

CHAPTER 2

KING GAZEL’S INVITATION

I could see a child suffering from an intense fever—a cold, damp cloth upon his forehead. Before it reached room temperature, a new cloth was immersed in water and wrung out. It was a valiant effort. It wasn’t even her own child, either.

“It’s all right,” she said, smiling at the child as he groggily forced his eyes open before closing them again, relieved.

The dream kept coming and coming. The fade to black, and then with each scene, the child would change out, each one looking in terrible pain.

—It was supposed to just be a dream, but somehow, it weighed all too heavily upon my soul.

Hmm…

After all that work practicing how to sleep and rewarding myself with the occasional nap, the dreams I had were starting to get pretty intense. Am I being punished for something?

I doubted it. No point in being pessimistic. Let’s keep our eyes forward. I make people worry whenever I act all gloomy. Gotta keep things bright.

The day of the promised meeting with King Gazel drew near. Benimaru was finally back after his extended absence, so now I could head over to the Dwarven Kingdom with some peace of mind. If he had been delayed, I was planning to delay my own trip as well, fretting that our simultaneous absences would leave my own nation wide open for attack.

Benimaru and Rigur briefed me on what they saw over in Eurazania—Benimaru first.

“Their warrior alliance is just as formidable as I expected. They are a thoroughly trained fighting team, down to the last soldier. Without factoring Carillon or yourself into the equation, Sir Rimuru, I am unsure if we would emerge victorious with our own troops alone.”

He had mostly focused on observing the domain’s military situation, and judging by his assessment, they were a force to be reckoned with.

“Yeah, their envoys had a lot of good things to say about our battle training, too.”

“I am sure, my lord, and we have Hakuro to thank for that. In terms of battle readiness, we are fully in step with them, but they have the advantage in numbers and core ability. To be frank, an army of two hundred thousand orcs would pose less of a threat than a lycanthrope force a quarter that size. Avoiding war with them is undoubtedly the right choice.”

Considering the supreme confidence he normally exuded from every pore, it was odd to see Benimaru provide no guarantee of victory this time. In any case, an all-out war was our very last resort. That’s why negotiating to avoid that was the smart thing with diplomacy like this.

“Well, speaking in smaller scales for the moment, d’you think we should develop some tactics for dealing with them that don’t involve a full-frontal assault?”

“Tactics, sir?”

“Yeah. I mean, with a military battle, if you defeat the main guy in charge, you win, right? Don’t try to wipe out the entire force attacking you. Just take down their commander, and it’s all good. That’ll mess up the chain of command and make it impossible for the force to communicate with one another, won’t it?”

“Strike the commander… I see…”

“It’s nothing that complicated, dude. Remember the orc lord? We didn’t kill all two hundred thousand of those guys, did we? We just decapitated ’em at the top. I’m just saying, we can do that at the force level with other opponents, too. I think training ourselves to take down enemy commanders will let us enjoy a pretty big advantage in battle.”

“Indeed. Without commanders to lead them, they will descend into a simple, unruly mob.”

“Right, right. And it’d suck if the enemy did that to us, too, yeah? So before we have to deal with that, I’m saying let’s grab an advantageous position for ourselves. It’s not easy to build up individual soldier skills, but what we can do is train ’em on that kind of teamwork. Then, we can use Thought Communication or whatever to confuse our enemy and make ’em lose track of who’s commanding our own forces. That’d help us be a better army, wouldn’t it?”

“Very interesting, sir. And I think I have just the method to train for that. Our fighters have been much better at keeping up with Hakuro’s training as of late. Now would be the perfect time to proceed to the next level.”

“Great. Let’s see what we can do with that.”

Benimaru grinned with excitement. The sight of Carillon’s proud forces unnerved him, but my suggestion seemed to ignite something within him that dispelled any uneasiness. So he promised to work with Hakuro to train our monster soldiers while keeping watch over the city. Good on him.

Next was Rigur.

“The buildings in Eurazania were a measure cruder than ours, my lord. However, the royal palace in the middle of the domain boasted the very heights of extravagance, striking a noticeable difference from the rest of the lands. The domain’s riches seem centered upon this palace, but not, perhaps, in an ill way—it seems to be what Carillon’s people want for their leader. The demon lord wields tremendous influence over his Warrior Alliance squadrons, and he seems committed to making life safe and peaceful for all his citizens.”

I had to hand it to the guy. His domain seemed an incredibly safe place to live. Simply recalling the sheer ambition he showed during his visit made me shudder, so I expected Rigur’s glowing report.

“Not just with the buildings, either,” Rigur continued. “Their overall industrial craftsmanship demonstrates technical skill notably below our own.”

“Oh? Yeah, I’ll bet, given that we got Kaijin and his men, plus Kurobe and Shuna and all. Guess we really do have it pretty good over here. I’m happy to hear that.”

“Rigur is right,” chimed in Benimaru. “From what I saw, the lycanthropes, along with the assorted races under their protection, lived in rather modest circumstances.”

Hmmmm. So they both felt that way. I suppose that meant our creature-comfort level had improved a fair bit, if it compared well with a demon lord’s personal domain.

“However,” Rigur interrupted, “there was one rather impressive thing that caught my attention.”

“What’s that?”

“Their agriculture. In Carillon’s domain, the fields are spread farther and wider than any of ours could hope to, packed with a wide variety of bountiful crops. The land is fertile indeed over there, sir, and they are highly skilled at managing their agricultural efforts.”

I see. Fertile land, huh? I was fresh from agreeing to accept some of those crops in exchange for finished goods…but could we wrest some farming know-how from them as well?

“Are any of these skills obtainable for us?”

“…I believe it is possible, sir.”

“Great! In that case, I’d like to have Lilina recommend a few members from our land managers for our next envoy trip. I want them to study the system they have over here in-depth and see if we can adapt any of it for our own lands.”

“A fine idea,” Rigurd said. “Our food situation has improved greatly, but we are still taking a trial-and-error approach with many of our issues. Perhaps that would help us speed things along.”

Now we knew what to have the next expedition focus their attention on.

Leaving Rigurd and the other elders to work out the details, I left our meeting hall. The Dwarven Kingdom awaited, and it was time to address all the little things I needed to cover before then. Between selecting a gift or two for King Gazel, building a portfolio of everything we had under development, and working out what I’d wear for my visit, there was a lot of annoying…or should I say, thorny issues to tackle.

Benimaru, of course, joined me.

“Hmm? Shouldn’t you stay in that meeting? You’ll be leading the next team over there, won’t you?”

“On that question, sir, I believe we are in good hands. We found the demon lord Carillon to be completely trustworthy. We may need bodyguards along the way, but with the relationship we have, I see no reason at all to worry about sudden ambushes. Sir Rigur and I were in agreement in that regard, so we have already decided to have him lead the next mission.”

“Oh? Well, sounds good, then. Guess Carillon’s not just some fool relying on his power, then.”

“Not at all, no. I did try picking a quarrel with him, but he merely laughed it off.”

Whoaaaaaa there! What’s with that out of nowhere?!

“Um, you sure that was a good idea? He wasn’t really angry, was he?”

“No, sir. I couldn’t exactly unleash Hellflare, so he beat me pretty soundly. I still have much to learn. It reminded me of Hakuro’s familiar refrain: Never rely on sheer strength to direct your moves. I had thought Lady Milim’s training had improved my technique to some extent, but…”

He gave me this story as nonchalantly as if he were reporting the weather. Ugh. Maybe I shouldn’t allow Benimaru outside our borders, after all. If Rigur was leading future envoys, at least I wouldn’t have to worry about that. Maybe that’s why Rigur volunteered for the position, actually.

Regardless, I needed Benimaru to keep our own domain safe in my absence—a task he was already aware of.

“I’ll be counting on you for that.”

“Understood, sir. I have already defeated Phobio, the Black Leopard Fang. Unless a demon lord–caliber foe rears its ugly head, I promise I will keep us all safe!”

Yeah… I didn’t want to give him too much praise after he admitted to picking a fight with a “demon lord–caliber foe” just now, but whipping Phobio like that was pretty kick-ass, I had to admit. Having a higher-level opponent like Milim train us in battle must’ve helped.

Benimaru was really growing with the rest of us. His unfettered aggression made me nervous about him representing us in foreign lands, but he should keep my own lands safe in my absence. I’d be making more and more foreign trips going forward, and Benimaru would need to become the keystone to our own defenses.

The big day was here. Changing into my travel clothes, I headed outside. Everyone was in a huge tizzy with departure prep; I was the only one without much to do. Well, myself, Kaijin, and the three dwarf brothers, that is. They were all milling around outside, dressed in fancy formal attire they’d normally never be caught dead in and looking all tense about it. They were so nervous, I almost had to laugh.

