspect I’ve got my eyes on expanding my territory?”

Momiji eyed me carefully, judging my intentions once again.

“You associate with that crafty bird woman Frey. That’s all the evidence I need to recognize your ambitions!” she retorted.

I can safely say I did not see that one coming.

“Whoa, time-out!”

“What does time-out mean?!”

“It means stop! We need to discuss some things!”

I called my administration over. Momiji agreed to this—with some complaints, I think, but I wasn’t really paying attention.

“What do you think of that?” I asked once we were all in a circle.

“The former demon lord Frey’s territory is connected to the Khusha Mountains,” Soei quickly replied. “I could imagine some conflicts with the tengu erupting along those lines.”

I consulted the world map in my mind. True enough. The tengu settlement was outside the Forest itself, so fighting for it wouldn’t violate any noncompete contracts. They might’ve tried to invade at one point.

“But why, though?”

“I can’t think of any reason,” Benimaru said. He must not have noticed anything amiss during his visit.

“I have heard rumors. It is said that Frey likes high places. As her second name of the Sky Queen suggests, perhaps she’s endeavored to move her capital to the tallest place within access to her?” Hakuro offered.

That didn’t sound quite right to me. Benimaru himself said the tengu stronghold was an idyllic enclave on the other side of a cave at the peak of a mountain—in other words, a small plane of space on another dimension. That’s not the kind of thing Frey would want.

“Hmm…”

We all murmured to one another. Then:

“Will you stop ignoring me?!”

“Whoa!”

I leaped up at the sound of someone shouting in my ear. Momiji was there, fuming and sick of waiting any longer. This time, I definitely couldn’t tune her out.

I gave up and sat back in my seat, facing her.

“Let me ask you a question. Does Frey have ambitions on tengu territory?”

“Huhhh? Of all the stupid things to ask…” She rolled her eyes, then realized I was being serious. “You’re kidding me,” she muttered.

It sounded like we weren’t on the same page at all here, so I decided to let her tell her side of the story.

As she put it, Frey’s aim was to capture Elmin Thalion, capital of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion. She wanted it not for its territory, but for its height.

I sure wasn’t expecting that. It was very in character for her, but I couldn’t laugh about it.

In terms of size, Thalion was a huge country. Frey didn’t have the military resources to overwhelm it. However, while the nation enjoyed a geographical advantage against ground-based armies, against Frey and her aerial forces, they would face tougher going. Tactically, they were an even match, but Frey refused to let her ambitions stay just ambitions forever.

That was why she had turned her attention on the tengu. She wanted to bring them under her rule, shoring up her resources for a later assault on Thalion. But the tengu were too proud for that, not ready to so easily accept Frey’s demands. Thalion, expecting this, hoped for the two sides to erupt into conflict with each other, which would take the heat off them and also let them profit from the ensuing war.

Frey was fully aware of that, however, and that stayed her hand. The result was this three-way détente that, frankly, looked pretty twisted to me.

While all that was going on, I fought against Clayman, and once the dust settled, Carillon and Frey gave up their posts and resolved to serve the demon lord Milim. It was the birth of a new superpower, one the tengu alone could never fend off, and now their government was in a heated debate over how to hold themselves going forward.

And then Benimaru came along, taking one of the Three Lycanthropeers with him. Bad idea. Momiji mistook that as my attempt to silently apply pressure on her.

“How’s Frey been lately?” I asked Geld. As the person responsible for building a new capital city, he had been taking orders from Frey, making him the most familiar with her out of our little group.

“Well, Sir Rimuru, Lady Frey seems tremendously satisfied with your plans. As taciturn as Mildo is, the two have gotten along well, and she’s been participating in some very detailed planning meetings.”

Frey found a way to make Mildo talk? That’s impressive.

“All right. So has she lost interest in Elmin Thalion?”

“Lost interest? I’d say her interests lie in…um…”

“In?”

