CHAPTER 3

TO HUMAN LANDS

I had a dream.

A dream that had grown more and more vivid over time.

—Hurry.

Again.

—Please…the children…

Not this dream again.

—Please, save the children…

All right, all right, I promise.

—Please. The children are in the royal capital.

The what?

—The capital of the Kingdom of Englesia. Please, save them before it’s too late—

—And that’s when I woke up.

I woke up and then realized I was crying. This was no longer something I could just dismiss as a mere dream. I suppose I needed to head to Englesia—to human-governed lands—as soon as possible. There wasn’t a single moment to lose.

For the first time in several weeks, I was back in Tempest. Benimaru and Rigurd had worked together to keep things running smoothly in my absence.

“No fights or thefts to speak of, my lord,” Benimaru reported. “Things couldn’t have proceeded more smoothly. Of course, if anyone was foolish enough to try any of that, I would’ve taken care of them immediately.”

“We’ve already received a shipment of fruit from the demon lord Carillon,” added Rigurd. “They were delivered by air, on the backs of these large avian monsters, so I’m afraid there is just a limited quantity for now.”

The monsters who called Tempest home got along pretty well by default, so I wasn’t expecting a sudden crime surge. If anything, I felt like my presence attracted the kind of attention this country really didn’t need.

Our people had already performed quality checks on Carillon’s shipment and divided it into supplies for food and ingredients for future distillation. Very well done, I thought.

Things seemed to operate without a hitch whether I was around or not. Yohm and his men were getting along well with the hobgoblins, high orcs, and other local monsters. It was more than my presence that kept Yohm from starting street fights. The monsters, abiding by my rules, were quite a bit friendlier toward them than I thought they’d be—and nobody in Yohm’s crew was bigoted enough to look down on them. It was really chill.

They might’ve been a rabble of hoodlums and pickpockets when I met them, but maybe they weren’t so bad at heart. Plus, I really think Yohm’s got this inscrutable magnetism, the kind of charisma money just can’t buy. And perhaps because both he and the monsters wanted to work together, they were dividing up their roles with surprising ease.

Using Tempest as their base of operations, the team was conducting regular patrols around the villages that dotted the forest. If everything was normal, they trained daily under Hakuro’s instruction. The frontier villages now had a firm support system backing them up.

Before, if someone discovered a dangerous monster or herd, they’d have to contact the guild, select a team to dispatch them, and occasionally send out an investigation party first. Without a communication crystal (an expensive magic item), it’d take at least a week for a village to receive any support at all. Unicorns rode damn fast, though, so if they got an emergency message from a faraway village, they could head to the rescue within two days. They could just go on and on without eating or drinking. In terms of all-out speed, they could even beat the starwolves.

That’s what being ranked B-plus gets you, I guess. Good thing they weren’t all snobby or only allowed virgins to ride them or whatever. That was a relief.

The Goblin Riders were handling security duties around the main city, but if anything, our capital was almost too well defended. As a result, we agreed to have around five Goblin Riders join Yohm’s team to handle sudden alerts. They had the free hob-gobs for it, so they were happy to work together. It also helped spread the word about our nation to the more remote villages, so I was all in favor. Yohm appreciated it most of all, and it never hurt for me to be on his good side.

Perhaps he felt a bit guilty about me doing all this stuff for him, so they provided us some instruction of their own on topics like group combat, sword skills, man-to-man martial arts, and so forth. I learned a lot from them about survival techniques and the way they kept themselves fed out on the field.

Our relationship of trust had grown to the point that it wouldn’t be ruined if I was out of town for a little bit. And if that’s where it was at, that made me feel all the safer about journeying to human lands.

That night, I gathered my officials and talked things over.

“…So I would like to spend some time traveling around human towns and nations. I want to keep it under wraps, too. No need to make a big deal about it.”

I told them all about the dreams I’d been having. Dreams I suspected were being shown to me by Shizue Izawa, the woman I consumed. I believed they revealed some of the reasons why she was so intent on confronting the demon lord Leon, despite all her internal conflict. And I unlocked access to them simply because I trained myself to nap a bit, out of sheer laziness. You never know what life will throw your way.

But did that mean when I ate Shizu, I took in her very soul as well? I was starting to think so, but the Great Sage provided no answer. It’s always lecturing me on things I didn’t ask it about but keeps its mouth shut in times like these. I imagine it’d answer if I deliberately thought the question, but nebulous queries like these were its main weakness. The Sage, which always sought to be as accurate as possible with its replies, probably didn’t want to admit it could be wrong about something. What is a soul? Not even it knew.

Once I was done, I gauged the faces around me.

“I understand,” a sullen Rigurd began, “but the idea of you setting off alone, Sir Rimuru, is not one we can accept very easily…”

“Indeed,” added Hakuro, “if something were to happen to you, it could upset the very foundation of the Jura alliance, and just when it’s beginning to take form.”

“Well, if we don’t want Sir Rimuru to go alone, perhaps we could provide him with protection?”

It was Benimaru who extended that lifeline out to me. As long as I could be kept safe, in other words, he wasn’t going to chide me too much.

Then Shion raised a hand.

“It would be all right for me to accompany him, then?”

I’m sure she hadn’t been listening. There wouldn’t be anything “covert” about my trip if she was with me.

“No, I… I don’t want to cause any trouble this time, so I’m planning to do my travels in human form, not as a monster. Soei tells me there are assorted magical barriers covering many of the towns, so if a bunch of super-A ranks like you come with me, we’re gonna get spotted immediately. Plus… I mean, look at you, you’ve all got horns on your heads.”

“Our horns are purely decoration! And I’ll work to hold my aura back; I promise you!”

“Okay, try it right now.”

I laid down the gauntlet, having had enough of Shion’s selfishness. If she really could dispel her aura, then sure, that’d work. We could conceal her horns some other way.

“Haaaaaahhh!!”

Instead, her aura just expanded. Wrong way, dumbass!

“Stop, stop! You’re gonna take this building down!”

Shion gave me a glum look of disappointment as I scolded her. I needed to. If I went easy here, I’d wind up bringing nothing but trouble along with me.