“Good morning, gentlemen!”

“Whoa! Hey, Boss!”

““Good morning!””

“…”

Mildo was his usual taciturn self. It was always odd how I understood what he meant to say despite that. The four would be heading back home for the first time in a while; there was little wonder, then, that they all had a lot to think about.

“We really gotta thank you, Boss,” Kaijin added. “If it hadn’t been for you, I don’t think we’d ever see our homeland again.”

“You said it! Didn’t he, guys?”

“Dang right, he did.”

“…”

Mildo’s reaction made me chuckle. They were being far too complimentary, but if they were excited for the trip, all was well, I thought. I did, after all, force them to leave the only home they knew. That was always a concern of mine.

“Well, I’m glad for you guys, too. And that I came to know you all. Kaijin, you’ve done wonders for us, both as a weaponsmith and as the manager of all our production efforts. Garm’s workshop is responsible for all our nation’s armor; Dold is handling everything from handicrafts to magical tools. And Mildo, with your assistance in running our construction department, you’ve got a hand in designing every building around us. You’ve all been a big help to me.”

“Heh-heh-heh! As craftsmen, we couldn’t ask for higher praise from ya!”

The three brothers nodded their agreement with Kaijin. Yeah, you really are craftsmen, guys. It made me so happy, I couldn’t help but laugh along with them.

After a little bit more waiting, we were all ready to go. That conversation with the dwarves helped me completely forget about that gloomy dream I had earlier. It’s always nice to kick off a journey on a high note like that.

Things proceeded smoothly en route. Geld’s efforts had paid off—we now had a beautifully laid road to travel on. It had been widened to a comfortable size, making it easy for wagons to traverse. Taking advantage of this, we were now traveling in style with two horse wagons in our party.

Well, not horse wagons. The Eurazanian envoys had tiger wagons; I suppose this means we were rolling with wolf wagons. They were being pulled by starwolves under Ranga’s leadership, and having such fine beasts leading the way made for an easy ride for all of us.

There were a little under ten people joining the dwarves and me on this trip. First, Shion, my main assistant, and Shuna, my deputy secretary. Shuna was more my personal cook than deputy, maybe, but I figured she could help introduce things like our fabric-making operation to the dwarves.

I was actually intending to have Shion stay behind and help Hakuro hold down the fort, but she put up such intense resistance that I let her come along. All “It’s not fair!” this and “It can’t be!” that and “Just Shuna alone…on a solo journey with you, Sir Rimuru…” and so on, with bouts of sobbing and violence in between. Quite an ordeal. I tried explaining to her that this was serious business, not a fun summer road trip, but she wasn’t listening, and in the end, it just wasn’t worth the time to try to make her.

She was, of course, all smiles as she held me close to her chest, enjoying the ride aboard one of the wolf wagons. We were on the lead one, alongside Shuna, which meant I’d be gently cradled by one or the other, in turns, the entire way. The second wagon was occupied by the four dwarves, and compared to that, I couldn’t complain about riding with a couple of beautiful women.

Ranga himself was with us, although out of sight and guarding me from the shadows. Thanks to Shadow Motion, he was literally shadowing me nearly all the time these days. I could feel him shutting his eyes in sheer bliss as he basked in my aura. I asked him whether he felt cramped, holed up in my shadow, and he said “Not at all, master! It is quite comfortable!” So I let him. Having him on call for emergencies made me feel better, besides, and everyone else agreed with me on this, so he’d be lurking around in that shadow for a while to come.

Finally, Gobta was shoring up our guard with several hobgoblins—patrolmen under his direct control.

One of the hob-gobs—a trainee named Gobzo—struck me as especially dim. I came up with the name on a whim, and he just…I dunno, looked stupid.

“You think that guy’s okay?”

“Who, Gobzo? You bet, sir!”

Gobta swore the guy was all right, just a little lunkheaded. A hobgoblin described as “a little lunkheaded” by Gobta, who’s a little lunkheaded himself. Hoo boy. He had a tendency to stare blankly into space, mouth agape, which made me worry. He didn’t seem too “with it” to me, but he did seem handy enough atop a starwolf’s back, so I figured it’d be just as lunkheaded of me to lose any sleep over it.

So we proceeded down the highway, guarded by Gobta and the other six goblin riders. The wagon was sturdy enough to make the ride acceptably comfortable—especially considering we were doing around twenty-five miles an hour, which your typical horse wagon just wasn’t made to handle.

The exclusive shock-absorber tech we developed was the secret behind the wagon’s sturdiness, allowing the axles to move independently without being hammered into the carriage. It did wonders to cancel out the bumps along the way, another hallmark of the precision quality being cranked out by our dwarf-driven forge. And it didn’t end there—our tires were cutting-edge, too. Normally, they were made for little more than reinforcing the wheel, which meant they quickly got scratched up and damaged beyond use. These tires were made of a special hardened resin that provided an additional shock-absorbing effect. The resin was more flexible and sturdy than I thought—a pretty good match for the tires from my world, even.

Gobta was taking a keen interest in these axles and wheels, curiously examining them up close. He had made a cart for himself long ago, and he must’ve been comparing these to his previous effort. “Wow!” He sighed in amazement. “I knew I should’ve built mine like this!”

I should help him build a second one later on, I thought.

But I digress. The point is, these innovations were making this journey go rather swimmingly. Maybe it was less because of our wagon’s suspension and more thanks to the flat, obstacle-free road Geld’s crew made for us, but it was still true.

We spied the faraway Canaat Mountains on the second day of travel.

Things had gone exceedingly smoothly along this well-maintained road so far. The trip was a bit over six hundred miles one-way, but traveling through uncleared forest ate up dizzying amounts of time. Spending the same amount of time on a road like this made for a much easier experience. I was a state guest this time, and showing up a dirty mess from the journey wouldn’t be too befitting, I thought.

We had made an effort to give ourselves plenty of time. Unlike before, there were sleeping houses put in place at regular intervals along the way. They served as workers’ quarters during construction, the idea being they could become simple inns once this became a public trade route. Thus, we were all squared away for night lodging.

Along the way, we also ran into a few high orcs in the middle of road-surfacing work. They worked as a unified team, under the command of a smug-looking foreman. Like a well-oiled machine, they skillfully carried out the job. Hell, they could teach a few of the construction crews I dealt with in my previous life a thing or two.

It was really an ideal environment. I gave them a “Good work, guys!” as I passed by, and they all kneeled and waved at me.

“S-Sir Rimuru! Our work is progressing on schedule. We’ve prepared the soil we’re using without a hitch, and right now we’re finishing up the surface. We’re making our way back from the Dwarven Kingdom right now, so the roadway ahead for you is fully complete!”

I shot a glance forward. The foreman was right—I saw a well-crafted road waiting for us. It was a simple one, yes—covered in gravel, with crushed stone laid out evenly above it. That was all we really needed, but above that, the crew had placed freshly extracted stone material to make a sort of paved surface.

Procuring all this stone and laying it out evenly across such a wide expanse of road would be all but impossible in my previous world. Here, meanwhile, our workmen had a wealth of helpful skills to assist the effort. The Stomach that Geld maintained with his Gourmet skill made small-scale transport (teleportation, really) between high orcs a snap, allowing them to ship processed stone from the quarries straight to the construction site as is. Talk about efficient. My job would’ve been so easy in my previous life with that stuff. No worries about material storage, no shipping hassles; just a few extraordinary skills used to maximum effect. A very monster-like approach.

It was clear, however, that the high orcs weren’t just letting their skills do all the work. They were giving 110 percent the whole way. That’s why I wanted to thank them for their efforts.

“Look at this! You’ve all done a great job for us. Feel free to knock off early and take it easy the rest of the day!”

I took several barrels of drink out from my Stomach, plopping each one on the ground.

“Don’t overdo it, now!”

Cheers erupted up and down the road. And with all the thanks I was showered with, we decided to stay there for the night.

The next day:

“““Good morning, Sir Rimuru!!”””

The moment Shion carried me out from the hut, we were greeted by several hundred orcs standing in neat lines. “Whoa!” I shouted. All the workmen I couldn’t greet personally yesterday must’ve assembled here in the early morning.

“Good job, everyone!” Shion nodded, trying to sound as self-important as possible. Shuna giggled at this as she greeted them all. The hobgoblins whispered among themselves, amazed at the spectacle.

Ranga, meanwhile, stayed curled up in my shadow—this was no concern to him, since road conditions didn’t really matter to his species. Unlike Ranga, I had a keen interest in how the completed road ahead looked. I had to give these high orcs my thanks.

