

CHAPTER 6

CONQUERING THE LABYRINTH

It was a tranquil late afternoon as Shuna set to reading in her room. Just as she did, Shion came barging in, like always, begging her for help with one recipe or another. But she keenly noticed the book in Shuna’s hand and asked her a question.

“What’s that, Lady Shuna?”

“Hee-hee-hee!” Shuna smiled. “This is a book, Shion. A book of magic that Sir Rimuru gave us.”

Just when they were getting used to the daily routine of running the place by themselves, Rimuru returned. It had only been last night when he came up to Shuna and dumped a massive pile of magic tomes on the ground. “Oh, are you up, Shuna?” he said casually, like nothing was unusual about this. “Perfect. You wanted to learn magic, right? Here; I got some stuff for you.”

One look, and she could tell these were valuable, secret tomes, the sort that humans would cherish as confidential knowledge and store under lock and key. It was a fortune, and she thanked him profusely for it. After that, Rimuru teleported away after waiting only long enough for Shuna to brief him about goings-on around town.

“Wha—?! He only met you, Lady Shuna? That’s not fair!”

“Oh! I forgot! He had a gift for you as well, Shion.”

“You’re so mean, Lady Shuna…”

But looking at the sweet-smelling snack presented to her, the anger immediately drained from Shion’s face. This was a new sort of sugary sweet, one Rimuru had reportedly discovered in the capital of Englesia. He had purchased a large quantity, enough for everyone in town to share.

Watching Shion happily take more than her fair share, Shuna couldn’t help but giggle as Benimaru walked in.

“Mm? Hey, Shion, what’re you doing, eating away in here? Plan to share?”

“Oh! Benimaru! Is your work going well?”

“It is. The envoys from the Beast Kingdom are the same as always; the deliveries were just as we agreed to. We provided our own goods, and they left with smiles on their faces. Geld reports in his regular briefings that construction is still going well. The tree-clearing crew has finished their work and should be home soon. But enough of that. Let me have one already!”

Before Shuna could stop him, Benimaru reached down and plucked out one of the treats—an otherworld pastry Rimuru had purchased, known as a cream puff—and scarfed it down.

“Ooh!” he shouted, sweets being one of his few weaknesses. “This is good!”

“Sir Rimuru purchased it for us,” Shuna said with a grin.

“Did he? So he’s paid a return visit? I tell you, working in his stead, I had no idea how difficult a task he had. He made it all look so effortless when he was here…”

“That he did. He even had ample time to goof off and do nothing…unlike you, not that you let that stop you.”

“What? Come on… You know, normally I’d be very angry to hear that,” Benimaru countered, although the grin on his face suggested otherwise. They almost always acted like this around each other.

“Sir Rimuru also asked us to construct some more row houses for lodging purposes.”

“I see. I will inform Geld at once.”

With that business out of the way—

“This is delicious. It’s almost too delicious! Truly, I can taste the love of Sir Rimuru cooked into each one!!”

Out of nowhere, Shion half shouted her approval of the cream puffs she was eagerly inhaling.

“…Did you taste that, Shuna?”

“I don’t think so, no…”

Shion was too far into dreamland to hear them. They sighed. This, too, was how she always acted around them.

Hmm. I had the nagging feeling Shion took my visit the wrong way. Better rescue those children and get back there quick.

I focused on what lay ahead of me as I shrugged off the sudden chill tickling the back of my neck. Before me were five children, sitting at their desks and concentrating on their reading and writing lessons.

“You need to be able to do at least that much, or else you’re gonna find it hard living in this world. You got me?”

“““Uh-huh!””” they all replied. Good. Nice to see some enthusiasm. And they had a reason for that, of course. I’d have liked to think it was because they adored me, but I knew that wasn’t true. I had a carrot dangling in front of them.

“Ahhh, I wanna read what happens next!”

“Boy, I sure didn’t think I’d get to catch up over here!”

“Well, I’m gonna get to it first!”

“I like picture books more, but manga’s good, too!”

“I think it’s more important to study, of course. But, wow, Mr. Rimuru, I didn’t know you were an otherworlder, too. I don’t know much about Japanese anime or manga, but that’s really fascinating.”

The carrot—more of that manga I copied—certainly had its effect. Said manga, however, had been translated inside my Stomach into this world’s language. You had to learn how to read it to understand anything, but it had already done wonders to improve their academic enthusiasm.

I had been teaching here for a month, guiding the kids through their studies as I worked on my own preparations. I had only one thing to investigate, and until I found my answer, I couldn’t go anywhere. I wished it could’ve gone faster, but I had to be patient. I wanted to do everything I could for these children, instead of letting this time go to waste—and luckily, it turned out I was pretty good at lighting a fire in them.

The days were occupied by classes; the nights by info-gathering sessions. It made me glad I didn’t require sleep with this body.

Unfortunately, nobody had the information I wanted—the location of a high-level elemental. Not even Hakuro, the smartest person I knew. I traveled over to Treyni’s domain in search of clues and paid another visit to King Gazel. I even tried hitting up Zegion and Apito for some leads, but nothing.

I was searching for elementals high-level enough that they could be imbued into these children’s bodies and tasked with controlling their magicule stores. That was the answer the Great Sage came up with for me.

I already had the ability to summon Ifrit, but that alone could let me save only one of them. That wasn’t good enough. Treyni and her family could summon similar spirits, but those were bonded with them as part of the summoning contract, and I couldn’t ask the dryads to sacrifice themselves for these children’s sake.

So I pressed Treyni for something else, and she told me about a Dwelling of the Spirits, a land ruled over by the so-called Spirit Queen. Sadly, it seemed like a dead end. “I apologize,” she told me, “but while there are several ‘entrances’ that lead to the Dwelling, the one I am aware of has already disappeared.”

It seems the Spirit Queen that Treyni and her family served had passed away long ago, practically in ancient times. They had no personal connections to the current queen, so not even the dryads knew where this Dwelling was any longer. A royal audience was apparently out of the question—and since the Spirit Queen could reportedly move these “entrances” around whenever she liked, they were difficult to track down. I suppose it made sense. Treyni was slippery enough at times—anyone higher up on the spirit-elemental food chain than her has to be even worse.

Figuring there was no need to hurry things, I decided to take a break and travel back to Tempest the previous night. Shuna caught me up with local news. Nothing too epic—the biggest highlight being a freshly minted sorcerer who had recently joined Yohm’s team. I wanted to meet her, but they were already on the trail somewhere, so I decided to pass for now.

That, and there was another piece of good news—a great discovery, in fact. We had been crafting Low Potions, a hundred at a time, by diluting Full Potions with magically treated water, but one day, Gabil decided to try using water directly from the underground lake instead. All the magicules inside that stuff apparently made the resulting medicine quite a bit more potent. Vester, surprised to find this, conducted some more rigorous research—and ultimately found that using this lake water would let us double our manufacturing output. Really good news. These potions were gonna be a huge revenue source before long.

Tempest also recently played host to a merchant from the Kingdom of Blumund, escorted by Kabal and his friends. This merchant, Gard Mjöllmile, made a purchase of one thousand High Potions for the price of two hundred and fifty gold coins—twenty-five silver per potion. That was our asking price, and he accepted it. Gard apparently had a trade route or two in Englesia that he ran as well, so I may actually run into him here sometime soon. I’d have to give my thanks if I did.

So all of that sounded good to me, but I was still pretty much stumped when it came to finding the Dwelling of the Spirits. As I watched the kids fight over the manga I just tossed their way, I resolved to redouble my efforts.

Today, I decided to take them all out on a picnic.

School wasn’t in session; it was the equivalent of a Sunday in my old world. Sitting in the same classroom for days on end would take the wind out of any student’s sails, and I still needed to work some magicules out of their system on a regular basis.

So we were walking down a street in the capital when I realized that a large crowd had gathered in the center of the city.

“Some kind of event going on?”

“Oh! Right, Mr. Rimuru! The Hero, Sir Masayuki, is holding a fighting demonstration at the arena today!”

“Yeah, they say that Hero’s a really strong guy. Who do you think would win if he fought Mr. Rimuru?”

“Oh, come on! It’d totally be the Hero! No way Sir Masayuki would lose to some weird dude with a mask on!”

“Um, well, I’m still on your side, Mr. Rimuru!”

