PROLOGUE

THE LIGHTSPEED HERO

Masayuki Honjo is a Hero. It wasn’t a name he gave himself, but for whatever reason, that is what the people he encounters call him.

It hadn’t even been a year since he came to this world that made no sense to him. But already, Masayuki’s name had spread across the Western Nations; now, nobody failed to recognize it. And his true, unvarnished reaction to this was: Why did this happen?

To find the answer, we must go back over a year’s time.

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Masayuki was on his way home from school, walking with his friends, when he spotted a beautiful woman with long blue hair. She was like a goddess from Norse mythology, one who would make models and celebrities turn pale, and her hair color was striking enough that it caught his eye even from a distance. If Masayuki had never seen anyone so beautiful before, it was a given that she’d also be the target of attention from everyone else around her.

“Hey, check out that hottie over there,” he said to his friends, being as honest with his feelings as any male teenager would. But there was no response. Surprised, he turned around—to find a totally unfamiliar world spread before him.

“…Huh?”

His body, and his brain, instinctively froze.

Wh-where’s my teacher?! What’s going on here?!

He treated his homeroom teacher like an idiot most of the time, but he called for them inside his mind anyway. It accomplished nothing. All he could do was stand there, at a total loss.

Sitting at the lip of a fountain in a town square, Masayuki stared into space. Some time had passed; he was calmer now, realizing nothing could be done and wondering how this could have happened. Looking back, that woman was terribly suspicious—that much of a beauty, but for some reason, nobody gave her a passing glance. It wasn’t exactly decisive evidence, but that’s what Masayuki’s instincts told him.

But the girl wasn’t here. He tried looking around, but there was no sign of her anywhere.

Doesn’t the girl causing something like this usually come with you? I mean…like, holy crap, is this for real? It’s not some prank? I’m really off in some other world?

It would certainly make things easier to grasp if someone in on all this was next to him. But Masayuki enjoyed no such convenience.

It was almost sunset. He hadn’t eaten anything since lunch, and he was hungry. Wait a minute, he thought. This is a town. He counted himself lucky they hadn’t transported him to a forest or monster lair or whatever, but how unkind could you get?

“Like, normally, wouldn’t a king or someone be waiting for me to explain what the hell’s going on?” he grumbled to himself, recalling the web novels he enjoyed chatting about with his friends. But reality can be tough.

There was no point whining about it, so Masayuki looked back at himself once more. His name was Masayuki Honjo, age sixteen, and he had just made it into a fairly competitive high school. He’d taken that occasion to reinvent his look, modifying his school uniform a bit and applying a light-blond dye to his hair. His face was well put together; there was apparently some Russian blood in their heritage, and his mother had beautiful good looks as well. That was probably why his features were so striking, he thought. Not only that, going blond made him stand out quite a bit. He was on the upper end in terms of popularity at school, and despite not being too physically strong, he still struck a presence around class.

That, and he had a secret hobby: manga and anime. He never breathed a word of that at school, but practically speaking, he was a pretty hard-core (if hidden) otaku. Maybe that was why, being thrown into this inexplicable situation, he really wasn’t panicking that much…

As he took all this into consideration, he checked his uniform and his bag. In one pocket was his wallet, which contained one 10,000-yen bill, three 1,000-yen bills, and some spare change. His textbooks and such were all in his desk or locker at school, so the only things in his bag were a brand-new issue of a weekly magazine, plus his phone and a piece of chewing gum. He had emptied it out at school so it wouldn’t be too heavy on the way home, and he was paying big-time for it now.

Man. Masayuki sighed to himself as he gauged his possessions. If I knew this was gonna happen, I woulda prepared a little more…

His disaster-preparedness kit, tucked into a corner of his room, had everything he would’ve wanted inside. If he’d had it with him, he’d be fine on his own for around three days, he supposed. Having a Swiss Army knife on hand, at the very least, would’ve made him feel a bit more secure, although he wasn’t sure how far a knife would get him around here. Either way, he had nothing very useful on him, except maybe the gum. Masayuki unwrapped the piece and put it in his mouth, hoping to stave off the hunger. Now, the sad truth was that he had literally nothing.

