

FUSE

Illustration by
Mitz Vah



That Time I Got
Reincarnated
as a SLIME

9

THAT TIME I GOT REINCARNATED AS A SLIME

– Tensei Shitara Slime Datta Ken –

- VOLUME 9 -
THE DEMON CITY OPENS

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as a SLIME**

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It began with a slow piano tune accompanied by an intense, impassioned violin melody. Then suddenly, the tone changed. In a way, it felt more like a duel than a duet—but the extreme force behind Shion's melody seemed to reflect her own disposition, and Shuna's piano playing (much like Shuna herself) gently enveloped it. The intensity and softness intermingled, accentuating each other in impressive harmony.

Ahhh... This was good. I drowned in the waves of profoundly expressive sound, shaken to my soul. This was different. It wasn't something you could accomplish with stopgaps. This was the result of innate discipline.



There we saw Luminus. I'd suspected we would, given how agitated the paladins seemed, and I was right. She was in her maid dress, seated with her legs crossed. The juxtaposition of her pale skin and the black garter belts and stockings was, frankly, hot.

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FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford
Cover art by Mitz Vah

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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

PROLOGUE



THE LIGHT-SPEED HERO

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.

.....

.....

...

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.

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.



CHAPTER
1

THE EVE OF THE FESTIVAL

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 1

THE EVE OF THE FESTIVAL

This time, it was Yuuki himself giving orders to Team Lightspeed.

Recently, an enormous slave market had been uncovered in Ballachia, one of the smaller kingdoms that ringed Englesia. Fortunately, a runaway slave had contacted the relevant authorities for help, and now they needed to form an expedition to investigate. But while Ballachia was small, there was a chance this market was backed by the kingdom itself. The assignment was ranked a B-plus or greater in difficulty, not the sort of thing your average brawling adventurer could tackle.

“I wanted to turn this down,” Yuuki admitted to Masayuki, “but I can’t say no to one of my sponsors. As famous as you guys are, I’d like you to act as a lure.”

Sending the investigation team in without support was likely not going to be successful. So, Yuuki explained, he wanted Team Lightspeed to join them on the expedition—and while the team collected evidence about the slave market, Masayuki and company could stay active in public, ensuring the Ballachian government’s attention stayed on them. An A-ranked team like Masayuki’s couldn’t be refused entry by the kingdom, and with the investigation team doing the nitty-gritty detective work, the party would strike a nice balance between brains and brawn. It didn’t seem too tricky to the Hero’s ears.

“Masayuki, let’s give these people a hand. Why, a nation that small could declare war against us and we’d *still* win!”

Jinrai was alright with the burning flame of vengeful justice. Ever since Masayuki had beaten him, he had become more refined, gentlemanly, a far cry from when they’d first met.

“Yeah,” Bernie added. “There’s no way we can let slavery happen in this day and age. With Masayuki’s strength, we can put things right fast.”

As an otherworlder, Bernie had some kind of unique skill as well, making him resistant to Masayuki’s Chosen One. That didn’t stop the man from respecting him nonetheless.

Masayuki couldn't guess why—especially given how much he liked complaining to Bernie about the issues in his life. But despite that, Bernie trusted and helped him in innumerable ways. His impartial impression of Masayuki felt like a cherished dose of reality, one he referred to often. And if Bernie felt that way about this, the decision was clear.

Jiwu, meanwhile, was more curt.

"Right. If Sir Masayuki says yes, I will join him."

She had a blind, incontrovertible faith in him, it seemed, almost never voicing a contrary opinion—and she had just made it unanimous. It wasn't much longer before they set foot in Ballachia.

They were in an ornate reception hall, the site of a ball attended by nobility not just from Ballachia but other nearby kingdoms. And Masayuki, an invitee, was being faced with a situation so terrifying, he would do just about anything to escape it. The slave market *did* exist here—and he'd just gotten to witness it for himself.

Give me a break. Isn't that the investigators' job?! It almost made him want to cry. Not again...

He was on his way back from a small journey to find a restroom when he heard a soft voice from a room he happened to pass by. He didn't intend to peek inside, but he took a glance anyway—and Braeber, the earl serving as Masayuki's tour guide, was there.

They locked eyes.

"..."

"..."

It happened in an instant.

"Um, are you—?"

"Well, *this* certainly isn't helpful," Braeber said, still smiling. "If you heard me, I suppose there is little I can do. I had a muscular soldier standing guard at the door, but I certainly didn't expect you to defeat him. I should have expected as much from the

Hero, shouldn't I?"

Soldier? What soldier?!

"Whoa, wait a—?!"

He was about to lodge a complaint but got cut off.

"Ahhh! The Hero has gone mad! He must be stopped! Everybody, after him! We must subdue him!"

Much to Masayuki's shock, the man Earl Braeber was talking to grabbed the sword he was leaning against—and slashed the earl down with it. Then the man tossed it away and began screaming, attempting to frame Masayuki for the attack. What ensued next was predictable. A dozen or so soldiers flocked to the scene, carefully eyeing Masayuki and his companion Jinrai.

"Well," Jinrai said, his fiendish face twisting into a smile, "look what the cat dragged in. Masayuki doesn't need to waste his time with you lot. Let me dispatch you all!"

Jinrai went on the move. And with the Chosen One support Masayuki provided, his performance in battle ventured into the realm of superhuman.

"Tch! Monster! But my enemy is the Hero who tamed that beast, for getting in my way!"

Gohsel, the marquis who had just struck down Braeber, gave Masayuki a loathsome scowl.

"You see the tide of this battle. Give it up and surrender—"

Considering how Jinrai was systematically destroying the gaggle of soldiers who poured in from the adjacent room, Masayuki figured the fighting was done. He was wrong.

"Heh-heh-heh... How kind of you to offer, Hero. But if anyone was witness to this scene—this travesty—all of them would side with me!"

Then Masayuki recalled Earl Braeber, still on the ground. He could hear footsteps; more people were coming toward the commotion.

"Blast! This is bad news, Masayuki..."

They were in the Kingdom of Ballachia, and while the Hero's name was known worldwide, Masayuki was still just a guest. Marquis Gohsel was a figure of power and authority here; between him and Masayuki, he would be the more trusted of the two. That's why Gohsel was acting so confident right now—and why Jinrai was biting his nails. But Masayuki didn't fret for a moment. Internally, he was annoyed, but already, his instincts told him things were going just like they always did. His skill, Chosen One, always had a knack for bending situations in ways that made him the hero of the day.

And it happened again.

Soon, the room was awash in curious rubberneckers, including a few Ballachian noblemen and foreign dignitaries. The marquis had been standing triumphantly in one corner—but now shock was racing across his face.

“...Ah... ahhh. What, what has become of me...?”

With a groan, Earl Braeber regained consciousness.

“Sir Masayuki, this is a valuable witness, is he not? He was still alive, so I healed his wounds.”

Jiwu, who had slipped in at some point, had cast healing magic on Braeber—and now she was looking right at Masayuki, fishing for compliments.

“Hey there, old man,” Jinrai thundered, turning toward Braeber. “Lucky for you, Masayuki’s such a forgiving lad, huh? If you tell the truth to everyone right now, I’ll make sure slave trading’s the only crime you get charged with. But if you try to keep anything secret... I imagine that man over there’s just gonna slash you down again, won’t he? So what’ll it be?”

The vicious smile on his face told Braeber everything he needed to know. He thought for a moment, calculating, then resigned himself to his fate. Hanging his head, he began his confession.

“What the devil is happening in here?”

And the king of Ballachia chose that exact moment to step in. As the nobility fell silent, things resolved themselves quickly. It all happened exactly how Masayuki had predicted it would.

Things got even more heated.

Military police quickly stormed the residences of Earl Braeber and Marquis Gohsel, uncovering evidence of their slave trade. It revealed a scandal—Gohsel was one of the leaders of an organized crime ring. And not only that: Their headquarters was right here in Ballachia.

The news weighed heavily upon the king. Orthrus, the slave-trading group whose sphere of influence was largely in the Western Nations, was using this small nation of Ballachia as a front. It was a sad state of affairs, one the king refused to ignore.

Orthrus dealt in much more than just slaves, however. They ran a diverse business, handling weapons, armor, mysterious potions, drugs, monsters, magic items, even arcane Artifacts. They were too powerful for a small kingdom to topple—and so Ballachia's king had enlisted the Free Guild for help. And if the Free Guild was involved, Team Lightspeed no doubt would be as well.

A person can grow used to extraordinary events all too quickly—but really, Masayuki could predict all of it. *Ahhh, I figured this would happen*, he thought as he accepted the king's request.

Before long, a large number of adventurers—including Masayuki's A-rank party—gathered together for an operation to sweep up Orthrus. Counting the support troops from Ballachia, they numbered over two thousand in all—and once Chosen One had sunk its teeth into all of them, they exhibited astonishing force.

Orthrus's base of operation had several hundred members on standby, including multiple A-grade fighting forces and a few captured magical beasts. This made them as powerful as a country themselves—but with Masayuki and the assault team he led, Orthrus was thoroughly and completely cleansed from the nation. Masayuki himself hardly had to do anything—or, to put it another way, his mere presence helped everyone shine, whether he knew it or not.

Thus, without a lot of work, the operation was a success, and the notorious Orthrus was smashed for good. Once again, things turned out well without Masayuki lifting a finger, and this latest feat meant he was famous not only in Englesia but all the way to the far edges of the Western Nations.

As usual, things went off without a hitch. It might've been nice if the story ended there—but this particular mission left a certain problem behind.

Among the slaves released and put into Guild custody were mixed in monsters—including some ferocious magical beasts, which were killed on the spot. However, some of the slaves couldn't be dealt with so swiftly—namely, the elves.

The issue of what to do with them soon arose. The elves wanted to return home to the Forest of Jura, but the Guild couldn't just drop them off and send them on their merry way. Certain geopolitical issues were involved. Jura had only just come under the jurisdiction of the demon lord Rimuru, and if the enslaved elves sought Rimuru's help, there was no guessing how he would respond. Perhaps he'd retaliate against Ballachia somehow. The Western Nations knew about the disastrous scene over in Farmus—and if a nation *that* big could fall, there was no way one as tiny as Ballachia could defend itself.

“S-Sir Masayuki, please, *please* do something!”

Their king, a dignified man usually, was all but pleading for help in his private chambers, away from prying eyes. Masayuki, feeling too guilty to turn him down, agreed. *It can't be that big a deal*, he casually thought. *All I'm doing is taking the elves to Tempest.*

That was the start of his mistake. For everyone who heard that *the* Masayuki was traveling to Tempest took that to mean the Hero was finally sallying off to slay a demon lord.

The rumors spread like wildfire—but Masayuki didn't take them too seriously. His mind was used to the routine, and it told him that, like always, it'd turn out just fine in the end. Certainly, Chosen One was a unique skill to be feared when set off; there was no doubting that. But no matter how strong you are, there's always someone stronger ahead—a fact Masayuki was too proud of himself to remember.

“*Right,*” Masayuki said through his magic link. “*In that case, we'll meet over there.*”

He was submitting his report and discussing future plans with Yuuki. Due to the multiple layers of barriers protecting Englesia, completing a magical link like this required sending your thoughts encrypted through certain wavelengths. It wasn't

something you could pull off on short notice, so they had agreed to reach out to each other only at certain times.

So Masayuki shut it off and sighed.

“Yuuki worries far too much.”

“You said it.” Jinrai nodded. “If you wanted to beat a demon lord, Masayuki, that couldn’t possibly be a problem for you.”

Bernie was less optimistic. “I’ll remind you that even Hinata the Saint could only fight this Rimuru to a draw. It’d be wise not to let your guard down.”

Masayuki gave this a vague nod. It made him think a bit. Things had gone swimmingly up to now, but really, he hadn’t *done* much at all. He didn’t know Hinata; they had never met, but Yuuki had nothing but praise for her, and Masayuki respected him. If *she* couldn’t beat this guy, maybe he was a lot tougher than Masayuki thought at the moment. It gave him pause.

“Yeah, you’re right. Everyone says Rimuru wants to make nice with people. We probably shouldn’t go in raring for a fight.”

“Ha-ha! Sounds to me like *this* demon lord knows his days are numbered!”

“Demon lords are evil, plain and simple!” said Jiwu.

“Well,” Bernie added, “we’ll have to see how he acts and decide based on that. But if the Saint and the demon lord have reached an agreement on matters, then only you, Masayuki, are qualified to be a true ‘Hero.’ You had best act carefully along those lines.”

Masayuki nodded. “Yeah. With all your help, I bet I could beat him, but let’s take things slow and steady, okay?”

The question of whether to fight Rimuru would be left for later. For now, they would wait and see.

In the eyes of Masayuki, all three of his companions—Jinrai, Bernie, and Jiwu—were utter beasts. He himself was nothing to write home about, but he couldn’t imagine anyone from this trio actually losing a battle. *I mean*, he reasoned, *if I actually got in a fight, I guess I'd win somehow, but it's not like I got a grudge against this Rimuru guy or*

anything... No point trying to start trouble.

So as they packed up and set off for Tempest, he was pretty optimistic about how this trip would go.



Even after all those royal audiences I gave, my schedule was just absolutely packed. Now I was entertaining human guests.

At the moment, our nation was receiving delegations from all around the world, one after the other. Some of the earlier parties arrived a good week ago, I heard. And not all of them received formal invites—there were also merchants, picking up on the rumors and bringing even more energy to town. Previous visitors were showing them and other new guys around, acting all proud of themselves, and even the nobler dignitaries and royal families stopping in looked around in wonder at the unfamiliar sights. It seemed, at first glance, that my expectations had paid off and our plan to make this a tourist hub was working.

Still, our town was only large enough to lodge maybe three thousand nobles at best. For commoners, that number was more around ten thousand, but in terms of higher-end accommodation, there wasn't quite that much. The service and the dining we had to offer were completely different, and considering we had people in royal lines of succession showing up, we had to consider security as well. Thus we made sure each noble was given ample space to work with.

Given all the dignitaries we invited, we had banned the general public from our luxury inns, whether they could afford a suite or not. Some of the richer merchants in town could, but I was worried about offending them if we were too busy with nobility to offer good service. But apparently, I didn't need to worry. Mjöllmile was on it, making sure all the more powerful of the merchant class were set up to their satisfaction.

"Great job, Mollie."

"Heh-heh-heh! Ah, Sir Rimuru, this much is simple to provide. You have Sir Rigurd and everyone else in town to thank for making a habit of being so thorough with their work!"

Mjöllmile was a really reliable guy. It went without saying that Rigurd, Rigur, and everybody working under them deserved great praise, but when it came to good

customer service and satisfied lodgers, Mjöllmile was my go-to man. All things considered, I figured we were off to a pretty good start.

“Okay. Keep it up!”

“That I will!”

Leaving the rest to Mjöllmile, I resolved to devote myself to our most important of visitors.

*

We were in our meeting hall.

Shuna and Shion were busy with all sorts of prep work. Catering for such a large crowd, after all, meant careful advance preparation. And Gabil and Kurobe were just as busy, performing final checks on the exhibits they had going. Since I wasn’t dealing with monsters right now, I didn’t need to put on such an overpowering “I am stronger than you” act—thus I figured we didn’t need my entire staff on hand. And given the lack of a strict species-based hierarchy, things didn’t have to be nearly as solemn and pretentious.

I was, obviously, in human form, dressed to the nines in order to express my force and financial wealth. That part, frankly, I didn’t care about. Being a slime would’ve been a lot easier, but I’d given up on pushing that. On *that* note, none of my advisers was willing to budge.

The nobility from the Western Nations were inoffensive enough in their greetings to me. The king of Blumund arrived in the midst of our hellos, looking like the same nice, approachable middle-aged man as ever—the kind of king you’d expect in an illustration from a book of fairy tales.

Next to him was his queen, beautiful and still looking young. I didn’t know her age, but apparently they had been married over twenty years. At first glance, they didn’t look like the best of matches, but they were a loving one, and the people of Blumund were great fans of them both.

“I must apologize for not thanking you sooner,” he told me. “You winning over Marquis Muller and Earl Hellman, as well as applying pressure to the Western Holy Church,

helped us all a great deal."

It was this man's consent that had allowed Fuze to move so freely. I could have pulled off that plan only because of the promises he kept. And thanks to his singing my praises far and wide, my reputation actually didn't seem that bad. Judging by the increasing number of merchants coming to my nation, the Kingdom of Blumund certainly proved influential to me.

I gave the king thanks, but he laughed and waved it off. "No, no, Sir Rimuru! There's hardly any need to thank me. All we did was live up to the terms of the treaty we ratified. And did Fuze tell you, by the way? I had staked quite a bit on you. Our nation's fate, in fact, is now tied in with yours. And I did this because we *do* stand to profit, of course, so there's no need for further thanks!"

He gave me a gregarious smile—but I could tell the king of Blumund could not be taken lightly. He just said, to my face, that he had his own interests in mind. The idea of requiring further thanks made him laugh.

"Still," I said, "*I am* happy to see that you trusted in us."

Showing gratitude is always important. I didn't mean to keep banging on this point, but I wanted to bring it across.

"I truly wonder if you really *are* a demon lord sometimes," the king replied with a snicker. Then he recomposed himself and looked me in the eye. "And I do understand that our Viscount Cazac caused you quite a bit of trouble. I'm quite glad you were able to rescue your countrymen from him."

Ah, Viscount Cazac. It was mostly Mjöllmile he'd caused trouble for, though. And if I had to guess, that "Orthrus" gang had been operating in the Forest of Jura well before I became demon lord. But it was a stain on the reputation of Blumund, I suppose, although it really all came down to the viscount himself.

He was just a patsy, really. A horrible man. It wasn't like he'd personally cracked the whip or anything, but a crime is a crime, as much as Cazac apparently crowed about how the nobility can treat low-born monsters any way they want without penalty. Expecting to get off scot-free was far too selfish.

"Well, with everything fully settled now, I have no interest in dragging that case any further," I replied.

“I appreciate that!”

“So what will you be doing with him?”

As part of Blumund’s nobility, I couldn’t prosecute him under my own rules—but no punishment at all was unacceptable. I didn’t want to make this a huge incident, but whether or not I did anything depended on the king of Blumund. He, fortunately, understood this.

“Cazac no longer holds a noble title,” he said, voice turning low and ominous. “Given his ties with international criminal gangs, it’s fair to say he’s forgotten his duties as a nobleman. I would hardly abide the likes of him referring to himself as Blumundian nobility. Thus, he has been stripped of his titles and exiled from our lands. The House of Cazac is no more, and thus I consider the case to be closed.”

No problems there. It almost seemed too harsh a penalty, but then, slave trading violates international law. Treating him with kid gloves could even make Blumund’s king look like a pushover. Thinking of it that way, the punishment felt almost merciful to me. Cazac had been a noble his whole life; finding another life for himself would doubtlessly pose difficulties. Without his name, fortune, or even a familiar homeland, I didn’t envy the path this man had ahead of him. But if he could stay alive, maybe he could turn over a new leaf. The punishment fit the crime, certainly, and I had no objection to it.

“Very well. I am willing to accept that punishment.”

“A relief to hear! Is it safe to say that our treaty remains in effect, then?”

“I’d hope for nothing else. May we remain partners for years to come.”

We exchanged a firm handshake. The incident was behind us.

Now it was on to the main subject. The king’s face brightened as he immediately got down to the business on his mind.

“Sir Rimuru, I heard the news from Fuze. He spoke of some grand operation you had in the planning stages?”

Apparently, he wanted to hear more about the outlook on the future I’d given Fuze.

"Well, that's something involving much more than just your kingdom and mine. I'm hoping we can assemble representatives from all the nations involved for further discussion. I intended to travel to you to discuss it in detail, but..."

"Oh-ho-ho! No need to be so secretive. Fuze gave me a short rundown, but it sounds like something that could very well affect our position in the world. I could hardly leave the matter to my bureaucracy."

"In that case, I could go into some detail..."

The official discussion was planned for another day. For now, I gave the king my basic plans for turning Blumund into a distribution hub for the world at large. But:

"...I see. Hmm, hmm..."

"My lord, this sounds like a proposal we should move every mountain to make a reality, doesn't it?"

I had given only a quick rundown, but the king had a different look about him by this point. The real him was now on the surface, revealing a man burning with ambition—and his queen, who hadn't spoken until now, had just as much trouble hiding her excitement. It seemed this woman was as equally astute as her husband. No doubt my pitch was all she'd needed to accurately calculate how much profit was on the table.

Blumund's king wasn't their only leader I should watch out for. Here we had a king with a gambler's penchant for snap decisions, along with a calm, collected, and calculating queen. Their powers combined must've been what had made this small kingdom so continuously influential.

"Of course," I cautioned, "this only happens after the Founder's Festival is a resounding success. It's still three days before it begins."

"Oh-ho-ho! I'm sure there is little to worry about. Why, it hasn't started yet, and just look at how lively things are! And I can only imagine how many nobles worldwide are making the journey over here."

"I can only imagine," echoed the queen. "But as you said, Sir Rimuru, there is no need for us to hurry matters. A plan like the one you proposed will require an agreement from all the nations involved. In the meantime, we will work with our own government to ensure a consensus on this matter."

"My lady is right. It was simply delightful to hear such a fine proposal from you, Sir Rimuru. Now, shall we be on our way?"

"I hope the Tempest Founder's Festival is a resounding success," the queen closed as she and her husband got to their feet. They had no intention of acting all pompous and wasting my time talking in pointless prose. They had what they came for, and now they were done with me. I liked them for that. It was much easier to deal with.

"Thank you," I replied. "Please enjoy our nation to the fullest."

"We certainly intend to!" the king shouted as they walked away, to which the queen added, "Yes, I can hardly wait."

*

The day after I spoke with Blumund's royal couple, I was greeted by another big name—Gazel, the dwarven king.

"Well, Rimuru, here I am!" he said as he sat across from me with an audible *whump*. "My first journey by carriage in far too long! I'm exhausted!"

Imposing as always, to be sure. He was already reaching out for the tea and snacks on the table, like they were his God-given right.

"Whoa there. Don't take *mine*, too, all right?"

I was a little slow on the trigger. In an instant, the last doughnut on the table was up and into his mouth. I had been looking forward to that. Who knew he had a sweet tooth to go with his tremendous drinking habit? There's just never any underestimating him.

"Ahhh, no need to sweat the details. If such trifles still bother you, you have much left to learn, mm?"

Much left to learn how? You're the one stealing my doughnuts. I stared at the self-serving Gazel, but he gave me no quarter, returning the gaze.

"And thanks to the chiefs raising a hue and cry, we had a whole caravan of carriages. The length of it was ridiculous. And it's all your fault, Rimuru!"

As he explained—in great detail—the journey here from Dwargon normally took a day

on winged horse. Since this was an official state visit, however, he wasn't allowed to go with the Pegasus Knights alone. It wasn't just because of security concerns, either. Gazel would be seeing nobility from around the world, and as king of the mighty nation of Dwargon, he needed to show he was a military power. This meant having to pack multiple changes of clothes and such, along with administrators and attendants to help dress him properly. It made his entourage a more than decently sized crowd.



"If you travel as a king, you need a *royal* amount of preparation. Having a paved highway to travel on was certainly a boon, but the past few days of travel were just murder on me."

That must have been why Gazel kept skipping out on his kingdom to travel as light as possible. And come to think of it, Soei had reported that the highway from Blumund was jam-packed with carriages and the like, enough so that the watch needed to play traffic cops for a while, and all the inns along the way were booked solid. Which was great, in a way, but it also reminded me of the need for a larger-scale transport system. Cars in Japan these days, after all, break down very rarely—and if they do, you can call for roadside service and get it handled in no time flat. In this world, though, if you break a wagon axle or something, you're in trouble. Simply carting the vehicle out of the way of traffic is a painstaking ordeal. You also had horses to take care of, and overall, the whole thing was rife with pitfalls. I deliberately planned for wide highways in anticipation of this, but it still didn't solve the problem. I was gathering info on these incidents so we could tackle them in the future, but judging by Gazel's tale, long-distance travel as a noble was an extremely arduous undertaking.

It seemed the traffic jam had mainly been caused by far more nobles deciding to participate than I'd planned for. I'll need to consider things like that more next time. It'd be nice if we could develop trains and make all of this a lot more comfortable, fast.

But regardless.

"You know, I didn't expect to see you here at all. I figured you'd send an envoy instead."