“…Well,” Gail intervened, “I’d kinda like to see the Hero, but we’re probably way too late to get seats by now. Let’s head out of town for that picnic we planned.”

The five acted remarkably excited about this, but we stuck with our original idea, resolving to buy advance tickets for the next showing. Gail, in his own inimitable way, was great at keeping his group pointed in the same direction, which was super-helpful to me. Having someone a little older serving as the leader made my job a lot easier.

I seemed to remember Milim telling me that Heroes were special people; simply calling yourself a Hero without the strength to back that up would set you up for a quick and nasty death. As Yuuki put it, “There are two kinds of people who go by the name of Hero—the kind who’s willing to shoulder the sins of the entire human race and the kind of fool who never thinks about the consequences.”

And then there’s this guy, starring in these gladiator shows or whatever in a city like this. Which pool does he fall under? Something told me his aims weren’t all that lofty. But then again, Milim said simply claiming to be a Hero would invite divine wrath upon you. Maybe this Masayuki guy wasn’t an idiot, after all, but just someone unfortunate enough to have a very interesting life. As Japanese-sounding as that name was, he might be an otherworlder for all I knew. I kind of wanted to meet him, but for today at least, I skipped out on the chance.

We stopped by a café—the owner greeting us with a hearty laugh as he provided the kids with juice.

“Hey, kids! You guys better sit up straight and listen to your teacher, you got it?”

“Thanks, mister! Can we have some cake, too?”

“Hmph. This juice isn’t bad, I guess. That cake over there looks really good, though, doesn’t it?”

Kenya and Alice always got straight to the point like that. It annoyed me, but I took out my coin pouch anyway.

“All right, all right. Hey, how ’bout some slices for all of them?”

“Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hey, I heard you made it to B-plus rank? Yuuki sure was surprised to hear that! We oughtta celebrate it! You can eat and drink on the house today, guys!”

He was a big, beefy-looking guy, but the owner was really nice to talk to—well-connected, too, if he already heard about that. I spotted a notice on the guild’s bulletin board about a baffledil-collecting job—those flowers that tripped Geld up before. Despite being a collecting job, I was still allowed to accept it—and since I rather fortuitously had a hundred or so blooms in my Stomach, I gave them over to the guild. This, combined with a few other tricky collection missions that I contributed to, made it surprisingly simple to get promoted to B-plus.

Now I had the right to try for rank A. Undertaking that examination several times, proving that you were as close to an A as it gets talent-wise, would earn you a promotion to A-minus. The wall to A itself was pretty darn high, I suppose, and while I planned to take the challenge sooner or later, being a B-plus was no big setback.

Either way, though, if there’s free cake in it for me, I ain’t gonna turn that down.

“Wow! You’re really too kind! In that case, I’ll get one of those strawberry shortcakes!”

The owner chuckled as he took the children’s orders. “Hah! Nothing like free food to pep you up, huh?”

This café was owned by the otherworlder who Yuuki mentioned. I had him mention me to the guy, and he’d been treating me real well ever since. He looked tough, but he was really a softy at heart, and the kids loved him (or the cake he was spotting them, at least). I was here just a few days ago, too, buying some cream puffs to give to Shuna as a souvenir. I figured I needed to placate Shion, at least, for being gone for so long—and of course, I was hopeful that they’d reverse engineer the recipe.

The menu had a lot of other things besides cake, so I attempted to convince the owner to open up in Tempest. He turned me down, but I didn’t mind that. Everything’s a negotiation. I’ll keep up the effort.

With the cake in our bellies, I picked up the box lunches for that day’s picnic from the owner. He had sandwiches for us all, ready for later in the afternoon. The kids were full of energy today, so I figured we could run a few mock combat rounds once we reached the countryside. I’m sure that’ll make their lunches taste all the better, once they’re tired out.

Before long, we were at the city gate.

“Ah! Good day to you, Sir Rimuru,” said the guard sentry there, whom I had come to know fairly well. “More training today? I would love to receive some instruction from you someday.”

B-plus adventurers definitely enjoyed a lot of preferential treatment around this city. It was like we were champions of the people or something…although, in this world, I suppose we literally were. I was finally starting to understand why Kabal enjoyed de facto celebrity status around Englesia City. He was a man of the people, and they could all see how he protected them. Unlike some high-and-mighty noble kicking back in his castle, adventurers worked on the ground level and earned the common man’s near-infinite appreciation for it.

“Keep up the good work, men,” I rather haughtily replied, the flattery getting to my head. “Here, I’ve got something for you. Feel free to pass it around the guardhouse later.”

That something was a plate of cookies I baked with the kids. Sugar was a high-priced commodity in Englesia as well, so these things were like gold to anyone with a starved sweet tooth. Even these slightly misshapen amateur-hour cookies would be a cherished treat.

“Well, heavens, thank you so much! And you kids be good around your teacher, all right?”

“Pfft. Not you people, too?! We’re always good around Mr. Rimuru. Right, Ryota?”

“Yeah. If we weren’t, he’d punish us.”

“You don’t have to say that, stupid!”

“Don’t lump me in with these kids, sir. If you guys keep carrying on like that, they’ll start to think I’m just as stupid as you, all right?”

Boisterous as always. We laughed as I waved good-bye to the guard.

So we walked for about another hour, as planned, before reaching a mostly deserted grassy plain. The perfect training ground. There wouldn’t be many people watching us, either, so we could go all-out to some extent. They had matured to the point where going easy on them would actually expose me to danger. Their moves had grown much more refined, thanks in part to the fact they were actually beginning to take my advice.

I fought them one by one, like always, making sure to keep my guard up.

“Shoot! I messed that up today, too…”

“Mr. Rimuru is just way too strong! It’s cheating!”

“Aren’t you supposed to go easier on girls?”

“I better learn more magic…”

“Agh! I was so focused on defending myself better today!”

Perhaps it was immature of me, but I wanted to be like an impenetrable wall to them. On this point, I was acting in stark contrast to Shizu. I had no intention of spoiling them at all.

“Ha-ha-ha! You kids think you could ever beat me? You’re dreaming!”

The kids started complaining back at me. This was a pretty common routine in my class.

Just then—

Hmm? I feel this weird sense of pressure…

Report. Large quantity of magical energy detected. Approaching—this is from a Sky Dragon.

According to the knowledge I had picked up at the capital library, a Sky Dragon was reminiscent of a wyvern, although pretty different in reality. Wyverns were an airborne offshoot from the Lesser Dragon family, but a Sky Dragon was part of the Arch Dragon group, maintaining a greater amount of original dragon blood. As a threat, it was ranked at Special A—a calamity-class monster.

It would appear our fun little picnic would have to wait.

“My heavens…”

Gard Mjöllmile fell to the ground, head in his hands.

It was one of the biggest deals he had made in a while, a stroke of good fortune that had come only recently. The Free Guild’s Blumund branch had reached out to him, and the guild master Fuze had discussed things with him personally.

“So the guild is starting to get serious about this potion deal. We’re talking about procuring three hundred per month for the guild’s reserves and two hundred for the royal knight forces. So five hundred, and we’d pay you a hundred fifty gold for them,” Fuze began, regarding Mjöllmile like a mobster shaking down a client. “Now, we got a business partner who’ll sell these to you for twenty-five silver coins each, and that’s probably gonna be the most discounted price you’ll get for the time being. Right? If you went over and bought ’em without that, they’re gonna ask for thirty each, so… What do you think? It’s not a huge deal money-wise, but this is a government job—it’s gonna be continual, for a long time to come.”

Mjöllmile worked out the arithmetic in his mind. By that arrangement, five hundred potions would earn him a profit of twenty-five hundred silver coins, or twenty-five in gold. Not bad, but not enough to risk one’s life over. This was Gard Mjöllmile, after all. A guy used to working back alleys and arranging loans to low-level street gangs. It would take more than a stern frown from Fuze to make him come to the negotiation table.



“You must be joking with me, sir. Under these conditions, I’m afraid I can’t give a yes to that. If those are your final conditions—”

“Oh? You don’t like it? Okay. Head back home, then. But if you do, keep in mind that you’ll lose any rights you’d have earned for the business deals we’ll be making with that country. This is something I wanted to offer you first because I trusted you, you know?”

Mjöllmile’s eyebrow twitched.

“…‘That country’?”

“Mm-hmm. But I can’t tell you any more if you’re heading out—”

“Well, give me just one moment, Sir Fuze. I was never good at this sort of tit-for-tat negotiation. Why don’t we just lay it all on the table?”