“Look, you’re a strong woman; I want you to keep order around this town for me. I’m counting on you!”

“Y-yes, sir! I will not let you down, Sir Rimuru!”

Giving Shion a compliment and some work responsibility helped bring her motivation back from the brink—even as her abject failure brought a pained look to Benimaru’s face. “So I’m holding down the fort again,” he whispered, clearly disappointed. He was probably going to offer himself as a substitute, but if Shion couldn’t hide her aura, he didn’t have a chance yet, either. Not with the massive amount of magicule energy he carried around, easily the most among the ogre mages. There was no one else I’d want to keep watch over things while I was gone, regardless. He was the only one who could retain authority over all the different monster species here. Shion and Soei, meanwhile, weren’t as deft at inter-monster politics.

“Well,” Shuna retorted with a prim smile, “I suppose it’ll come down to me to join you, then.” But that was a problem in itself. Yes, Shuna’s aura wasn’t as in your face as Benimaru’s or Shion’s, but she was still nearly an A-ranked monster. There was no talking her way out of that. Plus:

“Actually, I’ve got a job for you, Shuna. While I’m gone, I want you to keep watch over the town gates to make sure we don’t have anyone suspicious coming or going.”

If I were there, I’d immediately know if any shady characters showed up. The Analyze and Assess skill kept a constant vigil over what happened in town. Soei could do that on a physical level, but not even he could do much about a magic-born who hid their aura well enough to avoid detection. The demon lords were aware of us now; we had to stay on alert. I was friends with Milim and had at least a working relationship with Carillon, so I didn’t think anyone would pick a fight by now, but… I mean, these are demon lords. You gotta stay vigilant. So I thought it best to have Shuna stick around and keep tabs on our visitors. The Analysis unique skill she had was at least as good an investigatory tool as mine.

Geld remained silent. He was heading up our road works leading to surrounding nations, which one could say was the biggest civic-works project attempted in Tempest so far, and he wasn’t about to abandon his duty that readily. He was too responsible for that, and he knew what his role was.

Hakuro and Kurobe felt similarly. “I could join you, perhaps,” the former said, “but I imagine you’d rather have me continue training our troops, Sir Rimuru.”

“Yeah, me too! I still got weapons to make with Kaijin!”

They looked despondent about it but relented.

That being said, I wasn’t about to go traipsing off totally unaccompanied. From what Kabal’s band told me, and from the dangers I’d overcome so far, I had the impression that I was pretty damn strong by this point. But when faced with a threat as overwhelming and hopeless as, say, Milim, I clearly couldn’t afford to let my guard down yet. I could always run if I felt there was no chance to win, but for all I knew, something like her could kill me on first sight. I needed some protection.

“Do not worry. I will always be alongside my master. You may all have peace of mind as you carry out your tasks.”

Ranga seemed a little too eager to say this, with his tail wagging so hard I thought it’d propel him into the air.

“Plus,” Soei added, “I can use Replication to send a body double to maintain contact with Sir Rimuru, informing him immediately if anything should happen. I do not think we need to be that wary.”

As a magic-born with some expertise in traversing human cities, I appreciated the experience he’d have in this endeavor. Having them both nearby did a lot to calm my own anxieties, too.

I also had the perfect guides in mind.

“Yeah, guys, quit worrying about me. I made nice with Kabal and his friends just for this kind of occasion. I was thinking they could help guide me.”

“I see. In that case, I have no qualms left about this. Sir Ranga, Sir Soei, I leave Sir Rimuru in your hands.”

With Rigurd’s concerns apparently addressed, he gave me his formal permission to head off. Plus:

“In that case, I had best have Gobta alert Kabal at once. I will get their things ready.”

He was already helping me prepare. That’s Rigurd for you. Always reliable. And with everyone else nodding their approval, I could embark on this journey without any unfinished business.

The three adventurers walked through the forest—Kabal, Elen, and Gido.

Their job was to explore these woods, handling any monster-slaying and resource-gathering duties that fell on their shoulders. It was tough work that sometimes required them to sleep outdoors for days at a time, but it was getting to be a lot easier than it used to be. That was thanks to the birth of Tempest, the nation of monsters who called the Forest of Jura home.

By this point, they had visited the town of Rimuru several times. They couldn’t ask for a better spot for their adventures. The place seemed to change every time they showed up, growing and expanding. It gave them access to artisans who could fix their weapons and armor, and to be honest, all three wouldn’t mind having a dedicated adventurer’s station of some sort to call home.

Whenever they showed up, they would bring along the assorted fragrant herbs and fruits they found in the forest. Anything rare they presented was welcomed with open arms, and before they knew it, they had adopted a habit of keeping an eye out for anything harvestable Tempest might like. It helped them, too, especially since Tempest had succeeded in cultivating and producing some of the plants they brought back in quantity. That let them use it in food and such, and that directly contributed to the adventurers’ general level of satisfaction in their lives.

“Man,” Kabal noted, “the food over there gets better and better every time, huh? Shuna’s got to be up there with the cooks in the royal capital by now!”

“Nah, better than that! I mean, her stuff would beat any fancy-pants joint back home.”

“You said it. I’m a good judge of food, you know, and Shuna’s is top-of-the-line. And some of the team under her are nobody to sniff at, either.”

“True. But remember, guys, we aren’t here just to eat other people’s food, got it?”

Kabal gave his companions a stern look before they got too carried away. The quality of Tempest cuisine went without saying, but they stood to earn far more than that.

“You guys haven’t gotten so focused on eating that you’re forgetting our real mission, have you?”

“Oh, don’t be so silly, Kabal.”

“Yeah! We got Rimuru relyin’ on us out here. Better pay him back, eh?”

Kabal nodded.

Rimuru—the monster who had suddenly appeared in the Forest of Jura and started practically ruling the roost in the blink of an eye—had called them to his chamber earlier. The familiar sight of Gobta the hobgoblin flagging them down in the forest was a surprise, but it wasn’t the first time, so they managed to keep their cool.

“Um, I guess Sir Rimuru had a request from you guys?”