“I’m glad to see the magnificent work you’re all doing. Keep it up!”

A simple sentiment, but still a major morale boost. I followed it by going up and down the ranks, offering my personal appreciation as they greeted me. They all smiled at me from start to finish, which did a lot to lift my spirits as well. The beer I provided last night was apparently a big hit, so I gave the foreman a few more barrels before we left. It was key for a leader to show proper appreciation when the times called for it. I felt there’d be few better ways to provide that than with some fancy alcohol when visiting the front lines like this.

We rounded out the stop by watching the crews as they got back to work. Before long, we were on the road once again.

Riding on the completed road made the wolf wagon ride smoother than ever. It felt like we were going a bit faster. This construction effort was starting to feel worth it. The stones lining the highway were rough to the touch, meshing well with the resin tires on our wagons and also preventing slippage. They were designed this way to provide traction in rainy weather; I wasn’t expecting it to smooth out the ride as well, but I was sure the merchants who’d ply their trade along the highway would appreciate it.

I observed all this, satisfied with myself, as the wolf wagon sped along. It would be the afternoon of the fourth day by the time we reached our destination.

The Armed Nation of Dwargon.

Last time I was here, they made us line up in front of the gate. Looking up at that large, oppressive entrance, I shut my eyes and reflected on the past—or I would have, if I had eyes. Instead, I assumed human form inside my wagon and changed into my ceremonial attire.

As I stepped out of the wagon, I found a small furor erupting in front of the gate. Oh, crap, not Gobta again?! I reflexively thought, but I was wrong. It turned out the dwarves had already run out of their wagon, trying to get the gate open by themselves, much to the chagrin of the other merchants and adventurers nearby.

“Hey, bro. Glad to see you’re well.”

This was Kaido, head of the local guard and Kaijin’s younger brother.

“Ah, Kaido! How long has it been? Life’s been a blast working for my ol’ boss Rimuru, lemme tell ya!”

“I’m sure. It’s written all over your face. Where is Sir Rimuru, by the way? He may be your ‘boss,’ but he’s also our state guest. We’ll need to give him a warm greeting first…”

They were having this conversation right next to me. Come on, guys. Why are you ignoring me? …Oh, right, I’m in human form, aren’t I?

“Kaido, Kaido! It’s me! Rimuru! That cute li’l girl genius who’s got the magic to transform into anything she wants! Eeeek!”

I couldn’t help but join in the fun, as much as it made me hate myself. Thanks to Kaido’s extremely leading questioning at my last visit, it had somehow come about that I was a fetching young woman with magical skills—and while it was Shizu who granted me this particular form, it was a shockingly perfect match for my cover story in Dwargon.

“…What?! That couldn’t be! Er… Sir Rimuru? Do you mean to say…you actually were cursed by an evil wizard?!”

“Of course not! Enough with the formalities! This is Rimuru, Captain Kaido!”

He stared glassy-eyed at me, unable to form a response. I must have thrown him into utter confusion, and I could understand why. I’d probably be pretty freaked out if a slime turned into a pretty girl, too.

“I—I am glad you are well, er… Sir Rimuru…”

It wasn’t until long after the gate was fully opened that he managed to croak out a response.

We passed through the gate, guided by Kaido and his guardsmen. Normally, wagons and vehicles would be directed through another entrance, where they’d be parked in a holding area for unloading. As state guests, though, we were allowed to prance right in on our wolf wagons. We had starwolves pulling us—dazzling, muscly beasts—and that was attention-grabbing alone. But the simple fact the government opened the main gate for us was enough to attract a crowd on the other side.

I could hear the comments thrown from either side as we rode along.

“Taming such magnificent magical beasts… A powerful group, indeed!”

“Are those magical? I’ve never seen the likes of them before…”

“What strange wagons, too. The wheels move independently of one another! See how they bob up and down along the pathway, even as the wagon itself remains steady? A magnificent piece of smithery, there.”

“But who are they? And why do they deserve the full front-gate treatment? We don’t even do this for royalty from the smaller kingdoms, do we?”

“No. Maybe from one of the larger powers? Pretty small guard contingent, if so.”

“Also, with all this kindness we’re giving ’em, I was expecting a king or the like…but they sent a princess instead?”

“Ooh yeah! She’s pretty cute, isn’t she?”

Oh, crap. I was still in human form, since I was too lazy to switch back, but I really should’ve tried looking more male, at least. Doing that would mean expending a continuous stream of magicules, which was a pain. But it was too late now, and I was an honored guest of Dwargon and all, so better just keep it natural, I guess. Let’s go with that.

As I listened to the crowd’s commentary, I noticed Kaido nod gravely in my wagon, helping us lead the procession. “You know, I have to say, coming here with such a small group in response to a royal invite is a little careless of you, isn’t it? I know I’m being rude, but I’m afraid you’ll have to accept a few doubtful glances in response.”

“Oh, no, I appreciate the advice. I gotta admit, I’m kind of new at this sort of thing. Does this look like that tiny a contingent, though?”

“Fairly so, yes. Normally, you’d expect a large, ostentatious parade going through here, an awe-inspiring show of force. The yearly visit from the nobility over in Farmus, let me tell you… It’s nothin’ short of gorgeous.”

“Is it…?”

International relations were starting to sound like much more of a pain than I had guessed.

“Perhaps,” Shion resentfully remarked, “we should have brought the entire goblin rider force with us. With them, and with a dragonewt team patrolling the skies, we would’ve been able to express the fullness of your majesty, Sir Rimuru.”

“No, I rejected that idea because it’d leave our own lands vulnerable. Don’t you remember us deciding on all that in the meeting?”

I had thought Shion was going too far with that idea she floated at the meeting, but she might’ve been right all along.

“Still,” intervened Shuna with a smile, “I don’t think we are underselling ourselves with our procession. Gobta and his force are equipped with a full array of the latest in magic weapons. The trained eye would recognize their value and strength in a moment’s notice.”

She was right. It was all Unique equipment of exceptional make. As they were prototypes, there were very few of them around. The weapons were from Kurobe, the armor from Garm, and both were fortified with Dold’s magical carvings. Part of our mission here was to show off our technology to the world, so it was important they all bore the latest and greatest for us.

Such inscription magic still had very low success rates. It’d be a while before we could outfit all our fighters with Uniques. But we didn’t need to, either, and I was satisfied enough with what we accomplished already.

“Certainly,” Kaido said with a smile and a nod, “I couldn’t help but notice myself. I can’t say what other nations would think about it, but our comrades, at least, are pretty awestruck right now.”

Arriving with such a small group was a misstep, but in terms of quality, I think we were right up there with any other nation.

“Well,” I said with a satisfied grin, “no worries, then.”

We proceeded along the wide street as Kaido guided us to the palace. He would not be joining us inside.

“See you soon, brother.”

“You got it. I’ll see you.”

The two brothers said their good-byes, and Kaido saluted me before leaving. Picking up from Kaido’s lead was Dolph, captain of the Pegasus Knights, clad in his fanciest attire. He was wearing a civil officer’s uniform, but that was likely just a front. The Knights he led were a covert team reporting directly to the king, and if I didn’t recognize the outfit, I definitely recognized his sharp eyes.

“It is good to see you again, Sir Rimuru. It pleases me to see you in good health,” he said in greeting, a smile softening his stony face.

“And the same to you, Sir Dolph. Thank you for inviting me today.”

“‘Sir’? Ah-ha-ha! No need for that with me! I’m just here to guide you to His Majesty. But before that…”

Dolph flashed a sign to his men. Most appeared to be real, non-covert bureaucrats, but I spotted a few Pegasus Knights among them.

“My apologies, but may I ask to hold your weapons for you during your visit?”

“Oh, sure.” I nodded as I gave him the straight sword dangling from my hip. He accepted it with a polite pair of arms and placed it in a storage box. Shuna handed him a magisteel-crafted folding fan, which I wasn’t entirely sure was a weapon per se, although it sure as hell wasn’t a regular old fan.

Shion also removed her own longsword, but instead of surrendering it, she just glared at the attendant handling her. “This is Goriki-maru. It is extremely valuable. Treat it roughly, and you will pay for it,” she said, giving it a tender look in lieu of caressing it against her face. Once she’d said her piece, she handed it over.

Just how important is that thing to her? I thought. Geez, giving it a name and everything. Talk about beloved. The attendant struggled with it a bit before applying a steadier grip. Had he dropped it, Shion would’ve completely lost it. I figured the attendant was a covert Pegasus Knight, because the average person wouldn’t have any hope of lugging that thing around.

The weapon handover went pretty smoothly for all of us. Not so for the hob-gobs. Gobta and his crew all had armor on, and so they had to be escorted out of the chamber to change.