Now Mjöllmile smelled money. Fuze grinned as he realized this.

“Sure, sure. But before that, I need to show you the goods, don’t I? Here’s the first of their wares—a High Potion. What do you think? Still not interested?”

On the table, he laid down a High Potion, a special brew that made all potions that came before it seem obsolete. Whatever “country” was behind this, they had technical skills at least on par with the Dwarven Kingdom. That, plus the number values Fuze mentioned earlier, made Mjöllmile shudder.

“You want five hundred of these delivered to the guild? Just to be sure, is there any limit to the quantity I can purchase?”

“That I couldn’t tell you.” Another grin. “But that’s your job as a merchant to find out, isn’t it? Why don’t you travel over there yourself and ask?”

And Mjöllmile had—and now he was even more surprised. A journey he had expected to take at least two weeks was completed in one, just like his bodyguard Kabal claimed.

“See? I told you, this town is amazing!”

“I… I cannot believe this. Where did this highway come from…? And for that matter, this whole town?!”

He was flabbergasted. Hiring a party of three B-plus adventurers for this job meant he was all but guaranteed to lose money. They cost him a hundred silver pieces per day, and even that was a bargain at the B-plus level. A hundred silver made one gold coin; it meant hiring these guys for a month was thirty gold gone. The only assured profit from this journey was twenty-five, and between that and his travel expenses, he figured it’d put him deep in the red—but he still wanted to see this land personally, to see if it could lead to regular business.

Just a little while later, he purchased one thousand High Potions. Half would be delivered posthaste to his client; the other half, he’d see about selling outside Blumund’s borders. What he had also gained, however, was the priceless experience of having the monsters know him by name. That and information. These monsters, after all, held usage rights on this new trade route.

Taking this job couldn’t have been a better idea, Mjöllmile thought, chest practically bursting with joy. One of the leaders of the monsters, a hobgoblin named Rigurd, stated that he believed they would boost their manufacturing output going forward. He was also considering other specialties they could produce, too. He’d become a vital trading partner before long, no doubt.

Thus, Mjöllmile had traveled back to Blumund, successfully delivering five hundred of the monsters’ potions. Kabal and his crew took their leave afterward; in their place, Mjöllmile hired a C-ranked adventurer who called himself Bydd and embarked on another journey to Englesia. His wagon, loaded with the remaining five hundred potions, reached the kingdom without incident.

The incident only came after he’d crossed the border.

“What is that monster?!” Mjöllmile shouted. Ravaging the landscape in front of him was a glittering white Sky Dragon—a personification of pure destruction that no human could stop. Gate guards, presumably Englesian soldiers, had begun evacuating nearby residents, leaving travelers and merchants from other nations to fend for themselves. There were already casualties.

“Let’s get outta here, man!”

He could hear Bydd screaming at him, but Mjöllmile couldn’t quite drive himself to run. His wares were in his wagon, but the horses were too spooked to listen to his commands. They would have to abandon their load—which was fine. A major loss, but at least he’d live to make up for it some other day.

No, that wasn’t what made Mjöllmile hesitate. It was his lack of running speed. He hadn’t cursed his pudgy frame quite like this in a long time.

“Dammit!”

Ever the merchant, Mjöllmile quickly reached a conclusion in his mind.

“Hang it all, Bydd, we’re going to pass out these potions to the soldiers!”

“What’re you talking about? All we can do at this point is run, man.”

“You fool! How are we going to flee from that winged monster on foot? The only way to survive is to reach the other side of the gate! The capital’s got a magic barrier over it that blocks out monsters. Better to help out the soldiers and buy ourselves some time!”

“But…”

Even as they bickered, the Sky Dragon sent out bolts of lightning that charred the earth, delivering merciless judgment upon those too late to make their escape.

“Mommy! Mommy!!”

“Elno!!”

The mother had hugged her girl tightly to protect her. Now she was about to breathe her last, burned across practically her entire body.

“Waaaahhhhhh!”

People ran in all directions, shouting. Nobody would be left to give a helping hand to this woman who was on the brink of death—

“Dahh, let me have it! I’ll do it!”

“S-Sir?!”

Mjöllmile grabbed a box of High Potions and ran to the field where lightning had just struck—straight for the mother and her daughter. Lightning scared him, but he still ran, trusting in his good fortune.

It won’t hit me. I’m a luckier man than that!

He stumbled his way there, sprinkling the medicine on the half-charred woman. That alone was enough to stop her from dying on the spot. He breathed a sigh of relief, bending down to pat the crying daughter on the head—then noticed there was a shadow on the ground. His blood froze in fear; he could feel it drain from his face.

Reluctantly looking upward, Mjöllmile found exactly the kind of horrid sight he expected. It was fifteen or sixteen feet long, small for a dragon, but its strength was unstoppable. And now, the Sky Dragon had descended on the spot, ready to make quick work of them all.

“Dammit, so much for my luck…”

Just when Mjöllmile was ready to give up, something fell near him.

“Hey! Over here, monster! I’ll take you on!”

It was Bydd. He had thrown a rock to divert its attention.

“Y-you fool! Why aren’t you running?!”

“Heh-heh. I ain’t exactly led a clean life, but I had a guy tell me once… He said when people need help, you gotta give it to ’em! That’ll help people see ya in a better light, y’know? So get those victims up and bring ’em in the gate!”

Mjöllmile could see soldiers behind Bydd. They were passing around the potions, just as he had instructed them to. “We can buy some time with these!” they marveled once it became clear just how effective they were.

Maybe this will work, he thought for a moment. But it was an illusion. The Sky Dragon’s lips curled up, as if sneering at him. The next moment, with a terrific rumble, a rain of lightning fell upon the soldiers.

Now they were all down, a few apparently surviving, but none were able to stand after taking the strike at point-blank range. Bydd alone remained on his feet, arms opened wide to keep Mjöllmile and the others safe.

“H-hey, Bydd…”

“Heh-heh! If I’m gonna die, at least lemme look cool in the process.”

“Hah! Ah-ha-ha-ha! You know, I think I had you all wrong, Bydd. You’re a true champion, no doubt about it. If we survive this, I’ll hire you as my personal bodyguard.”

“That better come with a raise!”

They smiled at each other, then stared down the Sky Dragon. The fear was gone, although he regretted they couldn’t save that mother and daughter in the end. Mjöllmile knew Bydd felt the same way—but they were able to laugh in the face of death. It reenergized them as they awaited the end to fall upon them.

As if toying with its prey, the Sky Dragon’s smile deepened. Now the two were ready. But before the moment could come, someone appeared in front of them. A beautiful person with waist-length, silvery hair tinged with blue and who came quicker than the lightning—and the moment the bolts touched the small figure, they disappeared.

“N-no way… That person brushed away the Sky Dragon’s lightning like it was nothing…?!”

“Is… Is that a Hero?!”

Bydd and Mjöllmile reeled back in surprise as the figure spoke to them in his beautiful voice.

“Oh, hey, Bydd! Nice to see you’re putting in an effort out here. I’m impressed. But you probably shouldn’t take on a foe you could never beat, y’know?”

Bydd’s eyes opened wide. He didn’t know anyone as beautiful as this. It must’ve been a case of mistaken identity—but somehow, there was something familiar about his eyes.

“And given that I see our potions strewn all over the place, you must be Mjöllmile, right? Pretty softhearted of you, isn’t it, trying to help all these people? That’s not the sort of thing that makes for a successful merchant, I don’t think. Not that I’m complaining, but…”

Mjöllmile froze in shock. This was definitely a complete stranger—this slim figure dressed in unfamiliar, foreign-looking garb. Something about this person’s behavior reminded him of royalty. He wanted to ask who this newcomer was, but Mjöllmile’s mouth was failing to find the words.

“Right. Since you’re here and all, you might as well keep helping out the injured with those potions! I’ll do something about this monster in the meantime.”

Ignoring the frozen duo, the figure set off.

The decisions came fast once I felt that wave of pressure.

“All right,” I said to the children. “I’ll go help ’em out. Leave that thing unattended, and it’ll lead to a lot of killing. Ranga!”

“Here,” he said, emerging soundlessly from the shadows.

“I’m gonna go beat that dragon real quick. You stay here and keep the kids safe.”

“Would you like me to go out and give it a taste of my fangs, master?”