They weren’t bothered to hear this from Gobta—they were pleased, even, as they volunteered their time. Rimuru had treated them well, letting them roam freely around town and even having his underlings help them out of a bad scrape. He had done wonderful things not just for these adventurers but for the human race at large. The berserk Ifrit, the orc lord and his massive horde, the nation-consuming Charybdis: All were unprecedented threats to the small kingdom of Blumund, and Rimuru the slime briskly handled each one. They honestly couldn’t thank him enough.

Not that this was their only motivation.

“But—hey, hey,” insisted Kabal, “they got their patrols lockin’ down the forest so tight these days, it’d be a waste of time for us to take any guild monster-slayin’ work, wouldn’t it?”

“You probably got a point,” replied Gido. “All the monster-based materials we need, and we don’t even needa break a sweat!”

“Yeah, exactly. And we couldn’t have upped our rank to B-plus without him, either!”

“That was kind of cheating, though, wasn’t it?”

“Ahh, don’t be stupid, Elen! It’s just a li’l inside advantage, is all!”

“Yeah! You know what they say ’bout looking gift horses in the mouth, right?”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong, guys,” countered Elen, “but we have practically a whole stud farm’s worth of gift horses from him by now, no? We spent a while explaining how things worked in our town and with the Free Guild, but still, we haven’t given him much else!”

“Maybe so.” Gido nodded. “I’ve been trying to get some inside info to pay ol’ Rimuru back, but…”

“Ah, you know him; he ain’t the kind of guy to sweat the details too much. He said intelligence gathering was important, too, remember?”

Tempest did indeed have regular patrols navigating the areas around the main town—Goblin Riders, composed of hobgoblins and their starwolf mounts. They moved nimbly and quickly to keep the region secure, and it was thanks to them that law and order mostly reigned around the forest. One consequence was all the monster-derived materials and ingredients that now made their way into Rimuru’s town—a cache that was being channeled partly to Kabal’s team in exchange for new intelligence. Tempest itself wasn’t squeamish about using these materials. Much to the adventurers’ shock, Tempest was home to several well-known dwarven artisans, but not even they could use all the stuff they had access to. So whatever couldn’t be harnessed for weapons, armor, or food, they treated as scrap and let the adventurers have for free.

This was, to put it lightly, a windfall. Horned Hare horns, Poison Frog flippers, Giant Bear ears…even things like armorsaur horns, if they were lucky. Bringing this stuff to the guild was treated as them completing their mission—proof that they’d slain some of the dangerous creatures threatening the towns. This earned them points, and points meant rank upgrades. They couldn’t sell these parts for money, but to the adventurers, they were still eminently valuable.

Was it cheating? Oh, absolutely, but cheating was fine in this business if nobody finds out. That, at least, was the attitude Kabal approached this arrangement with as they sifted through Tempest’s refuse on a regular basis.

It was true that Fuze, guild master of the Kingdom of Blumund and head of the Free Guild they were affiliated with, was totally aware of all this. He had spoken with Rimuru himself, had seen the town he built, and knew exactly what Kabal’s gang was up to. The fact that he simply sighed at them and said “Don’t let this make your training go to pot, all right?” was because the trio were an important link between himself and Rimuru. He knew Hakuro, an ogre mage who offered military instruction to the town’s monsters, was training them as well. Thus, he reasoned, even with the way they gamed the system, their skills weren’t suffering for it.

Fuze was one thing. Others around them were less appreciative. Anyone shooting up the point rankings as fast as them was bound to be suspected of treachery. Taking it too far could blow the whole arrangement open, so the guild master called them in one day to advise them to exercise a little restraint.

Now, however, Gobta had brought them much more exciting news.

“But I guess ol’ Rimuru’s got a direct request for us today, for a change?”

“Yeah! Kinda feels nice to know he’s relying on us!”

“Mm-hmm. Time to flex our muscles a little bit!”

Thus, with exceptionally high spirits, they made their way back to Rimuru’s town.

According to Gobta’s report, the Kabal trio were on their way here right then, likely arriving in two or three days. They were reportedly more than a bit jealous of Gobta just hopping on his starwolf and using Shadow Motion to zip back to town. Elen apparently had the elemental magic Warp Portal in her repertory, but it was only practical for short-range emergency jumps; a very long distance required a massive amount of catalyst energy to work.

Vester’s own warp points needed none of this because they were made out of incredibly valuable magisteel. Perhaps we could provide Elen with one to eliminate the hassle, but they were so large and heavy that delivery would take major effort. Using a catalyst was the easier-to-employ solution, and given the choice, an adventurer would choose the quick-and-dirty method almost every time.

But anyway. Rigurd was handling my travel preparations, so for now, I decided to let Vester and Gabil know about the terms of my contract with King Gazel.

I had gone over the working papers Gazel provided me while on the wolf wagon that took me home. It included the names of dwarves currently working as doctors and the minimum conditions required for their acceptance. I looked all of this over and pondered whether I was willing to sign on, discussing matters with Kaijin along the way. As I did, I came to a mental conclusion, one I now wanted to run past Gabil and Vester, since they’d be working with the guys the most.

Vester was so devoted to his research that he refused an opportunity to return home. Either it’s going really well, I mused as I teleported into the cave, or really poorly.

Gabil greeted me on the other side. “Ah, Sir Rimuru!” he bellowed. “We’ve been waiting for you. What a wonderful environment this is!” He directed me over to Vester, who was deep in the middle of work but scrambled to his feet upon noticing me.

“Good to see you again, Vester. I’m glad you’re doing well, but…is it my imagination or have you gotten thinner? Are you eating all right? Or sleeping?”

“I am quite fine, sir. The food here is simply wonderful, and our menus are growing by the day, no less. I am eating very well. As for my sleep schedule…well, yes, my work might be affecting that, but I do have a cot here I can use. And besides, it’s rather nice to sleep only the barest amount that you need!”