It was true. I really hadn't. So I was honest with him, hoping he'd take the hint to stop griping at me. It didn't work.

"Pffft! You think I would do *that*? When I know you're up to some kind of scheme again? I can't sleep at night until I see what it is with my own two eyes! And also... I have a question for you."

"What?"

"So you fought Hinata Sakaguchi? The whole 'draw' thing... That's a lie, isn't it?"

I figured he knew that, and he did. He was aware I'd fought her, and he didn't believe the official results one bit. By the looks of things, he assumed I beat her.

"Well, you could call it winning the battle and losing the war, but yeah, I won."

I explained to Gazel how it had all worked out in the end, warning him to keep it under his hat for now.

"Unbelievable. That woman, of all people... Frankly, she's stronger than I am. Her swordsmanship, for one—but even in overall strength, I'd lose. You really beat her?"

This was some real talk from Gazel. I guess I'd impressed him. As a Hero King, Gazel would never get a chance to spar with Hinata, so he used his network of spies to analyze her strength instead. The conclusion he made from their findings: He'd be on the ropes. Hearing I'd won must've sincerely surprised him.

"Luck had a lot to do with it. I mean, she really *was* a lot stronger than Clayman, and he was a demon lord. I think the skills I'm blessed with had a lot to do with it."

Let's be straight: If I didn't have Raphael, I'd have lost. And Raphael *is* a skill of mine, but he's also managing all my other skills. If he hadn't harnessed some powers I wasn't even aware I had, there's no way I could've beaten Hinata.

"Ha! Luck is as important a strength as any other. I'm glad to see my old sparring partner succeed, but I hate to admit how inferior I am *that* readily..."

"Well, what do you want me to say? With my own 'real' powers, I can't even beat Hakuro yet."

"Ahhh, you're as strange to me as always, aren't you? 'Real' or not, those skills are part and parcel of your battle strength, aren't they?"

He looked a bit exasperated, but I really meant it. Without Raphael, I think my best match for a sparring partner would be Gobta, actually. Not that I'd tell anyone.

"Well, whatever. So," he said, erasing his scowl and giving me a serious look, "what are you up to *this* time?"

This was his way of switching to his main subject, apparently. I had no idea what it was.

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean?! The Western Holy Church sent us a missive asking to open a channel for future negotiations! They used to classify us as a nose away from monsters! Why'd they overturn their doctrine like that? It was so sudden, I just *know* you have to be behind it!"

Ah!

Gazel's shouting reminded me of my conversation with Hinata and her people. Yes, I *had* suggested that she could get King Gazel involved. The Dwarven Kingdom had retained its neutrality for a thousand years. You could place boundless trust in them, and even the most orthodox adherents of the Church couldn't *seriously* think dwarves were the same thing as monsters. Some, maybe, but it had to be a tiny minority.

That was my motivation behind the suggestion to Hinata, but I forgot to, um, actually ask King Gazel for permission to do that. Or, really, I didn't think I needed his approval—I wasn't expecting him to get this riled up over it. Best to play dumb for now. I doubt Hinata explicitly said it was my idea.

"Ohhh? Well, um, I have to say, it's the first time *I've* heard about this. But you know, I think duking it out with Hinata has helped us develop a sort of friendship. That's how we reconciled things, besides, and we agreed that we'll try to stay on good terms in the future. So maybe that got them in the spirit, huh? Like, it inspired them to make some official overtures with you, too?"

"...Hohh?"

Gazel raised a doubtful eyebrow. It's times like these that I seriously wished I was in slime form. I thought I could feel a cold sweat running down my back, even though I don't actually sweat.

Caution. The subject Gazel Dwango is applying Read Thought to your surface mentality. This is being permitted due to a lack of perceived hostile or malicious intent. Block this skill?

Yes

No

Yes! Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!! If it's something *that* important, then just tell me,

Raphael!!

But that explained things. I had *thought* it was a little strange before, but Gazel can read people's minds, huh? No wonder I've always felt a bit odd around him, like he was probing my brain for answers. Between his accurate reading of my actions during battle and how he always seemed a step ahead of me in our conversations, it only made sense he was doing that.

The Great Sage evolving into Raphael must've helped me recognize the Read Thought when Gazel pulled the trigger on it. It didn't seem to be active *all* the time, thank heavens, but who knows how much info he took from me just now...

I gave Gazel a glance. He grinned back at me, a blue vein visible on his forehead.

"Heh... heh-heh. You saw my Read Thought, did you? Well, I applaud you for it, but if you blocked it, that must mean you're thinking something *evil*, I presume?"

"N-no, no, I, uh, don't think so?"

"You fool! I caught a glimpse of you there! It told me you thought it best to get me wrapped up in this!"

Crime never pays, I suppose. He then more or less forced me to confess exactly how my conversation with Hinata had gone. And then:

"I see. So the Seven Days Clergy was behind their humans-first policy..."

"Yeah. And I think Hinata's people are thinking about purging the Church of anyone poisoned by the Seven Days' thinking. Given how they're all dead, I'm sure she can sniff out their sympathizers well enough."

I went over the internal dealings I had seen in the Western Holy Church and Lubelius, carefully leaving out Luminus's real identity. Gazel nodded and pondered for a minute.

"...I imagine you are right. In which case, it would be foolish to turn this down, then?"

He had decided to accept Hinata's—or the Church's—request.

"I thought you would say that."

"Enough from you. Doing my diplomacy *for* me, without permission... But oh well. No need to be a stick in the mud during this festive occasion. You've given me *only* the best seats, I am sure? I might as well enjoy what you've got for me."

After that fit he threw, he was willing to give up the subject for now. I figured he was happy enough with how things turned out, but I wasn't stupid enough to let him know that. I had word that Hinata and her paladins would be at the Tempest Founder's Festival as well, so I figured it best for them to meet directly and work matters out. Gazel no doubt had some of his own advisers to deliberate with, too.

So I promised him we'd set up discussions after the festival. He was soon on his way.

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It was now morning, three days since Diablo's return. Yohm's band was here, and he picked the exact right moment to show up—we were actually holding a preopening feast this evening, the festival itself finally starting up tomorrow. Before then, however, we were at the usual meeting hall, Yohm and a few of his closer advisers seated across from me.

"Hey, pal! It's been forever and a day, ain't it? Well, guess what? I'm royalty!"

His clothing certainly had a few more bells and whistles on it, but the person inside hadn't changed. He was just as brazen as always, greeting me with a defiant grin.

I smiled back. "And clothes certainly make the king, don't they, Yohm? Thanks for all your hard work."

"Ha! Hell, thank *you!* You're the one who took some grubby bum off the street and elevated 'im up to king," he said with a smile, "so I hope you're gonna see this to the end, yeah? I'm all in on what you're aiming for, so don't leave me hangin' halfway."

Just as he promised, Yohm had become a fine king for me—and with Diablo's behind-the-scenes work, he now had a firm grip on the throne.

Farmus, a nation with a long, illustrious history, had fallen. In its place was born a new kingdom, with the champion Yohm as its accepted leader. It was a nation reborn from the threat it once was, so Diablo thought fit to change its name to "Farminus." To cement this, he also had Yohm style himself as Yohm Farminus.

Next to him in the meeting hall were two magic-born—Mjurran and Gruecith. They were his constant bodyguards, and I had no doubt they'd keep Yohm safe—although Mjurran wasn't *really* a bodyguard at all, of course.

"Lord Rimuru, let me reintroduce myself. I am Mjur Farminus, wife of the king. It is good to see you again."

Perhaps noticing my eyes on her, Mjurran lifted up her dress a little and curtsied. It was beautiful, enough to make your garden-variety rich heiress blanch.

"You fit into the role of queen like a puzzle piece, Mjurran."

"Yeah, doesn't she?" Yohm said, beaming with pride. "She's educated and all, unlike me."

"I do have some experience in this, shall we say. Clayman was such a stickler for etiquette and manners..."

There was no doubting that Clayman held himself well, or at least had a thing for noble trappings. He'd festooned his castle with ornate furniture and artwork, and I'm sure he was just as fastidious with his own staff. Looks like that helped us out in the most surprising way with her.

"Yeah, well, it's an experience for all of us. I mean, ruling a nation's been hard for me, too. A little bit ago, I had to formally greet every species in the Forest of Jura, and it nearly killed me. I felt like some kinda sacred idol."

"Oh, I hear ya! I have all these nobles requesting audiences with me, and some of those idiots are already forming factions and trying to start something. What a headache, I tell ya! At least that old man Razen, our magic expert, is handling all that pretty well."

Razen himself was not here. Things were still less than stable around their nation, and he was busy darting to and fro, attending to post-civil war matters. I feared for a moment he'd betray us—but looking back, he was only under the effects of Diablo's Tempter spell, so no worries there. The retired Edmaris, meanwhile, had disguised his identity and was now serving as an adviser, making up for Yohm's lack of experience and education and helping out in assorted areas of politics.

And as for Gruecith the magic-born:

"So you're head of the Knight Corps now?"

“I sure am, Sir Rimuru. I turned the job down, but *he* never listens to me...”

Yohm had all but forced Gruecith to take a role in government. He certainly had the muscle for it, and none of the remaining knights voiced any complaint, so the fledgling nation of Farminus wanted to appoint him head knight, hoping to keep such talent from straying off. He’d balked at first, enjoying the new freedom in his life, but after Mjurran begged him as well, he found it impossible to refuse. Was Gruecith gonna be all right doing that? I didn’t bring it up. He didn’t seem *that* reluctant.

“I still consider myself part of Lord Carillon’s Warrior Alliance... but for now, I don’t mind babysitting this idiot.”

“Shut up! *You’re* the idiot!”

No, those two hadn’t changed much. And the sight of Mjurran wincing at them took me back as well. It was a familiar act, but this time, someone interrupted it.

“King Yohm! Captain Gruecith! You’re being terribly rude to the demon lord!”

The loud voice came from what looked like a grade-school boy, a very handsome and intelligent one.

“Ahhh, Edgar; you’re always so serious...”

“Ha-ha-ha! And why not? He’s far better put together than you. What more could we ask for in a crown prince?”

“Captain Gruecith! This is not the time for joking. I am trying my best to serve as King Yohm’s attendant, making sure he becomes a good, just king!”

Edgar, son of the previous king Edmaris, glowed red with embarrassment. He was still just ten years old, but “*well put together*” was an understatement. By the looks of things, he was already used to being the butt of their jokes—having to deal with such mean grown-ups at his age had to be difficult. At least Yohm and Gruecith seemed to care for him, as much as they carried on.

I wouldn’t have minded more of this pleasant small talk, but it had to end sometime. They were all tired from the voyage, and I’d have other VIPs coming for the preopening tonight. I suggested we could continue this conversation with some drinks later, and Yohm readily agreed.

“So, Yohm, as thanks for keeping your promise, I have a present for you. Diablo—”

“You mean this, Sir Rimuru?”

Before I could finish, Diablo realized what I meant and picked up a certificate we had prepared in advance, kindly providing it to me. I handed it to Yohm.

“Hey, what’s this, pal...?”

Yohm wasn’t particularly great at the whole “literacy” thing, either, so he quickly tossed it over to his assistant, Edgar. With a nod, the boy read it—and then his eyes bulged out of their sockets.

“You, you’re forgiving the rest of the reparations?!”

“Yep. Don’t really need any, now that Yohm’s king.”

They had already paid us 1,500 stellar gold coins in reparations. The total sum of 10,000 stellars was laughably astronomical, and now that our mission was accomplished, there was no need for that money anyway.

Yohm looked at the shocked child with a smile. “Heh-heh! Well, I don’t really get what that means, but there ya go, Edgar.”

He didn’t know, but Edgar sure did. No doubt it’d be another gold star for Yohm’s reputation.

Thus I became known as a person—or a demon lord, I suppose—who was willing to bargain a bit when it came to reparations.

My talks with Yohm’s group were over. They all left the meeting hall, dragging a still-petrified Edgar with them.

*

It was afternoon now, and I was no longer quite so busy. Visitors were still swarming in, but they weren’t eager to talk right now, either—not when there was this evening to prepare for. A lot of them certainly *wanted* to see me, and I agreed to, as long as they were willing to wait until after the festival.

I finally had some free time as a result, so (as I promised) I decided to travel to Englesia and pick up Yuuki. I could stop by the school there and take the kids as well—a festival like this, I didn’t want them to miss out on the fun.

The streets of Englesia were a nostalgia trip for me. It had been only several months since I left, but recalling life here naturally dissolved any tension from my face.

I couldn’t help but travel to the Free Guild headquarters in the middle of the city. Through the modern automatic glass door, I entered an air-conditioned chamber—and the moment I did, I was greeted with sharp-eyed stares. Only adventurers ranked B or higher were allowed in here, and this crowd looked the part—tough, seasoned, and not to be messed with. Looking around the chamber, it was clear nothing had changed. It made me happy.

A few of the men were openly appraising my appearance. Given they were here in the middle of the day, they might’ve been preparing for some big job or another.

“...Who’s that?”

“Haven’t seen ‘im around before. Is he new? Hey, you know him?”

“Uh-uh. You think I know anyone *that* pretty?”

These whisperings weren’t exactly welcome news. Less than a year’s time, and they’d already forgotten about me? But then I noticed—I didn’t have that mask on now, did I? I could fully control my own aura, so I went barefaced, since there was no longer any need for it. I had considered a disguise, but it was too late now.

Fortunately, I was dressed in my old adventurer’s garb, so as long as I acted the part, nobody would realize I’m a demon lord. Besides, Shuna had expended untold efforts sewing the demon-lord outfit I’d wear for official audiences. It was incredibly gaudy, decorated up and down with nothing but the finest accoutrements, and she even knitted a full-on coiffure to top it off, so it’d look nothing like what I’m sporting right now.

There were still relatively few ways to record things around you in this world anyway. It’s not like people far and wide would know what I look like as a demon lord. Maybe I shouldn’t bother worrying about it. For now, let’s go with this.

So I strode up to the reception desk. A man walked in front of me, blocking my way. I was struck by the weirdest sense of *déjà vu*.

"Hold on. I dunno what kinda backwater you earned your B rank in, but you think you can just come in without a word to the vets around here? Don't ya know it's the polite thing for a new adventurer to give his name first?"

Actually, it wasn't *just* *déjà vu*. I pretty vividly remembered him. This guy was Grassé, friends with Kabal and his crew, and he had whined at me about proper greetings last time, too. He must've lived his whole life like he was captain of the football team.

"Ummm, you're Grassé, right? You're always hanging out here at HQ, aren't you? Don't you have any work to do?"

"Huh? You know my name? So—"

"Mine's Rimuru," I said, cutting him off. "I was with Kabal's party, remember?"

I mean, come on, Grassé. I know that mask is gone, but my voice is exactly the same, okay? Why isn't he picking up on that...?

"Huuuh?! Uh, R... Rimuru?"

"Mm-hmm. And this is the first time you're seeing my face, but at least recognize my voice, man."

"N-no, um, but... Huh? Is it me, or were you kinda smaller last time?"

My name instantly threw Grassé into flustered confusion. I beat him rank-wise, so in his football-captain mind, I was above him. Adventuring was largely a meritocracy anyway, so acting superior based on age or years of experience wasn't really a mainstream trend. If a new guy helps you out, you'll naturally respect that and help him back in kind—but a lot of adventurers didn't see the need to be friendly to total strangers, either. Things changed if you were in a party, but in terms of social cliques? That was nearly all based on rank.

"Yeah, I grew," I said in a huff. More *evolved* instead of *grew*, but I didn't need to be that honest. It seemed to convince him.

"Oh. I get it. But, *man*, Rimuru, you sure got pretty hot! You must be well near invincible

by now, huh? Getting to see that sweet face of yours... I'm so moved!"

He was standing at attention now, like he did with Kabal, as he bowed to me. He always was a snake that way, but I couldn't hate him for it.

"Yeah, yeah. But why're you always here? Aren't you employed?"

"Heh-heh! Aw, don't give me that. This is kinda part of my work—I'm educating the new adventurers. There's a lot of barriers you encounter in the B rank, as you know, and my job's to approach any brash new guys and take 'em down a notch, that sort of thing. See those guys over there?" He pointed to the group looking at me earlier. "They're doing the same thing. We all hang here at the HQ in our downtime."

The group stood up straight and nodded at me.

"Forgive me—I didn't realize you were Rimuru, a B-rank adventurer," one of them, the apparent leader, said.

I nodded back at him. "I didn't think I changed *that* much..."

"Oh, no, you have! Now that I know, I just realized you got the same outfit on, but otherwise..."

"Yeah, totally. That face is just... Wow. What a standout..."

Is it really? That much?

"All right, all right. Should I put on the mask?"

Doing that was kind of a pain, but I didn't want to go through this every visit. I created the mask from my Stomach and applied it to my face, the adventurers looking a little disappointed for reasons I couldn't fathom.

"So, yeah. Keep up the good work, guys. Don't torment the newbies too much."

With that, I headed for the front desk.

Giving my name to the clerk, I had her take me to Yuuki. He was expecting me, apparently, so it didn't take long.

“Hey, Rimuru! Long time no see! Sounds like you’ve been through a lot, huh?”

“That doesn’t *begin* to describe it. I got attacked by Hinata, the Farmus Army invaded us, and then the demon lords summoned me... Just one thing after the other, you know? ‘*A lot*’ is the understatement of the year.”

“Ha-ha-ha! I figured you’d sum it up like that, Rimuru.”

Yuuki laughed it off, but it definitely *was* a lot. He understood that, I’m sure; he was all smiles, but there was a touch of gratitude to his voice.

“But, hey, at least I’m good with Hinata now. All’s well that ends well, right?”

“Sounds like it. I met her a few times to exchange information, and I told her a lot about you as a person. You know how, like, suspicious she is of people.”

“Oh, believe me, I do. She barely listened to a word I said.”

“Right? She’s the kind of person who only believes what she sees and hears for herself. It’s always been that way with her, and let me tell you, it’s not been easy.”

We chatted along these lines for a while. I’m sure it *wasn’t* easy for Yuuki. Hinata’s thought process can be a total mystery sometimes.

“Not that I can really talk about that with anyone but you, Rimuru...”

Hinata had a lot of followers. If Yuuki started complaining about her to the wrong person, she’d know almost immediately. Not that gossip is a good thing. I’ll want to be careful about that.

But it was time to cut to the chase.

“So what do you think? If you’re busy, I won’t force you, but would you like to check out the festival for two or three days?”

“Ha! Of course I’m going. Why do you think I tried so hard to get ahead on my work? And I’ve got people here I feel fine leaving this place to while I’m gone. Give me one moment.”

Yuuki stood up and went out of the room, calling for someone. I relaxed with my tea

for a moment, and he was back shortly with a woman.

"Let me introduce you guys. This is Kagali, the vice master of the Free Guild. She'll be running it while I'm gone."

She was a beautiful woman, very graceful on the outside, and the business suit-like attire she had on fit her to a T. Her eyes were blue, her blond hair tied in a chignon, but her ears were the real standout—long and pointed. She had to be an elf.

"Hello, Rimuru Tempest. Or should I call you Demon Lord Rimuru? My name is Kagali. It is an honor to meet you."

"Thank you. This is my second time here, but I don't think we met the first time, did we?"

I recalled the secretary who had given us tea, but not this girl. If she was the number two official in the Free Guild, I would've expected an introduction sooner—but there was a reason for that.

"Hee-hee! No, you wouldn't have been able to. I've only returned here recently. My passion is exploring old ruins, and I've just come back from mapping out the complex at Soma, one of the largest in the west."

It turned out Kagali was one of the world's greatest active explorers, lurking around this ruin and that since before Yuuki had founded the Free Guild. Her name was not that well-known—she hadn't taken part in the Society of Adventurers, the precursor to the Guild—but Yuuki had scouted her for her clear talent nonetheless. The Guild, after all, wasn't just about fighting. That was Yuuki's philosophy, which was why he had given an exploration expert like Kagali such a high position on the org chart.

Thanks to that support, Kagali had just pulled off a monumental feat—the complete mapping of the ancient ruins at Soma. This put her name up in lights for much of the world, quelling any dark murmurings of her being Yuuki's hanger-on. Now she was a vice master anyone could respect.

"Just because it's mapped, of course, doesn't mean all its mysteries are unraveled," she explained. "It just means there's a visual guide to follow to the bottom. There's still so much left to unravel."



"Yep. We can leave that job to the exploration-oriented adventurers. And with the map Kagali left for them, I think they'll make some serious progress."

There's the Guild philosophy at work again—instead of leaving everything to a single exceptional talent, they can bring on teams of people for the excavation work. It'd help younger members gain experience, too, killing two birds with one stone in a way.

So Kagali was now working here at the headquarters, helping educate the B-rank and higher adventurers. Given that she got a cut of the proceeds whenever the Guild sold the relics found by explorers, her take-home pay must've been astronomical.

"Huh. You can make a lot of money from ruins, can't you?"

"I have to admit," she replied, "you can. Although money isn't my main motivation; this is more my life's passion. I *have* auctioned off things I excavated in the past, however, to pay for my expenses."

Yep. Sounds like lucrative, if backbreaking, work. And speaking of ruins...

"I wanted to ask—who's got the rights to these ruins? Is it whatever nation they're located in?"

"Mm..." Yuuki paused. "That's a hard question to answer. In the case of the Soma complex, that's managed by the Free Guild. It was discovered in a somewhat tricky location—a desert region called the Barren Lands, farther west from Western Nations territory."

"Yes. To be more exact, the Barren Lands are located right up against the domain of the demon lord Daggrull. Thus, the area is not under governmental jurisdiction at all—everyone's too afraid to come near it. Ruins in unaffiliated lands like these don't have anyone who can lay claim to them."

"Oh... We'll have to be careful with those, then..."

"Hmm? Something bothering you about that, Rimuru?"

Yuuki must have picked up on my reaction. I needed no reminding of what that something was. It was the assorted unknown ruins near Clayman's castle, no doubt packed with magic items. I was sure exploring it would reap a huge harvest for us, but there was one snag: Who would the items we dug up really belong to? And what if

those ruins invited unscrupulous, profit-seeking adventurers—or worse, out-and-out criminals? The potential for discovering untold treasure was tempting, but even more important to consider was that treasure's historical value. They provided leads we could follow to learn about the ancients and what they did.

It's only natural, I suppose, to romanticize about ancient times. If we let just anyone go in the ruins and vandalize them all they wanted, we ran the risk of losing irreplaceable artifacts—that was my main fear.

There was no need to hide this fear, so I decided to bring up the topic with Yuuki. We had an expert explorer on hand, besides.

"Well, actually, there's another complex of ruins in Clayman's old domain."

"There is? You're sure of that?!"

Kagali's eyes instantly fixed upon me, like a predator aiming for the kill. It was quite the onrush, and it honestly surprised me a bit.

"Yeah. Clayman had this vast fortune and collection and stuff. He handed out magical weapons and armor to his forces like candy. I'm thinking he harnessed the things he found in that ruin to finance it. The thing is..."

"Yes?"

I paused for a bit, unsure, before continuing. "This might be rude to say to someone who makes exploration their profession, but I'm not really interested in plundering ruins just for the treasure. I want to know how the people there used to live, what kind of culture they had, and why their cities fell. I think ancient people deserve at least that much respect, so we don't let the past go to waste."

This was just me being sentimental, I knew. It wasn't that I didn't care at all about treasure; there were just more important things. That was why I ordered that ruin closed to outside visitors for now.

"You're more of a romanticist than I thought, Rimuru."

"What do you mean, '*more than I thought*'? I've always been this way, Yuuki."

"Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, you're right." He smiled at me, convinced. "You'd have to be, to come

up with an idea like building a nation of monsters.”

Kagali, for her part, mulled this over for a bit before nodding. The predatorial drive in her eyes was gone, the intellectual spark now firmly back.

“I see... Certainly, that’s a perspective I did not have. But I understand it. I am not a fan of seeing ruins get vandalized myself. We need to build the right sort of expedition team before we send them to Soma, of course.”

Maybe the romantic part of my thoughts didn’t come across, but at least she saw the need to keep the ruins protected. Hopefully she could lead that effort. She certainly seemed like the right fit.

So that just left one problem.

“Right. Well, the problem is, I’m the sole person responsible for caretaking Clayman’s territory. The demon lord Milim will eventually annex that land, but for now, it’s being run by us, the people who defeated Clayman. I think it’s fair to say he kept those ruins in pretty good shape, so I don’t want to be the one who messes them all up. I think I’ll have to bring this up with Milim—we need to make sure we’re thorough with handling them.”