“Ummm, I wish I could let you, but I’ll handle this. These kids are still treating me like some kinda charlatan anyway.”

I wanted Ranga to babysit for me. Plus, it was highly debatable whether he could defeat a Sky Dragon or not, although I didn’t say that to him.

“Mr. Rimuru! If you’re gonna take that monster on, you need to wait until the knights show up!”

“Yeah! Like, you’re stronger than us, but no way could you beat that freak!”

“Wait, wait, wait! If you die, who’s going to save us then, huh?! I’m not gonna let you die!”

You see? Times like these, it’s like there’s no trust in me at all. Chloe and Ryota were giving me concerned looks as well. I really needed to show them my full skills.

“Please, kids, just leave this to me! I’m not stupid enough to take on a fight I can’t win.”

“Indeed. My master is invincible. Perhaps not the winner of every battle, but invincible.”

True enough, Ranga. I’d never beat Milim in a million years.

“You heard him. That’s a core fundamental you need to learn first, before anything else. How to gauge your opponent.”

I began to prepare. If I retained my current childlike form, that opened the possibility that I’d blow my cover. Thus, I thought it best to disguise myself. Transforming using my slime-based cell structure would make me only about a child’s size, maybe four and a quarter feet, if that. So I decided to bust out my black mist, for the first time in a while, and take an adult form. It’d make my line of sight higher, but my perceptions were based on Magic Sense anyway, so it wouldn’t affect me in battle.

Instantly changing into the fancy kimono Shuna had prepared for me, I completed the transformation on the spot.

“Ah…,” Ryota said, stunned into silence.

“No way!” exclaimed Alice.

“Whoaaa,” Kenya shouted, eyes sparkling.

“Wow, Mr. Rimuru, that’s so cool!” Chloe concluded.

“You can do anything, can’t you?” Gail said as he rolled his eyes.

All this assessment helped me remember something.

“Oh, right. Here, hold this for me.”

I took off my mask. I’d need it once we got back to the city, but having it on now would be screaming my identity to the general public. The children all gasped as Chloe accepted it from me.

“Hey! No fair, Chloe!”

I took Alice’s whining as my cue to sprout wings and fly off to battle.

When I reached the site, I found a familiar-looking face staring down the Sky Dragon. It was Bydd, and I guess he really took my advice to heart, because he was stepping up to protect the wounded strewn around the fields.

Next to him was a fat little man holding a potion bottle with the Tempest seal stamped on it. Presumably, that was the merchant Shuna had mentioned. Considering the money-grubbing qualities of most merchants I knew, I was rather surprised to see him giving up profit to pass this medicine around. I didn’t know if that was a good or bad sign, really—but I suppose it was nice of him, even if his face was kind of weasel-like. If he was doing this for advertising purposes, it was a genius move.

I called out to them, which I really shouldn’t have, since I was supposed to be incognito. It was just such a surprise to see them on the battlefield that I couldn’t help myself. Better make sure they don’t blab about it later.

“Right. Since you’re here and all, you might as well keep helping out the injured with those potions! I’ll do something about this monster in the meantime.”

As far as I could tell, there were quite a few wounded, but nobody was dead yet. With enough High Potion, it wouldn’t be too late to save them all. The gate guard I knew was among the injured, making me all the happier that we were in time.

The two looked at each other in astonishment, then immediately sprang into action. Nice. Now to tackle that Sky Dragon.

After that, I killed it in quite literally the blink of an eye. It was big, at fifteen or so feet long, but a mere small fry compared to Charybdis. It had lightning and sonic waves and thick skin—but none of the Sky Dragon’s attacks worked on me.

So I battered the guy around a bit, then used Glutton to have it for dinner. An easy win.

That night, I took Bydd and Mjöllmile over to a high-end nightclub in the capital. As high-end as it was, the hostesses there sure gave the dwarven gang at the Night Butterfly a run for their money. No elves, disappointingly, but otherwise I had no complaint—the decor, as well as the food and drink, were a lot better than Dwargon’s club. Given its location in the very center of human civilization around here, it was about as fancy as this world got. There was little surprise it had all the good stuff.

I was back in my usual, masked human form. Mjöllmile, of course, was paying the tab. When I had a word with him about protecting my identity, he all but dragged me over here. I turned him down, bringing up the children I had to watch, but he kept insisting.

“So, Mjöllmile. If you have a moment, I’d like to discuss future plans, if you don’t mind?”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee! Absolutely, Sir Rimuru. I promise you by my name as Gard Mjöllmile,” he had said earlier, “that I know the perfect place for such discussion!”

“Oh, do you? I like the sound of that, I do! Are you maybe talking about…?”

“Say no more, say no more! I promise you’ll be very happy you joined me!”

That sort of thing. I agreed to it, if not with much enthusiasm.

This Gard Mjöllmile guy was apparently one of the major merchants plying the trade in Blumund. He had full guild accreditation, as well as an official permit from the kingdom’s government. That’s why he got this job, representing both his nation and the guild as he reached out to me.

It was rare for merchants to be licensed both by their local government and the guild, since it meant paying double the fees, but Mjöllmile saw it as a must. “Trust,” he explained, “is the most important thing you have.” He might be a short, fat, ferret-like kind of guy, but he still had it in him to show a little authenticity.

Like any good merchant, nothing escaped his attention, and he seemed to be dealing in quite a wide range of business. He was the president (boss, really) of Blumund’s main marketplace, and he was also something of a loan shark, lending at high interest rates.

Bydd was one of his clients on that front; this bodyguard job was part of paying him back. Being able to boss around someone like Bydd, who had muscle and wasn’t afraid to use it, definitely said something about how in control he always was. Apparently, he even held sway over a few members of the nobility who turned to him for loans when they were down on their luck. It explained why Mjöllmile was known as Emperor of the Alleyways back home. Getting caught up in debt like that is a terrifying thing. Gotta remember to borrow responsibly. We’d be bound to take out some loans as a nation sooner or later, after all.

Regardless, he was a merchant who knew what he wanted, and anything we could both stand to profit on was of keen interest to him. In some ways, I trust that a lot more than some alliance written out on paper. Plus, given his act out in the field this afternoon, I had the impression he was a really good guy, deep down. I love all the colorful characters Fuze introduces me to.

I think I could use this guy, Mjöllmile. I kinda like him.

Mjöllmile was now rubbing his hands together as he approached me—all smiles.

“Are you enjoying yourself here, Sir Rimuru?”

“Hey, Mjöllmile. Everything okay with us and the management here?”

“Ah, yes! It certainly did not come easily, but my reputation was enough for them to give the nod!”

“Hoh! Sorry to put you through that.”

“Oh, no, no, it’s all for you, Sir Rimuru. Not a problem at all!”

I had given Mjöllmile kind of a tall order. He had successfully reserved the entire club for us, having anyone we didn’t know kicked out. It turned out that he’s got an investment in this club—he really does work in a lot of fields. I was surprised at the kinds of connections he had available to leverage here in the city.

None of the other customers complained; one look from Mjöllmile must’ve been enough to silence them. I guessed he had a fair bit of power in this nation, just like back in Blumund.

I asked him this favor for a reason.

“By the way, Sir Rimuru…I’m sure this will sound rude, asking you…but are you sure it was such a good idea to bring these children to a club like this…?”

He chose his words carefully as he turned his eyes over to one side.

“You were so cool, Mr. Rimuru!”

“That was amazing! You just, like, zoomed into the air, and you gave that dragon the biggest KO punch ever!”

“Eh, it wasn’t bad. When I grow up, I bet I’ll be able to pull that off easy!”

“Very nice, very nice.”

“But you really were that strong, huh? Maybe even stronger than Miss Shizu…”

“Oh, no way!”

“But did you see him transform? That was really awesome.”

“He looked kind of like Miss Shizu. Very nice.”

“Yeah, I’ll grant you that, but…”

“Well, either way, now we know for sure that Mr. Rimuru is super-amazing!”

“Mm-hmm!”

“Yeah, I agree with you.”

“I like Mr. Tempest a lot!”

“Yeah! I wanna be that strong someday, too.”

It wasn’t the usual club crowd, no. They were children—my students, of course—having the time of their lives in here. Bydd was keeping them company, although for the most part, they were recapping today’s battle among themselves. They really shouldn’t have been in there. If someone found out, I’d lose my teaching job, for sure. I wanted to leave them behind, but they moaned about it so much I thought I’d go crazy. So I decided to bring them along. Two things in the world I couldn’t beat: Milim and crying children. Yep.