“See you guys later.”

“Roger that, sir!”

Gobta wouldn’t be entering the king’s receiving room anyway. Our guard contingent would be waiting in the next room over, up front. It would just be us and the king’s attendants in there, and I was fine with that. I was just happy they let Shuna and Shion in as government officials. Shion was my secretary, but the way she looked and acted just screamed “military.” If they decided that only I could come in, I knew she’d raise holy hell over it. Good thing the dwarves were open-minded about this.

Once that was all taken care of, Dolph escorted us inside the royal palace. We headed straight for the dungeon last time I visited, so I took my time to gawk as we moved along. Magic Sense was convenient at times like these. It let me do all that looking without having to swivel my head all over the place, allowing me to retain a (hopefully) regally authoritative air along the way.

So on we went down the long corridor before arriving at a large, ostentatious-looking door. “His Majesty Rimuru,” shouted one of the guards as it opened from the inside, “sovereign of the Jura-Tempest Federation!”

“Follow me,” a female dwarven attendant said as she approached. “King Gazel is waiting for you.” This was the end of Dolph’s duties, so he gave me a salute and stood bolt upright at the side of the door. It was all so stiffly formal to me. There were so many little rules I had no chance of knowing, I grew anxious that I was bound to screw something up.

“How nice to see you again, Rimuru!”

But I shouldn’t have worried, because once Gazel spoke to me, things started moving so fast I didn’t have any time to think.

I sat down on a seat offered to me, facing the king, as Shuna delivered a formal greeting. I could still feel the nerves as she provided a royal attendant a list of the gifts we had brought along. Man, Shuna rocks!

I had absolutely no idea what I should have been doing there, so I just remained seated, smiling, like we said I should beforehand. “Just act relaxed, in control,” she had suggested to me, “and I will find a way to take care of the rest.”

I trusted her to do that, so I remained seated, trying to look as elegant and unaffected as I could. Shuna was doing all the heavy lifting, for sure—she was an ogre princess, after all, and she demonstrated stateliness and dignity that I couldn’t help but admire.

The initial exchanges seemed like they took forever, but really, it wasn’t long at all. I was too out of it to pay much attention to what was being said. The Great Sage was automatically memorizing everything for me, I figured, and I could refer to that later.

Soon, Shuna and the attendants had wrapped up their back-and-forth. It sounded like they were preparing a royal dinner in our honor this evening. They say it takes several days to prep for that kind of event; I was sure glad we weren’t late.

We had some time before evening came, and they took this opportunity to show us to our rooms, figuring we would be tired from the journey. Only then did I dare breathe a sigh of relief.

“Oh, man, I was such a bundle of nerves.”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee! Were you? You seemed very dignified to me, Sir Rimuru.”

“Oh, absolutely! You cut a gallant figure in the royal chamber. I was in awe.”

“It seems to me that Shion could use more instruction as a secretary, however…”

“Hee-hee! My, Shuna, cutting it rather harsh with the jokes today, are we?”

“I wasn’t joking…”

Listening to Shuna and Shion carry on as usual helped me calm down a little.

“Yeah, well, I’m glad they’re treating me like royalty and all, but I really hope I don’t have to go through that again.”

“I’m afraid you may have to get used to it, Sir Rimuru. More of these opportunities will arrive in the future, no doubt.”

“Perhaps, yes. As you build your political and military might, little matters like these will be unavoidable.”

Wait a sec, Shion. I wasn’t thinking of this as some kind of world conquest; I don’t know where she got that idea. I just wanted to get along with my neighbors, if I could.

“Um, just so we’re clear, I’m not trying to rule the world here, y’know?”

“What? You aren’t…?”

Shion’s obvious surprise was a shock to me. “That’s what he has said from the very beginning,” commented Shuna with a sigh. At least nobody else was working under that assumption.

Our banter continued along these lines until it was time for the banquet.

Gobta’s team would be in another room, eating separately, and after meeting with King Gazel, Kaijin, Garm, and the other dwarves asked for permission to explore their old stomping grounds again; undoubtedly they were seeing friends and family right now. Thus, it was only me, Shuna, and Shion present with the king. I was a tad nervous about Shion coming along, but the dinner ended uneventfully enough.

“Now,” Gazel asked softly, “do you have a little time to spare after dinner?”

I nodded. “Good,” he said.

Events like these were no place for frank conversation. It was all just a bunch of pleasantries exchanged back and forth. It was hard to truly speak one’s mind with all the compliments and roundabout speeches the atmosphere demanded. Nobody wanted to shoot their mouth off and have promises extracted from them, so that naturally limited the topics of discussion a bit. In my case, too, I was so focused on King Gazel’s mannerisms and my own table manners that there wasn’t room in my brain to think about any of that. The king must’ve spotted it, which was why he offered some extra time to speak more confidentially.

I was finally able to relax once we moved to another room.

“That was a good meal,” I said to Shuna, “but I sure didn’t have much time to savor it.”

“Oh, no? I was quite pleased! All those uncommon things on offer…”

“I think Shion could stand to learn some manners—follow your example some more, if you will.”

“Oh, maybe. I think she’s fine, though. With manners, as long as you aren’t actively offending someone, then it doesn’t really matter.”

Etiquette changes with every situation, after all. Something that was completely wrong in one scenario could be perfectly acceptable in another. I didn’t see any need to try to memorize everything. It’s worth noting that in Tempest, where we’re still striving to improve our food situation, it was considered impolite to leave any part of a meal uneaten. That was a rule I enacted, no doubt affected by my past experience as a Japanese person, but that only applied to us, not the rest of the world. Those things change from nation to nation. Other countries saw virtue in providing the most extravagant experience possible for visitors; I heard that, in some, leaving some food behind was seen as a nice gesture, a symbol that you’ve been so well taken care of that you couldn’t possibly eat another bite. Some people did that in my previous life, too, so it sounded acceptable enough to me.

Fortunately, the Dwarven Kingdom worked like Tempest in this regard. Vester had schooled me on that beforehand, and it turned out the advice he gave was spot-on. His instructional briefing covered everything from polite greetings to proper manners around the royal court—but even then, I was so anxious around the king that I mostly just copied whatever he did. Hopefully, the experience would help me get more comfortable for next time. Shion was the same, too, but we had both performed above the minimum expected of us, so there was no issue.

We certainly did sprint through each of the courses, though. “It was all so delicious,” Shion said, “I just couldn’t help myself…”

“Ahh, it’s nothing to worry about. I’m sure the cooks would prefer this to having any leftovers.”

“You are spoiling her,” Shuna said with a cheerful look in her eyes.

After a few more minutes:

“Sorry to make you wait.”

King Gazel arrived, ready to have a frank discussion about the most important issues facing our two countries.

The king and I were seated in two padded chairs facing each other. Vaughn and Dolph stood guard behind him, Shion was behind me, and Shuna was off to fetch some drinks.

He was much more informal than before, which was a relief. It’d make talking things over a lot easier. I thanked him for the banquet; he replied with a hearty laugh.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! You were probably so nervous, you could barely even taste what you were eating, right? Let me tell you something: Diplomacy is all just one big bluff. If you act like that, don’t complain if people feel they have the right to run you over.”

“You say that, but Vester gave me his personal seal of approval.”

“Hmph. As skittish as he is, I’m sure he was simply going easy on the master he serves.”

The king was hurling a lot of criticism my way, but if anything, it made me all the more comfortable.

“Well, I’ll do better next time.”

“Heh-heh-heh… I’m much more comfortable wielding a sword than navigating these types of negotiations, too.”

As he put it, Gazel wished for nothing more than the ability to freely and aimlessly wander the land. Perhaps he would have been able to if his father hadn’t died so unexpectedly. But before the topic got too gloomy, he changed the subject.

“So! Down to business, then?”

I nodded. “Certainly. First, thank you for pardoning Kaijin and the others. I know they appreciate it a great deal, too.”

“Hah! That was the best way to earn the approval of my cabinet members. I was planning to forgive them from the very beginning. Plus, with someone as strange as you involved, I didn’t want you running around my kingdom too freely,” he bashfully admitted with a grin.

“Wow, that’s a pretty mean way to describe me. Of course, I would’ve had the exact same thought, but…”

“Would you?”

We faced each other and smiled.

“It really was a hard decision for me, you realize. Letting go of Kaijin and Garm was heart-wrenching. I’m glad it’s proven to be the correct answer, at least.”

“Yeah, they’re really working hard for me. We have a steady supply of armor thanks to Garm, and Dold and Mildo are a huge help in our construction efforts. And with Kaijin handling all sorts of things I couldn’t, we’re still able to function as a coherent group right now.”