“Oh, you aren’t going to rule that territory yourself?”

“It might be too much for me. It borders the Eastern Empire, and I don’t really feel like—um, I mean, having to run a border defense line against them is a pretty tall order. We can’t devote *that* many forces to it.”

Clayman’s domain was a buffer zone with the Empire. It contained a road known as the Valley of Death that wound its way through rugged mountains—a dirt path, not paved at all, but it still provided passage between Clayman’s lands and the Empire. The area was packed with undead creatures, but there was also evidence that Clayman’s forces made regular use of the trail—suggesting that the Empire was carrying out some kind of plan of action through his domain. It wouldn’t hurt to be on our guard about that.

We *could* deploy the army over there, but we’re running short on personnel right now. Managing the whole of the Forest of Jura took a vast amount of work. I was thinking I could leave Clayman’s land to Milim, and if the Empire ever made any moves, I’d just let Milim handle everything.

"So if we wanted to explore those ruins, we'd need the demon lord Milim's permission?" Yuuki asked.

"I suppose so, yeah."

"Ah... I have a keen interest in them, but do you think we'd be able to avoid interference?" inquired Kagali.

"Oh, I'm sure she'd say yes if we asked... but knowing her, I guarantee she'll want to go in, too."

"That..."

I was sure that condition would make any would-be explorer hesitate. The general public, after all, feared Milim deeply. Kagali seemed disappointed, but she shouldn't give up yet. Milim *would* definitely come along, no doubt about that—but if I'm there, too, what's the problem?

"But, you know, I was planning to explore those ruins anyway, so having an expert like you along would certainly put my mind at ease, Kagali. And since we've introduced ourselves to each other, maybe I could pay you through the Free Guild to help with that effort? What do you think?"

"Meaning that you'd have the right to whatever we found, Rimuru?"

"Well, we can talk about that. I have a museum in my capital, so I'd prefer to put it on display there rather than sell it off. But it's still gonna be Milim's land, so we'll have to discuss matters with her, too. It's hard to make a decision either way right now."

"I see. But you're definitely gonna stage an expedition sometime?"

"Yep!"

"Indeed," Kagali chimed in, "if I don't have to worry about expenses, I'd be delighted to take that offer. And if you can handle negotiations with Milim for me, I'd have no reason to say no."

It looked like Kagali's interests weren't strictly about profit, either. She had an intellectual bent as well, and if she did, there were no issues between us. So it was decided: She'd organize the team, and I'd talk to Milim and convince her this was a

good idea.

“Does all that sound good to you, Yuuki?”

“Sure! The Free Guild would be happy to help!”

“Now I’m looking forward to this. I’ll begin making arrangements for this while I run operations in Master Yuuki’s absence.”

Ah, right. We’d gotten a little sidetracked, but I was here to invite Yuuki over.

“Thanks very much, Kagali. Sorry you’re staying here while we get to have all the fun, I guess.”

“Hee-hee-hee! Oh, I don’t mind. Enjoy yourselves to your hearts’ content.”

“Thanks. The Guild’s in your hands!”

After saying our good-byes, Yuuki and I left the Guild headquarters. I hadn’t expected this, but now we had the ball rolling on exploring those ruins. I really wasn’t sure who to enlist for that effort, so having an expert oversee operations was reassuring. It wouldn’t be until things calmed down after the Founder’s Festival, but I really couldn’t wait to see what we found in there. We could all stand to learn a lot—maybe it’d even give me some hints for the underground Dungeon we’d built back in town.

Such were my thoughts as I took Yuuki along to my next stop.

*

I removed my mask outside of the HQ. Given that I no longer needed to hide my aura with it, I only really required it in places where revealing my face would cause trouble.

Yuuki, carrying a large knapsack, was eager to talk to me. Receiving that written invite, he must’ve had time to prepare in advance—and given the size of his bag, he must’ve been planning to stay at least a few nights.

“So are you gonna bring the kids along, too?”

“Yeah. Now that Hinata and I are even, none of ‘em has any reason to be against me. There might be an issue or two with them being over there, but we got some pretty

serious security, so..."

We had to, given all the dignitaries we invited. And if we could keep all of *them* safe, there was no reason we couldn't protect those five children, either.

"Okay. In that case, go right ahead." Yuuki smiled. "They're a lot more devoted to studying these days, so maybe they're due for a break and a reward."

I didn't send any advance notice to the kids. It would be a complete surprise to them. I kept quiet until I was sure it'd be okay to invite them, and hopefully they'd forgive me for that. I knew they really needed some more advance notice, but depending on how things went, I might've had to say no to them. No point in revving them up and disappointing them later if things went awry.

After walking for a while, we came to a familiar schoolhouse—the imposing home of Englesia's Free Academy. A word with the gate guard, and we were taken inside—I was with Yuuki, the school's honorary chairman, so it took no time at all.

We were soon greeted by the vice principal, who guided us into a classroom.

"Hey, guys! You all doing well—?"

Before I could finish saying hello, Alice tackled me like a lineman.

"Ugh! Mr. Tempest! You've been gone for so long!!"

I didn't think I had been, but maybe that was just my grown-up's perspective? Children have a different sense of time than we do. I guess this must've been hard for them.

"She's right. You promised me you'd come in regularly to visit!"

"Yeah! Gail's telling the truth! I thought you forgot all about us!"

"But I'm glad you're here now, Mr. Tempest!"

Gail, Kenya, and Ryota all gathered around me, expressing their joy even as they complained to me. Chloe wasn't far behind them, grabbing on to me and smiling.

"Welcome back, Mr. Tempest!"

"You're as popular as ever." Yuuki laughed as he watched. "I'm a little jealous."

"Oh, Yuuki's here, too!"

"Are you gonna fight me today like you promised, Yuuki?"

"Me too!"

"Right. Our spirit force handling's improved a lot lately."

Noticing Yuuki made the children's smiles grow wider. Kenya was even challenging him to a fight, and Ryota and Gail weren't far behind him. If they had their powers more under control now, I was sure they wanted someone to test them out on. But we were here for different reasons.

"Ah-ha-ha! You'd need to train another hundred years to beat me. I'll fight if ya want, but not today, all right?"

"Awww, why not?" Kenya protested.

"Sorry," I said, "but there's no time for that today."

"What do you mean?" a confused Chloe asked.

I looked right back at her. "Well, I wanted to invite all five of you to my homeland. We're holding a big festival starting tomorrow. If you don't want to go, that's fine, but—"

"Hurry! We gotta get ready!"

"All right, Ken!"

"Whaaaaa—?! Why didn't you tell us sooner?! This is *huge*!"

"Yeah, Mr. Tempest! How can you just say this out of nowhere?!"

"Um, um, I can't wait!!"

The children immediately sprang into action, not waiting for the rest of my speech. They didn't waste a moment of time. The decision was unanimous.

"All you need to bring is a change of clothes, guys!" I shouted as they scurried off. There was no response, all of them departing like a storm and shouting the whole way.

The teacher presiding over class at the time was understandably a little confused as he watched us. "That's quite a surprise to see." He sighed once they were gone. "They've never been quite that friendly to me..."

"Ah-ha-ha! You're doing a great job with them. They're a little better now, but it takes a rare teacher to wrangle the likes of these kids."

"No, no, I suppose it's only natural that you need to prove your strength for them to listen to you. I hate to say it, but I think I might actually lose to them if I don't pay attention. There's no doubting the power they pack, no. By the way..."

The teacher didn't look familiar. He must've been hired on to replace me.

"Oh, I'm sorry. My name's Rimuru, and I was teaching them before you. Sorry to interfere with class."

"Ah, you *are* Rimuru! I surmised as much when the children called you 'Mr. Tempest.' My name is Klaus, and I was hired by the academy as your replacement." He gave me a bitter smile. "And don't worry about the class—the vice principal warned me in advance that we may be canceling it for a bit starting today."

As Yuuki explained, Klaus was once an adventurer, a hunting specialist with a rank of A-minus. He was now approaching fifty and considering retirement before very long.

"Wait, you said *you* might even lose to them? They've gotten *that* strong?"

"Well, what did you expect? They take pride in the fact that you trained them, sir."

"Yeah," Yuuki said, "if they snuck up on me, maybe *I'd* even lose."

They must've grown a lot. That was impressive, especially in such a short time. It gave me something to think about, as a resolved-looking Klaus turned toward us.

"Sir Yuuki, I have a request."

"Mm? What's that?"

"It's something I'd like to ask Sir Rimuru as well—but at this rate, I can see myself as no longer able to win against them before long. It's an advantage that goes beyond any technical skill they have. But letting them slide by with just *this* much wouldn't be good for them. I think they need an adult who can serve as a kind of wall for them."

"How do you mean?"

"It's simple, Sir Yuuki. These children still have the potential to grow. I don't want them defeating me to make them arrogant, and thus, I was hoping we could provide someone who can train them in fighting technique."

I get it. Klaus really seemed to be looking out for these kids. Each one was housing a high-level spirit inside them—spirits that neutralized the magicule energy granted to them in the crossing from their world to this one. As they grew, however, they became able to control and harness these spirits' powers—and unleashing this extra energy would make it simple to cast spirit-magic spells, for example.

They really could become talented elementalists, the way Shizu had. Kenya even had the potential to go Hero-level, just like the light elemental we met said. With the right instructor, fabulous powers would be far more than just a dream to him. Like Klaus suggested, he needed a gifted teacher to guide him along. But:

"All right. So we'll want a good teacher along those lines, huh? But if we're talking someone stronger than you, Klaus, it'd have to be a current A-ranker. Hiring someone that far up as a teacher might not be possible..."

Yuuki was right. That *was* a problem. A retired adventurer would be glad to accept a steady job like that, but an active one could earn a lot more money taking challenging jobs than watching a classroom of kids. The Guild, too, had a mission to keep people safe; they'd naturally prefer their top talent to be working in the field for them.

"I imagine not," Klaus said with a sigh. "If we're looking for someone ranked A or higher willing to work as a teacher, well, I sure can't think of anyone. I can certainly teach classwork and adventuring skills well enough, but..."

He understood full well that this was a big ask. And, yeah, recruiting adventurers to teach must've been a pretty tall order. So I made another suggestion.

"In that case, you know, I'm planning to start a school of my own back home. We got a lot of B-ranked dudes over there, and I could probably have Old Man Hakuro, my own

teacher, serve as an instructor. When it comes to swordsmanship, at least, he's better than I am, so I'm sure he could teach them that much."

Hakuro would be just fine—when it came to sword skills. The children needed more instruction than *that*, of course, but...

"Whoa," Yuuki marveled, "that actually sounds great! Would you mind taking over custody of them for a while, then?"

"Yeah, that's another idea. But they're still gonna need to learn life skills for *human* society from somewhere."

Children learn a lot of these skills interacting with one another. Robbing them of that chance, I worried, could stunt their communication skills as they grew up. We'd be seeing more and more adventurers in Tempest over time, and their own children would probably be attending this school I pictured—but that wasn't likely to gain major momentum for another few years. Until then, they'd have to live in an environment with no other human children, and that struck me as problematic.

"Oh, because it's nothing but other monsters instead of human kids?"

"Yes, that *could* be an issue..."

Yuuki and Klaus had the same misgivings, nodding their agreement. I was glad we were on the same page with this—but I couldn't rest easy yet. There was something else on my mind.

"Which, I mean, they could just travel to Tempest for instruction in battle. We have the teleportation magic for it; they could come over a few times a week if you like. But given their background, I think they better get some instruction in elemental spirits as well."

This wasn't a "problem," exactly, but still not something I wanted to compromise on. The elemental spirits within them helped protect their lives, to a large extent. If they wanted to harness their powers correctly, they'd need more core knowledge about them—knowledge I simply didn't have. Not to put too fine a point on it, but everything I knew about this world was gained strictly off my own experience. Me trying to explain elementals would be like you or I explaining how to breathe through words alone. I could go over logical facts and stuff, but I couldn't impart the real essence.

I was reminded of the way Hinata and her paladins fought, a fusion of sorts between spirit magic and swordsmanship. It was a unique approach, and mastering it must require a deep understanding of spirits. If they could impart that to our kids here...

"And, you know, when I think about spirits, I think of the paladins. Should we ask Hinata?"

"Hmm... I was thinking the same thing, but Hinata can be kinda scary, you know?"

"Well... true."

"She'd never allow the kids to take advantage of her, that's for *damn* sure. But I'm worried she'll be a little *too* harsh on them."

"That's hard to deny, yes."

Yuuki and I looked at each other and sighed. But we'd need to save this discussion for later. I could already see the children running back to us, luggage in tow. It was festival season. No point in pondering these thorny issues when there's so much fun to be had. For now, I could ask Hakuro about instructor work and worry about other matters later. It was procrastinating, I know, but we'd figure something out.

So, following the same thought process I usually turned to for issues like these, I mentally switched gears and quit my worrying.

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Leaving the main gate into Englesia, I set up a transport gate in a secluded location. This wasn't "magic," technically, so I could deploy one without any magic circle required. Yuuki looked at me rather coldly about that, but the kids were used to it.

"Mr. Tempest, if it's *that* easy for you to use these gates, then come visit us more often!"

It was Kenya complaining, and he was absolutely right. I apologized profusely to him. With all the stuff that'd happened, it'd been hard to find free time and I couldn't really guarantee anyone's safety, but no point telling him about that. It'd just make the kid all anxious. So, while dancing around the subject a little, I promised to go back to see them more often.

On the other side of the gate, I took Yuuki and the kids straight over to my favorite

lodging in town—a private area, separate from the four-star nobles' accommodations and reserved for our top officials. Yuuki went off to his room, and as he did, I turned toward the children.

"I'm sorry, guys, but I still have some work left. You'll have to wait until tonight to see me, okay?"

""Awwwww!"""

None of them was too excited to hear this.

"Quiet!" I took a pendant out from my pocket, silencing them. "I thought we could use this to play a game, but...?"

That lifted their spirits. They were eager to hear more, and once I was sure they were, I began to explain.

"You see this pendant here? It's kind of a free-pass ticket to all the booths and stuff in the festival, starting tomorrow. Carry this around, and you can eat and drink all you want in the stalls, and you're free to come and go through any of the event halls you like. But just remember, there's an upper limit of one hundred silver coins—use that up, and it's game over. You'll have to go back to your rooms then, and I'll give you homework as punishment. But if you've been doing your work up to now, I'm sure you'll be smart enough to stretch this out for three days. Sound like fun to you?"

I knew from the start that I couldn't watch these kids all day, so I thought up this tactic for them. That's what you normally did with kids at a fair, right? Give them an allowance and let 'em run free. I felt bad about not taking them around, but I figured the kids would have more fun alone anyway. And with Soei's agents deployed across town, they'd have no trouble keeping tabs on them.

This way, at least, I could let them loose on the festival without major concern. And, really, one hundred silvers was a crazy-generous budget. Most of the stalls and attractions didn't even charge you one silver; you'd have to make a concerted effort to spend that much in three days. I called it a "game," but really it was just a premise I'd invented to set them on their way.

"Let's do it!"

"I bet there's all this rare stuff to see... Can't wait, huh, Ken?"

“Yeah, I can’t!”

“Thank you, Mr. Tempest.”

“Um, I’ll buy something for you, Mr. Tempest!”

They were up for it, all bursting with anticipation. I gave them the pendant, returning each of their excited nods. It’s always fun, I think: that anticipation before a big event. I also thought about telling them Ramiris was in town but decided against it. I planned to introduce them after the fest anyway, so no need to hurry things. Besides, all the kids—Kenya and Alice in particular—were already busy planning out the next three days of fun. The servants at our lodging would take care of the rest of their needs, I figured.

“Okay, guys, if you need anything, just ask the hostess in charge here, all right? And I doubt you’ll need to, but if you have to contact me about something, just hold that pendant tight and think hard about me. It’ll trigger a messaging magic.”

“““Okay!””” they all shouted back. Good to see them so eager. And with that, figuring I would be in their way beyond this point, I left their room.

Now I had wrapped up all the necessities.

I had a little time before the preopening, so I thought I would take a quick break in my room before it began... but the world had other plans for me.

“...Sir Rimuru, the Hero Masayuki’s party has arrived outside of town.”

Soei quietly appeared to whisper the news into my ear. A Hero, huh? What kinda dude could *this* be? I thought over the possibilities as I came by to greet him.

As I did, I could see several elves getting jostled around on a large wagon. I had heard they were freed from that Orthrus ring, and I guess the news was true. It was a pretty fancy wagon, too—they must’ve been treated well post-rescue.

On another, smaller covered wagon was a boy with blond hair, sitting in the cabman’s seat with another man holding the reins. Was that Masayuki the Hero? He looked Japanese to me, but with the rounded lines to his face, there might’ve been something in his blood from elsewhere. That sort of pop-idol look, you know? Silky blond hair,

almondlike eyes with double-fold eyelids... His face was childish, but he just projected this aura of coolness.

The girls must've loved him... but frankly, he didn't look very powerful to me. You can't judge a book by its cover, though. He was definitely an otherworlder—I could see it in the faint Heroic Aura he emitted. It was meant to be intimidating, but it didn't work on me.

Bracing myself, I retained my cool as I turned my eyes toward Masayuki. The party must've noticed me just then, slowing down and coming to a stop in front of me.

"You're the demon lord Rimuru? Funny to see you personally greeting us at the door!"

"Well, Sir Masayuki is a renowned Hero. Not even a demon lord could afford to ignore him."

"Hee-hee-hee! What d'you think, Masayuki? Wanna settle things right here 'n' now?"

Sheesh, *that* was sure friendly of them. I was glad they'd rescued those elves, but what did I do to deserve getting dissed like that? Well, gotta bottle it up. Anger right now would be ill-advised. I was trying to frame myself as a helpful, harmless demon lord, on good terms with Hinata and everything, and no way I could let that effort go to waste.

"Ha-ha! Harsh words from the Hero's friends! Well, out of appreciation for you rescuing our countrymen the elves, you are free to enter and stay in this town. I could even prepare a house for you, if you want, and feel free to stay as long as you like. But just so we're clear, I'm not interested in 'settling' anything right now, all right?"

There were merchants around us. I decided to take a friendly, humble route. It didn't exactly provide the results I wanted.

"Ha-ha! Look! The demon lord's afraid of you, Masayuki!"

The large, seminude man who took the reins roared in laughter as he looked down at me.

"I understand you are seeking friendship with us humans. But I'm unsure how much I can trust this. The rumors say that you're the one who schemed to topple the government of Farmus. Perhaps you've managed to trick Hinata the Saint well enough,

but don't expect to be so lucky with Masayuki here."

Talk about turning a deaf ear. They were hell-bent on making me out to be the villain, it looked like. But oddly enough, the Hero himself still hadn't said a word. He had tried to, but every time, one of his companions would speak up first. To be honest, they were acting more like groupies.

"Hmph! The evil must be dispelled, if you ask me. Sir Masayuki, defeat this demon lord at once and bring peace to—"

Guys, I'm telling you, we've already got peace.

The nearby merchants were giving me confused looks, no doubt totally lost. If I didn't put my foot down, I felt like there might be repercussions. But I couldn't really stage a fight here... Before I could get too worried, however, someone tossed me a life ring.

"What're you guys doing?"

Yuuki, in a fresh set of clothes, had already heard the commotion.

"Oh! Yuuki!"

For the first time, Masayuki spoke up—and from the sound of it, he had been hoping for divine intervention as well. But his companions weren't having any of it.

"Well, hello there, Yuuki! Why's the master of the Guild himself keeping tabs on a demon lord?"

"I'm not, Jinrai. Guys, Rimuru seriously wants us all to get along, okay? And as proof of that, I'll point out the fact that you're all still alive."

So the larger guy was named Jinrai. Yuuki explained to him about how I'd fought Hinata to a draw and that I'm not a bad demon lord. It didn't convince all of them.

"What do you mean by that? The way you describe it, are you implying that Masayuki is weaker than Hinata the Saint?"

"Don't be *that* harsh with him. A mere demon lord could never stop Sir Masayuki. And even the guild master could never be forgiven for insulting him this way!"

Masayuki himself was still silent. He sure had some extreme fans.

"Yeah, Yuuki. Like Bernie and Jiwu said, don't treat Masayuki like a fool, all right? I dunno how strong Hinata's supposed to be, but a draw's the best she could do against this guy? In that case, it's time for the headliner to make his debut, ain't it? Masayuki could whip this demon lord easy!"

The lauded Hero looked like he wanted to be somewhere else right now. Maybe he didn't seek conflict with me at all, then? Yuuki, realizing this himself, stepped up to assuage his friends.

"Guys, guys, calm down. Like I told you, Rimuru isn't hostile against us. There's no point fighting him."

"But he's a demon lord, ain't he? Who knows when he might hatch some nefarious scheme! And with the Western Holy Church sitting on the fence, ain't it about time Masayuki shows everyone just what kinda Hero he is?"

"No, I'm telling you—"

Hmm. I see. I could understand where this guy Jinrai was coming from, actually. I was a demon lord, and he didn't trust me. And sure, if you weren't familiar with me yet, maybe *you'd* feel the same way as Jinrai did about me. I still didn't know what the so-called Hero thought of all this, but at this rate, we'd never come to terms.

So I decided to accept the challenge. But:

"All right. In that case, I've got a suggestion. We're planning to hold a battle tournament at the festival starting tomorrow. If you enter it and emerge as champion, I'll gladly accept your challenge! That, and you'll be able to prove your strength to everyone there. Not a bad offer, right?"

I'll take the challenge, but before that, I wanted Masayuki and his team to enter the tournament. It'd help me learn how they fought, and for that matter, it might show that I shouldn't bother with them in the first place. A pretty shrewd idea, I thought, although I wasn't sure which of them would get to fight in the arena yet. I had planned to restrict the competition to fighters ranked below A, as I was still a little anxious about the arena's structural integrity. It did just fine against magic from high-level elementals, which was special-A stuff... but hey, if it crumbled, we'd just build it again. As long as we made sure no onlookers got hurt, us duking it out there shouldn't be a

problem.

“Oh? You’re in that much of a hurry to embarrass yourself in public?”

“What do you think, Masayuki?”

“You should accept the offer. It’ll help spread your name far and wide! Yes, let’s prove you’re on the side of justice, in front of the very people you must keep safe!”

“Um, yeaah...”

Masayuki’s attendants were all gung-ho about it. Masayuki was not. His eyes darted around, seeking an escape. Was this dude really all right? This wasn’t, like, just a huge bluff or something, was it? Nah, it couldn’t be. This gang apparently crushed Orthrus, which Soei described to me as one *seriously* dangerous organization. That’s not the kind of feat you could bluff your way through. Even if he *was* a big faker... I mean, hell, he could say no anytime.

“...Well, all right. I accept your invitation.”

Ah. Guess I really *was* overthinking it. After a few moments spent in thought, he said yes.

“Whoa, you sure about that, Masayuki?” a worried Yuuki asked.

The Hero smiled slightly. “Oh, I’ll figure something out. It ought to be just fine. It always is.”

That’s a lot of confidence! Especially considering I’m right in front of him.

“Very good,” I replied. “And this being a tournament, there’s not gonna be any killing, all right? Keep that in mind for me.”

“Hmph! Who do you think you’re talking to? Let’s go, Masayuki. We’d better rest up for the big day tomorrow!”

“Yes, Masayuki. Considering all the onlookers here, no way this demon lord’s going to chicken out now!”

“And don’t worry. We’ll keep a close eye out for anyone trying to poison or assassinate

you."

"A-anyway, we ought to get going. Better find out when the tournament begins."

"Rimuru," Yuuki said as they left, "you aren't *really* going to fight Masayuki, are you?"

"Ummm... I don't know yet. I mean, do you think he could win the tournament?"

"That's what *I'd* like to know." Yuuki sighed. "He's won a couple Englesia battle tournaments in a row, and honestly, I've never heard of him losing against a monster before. A lot of his strength is still an unknown to me."

I could read it on his face. This was something he did *not* want to deal with.

"Well, whatever happens happens. But let's give this a positive spin, huh? Having a bona fide Hero in my tournament's a mark of prestige."

It's all about perspective. Yes, this was a thorn in my side, but compared to conferring with demon lords or fighting Hinata, it didn't strike me as that depressing. We'd need to think of some measures later, but I saw no reason to dwell on it any further.