Over the past few hours of staring into space, Masayuki had noticed something. The people passing by, talking around him, spoke what sounded like complete gibberish. This was a different world, with a different language, and even getting food could be an uphill battle.

They ramped up the difficulty way too much on me, man…but oh well. At worst, I could try negotiating with people. Maybe trade my phone and bag for some food…

His mind made up, Masayuki stood from the fountain. He couldn’t be sure what this nation was like in terms of laws or safety, but he concluded that, if there was some kind of public institution he could get help from, that was probably the best. Before that could happen, his top priority was survival—and that meant getting some food, at any cost. Not knowing the language was devastating, and right now, he could easily see himself starving to death. Water, he could figure out; food was another thing entirely.

The concept didn’t thrill him, but maybe he could go look for discarded scraps somewhere. He needed to find a place with lots around—restaurants, produce stores, that sort of thing. He’d already over the past few hours disposed of any pride he had. Masayuki was flexible that way.

So after walking for several minutes, Masayuki successfully found himself in front of a restaurant. It was no grand feat; he simply let the sweet aroma guide him there.

Right. Time to negotiate. I’m assuming asking for a job isn’t gonna work. I can’t even talk with them…

The language barrier was just too high. Masayuki had consumed a lot of media in the isekai or “otherworld” genre, and it felt to him that the protagonists there often didn’t have problems with communication. Looking back, that seemed suspiciously helpful.

I’m not asking for some kind of video-game cheat or whatever, but I wish they at least allowed me to communicate…

But there was no one he could grumble about it to, so Masayuki approached the restaurant door, trying to open it. Before he could, it opened from the other side, revealing a loud clamor within.

“?!”

Masayuki took a step back in surprise and found something soft come running into his arms: a cute, petite girl looking a little scared of something.

Huh? Am I already in trouble here…?

He hoped not, but he was right.

“?…?!”

The girl was now clinging to him, talking rapidly in an unknown language. All Masayuki could do was give her a vague sort of smile and nod. Seeing that, the girl quickly breathed a sigh of relief—and then, for some reason, started to blush, her attention entirely focused on him. If it ended there, it would have been fine, but—of course—it didn’t. There was a man nearby, a big, muscle-bound brute of a man, and he was headed straight for the woman in Masayuki’s arms.

Whoa, if this goes wrong, he might kill me…

Masayuki couldn’t be blamed for instinctively thinking that. He was a bit over five and a half feet tall, and this giant was a good head above him. The man’s face was reddened, perhaps out of drunkenness, and he had a longsword hanging off his belt. Even without a weapon, there was no way Masayuki could take him. It wasn’t a wild stretch of the imagination to picture himself being beaten to death.

He thought about fleeing, but the girl was still draped across him.

It’s over. It’s totally over…

The smile was still on his face, but he was frozen, knees shaking. The fact that he didn’t lose control of his bladder, he thought, was worthy of praise.

But then a strange voice spoke into his ear.

Champion-like heroic behavior detected. Unique skill Chosen One unlocked. Deploy this skill?

Yes

No

Um, okay?

Masayuki wasn’t too sure about giving consent to this. But the choice would prove to decisively change his destiny for good.

Confirmed. Acquiring language skills via Chosen One… Acquired. Also deploying Heroic Aura and Heroic Compensation.

A cavalcade of unfamiliar terms flashed across Masayuki’s mind.

…What? What’s going on…?

He struggled to comprehend the events happening to him. But there was no time to ponder over them.

“Here, what’s the problem, kid? You thinkin’ about getting in my way?”

Suddenly, he could understand the giant. That was the power of that “Chosen One” skill he’d just awakened to, but Masayuki had no time to bask in it. The important thing was getting out of this scrape. One poor choice, and his life was likely over. He thought about going onto his hands and knees, swearing up and down that he meant nothing of the sort—but before he could, the girl in his arms spoke up.