“Is that so…? Well, perhaps it was all for the better, then. I thought they’d be better off exercising their skills in a freer environment, rather than toil in obscurity over here. And how has Vester been, by the way? He didn’t join you on this visit?”

“Well, I invited him, but…”

I did invite him, but he refused.

“He was all ‘Oh, I do appreciate it, but I could never show my face to King Gazel until I can offer him some real accomplishments!’ and so on. If you ask me, I think he just wanted to stay focused on his research.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Now that’s the Vester I know. So he has an environment where he can put his genius to work now, eh? Wonderful to hear,” the king said with a smile.

Deep down, he must have truly worried about his old staff. It wasn’t something he could publicly express, which no doubt led to all sorts of dilemmas. I was the same way.

Shuna came back with drinks just as I finished offering my thanks. She had brought in some of the whiskey I tested on Yohm before.

“Help yourself.”

“Hmm, is this…one of Dold’s creations?”

Gazel picked up his glass in wonder. It was almost crystalline in appearance, and it gave off a pale gleam in the light. The glass bore an intricate pattern, and it didn’t take an expert to see its value. This was also a magitool with a magical inscription lurking under the artistry to apply an antidote effect on anything poured inside. You’d need to be a magic user to trigger that, of course, but…

“Ah, this has an antidote magic inscribed in it? Very thoughtful.”

The king spotted it in an instant. Then he activated it.

“You can use that to check for poison,” I said, “but I’m a monster, so I’m too resistant to have much use for it myself.”

It was true. Alcohol isn’t exactly poison, but too much of it can lead to unpleasant experiences. Some people had trouble digesting it, leading to acute alcohol poisoning if they weren’t careful. I doubted the dwarves would have a problem with that, but just in case, I figured.

Gazel brought the glass to his lips. The smell instantly registered in a look of surprise.

“Hoh! A very elegant aroma.”

He took a couple moments to savor it. I, on the other hand, took an immediate gulp. I could feel something hot burn through my throat as I imagined my head catching on fire. Sadly, it lasted for a mere instant.

Report. Poison resistance…successful.

Don’t succeed on that, man! Alcohol isn’t poison. Why doesn’t the Sage get that? I’ve made this lovely indulgence for myself, and I can’t even enjoy it. It was very depressing, but I’d just have to be content with seeing others cherish it instead. Nothing’s sadder than an exquisite liquor you can’t even get drunk off of.

“My, my, my!”

Watching me take a swig, King Gazel tried a sip of his own. I’m sure the ensuing sensations that ran down his mouth, throat, and stomach were like nothing he had experienced before. But he was a dwarf. He didn’t gag on it like Yohm did.

“I like it,” he said before asking Shuna for another glass. Dolph watched on behind him, no doubt a bit jealous. He probably had a sip earlier to test it for poison, so now he’d know what it tastes like. Vaughn, left out of the party, simply gave his lord a perplexed look.

“Would you like some as well?” Shuna offered, reading the atmosphere.

“Ah, yes! Just one glass, then.”

Dolph greedily accepted his cup, as if he’d been waiting for the invitation all his life.

“It may not be right to drink during guard duty,” Vaughn dutifully stated as he took his own, “but to us, a good drink affects us no more than breathing the air.”

They took their respective swigs.

“Mm, mmmmmm?!”

Vaughn did a poor job hiding his reaction to the alcohol burn.

“There is no need to be modest.” The king laughed with a fiendish grin. “We are the only ones here. Let’s drink together, as we did in the past!”

“Y-Your, Majesty, I’m not sure we should—”

“All right! Let us, then!”

Despite his grizzled, battle-worn features, Vaughn wasted no time shouting over Dolph as he took a seat to Gazel’s right and thrust his glass in Shuna’s direction.

“If that’s what His Majesty wants, that’s what His Majesty gets. Let’s have it!”

The king gave another laugh as he slapped Vaughn on the back, making him wince and cough a bit. “Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! What has gotten into you today, Vaughn? You’re so open to suggestion, for a change!”

“Ahh, enough silliness! We have a platoon of elite forces on standby beyond that door. There is nothing to worry about. Plus… I doubt these visitors of ours could possibly mean us any harm. They would achieve nothing from it. If they intended to, they would’ve taken action the last time we shared a drink together,” Vaughn said, taking another swig.

This was enough to either make Dolph’s concerns go away or just make him give up entirely. Either way, he plopped down to the left of King Gazel. “Let me have some, too, then!” he said, presenting an empty glass to Shuna. I wasn’t sure exactly when he emptied it, but I suppose it was too tempting for him to resist.

After we enjoyed this bender for a little bit:

“So, Rimuru! Before I become too inebriated, I wanted to ask: That potent magical weapon you used to defeat Charybdis; what is it, exactly? I am told you unleashed a force unlike anything seen before, more powerful than even the most fearsome of tactical-level magic attacks.”

“Ah…that…”

Yes, that. The thing I already explained to them but failed to get anyone to believe. That crazy-powerful attack from the demon lord Milim, the one that indirectly led to this state visit. Ah well. Let’s try giving them the truth one more time.

“Hmm… Well, nobody believed me when I told them, y’know. I don’t think you quite understood what I was talking about, Dolph…”

“I didn’t?”

“No. That wasn’t any secret weapon of ours or anything. It was really just the power of the demon lord Milim.”

“Ah, Sir Rimuru, you and your jests again…”

“Well, hear him out, Dolph.” Vaughn stroked the hairs on his chin. “I’m rather curious about that question myself. As commander in chief of our armies, I know that if a hundred Pegasus Knights working in tandem can’t take down a threat, the only thing left to turn to is tactical-level magic. The most effective approach would be to neutralize the enemy’s magic defenses and deliver constant damage without giving them a moment’s rest to heal themselves. But Jaine told me herself—in her eyes, not even a nuclear-level magic strike could defeat the likes of Charybdis. The power levels needed would bend the rules of magic themselves, leading to heat-transfer problems or something—the exact details are beyond my understanding, admittedly, but in short, magic wouldn’t work, would it? So neither would magic weapons, I imagine?”

Jaine was the arch-wizard of the Dwarven Kingdom, an expert in all forms of magic and someone smart enough to notice that her skills didn’t work on Charybdis. Magic, in this world, gained its energy through magicules, unique particles that floated around in the atmosphere. Charybdis had the power of Magic Interference, letting it dispel those magicules and render all magic useless. I only discovered that because I possessed that skill myself.

Let’s say, for example, that a fireball attack works by heating up magicules in the air and directing that ball of heat toward your target. If I can dispel the magicules around me, that drastically reduces the transfer rate of that heat through the air. It’s possible to shut down slashing-, freezing-, and lightning-based attacks in similar ways. Pretty useful stuff.

If you wanted to break through that, it’d have to be via something besides magicules. Instead of aiming right at Charybdis, perhaps we could’ve triggered a shock-wave blast that heated up the air and sent that wave hurtling toward it. Maybe we could’ve damaged it more then.

We were flying by the seat of our pants out there, too focused on the fight to really notice any of this. It was too late to quibble about it now. But what was Milim’s attack, really?

Understood. Two possibilities are available. Either the Magic Interference was obliterated by an even larger force, or some simpler attack was used that did not work via magicules. Due to data collection errors, the exact attack cannot be identified. However, there is a high chance that the former possibility is correct.

That was the Sage’s guess. As it saw things, the presence of that unknown material it couldn’t detect the nature of indicated the second scenario was unlikely. Plus, logically speaking, it was totally possible for someone with the magical strength and energy of Milim to simply overwhelm Charybdis in a magical arm-wrestling match.

Dolph shrugged. “Indeed, magic was wholly useless. But pinning everything on the demon lord Milim just seems too convenient an excuse to me. If you had a previously unknown weapon you wished to keep a secret, though, that makes it more understandable.”

He was more willing to believe we had a secret doomsday bomb of some kind than that Milim actually agreed to join in combat. King Gazel gave him a thoughtful look.

“But, Dolph, do you think that’s possible? Even if we made our tactical magic ten times more powerful, do you think that would have defeated the opponent? We are talking about a monster that annulled the almighty force of a high-level dryad-driven spirit. Any magical force capable of defeating it would be beyond anything I could imagine. But with Milim, the dragon princess herself, we should expect the unexpected, to be sure.”

Gazel, at least, seemed familiar with her. I didn’t even know if Milim’s attack was magical or not, but either way, it obliterated Charybdis. The king was right; it really was beyond anything I could imagine.

“So you think that really was Milim?” asked an excited-looking Vaughn.

“Yes, well… That would explain a number of things. But why would a demon lord like her be there…? That I cannot say. If you claim Milim was with you, could you explain exactly what led to that?”