“Well… Lately, I haven’t seen Lady Milim around. Lady Frey had been teaching her about governance and the like, but apparently she ran off on her unawares.”

Oh, right. I’m pretty sure I know where she is. For the sake of this conversation, though, let’s pretend that I don’t. Let sleeping dogs lie, and all that.

“As a result, I’d say that Lady Frey’s primary focus at the moment is figuring out where Lady Milim went,” concluded Geld.

The gigantic capital building project, skyscrapers and all, had completely charmed Frey. It turned her interest away from any other potential capital she could conquer; they all paled in comparison. Milim, as Geld put it, was the bigger issue. And Momiji, listening to all this stuff going against what she imagined, was stunned into silence, unable to figure out how to react.

I couldn’t blame her. That’s reality for you—a force who you assume wants you and your people dead, and all of a sudden, their focus is on something else entirely. If it happened to you, you’d probably want to run away from reality, too.

“…All right. I understand. So there you have it. If you recognize all that as the misunderstanding it was, I’m cool with that.”

It could be said that tengu were not terribly wise in the ways of the world. The worry that they were surrounded by enemies had clouded Momiji’s judgment. Based on her situation, I could see why she made the decision she did.

“So I was imagining it all along…? Mother did say I was overthinking matters…”

She slumped back in her chair, the strength drained from her body. It was a lesson for all present: Jumping to conclusions can bite you hard.

With that behind us, our talks quickly came to a close.

Since Momiji was still a little out of it, one of the tengu warriors looked over the pact we were to sign in her stead. I thought these were bodyguards, but I guess they served as government staff, too.

The tunnel question would be saved for later. We wouldn’t be allowed to start on it, I was told, until we could prove it was safe. That made sense to me, so I didn’t make a big deal out of it. We needed to talk to Thalion about building a tunnel anyway, and it wouldn’t really get underway until we finished developing trains, so there was no need to set anything in stone quite yet.

The tengu didn’t want us to interfere with them because they mistakenly thought we were prepping for an invasion, but now that we’d addressed that misunderstanding, nothing stopped us from having normal relations. So we agreed to help each other out, in case something ever happened.

“…So is that all?”

“Yes,” the tengu aide said with a bow. “My thanks to you, Demon Lord, for allowing us to conduct such constructive negotiations.”

So things were square with Momiji. Our pact was signed. Now we needed to talk about Momiji and Hakuro’s relationship—and Benimaru and Momiji’s potential marriage. We failed to reach a conclusion on that last night.

Momiji started the day hostile toward us, but that had presumably changed now. Should we maybe work this out just with the people directly involved?

As I debated with myself over how to broach the topic, the tengu aide took out a sealed envelope.

“There is also the matter of this. Our elder, Lady Kaede, has this letter for you, Lord Rimuru.”

He respectfully handed it to me. Rigurd accepted it, and Shuna handled opening and reading it. It began with the sort of verbose, convoluted greetings you often saw in royal correspondence, probing me a bit to guess at where my disposition was, but grew less formal as it went on. Shuna’s face contorted in confusion as she read on.

“‘…I know things are complicated, and there have been a few misunderstandings, but I hope you will treat my daughter well. I remind you of what she told me about making Sir Benimaru turn toward her. I am sure she is not against the idea—’”

Wait, are you sure this letter’s for me?! It really doesn’t sound that way! If I had known it contained stuff like this, I would have dismissed my staff…but it was too late for that now.

“M-Mother?!!”

Momiji leaped back to her feet, snatching the letter out of Shuna’s hands. Rude of her, but I’d just pretend I didn’t see it. Couldn’t blame her. If I were Momiji, I don’t know what I would’ve done, either. This goes beyond infamy and straight into humiliation.

“So… So there were two letters?! Mother, why can’t you be more careful…?”

She slumped back down again. Aha. Kaede must’ve put a message for Hakuro in the letter to me. The tengu aides surrounded Momiji, trying their best to assuage her, but it only had the opposite effect. Times like these, it’s best to just leave people in peace.