Still, the sexy hostesses were all smiles around the kids, no doubt recalling their own childhoods. I didn’t think any would complain about this. It wasn’t exactly the way I planned this meeting to work out, but hell, it was good enough for me.

With the other customers gone, I had nothing keeping me from being as frank as possible with Mjöllmile. Of course, we didn’t have anything that important to discuss—it was mostly about replacing the High Potions he used up today. I offered him full replacements as long as he kept on advertising them.

“I see… So for you, Sir Rimuru, spreading the word is more of your goal right now than pushing sales? Indeed, once people know about how effective it is, I’m sure we’ll have customers seeking us out before long…”

Mjöllmile, clever man that he was, immediately realized my intentions.

“Exactly. So keep on passing ’em out, all right? Hell, you don’t even need to stop with five hundred. Give out one or two thousand if you want.”

“Hee-hee-hee! I see, I see. My first impression of you was correct from the very beginning, I see. And I’ll gladly pay your fees as well. We have a contract, and I was the one who started providing them to the soldiers.”

“C’mon, you really don’t need to worry about it! Just because I saved your life and stuff…”

“…Well, no, I do thank you for that, of course. But I’m not going to throw away profits for you just because of that. You’ve built that highway for us, making the journey safer and more convenient for merchants everywhere. You’re the leader of the Jura-Tempest Federation, which is bound to become a major hub among the trade routes. My losses are nothing compared to the chance to build connections with you like this.”

Gotta lose a fly to catch a trout, as the saying goes, and he certainly believed it.

“All right. Well, I look forward to doing more business with you, then.”

“Oh, absolutely! And I with you, too!”

And so, having earned each other’s trust, Mjöllmile and I established a new business relationship.

I picked his brain for a while longer, asking about future concerns and his impressions of Tempest. He gave me a lot of useful feedback, and as time went on, the children began to get sleepy.

Just when I was ready to head out, one of the hostesses whispered something I couldn’t afford to ignore.

“Ah, may the Spirit Queen bless all these children!”

“Huh? Wussat? Some kinda magic spell?”

“No, it’s not! It’s a prayer that people from my homeland say all the time. There’s a Spirit Queen, you see, who lives in what’s called the Dwelling of the Spirits, and she watches over them all!”

Huh? What did she just say? I had to delve into this.

“Hey, ma’am, sorry, you just said the Dwelling of the Spirits, right? Do you know where that is?”

The woman gave me a confused look, perhaps surprised at my sudden curiosity. “Oh, sure I do. I was born in a village right near it!”

Then, with a smile, she told me the location. It was in the Republic of Ur-Gracia, a sparsely populated country unaffiliated with the Western Nations, in a village near Urgr Nature Park in the northern tip of the land. She was born there, and thanks to that, I finally had an in—a clue in the most unexpected of places. No doubt more karma for my good deeds or something.

So I said my good-byes to Mjöllmile and the ladies.

“We’ll be back soon!”

“I look forward to entertaining you in Blumund next time, Sir Rimuru. I hope you’ll pay a visit to my store there.”

“Sure. I’ll tell the folks back home to prioritize you for potion replacement. Keep up the good work advertising that stuff!”

“Absolutely!”

““Thanks! Come back soon!””

The club staff all demonstrated visible surprise at Mjöllmile’s behavior. I’ll bet they’re pretty freaked out. After all, here was this tycoon, the guy who gave the orders around the joint, bowing profusely at this little kid. I was a B-plus adventurer, so my name was starting to become a bit known around here. They must’ve been willing to accept that as the cause.

Now, I just hope no one tattles on me about bringing kids to a nightclub.

So here I was at the Urgr Nature Park in the Republic of Ur-Gracia, alleged home of the Dwelling of the Spirits.

Two months had passed since I accepted the teaching role at Englesia. It took a fair bit of prep time and about three weeks of traveling, but I finally made it.

I had given my wagon to Kabal as a gift, but I wasn’t missing it much. We already had a new, improved version all finished up. I had borrowed it for the trip, Ranga pulling it at full speed the whole time—well, about thirty miles an hour, that is, just to make sure the wagon’s occupants didn’t get scrambled. Going at full-full speed on unpaved roads would have been suicide.

At night, meanwhile, I went back to the dorm. The Warp Portal elemental magic really came in handy here. With my level of magical force, it was no problem for me to make the leap and bring all five children along. I was really tossing around a lot of magic, which seemed kind of like cheating, but I didn’t want to put the children through a lot of stress. Using this magic meant I didn’t need to buy food or other supplies, too, which made things a lot easier. Whether it was right to use it, on the other hand, is another question.

The Republic of Ur-Gracia was far different from the nations that ringed the Forest of Jura. The Western Church had no influence on it, and it wasn’t a Council member, either. It didn’t even border Jura and had only a scant few connections to the Western Nations. Trade, for the most part, was with the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion.

It was situated on the southern coast of the continent, all but forgotten, but it was a peaceful, democratic nation, one that received the blessings and protection of the elemental spirits. There were no restrictions on entering or leaving, but crime was not exactly an issue. The reason? Simple: Every native of Ur-Gracia was a shaman or shamaness, capable of using elemental magic.

This involved providing some of your magicules in exchange for borrowing the power of the spirits to do things. Such elemental magic required no casting time; forge a pact with a spirit, and anyone could pull it off. That pact, however, required earning the trust of an elemental, and the one you chose could affect the power of the resulting magic. Humans didn’t have a lot of magicules by default, so without training, your average person couldn’t wield a whole lot of force. Still, even if it was only a bit more powerful than household magic, it was still magic, and it’d be enough to protect you from criminal activity, I suppose.

Mastering spirit magic like this could reward the user with an offensive arsenal that rivaled any other. After yet more training, one could even summon elementals themselves. Building stronger connections with elementals like this let you take advantage of their powers more fully, ruling over them and controlling them freely. It was certainly a lot more powerful than simply having one lend you a hand.

Ur-Gracia was a nation the spirits seemed to love a lot. As a result, legal custom called for a pact-themed ceremony held for everyone at the end of their tenth year of age. This ceremony, once completed, qualified you as a citizen of the country and was also the reason why literally everyone was a shaman.

Anyone who failed to forge a pact with an elemental was exiled from the nation at the age of twenty, losing all rights as a citizen—but with all the many spirits out there, it was rare to be completely unable to find one to partner with. The hostess I met that night apparently dodged it on purpose so she could see more of the outside world, but apart from exceptions like her, pretty much everyone succeeded.

Elemental spirits tended to dislike people with evil intent, so if you committed a crime in Ur-Gracia, it’d get spotted almost immediately. That was why the people around here were all pretty chill.

Having an entire nation of shamans naturally made it a threat to its neighbors. It was not widely known to the Western Nations, but its next-door neighbors in Thalion were well aware of them. That was why they had formal, equal diplomatic relations, despite Thalion being much larger and masters of its own brand of elemental magic. Thanks to the disposition of most Ur-Gracians, relations were friendly and trustworthy between the two, allowing them both to advance their civilizations and grow.

That was about how the lady at the nightclub described it. Now the kids and I were here, and our mission was clear—summon some elementals.

According to the theory I (really, the Great Sage) came up with, Ifrit fused with Shizu’s body to avoid a physical breakdown caused by magical energy gone out of control. A high-level elemental like Ifrit could keep a massive amount of magicules in check—if I could get some to fuse with these kids, that should hopefully solve the problem.

Fortunately, I had the unique skill Deviant, which let me Separate and Synthesize things. I wasn’t sure how the fusion process worked, but hopefully I could just smash the two sides together and see what happened. If the demon lord Leon could do it, I probably could, too.

The one problem that cropped up at a time like this was how the elementals feel about it. Few of these spirits had wills of their own. Possessing one at all was enough to deem an elemental as high-level.

In the hostess’s village, it was said there were two places to forge pacts with spirits. One was the altar in the main square, where local citizens performed their pact rituals. No high-level elementals had ever been found there. If you wanted to forge a pact with one of those, you needed to go to the other place.

These spirits often had, shall we say, attitudes; they would never accept you unless you passed a trial of their liking. Such pacts could only be forged in a place called the Dwelling of the Spirits.

