

CHAPTER 1

CALMER DAYS

Long before then—long, long before the Day of Ruin unfolded—the magic-born Mjurran was off to spy on Rimuru and his town once again. Her master, the demon lord Clayman, had given the command right after she finished a delivery of a certain magic item. “Investigate these mystery magic-born,” he said. “Find any weaknesses we can exploit, and find me some intelligence we can utilize on the bargaining table.”

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The report Mjurran gave him several months ago had been quite extensive. It covered the monster town Clayman was curious about, their level of cultural advancement, and the fact that Milim had apparently become friends with the enigmatic magic-born leading them. Said magic-born was a slime, as well as the masked figure Clayman had seen in previous reports. More important than that, however, was how the dryads, the overseers of matters across the Forest of Jura, had recognized this slime as the head of an alliance between them. They were now a kind of third power in the world, one neither human nor demon lord—and that made them difficult to touch.

Clayman didn’t hide his astonishment at the news of Milim’s new friend. The fact that this weak-sounding slime was the real identity behind that masked magic-born was surprising in itself, but Milim’s behavior was unfathomable. Unthinkable. Beyond the realms of imagination. The thought of a demon lord befriending some random magic-born off the street was the height of recklessness. It did nothing but confuse him.

Mjurran didn’t mind this. She was a regular person, and she long ago concluded there was simply no comprehending the thoughts of a demon lord. There were a couple of things…okay, many things about that demon lord’s behavior that gave her pause, to be honest. But it wasn’t her job to figure out what made them tick.

So she just reported everything she saw to Clayman and gave him the unvarnished truth. He rewarded her with a broad smile. “I see,” he said. “This could prove useful. A very fascinating story, indeed.”

It came as a relief to hear. Mjurran was glad her master was pleased, but above that, she had provided him with her ace in the hole—a crystal ball, the most important magic item there was. The information it contained documented the entire battle between Charybdis and this mystery magic-born, as well as a quick sample of Milim’s own strengths. It was a priceless asset, one that elated Clayman.

Not even this, however, was enough to make Mjurran a free woman. She needed to put in an even better performance or else Clayman would remain unsatisfied. She might not have been that useful to him, but she knew full well that Clayman was not the kind of man to let an upper-level magic-born go unchecked.

But it was still a major achievement. One that successfully earned her a decent amount of trust. And being granted a solo mission was perfectly suited to Mjurran, too. If she wanted to escape Clayman, any chance to prepare away from his prying eyes was perfect. And with the demon lord’s authority on her side, she had the ability to do what she wanted without checking in with him.

Back at the monster town, Mjurran continued her surveillance.

During the demon lord Milim’s stay, she had not once engaged in magical conversation with Clayman. She hadn’t used any magic at all in the region—in fact, she’d snuck into the town while holding her breath and restraining her aura as much as possible. For much the same reason, Clayman had not contacted her. Mjurran couldn’t have asked for much more.

Milim was aware of his presence now. True, she had to be more careful than ever. Fully realizing it might already be for naught, she made every effort to stay alert during her duties. Perhaps thanks to that, nobody else had noticed her.

After a while, Milim left the monster town. What could she be doing now, and where? That went beyond Mjurran’s orders to observe the magic-born and his people. There was no need to worry about it. Now Mjurran figured she could rest a bit, as much as her continued alertness made her hesitate. She kept observing quietly—and to achieve this, she decided to take advantage of a group of humans who were now regular visitors to the town.

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It was now several months since Mjurran had given her report to the demon lord Clayman. She had been active that whole time, but Clayman had never contacted her. She’d given a report when Milim left town, but his only reply was to carry on with her mission.

She could tell his interest in her was dwindling, and she decided some brash action was called for. She was here to gather intelligence, so she thought of ways she might be able to enter town. It was that group of humans who caught her eye first.

Slowly, carefully, Mjurran gathered her information. It told her this was an armed group that engaged in business within the monster town—a group that Rimuru, that mystery magic-born, was attempting to prop up as champions of mankind. Infiltrating this group would be the perfect approach, she thought. It’d let her enter town freely and with the perfect alibi.

So she put together a plan of action. As a former human, pretending to be non-magical was child’s play for her. Right now, she was beholden to Clayman for everything, but if it meant her freedom, she was ready to do virtually anything. If something could be exploited, exploit the hell out of it—such was her way of thinking. An approach that probably rubbed off on her from Clayman, as loath as she was to admit it.

Before long, she was off to the Kingdom of Farmus, the reported destination of the human party. “My,” she said with a sigh, “human towns have certainly advanced as of late.”

Mjurran had last been a human being several centuries ago. The only towns to speak of at the time were the capitals of kingdoms, where all the royalty lived. Beyond that, you had a few villages larger than the norm, and that was it. There simply hadn’t been a lot of humans around—not as many as now.

She stayed out of sight by habit as she walked around town, in search of a certain location—the local Free Guild branch, in this territory ruled by Nidol Migam, Earl of Migam. She found it just as the sun was about to dip under the horizon. Opening the door, she saw it was crawling with ruffians of all shapes and sizes. Thickly accented voices attempting to negotiate with the front-office brokers, voices yelling at one another in hopes of raising the sale price of their goods, happier voices bragging about the lofty achievements they scored today… The din almost made her feel dizzy, but she tried to tune it out, not wanting to use her magic for it.

Then Mjurran heard someone whistling at her. One of the ruffians, no doubt, sniffing out the fragrance she typically wore to mask the smell of blood.

“Hey, look! She’s a real beauty, eh?”

“Now this is a find. What’s a lovely lady like you doin’ in a place like this, huh?”

“See this creature I bagged today? I’m gonna sell it in a bit, so how ’bout you join me at the bar and we’ll drink on the profits, eh?”

…Ugh, what a pain , Mjurran thought as she wrinkled her nose. It was beyond her why she was such a target of attention around here. Thanks to living her life in seclusion, avoiding the company of others and focusing solely on her magic research, she was wholly indifferent to her outside appearance. But between the green-tinged silver hair, the blue eyes, and the calm demeanor, the consensus was clear: This was one beautiful woman. A beautiful woman who had just stepped into a Guild branch office packed with people just barely on the right side of the law. In the evening hours, no less. The furor was only to be expected.

“So? How ’bout it, eh?”

“Sorry,” she bluntly stated, “I’ve got some business to do.”

“Aw, don’t be like that,” the man countered. “Just come here ’n’ join me for a bit!”

“Lay off me, won’t you? I told you—I’ve got business.”

For a magic-born, Mjurran was more convivial with other people than most. But not even she was magnanimous enough to let a total stranger act like her best friend out of nowhere.

“Lay off? Hell, you just walk right in here ’n’ think you’re better than all of us?”

“Ahh, quit it, Isaak. You want the guild master to yell at ya again? This ain’t a tavern. Maybe she’s got a job for the Guild, huh?”