“Heh-heh… That’s just like her.”

Hakuro, smirking, walked up to Momiji, taking the crumpled-up letter out of her hand and giving her a nod.

“I see… ‘She has a great deal of strength but is still lacking in technique. As a fellow student of the sword, and as her father as well, I hope that the Sword Ogre will deign it worthy to offer her training and instruction. From your ever-loving Kaede.’ So she still likes me, eh? Heh-heh! Ah, how lucky I am to live to see this day.”

His smile couldn’t have been more sincere.

“F-Father…?”

“Mm-hmm. My name is Hakuro, and I am your father.”

“Father!!”

Momiji’s dark eyes, reminiscent of Hakuro’s, teared up as she hugged him tightly. Father and daughter were reunited. The girl, no longer wary of us, would never doubt Hakuro’s words again.

“I must warn you, Momiji, I am a hard taskmaster on the training grounds.”

“Yes…”

“But I want to see you overcome your challenges and win the heart of Benimaru!”

“Yes, Father!”

Um, what…?

Here I was, nodding my approval at this lovely little family reunion, and now the conversation was going kind of haywire. Talk about bridging a major gap. Hakuro, usually gruff and reserved even in the best of times, suddenly had a daughter…and it turned him into a weepy, doting parent.

“Uh, Hakuro…”

Benimaru’s words failed to reach him. He and Momiji were in their own little world.

“Oh, now I see,” Shuna murmured.

Everyone’s eyes turned toward her. She paid it no mind as she addressed Benimaru, who was looking straight at her.

“My brother, I have a message for you from Sir Alvis.”

“What is it?” a pained-looking Benimaru said.

I could get how he felt. He must’ve been thinking “Please, let’s do this later,” but Shuna was staring at him with a distinct lack of emotion in her eyes.

The message, given with Alvis’s accent, was this:

“‘Sir Benimaru, I have made up my mind. I intend to defeat Lady Momiji in battle and take the right to be your wife for myself—but even in the worst-case scenario, I could always be a concubine, couldn’t I? Either way, I refuse to give up, so prepare yourself!’”

My staff chattered with one another, their curiosity raging.

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Benimaru just crossed his arms in silence. I’m sure he wanted to bury his head in his hands, but I have to give him props for not doing it. Or maybe it’s more like he was frozen in place, unable to move or speak. Unbeatable in battle, maybe, but powerless against “threats” like these—we’d just discovered an unexpected weak point of Benimaru’s.

Sorry, man. As someone without much experience in love—not zero experience, but not much—I doubt there’s much I can do to help.

“Man, life’s sure hard when women are attracted to you, huh?” I tried.

“Sir Rimuru,” Gobta said reproachfully, “are you serious? Because I think you face some of the same issues…”

Don’t be silly, Gobta. I’m genderless now, remember?

“Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh… I have no interest in silly romance. To me, Sir Rimuru is everything.”

I didn’t ask you, Diablo. If you have no interest, then leave me alone, okay?

But even as I thought this, I could hear my staff gossiping.

“Sir Benimaru is rather popular, is he not? I believe some of the people under my sister Soka’s command had taken a liking to him, too, but compared with Lady Alvis and Lady Momiji, I’m not sure I like their chances.”

“You mean Toka, Gabil? And maybe Saika?”

“Right, right. They’ve already given up on you, Sir Soei, what with Soka staking her claim already…”

“Oh, don’t be silly!”

“No, it’s true!”

“Wow, it’s like a harem, huh? I’m so jealous!”

Come to think of it, Gobta had a point there, in the end. I began to wonder if this was the start of an envious romantic rivalry between Benimaru and him. But still, Alvis was a beautiful, reliable woman. Momiji was a little headstrong but still a nice little-sister type. Between them and all the other girls aiming for a chance, Gobta was right—Benimaru did have something of a harem going. Not that he wanted one…

“A harem, eh?” remarked Gabil. “Yes, that would make anyone jealous.”