So not much sleep, then. Letting him work himself to death would be no laughing matter. As much as he liked it, it was still possible for him to take things too far. But he seemed to enjoy it so much that I simply left it at cautioning him to keep it in moderation. If he didn’t heed that, I could always force the issue later. Unlike Kaijin, who had to supervise and direct pretty much everything in his job, Vester was devoted to pure research—something which I’m sure felt like heaven to him.

“So how are things developing? Have you succeeded in stabilizing the extraction process?”

“Oh, it’s perfect now, Sir Rimuru.” He smiled. “The problem did indeed turn out to be interaction with particles in the atmosphere. Performing the extraction in a vacuum environment now allows us to create Full Potions on a consistent basis. We should be able to produce medicine in quantity regularly.”

“And how’s our hipokute cultivation efforts?”

“No problems there, sir!” chirped Gabil. “I’m putting diligent effort into raising them!”

“He sure is. At this point, Sir Gabil is something of an authority in pharmaceuticals.”

So now we had a manufacturing facility on our hands.

At first, I was going to ask Kurobe to use his Researcher unique skill to produce a ton of copied potions for us. However, that presented problems for the future. Relying on some special, secret ability like that created a weak link that’d knock us out if we lost the person in question. We needed an environment that allowed continual work to be done. Nurturing the right technical staff would make us more powerful as a country later. That was the whole intention behind forging a pact with the Dwarven Kingdom.

“Great. So following discussions with King Gazel, I think we’re going to see some more personnel in here soon.”

“Oh…?”

“Heavens…”

Gabil and Vester both swallowed nervously as they waited for me to continue.

“First, I want both of you to take a look at this.”

I handed them the list of doctors, along with their conditions.

“Hoh.” Vester marveled as he read over them. “I see Johann and Marchet on this list. With these conditions, I don’t see a problem with employing all of them…”

His eyes, burning with a new passion, turned to me.

“They’re each talented?”

“They’re all personnel I’d like to have assisting me. If I can train them here right now, I can have at least one train the next generation of researchers, too.”

“And you can trust in these people?”

“Of course. I stake it on my dwarven pride!”

He certainly acted proud. I wanted to know whether these people would live up to the trust required to live in a place like this, and judging by Vester’s reaction, it was worth betting on. They were already worthy of assisting him, he said—and he was already thinking, like I was, about how this lab would develop in the future.

“What about you, Gabil? You think you can work with the new people we have in here?”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Not to worry, sir! I have trained my underlings to be as good a guard unit as you’ve ever seen. Goodness me, if Sir Vester can vouch for them, I could hardly think of a better team to rely on and work with!”

Gabil certainly didn’t mind more people around, which meant my answer was clear.

“Great! In that case, I’ll accept these conditions and take in all these dwarven doctors. Vester, you said you’re happy with these skills and conditions, but I’d still like you to examine these documents in detail, if you don’t mind. Gabil, you inform the other dragonewts and make sure this cave’s safe for them all!”

“Absolutely, Sir Rimuru!”

“Yes, my lord! I, Gabil, will sacrifice every bone in his body to serve you!”

“Oh, also, Gabil…?”

“Yes, my lord!”

“Do a good job on this, and I’ll appoint you to my executive team. I’ll expect you to give it your best.”

“Ah… Me, an executive…? In your cabinet?!”

“Um, yeah. And that applies even if Abil decides to welcome you back and appoint you chief of the lizardmen. You’re one of my people now, and I’d like to treat you as one. Do you think that’ll bother you?”

“Not—not a single bit, sir! Nothing would bother me about that at all! I—I am so overwhelmingly happy that I…sniff…”

So overcome with emotion was Gabil that he burst into sobs, shedding a steady stream of manly tears. “Wonderful, Sir Gabil, wonderful,” Vester said as he patted him on the shoulder.

“Whoa. Not so fast. That assumes this is all successful. Don’t pretend it’s proven fact yet, or else it’s gonna blow up in all our faces. I want to see serious effort, okay?”

“Yes, sir! Never have I been so inspired!!”

Gabil had managed to calm down enough to choke out the words. Which was good, because if we were going to bring our recovery potion business (one of Tempest’s new specialties) to the next level, I needed him with a cool head.

Vester filled me in on the details later.

At the current rate of manufacture, we could produce a single dose of Full Potion, the highest-quality healing medicine out there, in a full day of work. This included harvesting the hipokute herbs, magically conjuring an air-free vacuum, and operating the extraction equipment. It was a job that ran from morning till evening, followed by another ten hours for the herbal essences to be fully extracted within the potion. It took this long for said essences to make the required magicule fusions in the solution; there was no way to speed up that process.

It all happened instantaneously when I made it inside my own body, but pointing that out wouldn’t help matters. Kurobe could harness his own skills to make one in about three hours, apparently, but like I said earlier, this wasn’t for Kurobe to get involved with—I wanted him to focus on weapons production. But back to the first topic.

A completed Full Potion could be diluted to create a hundred Low Potions. We were using water from an underground lake infused with magicules, so it was pretty powerful stuff. This dilution works via a magic known as Build Membrane, which was Vester’s job, but apparently Gabil had taken it upon himself to learn it and help out as well. They had now divided work duties evenly among themselves—the dragonewts picked the hipokute herbs, Vester mixed them, and Gabil diluted them into a hundred doses each.

In other words, we could now potentially manufacture a hundred Low Potions a day. For sake of comparison, one Full Potion could be diluted to 5 percent strength to craft a High Potion, as produced in the Dwarven Kingdom.

What does this mean, exactly? Here’s a quick rundown:

Full Potion:

Equivalent to my own self-made healing potion. A de facto cure-all, capable of everything up to and including reconstructing missing body parts.

High Potion:

Fully heals even serious injuries. Cannot handle missing body parts.

Low Potion:

Heals injury to a certain extent.

By “body parts,” I’m talking full-size limbs and such, which ought to give an idea of how potent it was. The magicules inside the medicine crafted temporary limbs; then, over time, the actual flesh and blood would regrow itself, just as it was before.

This was all great, but it led to a thorny issue. What kinds of potions should we be producing? We could only make one Full Potion a day, which meant twenty High Potions and a hundred Low Potions were our production limit. With those research doctors helping out, however, it felt like we could up our daily output to three times that. It took time to grow hipokute, though, so there was no pressing need to speed it up.