“Yes! This person said he’ll help me!”

“…Did he now?”

He could see a blood vessel throb over the giant’s temple. His muscles seemed to visibly swell, making crystal clear how powerful this guy was.

Oh man, he doesn’t even need to use his sword. One punch, and it’s over…

The fear was strong enough that it gave Masayuki a cool head to think with. But he just couldn’t figure out how to escape this alive.

“Well, how about that?” roared the man. “In that case, let’s see you defeat me and protect this girl!”

A cheer arose from the passersby and restaurant patrons who had formed a circle around them.

“Whoa, whoa, he’s pickin’ a fight with Jinrai the Mad Wolf!”

“Think that’s a good idea? He’s gonna kill ya!”

“Yeah, Jinrai’s been furious ever since he failed his B-rank exam. Kacha knows that, and that’s why she cut him off the ale!”

“Ahhh, makes sense. Getting the cold shoulder from a girl he has feelings for must’ve put him over the edge. Ain’t no stopping him now…”

“Well, someone’s gotta! If an adventurer kills a guy in the middle of town, that’s serious! Somebody inform the Guild!”

“They already did. But why don’t you stop him, if that’s what you think?”

“Are you crazy? Jinrai’s ranked C-plus, but he’s easily worth a B or higher! He failed the exam ’cause he got points taken off for behavior, but in strength alone, he’s a powerhouse. I could never beat him!”

Presumably these were coworkers of Jinrai, the giant before Masayuki. Listening to them inspired feelings of both hope and despair at once. Someone was off informing the “Guild” of this; if he could stall long enough, maybe help would come. On the other hand, he had no idea how long it’d take, and nobody in the crowd seemed interested in lending a hand. He had to buy time, and he had to do it solo—and to Masayuki, that sounded like a death sentence.

“And look at Kacha,” one onlooker muttered. “What’s she doing, getting some passing kid involved?”

Yeah! Why me?! Masayuki protested to himself. But he was the one who had nodded to a question he didn’t comprehend. He’d put this on himself in the end.

“You ready to go?”

Of course he wasn’t. But it didn’t look like he’d be given any more time. Still, if he was going down, he at least wanted to look cool while doing it. He had reimagined his look for high school, but he wasn’t some street delinquent. His hair was dyed, but it wasn’t like he was any good in a fight. He had gone to some kendo classes in the past, but that wasn’t going to help now—not when he didn’t even have a piece of wood to battle with.

But one thing Masayuki was good at was bluffing.

“The bigger they talk, the harder they fall, y’know. You sure you’re ready for this? After picking a fight with me?”

He didn’t hesitate to grandstand here. There wasn’t any reason not to. He already assumed a single punch would end this. If this bought him some time, perfect; if not, he’d be lucky to get out of it alive. His legs weren’t even shaking any longer—his fear must have frozen them in place.

“…You got guts, huh? Great. Then I don’t need to hold back, either.”

Jinrai stared Masayuki down, a ferocious-looking smile on his face. Subjected to his threatening gaze, Masayuki immediately began to have regrets.

Let’s just run now— Oh, but that girl Kacha is behind me…

“Hey, can you give me a little more space?”

“Okay! That guy’s always looking at me with those leering eyes! Teach him a lesson for me!”

Masayuki was trying to secure an escape route, but Kacha must’ve assumed she’d get in the way of his fighting. She finally took her arms off Masayuki and joined the crowd gathering around him.

…Oh. I’m surrounded anyway. So much for that…

Messed that one up, he thought. Jinrai hadn’t touched him yet because Kacha was draped all over him. Brushing her away because she blocked his escape served only to shorten his life.

“Heh-heh…”

Jinrai’s grin widened. There was just one option left. He’d have to use the gum in his mouth as a smoke screen somehow and escape in the confusion.