“Well, not so fast,” Soei replied. “Benimaru is something of a late bloomer. I would not call him particularly adept with the opposite sex. He acts tough, but I’m sure he is just as confused as all of us.”

My thoughts were exactly the same. Having all this attention would be nothing but trouble for Benimaru. Shuna was watching him, too. I had a feeling Benimaru cared a lot for her sister, so I’m sure he was sensing danger from her and her overbearing ways right now.

“But I think it’s nice,” Geld said. “As manly a man as Sir Benimaru is, it’s only natural the women around town would love him. Lady Alvis is leader of the Three Lycanthropeers, and I suppose Momiji is the daughter of Hakuro—both worthy partners. I have a lot to learn from him.”

He certainly seemed enthusiastic about the idea of Benimaru finding a wife, harem or not. Geld himself cared more about his work than chasing women, so I wasn’t sure whether he really meant the part about having a “lot to learn.”

Besides, Geld was already pretty popular. As quiet, serious-minded, and responsible as he was, he had a fan base among not just high orcs, but other races as well. If he got off his ass and did something about it, he’d have a partner in no time.

“Oh, no, you are doing well enough for yourself, Sir Geld! Like I said before, Toka and the others never give me a second glance… For some reason, only the men show me any kindness in my unit,” Gabil insisted.

Geld nodded sagely. “You just need more chances to encounter women. I understand that a little.” He mostly worked on construction sites manned by burly male workers, so I bet he did.

Someone like me with no gender—or maybe an amphibian where gender was just a messy topic to begin with—was one thing, but building a work environment where women could participate equally was probably important, huh? It’d help encourage the men more, maybe. I’d have to think about that.

“Well, I should say, there are a few female dwarf apothecaries in my workplace. We do exchange some pleasantries, but…”

“Oh? No problem, then, right?”

No, that is a problem. Those are two totally different monster races. You aren’t okay with anything that breathes, are you, Gabil?

“No, a big problem. They told me that going out with a lizard was ‘physically impossible’! I’m just so unpopular with them…”

“Oh…”

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Well. Don’t know what to say about that. Sounds like the species difference wasn’t the only wall to overcome there. Gabil may want to explore other avenues.

“And yet, they keep inviting Nanso and Hokuso out to eat—or for dates in the forests. It happens all the time! I find it so frustrating…”

Oh, so the species thing didn’t even function as an excuse, then?

“I, um, I’m not sure what to say…”

Geld was out of words, unsure what else he could do to comfort Gabil.

“Yes… That’s why I’ve been thinking lately that I should take more of a human form. My own dad transformed into a tall, dark, handsome person, so I wonder if I have a chance at that, too!”

Doubt it. Besides, it’s not about looks. I looked like a pretty nice guy myself, but I went almost forty years without a girlfriend!

The real key is—

“Don’t be ridiculous. You need to get up and do something.”

Right! That’s correct, Soei! Sitting around all day and whining like Gabil won’t win anyone over. Stop pretending someone’s going to pop out of nowhere and confess her love to you—and start going more on the offensive! Too bad I didn’t realize that until after I became a slime, but…

“W-well, yes, of course, but…”

“Soei’s right! I heard those dwarves talking once, and they were saying all these nice things about one of your men, Gabil. All like ‘Oooh, isn’t Gazatt so cool?’ and ‘Oh, you think so, too?’ and ‘He’s the classic strong, silent type, huh?’ and ‘He’s cute, kind of like my pet lizard.’ They were crazy for him! So I really don’t think it’s just about looks, Gabil!”

Wow, Gobta. Way to throw him under the bus.

Gazatt was one of Gabil’s underlings, part of Team Hiryu—quiet and handy with a spear, but not exactly the sharpest nail in the box, so he was mainly tasked with guard duty for our researchers and pharmacists down in the Sealed Cave. He was a former lizardman, of course, and even now as a dragonewt, his looks, much like Gabil’s, were more reptilian. As cruelly as Gobta put it, it definitely proved that looks aren’t everything.