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And then evening came—and with it, an ornate reception hall packed with dignitaries from all over.

We had tons of nobility in there, all dressed to the nines in their flashiest formal gear. There were more men than women, by the looks of it, but I guess I had earned the trust of quite a few nobles, because I saw some with their spouses and children. There was even a young doll-like girl with blond hair among them, making for quite a spread of ages.

Tonight's plan called for a pretty loose invitee list. Anyone could come if they liked, and we'd be serving them buffet-style, with a variety of food spread out on the table and invitees free to pick and choose. Plus, there was something you wouldn't see in any other country—a section of the chamber decorated Japanese-style, with tatami mats on the floor. This took up about half the room, with invitees obliged to remove their shoes before stepping on it.

This wasn't a tradition many guests were used to, so the tatami section was still sparsely populated. But it wasn't empty. I saw a few people trying the space out, relaxing on new and unfamiliar *zabuton* floor pillows. King Gazel was one of them, and this wasn't his first time, so he was well used to it. We spoke for a bit. Apparently, he'd gone around town this afternoon, seeing how it was developing—the sewage treatment facilities, the rails we were constructing, and so on. He spent a while gazing at all the buildings and entertainment we had built, much of it based on my own whims.

"What will you be doing with those rails, if I may ask?"

"Well, on that topic, I actually had some things to discuss with you. I'm thinking about developing these new vehicles called 'trains,' and I'd really like you to join in."

"Hohh? Well, if it's my beloved sparring partner asking, I'll gladly accept."

That was fast. I guess seeing those rails convinced him it was worth signing on for. If anything, I bet he would've insisted on joining, even if I told him he couldn't. No need for that, though.

"Scuse me," I heard someone say as he sat nearby. This was Yohm, another familiar face, and he just *whumped* himself down right in front of King Gazel, who greeted him with a grin and deftly poured some wine into his cup. It was surreal to watch the king

of a brand-new nation chatting with someone like Gazel—no doubt the sight would make some people rethink their opinions of Yohm.

The three of us chatted about this and that awhile. Gazel's main purpose here was to show people that we were friends. The more intelligent people watching us would have to raise their opinions of Yohm and me. Here, they'd think, were two people the Dwarven King obviously respected—and that, in turn, would give us more leverage at the bargaining table. In effect, Gazel was providing support fire for us.

Of course, I was sure he'd scrutinized what we talked about before, making calculations to ensure the Dwarven Kingdom stood to profit from it. But I still definitely appreciated it. It reminded me all over again that in Gazel, I had a trusted confidant.

Some of the attendees had a chance to try out our large public bathhouse before the party. It was generally warmly received, the bath attendant fielding all sorts of questions.

Bathhouses already existed in the larger nations of the world—the novelty here was the hot-spring water itself, I assumed. We kept careful tabs on the healing properties of the minerals and such it contained, so now it could be easily replicated. A number of nations asked if we could bring a bath like this to their homeland, and I planned to reply to this customer commentary at a later date. My answer was always going to be *sorry, come visit us again*, but regardless.

A few of our bath customers were in the tatami space now, relaxing in the light *yukata* kimono we'd provided. They were quite muscular folks, discussing with one another what they had seen and experienced. One of them wanted to speak one-on-one with me, but I just didn't have the time to get to everybody in the chamber. I thus reached out and greeted those I was able to timing-wise as I made my way to the seat of honor.

Many of the people here were seeing me for the first time. I felt a lot of curious gazes upon me—people who turned pale upon learning I was a demon lord and people all the more curious and observant upon hearing the news. I was still not used to so much attention at once, so I gave them all quick hellos before reaching my seat. It was time to officially get this party started.

"Ummm, first off, thank you for coming here today. My name is Rimuru, and as you all know, I have recently been appointed a demon lord. However, tonight isn't the night for intense political discussion. I hope that all of you here will enjoy the food of our

nation that we'll present to you tonight. I was never one for long speeches, so let's begin!"

Everything was set to go. Food is an integral part of good hospitality. Hopefully the sincerity behind it came across to everyone.

Each table had a waiter attending to it; Vester had drilled them on how to divvy up the available food upon request. What he taught them—about how everything came down to providing the best possible experience for our guests—was about to be unleashed on the public.

My speech over, I lifted my cup in a toast. The eve of the festivities was underway.

The cold beer, for one thing, led to loud cheers and applause. I figured it would. If your alcohol consumption involved not much carbonation, Tempest's beer must've been a huge surprise. I mean, it's ice cold. I instructed everyone thoroughly on Japanese-style service here, chilling the glasses and everything. I couldn't compromise on that, for my own sake.

Even better, I had lovely elven girls pouring for me. No one was forcing them to, okay? They'd personally volunteered to help out, and we were letting them. And they were a big hit, too. Having such beautiful elves going around the hall with drinks, wearing *yukata*, was no doubt *quite* attractive to people only familiar with women in dresses. And the way they greeted you—with a polite seated bow on the tatami mats, three fingers of each hand on the floor—had a kind of universal attraction among men, no matter where they came from. A lot of them were blushing, and not because of the booze.

I mean, you know how breasts can look under a *yukata*. Hee-hee-hee. Just as I calculated.

But, ah, the ultimate blending of Japanese and Western styles! Seeing people in *yukata* dotted among all the nobles in formal wear was something different, definitely. Something you could see only here. Things were getting a little hectic at this party, though we'd expected as much. Really, the party itself was a crazy idea from a common-sense perspective—but why let it bother me? I treated it as perfectly normal as I watched the other guests.

The tables were lined with the latest and greatest work from Shuna and Mr. Yoshida.

It was all excellent; I could guarantee to everyone attending that they would enjoy it. You had smoked chiducken and vegetable sandwiches, cowdeer steaks, sautéed veggies with red bean paste, *karaage* fried chicken, and roast-beef salad. For palate cleansers, we offered assorted fruit sorbets, and there were even a few dishes from the Walpurgis I attended, like black-tiger stew and grilled sage rooster. Tracking down those monsters wasn't easy, but with the leads I had beforehand, we managed to procure them over the course of three days.

This food, made with the finest and rarest of ingredients our nation had to offer, seemed to fully satisfy the palates of our noble attendees—all of whom were dyed-in-the-wool gourmets, no doubt.

And that wasn't all.

A large fish was brought into a corner of the hall, on the border between the Western and Japanese sections. The monster was called a spear tuna, bearing a solid-looking exoskeleton and a sharp, spear-like head. Even without the horns, it was over thirteen feet in length and looked viciously mean from nose to rear fin.

Why did we bring in such a behemoth? Because despite its appearance, this fish had the nicest, most well-rounded taste to it. The armor-like exoskeleton hid lean red meat, similar to tuna. I happened to catch one during a fishing competition with Gobta, and all I can say is, good thing I bothered to run Analyze and Assess on it before tossing it back. It told me that the fish was both nonpoisonous and packed with nutrients. Pour a little of our soy sauce on it (now ready for practical use), try it out, and... Well, it was good. Really good. The experience drove me to show it off to the crowd at this party.

I'd actually caught this guy myself. I had grown pretty adept at moving in the water by now, and it was a good experience for me. I'd have someone else handle that next time, of course, but either way, this was a freshly caught spear tuna. Meanwhile, Hakuro cut and trimmed it for me. The first time, he used a well-honed long knife from Kurobe to dice it up and present it in pieces, arranged all lifelike on the table. This time, however, he'd be performing for a crowd, so he took his time, slowly slicing up the body. Deftly avoiding the spear tuna's solid exoskeleton, Hakuro's knife ran through it like butter. It was the most artistically beautiful dissection I had ever seen; even Shuna was surprised at his dexterity. Put a knife in his hand, and he truly had the air of a craftsman.

Shion, behind me, really wanted to help out with the knife I had gifted her, but I dissuaded her from the idea. The reason should be obvious. I couldn't feed inferior goods to a group of world dignitaries. This wasn't something I could joke around with. Shion was my secretary-slash-bodyguard, and I wanted her to stick to that.

How did the crowd respond? Well, more than a few were surprised—even scared—of the vicious-looking sea creature when it was first brought in. But as Hakuro's trimming unfolded, looks of joy started to creep over their faces. Then the head came off, the body was cut into four sections, and the dishes slowly filled up with the resulting sashimi pieces. In the center were the fattier cuts of white sashimi, the red pieces fanned out around it. The mere sight of that made me salivate, but the crowd—most of whom had never had anything like this before—was a little more nervous.

As they continued to watch, Hakuro began to make sushi out of some of the pieces. *This* feat, I wasn't expecting.

White rice, cooking sake, vinegar, mirin, and soy sauce. We had all of those now, and they added incalculable depth to our cuisine, as was clearly being demonstrated here. But, man, I never thought I'd get to eat *real* sushi in this world. Apparently, Hakuro's grandfather had told him about it when he was young, but... *whew*. I sure felt for that guy. Coming to a world like this, and all he could think about was sushi, this thing he'd never enjoy again in his lifetime. He must've had so many regrets.



Compared to him, I had it *damn* lucky. Like Hinata told me as well, trying to replicate Japanese cuisine in this world was, to say the least, a challenge.

Hakuro's granddad, though, huh? I remember him described as an otherworlder named Byakuya Araki. Did he live back in, like, the Edo era, maybe? Samurai and shoguns and so on? I doubted he was a sushi chef himself, but when could he have been born?

...But, ah, it doesn't matter. Gotta live life in the now.

The buffet table was alive with chatting guests. The food was a hit, everyone raving about it. Shuna and Yoshida had given everything they had to their team-up, so I'd say they deserved all the praise they got.

On the other hand, the sashimi and *nigiri* sushi Hakuro made for the crowd was still being wholeheartedly ignored. Maybe the terrifying sight of that spear tuna was a little too stomach-churning to whet their appetites. I spotted at least one show-off telling his friend, "Good heavens, that's an A rank..." and so on. There's one trivia whiz in every crowd, isn't there?

But... c'mon. It was freshly cut sashimi; there was no way it could taste bad. I wished they wouldn't act so boorish and give it a try, at least. In this world, you could detect poison in food without eating it first, so everybody here knew that wasn't a concern. The visuals must've convinced them this was some kind of low-grade garbage food.

Well, if nobody was willing to step up to the plate, it was time for me to lead off.

"I'll take one."

"By all means!"

Hakuro was kind enough to whip up a new piece of *toro* fatty tuna for me. I placed some soy sauce on it and popped it in my mouth. The combination of fragrant wasabi and the tuna's melt-in-your-mouth umami came together, forming an explosion of supreme taste.

It was so goooooood!! *So* good. I mean, I'd been to crazy-fancy places in Ginza before, and I'd *never* had anything at this level.

"This is *amazing*, Hakuro!!"

"That it is, I'm sure. I was concerned such fine fish may not last long tonight, but I fear the audience reaction is a tad disappointing. It will be something to look forward to over drinks tonight, though, no doubt!"

Hakuro and the rest of the staff would eat after the guests left. He must've been hoping for some spear tuna to enjoy with his sake later. And he was right—the snub from the guests was a pity, but if he'd made this for himself anyway, then no harm, no foul. In fact, he almost seemed to *want* them to hate it.

Unfortunately, it was Hakuro who had to be disappointed.

"Would you make me a piece of tuna underbelly without the wasabi, please?"

Well, well, who's this? Someone with a lot of guts, asking for the *ootoro*, arguably the best part of the whole tuna. And no wasabi?!

"What are you, a child?"

"Oh, shut it. I don't like that sting in my nose."

It was Hinata, dressed in a simple night dress and acting a little too big for her britches for my taste. Ordering sushi like it was her divine right!

"Too bad there isn't a little more variety."

And now she was complaining about *that*? First no wasabi, then a larger menu? Okay, I'll grant you that not everybody's on the wasabi bandwagon—it can be tough if you've never had it before. I asked for no wasabi up until around middle school age myself. But as a grown-up, a *real* connoisseur knows how to enjoy the flavor of the wasabi as part of the package.

"What do you mean '*a real connoisseur*'? What's that even matter? If it tastes good, it tastes good."

She was chortling at me now... but she was right. Goddamn it. Why does Hinata have to be so *rational* about everything?

So she picked up the plate from Hakuro, beaming. Slowly, she placed a piece inside her mouth, closing her eyes.

"This... really is excellent. First sashimi and then sushi... It rankles me, but I have to respect you, Rimuru."

Sounds like a satisfied customer. She savored the tuna, a look of joy on her face.

"Right," said Yuuki, coming up from behind, "I'll have one, too. Oh, and *with* wasabi, because I'm not a kid."

Given the jab at Hinata, he must have been observing us for a while. I knew he had sampled quite a bit from the buffet, but he must've still been just as hungry. Taking a plate from Hakuro, he finished off the contents fast, no doubt waiting for this moment.

"Whoa. It's just melt-in-your-mouth! Man, getting to eat sushi *this* good, over *here*... It's honestly kind of moving."

He was already reaching for the sushi as he spoke, a smile on his face.

"It certainly is different from freshwater fish," countered Hinata, "is it not? You know, I asked the Free Guild for fish like this, but they turned me down, and I can't magically transport them to me. I had given up on it. But this definitely brings a little more joy to my life."

Apparently, Hinata had missed seafood so much that she'd asked Yuuki to bring some over to her. That, however, was logically difficult—there were so many issues to deal with, they couldn't find anyone to tackle the job. Hinata must've brought that up to get back at Yuuki for his wasabi jab.

"Well, I couldn't do much about *that*," Yuuki replied with a pained grin. "The northern seas are too full of giant fish to be safe, and the south is too far away to make transport very efficient. And you can't make a profit off seafood if you're shipping it in just from inland waters."

He was right. Logistics in this world were still pretty weak. As I expected, inlanders had almost no chance to sample fresh fish. Getting seafood to them was just too difficult. Wagons could carry only a little at a time, and temperature control was a major hassle. You'd have to either bring along a sorcerer or have vast quantities of ice available in each town—and even then, there was no telling if you could maintain freshness from the shores all the way to inland cities. You'd have to be pretty rich to have a chance at a fresh fillet, and in fact, the idea probably wouldn't even occur to you in the first place. The concept of fish in stews and such existed, but again, the problem

was supply.

This, too, was just what I pictured. Thus, I wanted to take this opportunity to tell the world about the delicacies they could enjoy only in my nation. I'd build more of a distribution network later, but until then, I wanted Tempest to have a monopoly.

Whether they were put off by the spear tuna's appearance or hesitant about exotic food cultures, nobody had touched the sushi or sashimi. But now, with both Hinata and Yuuki singing its praises, the tides were about to turn. A man stood up from the corner King Gazel was occupying and came over.

"Sir Rimuru, can we have some as well?" he asked.

If I recalled correctly, this was Dolph, captain of the Pegasus Knights.

"Certainly, go ahead. I'll have it brought over."

As if on command, Hakuro's hands began moving at astonishing speed. The plates were quickly lined with fresh-made sushi, sashimi, and *osuimono*, a light seafood broth. These were brought over by our elf-girl waitstaff, all arranged in a neat row in front of Gazel, Yohm, and the others seated on their pillows.

Now, for the big moment. How would they react?

"...Mm. Excellent as always."

"*Kahhh!* This is good!!"

With a swig of chilled sake, Gazel grabbed a piece of sashimi—and it certainly didn't seem to disappoint him. Yohm, meanwhile, was enrapt at his first bite, expressing himself in his usual honest (and very un-noble) way.

The rest of their friends had similar praise for it.

"I had no idea that monster fish could be so delicious!"

"I thought fish wasn't good for much of anything apart from grilling..."

"Hey, if it tastes good, it tastes good, you know?"

“Yes, and certainly Sir Rimuru has never brought us anything short of excellent!”

Good, good. Glad I had everyone satisfied. And even better: A large number of people were observing their reactions.

“Me too! I’d like to have some!”

The moment one noble shouted that, a mad dash of orders for Hakuro ensued. Now it was a big hit—one that made Hakuro happy, if a little regretful. Yeah, I wasn’t so sure he’d have something to enjoy with his sake tonight after all. *I actually have another spear tuna on hand—let’s surprise him with it afterward.*

After Hinata and Yuuki kicked off with their light banter, they were exchanging heated opinions about every other topic in the world with each other, drinks in hand. It was hard to tell if they liked or hated each other—but their little debate over wasabi had turned this offering into a success story. It wouldn’t be nice to interrupt them now, so I resolved to thank them later.

So the party continued. So far, I’d call it a big success. All the food, Western- and Eastern-style, was earning raves. This was a “come if you like” thing; nobody’s attendance was required, but a lot of people showed up anyway. If we kept up relations with them all, I’d have to be sure to dangle these foodstuffs in front of their eyes and tell them we could get a regular supply going.

This much, too, was as I’d planned it. This kind of on-the-ground PR was my job. I’m not just here to live it up and dine on the hog, no. I’m not extravagant and selfish—that was all prep work for a chance like this!

...But enough excuses.

In that way as well, the event was proceeding as planned. But then:

“U-urgent news, sir!!”

A soldier burst into the room. I guess we had a problem.

*

As one would expect, there were guards posted all around this reception hall, including

the personal bodyguards of the political figures inside. The area around the building was thus full of people, and if there was an issue out there, it was likely to be a serious one.

"What's up? What happened?" I spoke slowly to the soldier to calm him down. I'd love to run out and see things for myself, but I couldn't act agitated right now. But before the soldier could answer, a large contingent of bodyguards from all manner of nations tore into the room at great haste.

Seriously, what was going *on* here?! Our security program was supposed to be perfect. If we had an incident on our hands, something seriously went wrong. I didn't sense any particularly large aura approaching; this wasn't a monster attack. If it was, it would've been detected sooner. Milim and Carillon *were* a bit late, but their arrival wouldn't trigger a panic like this.

So what could it be...?

The soldier turned toward me. "A large flying object has flown in! It's outside of town!"

As he spoke, the other bodyguards were giving their own reports to their respective bosses, shouting in loud voices.

"Reporting, sir! The emperor of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion has appeared!!"

"It's an emergency! The Heavenly Emperor, Elmesia El-Ru Thalion herself, has set foot upon this land!!"

"Her Excellency the Emperor and her entourage are walking toward this reception hall!!"

I was freaking out for a moment, but to sum it up, this was just the emperor of Thalion arriving a little late.

"Whew. *That's* a relief. I was wondering what was up."

I breathed a sigh of relief. But Gazel, who deigned to get up from his seat to approach me, was sighing for other reasons.

"Just as thoughtless and ignorant as ever, eh? What else would happen if Emperor Elmesia left her borders? I know we're all trying to gauge one another at this event—

even me—but the emperor herself is simply too much to handle. I am sure even those not in attendance tonight are hurriedly sending missives back to their homelands.”

“What do you mean?”

I wanted more details, and Gazel was just waiting for the chance to give me some. He just *loves* to go on about all his knowledge in front of me, like some kind of genius—but it *did* help me, I realized, so I resolved not to complain too loudly.

As he put it, the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion was a large country, one as strong as the Armed Nation of Dwargon, despite being fully independent with no involvement in the Council of the West. Plus, as the term *Dynasty* suggested, it was a federation of thirteen distinct kingdoms. In terms of power, the Council of the West was definitely the biggest force out there—but given its parliamentarian system, it couldn’t immediately carry out policy at a moment’s notice. Dwargon, on the other hand, was a monarchy under Gazel, so while it fell behind in overall power, its statements still held sway with the Western Nations. The same was true of Thalion.

“Elmesia holds immense power in Thalion. She’s hailed as a descendant of divinity, and she’s the one who declared herself Heavenly Emperor in the first place. I don’t know how divine she *is*, exactly, but it’s absolutely true that Thalion was founded by a high elf named Elmesia. That woman’s been around for longer than Thalion itself.”

It wasn’t even remotely on the same scale. Dwargon’s history extended back for a thousand years. Compared to that, it was said Thalion could trace its roots back over two millennia.

“Do you see what I mean now, Rimuru? Even *I* have to be respectful to Elmesia. And imagine if you were a human, with your short life span. Why, you would never have a chance to meet her in your life, even if you wanted to!”

Given Gazel’s obvious distaste for her, Elmesia must have been one tough cookie to deal with. Hmm. I meant to invite only Archduke Erald, I think... but I guess we’d landed someone even bigger.

“Yeah, you know, I guess it’s important to write a name down on your invitations, isn’t it?”

“...I don’t think that’s the problem,” a peeved-looking Gazel replied. But she was here, and I had nothing to counter him with. We’d just have to give her the best service we

possibly could.

As we spoke, a commotion erupted near the entrance.

"Looks like she's arrived."

"Stay on your guard, Rimuru. Think of her as the slyest old fox you'll ever see."

If that's how Gazel put it, I suppose I'd have to resign myself to some serious competition. I gave him a powerful nod, showing him I was ready to accept this.

The hall was in a furor. As I suppose it would be. Here, after all, was an emperor of a vastly powerful nation—one who apparently hadn't even made a public appearance in decades. Most everyone in the room would normally never get a chance to see her their whole lives.

Elmesia El-Ru Thalion, the leader who declared herself Heavenly Emperor, solemnly strode inside. Everyone there no doubt thought of her as the personification of beauty. They all watched her silently, captured by her presence. Even me, I think—especially since, externally, she looked like such a beautiful young girl. Her skin was like fresh snowfall, her hair a shiny silver. Her ears were long and pointed at the ends, her penetrating eyes the color of jade.

She was female, judging by what Gazel said—no denying that. Are high elves purebred from the fairy races, then? If not, then they must be closely related. Fairies came in all sorts of types, I suppose, but some were descended from the high-ranking spirit classes, and maybe this Elmesia was an example of that, a menace from ancient times. No wonder Gazel was wary of her.

And we had to watch out for her entourage as well. Each guard practically oozed power. They were dressed in ceremonial gear, but even *that* stuff was all magically charged. All Legend-class, I'm sure. It was strength on the level of Hinata's sword, Moonlight—and it was coming from their clothing. They had to be at least as strong as Arnaud and the paladins—or maybe, judging by the quality of their gear, the emperor's guard was even better.

It's a big world out there, I thought.

Then, waving a hand to keep the guard at bay, the emperor stood before me.

"I have accepted your kind invitation," she said in her clear voice. "It gladdened me."

That voice was enough to make all the invitees here melt, it looked like. One might confuse it with a charming magic, but it wasn't. Her voice really was just that mesmerizing.

"It's an honor to meet you as well," I said, returning the favor before her.

Then Elmesia's jade-colored eyes looked at me.

Warning. Spiritual Interference detected... Blocked. This was likely not an attack but a natural side effect of Heroic Aura.

Oh man. This lady's Heroic Aura on a level that even beat Gazel's. That means she was at least as powerful as him and quite likely even more so. Demon lord-level, perhaps? It seemed like a keen idea not to get on her wrong side. This was a peaceful invitation, and I wanted to appeal to her with everything I had so we could build a friendly relationship.

"Now, we have some food prepared for all of us, so I hope you will enjoy the remainder of the evening."

"Yes, I am most pleased to see so much careful attention paid to these proceedings. I do look forward to the festivities beginning tomorrow, and I hope they prove to be eminently enjoyable. Also..."

Elmesia had a calm, composed smile on her face as she spoke. Then she brought her face closer to mine. "Doesn't have to be today," she whispered so only I could hear, "but I want you to make some time for me, y'know. There's something I wanna discuss frankly, in a more relaxed environment."

It was a markedly more casual way of speaking—Elmesia's true colors showing, I imagined. As someone still getting used to playing the role of a stern, dignified demon lord, it made me feel an affinity for her.

"All right," I replied. "I'll let you know when I work out a time."

She nodded, smiling, then returned to her ring of guards. She kept the smile up, as people clamored around for a chance at winning favor with her while she headed for

the buffet table.

By the way, I was surprised to see that Erald, the archduke I *did* invite, was nowhere to be seen. But then I matched eyes with one of her guards.

Whoa, it's him?!

He looked so imposing that I totally ignored him at first, but I guess he *was* here. We exchanged glances and nods, but I definitely wanted to give more formal hellos later.

*

It was only a short exchange, but it still exhausted me. Fortunately, Elmesia was now distracting people's attention away from me, so I decided to kick back in the tatamimat section. I had assumed this would be a chill little open-invite event, but now I had some real power brokers in here.

"Man, I'm beat."