“Pfft. Yeah, yeah.”

The man called Isaak took a step back, his eyes still squarely upon Mjurran. She nodded her thanks to the man who had stopped him, then made a beeline for the service window.

“I’d like to register, please.”

“Registration? Will that be for a general-purpose member account, then?”

“No. As an adventurer. Umm…” Mjurran paused for a moment, thinking about which department to join—retrieval, exploration, or monster slaying. Then she remembered how she used to make a regular habit of picking and preparing medicinal herbs. “…The retrieval department, please.”

“Retrieval… All right. There’s a test required, so are you ready to take it?”

“I am. What do I have to do?”

“Well, please fill this out for us first.”

Mjurran did so, offering all the information needed for the Guild to provide her identification papers. Then Isaak decided to try his luck again.

“Whoa, whoa, a woman filing to become an adventurer? Like, you aren’t by yourself, lady, are ya? I could help with the exam if you like.”

He was grinning the whole time, but the question’s real purpose was more to intimidate the rest of the adventurers in the room than anything. Even if Mjurran decided to hire some bodyguards, it’d be harder for anyone else to accept the invite now that Isaak’s hat was in the ring. Doing so would instantly make Isaak your enemy, after all, and despite his attitude, Isaak had a pretty serious rep around this Guild.

In terms of pure strength, he was on the lower end of the C rank, but that still put him near the top of the membership roll in this rural branch. Anyone with real talent for this line of work usually set up shop in the larger cities, only traveling to the hinterlands if work demanded it. This, unfortunately, gave Isaak something of a mistaken impression of himself. He thought he was one of the big men around the village, and that meant nobody was allowed to defy him.

Oh, please. I don’t feel like getting involved with these yokels. Should I just kill him, maybe?

Ending his life here would cause serious problems, but killing him covertly wouldn’t warn the others to stay away from her. Mjurran saw no merit in voluntarily becoming a murder suspect. But what to do, then?

“Hmm. I think it’d be faster if I showed off some of my skills to you.” She turned back to the Guild agent, her voice calm and composed. “Hey—I changed my mind. Instead of retrieval, I’ll join the monster-slaying department. I can take that exam on-site, can’t I?”

The agent nodded.

A little while later:

“Hee-hee! This here’s the inn, lady!”

Isaak was scared so straight by the carnage Mjurran released that—without her asking—he became her underling.

A few days later, Mjurran was already part of the regular Guild crew, taking on work and living nearby—just as she had planned it. Yohm’s team, the armed group she was targeting, would be here soon. She was waiting for them.

Isaak, for his part, was proving to be a surprisingly devoted henchman, unwittingly helping her gather more intelligence. He was used to showing people around town, which helped Mjurran catch up on customers much more quickly than otherwise. He also happened to know a great deal about Yohm and his team, which was an unexpected bonus.

Good thing I didn’t kill him after all , she mused as Isaak came to her with some pressing news.

“They’re here, lady!”

Now it was time to proceed with her plan.

The scheme Mjurran devised was fairly simple.

She had asked Franz, master of the local Free Guild branch, to introduce her to Yohm. Her work performance over the past few days was already enough to make rumors about her skill spread far and wide. Franz himself was a catalyst for this, given that he served as Mjurran’s test manager. At this point, nobody involved with the Guild was unfamiliar with her name any longer.

“I wish you’d stay with this branch permanently,” Franz even offered her. But that wasn’t part of her plans. All she wanted were those ID papers.

“I’m a pretty handy woman when it comes to magic, you know, so if this man is a true champion of the land, I would love the opportunity to serve him. I hear Sir Yohm has few magic-users among his team.”

“Ah, that’s a pity to hear. Still, you in Yohm’s party would help us out enormously, if indirectly. Very well. Rest assured that I will give you a glowing recommendation.”

Things seemed pretty well set in motion, then. Or so Mjurran thought.

Now she was holding her head in her hands.

Why did it turn out like this?

The introduction had gone well enough, at least.

“Huh? I already got a sorcerer and mysticist in Rommel and Jagi. What can some girl do for us beyond that? I’m fine, thanks!”

This out-of-hand denial riled Mjurran.

“Hmm. In that case, let me show you what an angry wizard can do.”

And she did. She, in so many words, beat the crap out of Yohm. This got her on the team, and for some reason, they were treating her as the number-two of the crew, a military adviser with the power to guide their direction, second only to Yohm himself. This put her up there with Yohm’s aide-de-camp, Kazhil, and staff officer, Rommel.

Ugh. I was hoping I could just pose as a shamaness and keep a lower profile in this group…

Maybe, Mjurran ruefully admitted to herself, she had a much shorter temper than she thought.

The day taught Yohm a lesson he had almost forgotten: Never judge a book by its cover.

They were in a largely deserted wood outside town. The only witnesses were Franz, who had introduced this woman Mjurran to him, and Isaak, a local petty adventurer.

Yohm sniffed at her. There was no way he could ever let a woman defeat him. A few of his men had joined his side, concerned and overprotective, but they were just silently watching for now.

He saw no reason why he couldn’t handle this fight by himself. After all, he was wearing the Exo-Armor Rimuru gave him, the best protection anyone could ask for. It brimmed with enough magic resistance to neutralize pretty much any threat he might come across.

Ha! I have nothing to worry about with conjurers like her. Just dash forward, close the distance, and cut her down!

It was a tactic that served Yohm well. No magic-user had ever given him much of a headache up to now.

“I would like three of you to take me on at once,” the woman called Mjurran declared. “In fact, you can all descend upon me simultaneously.”

This offer immediately made Yohm lose his self-control.

“Don’t give me that nonsense, lady! Rommel, Jagi, don’t bother going easy on her. We got potions to spare anyway. Give ’er all you’ve got!”

They both prepared to follow his order—Rommel less than enthusiastic about it all, Jagi cool as a cucumber.

It was three-on-one when Franz gave the signal to begin. No sane witness could have imagined any possible scenario where they’d lose. The moment the signal came, Yohm was immediately bathed in strengthening magic from Rommel and support magic from Jagi, both enough to make him physically feel his muscles expand to their limits. Supremely confident, he rushed toward his target—and right into a pitfall trap.

“Ah?!”

Right in front of Mjurran, just as he planted a foot down to land a lethal blow upon her, that foot fell through the ground.

“Aspectual magic: Earth Lock,” came the quiet voice as Yohm floundered. Normally, this magic was used to help the caster gain surer footing—but when used on a target trapped in a pit, it made the walls literally close in. Just as the battle started, Yohm was out of the contest.

“How on…?!”

“I’ve never seen such simple magic used in such a devious way!” marveled Rommel. One couldn’t blame him. Mjurran had used two magic spells, one to soften and muddy the ground enough to build a pitfall and a much simpler one to solidify it again. No matter how resistant to magic Yohm’s equipment was, it couldn’t do much about the ground caving in on him. It was a breathtakingly straightforward tactic, one crafted with a clear understanding of how Yohm would strike.