Now the king had pointed the argument back at me. Dolph and Vaughn followed his gaze.

“Yes, well…it’ll be a bit of a long story. But let me begin with what happened after I last took leave of this kingdom.”

So I did, telling them about everything following my unceremonious removal from Dwargon. The rest listened on, consuming our brandy and finger food in silence. By the time I was done, a third of the barrel was gone. Talk about maintaining a pace. The barrel would’ve been bone-dry by now if it was beer I’d provided, no doubt.

“That does seem to make sense, but…”

“The very idea of taming that demon lord… Imagine!”

“Hard to believe, indeed…but we do have reports of a young girl taking a central role in the battle…”

The three looked at one another, exchanging their own takes. “Hmph!” Shion snorted next to them. “Sir Rimuru would never lie to anyone!” I supposed she must have been sampling some of the wares in the barrel with the rest of them. Shuna was the sole attendant responsible for keeping our cups full and our stomachs filled with something to absorb all the liquor. It certainly kept her on her feet. Very thoughtful of her. I wish Shion could learn from that a little.

As I thought about that, King Gazel and his men made their conclusions.

“I believe your tale, Rimuru.”

“My apologies for mistrusting you. It was just rather difficult to wrap one’s mind around…”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! You are a mysterious one indeed, Sir Rimuru! Making acquaintances with the oldest demon lord in the land—and in such a short time, too!”

Finally, they were seeing things my way. Which was better for me, I suppose, but either way, I was glad we were on the same page. I figured that was the end of the night’s serious discussions, but I was wrong—if anything, our summit conference disguised as a domestic drinking party was only getting started.

Our conversation turned to recent events in our respective kingdoms as well as our latest research results. I also heard about an event planned for tomorrow, where we’d go before the public and formally declare friendly relations between our two countries.

As the night wore on, the topic drifted over to the whiskey I’d brought.

“This is such a wonderful drink. I have never tasted anything so intense before. What is it exactly?”

The barrel was now less than half full, which I probably should’ve expected. This was some heavy drink, and we were having it straight on the rocks, so a little drunkenness at this point was unavoidable.

“This is called whiskey. It’s made by distilling beer.”

“Oh? What is this ‘distilling’?”

Hoo boy. This was gonna get thorny.

“Well, you’re a researcher, so I’m sure you know it’s the alcohol in beverages like these that makes you feel drunk. Alcohol has a lower boiling point than water, so if you boil a fermented compound like beer and collect the steam that results, you’ll wind up with a higher-alcohol beverage. That’s what a distilled spirit is, basically.”

Gazel nodded at my executive summary. “I see. Perhaps that high-grade liquor made by the otherworlder was crafted in the same way.”

“An otherworlder?!”

Oooh, now this sounded like some useful information. I’d love to meet them, if we’re all from the same country.

“Yes. In the capital of the Empire, there was a beverage created by an otherworlder who was presented to the emperor. Some of it was put up for sale, and given the limited supply, it’s being traded for exorbitant prices. It seems it cannot be made in large quantities; does the same apply to this whiskey?”

Ah. Too bad. I wanted to check out the Eastern Empire, but they were a full-on military state, and they ran their borders pretty tightly. It’d be harder to pay a casual visit than it’d be with the Western Nations. Plus, they even had a specialized force devoted to monster slaying—not to mention monster-specific fighters in the west as well, something else I’d have to watch out for. No need to rush it—best to wait for the right opportunity to meet this Empire otherworlder.

If I had to guess, the short supply was more an excuse than anything. Perhaps they didn’t have facilities large enough for mass manufacture, but money could do a lot to fix that. They probably just restricted production to retain its premium value.

“Well, this is a luxury item of sorts, so we can’t make massive quantities. It’s not a technological problem, though; more of an issue with my nation’s food situation. Remember how we didn’t even have beer to offer you at your visit? We’ve finally finished growing some test samples for the wheat and barley we’d need for that. We’ll begin brewing in earnest starting next year, but depending on how much grain we harvest, there’s only so much we can devote to high-end distillation like this.”

So as I told them, we can only make enough to enjoy for ourselves.

“Ah, is that so? Yes, we rely on Farmus or the Empire for much of the food we import as well…”

“Indeed. Our low food self-sufficiency is our kingdom’s single weakness.”

“And you can’t use magic teleportation to send food long distances, unlike weapons and armor. You’re forced to work through merchant middlemen. Which is partly why we’ve made ourselves into a successful free-trade city, but…”

Hmm. Interesting. Their nation was built from the ground up for self-defense, but large-scale crop production couldn’t be very easy in underground caverns. It wasn’t completely shut off from sunlight, but it wasn’t really suited for food production, either. That’s why they decided to tackle that obstacle by polishing their tech skills and encouraging trade. Being a free-trade city pushes more merchants to stop by, strengthens economic bonds with other countries, and makes them a more valuable asset to the world at large—hence why the Dwarven Kingdom was such a force in this land by now. I’d love to learn from that and build our own economic links.

But something else about that grabbed my attention.

“Hey, can I ask a question?”

“Mm?”

“When you said you can’t use magic to transport food—?”

“Ah, yes, about that—”

Dolph explained it all in King Gazel’s stead. As he put it, transportation magic wasn’t a cure-all—using it to teleport organic matter could transform it, due to all the magicules it’d get exposed to. Things like fur pelts might just have their quality affected a little bit, but food would be mutated into something wholly inedible. Gobta had mentioned to me that the Dwarven Kingdom had transport offices in place; I was hoping to research them a bit to see if they could help with our own logistics. Hearing about this issue sounded like a big setback.

“But you can transport people all day with teleport magic,” I mused. Dolph and Vaughn immediately seized on that point.

“Exactly. Jaine tells us that teleportation works on wholly different principles and levels of magical force consumed. She mentioned it during a military conference where we discussed more effective methods of troop transport.”

“Ha-ha-ha! I thought it’d be nice if we could teleport an army division directly behind the enemy with magic. But apparently another nation tried that once and wound up killing several thousand soldiers in the blink of an eye. It was meant to be a last-ditch tactical maneuver, but it wound up wiping the nation off the map.”

“Hold it there, you!” King Gazel bellowed. “Are you drunk? That is confidential military intelligence…!”

“Ah! I—I apologize, Your Majesty!”

“Aye, shouldn’t have let that one slip. Sorry, sorry. Forget about it.”

“Normally, I’d court-martial you for that one. Honestly…”

The king was forceful in his words, but his demeanor didn’t indicate much offense. Dolph and Vaughn just smiled and expressed their regret, no doubt recognizing this.

“I see, though,” I ventured. “I suppose we’ll need to build our trade routes the old-fashioned way. We’re on our way to procuring an import source for fruit, too…”

“Oh? Somebody besides us has tried to build ties with you?”

“More or less. Not a humanoid kingdom anyway.”

“What? Which country, then?”

“We’ve only exchanged envoys at this point, but the Beast Kingdom of—”

“No! Eurazania?!”

“Ridiculous! That domineering Beast Master, reasoning peacefully with other nations?!”

“I find that very, very hard to believe…”

This came as more of a shock than I expected. I felt a little proud at so thoroughly flooring them like that. I gave them a grin, basking in it.

“Oh, believe it! I had the chance to get acquainted with the demon lord Carillon. He kind of owed me a favor, so I suggested we open up some trade ties, and he gladly agreed to it. So we sent teams of envoys to each other.”

“So not just Milim but the Beast Master as well, you…? If that’s a lie, then you’re the greatest impostor this century has ever known. But…”

“It doesn’t seem like one to me.”

“If so, then Tempest is suddenly more important than ever. You may be sitting right at the center of world trade before long!”

“So, Rimuru, what do you intend to trade with each other?”

Despite their surprise, King Gazel and his team had opted to believe me. I suppose they analyzed it in their heads and decided it must’ve been the truth. Gazel’s eyes were back in “king” mode now, searching for ways his nation might profit from this. I was ready for it.

“Well, they have a good supply of fruit and other luxury goods—befitting the magic-driven country they are, I suppose. A far cry from a nation like ours, still scrambling to feed ourselves. There’s only enough fruit and such from the forests to keep our own plates full. If we can get enough trade going with that, we’ll be able to shift more supply over to our liquor manufacturing efforts.”

“Ah! Fruit? Could you distill some of that as well?!”

“Of course we could. Shuna?”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru?”

Right on cue, Shuna presented a different bottle, this one filled with our scarce secret stash of apple brandy.

“Try some.”

She passed out new glasses to everyone—her elegant hands filling each one halfway with a clear liquid. Shion had been silent for much of the past while, focused wholly on the drinking effort. I worried a little about her.