"About to get swallowed up, aren't you? Better keep yourself sharp, or else that old f—"

Gazel stopped himself, taking a swig from his chilled sake to change the subject. I'm guessing the even chillier stare from Elmesia was the reason. I'm sure I wanted to know what he almost said there, although I could venture a guess. Good thing he didn't finish the sentence. Elves have pretty good hearing, and loose lips sink ships, as they say. I'll need to be careful, too.

But regardless, time to unwind. I toasted with Gazel and Yohm, opening things up with some chitchat. Unfortunately, I couldn't relax for long. There was further commotion at the entrance—another celebrity appearance, by the sound of it.

"Looks like she's finally showed up."

"She sure has," I replied to Shion with a nod. "I was worried she'd be too late before long."

I prepared to give my good-byes and stand back up.

"Oh, Milim's here?" Yohm said, recognizing her. "Man, she's painted up all pretty tonight, huh?"

Ever since they had a bit of a tussle, Yohm had kindled something of a dislike for Milim. The fact he managed to keep it just to "dislike" probably spoke volumes about his personality. No way any normal person could speak of a demon lord as "painted up" like that, I don't think. I really had to hand it to him.

"...I see. Bring in the demon lords, eh?"

Gazel's eyes were sharpened on Milim as well, but it took Yohm to tell him who she was. But I'm sure a few other faces by the door were more familiar to him. After all, she was being led in by members of my own staff—Benimaru, Diablo, Geld, and Gabil.

Now the dwarf king looked nervous. And why not? This quartet was guiding ten people inside, Milim included. She was taking the lead, with two attendants on either side—a bald man named Middray, the head priest of the Dragon Faithful and a fighter worthy enough to earn praise from Benimaru. The other robed attendant was more easygoing. That must've been Hermes, the guy Gabil had fought against.

Behind this trio were two former demon lords—Carillon the Beast Master and Frey the Sky Queen. Carillon looked just as majestic as always, and Frey was in a dress I could describe only as "provocative," turning heads all across the hall. Both of them, to be sure, struck an almighty presence.

Trailing Carillon were the Three Lycanthropeers. Say, this was the first time I'd seen Phobio in a while! He looked a bit thinner than before, but I was glad he was well. Frey, meanwhile, was attended to by a pair of beautiful identical twins, their blond-and-silver hair suiting them well. I had heard of them—they were the "Twin Wings," her closest servants. I hadn't realized they were actual twins, but I was sure they were two powerhouses in a fight.

In this group, we had a set of massively powerful rulers, all declaring Milim to be their new queen. Nobody could hide their nerves around them, and I could see why.

"Yep," I told Gazel as I stood up to greet them. "I'm gonna go say hello."

The moment Milim saw me, she burst into a broad smile.

"Hee-hee-hee! The day's finally here!" she shouted. "Can't wait to see the kind of food that'll make Midray moan with excitement!"

"Not a problem," I replied, voice low. "But isn't anyone angry with you?"

Milim had spent much of the lead-up to this festival poking around my Dungeon and generally avoiding Frey as much as possible. She had been here in town until yesterday, in fact, and they were all late arriving today. This suggested Frey was livid with her, and I was concerned about that.

"Oh, um, no worries there," she whispered back. "I emphasized to Frey that I've built up my self-awareness as a ruler, so I was out protecting my territory the whole time—and she believed me!"

Judging by the sweat running down her face and the way her eyes darted around, I had trouble believing her. Frey was an intuitive woman. Milim had been busy protecting the labyrinth floors I assigned to her, not any of her own lands. If Frey finds out, then I could be dragged in through no fault of my own—but for now, I'd just have to believe in her. I'd have to, but no matter what, I wasn't involved, okay? Even if it means ditching Milim at the side of the road.

"Thank you for inviting me today," Frey said after I was done with Milim. "I apologize for our tardiness." Then she looked into my eyes. "Lady Milim," she furtively continued, "our new master, was absent from my sight until this morning. It took some time to fit her for her ceremonial wear..."

"Ah, ah-ha-ha, yes, I see! Well, I certainly don't mind it at all, so please enjoy yourselves for the next few days."

I turned my eyes away from her penetrating gaze, talking my way out of my imagined predicament. As a slime, if I ever got nervous, it'd never be discernible on the outside. Now, I feared my eye movements made my inner intentions bleedingly obvious. Whenever I dealt with anyone as intuitive as she was, I could never afford to look them in the eye.

"...Oh, of course! Here I am, leaning on you to build an entire new city for us, and now you've even invited me to this grand event... I have so much to thank you for."



Frey smiled. The thanks helped me loosen up a bit. That was all it took to create new problems for myself.

“Well, I hope our food here is to your liking. And ah yes—are there any ingredients you can’t have? We *do* have chicken on the menu, but if that’s a problem—”

It was only at that point that I realized the mistake I was making.

“Chick... en?”

Tension cut across the air like an icicle. *Oh no*, I thought, but it was too late.

“Ah—”

“Sir Rimuru, are you equivocating myself with livestock?”

“Ummm, no, I didn’t mean to...”

Frey was still smiling. The Twin Wings around her all but snarled at me. What a mistake. What did I just say? Loose lips *do* sink ships. They had just sunk mine.

But as I agonized over how to react:

“Pfffft! Bwah-ha-ha-ha! Oh man, Rimuru, that was *great*! You’re just the most incredible man ever. You, calling Frey a bird... That’s just brilliant!”

Carillon, failing to read the room one bit, burst out in laughter.

“Yeah,” Milim respectfully added, “I could never do that.”

Stop it, guys. Quit giving me those sparkling, wonder-laden eyes of yours.

“May I ask what’s so funny, Carillon? And you too, Milim?”

Now Frey was annoyed. I was clearly at fault.

“No, no, I’m sorry. That was a mistake on my part. I just thought you may not like poultry, but I see I was overthinking matters.”

At a time like this, a humble apology is your best bet. Trying to cop an attitude could

lead to even worse disagreements later. So I tried to calm Frey down as best I could, bowing my head despite everyone around me.

She reacted to this with a look of surprise. “Hee-hee! Ah, Sir Rimuru, you’re exactly the sort of person I hoped you might be. I realized you didn’t intend to insult me, but I just wanted to test your reaction. Now I know. Seeing how you hold yourself has doubtlessly helped Lady Milim grow and mature as well.”

The composed smile returned to her face. Milim was no longer a tyrant. She wasn’t exactly a benevolent ruler, no, but at least she was willing to listen to people a little more—and Frey must’ve thought I was the reason, so she used my mistake to test me a little. She must’ve hoped I was an example for her to follow.

Bowing to her, then, was the correct answer. If Milim was imitating me, after all, I should’ve expected Frey to test me. If I was a *bad* example for her, after all, she might have kept Milim from visiting me. I had to hand it to Frey—I thought she was a scary big-sister type, but she really *was* looking out for Milim.

As for bad examples...

“By the way, Caaaaarillon? What exactly was so funny again? Would you mind explaining in a way I would understand?”

A wave of pressure crashed on Carillon’s head. I could almost hear the sound of twisted metal when it hit home. Frey descended upon him with lightning speed, her graceful hand palming his entire head. In terms of muscle, Carillon could win out, but this eagle-like grip was definitely something Frey had over him.

“W-wait a sec! Ow, ahhh, seriously, *ow!*”

Frey’s arm was stiffened from her elbow to her fingertips. Her fingers grew into talons harder than steel, expanding in size as they dug into Carillon’s head. Yeah, I *bet* that hurt.

“No, that... Really, I can’t take any more! I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Please forgive me!!”

Despite their master’s shouting, the Three Lycanthropeers didn’t move a muscle. Phobio fidgeted a bit, clearly worried for Carillon, but the other two just gave the ex-demon lord exasperated stares. Yeah, Carillon could no doubt hold out a little longer—and given his obvious lack of regret, he probably had it coming, too.

"Are you watching, Milim?" I asked. "If you do something bad, you apologize. That's the correct choice, isn't it?"

"Yes, I agree! And for *that* matter, I'll try not to get you angry in the first place, Frey!"

Milim understood what I was trying to tell her. She could play till she was pooped in the Dungeon, but moderation was key. Take care of everything that needed to get done first, and that made your subsequent recreation all the more fun. If you could accomplish that, then great—just watch you don't cause offense like Carillon.

"Whoa! Come on! Hey! Stop chatting over there and help me!!"

Milim and I nodded, the struggling Carillon serving as a fine example of what *not* to do.

"Don't just ignore me! Owwwww..."

His voice was fading from my ears. *Thanks, Carillon*, I thought as Milim and I waited for Frey to cool down. *We'll never forget your sacrifice.*

*

Even as this little fracas was taking place, Shuna was fully carrying out her duties for me.

"All right, here comes more food!" she said with a smile as she brought out all sorts of dishes, the crowd cheering her on.

Putting Carillon's sacrifice behind us, we all moved on. "Hey!" he protested as Frey finally released him. "Milim! Rimuru! I was screaming at you to help me!"

"Oh, stop complaining! You're totally fine!"

"Yeah," I agreed. "Frey wasn't really serious, so it wasn't *that* big of a deal, was it?"

Carillon was clearly unharmed, so I felt safe saying that. Apparently, I was wrong.

"No, it was! From the moment she put her claws around my head, that knocked out all my skills. I think that's Frey's unique skill or something. If she used *that* on the likes of me, then it must seriously be love!"

I *really* didn't think so, but I didn't tell him. Shuna's cuisine takes precedence right now. The dishes were all placed on a single round table. Our attendants had reserved this set for Milim's party.

"Thanks in advance for this," Milim said to Shuna. "Middray's a pretty stubborn guy, so I want something that knocks him on his butt on the first taste!"

"Hee-hee-hee! I understand, Lady Milim. Enjoy!"

Shuna smiled, putting Milim's mind at ease. They had taken a liking to each other, so Milim looked even more reassured than when I'd spoken to her.

However:

"I have to say, Lady Milim, I am not impressed by you being taught all these blasphemous ways..."

The moment dinner was served to Milim's servant Middray, he immediately started chiding me. This was exactly who Milim was talking about in the letter she sent. Hermes, meanwhile, was looking at me, hands clasped together in a prayerful apology—he must've been worried Middray's words would anger me. The long-suffering type, I guess. I liked that.

Watching us from afar, meanwhile, were the now-well-fed nobility, busily chatting with themselves. It was chitchat, yes, but it was *noble* chitchat. Info gathering was the name of the game, and right now, they were more interested in our exchanges than their own conversation. The question on their minds: How would the demon lord Milim and her people react to the food they considered so tasty? Especially given how one of them, Middray, already demonstrated so little understanding of our efforts? Some would no doubt conclude that, while having different values wasn't necessarily a bad thing, humans dealing with magic-born would remain an uphill battle.

If that happened, then so be it, but I figured we were fine. Hermes, Milim's other attendant, apparently wanted to spread the general concept of cuisine among the Dragon Faithful, besides.

So I decided to engage Middray. "Blasphemous?" I asked.

"Hmph! Since ancient times, we have deemed it proper to praise the blessings of our foodstuffs—and to enjoy them as is, in their natural form. And now I am presented

with this..."

It was a salad with dressing. That was no good. Neither, it seemed, was potato salad, since it meant mashing the potatoes and defiling their original form.

"And what manner of behavior is this? Grilling meat—all right, fair enough. But why do you then stain it with this mysterious liquid? It is deplorable—truly deplorable!"

Middray must've been angry, because I saw a throbbing vein on his forehead as he glared at me. This offended Shuna enough to wipe the smile from her face, and she glared right back at him. Hermes, noticing this, grew pale and started bowing profusely to Shuna and me... but Middray, not bothered by this, kept right on going.

"What sheer disrespect for our natural blessings! I was prepared to accept whatever you choose to do within your own territory, but now you are getting Lady Milim involved? Outrageous!"

He pointed out the hearty soup and bite-size cream croquettes on the table as he lectured me on his food theories. The sheer force he put behind each word certainly made it clear why Milim asked me for help. Trying to reason with him was exhausting... or, really, stultifying. He was the type who believed he, and only he, was correct, refusing to lend an ear to anyone else.

But that would end today. It'd be one thing if their palates evolved differently from ours, but the only issue here was Middray's way of thinking. And it wasn't just a wrong assumption of his or anything—there was just nothing correct about his theory at all. I mean, Milim—the figure he worshipped—couldn't wait to chow down on this. She was pouting, like a dog ordered to wait for a treat.

It was time to finish this. I knew I had it in the bag. If I got Middray to say, *This is good*, I won. Just one spoonful of anything from Shuna would seal the deal once it crossed his lips. Thus I was optimistic about this—but then reality came along.

"I absolutely refuse to recognize anything even *close* to this!!"

Middray was still enraged, uninterested in a single morsel. My victory rode on the assumption that he'd at least try *something*, but if he wasn't up for that, it meant I'd lose without a fight.

Milim gave me a concerned look. Hermes's gaze was skyward, wondering where

everything went wrong. With all the yelling from Middray, we were starting to draw a large audience. Even the lower-ranked invitees, the kind who failed to get an audience with Elmesia, started gathering to see how this would turn out. If I lost this verbal sparring match in front of this crowd, the fallout might affect a lot more than my street cred.

"Rimuru," a worried Milim said, "I didn't expect Middray to be so stubborn about this. Should I maybe ask him to go to another room for now?"

"Yes," added Hermes, "I'm sorry about our head priest. He's always a little hot under the collar, but he's really not a bad man... I didn't expect the topic of food to enrage him so much."

"Hmm... I thought a taste would change his tune, but I underestimated him. I don't want to force the issue, so I don't know..."

I mean, we didn't *have* to work this out today. The festival only truly began tomorrow, so there was no need to rush things. So I decided to learn from my mistake, think of a better way to deal with Middray, and move on.

But someone wasn't willing to let this slide. The hall echoed with a loud *wham* as Shuna—a smile of a very different sort on her face—slammed her hands against the table in front of Middray. The head priest's eyes shot open—out of surprise, not pain. I could see why. Shuna had reacted *incredibly* fast. Even if you were prepared for it, not many people could've reacted in time.

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

"Silence!!" a glassy-eyed Shuna shouted, taking a bowl of stew and thrusting it in his face. "See all the ingredients in this stew? This is what Sir Rimuru sees as their ideal state!"

Um... What? What's that mean?

"Under Sir Rimuru," she continued as I sat there stupefied, "there are gathered lycanthropes, there are harpies, there are the magic-born who once served Clayman... There are even dragonewts like yourself. Any one of those races alone would be powerful, I am sure. But bring them all together... and they will enjoy even more power than ever before. Please try this."

With unexpected force, Shuna made Middray grasp the spoon. Swallowed up by the momentum, Middray meekly brought it to his lips. And here I had given up. Shuna made it look so easy... and once we reached this point, the results were just what we expected.

“...!!”

Abject surprise crossed Middray’s face.

“Wh-what is this...?!”

“Well? It’s good, isn’t it?” said Shuna. “This is called ‘harmony.’ Each individual ingredient tones itself down in order to form a complete overall taste. That’s the fervent hope contained in this stew.”

...Oh. And here I thought it was just a nice bowl of soup.

“It... It’s good. Better than any kind of vegetable I’ve eaten before... This single spoonful has so much depth to it...”

Yeah, I could imagine. Compared to raw veggies, Shuna’s cuisine is always gonna take the prize. To Middray, it must’ve been an unprecedented, revolutionary discovery.

“Um,” a red-faced Hermes said, “I would appreciate it if you could stop looking at me like a poor beggar on the road...” Very clearly, he didn’t want people to think he was like his boss. I’d probably say the same thing. I knew all about people trying to do the right thing and their bosses shutting them down—and those very peons being held responsible anyway when things went south. I felt bad for him, so I gave him a reassuring nod for his troubles.

Even as Hermes and I exchanged glances, Middray was finishing off the bowl of stew. “If you understand now,” a much sunnier Shuna told him, “then very well. But please remember this: Cuisine is about far more than this single bowl.”

After that stew, Middray seemed much more receptive to her words. “What do you mean?” he asked back, face serious and thoughtful.

“If this stew,” she replied, “is like the land Lady Milim rules over, then this loaf of bread is the Kingdom of Blumund. This steak is the new land of Farminus. If this foie gras terrine is the Dwarven Kingdom, I suppose that makes the seafood here Thalion. You

can combine them in many ways—but no cuisine can survive on a single plate. And nations are the same way. It's the broad, deep connections among them that make them more bountiful and satisfying. *That* is the world Sir Rimuru seeks."

The smile on Shuna's face came from the heart. Middray must have felt something from it, because now his eyes turned to the other dishes on the table. He thought for a moment in silence—not just him but everyone watching from afar.

"It... It is...?"

"Sure, diplomatic relations certainly are important," I replied.

"Indeed. But I did not know that His Majesty, the Demon Lord Rimuru, had such thoughts..."

"How wonderful! And even the best of cuisine can be ruined with the wrong amount of salt. Instead he's bringing different dishes together to form a complete full course, then? A truly fascinating concept!"

Now the crowd excitedly talked among themselves. I, um, couldn't say I thought about it *that* way, no—but Shuna's forceful persuasion must have spoken to their hearts in grand fashion. Considering the total lack of theme to the buffet food, it was *really* a stretch, but it worked.

Honestly, Shuna had impressed me just now. Not only her speech but the glorious food that did so much of the talking for her. People like Middray, afraid of values different from their own, now found it in themselves to dream of a future where humans and monsters worked together—all thanks to the example of "harmony" within cuisine.

"Also," Shuna added, "note that it takes more than simply tossing everything into a bowl and mixing it up." Her eyes turned on Shion behind me for just a moment, and I'll just pretend I didn't notice that, thanks. "So now that we've convinced you, bear in mind that most food's best while it's warm. Lady Milim, Lord Carillon, Lady Frey, and all their attendants—please enjoy it before it gets cold."

Her words were like a starter pistol to Milim's ears. She immediately dove in.

"Yes! This is *great*!!"

That, plus her wide grin, was the answer she had for us, loud and clear. No need for

grandiose vocabulary with her. One look at that face, and it was easy to understand.

"I... see. I have been mistaken... and Lady Milim waited so patiently for me to realize it..."

The message came across to Middray, too. After far too long, he had finally seen the light.

"Now, Sir Middray, no need to feel depressed. You'll just make things gloomy for the whole table. Let's enjoy it while it's hot!"

Hermes's advice—not advised for the current situation, although he likely knew that full well and said it anyway—made a vein throb on Middray's head once more.

"Youuuu..."

"Um, what? Why is your head looking like a melon...?"

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Why be angry, Middray? Hermes is right. Besides, if you don't chow down soon, *I'm* gonna eat it all instead!"

"Pffft. Count yourself lucky today, Hermes. On behalf of Lady Milim and this fine food before me, I will forgive this affront!"

Smiles and laughter filled the scene, as if everyone—man and monster alike—shared in the same heart.

"You've got some little sister," I remarked to Benimaru when we happened to make eye contact.

"Don't I, though? I'm so proud of her." He nodded back, like this was a given. Shuna, who must've overheard us, blushed a little and headed to the back room.

The feast was set to run from six to nine p.m. that evening, but we wound up extending it another two hours. One reason was all the latecomers—the VIPs and such who had snubbed the event at first but ran over once news of Elmesia's appearance spread. The other was the, shall we say, *excessively* healthy appetites of Middray and Carillon's band. It was a long time before they finally said "no more," for sure.

But the reasons don't matter. In the end, it was a huge success. And so the preopening feast, despite a few unexpected bumps along the way, came to a close after providing results beyond what even I expected.

INTERLUDE

A LATE-NIGHT MEETING

At midnight, after the banquet wrapped up, we held an impromptu emergency meeting.

"Right," I said, looking at the attendees. "Sorry to get all of you here this late. I know we're tired out, but just hang in there a little more, okay?"

First, I wanted to thank Shuna for tonight's performance.

"Shuna, you really helped me out. Your food was excellent, and you even succeeded where Milim failed and convinced Middray to change his mind. Seriously, thank you."

Shuna gracefully smiled back. "No," she demurred, "our menu succeeded tonight thanks to the support Mr. Yoshida gave me. Besides, Sir Rimuru, considering the great praise you had for Hakuro's seafood, I feel like *he* stole the show."

When it came to preparing fish, cutting sashimi, and even whipping up sushi for hungry customers, Hakuro was far better than Shuna. It was almost like a second calling for him, so I didn't think Shuna was slumming by comparison... but she seemed a little peeved nonetheless, although she did accept my earnest thanks.

Next, I addressed Mjöllmile, my main man behind the scenes.

"Mollie, how are the merchants doing? You run into any problems?"

A wide variety of products and goods was flowing into town from nations worldwide, for sale or use in our many pavilions. Rigurd and Lilina were managing it all, and Mjöllmile was tasked with handling the merchants coming to town with it.

"It's been nothing but smiles from them so far, sir. Seeing a town as majestic as this for the first time is dumbfounding all of them—and our attendees tonight were smacking their lips at the spread. We're seeing a great deal of farmers coming from nearby nations as well, so I think our efforts are really paying off. They're bringing a lot of fine goods, too, and I think we can build rather good ties with them..."

Mjöllmile glanced at Rigurd, who nodded back at him.

"Yes, as Sir Mjöllmile said, they're bringing fresh fruits and vegetables, smoked beef and fish, and assorted rare handicrafts. Some are bringing livestock with them as well. I think we're well prepared for the festival along those lines."

Rigurd seemed assured that shortages wouldn't be an issue.

"We plan to use some of these imported goods," Lilina added, "for our meals at the evening banquets starting tomorrow."

"Ah, that shouldn't be a problem, should it?"

"No, I don't think so. However... No, no, it'll be fine."

Hmm? Mjöllmile seemed about to say something before he clammed up. If he had qualms, I wished he'd follow through and talk about them.

"Whoa, whoa, say whatever's on your mind, all right? Because if you stop yourself midway, it'll weigh on me even more."

Benimaru and Soei nodded in silent agreement. The pressure made Mjöllmile scratch his head before he spoke again.

"Well, it may just be my imagination, but I am recognizing rather few of the tradespeople working here alongside the large merchants I have close ties to. I have a knack for remembering people's faces, you see, so it made me curious. So I did a little research..."

As Mjöllmile put it, while it seemed odd at first, there was no actual problem to speak of. He'd asked some of his merchant friends, and they'd replied that, yes, there *had* been some new blood entering the business. But none of them had heard any scuttlebutt about these tradesmen; they were model businessmen, offering quality products at low prices. Mjöllmile said his friends laughed at him for worrying too much—and when he himself called on a few of these unfamiliar faces, they were all affable and sociable with him.

"Perhaps," he reflected with a grin, "being given such a large task has made me a tad high-strung."

"Hey, are you really all right? It's not too much work, is it? I don't want it to affect your

health..."

His workload had ballooned to epic proportions as of late, indeed. This time, though, he really did laugh off my concerns. "Ha-ha-ha! No need to worry. But I have even more important news for you! It turns out that the Hero Masayuki intends to join the battle tournament tomorrow! The whole town's alive with rumors about it. People are already placing bets at the taverns."

As Mjöllmile put it, he was too excited about the work he tackled to grow tired of it. More pressing to him was the news that Masayuki had decided this past evening to join the fight.

"Exactly," interjected Soei. "That is why I wanted all of us to discuss this matter."

The group that came to greet Milim outside of town apparently hadn't heard the news. Benimaru, among others, turned his eyes to Soei, silently asking for some details—but Shion answered first.

"That boy drives me up the wall! He went on about how he'd defeat Sir Rimuru, among other nonsense. I wanted to dispatch him myself, but..."

"Yes," Soei replied, "and I stopped you. There were people watching. And if you cause trouble right now, it could affect the whole festival."

That explained why Shion was being relatively well-behaved. I thought she was maturing a bit, but we couldn't let our guard down yet. Good thing Soei was around.

"Well, I'm glad you were there to do that. He was with my friend Yuuki, besides. And if people spread rumors that I picked a fight with a Hero at the entrance to town, that'd invite all sorts of suspicion I don't need."

I sighed as Benimaru nodded his agreement.

"Quite true. Shion, can you please keep your head cool for us?"

"Ha! You don't need to tell me. I was just a little riled; I didn't plan to actually start a fight."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I fully understand you, Lady Shion. You cannot stand by idly while someone belittles our master, right? And you, Sir Benimaru—if you were there

to see it, would you have reacted in another way?"

"...No, Diablo. I am always fully composed."