“All right. Once we have a steady manufacturing process in place, let’s keep a single Full Potion for safekeeping. After that, we’ll make a hundred Low Potions to satisfy the terms of King Gazel’s contract. Then we’ll spend a day making twenty High Potions—that’ll be kind of a Tempest specialty, and it’ll help us target a broader audience. So what I’m suggesting is we’ll cycle through making a little bit of each. That sound doable to you?”

“Hmm. I imagine so, Sir Rimuru, once Johann and his colleagues arrive. I should be able to devote myself entirely to supervising the effort by then.”

If we could make this much happen, I’d say that was enough. It was important, going forward, to have Vester serve as a teacher for our future employees, as much as I was sure he’d want to shove the grunt work on the new guys and focus on research again. If we wanted to have it easy, we’d need to have a fully trained staff working under him first.

“Sounds great, then. I’ll be expecting hard work from you two!”

“Yes, sir!”

“I promise I will!”

With those firm promises, I took my leave.

Now we had our general direction in place.

For the time being, I took ten samples of each potion type from our storage and placed them in my Stomach. I thought they’d be nice to show off to any merchants I passed, especially if I wanted to make these into trademark Tempest goods. Better talk with Kaijin to figure out what I should be charging for them, though.

Currency in this world mainly took the form of coins, or metal pieces. There were no paper bills—paper had only just become a commodity, and it was still too costly. I was surprised to find out that the coinage circulated around the Western Nations was actually minted in the Dwarven Kingdom—which made no sense to me, but that’s what it was. The conventional wisdom back in my own world was that the value of a currency was directly proportional to the power of the nation that made it, and that rule largely applied here, too. Some of the individual nations to the west minted their own, yes, but Dwarven coinage and its guaranteed quality were treated as the official standard across most of the land.

To put it another way, it was a key currency around here, the coinage of a superpower. If you wanted to use some other money from a smaller, less powerful land, it’d be subject to careful scrutiny from a money exchanger—with high fees, of course. The money I had was the gold coins Kaido gave me, so at least I didn’t have to worry about that.

This world’s economy was still in its early stages, in that money was really nothing much beyond a substitute for bartering. I figured there was nobody issuing government bonds, no futures trading, no systems that helped back people’s trust in currencies. It was all based on solid, real-life exchanges, for better or worse. All this was instead made possible in the Western Nations by a regulatory system run by an outfit called the Council—but it was all starting to become too much to wrap my head around, and it wasn’t like it involved me at all, so I resolved to check that out later.

There were generally three types of coins in circulation: bronze, silver, and gold. To me, one bronze coin was equivalent to around ten cents. Anything below one cent in value was considered small change. Their usage depended on each individual nation’s currency, but I doubted I’d be dealing much with anything like that. Silver coins were pegged at one hundred bronze coins, which made them kind of like a ten-dollar bill. Two of these coins were the going rate for a night at the inn of a rural farming village—which, hey, twenty dollars for a hotel room sounds great, but don’t expect the quality of a modern Earth hotel or even a hot meal. If anything, two silver seemed a little pricey.

Finally, gold coins could be traded for a hundred silver pieces, making them the equivalent of around a thousand bucks. This world was based on the gold standard, meaning the metal had inherent value in itself, so this made sense. Some of the peasantry might go their whole lives without handling a single gold coin, which made it easy to gauge what kind of economic prosperity much of the people enjoyed.

Speaking of things you may never see, there was also something called stellar gold coins, or just stellars for short. These were produced with a specialized dwarven process and instilled with a compressed supply of magicules, giving them an artistic value beyond their monetary one. One of these was worth a hundred gold coins, making them chiefly reserved for large business transactions and payments between nation-states. Which made sense—being worth around a hundred thousand dollars, it was really more like a security certificate.

Our extravagant evening at the dwarven nightclub a while back still left me with fifteen gold coins to work with—in other words, about fifteen thousand dollars, which meant I was carrying some pretty serious bank around. Not sure I want to think what that night cost me, though…

To sum up: one hundred bronze equals one silver; one hundred silver equals one gold. Easy. So what to charge for those potions? The main reference I had were the Low Potions on sale now in the Dwarven Kingdom, which went for three silver coins a pop. More than I thought! That could be an entire day’s wages for someone. However, an adventurer’s main asset was their physical health. It was considered far wiser to shell out for some potion than risk losing a few days or weeks of salary due to injury.

Trying to skimp on your healing tools on a monster-slaying job, where your life was constantly on the line, would be silly. Even if you had a sorcerer on hand for healing, you still needed to take care of yourself—the delay before healing magic takes effect could easily spell your doom. Some sorcerers were better than others, of course, but either way, having an emergency potion in hand was quicker and much more reliable.

With that in mind, it was time to think about High Potions. The level of healing they provided was on a scale far beyond Low Potions—which made sense, given they had five times more hipokute extract in them. Thus, they needed to be at least five times the price, or they wouldn’t be worth crafting.

“Listen, Boss,” Kaijin said when I asked him about it, “those things would be a steal even at quintuple the price. I’d say at least twenty silver. This isn’t some toy an idiot out on their first errand would purchase. You’d be targeting at least B-rated adventurers with ’em. Don’t be afraid to charge a premium, either—let’s try for twenty-five, maybe.”

All right. Fair enough. It was pretty useful stuff, and I didn’t want to be overwhelmed with orders anyway. Twenty-five silver coins seemed like a fair target, too—I wasn’t running a charity.

We’d already decided to supply Low Potions to King Gazel for two silver each. A stock of one hundred would go for two gold coins, then, which meant we’d be grossing the equivalent of about two thousand bucks per day…? They’d be a regular customer, too, and it seemed like decent remuneration for the efforts of Gabil and crew. Better to save the higher profit margins for those Tempest-exclusive High Potions, I thought—sell those wholesale for twenty silver, and that’d be four gold per day; twenty-five silver, and that was five gold. But that was all up to my negotiation skills going forward.