The two witnesses were stupefied but not enough to miss their enemy’s next few words.

“Ailment: Silence.”

“—?!”

“—!!”

That was the finisher.

“What a pitiful show.” Mjurran groaned. “Neither of you prepared any defense against ailment magic? How are you going to handle magical opponents that way…?”

She hadn’t even needed three minutes to claim victory. It all but forced Yohm to accept that she was a force to be reckoned with.

They were all at the local tavern that night, holding a small celebration to commemorate Mjurran’s induction into the group.

“Yahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha! You’re a strong woman, you are,” Kazhil managed to work in between his laughter. “Sure wasn’t expecting the boss to get trounced like that!”

“Ahhh, shut it, Kazhil. I just didn’t think it’d be so easy . Is that normally how magicians go at it, Jagi?”

“Oh, no, boss, that’s just crazy! You’ll never find a wizard who wouldn’t flinch at the sight of a skillful warrior’s sword thundering their way. You need to define a point to dig a hole at, too, so you gotta have enough courage to stand right by it to serve as the bait. I don’t think either I or anyone else would try something like that.”

“He’s right, Yohm. She must’ve planned out that whole bait job in advance. I guess Mjurran was right—sooner or later, we would’ve met our doom in a clash of magic.”

The conclusion made Yohm realize all over again how lacking their team was.

“Pfft. True enough. I can brag all day about how invincible I am, but it don’t mean a thing without results. We took you on three against one, and we still lost; I’ll admit that to ya. So, you know, I’m sorry to bother you about this, but I hope you can teach us how to fend for ourselves against magic-wielding foes.”

“Indeed,” Rommel added, “they never taught us how to fight like that at the magic academy. We did learn about taking advantage of the terrain in my legion-magic classes, but…”

“…Well, I could help you a tad, perhaps…?”

“Oh, wonderful! I’ve just got to broaden my knowledge a little. Better learn how to use my skills more effectively!”

“I’m in on this, too, yeah,” said Jagi.

“Certainly, certainly. But just a little, all right?”

“Yeah,” Yohm interjected. “Thanks a lot for puttin’ up with us.”

It felt a little shameless to him, asking Mjurran for help. But it nonetheless meant that she was part of the team now—a trusted adviser, no less.

Mjurran was starting to suspect she was a bit of an easy mark. She had infiltrated Yohm’s team in order to more fully investigate the nation of monsters in the forest, which was fine, but now she was some kind of senior official among them.

These people are so stupid. They don’t suspect for a moment I’m magic-born.

She looked down on them for that, but there was still a faint smile on her lips. Interacting with these kinds of people for the first time in quite a while was oddly exhilarating. She wanted this to continue, whether she consciously thought it or not; she wanted to enjoy this state of affairs for just a little while longer.

Then, an innocent look on her face, she went back to her usual work.

Once she’d joined Yohm’s team, Mjurran’s days suddenly became packed.

She was responsible for giving tactical advice to the party, providing in-the-field guidance on working together to fend off monsters and magical attacks. She had inadvertently admitted to them that she was a wizard, but there was no point regretting that after the fact. She couldn’t take back the words, so she resigned herself to their consequences, offering her teachings to Rommel, Jagi, and everyone else in the party at least somewhat familiar with magic.

Tactical advice was enough of a workload; magic only added to it. Simple curses were easy enough to teach others about. She was a witch, so talking about the kinds of magic available to humankind was child’s play for her. Higher-level magic, on the other hand, was a far different story. Some of it could be conjured only by magic-born. Blithely imparting everything she knew could cause serious problems for her later.

So what were humans capable of? Where did the boundary lie between what they could and couldn’t handle, magic-wise? She needed to know that before anything.

This is such a pain. Why did it turn out like this…?

She could whine about it all she wanted, but she knew full well that she had done this to herself.

As military adviser, she had one other important role: casting the deciding vote on the party’s actions. This was its own barrel of monkeys, one that required far more work than she’d anticipated.

Whenever regular reports came in via the communication crys tals installed in each village, the team’s main officers would congregate and work out their future direction. Mjurran was among them, but something about these meetings—likely the lack of intelligence among the men, she guessed—made them drag on forever without any resolution. It sorely tried her patience. They passed out these incredibly valuable magic items to all these settlements, and now they were wasting time quibbling over the silliest things thanks to them? She spoke up about all this waste, and once again, she sealed her own fate with it.

Now she was giving orders to each individual platoon, making arrangements for them and reporting directly to Yohm about them. It was all her. She didn’t understand why they were giving so much responsibility to someone brand-new to the squad, but given the lack of other qualified candidates, it was like they had just been waiting to spring all this on someone like her.

The only real decent-minded person among them was Rommel.

“Man, Mjurran, I don’t know what we could’ve done without you!”

Receiving such heartfelt thanks made it tough for Mjurran to disappoint him. Imagine , she thought, trusting a magic-born like me… I can’t believe what a pushover I am! But she never said it.

He had apparently been hired right from the magic academy by the local earl, who had tapped him to serve as his personal conjurer. He had essentially no battle experience, making it hard for him to be decisive on many matters. Until Mjurran came along, every day was a long trial-and-error process for him.

Rommel did seem to have a good head on his shoulders, though. She could practically feel him maturing as she taught him. For now, her main mission was to get Rommel up to snuff as quickly as possible so he could take her place for a change.

Once they decided on a plan of action, the team had to carry it out. They went around the villages in their territory, in order of priority, and dispatched the monsters that appeared. It was her job to juggle the adventurers stationed in each area and keep the whole operation purring.

Why do I even have to do this? This is ridiculous…

She thought she had a legitimate complaint, but as long as she had that mission to infiltrate the monsters’ country, she couldn’t quit in a huff yet. The whole plan was starting to seem like a failure, but she couldn’t bail on it now.

Through it all, days passed on as Mjurran firmed up her position on Yohm’s team. Defeating monsters, saving villages…

…This is wrong. It’s got to stop somewhere.

But even as she whined to herself about it, she also felt oddly fulfilled. Dealing with people for the first time in ages, recalling emotions she thought she’d forgotten about. And then, finally, mercifully, the group found the opportunity to head back to Tempest.

The magic-born Gruecith was joining them as a guest in their battle training.

“Argh… Boy, that old coot sure isn’t letting up today, either!”

“G-Gobta… Is that demon, er, is Sir Hakuro like this every time…?”

It astonished Gruecith, covered in welts and bruises from head to toe. Gobta, his hobgoblin companion, didn’t look much better.

“Oh, you bet he is. No joking!”

Gobta wouldn’t dare say that in front of the teacher himself. Gruecith firmly agreed, but he bit his tongue so as not to sound ungrateful. It saved the day for him.

“Ohhh? By ‘old coot,’ you wouldn’t happen to be referring to me, would you?”