Benimaru paused a little before answering, eyes darting around. I wasn't sure I could count on that.

"So," Diablo continued, "are we here to discuss what to do with this Hero? If you can leave matters in my hands, I could have him vanish without a trace before the sun rises..."

Whew. Scary. And I knew *he* meant it and could pull it off without a second thought.

"We're doing nothing like that. Nothing hasty, all right? No matter what."

After making sure everyone was clear on that, I moved on to my main concern tonight.

"So this is the question: Can anyone here on my staff join the battle tournament starting tomorrow?"

This offer wound up being one powerful bombshell.

"Hohh?"

Benimaru's eyes lit up.

"I see..."

Shion flashed a fearless smile. It seemed like they were conspiring over something; should I stop them? Maybe turning the topic toward fighting made them forget their promise from a moment ago.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Interesting. Truly interesting."

Diablo, too, was grinning from ear to ear.

"I would be glad to offer myself. My skills should prove useful."

Even Geld was ready to go. And the little snicker from Soei told me he, too, was

volunteering. Hakuro, too. He remained silent, but I could tell he was getting fidgety. At least Gabil, with his own presentations to run, had no choice but to bow out, as chagrined as he looked at this prospect.

...So yeah, about what I figured. The only one who didn't react was Ranga, and that's because he was sleeping in my shadow. That was fine—I didn't want him to join in anyway.

With a cough, I quieted the crowd before they started arguing over who deserved to sign up.

"Hold on. There are agents all over town right now. Do you really need to go all out in the battle arena? You don't, do you?"

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh. I hardly need to, to trample over our foes—"

"Whoa! Easy. Let me just say in advance—Benimaru, Shion, Diablo, Soei: All of you are out."

"Wha—?!"

"What do you—?"

I raised a hand to quiet their protests. "First, Soei, you're our Covert Agent, all right? You can't fight while you're running surveillance amid the crowds."

The thought didn't seem to have occurred to Soei until now. It must've convinced him, though, because he fell silent after that. At least he didn't suggest competing in disguise. But just to seal the deal...

"Instead, I have a new job for you."

"A job?"

"Yeah. I'm leaving all spy operations in our nation to you, but I'm also officially appointing you the head of what I'll call the 'Oniwaban,' our intelligence operation."

This was the name of the group of secret agents who patrolled the streets of old Tokyo during the samurai era and reported news back to the shogun.

"In addition, I am assigning the name 'Kurayami' to your personal team. That includes Soka and your other agents, but don't let those trainees of yours call themselves that yet, all right?"

"Yes, my lord! Thank you very much!"

That wowed Soei more than I expected. It was basically a pretext to keep him from joining the tournament, but if he liked it that much, superb. Soei was overseeing several hundred people these days, besides, so if he liked to assemble his elites under the Team Kurayami name, all the better.

That left three other people to handle—the three strongest members of my staff. Letting any of them join the tournament would be nothing but trouble—and, knowing that, I already had plans worked out for them.

"Okay. Everyone else, listen up. I'm establishing a new committee that'll be responsible for handling our dignitaries from the Western Nations. I'm going to call it the 'Big Four.'"

"The Big Four..."

"Heavens—"

"I see..."

It brought all three to rapt attention. Talk about taking the bait.

"The three of you are far more powerful than the rest of my staff. Thus I'd like to name Benimaru the head of the Big Four. Out of the other three posts, I'd like to name Shion and Diablo to two of them."

Benimaru had the most leadership skills out of the three. He was, after all, a man who could substitute for me when I needed it. He was uniquely qualified to lead the Big Four—whatever this shadowy cabal was supposed to be doing. I tried to make it sound important, but the post was purely ceremonial—again, a pretext to keep them out of the tournament.

"Me as leader... I humbly accept this post!"

Great. He's on.

“I’m not sure I agree with Benimaru as leader, but hopefully you will reconsider after seeing my performance on the job. I will be happy to call myself part of the Big Four, Sir Rimuru!”

Shion was happy enough with it, too. I wasn’t sure why the post gave her so much confidence, but if she was cool with it, we’d just leave her be.

“The ‘Big Four’? I aim to be strictly number one with you, Sir Rimuru, but I am still a new participant in your endeavors. I know it will not do to be greedy. For now, I will do whatever I can to approach your glory, Sir Rimuru!”

Hmm. Was that a yes? Diablo could be such a handful sometimes. Regardless, they were all Big Four material now.

“Thank you for accepting my appointments. Now, you may be wondering why I banned you from joining the tournament, but your Big Four posts are actually related to that.”

“How so, sir?”

“Well, you see, I’m having trouble picking someone for the fourth and final spot. I thought Soei would work well, but he’s our Covert Agent and it wouldn’t do to expose him in public, so I fear he’s not quite the right fit.”

I gauged my audience’s response. They seemed convinced enough. I saw a few nods.

“Thus I thought we could have a friendly competition. The rest of you here may join the tournament—and whoever wins the championship can call themselves one of the Big Four, in both name and substance. How about that?”

I pressed them for an answer. The meeting hall grew silent, everyone gauging how everyone else would approach this. But then I heard something unexpected from the crowd.

“Hmm... I wanted to join, but tomorrow I must meet with Momiji for an outing—er, so I may guide her around town... But, ohhh, if you order it, Sir Rimuru...”

Hakuro, the guy I was counting on the most, recused himself out of nowhere. Someone as technically skilled as he was would be perfect for the job, but I guess the timing just didn’t work out—and I wasn’t about to order him to the arena. He really would’ve been the best person to gauge Masayuki’s talents, but if I got in the way of a day out with

his own daughter, he'd hate me for it.

"Oh, no, that's quite important, Hakuro. If you break your promise with Momiji, she may never speak to you again."

"Um, well..."

I had a boss once who ditched an outing with his daughter for work reasons. He wailed about how it took a week before they were on speaking terms again. And here, meanwhile, we had a father and daughter who had only just reunited! If he broke a promise *that* early on with her...

"Besides, you're more like Benimaru's military adviser than Big Four material. A vice general of sorts. There's no urgent need for you out there."

Hakuro nodded, the praise deeply moving him. Thus, for his own sake as well, I excused him from the tournament.

So which candidates remained?

"I have our science presentation to run," lamented Gabil, "but Sir Geld is stronger than I regardless. I will gladly leave this to him!"

Yeah, Geld was my last bet, wasn't he? Gabil, busy with his own work, regretfully had to decline—instead, he was placing his hopes and dreams on Geld.

"Very well. I will tap my full strengths to prevent the victory of this upstart Masayuki!"

He briskly nodded, answering the call.

I had no issues with Geld's strength, of course. But as part of the *Big Four*? And all the glamor and glitz that suggested? I wasn't wild about that. I appointed Benimaru to lead the two problem children under him, but it seemed kind of mean to Geld to have him take the rear. But I'd worry about that later. For now, if he could just spar with Masayuki and see what he was capable of, perfect.

As I thought about this, Rigur suddenly stood up and spoke.

"I can think of someone else suitable for Big Four membership!"

Yes, you never knew what could happen in a tournament, depending on who you got paired with. Maybe having more than one participant on our side would be preferable—and if it was an A-ranker like Rigur making the recommendation, I could rest easy.

“Um, sure. I think Geld will be just fine, but who do you suggest?”

“Sadly, my security duties prevent me from joining, but there is someone second only to me in terms of strength...”

Second to him—? Oh crap...

“...and that is Gobta!”

Oh, great. Him. Just as I feared. But the suggestion made Rigurd nod vigorously.

“Yes, I’d have no complaint with Gobta representing us.”

Come on.

“Hee-hee! He has proven to be quite a fine apprentice of mine. He’s quick on his feet, and there is a vivid crispness to his moves. His core physical strength has not grown with his other traits, but using this tournament as an opportunity to grow could prove very exciting for him.”

Even Hakuro was pushing for him. My core staff had no reaction.

I thought about asking the man himself what he thought about it, but...

“...Zzzz... zzzz...”

Ah, good. Rarin’ to go. No issues, then. Gobta was in the tournament.

I wanted to end our meeting there, but someone else spoke up before I could.

“Master, I would like to join this test of skill as well!”

Ranga, who had woken up when I wasn’t paying attention, popped his head out from my shadow, wagging his tail.

"You really can't, Ranga. This is mainly about armed combat, you know..."

"Ah yes," Mjöllmile added. "We do have at least one summoner in the mix, so a summoned creature or two is not out of the question, but I still think Sir Ranga's participation presents a few issues..."

This tournament was a test of strength and skill, and there was no questioning Ranga's qualifications there. But his entry would deviate from the spirit of the competition a bit too much.

Ranga looked reproachfully at Gobta as Mjöllmile echoed my judgment. I knew he was downhearted, but I couldn't help him. I had to reluctantly put my foot down.

"In that case, I will give Sir Geld and Sir Gobta a bye in the first round and place them in the quarterfinal seedings. We have over two hundred participants in this tournament, so I think we'll begin by dividing them into six groups and staging a battle royale for each one."

Wow. Over two hundred sounded like a lot.

Tomorrow was the qualifiers, and the eight people who emerged at the top of them would make it to the elimination round the next day. The plan, at first, was to divide the participants into eight groups and have each one duke it out all at once, the winner earning a quarterfinal seed—we couldn't devote a huge amount of time to the first round, after all. With Geld and Gobta guaranteed spots in the quarterfinals, however, we'd whittle that down to six bouts.

"All right. I'll be guiding visitors around for much of tomorrow. Mollie, keep up the good work with this tournament."

"I'm on it, sir!"

I nodded back. That was good to hear. I knew I could rely on him.

And one more thing:

"Diablo, you're pretty well-known to the international press by now, right?"

"Yes, my lord. I've invited them to the Founder's Festival and am preparing measures to have them paint us in a positive light."

I was always impressed with Diablo's thoroughness. There was no need to hide the guy (or his powers) any longer. In fact, a scary demon serving as referee for this tournament might even improve his reputation a little.

"Well, sorry for the trouble, but I want you to referee the matches. If I got Masayuki, Geld, and Gobta in this, I'm a little worried about having a hobgoblin as ref."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Certainly!"

Perfect. If anything weird happened in the arena, I was sure Diablo would work something out.

"Right. Sorry to take up all of your time. I know it's late, but for now, get as much sleep as you can!"

"""Yes, sir!"""

This time, for real, the meeting came to a close. We all needed to get some sleep. The real thing was starting tomorrow.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
2

THE FOUNDER'S FESTIVAL

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THE FOUNDER'S FESTIVAL

Following my audiences with the monster leaders of the Forest of Jura, my discussions with Western Nations representatives proceeded without a hitch. We'd talk details with them at a later date, but for now, all signs looked pretty good.

The rather bizarre banquet we'd held the previous night also went smoothly, even with the movers and shakers from all over the world attending. Really, it was a coup for us. But for the most part, I spoke only with people I already knew beforehand—Rigurd and Mjöllmile were handling the more practical side of things, talking to people and summarizing what they said for me. They also made it known that visitors shouldn't try indiscreetly talking to me while I went about my business.

Great job, guys. Talk about *capable*. Because, honestly, if someone went right up to me with an offer, I might very well just say *all right, sure* to them, and who knows what kinds of commitments I'd be beholden to then. Having a cushion against that was extremely helpful. I mean, if it'd help build relationships with other countries, I wouldn't hesitate to offer as much support as I could... but it was safer to be conservative until we had a better gauge of the other party. Basically, stop being such a yes-man to everyone I see.

Besides, the facts were that we had a personnel shortage. Once the excitement from the festival died down, we had a mountain of projects to tackle and a herd of issues screaming to be addressed. Whether we could cover them all or not, we lacked the government infrastructure needed to fine-tune and execute on them. If I threw even more work on everyone's laps right now, we'd just drown in it all.

Rigurd and Mjöllmile were even better at processing this than I was. Their expert handling of any issue I ordered them to look at was making me complacent, despite myself. I even kept them up late for last night's meeting. From now on, I resolved to myself after the emergency conference ended late, I couldn't let them spoil me.

Today, then, my mission was to act like the national leader I was and give our visitors the best service I possibly could.

So here we are now, a bright, sunny day. The Tempest Founder's Festival was here. If it was raining, I would've blown the clouds away and held it regardless, but...

This was Rimuru, capital of Tempest. The northern zone of the city named after me was where most of our government agencies were located, and atop the balcony of the main assembly hall in the middle, I looked down at the people below. Ahead was the main street, extending out from this building and across the whole of town, and today it was completely full of people. There were my people—former monsters, more appropriately called demi-humans these days. There were magic-born gathered from all across the Forest of Jura. There were merchants from nearby nations, along with the adventurers serving as their bodyguards. There were even farmers stopping in, hoping for a taste of the excitement.

They were a melting pot of races and species, numbering over a hundred thousand—and right now, they were all spread out before me. Slowly, gradually, it made me truly feel I had done it—I had created a nation where man and monster could coexist without conflict. The feeling filled my heart, piece by piece. It comforted me.

Now it was almost time. I stood up and placed a hand on the mic.

“Ladies and gents—er, gentlemen, I am the, um, almighty demon lord...”

Ugh. Screw this. A formal policy speech was asking a little (actually, a *lot*) too much from me. Instead, I opted to wing it and give the crowd my honest feelings.

“I’m the demon lord Rimuru. Good to see you all. So, um, I’m glad you all accepted the invitation to my country here. Some of you are visiting for the first time, but I don’t want any of you to be anxious. It’s true—I *am* a demon lord, but I have no intention of being hostile toward any human. My hope is that I can build a nation where all of us can get along together. I believe that, instead of people and monsters fighting, if we join hands and work together, a better future is waiting for all of us.”

I gauged the reaction as I spoke. They all seemed to be lending an attentive ear—my own subjects, of course, but also the peasants just here for fun. Sensing I had some momentum, I continued.

“I am sure some of you are wary of me because I’ve become a demon lord. That’s only natural, of course, but I honestly want you to believe in what you’re feeling. I have no

interest in forcing my will upon any of you. If you think you can believe in me, I'd be happy to hear that. But if you don't, I'm not going to dwell on it. Trust isn't created overnight. I'm not going to press you for a conclusion on that, because I feel trust is something we earn by building it up over the course of our relationships."

Rome wasn't built in a day, as they say. Trust is a gradual process, and that's fine. It'll depend on them, I suppose, to accept me for what I really am.

Next, I wanted to reveal my true intentions to my fellow rulers, the royalty and nobility in the audience.

"To all the nobles here, when you return to your homelands, I ask you to be honest and relate everything you see to your countrymen. We have already established friendly relations with several countries. Even if you don't trust us, are those other nations worthy of your trust? If you are biased against me because I am a slime or a demon lord, I hope that you cast that aside."

That, of course, would be up to the nation in question, not the individuals who make it up. The feelings of the people in the audience may not be the real issue... but I'd still like to believe that what I said had value.

But I also needed to give a warning, just to prevent a second Farmus from happening.

"Personally, I have no intention whatsoever of waging war simply because someone will not join hands with us. However, if you try to push unequal treatment on us because we are monsters or attempt to wage a war in order to eradicate us, we will not show you any mercy. I think all of you can understand that much looking at the recently destroyed Kingdom of Farmus."

Those, too, were my thoughts on the matter. It could be construed as a threat, but it was how I honestly felt. I didn't like war, but I had no qualms about waging it. If a ruler ever shows indecision, it's their defenseless civilians who wind up getting dragged into it. The entire role of a nation is to protect the lives and fortunes of its citizens. I had monsters gathering here because they relied on me, to say nothing of the people who'd be moving in before long. Keeping them safe was the most important job I had.

A world without military power would be an ideal one, but that was an impossible fairy tale. People are free to dream about it during peaceful times, but rulers don't get that luxury. At a bare minimum, a nation is expected to be prepared to deal with any

situation that could arise. That was why I wanted to address the ruling class listening to me, while I had the chance.

To wrap up:

"And to all the merchants, adventurers, and regular peasantry gathered here: I swear to you that I will not lay a hand on any of you. I mean, unless you commit a crime or something, but otherwise, no. My nation is facing a lack of workers. We have many jobs that need to be filled, so if you seek work, I would like all of you to consider moving here. Wherever people gather, new opportunities, and new chances, are bound to follow. As a rule, we guarantee your right to free expression. This includes free speech, as well as the right to choose the job you want. You do, of course, still have responsibility for your words and actions, but regardless, it holds true. If this sounds like a nation you'd be interested in, then by all means, give some thought to what I just said. Going forward, our nation is planning a multitude of events. The Tempest Founder's Festival starting today is only the beginning—and I hope all of you enjoy it!"

After that appeal to the common man, I ended my speech. Was I being a little too honest? Ah well. I'm just an ex-employee at a contractor anyway. Getting this promotion out of the blue doesn't mean I'm suddenly capable of looking and talking like nobility.

But despite that, the crowd listening to me erupted in applause. Not only my citizens, but I could see visitors from other nations, too, whooping and hollering. A few of them looked pretty unconvinced still, but by the looks of things, I'd say a solid majority believed in me—and, by extension, my country. For now, I was happy with that. It'd be creepy if I received 100 percent support from the start.

I had given them my honest feelings. Now I'd have to wait and see how people reacted to them. But either way, the speech was a signal that the Tempest Founder's Festival was underway.

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My speech wrapped up, I went down to the first-floor hall. There, I was greeted by my kids, dressed in a new change of clothes.

"Hey, Mr. Tempest, you're the king of this country?!"

Oh, um, didn't I tell them?

"You didn't know that, Kenya? Well, it's not too late to realize how great a person I am. How about treating me with a little more respect?"

"Why would I—?"

"Okay, Mr. Tempest! Lots of respect!"

As I prodded Kenya a bit, Alice gave me a big hug. "Me too!!" Chloe shouted, adding herself to the pile. I laughed, patting their heads as I gently peeled them off me. Alice and the others weren't pleased, but I had only one body. They'd need to realize that before they started fighting over me.

"But it's still a huge surprise," said Gail, Ryota nodding with him. "I mean, I was kinda suspicious yesterday, but..."

"Oh, don't worry. I didn't become 'king' until after I left you anyway. See why I was so busy now?"

"Well, yeah... That's a pretty good excuse, but..."

Kenya still wasn't too satisfied with this, but at least he was thinking a little about it.

"So I guess we still won't see a lot of each other, Mr. Tempest?"

"Ohhh, I'll come over when I'm free. Really, despite the looks of it, I'm more decoration here than anything."

"What's *that* mean? Are you a big shot or not, man?"

I tried to smooth things over with Kenya as much as I could as I went over our rules for this event.

"Okay, listen, guys. At a festival like this, it's easy to get excited and cut loose a little too much. So don't get carried away, and don't get in a fight with anyone, all right?"

"""Okay!!"""

That's the spirit.

"Do you have your handkerchiefs, your tissues, and your pendant?"

“““Of course!!”””

Their responses, at least, were always snappy.

I could've asked someone to chaperone them around, but my own staff members were already busy. Diablo was at the coliseum handling referee duty, Hakuro was having some family time with Momiji, and Benimaru was guarding me.

“You sure you don't want Momiji spending time with you instead of her dad?”

“Please, sir. It's still too early for that...”

Benimaru seemed eager to run away from that question, didn't he? Ahhh, I guess we'd just have to wait for time to sort it out.

Anyway, Shuna was running a café for the festival, and Shion must've had some business as well because I hadn't seen her since morning. That, in itself, was cause for concern, but I wanted to believe she was fine.

Soei was running town security undercover, though, and I was sure he'd alert me if any trouble happened. His team was keeping an eye on the kids as well, so I didn't see too much need for worry—

“Hey, what's up? Something bothering you?”

Just when I thought there wasn't much need for worry, someone came up to me. It was Hinata, in street clothes and standing there with her rapier by her hip. She had a sleeveless dress on, in a navy-blue color that ventured close to black, and her armpits and chest lurked just barely out of sight, giving her an inexplicable sort of attraction. The belt her sword hung from accentuated just how narrow her waist was.

Yep. A sight for sore eyes. I wanted to stare at her some more, but then she flashed an icy look at me, so I coughed and looked away.

“Hey, Mr. Tempest!!”

“Who's that woman?”

Alice and Chloe shouted at me, both a little put off.

“This is Hinata. She’s really strong, you know. We fought to a tie once.”

“Huhhhh? A tie against that old—?”

Before Kenya could finish, the tip of her rapier was against his throat. I didn’t even see her draw it, and there it was, maybe a millimeter away from bare skin. The slightest movement from Kenya would skewer him.

“What were you about to say?”

“Um, uh, I just meant you were really beautiful,” he managed to blurt out as he shivered, tears in his eyes.

“Ken...”

Ryota wanted to help him but couldn’t even move. A mere look from Hinata planted his feet to the ground. Gail, too, was frozen solid, boundlessly fascinated as he was. I could imagine why. Even *I* was scared of her, so Ryota’s and Gail’s reactions were completely understandable.

“Don’t be rude to her, okay, Kenya? She was an apprentice to Shizu, too, you know. That makes her your senior, like with Yuuki.”

Kenya gave me a “I wish you told me sooner” look. I understood how he felt, but really, this was his fault. It happened right after I told him not to get carried away or start fights, so really, I have to say he deserved it.

“Shizu’s apprentice... Wait, no way!”

“The girl who got stronger than Shizu in just one month...?!”

“Hinata Sakaguchi, captain of the Lubelius Crusaders?!”

“Wow! But is it really you...?”

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner? Come on...”

With a light *ching*, Hinata put her sword away. Kenya promptly fell to the ground, too unnerved to get back up.

"I thought I was gonna pee my pants," he said, a little pale.

"Gross," retorted Alice.

"Look, I was scared, all right?!"

"But I think that was your fault, Kenya."

Kenya fell silent. He knew Chloe was right.

"But did you really fight to a tie with Hinata, Mr. Tempest?"

I gave Gail the honest answer. "Pretty much. One side ran off before the battle could be decided, so definitely a draw."

"Wait, *you* ran, Mr. Tempest?"

Did I say who?! Damn, they're sharp.

"I'll leave that to your imagination," I replied, trying to salvage my image. It wasn't a lie, and I think I had revealed enough of the truth anyway.

The children looked like they had more questions, but Hinata cut them off.

"So what were you concerned about just now?"

I recalled thinking about who I might be able to leave the kids to.

"Well, these kids are about to hit the town, but you see how crowded it is. I need someone to watch them..."

"Oh? Well, I can babysit them."

"...so I was just figuring out who to— Huh?"

What did she just say? Hinata would watch the children? If that was a joke, it wasn't funny.

"What, are you saying I'm not good enough for that?"

“No, no, not at all...”

She was staring at me. So scary. Now I was impressed Kenya didn’t piss himself. He deserved more praise.

“And you won’t say no to me, either, will you?”

“No, of course not!”

“Ken...”

“Absolutely! By all means!”

“You too, Gail...? Well, all right.”

Kenya and Gail immediately fell to her will. Ryota, seeing their reaction, didn’t hold out much longer.

“I can’t believe I’m getting to be with you, Hinata! I look up to you so much!!”

Alice was fangirling out, too. She looked up to Masayuki, too, she’d mentioned earlier, and I suppose Hinata was like a pop star to her. And no complaints from Hinata—she was already getting attached.

As for Chloe:

“I like you! You kind of remind me of Shizu!”

She gave Hinata a hug, all smiles. If Chloe liked Hinata, she must really be a good person inside, huh? A little scary around the eyes, but that didn’t affect Chloe much. And unless I imagined it, I thought I saw a bit of a smile on Hinata’s face as well. In the blink of an eye, she had captured their hearts.

“Right, let’s go. Why don’t we check out the food stalls first? I heard they have *yakisoba* noodles and grilled corn.”

“““Okay!!”””

What leadership. It was astounding.

I could only assume the children would be fine under Hinata's care. It filled me with relief, even as Hinata came up and whispered in my ear.

"I'll watch them for you, but *you* handle Lady Luminus, all right?"

Huh?

I hadn't seen her last night, but Luminus was here after all?

"Oh, did she decide to pay a visit?"

"You invited her, didn't you? I saw her gleefully preparing a maid outfit for the occasion."

Amazingly, Luminus had disguised herself as a paladin alongside Arnaud and Bacchus to partake in the festivities. For the first day, she'd be joining the group of royalty and nobility on the tour of the premises I'd be giving. Paladins qualified as nobility, as the rule went, so she was perfectly fine being mixed in with the tour.