Champion-level “forward-facing courage” detected. Unlocked the powers Heroic Charm and Heroic Action from the unique skill Chosen One. The subject Masayuki Honjo has now fully unlocked the unique skill Chosen One.

Uh, no, I tried running away!!

Masayuki’s inner voice was ignored. But what was this voice that’d been running through his mind? He wasn’t sure, but without much idea what he had “fully unlocked” at all, he decided not to think about it. A “unique skill” certainly sounded fancy, but if he’d obtained it that readily, it must not have been anything too powerful. He wasn’t that interested in it—really, now wasn’t the time.

He had no interest whatsoever in “facing forward” against Jinrai. He was intending to spit his gum in his face and run—about the most cowardly approach possible. It was unclear how anyone could interpret that as courageous in any way, shape, or form.

But despite his thoughts on the matter, things kept on happening to him.

“…Ngh! What’s this…feeling overpowering me…? You’re no kind of weakling at all…?!”

Jinrai, brimming with confidence a moment ago, was now visibly sweating before Masayuki. He was chewing his gum, an unconscious attempt to keep calm, but it only disturbed Jinrai even more.

“You, you’re casting some kind of arcane spell?! Well, I don’t care who you are! I-I’m gonna kill you!!”

With a shout, the enraged Jinrai went at Masayuki. What happened next, he couldn’t quite keep up with at first.

“?”

He stood there, unable to parse this. Jinrai was just a step away, winding up to punch him. Masayuki groggily gave him a glance. His foe’s gigantic fist was headed straight for him.

Oh crap, this is it!

He closed his eyes and ducked, trying to dodge it. There was no way he’d avoid it in time, he knew, so he just wanted to brace himself for the pain ahead. But the worst-case scenario he pictured never came to pass. Yes, there was pain, but just a little twinge on his forehead. It struck him as odd. Gingerly, he opened his eyes. There, he saw a toppled Jinrai, faceup on the floor and completely unconscious.

“Huh?” Masayuki grunted, completely unaware of what had happened. However, his asinine utterance was drowned out by the cheers erupting around him.

“W-wow! He didn’t even need both arms to beat the Mad Wolf!”

“I can’t believe it. Did you see how he moved?”

“I did… He dodged that swipe by a hairbreadth, then slammed his head right into his chest. What a master!”

“Who could that kid be anyway?”

The crowd of onlookers was murmuring all around him. This was, however, due to the combined effects of Masayuki’s Chosen One skill all working in tandem.

Heroic Aura:

An overpowering aura that can be unleashed by champions. Also acquired by Gazel, king of the dwarves. Lesser enemies will be frozen on the spot, awed by this unique aura and ready to take orders from its wielder.

Heroic Compensation:

Grants the user immense luck, making all regular attacks critical blows. The effect is applied to any companions of the user as well. Also has the effect of making anything the Chosen One says and does interpreted in a positive light by the people around them—a starkly powerful effect.

Heroic Charm:

Rouses the hearts of anyone watching the user in action, reducing their fear and stimulating their bravery. Anyone affected trusts in the champion, seeking to travel in their path. As another effect, anyone defeated by the champion will join their side and become their companion. This effect also applies to all non-undead monsters.

Heroic Action:

The user’s activities are all the first steps to becoming a champion. They provide guidance for their companions, eventually earning them all praise. Further…

That was the gist of what the unique skill Chosen One offered. It was actually one of the rarest of all uniques, a superior skill that ranked up there with the ultimate in superpowers—alongside skills like Absolute Severance and Unlimited Imprisonment, as wielded by the Heroes of the past.

Jinrai may’ve been strong enough to call the shots around this town, but he was powerless against Masayuki’s skill. Unfortunately, Masayuki himself had no idea about any of this. He had just fully unlocked one of the most fearsome uniques anyone in this world could ever dream of, and he was clueless about it.

He was clueless, but fortunately, that was all right. Chosen One was a passive skill. Masayuki wanted to be a hero, and now that Chosen One was his, there was no stopping it. And whether he wanted to or not, Masayuki was hurtling toward a new, heroic destiny at unstoppable speed.