“Hohh! What a sweet-smelling concoction this is!”

The scent was thicker and mellower than the whiskey from before. King Gazel was immediately in love with it, letting just a few drops fall upon his tongue to sample it before proceeding.

“I…cannot believe this. This is even better than that drink from the Empire I mentioned…”

He’s had some of that?! I resisted the urge to ask. Unlike that otherworlder’s liquor, I had the Sage’s Analyze and Assess skills to help me craft the best distillation process possible. It was then aged in barrels made from magical trees harvested from the treants’ village, ensuring all the beneficial traits of the original ingredients were matured to their fullest. Keeping the latent flavors, in other words, while imparting aromas from the barrel itself created exquisite harmonies that only deepened the final flavor.

The result was this transparent liquor here—aging didn’t give it a whiskey-like amber hue; it remained crystal clear. Amber would make it look more like fancy liquor, but that was really a matter of personal preference. This tasted a hell of a lot better. If I had started from scratch on this, I would’ve had to spend years sifting through and selecting the finest ingredients. Relying on my magic skills instead felt a bit like cheating, but nobody could say that the final product loses out at all.

“I do hope your overtures with him succeed,” King Gazel whispered to me. I could tell there was a flood of emotions behind that statement. Dolph and Vaughn both eagerly nodded their agreement—everyone must’ve really liked that brandy.

Suddenly, Shion stood up. “No need to worry about that!” she shouted. “Sir Rimuru is bound to solve all our problems. It is now a given that we enjoy a wealth of delicious food on our tables on a daily basis. Having it be joined by good drink is all but promised to us!”

She accentuated her point by draining her glass, settling back down, and immediately falling into a pleasant, self-satisfied sleep.

“……”

I found myself at a loss. “You’re making me handle all this now?” I wanted to yell at her, but she was already far off into dreamland. It’s just every time with you, isn’t it, Shion? Geez. Still, it was weird. Whenever I had Shion avowing her trust in me, I felt like I could do pretty much anything. I’d bitch and moan about it, but I’d always try to make her wishes come true.

“Well,” I offered, “if that’s what Shion here’s expecting, I’ll do my best, I suppose.”



“Hee-hee! How reassuring to hear,” Gazel said. “I’d expect nothing less from a fellow pupil of Hakuro like yourself, Rimuru. I hope you will be generous with this when the time comes.”

Hakuro doesn’t have anything to do with this, man. And I know I readily agreed to it, but the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania wasn’t exactly right next door. Maybe we could blaze a rough track, but paved-over gravel was out of the question for a while.

“We’ll need to build some kind of transport path first, of course.”

“Ah, about that… The hard work your crew has been putting in is nothing short of astonishing. They work several times faster than the best of our engineer corps, and seeing them build a road practically before my eyes sends shivers down my spine.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty impressed, too.”

“But are you sure you are content with this? We are providing you with no support at all. I didn’t expect you to come up with such a splendid highway for us…”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. That’s what we promised you. And actually, I have another offer for you, so if you’d be willing to give it some thought going forward…”

I gave him a satisfied grin.

Step one, put your partner in a good mood. Step two, move on to the main issue. All according to plan. It was now time for me to sell the king on our Low Potions and procure a doctor or two from them—my two biggest goals here. The result: a total success, as I extracted a promise that he would give both offers ample thought.

With the night now behind us, today was the big day of our friendly bilateral relations pact.

I felt fine, of course, but King Gazel seemed totally unaffected by all the whiskey he drank. Dolph, on the other hand, was looking a bit green around the gills, and I heard Vaughn was still sleeping it off in his room. Wasn’t he supposed to be an admiral paladin in the Dwargon force? Could he get away with that? It wasn’t my place to criticize how they do things in foreign lands, but come on.

Gazel whispered at me to keep smiling, so I did. The ceremony came and went, and while I was still nervous throughout, nothing terrible happened. Not until just before the end of it, when I was expected to say a few words.

I pored over the speech in my brain before my turn came up. Rigurd and Kaijin had offered some feedback before I left, so after several rewrites, I had it memorized. I can do this. Let’s rock!

In another few moments, King Gazel wrapped up. I was in slime form now, and Shion held me up to the skies in front of the lectern.

“Umm, hello, everyone. I am Rimuru Tempest, lord and overseer of the Jura-Tempest Federation, or just Tempest for short. To tell the truth, I am, as you see, a slime, and one who was actually born rather recently. Through various twists and turns of circumstance, I came to know and foster a close relationship with Yohm, the champion. When the orc lord threatened to conquer the Forest of Jura, we both worked together to fight off and defeat this menace. Here, in this wonderful land called the Armed Kingdom of Dwargon, man and monster work together to create what is truly an ideal and prosperous coexistence. It is an ideal I wish to pursue for ourselves, as we attempt to build a nation in the Forest of Jura that serves as a bridge between the human and monster races. King Gazel has given his stamp of approval to my dream, which I cannot thank him enough for. Going forward, I want to maintain the mutually beneficial relationship we have. In order to do that, we will need help from each and every one of you. There are a great number of monsters in my nation, myself included. In fact, it would be fair to call ourselves a land of monsters. However, at our core, we are no different from any of you. Instead of fearing us as monsters, I hope you will accept us as new friends. I hereby swear to you that everything I have said is the unvarnished truth, and with that, I conclude my address to you.”

It was short, but I still put as much firm emotion behind it as I could, hoping it would reach the hearts of Dwargon’s people. I was trying to be honest; it wasn’t like I was capable of pulling a bunch of crap out of nowhere for a speech like this. I also didn’t forget to casually note my relationship with Yohm, who was starting to become a legend in his own time.

To me, the speech was pretty well perfect…but King Gazel still gave me an earful about it afterward. One, it was too short; two, it was too self-effacing; three, it was too much of an emotional appeal. To him, it was a near-perfect zero, but it’s not like I would get Gazel-style feedback from the likes of Rigurd or Kaijin. I’ll let it slide and tackle things in earnest next time.

A leader was someone who governed his country; it therefore wasn’t advisable for one to depreciate himself in public, it seemed. That was all the more applicable when addressing a foreign audience, since that could lead to them writing you off as a pushover.

Most important of all, however, was that ruling a nation under the concept of “Wouldn’t it be nice if…?” was strictly prohibited. As Gazel put it: “I won’t ask you not to expect great things from your people. But if you speak like that, could you blame them if they betray you later? A leader is treated as a leader because he leads. He’d be wholly unsuited for government if he can’t even believe what he’s thinking. Truly wonderful happenings won’t simply come running up to you. You need to grab them for yourself.”

I suppose that advice came from the heart; he’d never need to say it otherwise. I accepted it with my utmost appreciation. I had lived wholly outside the realm of politics, but now I had (somehow or other) become the head of a nation. I had to stop crying about things and start doing things.

In a way, building the kind of relationship with King Gazel where he kept looking out for me like this… Could I have asked for a better stroke of luck? I wanted to harness that luck as much as I could, no matter how much our personal interests got involved.

That wrapped up all the major events at Dwargon. Beyond a few casual meetings, I’d be devoting the next few days to tourism and the like.

Dolph would be leading me around. He headed the Pegasus Knights, but that job was classified; officially, he led the civil servants who filled the government’s bureaucracy, which chiefly meant he was King Gazel’s assistant.

“So was there someplace you wanted to see? I’ll be happy to fill your requests to the best of my ability.”

I didn’t hold anything back. I wanted to check out every facility here in Dwargon that could teach me something to improve on back home. Dolph was accommodating to it all, thankfully, and we spent several days going through all the Dwarven Kingdom’s most famous spots. Production workshops, large-scale transport facilities, even cavern air-purification setups—the works. A lot of it would be helpful to us later, I was sure, especially the air-conditioning facilities and such. I definitely wanted to get something like that set up for Vester and the rest of the gang conducting research underground.

“Regular people aren’t allowed inside here, though, are they?” I asked Dolph.

“Ha-ha-ha! Not normally, no, but we have a technology-sharing agreement with you. You already know about things even more classified than this; there’s no point hiding anything more from you.”

That was a relief. It also showed exactly how much Gazel trusted me.

We finished up most of the touring over the next few days. But of course, there was one place in the Dwarven Kingdom I’d never want to omit. That’s right—the Night Butterfly.

Ah, nightlife! I was rudely interrupted by a highly agitated Vester last time I paid a visit, but that was no worry this time.

“Gobta.”

“Yes sir!”

“You sure you’re fully prepared?”

“Of course, sir!”

“Well, then…in that case, shall we head over to the place I promised you?”

“Ooh, finally, sir! Can’t wait!”

We smiled and chuckled at each other.