The question was, were the hostess and Treyni talking about the same place? As the hostess put it, nobody who ventured forth to find the Dwelling had ever come back. The rumors about it kept circulating, though, which she found strange. They called it a sort of maze that spread out underground, or up in the sky, with the Dwelling itself found only at the other end.

Only the “entrance” existed in Urgr Nature Park—a simple door blocked by a large boulder, as if connected to another dimension. We were here to find some high-level spirits, and that meant we had to go that way.

We spent an evening resting up and preparing. I wasn’t wholly sure I could use a Warp Portal to get back outside from whatever was beyond that door. I had a feeling I couldn’t, but just in case, I drew a magic circle on the ground in an inconspicuous section of the park. Just a bit of insurance. It’d be nice if it worked.

I sized up the children.

“You guys ready? Once we go in, we might not be able to get back out. Do you think you’re prepared for that?”

They all briskly nodded at me.

“Of course!”

“We’ll be fine.”

And so forth, from one kid to the next. Good. At least they’re not scared. It feels like they’ve been friendlier with me, trusting in me a lot more lately. That little dragon hunt a while back must’ve had the intended effect.

I had earned their trust. It was time to go.

There wasn’t any information on this spot in any of the books I scanned at the library. Unfortunately, I had no idea what monsters might be lurking on the other side. It was described as a trial, so it had to be pretty dangerous. But how come nobody ever came back? There were other elementalists out there besides just Shizu, after all, capable of taking full control over high-level spirits. I couldn’t make contact with any of them, but Yuuki had said as much to me, so it had to be true.

There was at least a touch of concern in my mind over whether Ranga and I could keep the children protected. If it looked hopeless, I intended to fall back and ask Benimaru and the other ogre mages for backup…assuming, of course, we could get out that easily.

Either way, it was with a sense of firm resolve that I grasped the door handle. Slowly, carefully, I stepped inside. It was strange—the sun shouldn’t be able to reach in, but the entire area was bathed in a dim light. I tried it out before letting the kids in, but it was bright enough to keep things visible without using Magic Sense. Nothing bad in the air, either.

At my signal, all five went inside. We had just taken our first steps into the labyrinth.

The moment all of us were in, the door closed. I immediately tried out my Warp Portal. Just as I thought, it failed to activate. I suppose this maze or whatever was set up so spatially oriented magic wouldn’t work in it. Ranga’s Shadow Motion failed, too, so I was pretty sure that was it.

Better give up on escaping for now and switch gears to solving this trial. We proceeded inside. It wasn’t really much of a labyrinth—more of a single corridor. Nothing you can really get lost in, I thought as we carefully pressed forward.

………

……

…

Good thing my brain’s got a map function.

It looked like a single path, but it was packed with traps designed to throw off your sense of direction. Try to go back, and the light would adjust itself to hide your previous path in the shadows. Even going forward, a path that looked completely plain would be hiding branching paths at the outer edge of the light.

Yep. It sure was a labyrinth, one a regular human’s directional skills would never work inside. You might not even be able to go back, for that matter. Pretty scary setup they got here.

Just then:

(Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear…)

(He noticed, he noticed.)

(Oh, my, my, my, my, my…)

(Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee!)

Suddenly, voices echoed in my mind. A very powerful form of telepathy?

(You bore us, guest!)

(Be more scared for us!)

(Be more frightened for us!)

They babbled on at me. I saw Kenya and Ryota look around searchingly; they could all hear the same voices, no doubt. Chloe hung on to my clothing, refusing to let go. Alice was acting defiant, but she, too, was staying right by me.

Gail had his sword out, seeking to keep everyone safe. His job as the oldest, I suppose. It was the sword I gave him, a child-size one I asked Kurobe to forge for me. Small but made of pure magisteel and capable of changing its shape to match the wielder’s habits. I was hoping he wouldn’t have to use it, but…

(Good, good!)

(Be more afraid!)

(That’s it, that’s it! It’s too boring otherwise!)

Hmm. Now I know where it’s coming from. All this selfish chatter was getting on my nerves.

“Hey, do you guys live here? Are you elementals? We’re here on a mission. We need to talk to some high-level elementals. If you don’t mind, could you lead us forward instead of getting in our way?”

I figured I’d give it a try. How would they respond to it?

(Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!)

(Ee-hee-hee-hee-hee!)

(What a funny thing to say!)

(Interesting. More so than being surprised. More so than being scared.)

(Good, good!)

(Let me tell him.)

(But, but—)

(Before that!!)

Another pathway of light appeared in the corridor in front of us. Apparently, we were being invited. We had to go.

The path of light was no problem to walk on. Proceeding across it, we found ourselves in a large, open chamber that housed a big standing statue, a giant of steel looming over us.

(Let me explain the rules of the trial!!) a telepathic voice boomed. As it did, the eyes on the giant statue glowed red. What is it with creepy monsters all having eyes that glow red like that? I don’t know why that thought struck me, but it did.

“Whoa, wait. By ‘trial,’ do you mean I gotta beat this statue thing?”

(Uh-huh!)

(Yep!)

(You got it!)

Well, that’s easy.

“Shall I?”

“No, Ranga. I’ll do it. You stand guard for them.”

I stepped forward. It was my job to deal with the worst. And if we had to run for it, I wanted Ranga in healthy shape.

(Hmm? Hmm? Hmmmmmm?)

(Doing this by yourself?)

(Too much confidence is a dangerous thing!)

They were worried about me? I sure wasn’t too concerned.

I ran Analyze and Assess on the statue in front of me.

And I almost choked. It was…nuts. A golem, built in magisteel from head to toe, with enough magical energy to put it beyond A rank. Stronger than the Sky Dragon I beat earlier. It was nearly ten feet tall, looking dignified and massive—I’d have to guess it weighed over thirty tons. Simply falling on me would be a strike I’d have trouble dealing with. I had Resist Melee Attack, sure, but it wouldn’t help much if I got squashed flat as a pancake.

As I racked my brain figuring out what to do, the statue shuddered. I immediately sped up my thought process, following its moves. It went nimbly, quickly, like a master swordsman. At that size and with this speed, it was an incredibly dangerous foe. It could bump into me, and I’d look like the victim of an especially gruesome highway accident.

You call this a trial?

“H-hey! Hey! What’s with this guy?! This isn’t any kinda trial at all! You’re trying to kill me!”

The elementals erupted in laughter.

(Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee!)

(Yes, yes we are, exactly!)

(Think you can win? Think you can win?)

Were these really elementals? Because they seemed downright evil to me. Plus…that attitude, treating me like a baby. They were really starting to piss me off. Like…really.

The rage from the pit of my stomach made me start to get for-real serious about this—a rarity for me. Hoo boy. Can’t let that happen. I need to retain my dignity around these kids. I never got angry about much—something they already knew. I was a role model for them, and I needed to show that losing your cool was a negative.

Right. Deep breaths. I retained my composure and tried to look as casual as possible as I took a battle stance. No need to go crazy here. Just don’t let it hit me, and I’ll be fine. The statue’s pretty fast, but I’m much faster. I’m a guy who can break the speed of sound, even.

But just running all day wouldn’t get me closer to beating it…

I had a feeling Dark Thunder wouldn’t work on it. It was steel, after all. The electricity would just get sent to the ground. A few spells from the magic books I pored through seemed like they had potential, but they were too large-scale in effect to be suitable. Water Blade and magic fireballs wouldn’t be enough to break through the statue’s armor, either. Hacking at it with a sword would be pointless; I’d chip the blade long before I’d ever cut through. I might even break it, which would suck.

Like, seriously, a giant walking hunk of magisteel? Cut me a break. A golem made out of the hardest metal on the planet, moving this flexibly… There were so few weak points, I didn’t know where to begin.

Only one thing left I can think of. Burn the thing down. Burn it but keep the flames limited to reduce any collateral damage.

“Hey, if you’re gonna apologize to me, better do it soon. If you don’t, I’m gonna destroy this thing. You okay with that?”

(Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!)

(That’s funny! Very funny!)

(Ooh, a big, strong boy!)

(Good, good. Very good!)

(Let’s see if you can!)

Hnnnnng.

Come on. I’m a grown-up. I’m fine. I won’t let a bunch of telepathic brats get me angry. I’m sure the way the veins in my forehead felt like they would explode was just my imagination. I didn’t even have any veins.

Well, at least I had their permission. Sayonara, golem. I’d love to take you home and use you as a toy…er, I mean as research.