“Gahhh!! M-Master, why are you—?”

“Silence, you insolent oaf! It’ll plainly be at least a hundred years before I let you call yourself a disciple of mine!”

They’d both thought he was gone, but there he was, completely concealing his presence until the last minute. His wooden practice sword swung down, faster than Gruecith could follow with his eyes, and smacked right against the crown of Gobta’s head. He was out cold in an instant, eyeballs lolling around the backs of their sockets. Gruecith watched piteously as Hakuro then dragged him off, no doubt for yet more “instruction.” All he could do was pray for his friend’s safety.

He was here in Tempest on orders from Phobio, one of the Three Lycanthropeers, to live in this nation and observe its people. Rimuru, its leader, was away from the land for the moment, but he had already given his full permission for Gruecith to be there. It was hard for him to believe the leader of Tempest was traveling the world solo, but none of his subjects had any objection to it, so he did not press for an explanation.

Right now, his priorities were pointed more toward using this opportunity to gain as much knowledge and experience as he possibly could. Along those lines, he was joining in every training session Hakuro offered him. This was per the invitation of Yohm, the first human friend he’d ever had; Gruecith hadn’t expected it to be so grueling at the time, but this session was different. The training Hakuro gave when only native Tempestians were in attendance was like nothing he had seen from him before.

This is incredible , he marveled. He was going easy up to now just so Yohm and the humans wouldn’t be ripped apart!

Yohm’s training involved a rundown of the basics with a bit of skill training mixed in, but the session they just wrapped up was almost all core foundational stuff. “Don’t expect me to teach any Arts to a bunch of weak-hearted sissies like you!” Hakuro bellowed as he bashed his pupils to bits with his practice sword in battle (Gruecith included). “You’ll have to seize them from me by force! Watch with your eyes, and stake your very lives upon learning them yourselves!”

Gruecith was at least somewhat confident in his skills when he’d joined in. Now, he wasn’t. The results were clear as day. Hakuro closed the distance between them in an eyeblink, slashing away faster than he could follow. Hence all the bruises on his body.

I might’ve died if that sword wasn’t wooden… And how could a wooden sword be so damaging to me, even?!

He was a lycanthrope and therefore gifted with natural healing abilities, but dull pain radiated from everywhere he took a blow. It was some unknown-to-him Art, perhaps, that drilled into him and made the damage cut deeper.

They had put it in different ways, but Gruecith and Gobta agreed: Hakuro was a demon beyond all comprehension. Maybe he could have survived against him for a few moments longer than the other hobgoblins. Now, though, all confidence he had in his own strength was shot.

Gruecith had taken an interest in the creatures who served under Gobta, the hobgoblins who rode the starwolves—themselves a rare evolution to see. They were called goblin riders, and they were responsible for security around town. Hakuro trained them, focusing primarily on team-oriented strategy, and they functioned as a single cohesive unit—well honed, well practiced, and moving flawlessly. If I had to tangle with them , he thought, five would likely be the most I could handle.

He hoped to invite them to the Beast Kingdom someday, as impossible as he imagined that was. Judging by the residents around town, he knew there was almost no chance they would leave their posts.

The land of Tempest was filled with warriors whose hardiness went far beyond Gruecith’s imagination. He might have been complaining about it the whole time, but Gobta, his partner in training, was keeping up with every step Hakuro the ogre mage took. That in itself made him formidable. And he was hardly alone. Rigur, head of the security patrol, was even stronger than Gobta. The dragonewts Gruecith occasionally caught sight of seemed just as daunting to him. He had spotted several powered-up high orcs among the ones who served as Tempest’s combat engineers. One among them, named Geld, even looked and acted every bit like a reincarnation of an orc lord. Taking that guy on, Gruecith gave himself a fifty-fifty chance. It was his battle to lose.

Last but not least came the ogre mages. Approach one, and their strength was obvious. In his own mind, Gruecith figured he could defeat Kurobe the blacksmith and Shuna, that fetching young lass. Beyond that, he had no confidence at all. The other four ogre mages, his instincts told him, he couldn’t even scratch.

Gruecith might have been on the low end of the Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance totem pole, but even he could tell there was something unnatural about this. His instincts on that score—judging by the thrashing Hakuro just gave him—were right.

What in the hell? This entire town is sheer madness! I mean, they could even take on my homeland in battle, couldn’t they?!

He had to breathe a sigh of relief. His master, the demon lord Carillon, was absolutely right not to challenge Tempest to war.

Yohm’s team returned to town a few days later.

“Hey. Doing well?”

Gruecith smiled back at Yohm. “I am. Glad to see you are, too.” But what struck his interest the most was the beautiful woman among them. “So, who is that?”

“Oh? I didn’t think magic-born like you cared about women.”

“Don’t be stupid! All magic-born aren’t the same, you know. Lycanthropes like us are closer to demi-humans than full-on magic-born. It’s not uncommon for some of us to mate with humans and produce offspring, too.”

“Really, now? Well, here’s a word of advice for you: Don’t you dare cross that woman. I did, and lemme tell ya, I paid dearly for it.”

“What? Of all the ridiculous things to say…!”

This threw Gruecith. Yohm the champion, defeated by a woman who couldn’t look more out of place on a battlefield? It was a difficult story to swallow.

“Would you like to try your luck, then?”

“Ha! I like that! No point trying too hard for this one. Let me at her!”

Gruecith’s behavior was fairly easy to predict. A challenge like that , he’d never turn down.

So they traveled to the usual training ground, and Yohm brought with him the woman—his new military adviser, apparently.

“Why do I have to go through with this charade?” she asked, looking seriously reluctant.

“Oh, it’s nothing big, Mjurran. I just want you to show this guy how strong you are.”

“Yes, and I told you, I don’t see why I have to.”

“There’s a good reason for it! He’s already put you down. I hate it when people put my team down!”

Gruecith gave Yohm an exasperated look as he sized up the woman. Hmm. Mjurran’s her name? She sure is a sight to see. But why’s that bastard Yohm trying to trick me? There was a kind, gentle air about her. Strong wouldn’t describe it at all. He couldn’t believe the thought of her defeating Yohm.

After a few more pleas to his cohort, Yohm at last turned toward Gruecith and smiled.

“Heh-heh! I finally convinced her. Gruecith, if you can beat this lady, I promise I’ll serve as your lackey forever. But if she beats you…you’ll have to be my gofer!”

“What?! What kind of nonsense are you spouting now ?”

“Oh, don’t like your chances?”

“…You think so? Well, you’re on. You’re gonna be the one calling me ‘boss’ in a few moments!”

He accepted the bait all too quickly.

“Listen,” interrupted Mjurran, “you’re probably looking down on me because I’m a woman, aren’t you? It feels ridiculous being the subject of a bet like this, but I’ll be happy to spar with you. But let me warn you: I’m a wizard, so I hope you’ll fight me appropriately!”