“All right. I’ll put the prices up high to start and earn as much profit for us as possible. And in the future, when our operation’s ten, twenty, a hundred times bigger, I’ll do my best to make sure our treasury gets the maximum out of that!”

“That’s the spirit, Boss!”

Now I was all ready to go.

Woo-hoooooo!

There was something about hitting the big cities that always got my adrenaline pumping. Getting to embark on a trip solo like this, unbothered by any other obligations, made me feel free for the first time in a while. I liked it. I couldn’t afford to let this opportunity go to waste.

Of course, there was one goal I didn’t want to forget as I forged my way into human lands. There were those dreams with the children, yes, and trying to secure some new sales routes for our potions, but I hadn’t forgotten my original objective—to meet one or two people from my original world. People like Shizu and her two apprentices—both “otherworlders,” as she put it. When I showed her a little bit of what Japan looked like these days, she also gave me some insight into her own memories.

Yuuki Kagurazaka and Hinata Sakaguchi. I wanted to see them both, but honestly, that Hinata Sakaguchi lady kind of freaked me out. She was the kind of person who’s relied on nothing but her own powers to survive. Even ten years ago, she was either equal to Shizu or above her power-wise, which unnerved me.

Might be better to save her for later and hit up Yuuki first. He was said to be the Free Guild’s grand master, the highest position in the organization, so he had to be pretty capable, too. If I had his support as a monster, I couldn’t ask for someone better to rely on.

I ticked off all the things I wanted to do as my mind raced with thoughts of the human towns I had yet to see. It had been nearly two years since I was reincarnated in this world, and now, I could finally interact with their nations a little.

Our own stronghold was deep in the forest, behind the mountain with the cave Veldora was sealed in. The Dwarven Kingdom was northeast of us, Carillon’s Beast Kingdom southeast, and Blumund to the west.

Right now, three highways were in the works leading out from Tempest. One, linking it to the Dwarven Kingdom, was nearly complete. The second, leading to Eurazania, had only just begun construction. The third, headed for the Kingdom of Blumund, would begin to proceed in short time, I imagined. There were (generally speaking) two paths between us and Blumund—a trail that plunged straight through forest land, and another that circled over to Farmus before hitting Jura. That path took longer, but with all the dangers in the forest, the Farmus route was the safer one, if you had the time for it.

Kabal’s party usually took that one; it involved beginning on one of the highways from Farmus or the Dwarven Kingdom and taking a turnoff for the forest midway. These were rough walking trails, of course, originally blazed by animals. Thus, taking a round trip from Blumund to Tempest was a daunting task—you could pick up a stagecoach on your way here, as Kabal put it, but you might not be so lucky on the way back, especially if you’re trying to cram in three people.

As a result, even a one-way run took anywhere between two and four weeks, which just shows how impossible it was to schedule one with any accuracy. Bad weather or the wrong kind of monster encounter could further delay things. You really did stake your life on the journey; Kabal took his familiarity with it as a source of pride.

So he and I discussed all this as we prepared to leave. To them, hearing about a new highway opening a formal route from Tempest to Blumund was a real eye-opener.

“What kind of trail’re you talkin’ about…?”

“Hmm? Didn’t I promise you I’d build a highway to Blumund?”

“N-no, you did, but… It’s going rather fast, isn’t it?!”

Hmm. Is it? It was an ambitious schedule by my old construction company’s standards, but with the monster crews I had at my fingertips, it seemed doable enough to me. I must be getting too used to this world.

“It is not too fast, no,” Geld advised. (He would be leaving town with us, so he could rejoin his work crews out on the field.) “I’m working hard here, but there’s still room for more. I need to do everything I can to earn my keep with you, Sir Rimuru.”

Gido, Elen, and Kabal looked stunned.

“Yeah, um, Geld might say that, but to me, this kind of construction speed is crazy! I mean, even with a nationally funded highway like the one we’re taking, this level of quality in such a short time couldn’t possibly be real…”

“No, not at this speed. Not even if you had a team of wizard-class magicians working for you.”

I don’t know what’s with these guys, really. They’re so amazed by the tiniest of things. But I’m sure Kabal and his gang will get used to things shortly.

“Well, no need to worry about it,” I said, trying to shift the topic toward more positive things. “Boy, this is gonna be one hell of a trip! I hope you’ll have fun guiding me, Kabal.”

The mention of his name made Kabal snap out of the weird sort of daze he was in. He gave me a half-panicked nod and boarded our wolf wagon.

We traveled for a little while after that, but for some reason, our human companions didn’t seem very cheerful. They stared at me, looking a bit dubious of the whole thing. Maybe they were hoping to spend more than a single night in Tempest before getting back on the road. They had actually arrived right on schedule, the evening after I had completed all my preparations. I felt a little bad about it, but we left early the following morning, as planned.

“Hey, that’ll be no problem.”

“Yep! You’ve been real kind to us, Boss.”

“Ooh, sure, that’s what we’re here for!”

They all seemed accepting enough earlier, but… I decided to come out with it.

“Hmm, maybe I should’ve had you guys stay in town a little bit and rest up first?”

“Oh, no, Boss!” Kabal vigorously shook his head. “This wagon’s almost too well-built, so I was just kicking myself for all the pain we had to go through by comparison to get here!”

“You sure said it!” Elen exclaimed, clearly waiting for this. “I mean, what kind of horse—I mean, wolf wagon is this? I haven’t felt a single bump this whole time!”

“Yeah, exactly! This is so comfy, it barely even feels like a journey to me!”

“Well, hang on, hang on!” I had to stop Elen and Gido before they got any redder in the face. “What do you mean, you haven’t felt a bump? It’s been springin’ around all over the place!”

On roads like this one, laid out but still unpaved, the wheels bounced with every small pebble they ran over. Running paths like these at twenty, twenty-five miles an hour made for a lot of shaking. It really made me wish these roads would get done already. But Elen just laughed the idea off.

“Hah! This barely even counts as bumpy in my book! Regular horse wagons can’t run this fast in the first place, and if they did, they’d put the passengers through all kinds of hell!”