“Demonwire Bind!”

This was a Soei move, but I was trained in it by now, the result of regular efforts over time. Plus, my Sticky Steel Thread had grown stronger, far more than it was before. It was a cinch to wrap it around the statue and keep it from moving.

(No way?!)

(I cannot believe it!)

(The Elemental Colossus?!)

Then an ebony darkness covered the statue. Ignoring the surprised elementals, I launched a Hellflare at it. Again, a move I mastered from Benimaru. Focusing my concentration to a razor’s edge, I kept its range as small as possible. Such focus wasn’t necessary if I was just using it normally, but defining a specific range required full control over a massive amount of magicules.

A dome about ten feet in radius, a size so compact not even Benimaru could conjure it, covered the statue. Even this was something I could only pull off with the help of the Great Sage. There was a massive foom sound, and when the dark dome disappeared, nothing remained.

According to the Sage’s calculations, the temperature inside the dome exceeded several hundred million degrees, enough to create a burning hell that vaporized everything in an instant. Even my own Cancel Temperature would be worthless against that.

It was the strongest attack skill in existence, one nobody could ever resist. Not too useful against oversize monsters like Charybdis, but still. Its main weakness was how easily avoidable it was; it took long enough to create that simply running away worked pretty well. You couldn’t just throw around an attack with an inherent weakness like this, or else your opponents would figure out how to deal with them. I had to save the big guns for situations like these.

Of course, binding my foe in advance took care of that weakness pretty handily. Either way, though, this was one of the attack skills I hardly ever wanted to show anyone.

(No!!)

(I don’t believe it…)

(In one strike…?!)

Some very flustered-sounding messages rattled in my brain. It would seem they had had absolute confidence in that golem. I couldn’t blame them. The children all had their jaws to the floor as well; it must’ve been quite a shock. Exactly why I didn’t want to show them, but ah well.

Those elementals had screwed with me for long enough. I hope they’re ready for me now. It’s my turn to hand out some punishment.

After burning away the Elemental Colossus, I let an evil grin spread across my face. Heh-heh-heh-heh. I think I had a negotiation advantage by this point.

“Right, then. Come on out! Unless you guys wanna be burned to ashes next. I know where you’re hiding!”

I didn’t, of course. I had a general idea, but the telepathy-based blocks made an exact location hard to pinpoint. It’d save me a lot of trouble if they came out voluntarily.

“Yes! Yes, yes, yes!! I have humbly been called upon!!”

What then flew out was a cute little girl (?), looking a bit like a poseable doll with dragonfly’s wings attached. Not a dwarf, but more like a fairy-tale sprite. Her hair, a mix of gold-based green and black, was braided, and she wore a flared dress with white-and-green patterns over a black background. It was a pretty flashy outfit, full of fancy frills and the like, and it was opened in the back to make room for the dragonfly wings. Behind this fairy were several others like her, though dressed much more plainly.

“Ta-daaaaaa! Behold, for I am the mazzh… Ahem!”

It sounded like she just tripped over her words in a script. Should I poke fun at her for that? I guess they’re so used to telepathic speech that her vocal cords are out of practice.

“…You all right?”

She waved a hand to dismiss the question. “Behold, for I am the majestic Ramiris of the Labyrinth, one of the Ten Great Demon Lords!! Bow down be… Um, before me!!” Then she cocked her head at me, like she was king of the world. I had no idea how she kept pushing my buttons like this. I think someone here needs a karate chop.

“Oww! Wh-what was that for? You scared me!!”

She dodged it. Darn.

(That’s mean, isn’t it? Isn’t it?)

(Can we beat him up? Can we beat him up?)

(But, but, but, but he beat our Elemental Colossus!)

(We can’t. We can’t. He’ll kill us!)

Oh, shut up.

“Besides, you’re cheating! Why doesn’t Spirit Control work on you?! I haven’t seen someone as tuned out as you in ages!!”

They were certainly working themselves into a lather over me. My unconscious resistance to Spirit Control or whatever it was might have been the cause of a lot of their anger right there.

But that’s not the only reason. I had the sense they wanted dearly to deceive me about something. No way this little pixie was a demon lord. Why were they telling such an obvious lie to trick me? Or were they still making fun of me?

“If you’re gonna lie to my face, you really oughtta come up with a better story. How could a little kid fairy like you be a demon lord?”

“I’m not a kid! You really are rude. And what am I, exactly, if I’m not a demon lord?!”

“Huh? You’re that dumb? I have a real demon lord as a friend, you know. Her name’s Milim. That’s how I know you’re making that up. You’re so weak, it’s not even worth comparing you two.”

“You’re so stuuuuuuupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid!! A big stupid man!!”

Ramiris had to pause a moment to catch her breath after all that shouting. She continued on.

“Listen, you,” she growled. “You know what they call Milim? The call her the most ridiculous demon lord in the universe. She tries to solve every problem she runs into with her fists. It’s pretty rude comparing someone so ridiculous with sweet li’l old me, don’t you think? Because if you don’t understand that, we’re gonna have problems, mister! Besides, aren’t you a little messed in the head anyway? Like, what’s with that attack? It’s crazy! And dangerous, too! Don’t you need to combine a bunch of special skills together to create something like that? I wish you wouldn’t be so reckless, you!”

She had concerns about how dangerous Hellflare was. I wish she would stop being so reckless with me, actually.

“So you really do know Milim?” she asked.

“Uh-huh! We just became friends recently.”

“…Oh. Well… Wait a second. Are you, um, that slime who became the new leader of the Forest of Jura?!”

“Yeah, but how do you know about that?”

“Ahhh, I knew it!! She stopped by for the first time in a while and bragged about this new friend she had, so I laughed her right out of this place…”

Ramiris gave me a surprised look, beating her wings in a rhythm in the air. So she wasn’t lying. She’s really a demon lord, though…?

“Well, glad my reputation precedes me. I’m Rimuru, Milim’s friend. And I’m here because I had a request.”

“Oh, all right. I guess you really are someone Milim knows, so I’ll believe you. So stop looking at me so suspiciously! I’m a demon lord, I mean it!”

Guess she could tell I didn’t believe her. Ah well. She seems harmless. Might as well accept her story for now. I decided to relax and hear her out with a calm mind.

For some reason, I was the one providing tea and food. She had been calling me a guest for a while now, but doesn’t it usually work the other way around? Whatever. The children made fast friends with the fairies, enjoying a few cookies together in a scene I could only describe as darling.

Ramiris’s aim was to try to scare us with that big statue. Once they watched it happen and had a big laugh about it, they would then step in to offer assistance, earning our profound respect and appreciation. She claimed they had no intention of killing or hurting us.

All those rumors about adventurers and travelers never returning got their start because they usually dumped them into an exit connected to some faraway land. “Maybe they’re just taking their time getting home?” she remarked nonchalantly.

This was the reason she was so whiny about me destroying her Elemental Colossus. Really, more vaporized instead of destroyed, I suppose. Sure can’t repair it now. Either way, though, she really had it coming.

“Dahh,” she said over and over again, “after we spent all that time tinkering with that toy I picked up, we finally got it done, and now…”

Well, sorry. My take on it was kill or be killed.

“Besides, you know, that thing had a lot of features! It had earth elementals controlling its weight, water elementals working all the joints, fire elementals powering its engines, and wind elementals adjusting its heat level. A big elemental party! All the top names in spirit engineering worked on it, too…”

She just refused to drop the damn subject. Maybe I shouldn’t have destroyed it, after all, I almost caught myself thinking. But then I’d be indulging her too much.

Spirit engineering, though…? I was curious about that. Maybe it was related to the magical soldiers Kaijin discussed?

“Is that like the magic-armor soldier project the dwarves were working on with the elves?”

“Ding-ding-ding-ding! I’m impressed you knew that! But that failed because they couldn’t make the spirit-magic core that served as its heart. No way you can just make that out of plain steel and expect it to withstand an elemental’s force. So thanks to them using a bunch of shoddy parts like that, it went berserk and got all broken up. They just threw out its outer shell, so I brought it back home and fixed it up! I guess you could say I’m kind of a genius, huh? Isn’t that great?”

It was, although I didn’t care for her boasting. Thinking about it, spirit engineering was based around the power of elemental spirits, so it made sense that a fairy so intimately familiar with elemental powers would better understand it.