“A wizard, eh? You sure you should be giving me so many details before combat even begins? Of course, with that getup, it’s pretty easy to picture you as a conjurer.”

The term wizard referred to those adept in at least three different systems of magic. It implied talent in these dark arts far greater than your run-of-the-mill sorcerer or mysticist. The magic they wielded was as diverse as it was powerful—several times more so, it was said, than the attack magic of a typical conjurer. What Mjurran had just said, in effect, was that she was a well-seasoned, battle-tested magic expert.

Gruecith got the hint—and it made him respect her more. But he still didn’t take any special precautions. A higher-level magic-born like him had intrinsic magic resistance, and as long as limbs weren’t flying off him, his Self-Regeneration skill could heal most wounds. Anything short of lethal magic could be safely ignored.

Plus , he thought, if she can cast magic powerful enough to kill me in one stroke, she’ll need a vast amount of time to chant the spell. Conjurers like her leave themselves wide open—I can just finish her off then.

It was the exact same thought process Yohm had gone through back in the day. The results were similarly predictable.

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“Baaahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha! Woudja look at that!”

Gruecith found himself bitterly looking upward as Yohm held his stomach and laughed for a good long while.

Damn it…!! How’s this even happening?!

His cheeks were red with embarrassment, not half because he was buried up to chest level in the ground. It took a lot to keep from crying.

“I know I probably should have begun with this,” he told Mjurran a bit later, “but my name is Gruecith. Perhaps it did not show very much earlier, but I am a lycanthrope and upper-level magic-born. And by that, I don’t intend to suggest I could have won if I transformed, let me assure you.”

They exchanged a few pleasantries with each other—pleasantries filled with sarcasm and excuses, although it would’ve sounded innocent enough to the impartial observer.

“Well, you two keep gettin’ along, all right? So, Gruecith, about the promise earlier?”

“Mm? Ah. Right. Yohm, from now on, I promise I will call you ‘boss.’ The demon lord Carillon is the only master I will ever truly devote myself to, but I see no reason not to show respect to someone I view as above me.”

“You sure about that? ’Cause I really meant it more as a joke to motivate you than anything…”

“It’s fine; it’s fine. But if I may be honest, if Lord Carillon ordered me to kill you, I would not hesitate for a single moment. My apologies, but that is how the rules operate between us.”

“Fair enough. I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

At least Gruecith was honest as he lived up to his end of Yohm’s bet. He had to appreciate the lycanthrope’s devotion to his promises.

“In that case, I’m going to join your band as well. I’m pretty used to things around town by now, and I’d like to see some other human nations while I’m at it.”

“You sure ’bout that?”



“I am.” Gruecith laughed as he pulled himself out of the hole in the ground, grinning. “My job here is to explore the world. I’m allowed to do whatever I wish until ordered otherwise.”

But now someone was stealthily approaching them.

It was none other than Gobta.

Hee-hee-hee… I saw them. If she can do that…

He was plotting and planning as he interrupted the pleasant atmosphere surrounding the group. “I saw that battle just now! What a marvel! I am astounded . I simply fell in love with that lady’s moves, I did! And that’s why I hope I can ask a favor of her.”

He smiled eerily. Yohm and Gruecith both knew him well enough to grasp what this meant. He was scheming something again. Mjurran, on the other hand, raised a quizzical eyebrow at him.

“Ah, Mjurran, this is Gobta. He’s…um, well, you could say he’s a force all his own around here.”

“Hee-hee-hee! No, I’m really not.”

“No, seriously, Gobta here’s a real performer,” volunteered Gruecith. “He let that demon instructor beat the daylights out of him just now, but he always comes back for more.”

“Ooh yeah, that was rough earlier…”

Gobta modestly turned away a bit before remembering what he was here for. His face stiffened.

“So, um, there’s someone I’d like you to defeat, lady, using that same tactic. That demon—um, I mean, that old coot, um, I mean our sage instructor always goes around acting like he’s king of the world, y’see? So—”

Yohm and Gruecith nodded their recognition. Gobta lowered his voice, looking around in case anyone was eavesdropping.

“I’ll help you with this, Mjurran. If we can beat him, that’ll force him to treat us with some respect, at least. Besides, I’d love to see how the guy’d react to that.”

“Indeed,” Gruecith agreed, “it is an excellent strategy. Even an ogre mage would be helpless!”

So Mjurran, outnumbered three to one, reluctantly agreed to the request. “But can we make this the last time, please?” she begged. “Something that simple isn’t guaranteed to work every time.”

“Oh, it’ll be fine! The old man’s a swordsman, fighting at close ranges. He prides himself on his speed. He’s got to fall for it!”

“Yeah! He acts like he’s sooo superior to us hobgoblins, so I wanna make him pay for it for a change!”

“It was enough to trick even me, after all. A close-range battle, reliant on quick footwork like that, would be much harder if the trap was sprung in the right place.”

That trick worked , Mjurran said to herself, because you’re too simpleminded to spot it. It can’t put up with that much heavy use.

“But,” she pleaded, “what pretext should I challenge him with?”

“Hmm… Any excuse should do,” ventured Gobta. “Just tell him you want more instruction on dealing with magic-castin’ foes.”

“So this should be a scrimmage, then, not a real battle?”

“That’s fine, isn’t it? It’ll just be one strike. Tell him whoever hits first wins, and I’m sure he’ll be fine with it.”

“Indeed, Yohm. Magic resistance plays no part in those rules—land a spell upon him, and you win. If he touches you first, he wins. A test of speed, you could say.”

“…Um, do you really think I’ll be willing to accept those rules? That puts conjurers at an enormous disadvantage. How can someone like that compete in speed with a swordsman who’s clearly faster than they are?”

“…Ooh yeah,” Gobta admitted.

“Accepting restrictions on your own abilities when you don’t know what your opponent’s capable of is like signing your own death certificate.” Mjurran sighed.

To her, serious-minded at heart, Gobta’s poorly thought-out ideas were enough to give her a headache. Suggesting rules like that was all but advising her foe to expect a trap of some sort. All the men here were too boneheaded to pick up on that.

“All right,” said Yohm. “So Mjurran doesn’t fight. We just want ’im to accept that you’re good with magic, y’know? So since Gobta suggested this first, maybe we can use him as bait.”

“A fine idea. He would certainly accept a challenge from the hobgoblin.”

Gobta began to dislike the direction this was going. “H-hold on a second!” he barked. Yohm and Gruecith were too busy working out the plan to listen. It’d be hard to bow out at this point. Having Mjurran fight for him seemed like it’d bear positive results, but if it was his neck on the line, that gave him pause.

Oh no… If I mess this up, I’ll be in big trouble, won’t I? I guess I’ll have to help think up a more serious plan…

“All right, guys. I have an idea. First, I challenge him to battle. When I do, I want you to put pitfalls in a big circle around us!”