“Besides, women can be easier to attract than one would expect,” Soei added.

“They can?!”

“Very much so,” he said, half-chidingly. “A lady knight from before, for example. I am unsure how she got the idea, but she seemed to have quite an interest in me.”

“R-really?! What did you do?”

“Oh-ho?”

“How very interesting!”

“Tell us more!”

This was enough to even arouse my interest. Which “lady knight” was this? Wait, wasn’t he up to something with Litus, one of the Crusader paladins? What was up with that? I meant to ask, but it kind of slipped my mind. I spotted her looking at Soei and blushing, so I feared the worst, but…

“You want to know, too, Sir Rimuru?”

“Of course I do. And that report you made that one time…”

“Ah yes, that. You see, I took some Sticky Steel Thread and—”

He was stopped mid-sentence by a feeling of impending doom from behind us, followed by an almost deafening clearing of the throat.

“Ah-hemmm!!”

Our little whispered chat was over. We immediately shot straight back up, faces serious. Sensing the danger, I slipped back into slime mode and attempted to escape the front line but instead found myself lifted up by a thin, pale arm.

“Enough joking, Sir Rimuru. Don’t we have my brother to talk about right now?”

Ah yes. That we do. We got a bit derailed, didn’t we? And we sure couldn’t afford to piss Shuna off anymore. Right. We needed to get serious about this.

Anyway…

Well, not that thinking about this issue would get us any closer to solving it.

“What do you think about this, Benimaru?”

“Hmm… Personally speaking, I do feel this is all going too fast. However, one thing I can say for sure is that one spouse is all I’d like to have.”

Yeah, fair enough. Being asked out of nowhere to marry would knock anyone for a loop. I know it’d throw me off. The past is one thing, but we live in an era where you’re free to love whoever you want. Besides:

“Besides, for higher-level magic-born like ourselves, siring a child is not a simple task. Some people have many wives and they impregnate each, who must compete with one another to give birth, but I have little interest in that approach. I do not intend to keep any concubines.”

Momiji watched Benimaru starry-eyed as she spoke.

“So no harem, then?”

No harem, it sounded like—or no polygamy, to be exact. No real reason to adopt that in Tempest, unless we were forced to because of a glut of widows or something.

I was hoping that was the end of the topic, but it was really just the beginning.

“All right. In that case, I accept Alvis’s challenge. I promise you, I will earn the role of Benimaru’s wife with my own two hands!”

Momiji all but shouted this declaration out to the world. I wasn’t sure this is how love worked, exactly, but Benimaru seemed to have given up and didn’t comment on it.

“What do you think of that, Sir Rimuru?”

What do I think of it? All I can say at this point is—hey, whatever.

“Well, there’s no problem with it, is there? I don’t want any to-the-death duel or whatever, but if it’s more like vying to woo him, sure, that’s fine. If he’s not up for it, we’ll need to end it, but…”

As long as it didn’t venture into stalker territory, I was cool with it.

“Very well,” Shuna said with a smile. “In that case, do as you like.”

I had a bad feeling about that the moment she said it.

“I can beat you, Lady Shuna!”

“I look forward to seeing you try, Shion.”

They both smiled at each other. I wasn’t exactly sure what this meant, but I hopped out of Shuna’s arms anyway, sensing mortal danger.

I should note, by the way, that the previously reserved and hesitant Alvis got seriously aggressive from that day forward, attacking Benimaru from every possible angle regardless of how it made her look. Momiji, of course, followed her every step of the way, resisting her efforts. The other women coveting Benimaru, of course, didn’t take this lying down and immediately threw themselves into the fray. To say the least, things got intense.

It kicked off the start of a new tradition in Tempest—the idea that, if you love someone, prove it to them with your own might. Love on the battlefield, I suppose.