Very shrewd of her, I guess you could say. She even stayed last night in the brand-new church I had built in this nation. I had no idea at all, which just shows how well she had concealed herself.



"Thanks in advance," Hinata said as she went off with the children. Suddenly, I felt like I had *much* more to worry about. Hinata was practically skipping down the street, meanwhile. She got me again, didn't she? I knew it.

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The moment Hinata was out of sight, I felt a light slap on my shoulder.

"Well, well, Rimuru! I don't think I've ever seen Hinata smile before."

It was a smiling Yuuki standing there, dressed not in a fancy suit but in a uniform that looked like a modified school outfit. He was here to take me to our designated meeting point for the tour.

"Yeah, I never would've guessed she'd be interested in watching the kids. I figured she'd tell me to shut up and storm off."

"Oh, I dunno about that! You might not guess it, but Hinata's pretty good at taking care of people. It *is* a surprise, though. And she looks really great in that dress. Apparently, she bought it in town here. She looks kind of like a pretty, fashion-conscious college student, huh?"

So that *was* from Tempest? I thought I was mistaken, but I guess I wasn't.

"In that case, Hinata's gotta be loaded, 'cause lemme tell you, that dress doesn't come cheap."

It was made from hellmoth silk, comfortable against the skin and granting the wearer the effects of Cancel Temperature. It also offered pretty decent defense, reducing damage better than your bog-standard leather armor. But it was *lavishly* expensive. We had a steady supply of silk fabric, but it still wasn't nearly enough, and each piece had to be handmade. Between the scarcity and labor involved, we all but had to charge an arm and a leg for it. It was boutique shopping for nobles, not the girl on the street—and Hinata had bought it at first sight yesterday without hesitating. If she'd already had it tailored to her size, then clearly money was no object with her.

Not that I'm complaining. Always nice to have a free-spending customer.

"Well, it's a big party right now, so maybe she's loosening the purse strings a little? She was looking around town all excited yesterday, too."

She was?! Maybe I was even more mistaken than I thought. She was really looking forward to the Founder's Festival, wasn't she?

...Oh. And *that's* why she was palming Luminus off on me. So she could *really* cut loose, huh?

"What was she looking for yesterday?"

"Oh, just checking out what stalls you had, I suppose. She went on and on to me about how you had *yakisoba* and roasted corn, for one."

"She did? Um..."

So Hinata had been casing the festival grounds yesterday. She certainly wasn't messing around, was she? To her, this event was like a battle she wanted to plunge right into the middle of, heart and soul.

Indeed, we had all kinds of stalls lined up in rows around the coliseum. The fast-food outlet (or what you'd call "fast food" in my previous world) was part of that. Mjöllmile had made all the arrangements for it, and we had the whole menu ready for today—burgers, hot dogs, fries, and a selection of juices.

And that was far from all. Yes, there was *yakisoba* and corn, but also cowdeer kebabs and other local favorites. We even had shaved ice on offer, although it was still a little too early season-wise. Come summer, that'd probably become a top seller. I made sure the ice was shaved into thin, tiny strips so they gently melted in your mouth, and there were gobs of sweet syrup poured over every bowl. It was truly a treat that reigned supreme—and I know, because I tried it myself.

Take a walk down there, and you were greeted with the fragrant aromas of cooking soy sauce and sugary fruit flavors. Lots of people were working hard for this day, and it showed. I'd used Thought Communication to send images of the food I had in mind to everyone involved, and the able hands of Shuna and her staff had made most of my suggestions a reality. Then Mjöllmile worked out all the logistics for the food stalls—and, for some reason, Veldora was opening a grilled-food joint of his own.

Hinata, according to Yuuki, had checked out the whole scene yesterday, deciding exactly where she wanted to visit.

"Wow. Hey, maybe Hinata's a bigger fan of junk food than she looks, huh?"

"Hey, join the club," he replied. "You're right, though. It's kind of surprising."

Learning this unexpected fact about Hinata was a welcome surprise... I think. At the very least, I knew now she wasn't afraid to toss big money around on a whim, so she'd definitely be a favored customer of ours. I *was* a bit worried, though. Hopefully she doesn't set a bad example for the kids...

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So I headed to the reception hall with Benimaru and Yuuki. By the time we did, Rigurd was already going over today's schedule with the large noble contingent on hand.

"Ah, Sir Rimuru! That was an excellent speech earlier!"

Um, was it? Seeing Rigurd look so happy about it warmed me up. Guess it didn't go so badly after all. Good, good. I returned Rigurd's smile.

"Now, everybody, let me guide you to our first attraction of the day!"

He began to walk off, leading the group to our first stop—a building right nearby the reception hall. This was our concert hall, its interior remodeled at breakneck speed, but the results looked better than I expected. The high-quality seats were lined up in rows oriented based on our acoustic calculations. Our visitors each sat at their assigned chairs without complaint.

Compared to Japan, I couldn't help but be biased against this world's level of culture. I'm sure people on the other side would think the same of me, but regardless, those were my feelings. There was a robust art scene, and this world didn't lose out to my old one much in terms of painting or music—but that applied only to the noble ranks. It served as a diversion for them, something on which to lavish money and time. Whenever a city developed itself to an advanced enough level, the angels would start attacking it—and thanks to that, the ruling classes tended to isolate and conceal scientific research to some extent. Art was the same way, and generally, patrons of the arts saw such work as something to commission and enjoy strictly for themselves.

Personally, I think culture is something nurtured by all of society. There's genius lurking all over the world, and in such a close-knit art scene, that genius is not only hard to dig up but may likely not be discovered at all. Art, and creative activity, can be enjoyed only when one has room for it in their lives. It's almost too extravagant to expect that much from this world, but I wasn't willing to give up. I wanted to search

far and wide for that hidden genius, and to achieve that, I needed to start by spreading culture from my own nation. This concert event today was our first step.

A lot of musical instruments in this world resembled the ones I was familiar with. We even had a piano, surprisingly enough—found in Clayman’s mansion, of course. That demon lord was living a stereotypical life of nobility, and we uncovered a large cache of instruments in one of the many ornately decorated rooms in his manor.

There were many among the monster races with an ear for music. There was a tradition for yearly festivals, for one, featuring flute- and drum-based rhythms. And thanks to lending those instruments to the more musically inclined among my people, we were starting to see some budding prodigies.

I had given some practice instruments to those interested, teaching the basics of reading sheet music. That was about as far as my own expertise went, but then my good friend Raphael stepped up. Between the music textbooks I had in Japan and the instrument-related knowledge from the library in this world, Raphael was able to collate all those data and put them together in a single volume. The guy was even able to rebuild knowledge I had long forgotten. I couldn’t be more grateful.

After that, of course, it’d all come down to the monsters’ own efforts. It’s really true—if you like something, you get better at it. And in a flash, we had monsters picking the instruments of their choice and improving at them by leaps and bounds. I also had some sheet music re-created from what I remembered from my past—I don’t have perfect pitch or anything, but it didn’t matter to Raphael, who edited and arranged everything just right. I’d worry about infringing on someone’s rights, but copyright organizations—and the concept of copyrights, for that matter—didn’t exist in this world. If someone finds out, hopefully they’ll turn the other cheek for the sake of our cultural expansion.

Violins formed our main inventory, accompanied by trumpets, kettle drums, and so forth. Finding a piano was itself a surprise, but seeing monsters play it like it was the easiest thing in the world was positively moving. I suppose you could debate whether a piano belongs in an orchestra or not, but I didn’t lose sleep over the question. If there was demand for the piano as a way to express yourself, no need to deny it.

I personally had no musical talent, so I just let the monsters do what they wanted. The results had been personally guaranteed by Mjöllmile, and today, I’d be hearing them for the first time. Excitedly, nervously, I waited for things to begin.

Once everyone was in their seats, the lights slowly began to dim as the curtain rose. It revealed a group of performers, all dressed in the same formal wear—a hodgepodge of races and species, each with the instrument of their calling; some humanlike, others closer to animals, but all brimming with confidence and pride in their instruments. A halfling, apparently the conductor, advanced to the front of the stage, giving the audience a deep bow.

That, I think, was the boy who had come wailing at me once, crying about how there was no work he could do. “*No*,” I said, “*of course that’s not true*”—but he was too weak for construction work, he wasn’t good at math, and he tried farming but didn’t last long. He then volunteered for our armed forces, but he wasn’t very good in a fight, either.

The thing about him was, he was great at motivating other people to perform. He had a repertoire of songs he’d sing to help people unify and come together. I think I wound up recommending him to the military band... and while I was at it, I gave him the name of Baton.

Baton now lifted his head, his face colored with intense passion. He turned to the stage, taking in the curious stares from the upper-crust audience. He was small, but his back seemed to loom large from my vantage point.

There was a pause.

It’s always so fortunate when you can find what you’re truly good at.

The conductor’s baton rose, and then the music began. It started with an easy, gentle melody but then transformed, growing solemn and grave. Under Baton’s conducting, the musicians moved in perfect harmony, each of them having discovered something they could be proud of as well.

The music they played charmed the hearts of listeners, making them wonder if this exact moment was the best in their whole lives. It was classical—in terms of being from olden times—with the nuance of spanning generations to be recognized as a masterpiece. Some pieces soothed the heart; some sent it soaring to grand heights; some stirred up your courage. One masterpiece came after the other, created by this small band of geniuses. This group, some of whom weren’t even literate, worked so

hard to study the music—and now the fruits of their labor echoed beautifully across the hall. Nobody would dismiss them as useless now, and if anyone did, I think I'd punch them out. That's just how wonderful their playing was.

I had gone to classical concerts maybe two or three times in Japan, but these guys didn't lose out to them at all, no. I never expected to see music played at such a high level over here. Yuuki, too, closed his eyes and listened; I'm sure it was nostalgic for him. I almost wanted to start bragging to him: *See? What do you think of that?*

As I thought about this, the sound came to a close. Then the next piece began—one of my favorite anime opening songs.

You're kidding me. They shifted gears from classical to anime? Like it was the most natural thing in the world? And *that* was followed by a pop tune. Yuuki's eyes were no longer closed—they were open and staring right at me. *Stop that, man. I'm not the culprit here.* After all, the guy who read my memories to create that sheet music was...

Understood. My selection prioritized those pieces in my master's memory data, which provided him with the most psychological satisfaction.

Raphael seemed a little too proud in that reply. But I couldn't make any excuses. It was going so *well*, too! Now the effect seemed kind of ruined. I mean, I *liked* these songs, yes, but hearing them played with such solemn grandeur in a concert hall just didn't seem right at all. Yuuki, no doubt thinking the same thing, began to snicker a little.

But it was only Yuuki and I who felt jarred by this. It made sense if you thought about it, but everybody else in the audience was listening to this music for the first time. They'd have no idea where it came from—and Raphael's musical arrangements were a perfect match for the scene. They'd have nothing to be suspicious about. And whether they were used to the classics or not, I could tell they were enrapt with all this new music they were experiencing.

The orchestral pieces dominated the hall, and the crowd was perfectly quiet as they sat there at full attention. The music from Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, and other anonymous geniuses was charming the nobility of this world.

I had to call this concert a great success. Anyone in attendance for this performance had to admit it—even if played by monsters, these tones, these melodies were sheer

beauty. Even the anime tracks, in their capable hands, compared favorably with the historical classics—and the pop music grabbed your heart like it's supposed to; the rock revved you up like it's meant to.

Thus, with enthusiasm taking hold among the audience, the final selection came to a close.

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It's over?

The concert lasted only sixty minutes, but it felt so packed, like an eternity had passed. We had planned to end things here; Mjöllmile told me he had arranged for an hour-long set in the morning and afternoon. Much of the audience wouldn't know a great deal about music, so we opted for shorter sets to keep their attention, without an intermission. This was an experiment for all of us, so we put these measures in place to keep the procedure as simple as possible.

I was only briefed on this; the details were all worked out by the people in front of me. I was proud of them. Standing up tall, I was about to celebrate their success with as much applause as I could muster... when Baton bowed and swung his director's stick.

Instantly, all the lighting was extinguished. The crowd began to nervously murmur—but it lasted only a moment. Then the spotlight was turned on a single onstage figure, a touchingly sweet woman with light-pink hair—Shuna. She was in a sleeveless party dress, bursting with an allure you didn't often see from her. And there was another with her—a beauty with purple hair, lit by another spotlight. Was that Shion? I didn't recognize her at first, what with the slip dress she had on instead of her usual business suit.

Shion stood there like a fantastic vision, as if lit by the moon. Her dress took on a transparent feel depending on the light, revealing a sexier side you didn't often feel from her. She really was a dignified beauty—until she opened her mouth, at least—and this presentation further accentuated that beauty.

They went up to the front, in their respective spotlights, and bowed deeply. That alone captured your attention, like a fine work of art—but seriously, what were they about to do here? I hated to think it, but...

The spotlight moved, and Shuna moved with it to the piano—one that sat in place,

untouched, the whole performance. Shion, meanwhile, picked up a violin. There was no longer any doubt. They were about to play a duet. Shuna, maybe I could picture as a pianist—but Shion at the violin? Were we really safe, having her play in front of such an influential audience? I recalled the assorted disasters she had engineered with her food in the past—if her musical skill matched that, it could spell doom for us all...

...Or maybe not? I mean, there was no way Shuna would allow that. And Mjöllmile seemed so confident, too, didn't he? He was virtually staking his life on this whole event, and I doubted he'd let Shion throw a monkey wrench into the works.

Let's believe in them. I closed my eyes, still a bit wary as I waited for the performance.

It began with a slow piano tune accompanied by an intense, impassioned violin melody. Then suddenly, the tone changed. In a way, it felt more like a duel than a duet—but the extreme force behind Shion's melody seemed to reflect her own disposition, and Shuna's piano playing (much like Shuna herself) gently enveloped it. The intensity and softness intermingled, accentuating each other in impressive harmony.

Ahhh... This was good. I drowned in the waves of profoundly expressive sound, shaken to my soul. *This* was different. It wasn't something you could accomplish with stopgaps. This was the result of innate discipline. It made sense, given Shuna's roots as an oracle and Shion's role in protecting her. Music is an indispensable part of any religious rite... and maybe that's why Shuna and Shion's melodies seemed to hit me right in the heart.

Silence. The dreamlike moment was over—it seemed like forever, but not even five minutes had passed.

When I snapped out of it, I attempted to give them thunderous applause. But before I could, I heard staccato clapping break the quiet. Darn. I was hoping to be first, but I had the rug taken out from under me. I joined the clapping, craning my neck to see whose lead I was following.

Shockingly, it was Luminus, disguised as a maid in the employ of the two paladins in attendance. She heartily applauded the performers, looking gloriously satisfied. I tried to keep up—and soon, other clapping overlapped with ours.

The reaction was cacophonous. Elmesia, Heavenly Emperor of Thalion; Gazel, king of

the Dwarven Kingdom; all the nobility of the Western Nations; Milim and Frey... Even Middray, a man I wouldn't expect to be very cultured. They all stood up and sent out their applause. This tradition of clapping was the same in this world, it seemed; I wasn't sure if a long-gone otherworlder had brought it in or if it was just always that way.

What I *did* quickly learn, however, was that this world didn't have a custom of giving encores. Public artistry in itself wasn't a common thing, so I suppose that should have been obvious. Thus I assumed we were done here, but apparently not. Darkness fell on the hall once more, before the entire stage was relit and the orchestra—with Shuna's piano and Shion's violin this time—played one final song to round things out.

Music, and art in general, has a way of tearing down barriers. Seeing this concert unfold, I wanted to believe, for just a moment, that there're things out there that everyone in the world truly can find wondrous.

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The concert was a monster hit. It was the only topic on visitors' lips as we retired to the reception for a light lunch.

“Wasn’t that just wonderful?”

“Ah, what can I say...?”

“I had my eyes closed, taking it in from start to finish!”

“Me too. And who cares whether it was man or monster? Those melodies are still in my ears!”

“Indeed. Quality is quality. That’s all there is to it.”

Based on my eavesdropping, it sounded like high praise. And at least one member of the crowd was going up to me now.

“Um... Sir Rimuru, I would very much like to hear this performance again. What can I do to gain such an opportunity, if I could?”

“We’ll be holding the concert regularly over the next three days,” I told him, but I suppose we should consider a more regular performing schedule. Our song repertoire

wasn't *that* vast yet, but I was sure it'd grow going forward. Having more chances to show it off would provide more practice motivation, besides.

"That was a fine performance," Luminus whispered to me as we passed by in the hall.
"I enjoyed it more than I expected to."

Quite a compliment, I thought; she didn't strike me as the sort to offer praise freely. I should probably consider that a five-star review.

"Shion was certainly a surprise," I commented to Benimaru.

"I'm sure she was. But... Well, despite all appearances, Shion has always had a good sense of rhythm. She certainly seemed extraordinarily compatible with that 'violin' instrument as well. And Shuna, too... I didn't know she could play piano, but she always did enjoy singing. It does not surprise me."

It all made sense to him. He apparently knew they were good singers, and come to think of it, I remember them breaking out a happy tune or two as they went about their business. It made me realize, despite my intentions, that I still didn't really know everyone very well.

After lunch, we had our science presentation scheduled for the afternoon. I followed Rigurd as he guided the crowd of nobility, still keyed up from the morning's events. We passed by the concert hall from before, this time heading straight for the museum. Our destination was the historical archives inside, as much as it seemed odd for nobility to be in there.

Gabil and Vester awaited us at the entrance. Being a former Dwargon minister, Vester was immediately recognizable to a few in the crowd, eliciting murmurs of surprise. Vester himself paid it no mind, flashing a smile as he greeted the tour.

The two of them guided us into the building.

"Inside this case is the first healing potion that Sir Rimuru ever created. It is a complete extraction from hipokute herbs with all impurities removed. It boasts ninety-nine percent purity, and while it is not quite up to the level of a Revival Elixir, its healing qualities are equivalent to a Full Potion."

I listened to Vester talk as we went along. Then I realized we had made a mistake.

Vester was offering valid, thorough guidance, yes, but to those without scientific knowledge, it must've been incredibly boring. I could already see a few people tuning him out, staring at the ceiling.

That, and we had scheduled this all wrong. If we held the tech demo in the morning, everyone would be awake, refreshed, and perhaps more open to this guided tour. I didn't think we'd have so much disengagement anyway. But thanks to the thrill of that morning concert, all this scientific mumbo-jumbo must seem like such a letdown. Besides, think about it. We were entertaining people from royal courts and noble mansions. They might care about the things we produced, but with most of them, they couldn't care less about *how* they were made.

Vester must've picked up on this. He snickered a bit.

"Ah, but I see I am bogging all of you down in needless detail. Let's turn our attention elsewhere, then, and stage a scientific experiment."

He exchanged a look with Gabil, who nodded back.

"In this experiment, we will pursue what healing potion *is*, exactly, as much as we can. Diluting this Full Potion to twenty percent strength creates High Potion, used to treat serious injuries. Dilute this further, and you create twenty doses of Low Potions. That should show you just how effective a Full Potion can be."

Gabil lined up bottles of all three potions on a table. "If any of us is currently dealing with an injury," he said, "we would be able to test out the effectiveness of each potion, but it would be barbaric to hurt ourselves for the sake of experimentation. Thus we have come up with rather an interesting experiment."

As he spoke, Vester brought in a broken sword.

"So will a potion fix this sword?" asked Gabil. "Does one of you have the answer to that question?"

"Rubbish! Hipokute herbs only work on living things!"

The shouted reply came from a man dressed in magician's garb—perhaps the court sorcerer for one kingdom or another. He totally dismissed the idea, and it looked like he had the intelligence to back up that answer.

Gabil laughed and nodded. “Yes, of course. At the very least, there is no way this Low or High Potion could ever be effective against a sword.”

That much was obvious. There wasn’t much need to stage an experiment. What was Gabil—and Vester, for that matter—getting at with this question?

“So the question is, how far does that rule apply? What do all of you think?”

More protests from the crowd. They must have thought Gabil and Vester were treating them like idiots. Things were even getting a little raucous—I know this wasn’t what they were expecting, but sheesh, pipe down.

But how far could you apply healing potions, huh? Well, they worked on people, of course, as well as animals, plants, and monsters. Where’s the threshold, then, the boundary between effective and ineffective? This was actually kind of fascinating. Is being “alive” or not the main thing? Probably not. It was the presence of a consciousness that likely made the difference.

Report. Plants have a consciousness as well. A consciousness has its roots in the soul, a collection of the spiritual particles that form magicules. Its presence, or lack thereof, is thought to be the difference.

Right. Plants have wills—maybe they’re not fully sentient, but they have a desire to keep living. But swords don’t have “souls,” and therefore no wills. They’re just things, so obviously...

...But hang on. Something just occurred to me. Didn’t Kaijin say that swords *do* have wills of their own? No way...?!

“Heh-heh-heh... I would like to know as well. And the desire to know provides the entryway to new discoveries.”

“Indeed. And trust me, I ordered him to not conduct this ridiculous experiment at first. I called him a fool in my mind, for that matter. But I was the only fool in the room. I was so bound by the laws of common sense, I forgot my original drives as a researcher.”

Vester smiled warmly as he sprinkled some Full Potion on the broken sword. Then—just a little, but enough so that everyone could see—the sword reacted.

“...?!”

“And here is the answer. While it does not fully rebuild the sword, we are clearly seeing the early signs of repair here.”

“R-ridiculous...”

“I can’t believe it. Healing potion could be used for *this*...?”

The tour group couldn’t hide their astonishment. I could see why. It flew in the face of common sense; you’d have a hard time *not* being surprised—and that included me. I had no idea they were conducting experiments not even I could anticipate the results of. They didn’t give me any report on this, which only added to the shock.

“Of course, you will only see these effects on arms and armor that matured past a certain level. The weapon must be made of magisteel, at the very least—and it will not give a reaction unless it has been used regularly by its owner.”

Ah. So it’d have no effect unless the sword had a will instilled in it.

“...Why,” Gazel asked Gabil in his low, stentorian voice, “did you want to know something like that?”

“It’s simple, my lord. I found it difficult to believe that plants and vegetation growing in the wild have wills of their own—but after experimentation, we found that healing potions work perfectly fine on them.”

Now that we had Full Potion mass manufacturing underway, there was a decent quantity to work with. Thus they had been trying it on all sorts of things. Certainly, the desire to learn was the first step toward new discoveries. I recalled the experiments we did in grade school science class, challenging ourselves to do things that seemed pointless at first. Gabil had that same spirit—the first thing’s to just try it out.

So it worked on plants, restoring damaged tree bark and producing new buds from broken branches.

“I then remembered the existence of dryads,” Gabil said. “Vegetation may have only a weak consciousness at first, but over many months and years of life, they can evolve into powerful monsters, can they not? But as I thought, this may only happen under certain conditions.”

Around half the audience was taking a keen interest in this explanation. I'd expect the more quick-witted among them to be fascinated, yes. This was the kind of research I'd normally want to keep confidential, after all. Should I let Gabil keep going? The thought, as mean-spirited as it felt, crossed my mind, but I hurriedly brushed it away as I listened on.

"The only things that react to healing potion are those already intertwined with magicules. Things with no magicules to them at all show no reaction in our testing. What this means is that magicules house consciousness itself—or, at least, the two are deeply related."

"Yes. And when Sir Gabil presented these data, it led me to reconsider my thoughts as well. Soon, a question arose in my mind: What *are* magicules?"

Magicules were one of this world's unique substances, freely spread around the atmosphere like oxygen. They were the engine for all kinds of mysterious forces, and people could wield them to do their bidding, to some extent.

"So we have a sample from a certain plant here... And over in this other room, I can show you an enlarged picture of it."

We followed Vester to another room, a large, spacious chamber with chairs lined up in rows—something like an AV-equipped college lecture hall. It had a projector, still in the trial testing phases, and there was a stretched-out white sheet on the wall to serve as a screen. Gazel curiously observed the projector but remained politely quiet about it, realizing now was not the time. That's Gazel for you—mature enough to pick the right time and place.

Once everyone was seated, Gabil turned on the projector, a device with light-based magic inscriptions that let it project color images on the screen. The chamber's lights dimmed as the image appeared, surprising a few in the audience.

"Take a look at this image," Vester said, ignoring the chatter. "It shows the structure of the plant sample you saw before. And this is the structure of some grass, the type you see growing anywhere..."

He placed the enlarged images next to each other. I didn't get why Vester was acting so haughty here—"a certain plant" and so on. *What's his aim?*

"...Are they not the same? I don't see any difference..."