Listening to Ramiris gave me a general outline of that magic-armor soldier project; it was apparently meant as a way to produce so-called “crucial golems,” driven by elemental power and controllable by a regular person. A sort of ultimate weapon in this world, you could say.

It was really crazy, this thing King Gazel was trying to make. Magicules ran up and down its body like blood vessels, working the same way as oil pressure on a car to spring it into motion. Its weight could even be controlled by magic, allowing it to fly—on paper anyway.

Whether the project failed or not, though, were the dwarves really that keen on boosting their military…? Well, maybe so, actually. It was just taking a different approach from the pack. Instead of relying on otherworlders like their rival nations, they were using their technological supremacy to create a would-be death robot. That made sense—and it showed all over again how enormous, and lethal, a threat magic was in this world.

Still, though, she had succeeded where Kaijin and his team failed, in her own way. She looked like an idiot, but this demon lord Ramiris might actually be someone real special. She transformed the concept into a golem that worked on given orders, but it was a fully complete machine.

“All right. I’ll admit it, that golem was pretty impressive. And that’s why I have a request for you!”

“Huhh? Why do I have to listen to…?”

Sensing she was about to turn me down, I stopped her by summoning a little Dark Flame in my right hand.

“…I…could be interested in hearing you out, I think, yes!”

Right. That’s a good girl.

“I appreciate that. Thank you. I won’t ask you to do it for free, either. If you’ll help me out, I can have a new golem made for you!”

“Let’s hear it!”

She sure was fickle. Dropping the right bait her way made it easy to change her mind. Which was great. Now I could finally get down to business.

I explained the kids’ situation to her. The whole, honest story, not hiding anything. The children meekly listened.

“So that’s why we’re here. We want to go to the Dwelling of the Spirits that lies beyond here.”

“Ah-haaaaa.” Ramiris sighed, watching the children as the fairies chased them around. “These kids have been through a lot, huh?”

“They have, haven’t they?” I drew closer to drive my point across. “That’s why I want to introduce them to the Spirit Queen. We’ve got to get some high-level elementals on our side.”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? The Spirit Queen’s me! I’m it!”

“Huhh?”

This was rather sudden.

“I’m not really in the mood for jokes…”

“How rude! It’s not a joke at all. It’s real!!”

So this fairy calling herself a demon lord was now claiming to be the queen of all elementals?

“Um, look, why is a demon lord working as the Spirit Queen?”

“It’s the other way aroooouuund! I, the Spirit Queen, went to the dark side and got demoted to demon lord!!”

Now that’s her story? I couldn’t expect much from this stupid kid, but if she claimed to be the Spirit Queen, I had to hear her out.

“In that case,” I continued, wondering if it was really okay to do this, “I want to summon some high-level elementals. Can you help me with that?”

“Hmm, right, right. Now I remember. Someone else who came here and made it past the trial… Oh! Leon! That was Leon! And then, he had the nerve to up and become a demon lord, too. Can you believe that? An ex-human doing that? I could KO him in one punch, you know! Easy! I mean it.”

This was obviously a lie. You could see it in the way her eyes darted around. But enough about Ramiris. Let’s go back to Leon for a second. He was here? She didn’t exactly answer my question, but I couldn’t let that topic slide, either.

Keeping my cool, I asked her for more details, and here’s what she told me: Leon, as a human child, paid a visit. For whatever reason, Ramiris’s Spirit Control didn’t work on him—in fact, he almost brought her under his thrall, which made her panic. She was gifted in elemental-oriented illusory magic, but none of it managed to fool Leon. So, her options exhausted, she listened to his tale.

“And like, you were the same, too, but if my illusory magic doesn’t work, I’m done, you know? I don’t have anything else to throw at ’em, right? It means that sweet, helpless, li’l old me has nothing to defend herself with. That’s why I made that Elemental Colossus for a little extra muscle, right? And here I thought I could get back at all those mean demon lords who laughed at me…”

Here we go again.

“I told you, I can make you another one!”

“Hee-hee-hee! I’m looking forward to it!”

Nothing like a little bait to steer this simpleminded girl back on topic.

“So anyway, I wound up helping Leon out a bit.”

Utterly defeated, this non–demon lord Leon forced her to cooperate. He was apparently seeking information on something and asked her to summon an ancient high-level elemental who would know about it. Then, surprisingly enough, he forged a pact with the spirit.

“Now that certainly startled me! That was a light elemental, practically my right-hand man around here, and it just sidled right up to Leon. It recognized him as its master and popped right into his body.”

Having little other choice, Ramiris officially named Leon a Hero and offered him the divine protection of the spirits.

“Wait a second. Why did someone who was named a Hero become a demon lord?”

“Who knows? Maybe he fell to the dark side, too. Following in my footsteps, you know?”

I doubted that, but I didn’t mention it. Ramiris apparently didn’t have much idea how Leon became a demon lord; I’d have to ask the man himself about it. This world, though… Heroes could become demon lords, just like that? Heroes here were bound by fate, granted astounding powers in exchange… If anything, it made me worry that Leon was an even more formidable foe than I gave him credit for.

If you give it a little thought, it looks like I might be the one who pays for it when we ever meet. Maybe I’m lucky I got to learn about this facet of him here. Better brace myself for anything with him. I can’t let my guard down.

Ramiris’s story continued. She had hoped that would be the last of Leon she’d see, but it proved not to be the case. Even with the high-level elemental’s knowledge, the man still didn’t find any of the clues he needed. This angered him so much that, out of spite, he went back here and stripped away a high-level fire elemental.

“That shameless young man was being so unreasonable. He wanted me to summon a certain person from another world. He knows I can’t do that. Like, how stupid can you get? Then he gave me a look like he was about to cry. In fact, he did cry! Yeah, it’s not lying to say he cried. Not only was he a crybaby, but so self-centered, too! What a doofus!!”

The memory was getting Ramiris worked up. It must’ve been frustrating for her, but to me, it sounded more like she was just being a sore loser. Milim was a handful herself, but at least she exuded real presence as a demon lord. At first anyway.

Is this fairy sure she should say all this, though? If certain people find out about her complaints, they could make her disappear, no? If I discovered people were talking about me this way, I could easily vaporize ’em.

“Hey, you aren’t thinking about something really rude right now, are you?”

“No? Not at all.”

Her eyes doubted me, but she was too ditzy to see through my ruse. I could see why she was on alert, though. I wanted her to summon some high-level elementals, and she was no doubt worried she’d be repeating mistakes from the past.

“Well, I promise I won’t do anything like that to you, so don’t worry about that.”

“For real? For really real?”

“I promise!”

That was the key that finally made her agree to help out. I wasn’t without my concerns about this, but I decided to just believe in her for now.

“All right. Could you take us over to the Dwelling of the Spirits, then?”

Ramiris gave me a serious and thoughtful look. Then she flew over toward the children, peering intently into their faces. I had no idea she could express herself this way, actually—with that kind of real and very non–demon lord affection.

“Mmm. You know, I’m a demon lord, but I’m also a guide for the holy. I am a fairy resident of this labyrinth, and I was also the Spirit Queen. My job is to instill the protection of the spirits into Heroes, just as I did with Leon. So don’t worry. I always play it fair with people. Because I—yes, I!—am the one who maintains the balance in this world!!”

The other elementals flitted happily around in the air. Blessed light filled the chamber. It was a very solemn, very divine series of events. Her ditziness was now gone and replaced with true dignity.

Ramiris turned to each of us and smiled. “All right. Let me help you with the summoning! Let’s see if we can get a buncha nice ones for ya!” she declared.

She began by giving me a crash course on elementals, helping me understand what they were a lot more.

Higher-level spirits had sentience; summoning them successfully was more dependent on their own whims. One way around this, however, was to siphon some energy off one of the greater elementals, creating a new high-level elemental with it.

“So, like, if you can’t call for one, you can just have a new one made?”

Ramiris gave me a broad nod. Birthing a new spirit, as she put it, eliminates a lot of unknowns from the equation. She thought she’d be able to pull that off before she ran out of time.

It wouldn’t be easy. There was the issue of compatibility with each of the children. Ideally, it’d be better to find elementals that volunteered to join their bodies…but we’d have to do what needed to be done.

I looked at the children. They all returned my gaze with firm looks.

“You guys okay with this?”

“““Yeah!”””

It was a stupid question. Now, we’d just have to try it out and believe.