“Damn right,” echoed Gido. “With a real horse wagon, it’s a given that your ass is gonna have a bad time. Ride in one for long enough, and you’ll have aches and pains up and down your whole body! If you think a little tink! here ’n’ there counts as bumpy, a real horse wagon’s gonna reduce you to tears!”

“He’s right, Boss. Being in a smooth ride like this and having someone be all like ‘Man, this sucks’ or ‘You guys tired out yet?’ …I mean, it makes me wonder why we went through all that crap up to now, is all. Especially if you’re all set to explore these unknown lands, watching out for monsters that might leap on ya at any time—something as easy as this doesn’t count as a journey at all!”

Well, what do you want from me, guys? It’s still a journey either way, isn’t it?

“Yeah, well anyway, just relax. Kaijin didn’t say anything along those lines when we went to the Dwarven Kingdom in it. Don’t you think you’re playing this up a little too much?”

“No.”

“No!”

“I sure don’t, no…”

Ugh. Like I said, what do you want from me?

“Well, look, this is reality, you know? Just another way of traveling.”

“No, Boss,” Gido lashed back, “what I’m telling you is that you’re crazy to think that.”

“Yeah! I mean, the easier the better, but…”

“That, and Kaijin didn’t say anything like that because his guys built this. He’s happy with it because he’s got your approval on it, Rimuru. That’s probably why it didn’t feel right to state the obvious. Plus, hell, why are Kaijin and Garm even living with you guys anyway, Boss? Isn’t that weird?!”

It seemed they couldn’t hide their shock at having some of the best dwarven artisans in the land living alongside monsters like us.

“What’s the big deal with that? They’re friends of ours. And if you don’t like having a nice, easy journey, we could always walk instead.”

“Well, no, um…”

“I just said, the easier the better!”

“I wouldn’t want anything else, Boss!”

If they were that dissatisfied with traveling in comfort, I figured they would’ve been a lot more eager about my suggestion. Guess not. What a pain.

“Okay, then the topic’s over, guys! How ’bout we talk some more about the city you live in?”

They muttered a few buts and awwws about this, but even they had to admit that a wolf wagon was a pretty awesome ride, so they dropped the subject. Nobody gave me this kind of feedback during my last journey. It was funny to see these kinds of differences in common sense among my friends. I was planning to purchase a horse and wagon once we hit Blumund, but if they were that keen on walking, maybe I shouldn’t bother.

So the journey continued on without incident. We had left at sunrise, and it was already past noon.

“I can’t believe this,” Kabal muttered. “That mountain looks so small now…”

Gido and Elen nodded their agreement. Well, yeah, guys. A starwolf’s a B-ranked monster by itself, and unlike a horse, it didn’t need to rest after this much distance. If anything, this was a mild jog to that species’ standard. It could keep on going practically forever at this rate.

I gave Kabal a wry grin as Geld turned to me. “Sir Rimuru, what will we do for lunch? There’s a resting house a ways ahead.”

Ever prepared, he had set up food for us in a nearby waypoint.

“Nice one, Geld. Let’s take a break and have ourselves a meal in there!”

That lit up the mood across the wagon. Despite their initial complaints, the adventurers were well used to traveling in wolf-wagon luxury by now, even enjoying the view out the windows. Talk about self-absorbed.

Once we reached the hut, Geld hopped off the coachman’s seat. The starwolf pulling us was a body double of sorts provided by Ranga, so there was no particular need to attend to it. It was simply being run down the road at the equivalent of cruise control. Geld, however, volunteered to take the seat anyway, claiming he’d take up too much space. I loved how serious-minded he always was, and it reflected clearly in his work. The perfect picture of an artisan, I suppose.

As we ate, we discussed our future plans.

At the moment, we had only blazed about half the trail to Blumund. Over a third of it was still untouched forest. We had kicked things off by having me examine the forest from above, picking the route with the fewest obstacles. We drew up a plan for building the most suitable highway possible after we took height measurements at regular intervals to figure out how the path sloped.

Geld’s crew was now in the midst of following that plan and constructing the road itself. The crew was divided into three teams—one to cut down and transport trees; one to level and improve the road surface; and one to lay down the paving and finish it off. Such was the general division of labor. The route we picked didn’t require any wide detours and extended a little bit under two hundred miles, with Blumund being a measure nearer to us than the Dwarven Kingdom.

On the way was a lush forest, rugged mountains and valleys, and a wealth of native creatures. With this highway, however, merchants could complete a full one-way walk in under a week. They’d need to deal with monsters, granted, but it’d still be an enticing route to take.

A regular wagon sans wolf could finish the journey from Blumund to Tempest in three days, as opposed to ten between us and Dwargon. Depending on conditions, this meant a trip from human to dwarven kingdoms could be completed in around two weeks. The current Farmus route apparently took at least three, and while monsters weren’t a major threat there, bandits and the like were, so security costs often ate up any potential monetary savings. It could make our nation an even more important hub in the local infrastructure.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. For now, after another hour or so’s journey by wolf wagon, we’d reach the edge of current construction. From there, I imagine we’d switch to walking.

“Ah, so that’s where we’ll be coming in,” Kabal eagerly commented. He was right.

“You certainly will. Make me proud!”

“Sure thing.”

“Absolutely!”

“About time I had something to do, Boss!”

They were all raring to go, so I imagined I was fine. Soon, our lunch was complete, and it was back on the road.

Two hours later, Geld and his crew of high orcs waved their good-byes as we set foot in the deep forest ahead.

“Heh-heh-heh! Better be careful, Boss! This is already the Forest of Jura here! The den of monsters itself!”

“But don’t worry! You’re with us, so…!”

“Leave the heavy lifting to us, Boss!”

They were certainly enthusiastic now. I was glad. Trying to convince a Jura resident like me that this was a den of monsters would be an uphill battle, however.

Kabal quickly took out a dagger and began swiping at the coiled vines ahead, carving out a gap just large enough for a person to squeeze through. Gido, meanwhile, put an ear to the ground, checking for any violent monsters in the area, as Elen ran around and cast spells to grant everyone things like insect repellence, poison detection, and some light bodily defense. A forest like this was laden with potential danger, from stings by poisonous bugs to the thorns on hanging vines.