“Yes… A blond-haired Hero…”

“It must be. I have heard of this…”

“Ah yes, there was a Hero like this in the past, no? I heard he went missing.”

“Has he been revived…?”

The rumblings had grown into a roar.

“A Hero?”

“A Hero, you say?”

“It couldn’t be…”

“But look at that strength! It must be so!”

He couldn’t be sure who’d said it first, but the crowd was quickly growing convinced they had a Hero in their midst.

This hair’s just a dye job…

But by the time Masayuki realized, it was already too late. There was passion in the crowd’s eyes; they sparkled, as if transfixed on someone they looked up to.

“Huh? Um, you have the wrong person—”

He hurriedly tried to deny it but was drowned out by a loud, rumbling voice at his feet.

“Fall back! All of you! How dare you act so flippantly toward the Hero who bested me with such ease!”

Jinrai, the giant of a man Masayuki had defeated out of pure luck, stood up and started shouting at the crowd. He turned toward Masayuki, dusting himself off, and bowed to him.

“Please excuse my rudeness from before. I had no idea you were a Hero.”

“No, I’m telling you, I’m not—”

“My name is Jinrai. I’m something of a well-known adventurer around these parts; people call me the ‘Mad Wolf.’ Guess I let my fame get to my head a little, eh? Sorry about that. Facing the brunt of your skills, Hero, taught me just how much I have to learn. Could I humbly ask you to let me join your side?”

He bowed his head even deeper. Masayuki couldn’t begin to deal with this. Here was this monolith-like man, begging him to be his lackey, and he had no idea what to do about it.

“Well actually, I’m really not a Hero or anything—”

“Oh, are you trying to keep the fact a secret, perhaps? What shall I call you, then? I would love to hear your name as well.”

Jinrai grinned at him, turning a deaf ear to Masayuki’s desperate denials. There was nothing Masayuki could do. The crowd, shouted down and silenced by Jinrai’s roaring, nervously watched them both. Well, he thought, whatever.

“My name’s Masayuki. Just ‘Masayuki’ is all right. I’ve just arrived in town, and—”

If Jinrai was being this subservient to him, he thought, maybe he could earn a free dinner out of it. Plus, if he kept playing dumb, maybe Jinrai could fill him in on this world a little more—two birds with one stone. But, once again, events were moving far more rapidly than what he’d expected.

“I understand,” Jinrai replied with a knowing smile. Then he came closer, bringing his lips to Masayuki’s ear. “You’ve only just revived, haven’t you, Sir Hero?”

Huh? Masayuki thought at first. But this was one misunderstanding that was best taken advantage of. It didn’t seem like Jinrai was much interested in his protesting, besides. Plus, he reasoned, maybe it’s better to frame it this way anyway. It’d probably kill this guy’s pride if he lost to some kid, but losing to a Hero is different.

So Masayuki stopped bothering to plead with people not to call him a Hero. This turned out to be a dreadful mistake. Why? Because it gave birth to the legend of “Lightspeed” Masayuki the Hero.

In short time, Masayuki was taken in by the representatives from the Free Guild, who had quickly run to the scene and transported him to the capital of the Kingdom of Englesia. There he met Yuuki Kagurazaka.

“You’ve had it tough, too, huh?”

Hearing that almost made Masayuki cry, despite himself. But as he learned, this boy Yuuki had lived in this world for nearly ten years now, older in age but still childlike in appearance. Based on his actual age, he would’ve been transported here back when he was in middle school.

It’s been even harder for him, huh…?

Masayuki composed himself. Now was no time for crying. If anything, he was inspired more than ever to do his best.

After discussing matters with Yuuki, Masayuki decided to try becoming an adventurer. He had a useful companion in Jinrai for this, and Yuuki promised to make arrangements on his behalf as well. Masayuki, not wanting to be a burden on Yuuki forever, figured that adventuring was the easiest way for him to become independent.