Gobta and I had been discussing things in great depth to prepare. I would retire early to bed, use Replication to keep a version of myself in there, then head back out to rendezvous with Gobta so we could hit the club together. Kaijin and the others were aware of our plans and would meet us there. There was no need to worry about unwelcome visitors since we had reserved the entire place for ourselves tonight. I was covering all the expenses; I’d been saving up for it, and I still had some of the gold from last time, so I doubted I’d get cleaned out.

It was gonna rock.

I mean, I wasn’t anticipating much, but Gobta and the rest of the gang were so excited, I didn’t want them to be a pain on the staff or anything. I was…chaperoning, that’s it! A grown-up conscience for the rest of the crew. Convincing myself this was true, I waited for the night.

Once night finally came, I snuck out of my room, beside myself with anticipation. My body double was in bed, and I knew what Shuna and Shion were doing. They, of course, were my biggest obstacles to enjoying my night. Shion was engaging in some night training with Dolph and Vaughn, with whom she had hit it off, and luckily, the session was set to run exactly as long as our reserved time at the Butterfly. Shuna, meanwhile, was meeting with the palace cooks to organize the going-away banquet tomorrow night.

God had truly blessed us with perfect timing. Without this opportunity, I’d never have had a moment to myself. It was little wonder that I couldn’t wait for night to fall.

“Gobta, you there?” I whispered.

“Yes sir! Right here, sir!” he whispered back.

I gave him a nod of approval—a spring in our step as we walked.

“Sure gonna be fun, huh?” Gobta asked for the millionth time. He was really attached to this place; he’d been bugging me about coming there for ages. He probably couldn’t be happier now, as his massive smile suggested.

Our preparations fully complete, we followed the familiar path without fail to the club. The moment we opened the door, we were eagerly greeted.

“Oh! Hello! It’s the big slime himself! Hey, everybody, he’s here!”

“““Good evening!!”””

“Eeeeee! I’ve been waiting forever for you!”

“Wait! I get to hold him this time!”

“What?! Since when do we have a rule like that?”

“Welcome back!” the owner shouted. “Everything been good with you?”

“You bet, sir! How ’bout all of you?”

Oops. I let a little bit of Gobta slip in there.

“Oh, of course! The rest of your friends are already here.”

We had the whole place to ourselves, so my “friends” meant Kaijin and the dwarves. Led inside, we saw them in the main lounge, each with a female companion and in their own respective states of bliss.

“Rimuru! Hey, Boss, this place is spectacular!”

“Yeah, thanks for inviting me today, too, Sir Rimuru!”

“Why wouldn’t I, Kaido? You’ve been a lot of help to me—at least let me spot this for ya. We’re outta here in two days, and you probably won’t see Kaijin too often after that, either. So let’s kick back and chat, okay?”

“Sounds good to me!”

“Hah! What’re you, crazy? A club like this, and you wanna chat with other guys?! C’mon, we got all these fine ladies here—let’s have some fun, too!”

“Yeah, Kaido! Kaijin’s right!”

“Right. Tonight I brought along some necklaces I made for you ladies as souvenirs. Take whichever ones you like!”

“…!!”

Good to see Kaijin was being Kaijin. The three brothers seemed to enjoy themselves well enough, too. But yeesh, Dold, when did you make those necklaces for these ladies? Trying to earn some brownie points? I can’t take my eye off this guy for a single moment.

“Hey! No fair! You’re tryin’ to get a head start on us!”

“What? This is a battlefield, man. Only the strong survive!”

It was an incredibly cool way for Dold to fend off the accusation, I thought, although other people’s mileage may vary. The women seemed to enjoy the presents well enough, though, so Dold’s tactics certainly won out tonight.

At the moment, I was on the knees of the owner, a familiar boinging sensation making itself known behind me. Yes. This is it. This is it! This is what men go wandering in the vast wastelands for—this oasis, this fleeting sanctuary.

It filled me with such deep emotion that I offered her a drink. The club had all the usual items—beer, wine, milk, assorted fruity things—but I had a sneaking suspicion it’d be offering more mature selections—say, whiskey and brandy before long.

“Ooh, what’s this?”

“Ah, a new product we’re planning to make. We’ll be providing King Gazel with a supply, but we’ll let you guys have a bit as well, so offer it to your regulars and see what they think. I’d love to hear whatever feedback you get.”

“My! Are you sure it’s all right?”

“Oh, no problem. We can’t make very much, though, so it’s not the kinda thing we can ramp up production on for money. Maybe if you could comp your regulars one glass each, then see how much they’re willing to pay after that? I’d like to do some test marketing.”

“Well, aren’t you a shrewd little rascal, Sir Slime! I can’t believe this is the same slime who gave that stiff speech in the main plaza earlier!”

The owner smiled warmly and laughed. Realizing she was in the audience filled me with embarrassment. And here I thought she’d be asleep during the day since she works the night shift.

“Yeah, well, that…was kind of an act, you know? I probably looked like a total amateur, didn’t I?”

“Hee-hee-hee! Yes, let’s just go with that.” She smiled at my bashfulness. “But you know, I really liked it! You sounded really sincere. That’s the kind of thing that attracts people, I think. In that respect, you were a perfect ten. I was like ‘I can totally trust this slime!’ And I’d just love to see a nation like that—people and monsters living in peaceful harmony.”

This made me happy. Now I knew there was someone out there who took my heartfelt speech seriously and didn’t just laugh it off as a delusion.

“Well, thanks.”

That was about all the reply I could muster, though.

The night was an enjoyable one for everyone involved. Gobta was all nerves at first, but now they were all egging him on to perform some acrobatics for their entertainment. The ladies had him wrapped around their fingers, but he seemed to be basking in it, so I didn’t intervene.

Soon, our reserved time slot was almost up.

“Well, time to head out pretty soon.”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t wanna bother these girls all night.”

“Oh, you’re not a bother!”

“Aww, you’re leaving now?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Sorry, ma’am! I promise we’ll be back!”

I was reluctant to go; still, I had to get back. My Replication double was still active, but if they found out about this, I’d be in deep crap.

Kaido had cleaned up the home Kaijin and the dwarves used to live in, so they’d be staying there for the night. It’d be ready for use whenever they came back, too. Gobta and I, meanwhile, were headed back to our staterooms in the palace.

“Now listen, guys, make sure nobody sees you on the way back home, all right? This whole night’s my little secret!”

No point hammering the point home yet again, but I did so anyway. Just to make sure we all had operational security in mind. But then, one of the hob-gobs sitting on the far end of the lounge spoke up.

“Oh? Um, Lady Shuna asked me where I was goin’, so I told ’er everything, sir, but…”

Wh-what?!

The rest of the group stared at him. Gobta went pale and clammy, and the rest of his team was unable to hide their agitation.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, you told her everything?”

“Seriously?! Gobzo, what have you done?!”



“That, um. Yikes.”

“W-well, Boss,” Kaijin said, already stone-cold sober, “we, um, we’re going home. Best of luck with today and, y’know, Shuna and things…”

He headed for the door with the other dwarves, leaving us to pick up the pieces.

“Gobtaaaaaa!! What kind of training have you been giving these idiots?!”

“I-I’m sorry, sir!”

With tears in his eyes, Gobta apologized profusely. But this wasn’t the kind of problem a bit of sobbing could solve—and losing my temper would help even less.

Then I heard it.

“You look like you’ve been enjoying yourselves tonight.”

“You were so late coming back, we came to pick you up, Sir Rimuru!”

Shuna’s frigid voice and Shion’s resentful one.

It’s all over. The dwarves sat themselves meekly on the floor, preparing for the end. They didn’t quite make it out in time.

Time for me to give up all resistance, I suppose.

“““W-we’re so sorry!!”””

“Hmm? There’s nothing to apologize about.”

“Exactly. We certainly aren’t angry that you didn’t invite us!”

Their hatred ran deep this time. And thus, like perhaps a lot of evenings here at the Night Butterfly, ours ended with us wailing and apologizing to the most fearsome women in our lives.

Gobzo, one of Gobta’s Goblin Riders, had put all of us in the doghouse. I thought Gobta was enough of a lost cause, but Gobzo was even worse. Better keep an eye on him.

The next day, after wrapping up our final dinner banquet, I was called into King Gazel’s personal chamber.

“Rimuru,” he said, “I have decided to accept your offer.” He handed me a stack of documents outlining a potential transfer of medical staff to our city. “This is just a draft, so I’d like word on how much you’re willing to accept as soon as possible.”

“All right. I’ll bring this home with me and discuss it with my team.”

Fortunately for us, he seemed willing to take on what I had offered him. It was a nice way to end our stay in Dwargon, not to mention begin our journey back.