I was impressed—this certainly wasn’t their first rodeo. I was in human form, wearing my mask. Nobody would ever mistake me for a monster now. I was just the weird little companion of a bunch of equally weird adventurers.

“Hey,” Gido asked, “why’d you bother putting that mask on?”

“I can’t fully hide my aura yet, actually. It’d be bad if I got caught in some magic barrier, and people found out I was a monster, so this is a just-in-case kind of thing.”

“Ahh, you sure don’t look like one to me,” he muttered back, but he didn’t press me any further.

We continued in this vein for three hours. It was already evening, about time to set up for dinner, but the three didn’t show any sign of resting. Instead, they were discussing something, cold sweat dripping down their foreheads. We were on a path that, for some reason, I remembered being on before. What were they doing? I figured I could leave things to them, being veterans and all. One of ’em looked ready to cry, even. Better butt in.

“Hey, hey, you guys aren’t lost, are you?”

“N-nnnnno, of course not, I don’t imagine!”

Kabal was talking funny. I didn’t like that. Are we okay? I brought up a map in my mind; this was definitely a path we traversed earlier. Maybe I was just imagining it…wait, I couldn’t be!

“Quit screwing with me, guys! You’re lost, aren’t you?!”

The three shivered.

“““I’m sorry!!”””

They shouted their apology in unison, bowing their heads at me. They were lost. Are these guys really professionals or what? Ah well… We weren’t in that big of a hurry, and I didn’t feel like setting up camp. There’d be huts set up in the construction zone; we could rest up over there.

We made it back in about an hour, following the trail we blazed. I used Thought Communication to warn Geld, so they had food ready for us upon arrival. My three companions couldn’t have looked more sheepish.

“How could we have gotten lost in a place like that…?”

“Kind of hurts my confidence…”

“Yeah, and I’m supposed to be a pro at forest trails, so this is even worse for me!”

Gido seemed to take it the hardest, but it hurt them all, given how much they wanted to show off around me. Geld responded by showing them all a single flower.

“Maybe this was the cause?”

Hmm? What’s that?

“Ah!” Elen exclaimed. “That’s a baffledil, isn’t it? They’re a collection target for B-ranked guild quests. Not exactly easy to track down!”

This flower, which has a hallucinatory effect on its environs, was both rare and sought after for use in magical items.

“Yep. This guy’s been delaying our own work effort today, too.” He bowed to the trio. “Sorry I didn’t warn you about it earlier.”

He hadn’t bothered, he explained, because he figured we couldn’t be lost with my Magic Sense ability. He had a point. Given that I flew right over this patch of forest to help plan out the route, the idea that I’d get lost walking much more slowly through it must never have occurred to him. It was hardly Geld’s fault. If anything, it was mine, for wanting to have an Authentic Adventurer Experience without any cheats.

“Oh, no, I’m sorry for being negligent myself. I’ll help ’em out more tomorrow!”

Geld had already had his crew track down and uproot the baffledils in the area, lest they interfere with work any further. There were over a hundred stuffed into a bag inside their storehouse. It seemed like a neat opportunity, so I swallowed them into my Stomach and had them analyzed. They were glad for it, too—burning them would just release the hallucinogens into the air, and burying them could make them take root and threaten passersby again later. If they were useful enough for the guild to assign quests about them, then win-win, I guess.

That was our first day on the road. The next morning, as promised, I planned to provide my adventuring team with my full assistance.

Time to shine, Glutton! I thought as I pointed my right hand forward. In an instant, the trees and growth in front of us disappeared.

“Hey, Geld, I’d like to eat up enough width for you to build the road on, but that’s gonna take too much time, sadly. I’ll just eat what’s in the way of us and put it in a big pile, so can you clean up for me?”

“Yes, sir. No need to worry about that. That’s our job.”

With his agreement, I breezily ate up the trees and vegetation in our way as I walked. It went much more quickly than yesterday.

“…Are you kidding me?”

“This is crazy. I’m telling you, this is crazy!”

“I know Rimuru’s not, like, normal, but this is just…”

I seemed to be scaring my companions a little, but I wasn’t worried.

“Hey! Quit staring and start following me!”

We were back on the trail.

After about a week of this and that, we finally reached the edge of the forest. It was mostly along the trail I originally surveyed from the air, and we didn’t waste much time along the way. I was in no hurry, though. I’d been enjoying the sights and wonders along the journey.

I never tired in slime form, really, and by definition I never got “dirty” per se, so I admittedly had an easier time of it than others. Elen’s cleaning magic—or whatever she had—helped a lot, though. I tried it out, and my version was more powerful anyway, so I cast it on the rest. The results reportedly made the journey quite a bit more pleasant for them.

Building a campfire was a snap, and we had a lot of food along with us. More than anything, though, the wolf wagon in my Stomach, complete with long, sofa-like seating and a solid roof, was excellent. There were sofas in the front and back, facing each other, letting two people use them as beds. I didn’t need to sleep and thus could keep watch every night, but they were too polite to let me. So two of us took turns keeping watch while two rested inside.

It was much more relaxing than a lot of inns out there, so the other three loved it. “Rimuru,” Elen said, beaming at me, “let’s be adventuring partners forever!!” I couldn’t say yes to that, but I’m glad she enjoyed my digs, at least.

Maybe life would’ve been a lot different if I wasn’t leader of the Forest of Jura, huh? I could probably leave most operations to Rigurd and the rest of my bureaucracy by now, but I couldn’t go AWOL forever.

…In the future, though, maybe. Once I wasn’t so needed any longer, perhaps it’d be fun to be a freelance adventurer for a while. Too bad you guys will probably be dead of old age by then…

Well, that thought came out of nowhere.

Now part of me wondered if Milim had similar feelings. Maybe it’d be better to be a lone wolf, after all, instead of making lifelong friends who I’m doomed to outlive. I dunno. I didn’t have enough experience to answer that question right now.