“I’m not sure how it happened,” Masayuki said, “but at least I know how to speak the language. Compared to you, I guess I might’ve lucked out a little, huh?”

“You absolutely did! I can’t even tell you how hard it was at first…but I had a teacher in my own life, too, so it wasn’t that painful. Thanks to having magic and everything, it’s actually pretty easy to pick up the spoken language.”

That much, Yuuki explained, could be learned through magic, although learning how to read and write had to be done the traditional, painstaking way.

The Guild leader looked through a set of documents, introducing Masayuki to people who could become potential work companions.

“Ah, this reminds me of Bernie. He learned how to speak magically, too.”

Bernie was a young man, a graduate of the Englesia Institute, and another “otherworlder” Yuuki had harbored for a time. A native of the United States, Bernie could speak only English at first, which made even communicating with Yuuki slow going. With the right sort of magic, however, things were sorted out quickly—and the experience made Bernie interested enough in magic that he wanted to study it in school. Now he was a freshly minted adventurer, one looking for fellow party members to work with—and Masayuki and Jinrai seemed to fit the bill perfectly.

So they became a three-man adventuring team, a job Masayuki grew proficient in with overwhelming speed. By the time half a year passed, their party was being called “Team Lightspeed,” already the stuff of lore. Jinrai was ranked C-plus, but as one onlooker said in their first encounter, he was really more B-level in terms of skill. His strength, paired with Bernie’s magic, made it possible to handle hunting runs at a stable clip.

Masayuki had learned kendo, but only at the most casual of levels. He was an amateur, but an amateur with Chosen One in his arsenal. The skill applied itself to his companions as well, which meant every attack they dealt out landed critically. As a result, anyone with Masayuki was always performing above their regular abilities; Jinrai could even give you a performance that overcame the barrier to rank A. It also made it harder for enemies to hit them, an extra blessing that made them all but unbeatable.

But that wasn’t even the best part about Chosen One. Astoundingly, anything and everything Masayuki’s companions did was treated as Masayuki’s own accomplishments. All praise and adulation for Team Lightspeed was heaped upon the shoulders of Masayuki alone, leading him to acquire the “Lightspeed” name for himself over time.

His participation in a battle tournament held around that time in Englesia helped to further the spread of that alias. He joined it so he could use the prize money to shore up his equipment, but he barely broke a sweat all the way to the winner’s podium. Simply unsheathing his sword would make his opponents give and plead for mercy. The crowd assumed Masayuki had laid down some kind of “lightspeed” attack—he never did, but they didn’t understand that, and having the name “Lightspeed Masayuki” only further encouraged them to overrate his skills.

This was all thanks to Chosen One, and while Masayuki was aware of that, there was no stopping now. Or, to be more accurate, he didn’t know how to stop it. It was impossible to resist this skill unless you had a unique skill of your own, and since Masayuki couldn’t deliberately turn it off, it was a given that the rumors would keep spreading. It gave Masayuki a stomachache thinking about it—but it didn’t do anything bad for him, either. So he decided to just give up, at least pretend to live to the expectations of the people, and keep playing the role of a Hero.

By this time, he had been joined by a fourth companion—a young girl named Jiwu. Gifted in fairly high-level spirit magic, she had followed the rumors to Masayuki’s doorstep. She’d rebuked him at first, assuming him to be a villain calling himself Hero for nefarious purposes, but over time, she grew to trust him. And despite her peculiarities, the healing spells she cast made her the keystone of the party’s exploits.

Thus Masayuki and his companions continued their steady advance at virtual breakneck speed. He was now an A-level adventurer, still undefeated in battle sport, and after less than a year of life in Englesia, he was part of the Hero echelon.

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It had been, to say the least, an eventful year.

This was all still something that shocked even him, but by now, Masayuki had grown accustomed to being called a Hero. I guess it’s true, he detachedly thought. People really can get used to just about anything.

But despite all the adulation, he still kindled deep-seated doubts about himself on a daily basis. And before long, he was facing a major turning point in his life.