“From that distance, a safer bet would be to liquefy the soil and keep him from moving.”

“How will that work?”

Mjurran liquefied a small patch next to her to demonstrate the process to Gobta. He took a step, then marveled as his foot went right in with a ploop , resisting his efforts to pull it out.

“Ooh, this oughtta work!”

That was the end of their deliberations.

“Right,” Mjurran said. “So my role here is to wait for the battle-start signal and transform the earth. Is that it?”

“Right you are!” Gobta beamed.

Now they just had to pull it off.

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“So will I receive an explanation for this?”

Gobta, Yohm, and Gruecith had been made to kneel on the bare ground. Mjurran stepped up to join them, but Hakuro shooed her off with a wave and a grandfatherly smile. “You are fine,” he said. “I’m sure these fools before me instigated it, did they not?”

“But I couldn’t just—”

“Oh, think nothing of it. They got caught in your trap, so they reasoned that it’d have to work on me as well, no? It was an impressive spell, but their eyes telegraphed it from the start.”

Mjurran sighed. She’d seen it coming the whole time, too.

After settling on their plan, the group had called their teacher, the elder Hakuro. That much, at least, went well enough. One look at the man was enough to make Mjurran recall that he split a megalodon in half with a single swipe. Between his foreboding demeanor and the sheer sense of presence, she already predicted doom for this silly prank. Had this been a no-holds-barred battle, she would have immediately suggested a hasty retreat—but this was just a game, and she reasoned that being defeated would help her cohorts mature a bit.

It’s not going to work, I’m sure, but it might be a good idea to see for myself how this Hakuro character fights.

So she agreed to join in.

“Excellent!” Hakuro bellowed when asked. “That’s the spirit, lads! I will base it on real battle situations for the first time in a while. All three of you, take me on at once! And will the new woman be joining us? She seems to be a magic-user, yes?”

“Whoa, you old—I mean, sage master! Don’t count us out too early!”

“Listen to the hobgoblin, sir. Ya sure you aren’t being a little too confident for your own good?”

“Heh-heh-heh! As your guest, I thought it rude to horn in too much on the fun…but after what you just said, I suppose I’ll have to go all in, won’t I?”

The sight of the entire trio latching on to Hakuro’s goading made Mjurran modify a key part of her prediction. This was doomed even before the battle began. I have much to teach them after this…

Despite her complaining, she was used to being Yohm’s military adviser—really, anything adviser at this point. She was as strong and responsibly minded as ever, and she opted to just smile and treat this as a learning opportunity for her group.

Once things began unfolding, the match turned out just as wretched as she predicted. Liquefying the ground around him did nothing to slow Hakuro down.

“Geh! Why’s he moving like normal?!”

Mjurran had laid out her magic in a circle around the area, dispelling it just enough to create a path for the panicking Gobta to escape through. As she did, she defined a position for her pitfall and set it in place. Hakuro acted like it wasn’t there, as if running on thin air.

Ahh, he must have noticed. But nothing would change if he didn’t. That looks a lot like Instantmove to me.

That was one of the more difficult skills in the arsenal of Battlewill, a set of Arts that only the most talented could ever hope to master. Seeing it unleashed so effortlessly made Mjurran fully aware of just how pointless her tricks were.

“Tch! Over here, old man!”

But Yohm pressed on, revealing his position with a shout as he slashed at his foe. He was being read like a book. Gobta, to his credit, tried to tumble his way back to safety. He was rewarded with a wooden sword to the forehead.

“Not again…” He groaned as he sunk into the ground. Yohm joined him shortly—not to rescue him, exactly, but the real reason didn’t matter much anymore. Hakuro was just too fast. Before Yohm could even stick the follow-through, Gobta was down and Hakuro was behind him.

“Whoa?! I didn’t even see—”

“Fools.”

One strike later, Yohm was down.

If the liquefaction trick didn’t work, the original idea called for Yohm and Gobta to distract their foe while Gruecith snuck in a surprise attack. That proved a similar waste of time. Before Gruecith even realized what Yohm wanted him to do, Hakuro had defeated both his teammates.

And, in the midst of all this, Mjurran looked on at this beautiful demonstration of athletic ability. It required Magic Sense; the naked eye couldn’t keep up fast enough to let her understand what was going on. And she wasn’t just looking. She had the spell cast in advance to keep her magic-born roots a secret.

Still… If you’re going to challenge a foe who requires Magic Sense just to keep your eyes on him, the only thing that’d work is ranged magic covering a wider area. That wasn’t available here, so this was over before it began.

Really, any magic that required casting time wouldn’t do a thing against a target coursing at supersonic speed. For a wizard, tackling a foe like that would require racking several spells in advance, chanting them beforehand so they could be summoned with a deftly woven trigger during battle. That, or using Cast Cancel.

But even if I used Cast Cancel on my own, it’d only work up to midlevel magic. Any serious attempt might be doomed to fail…

Mjurran’s body contained more of the magicules that provided energy for all her spells, but trying to outclass him in strength seemed like a struggle to her. The sight of it all unfolding did make this nonsense seem worth it to her, though. Hakuro was targeting Gruecith, not the cautious Mjurran. Before neutralizing the magic-caster, he first wanted to defeat the biggest obstacle out of the group. In other words, Hakuro didn’t consider her magic to be an impediment.

A bit insulting, but so be it. Sir Hakuro could likely handle anything I could throw at him, here in my human form. I wish I could have hit him with something , though…

Following her pregame analysis, Mjurran had prepared three small explosive spells, meant to be triggered in a staggered arrangement. The first went off before Hakuro’s eyes as he struck down Gruecith—not a lethal bomb but a blindness strike that plunged the two of them into darkness.

“Ngh?!”

It was enough to produce a surprised grunt from Hakuro. But he pressed right on, unwavering. Gruecith had a keen enough sense of smell that blindness wouldn’t affect him in battle—that was the whole backbone behind this plan—but Hakuro didn’t rely on that sense much, either.

So much for that. Can he read people’s presences, or…?

Of course, Mjurran had guessed in advance that blindness wouldn’t slow him. Without flinching, she launched her second magic. This was a Flashbang, a spell that created a flash of light and a deafening noise to paralyze the target’s sight and hearing. It was one of her antihuman spells, effective in or out of doors, and she expected the blindness bomb would only accentuate the effect.

And again, she was right. Just before the magic took effect, she saw Hakuro edge backward for a brief moment in his darkness. He was within point-blank range of the light and noise, but he paid it no attention at all as he sprang back into action.

I knew it…! I suppose Hakuro knows Magic Sense as well…

The reaction to that Flashbang was something shown only by those who could read the flow of magic—the movements of magicules. The blast itself, too, had no impact on him whatsoever. Just like Mjurran, he based his decisions in battle off Magic Sense. That meant he could read all magic before it happened, and that meant Mjurran would’ve had to bust out the big guns immediately if she wanted to impact this fight at all.

Ignoring her and tackling Gruecith first was an extremely sensible decision. She had focused on keeping him safe from status ailments rather than trying to cast magic directly herself, but Magic Sense made all that moot. The operation was upended at its very roots.

If anything, it hurt Mjurran’s ego, seeing her magic be so dismissively tossed aside like that. That was no fun , she thought. I was never too enthusiastic about this, but if he thinks he can pick on a wizard, let me show him what that costs!

So she turned her eyes toward Gruecith—and then she lost all interest.

“Arrrhhh! My—my eyes; my ears!!”

“What are you doing , you fool?!”

She could be excused for yelling at her comrade. That Flashbang had been pointed in a single direction. It shouldn’t have affected Gruecith that badly. The idiot must have stared right at it. She told them all beforehand what magic she intended to use. She could conclude only that Gruecith was the kind of lycanthrope who, if you told him not to do something, would immediately try that out first.

Mjurran threw her arms up in surrender. This is just ridiculous. I thought the way lycanthropes are so stupidly straightforward with people would make them easy to use. But it’s the exact opposite, isn’t it?

“If that did nothing to you, then we have lost. I doubt Gruecith will make any further contributions to our cause.”

“Ho-ho-ho! You are quick to read the tides of battle, my good lady—at least, much more than this rotten trio. So you will not use your final spell?”

“No. I doubt it would make any difference.”

The final spell was Sleep Mist, her trump card. Putting Hakuro fully to sleep was likely impossible, but if she could slow his thought process just a bit as he locked swords with Gruecith, that would provide just the chip in the armor into which to potentially drive the sword of victory. Even if it didn’t, Mjurran figured the surprise factor would throw off his game.

But the sight of Gruecith vaguely sort of floating atop the liquefied soil drained her will to continue. So she sighed and unraveled the spell.

“…Their eyes telegraphed it from the start.”

Mjurran rolled her eyes when he said it just now. All the prep work she’d done to ensure the magic could never be spotted, and Gobta and Gruecith had their eyes on the ground the whole time. There you go, then , she thought with a sigh. It’s all but opening your mouth and telling him, “Ohhh, hey, something’s here.” Yohm was stout enough to resist the urge, at least, but he’s only human. Nothing from him would work on Hakuro.

“Ho-ho-ho! You may be a fine strategist, my lady, but without a keen insight into your allies’ personalities, one can never hope for truly effective teamwork. No hastily put-together team could ever defeat me.”

Mjurran nodded at the condolences. “It’s been a lesson for me, yes. I’d like to begin by examining them further in depth.”

“Mm. Yes. A good idea.” Hakuro nodded, then turned to his three kneeling opponents. “So may I suggest you answer me now? Before I decide to switch blades from wood to metal?”

The avuncular smile he’d given Mjurran was a thing of the past. Now he was back in full demonic form.

“Pah!”

“Whoa?!”

“Waaaaaait!”

Three hours later, they were still there, legs numb from all the kneeling. Hakuro was making them stay until he was damn sure they wouldn’t pull any more malarkey like that. Mjurran gave them a passing glance as she returned to her bedroom, promising herself that she’d never join them on a “plan” like this again.

“Now, I say this just in case, mind you, but promise me you won’t try to ‘test’ Sir Rimuru like that, please?”

“What’re you talking about?” Gobta pleaded to the rather concerned-looking Hakuro. “No way any of that would work on Sir Rimuru!”

“…Oh? Because, to be honest with you, I think it might have more than an outside chance of working…”

“Ha-ha-ha! Come on, Gramps. Don’t you think you’re worrying too much? Someone like Rimuru, he’s not about to fall for a trick play!”

“Hopefully not,” Hakuro said. “If he did, we would all be in trouble.”

His three pupils shuddered at the thought.

“Y-yeah… We weren’t planning to, but definitely not now , no.”

“Gobta said it. He and that other girl, too. The violent one.”

“You mean Shion?” Gobta asked. “Or, wait, not Mili—”

“Whoa, stop right there, Gobta.”

The hobgoblin nodded at the panicked-looking Yohm. Gruecith failed to follow this conversation but understood well enough that he should stay out of it. A smart move, although he may not have realized it.

“All right,” Hakuro gravely intoned. “Soei is too prudent to fall for that, but Sir Rimuru and Sir Benimaru… They have their quirks, shall we say? Sir Rimuru seems to be restraining his Magic Sense, too, to some extent.”

“Why’s he doing that, sir?” asked Gobta.

“Who knows,” Yohm replied, looking at him. “I couldn’t even guess how that Magic Sense stuff works.”

“Well,” interjected Gruecith, “I certainly see why Lord Carillon accepted Rimuru as an equal. Placing limiters upon his own strengths like that… A constant, never-ending cycle of training!”

“Huh?!”

“Wow, is that it? Boy, Sir Rimuru sure is great!”

“Huh. Man, his mind works on a whole different plane from ours, eh?”

This, along with Hakuro’s later approval, led to a new fad around Tempest where monsters deliberately limited the release of their skills to better hone them. It had nothing to do with Rimuru, but if he were around, they hoped he would approve.

All that slogging through liquefied soil and getting rapped soundly by swords had made the three of them very muddy. It wasn’t long before they discussed entering the town’s famous bathing facilities together.

“Boy,” Gobta observed, “that lady sure knows how to use her magic. She’s pretty, too!”

“Yeah, ain’t she? And she’s got personality, too. It ain’t just looks.”

“I have no argument with that. Her name is Mjurran, right? It’d be nice if she could give birth to my child…”

“Whoa there, Gruecith. Ya can’t go talking like that. She’s one of my officers.”

“What does that have to do with anything, Yohm? When it comes to romance, I’m free to do whatever I want. First come, first served.”

“Wow, really? I’ll keep that in mind!”

“Don’t you start, Gobta!”

Gruecith snickered at the wailing Yohm. “Maybe I should talk to her myself, hmm?”

“Damn it, Gruecith, I go first! I’m your boss!”

“Are you crazy? I just told you: Romance is all about freedom!”

“Yeah, Yohm!”

It was turning into quite a heated argument by the time they reached the bathhouse. The moment they washed off and settled into the hot bath, Gobta’s eyes began to emit a sinister twinkle once more. “I just remembered Kabal said something to me when he was here last,” he began. “They say there are some baths in the world with a ‘mixed gender’ rule. He said Sir Rimuru told him about it… And, you know, Sir Rimuru’s word is law, isn’t it?”

“Hang on, Gobta. If that’s an order from Rimuru himself, then we gotta make sure it’s enforced, yeah?”

“Uh-huh! I think so, too!”

“What? Gobta, what do you speak of? Tell me more of this…mixed genders.”

“Hee-hee-hee! You like it, too, huh, Gruecith? Well, it’s like this…”

He went over the topic in detail, growing more excited with every syllable.

“So you mean…not only Mjurran but Lady Shuna and Shion as well…?”

“You gotta be kiddin’ me, Gobta. I had no idea those were the rules around here!”

The pleasant sensation of the hot mountain-spring soak was putting the trio’s minds at great ease. It also raised their voices high, their schemes echoing around the chamber.

Not all of it bounced back, however. Some of the sound waves wriggled their way right through the wall—and into the ears of Shuna and Shion, who had invited Mjurran to enjoy the women’s bath with them.

“I wonder if we should develop a potion to banish the stupid from their minds?”

“Do not worry, Lady Shuna. I will beat it out of them until they cry for mercy and their willpower is retempered!”

“I’ll be glad to help,” Mjurran added.

Records, sadly, did not exist to say what happened to the men afterward.

“Mjurran, can we have a talk?”

Several weeks had passed, enough time for Mjurran to get fully used to life with Yohm and his crew, when her leader spoke to her.

“Certainly. What about?”

“Not… here , if you don’t mind.”

“Oh?”

That struck her as odd, but not queer enough to turn down his request. She followed Yohm out of town and toward a deserted patch of forest.

Hmm? Uh-oh. Did he find out who I am? I don’t sense any traps or ambushes up ahead…

The rest of Yohm’s team was still garrisoned in town; Mjurran knew all their exact positions. She didn’t much like the look Yohm had exchanged with Gruecith when he called her to him, but it still seemed like her cover was safe.

So what is it, then…?

She remained baffled right up to the entrance into Forest of Jura land.

“Have we walked enough, then? What is—?”

“Mjurran!”

The interruption made warning flags shoot up in her mind. No! Really?! So had he found out after all? Had he told anyone else yet? Or was Yohm the only one to ferret her out so far? Either way, she had to come up with urgent countermeasures before—

“I love you! I swear: I fell in love with you the first time my eyes met yours!”

Her mind stopped.

…What?! What did he say?

“Huh?”

Assorted questions popped in and out of her mind, but that was the only response she could muster. Simply returning Yohm’s gaze took all her mental fortitude.

Looking back, Mjurran had always felt a pair of eyes upon her. It was true ever since she’d infiltrated his force. It belonged to Yohm, and when their eyes met, she found herself averting hers out of awkwardness several times. It made her a tad nervous, perhaps wondering why he was so watchful of her. But maybe her misgivings were really about something else entirely.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I promise I’ll make you a happy woman. I promise!”

The sheer frankness of the confession made Mjurran’s cheeks flush. The last time she was (chronologically) a young woman, it was a good seven centuries ago. Her memories of it were vague at best. No memories of anyone else back then. To her, romance was a completely novel experience. Unexplored land.

Anxiety won out over happiness in her head. That, and:

…He’ll make me a happy woman? The demon lord Clayman’s used Marionette Heart to make me his personal puppet. If I can’t get my real heart back, I can never be free—and there’s no way to do that. And how could a human ever love me? They all die far too quickly…

So she opted to delay her response. The logical part of her brain told her to say no and get on with life, but somehow, she didn’t quite have the courage for that. Four hundred years of life as a magic-born, and it was the first time she had ever felt so anxious about herself.

Even after the confession, life went on as usual.

Yohm was usually fairly shallow personality-wise, but—perhaps out of respect for her feelings—he made no further advance upon Mjurran. The feeling was no doubt mutual. Whether circulating around villages on monster hunts or relaxing back at town, Yohm showed concern for her, but he never did anything to squeeze a reply out of her.

I… What should I even do? As long as Clayman lives and breathes, there’s no way his dream could ever come true…

Somewhere along the line, Mjurran began to have daydreams of herself more closely united with Yohm. The logical part of her brain denied it could ever be a possibility, but she just couldn’t bring herself to abandon the thought. Her mind gradually began to open itself to it, enthralling her so deeply that she didn’t even notice Gruecith staring at her, a troubled, lonely expression on his face.

Life was good—and now, within a week’s time, it would be destroyed.

“It has been a while, Mjurran. Are you doing well?”

The magical communiqué from Clayman arrived out of the blue. It made her panic a bit.

“L-Lord Clayman! What motivates you to contact me?”

To her, Clayman was unworthy of her loyalty. If she could, she’d murder him in his sleep. She didn’t because it was so obvious to both parties that she’d fail.

The last time she’d reported back to him, Clayman had been in oddly high spirits. The same was true this time. Mjurran’s instincts sounded the alarm. It creeped her out. Clayman almost never showed emotion to his underlings—if he was so obviously enjoying himself now, things must be going exactly the way he wanted. It did not seem like good news to her—and it wasn’t.

“Thanks to the intel you provided me,” Clayman told the cautious Mjurran, “things are going quite well over here. You’ve done a superb job. Why, I’m even starting to think it’s time to return this heart in my hand and set you free.”

Mjurran paused, confused at the proposal. For just a moment, Yohm’s face appeared in her mind. She could feel her spirit leap with excitement, but she still managed to keep her voice calm. Clayman must never learn of her true feelings. He was a demon lord, a devious Marionette Master perfectly willing to deceive his own servants.

“Thank you very much, sir. This sudden suggestion is quite a surprise to me. Does this mean you no longer require my services?”

“Haaa-ha-ha-ha! Ah, you never change, Mjurran. There is hardly any need for such modesty. Why would I ever want to do away with such a talented pawn? I do hope you’ll still be able to serve a role for me, yes.”

“I see. I am glad to hear—”

“Mjurran,” the demon lord quietly interjected before she could finish her wary answer. “There is no need for alarm. I simply want you to perform one final piece of work for me. You won’t turn me down, will you? I’m sure you aren’t ready to die yet, and I’m sure you don’t want to see the man you love die before your eyes!”

She could feel the blood drain from her head.

“I—I have no love for…?!”

“For any man, is it? You give me far too little credit, Mjurran. All you have to do is follow my orders, and everything will be fine. I showed you the sweet dream of release there; I wouldn’t mind a little appreciation for that. Just sit tight until I provide your orders, if you could?”

Then he shut off the link.

Mjurran, sadly, had nothing to counter with. No matter how unhappy it made her or anyone else, the only road to salvation was to serve him. The only thing that remained in her heart was the demon lord’s final words: “When it is all over, I will release you. Your dream of living with the man you love may not be a dream before long.”

Was this a trap?

—No, it had to be one. But all Mjurran could do was trust in his words. If she ever doubted them, it’d lead to potential tragedy for both Yohm and her. Far better for her to just do what Clayman said and hope for another passing whim in her favor.

Just as it always was, the only option available for Mjurran was to wait for her orders. But if it really did lead to her release—

Could I ever really accept him?

She had to explore the thought, no matter how much she knew it was unforgivable.

If this dream can come true, it’ll likely mean selling my soul to the devil.

It was settled. Mjurran was resolute now. And then, as if nothing had just happened, she was back in action.