“No, me neither. Why aren’t they the same?”

The voices in the crowd were met with wide agreement. A few of them weren’t as sure—“*that* part is different”; “no, *that* part is”—but I doubted any of them were on the mark. So what was the answer?

“Now, let’s enlarge these further.”

“What do you think? They look just the same, don’t they?”

Vester and Gabil flashed villainous smiles—and then they revealed the trick.

“The plant in the first picture is hipokute herb. The second one is a simple weed we picked from a lawn in town. Do they look the same to you?”

Vester’s question made things begin to dawn on some of the audience. What they saw unnerved them. Hurriedly, they spoke up.

“They *aren’t* the same. The difference is clear if you look closer!”

“That’s mean of you, Sir Vester. How can we tell the difference just from *those* images?”

Hipokute was a rare herb. I’d dined on quite a bit of it in the cave Veldora was sealed in; it’s famously the core ingredient of healing potion. Most would assume it’s structured far differently from the grass you step on every day. But a few people, myself included, found Vester’s question *very* disturbing. Gazel was one of them; I could see the blood drain from his face.

We were showing that hipokute and regular grass were both structured in the same way—proof that, essentially, they *were* the same. It begged the question of what, exactly, constituted a rare herb—which, in turn, had the potential to overturn common sense itself.

Vester lifted his arms up high, that sinister smile still on his face.

“Quiet! Quiet, please!”

He and Gabil waited for things to settle down. When they did, he placed a series of images on the projector.

"Squeezing the extract from hipokute and combining its magicules together creates healing potion. The level of this fusion process, as you all know, depends on the properties of the extract produced—and while we cannot go into details, we have successfully refined this extraction process to a purity level of ninety-nine percent. That is how a Full Potion is made."

Through a variety of images (while still hiding the core technology), Vester explained the potion-making process.

"Now we move on to hipokute leaves. Grinding these leaves and combining their magicules produces a salve that can close wounds, although the effect is not dramatic. This makes sense, since these ground leaves are simply the leavings from the extraction process."

An image of a leaf filled the screen. The leaf was shown being ground, then mixed with the extract from before to create an ointment—the basic process behind it. Nothing unnatural. I didn't get where Vester was going with it.

"Now, everyone, look at this image."

On one side, you had leaves from hipokute herbs grown in our cave; on the other was regular grass. They looked totally different. There was no way they'd have the same organic structure... but as the images flashed by, changes began to occur on the hipokute side.

"Do you see? I only came to notice out of sheer coincidence. Sir Rimuru has ordered me to work on our hipokute cultivation project, but one day, I took an interest in the strained leaves from our extraction process. Making ointment from it is well and good, but it has to be kept under exacting conditions or it quickly loses its effect. Plus, compared to the liquid extract used to make potions, its effect is extremely weak. I didn't give it much thought, since we had other uses for the extract, but if you think about it, do we really need this ointment? So as I said, I began to look at the strained leaves..."

...And then Gabil realized that the shape of these post-extraction leaves, now free of magicules, was different from the hipokute currently growing in the cave. Shocked, Gabil decided to take more detailed records, resulting in the images he was showing us now.

"So at the conclusion of all this, we've found that, technically speaking, there is *no such thing* as a hipokute plant. The plants we call hipokute are actually mutations..."

"Yes!" exclaimed an excited Vester. "And it's not that hipokute grows in magicule-rich areas—it's the magicule concentration itself that causes this mutation and creates hipokute from simple grass!"

I could see why he was excited. Everyone who heard him immediately began talking.

"That... That's a major discovery!"

"S-Sir Vester, this is *not* the type of thing to announce in a place like this! There could have been some more appropriate occasion... You must contact a scientific society or the like at once and follow the proper announcement procedure!"

It was chaos inside the room. Even those who didn't take much interest before couldn't stay silent now—and the audience members who had been paying attention from the start were even more astounded. It was beyond anything they imagined, and the "*not the type of thing to announce*" remark symbolized just how much it roiled the crowd. Gazel, too, had his eyes wide open, and even Elmesia and Erald were discussing matters with each other.

I was surprised, too. I never gave it much thought before, but the way they put it, it made sense. It was pretty obvious, in fact. I doubted Veldora just *happened* to be sealed off in a cave full of hipokute herbs. If that was the result of a mutation—or a plant evolution—that was more convincing. And once all the magicules were extracted from this plant during processing, its shape went back to the plain old grass it once was. The dried, strained samples projected on the screen made it obvious that they shared the same organic structure as regular grass.

In which case, no wonder Gabil thought potions could heal swords. Metal might mutate into magisteel ore, just like grass mutated into hipokute, and it was that ore that was processed to make magisteel weapons. Put the pieces together, and anyone would wonder if healing potion could work on magisteel as well. The result: the experiment we saw earlier.

"My original question," Vester continued, "of the exact nature of magicules remains unanswered. Monsters, and magic-born, are exposed to the effects of these magicules—that much is evident. But what about demi-humans? If you took all the magicules out

of their body, would they go back to being humans? I have boundless questions along these lines, but investigating them could prove fiendishly difficult.”

“Despite this, we intend to continue our research. And in this land, where some of the world’s greatest minds are gathering, we promise to keep pursuing the answers... and with that, we close our science presentation.”

“To everyone who came out to attend—”

“Thank you very much!””

Gabil and Vester bowed and spoke in perfect sync. They must’ve worked the presentation out in pretty deep detail; I don’t think this was the first time they’d run through this lecture.

The content, however, was excellent. I had left it all to them, but it really grabbed your attention—and what’s more, it spread the word about great discoveries while keeping all the key parts a secret. Most important of all—we didn’t have to worry about anyone copying our technology with what we revealed. Changing the nature of plants with magicules was a grand discovery, but it wasn’t something other nations could easily replicate. They could experiment with it, but it wouldn’t let them mass-produce hipokute or anything.

Our position of superiority remained firm—and our research continued. As Gabil said, great minds were gathering here, and we’d have more before long. In a land so blessed with magicules as this one, we could do all the experimentation we wanted.

Overall, this scientific presentation was a major shock to the attendees. After a morning spent enjoying fine music, this afternoon stimulated their intellectual curiosities. I’d leave it to the audience to decide which was more enriching, but given how much interest both events generated, I’d definitely call them a success.



A lot of the audience seemed bored at first. I worried that we should have swapped the order out, in retrospect... but it appeared I was worried over nothing. In fact, maybe this was the right order after all. We certainly fulfilled our main goal of making the movers and shakers in the audience interested in us. I internally resolved to give Gabil and Vester unbridled praise the next time I had a chance.

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After the presentation came some free activity time. A number of our VIPs would relax at our salon, while others would peruse our food stalls incognito. A few would savor the hot-spring bath, and others would enjoy checking out our amusement facilities. Each one of them had their own guide, so they were free to pursue their own interests. They were all abuzz about the concert and science presentation, too, reportedly spreading praise about them to everyone they spoke to around town.

As I watched them take in the festival, I saw Arnaud and Bacchus come up to me, looking concerned. "We need to talk," Arnaud whispered to me. It sounded like something important, so I brought Benimaru and Shion along and guided them to a room in the reception hall.

There we saw Luminus. I'd suspected we would, given how agitated the paladins seemed, and I was right. She was in her maid dress, seated with her legs crossed. The juxtaposition of her pale skin and the black garter belts and stockings was, frankly, hot. Arnaud and Bacchus stood bolt upright behind her—the sight of them serving this maid was a surreal role reversal, but it actually fit her well. Luminus's powerful aura at work, I imagine.

"Now," she began before I could talk or even sit down, "we have a treaty of nonaggression in place... but that will not be enough."

I always knew she was impatient, but not *this* impatient. Exasperated, I helped myself to a chair. Something told me I wasn't about to get invited to a seat.

"Not enough how?"

"How else? It lacks interaction! If we cannot make contact with each other, how will we ever have interaction?"

"Um, I don't see why we can't...?"

I organized the situation in my mind as I thought over what Luminus meant.

As she said, there was a nonaggression pact between the Holy Empire of Lubelius and Tempest. The Western Holy Church was a part of Lubelius, which also helped boost our position with the Western Nations. I really appreciated that, but in terms of interaction, she was right—we had virtually no diplomatic relations. We were just too physically distant from each other. There was no national-level trade. Any circulation of goods was left to market principles, with whatever merchants or nations wanted to be involved.

We weren't completely cut off from trade, though. I had actually asked Mjöllmile to send a few traveling peddlers in their direction. Why wait for Lubelius when we could take action ourselves? We were conducting basic market research, and I had already gotten a report of products and goods that the Holy Empire specialized in.

That report told me that Lubelius was an agricultural giant, producing great quantities of crops (primarily wheat) and exporting much of it to the Western Nations. I looked at a sample, and it was very high-quality—tasty, too. I was hoping to import some, in fact, but as mentioned, the distance involved made it tough. Before we started talking about more formal trade, I wanted to see that problem dealt with first.

So that's where we were now. I wanted to deepen our relations in the future, but if you asked me what could be done right this minute, I couldn't give you anything.

"You inconsiderate clod. Or are you toying with me?"

"No, no, that's not it at all!"

Luminus gave my harried reply an irritated sigh. "When I say interaction, I mean *cultural* interaction. Frankly, I underestimated all of you. The people under our protection in Lubelius lack a great deal in the way of artistic talent. Meanwhile, although I expected little, your musical presentation earlier was impressive. I have reconsidered my views of you today."

Whoa. *Heaps* of praise. She had a few kind words for me as we passed each other earlier, but I guess she really *did* like the concert. That, and now I understood her. Today's musical performance finally made her recognize our talents. I imagined Luminus had some kind of musical band, and presumably she was talking about an international exchange with its members, to help improve both of us.

"There are some among the vampires who are artistically inclined. They carry on the heritage of our old music while working on new creative endeavors, but lately they've been stuck in a rut. I think some input from visiting creators of your realm would be a fine catalyst."

I had it right on the mark. And really, I appreciated the request. An experience like this always enriches the heart and mind. And if you want to improve your cultural activity, interacting with other people was the best inspiration you could feed on.

"I like that idea! We couldn't ask for anything better."

I had no reason to turn her down, so I readily agreed. Looking at our future relations, besides, it was bound to have more positive impact than bad.

"Very good. I will make sure things proceed along those lines."

She gave me a satisfied nod. Just as she did, an elderly servant placed some tea in front of us. Gunther, I think his name was—just as strong as Louis Valentine but also one talented servant. Diablo was the same way, come to think of it. Who knew that butlers were such lean, mean fighting machines in this world? And now other servants were bringing drinks to Benimaru and Shion behind me. They weren't delayed; it was just that the impatient Luminus summoned me so quickly that they couldn't keep up.

Luminus gave them a cold nod—a sign of a strict master-servant relationship, I thought. But:

"Isn't that great? Now *you* can enjoy that music, too, soon."

It sounded pompous as she spoke to her attendants. But they didn't take it that way, saying, "Thank you very much" and "I look forward to it!" in return. They looked happy enough to me, so they definitely meant it. Their attitude to Luminus was based on respect, it seemed, not fear. I found it odd at first—and then I looked closer and realized they were all vampires.

Their auras were wholly shut off, their powers restrained to the point that they were indiscernible from regular people. They were high-level vampires, I imagined, given how close they were to Luminus. Just the few of them here alone could easily topple an entire nation, I'm sure, and here they were serving tea to us. The world can be one irrational place sometimes.

"Now, Gunther, carry out the necessary details when we return to Nightgarden."

"Yes, my lord."

Luminus nodded and took an elegant, silent sip of tea—a beautiful showcase of manners, one you'd want to teach to a debutante.

"Ah yes," she brightly said as I stared enrapt at her, "that scientific presentation was quite interesting as well. Dissecting the effects of magicules is quite a fascinating idea to come up with. There are those on my staff with a rather odd interest in research. I was thinking we could send them here, but would you mind that?"

I asked for some more details. The way she put it, there was still little in the way of cultured civilization among the humans who lived on the surface of Lubelius, but the underground mainland boasted a fairly decent level of technology.

"Oh? That's surprising. I thought you wouldn't be so secretive with all that."

"I dislike causing trouble for myself. If we were too conspicuous, we feared that accursed lizard would find us, remember. I hardly want the angels interfering with us, either. That's why I've had all our major research moved underground, until we can fully eradicate them."

She seemed proud of herself.

The way she framed it, Luminus was the most powerful political ruler among all the demon lords. She was a vampire, so essentially immortal, with a life span transcending even that of elves. The more powerful among her kind didn't even need to eat, capable of sustaining themselves via minute doses of life energy from human beings. There was no doubting the fact that vampires sat at the top of the food chain.

But even they had their deficiencies. Vampires were called "rulers of the night" for good reason—they could wield untold powers in the darkness, but exposure to sunlight wiped them off the planet. It was a huge weakness, but even with it, they remained incredibly dangerous. But again, the more powerful among this advanced race—some among the noble classes under Luminus—could apparently overcome this weakness against the sun. These were called "overcomers," and they could pretty much go around by day and do whatever they pleased. There were very few of them, which was a good thing, since a vampire without weaknesses would be a nightmare for humanity. Definitely a Calamity-level threat, if not as much a one as Louis or

Gunther.

The servants here were overcomers as well. They served Luminus as a sort of hobby, it seemed—with, of course, a heavy nuance of being her bodyguards. Being an overcomer meant having no weak points and therefore a lot of free time on your hands; that was why so many of them enjoyed making assorted things for fun. They'd craft all sorts of junk, in fact, hoping to win Luminus's affections.

"To be honest," she said to me, "it's dreadfully irritating. I have ordered them to develop something more useful, but they're too fixated on their own ideas, I suppose. They've made no progress whatsoever. I would love for you to take them in and give them a little education."

"Hmm... I wouldn't mind that, but..."

But of course I'd have qualms about the whole thing unless I got to meet Luminus's candidates. Being an overcomer meant enjoying life in the ruling class—someone like them traveling to Tempest for study could lead to problems I had no way of predicting in advance.

Luminus, perhaps seeing my indecision, made another offer. "I'm not asking you to work for free, of course. Perhaps I could offer a skill to you."

"A skill?"

"Yes. The 'secret skills of faith and favor'"

What's that? Sounds really cool! Or at least cooler than the kinds of skills I came up with for myself, such as relearning how to get drunk.

"What are those?"

"Oh, it's quite simple." She gave me an evil, complacent smile. "It allows those faithful to you to harness some of your powers."

Whoa. That sounds dangerous. If she taught me this around all these people...

Report. Luminus has used Spatial Severance to isolate your location.

Raphael neatly pointed it out, cutting me off before I could get worked up. Ah. That *would* explain why I couldn't hear anyone besides ourselves right now. She really *was* a pillar among the strongest of demon lords; setting off skills just came naturally to her.

"So you'll teach me this in exchange for allowing your students to come here to live for a while? Am I understanding that right?"

"You are. I would be happy enough to have a cultural exchange with our musicians alone. In a way, this is my token of thanks to you."

She didn't appear to be lying.

"All right. I'll take your offer."

"Hee-hee! Then we have a deal."

We did. She'd have her musicians trained here, and I'd have my "*secret skills of faith and favor*."

To put it very simply, these skills were the principles behind all holy magic. It involved me using my name as a vessel in order to cast spells. Hinata and the paladins, for example, could wield holy magic by using Luminus's name as a vessel—borrowing a bit of her power with each use. If I could learn the trick behind it, more of the people under me could gain access to holy magic.

Surprising—it seemed like I was getting a lot out of the bargain. Luminus being Luminus, of course, I knew she had calculated all of this.

"That sounds great to me, but are you sure about this?"

"Oh, I don't mind. You were likely to discover the truth of it for yourself in a few years' time anyway. It is best to take advantage of information while it is still valuable, is it not?"

...

Ah, I thought. All right. And judging by Raphael's pained silence, it wouldn't have even

been a few years. We were researching the nature of magicules, and after Hinata's battle, we already knew the existence of spiritual particles. Put those together, and the truth would've come to us naturally. Well, not to *me* but to Raphael, certainly. And Luminus, spotting this, simply offered it while she was still able to extract something from me for it.

"Well, even so, I appreciate it, Luminus."

"As long as you keep *your* side of the bargain, all is well."

Attempting negotiation with Luminus was still too heavy a task for me. *This* time it didn't hurt me, but I'd have to think things through more carefully from now on. I mused over this as I shook hands with her.

Thus our budding orchestra would be traveling to Nightgarden shortly, while the noble "overcomers" serving Luminus would be coming here for research purposes.

Once Luminus deactivated Spatial Severance, we relaxed a bit, as if nothing had happened. I kicked back and enjoyed my tea, listening as Luminus gave me her review of the morning's concert. It seemed like she was more enthusiastic about exchanges of the musical, and not scientific, sort. Most of her questions involved our orchestra and when we could get them over to her.

Then, at the end:

"By the way, Rimuru, there were some rather disagreeable people among the dignitaries you invited. Were you aware of them?"

She acted casual about this, her tone unchanged. I wondered what she meant for a moment—but it had to be her way of warning me about something.

I guess it wasn't my imagination after all.

"Ah yes, *that* pair?"

"Mm. If you don't shirk your duty and keep your wits about you with them, then very well. But I do hope you will make efforts not to denigrate the good name of the Octagram."

That was her way of signaling the end of our conversation. I nodded at her and took my leave.

*

After my spontaneous conversation with Luminus ended, it was time for dinner.

For whatever reason, Yuuki, Hinata, and I were assigned to the same table. They were all smiles with each other, busily discussing the day's events and virtually drooling at all the food brought in. I could hardly wait to dig in myself as I listened to their reflections. There were two choices available for the evening's courses, Japanese and Western; Hinata went for Japanese, while Yuuki and I picked Western.

"I tell you," Yuuki began, "that was a seriously incredible performance. You really should've checked it out, Hinata. The food stalls'll be open later, you know."

"Don't tell me what to do. I achieved what I set out to do today. What's the problem? Besides, the *takoyaki* was so good, and..."

Her voice went down to a whisper and she started making excuses.

"...But really, though. You guys went with 'Alias'?"

I averted my eyes from Hinata, pretending to have no idea what she was talking about.

"But no, I mean it—it's *really* worth listening to. I mean, I quite liked that one song already, but hearing it arranged for an orchestra... It just blew me away."

Nice one, Yuuki. His unbridled praise for Baton and company had successfully diverted Hinata's attention.

"All right, all right," she said, not sounding that peeved. "If you're going on about it *that* much, I'll take the kids there tomorrow."

Hinata, for her part, seemed to make the most of today, throwing her money up and down the festival, much to my appreciation. Clothes, weapons, armor, magic items—she bought it all, and at marked-up festival prices, too. She also made her way up and down the food stalls, and honestly, I think she took the kids just as an excuse to stuff herself. They loved her, though, it sounded like, so I couldn't complain at all—especially since she'd already volunteered to watch them the next day.

"Personally, I'm more interested in that research into magicules," Hinata continued, lowering her voice again. "Healing potions don't really work on me, you know, because my body breaks down the magicules... And actually, there are some healing magics that work on me and some that don't."

She had apparently done a bit of research of her own, to see if there was any potion out there that worked on her. Having the ability to annul magic applied to her sounded good on paper, but the more you thought about it, the more inconveniences it created.

"Yeah, you know, I haven't thought about it, huh? I'm affected by magicules, too, I guess, so..."

"When you jump between worlds, you take in a vast amount of energy. Sometimes these manifest as skills, and sometimes it results in nothing—like with you, Yuuki. But you're right—you're still affected by them. You haven't grown at all, for one—"

"Whoa, whoa, don't put it *that* way! I haven't grown, no, but I've done a lot in my years here, you know?"

"I know, I know. You don't have to get worked up every time I mention it. I'm just picking on you."

Maybe Hinata was just picking on him... but with those imposing eyes of hers? When she said stuff like that with her sharpened glare and joyless face, it really didn't sound much like a joke.

"All right. But you know, Rimuru, I'm fascinated by the directions you're taking your research here."

I appreciated the compliment, but Yuuki was really thinking too much of me.

"No, no, that was really all Gabil and Vester's own work. I only learned about it the same time all of you did."

"Oh?"

"Didn't you order them to do that research?" Hinata asked. "And you let them announce it to VIPs from around the world without even knowing what it was?"

They both gave me incredulous looks.

"Um, this soup is good, huh?" I ventured, fleeing reality while I fished for an excuse.
"But look, what could I do? I want them to be independent!"

Not having any other ideas, I tried being more forceful in my approach. It didn't work. They just glared back at me.

"...All right, I *kind* of regret that. I was really busy, but maybe I should've at least heard what it was first..."

Too late now, of course.

"Man, Rimuru. You sure are something, you know that?"

"Honestly. Sometimes, I seriously think he's a real big shot. Sometimes."

That did *not* sound like praise to me, but ah well. Even I had to admit, it was kind of a slipup. The presentation's content was great, but I got a bit nervous in the middle of it and Gazel admonished me about it as well—already, I wanted to be more careful next time. Didn't think Yuuki and Hinata were gonna rake me over the coals about it, too, though...

Fortunately for me, the conversation drifted back into small talk as the dinner continued.

Thus the first day of the Founder's Festival closed to largely excellent reviews. It really felt like a strong start to me, and I had no doubt in my mind that it'd end a great success—not knowing, of course, that I'd learn in short order just how naive I was.

INTERLUDE

A PROBLEM ARISES

We were all in the meeting hall for a regular update, waiting for... well, Mjöllmile was the last straggler, wasn't he? It was nine in the evening, right after dinner ended. The festival was still in full swing outside; we could hear flutes, drums, and laughing from afar. The official closing time was ten p.m., so this was fine; the lodgers in our nobles' accommodations could shut the windows to cut off all the noise. We wanted to be sure noise complaints were never an issue with that building.

So as much as I wanted to tour the evening market, I wanted to get this meeting over with earlier than the late hour I'd kept everyone up until last night.

"Shuna, Shion, good work today. That performance was amazing. I was completely surprised."

"Hee-hee! We've been practicing on the sly," Shuna said with a grin. "I've always been a good singer, and I think I'm a rather good fit for that piano instrument. The two songs I played are all I know, though..."

If she could play *that* well after starting so recently, I'd say a "*good fit*" is an understatement. But indeed, if she had to squeeze practice time into the nooks and crannies of her busy schedule, I could see why she had to focus on a limited song pool.

The same went for Shion, too. She smiled at me.

"I kept my practice hidden alongside Lady Shuna as well. I wanted to surprise you, Sir Rimuru, and I think we succeeded!"

There was something beautifully dignified about her playing the violin. I honestly needed to give her some praise.

"Yeah, you looked great. You're gonna keep it up, right?"

"Yes, of course! I'd like to get to the point where we can play all the songs you remembered, Sir Rimuru!"

“I’ll look forward to that. There’s a lot I’d like to hear from you!”

Shion’s never seemed more trustworthy to me than today. She could be a disappointment most of the time, but right now, she was shining.

I then moved on to Gabil.

“Gabil, your presentation was also received favorably. Yuuki was shocked by it, and King Gazel took quite an interest as well. They said that we perhaps revealed a little *too* much to the public, but I think that was fine.”

“Ha-ha! Thank you very much! A lot of it was Sir Vester’s doing, but I took the initiative to do the best job I could on it. And conducting those experiments did more than just satisfy my intellectual curiosity—it made me want to relate those feelings of mine to everyone else. Perhaps I went a bit overboard with it.”

“No, no, I’m not criticizing you. Your research surprised me as well, but the content was really interesting. I think our visitors were just as engaged, too. More than enough of a success.”

Gabil breathed a happy sigh of relief. He must’ve been pretty nervous.

“Tell Vester I said the same to him, all right?”

“Absolutely!”

Vester was likely drinking with Gazel as we spoke. The king might be a bit angry at him, but Vester would probably treat that as high praise. To him, Gazel was eternally worthy of his respect. During this festival, at least, they should be able to enjoy themselves without worrying about things like rank or position.

Diablo also updated me on arena goings-on.

“We have our six remaining seed slots filled, sir, but none of them would be a concern if I was part of the tournament. I watched the Hero in action as well, but... heh-heh-heh... Yes, he certainly has some fascinating tools to work with. Should I take care of him before problems arise?”

“*I told* you we weren’t doing that!”

"As you wish. I think any further briefing on the day's events would spoil the fun for you tomorrow."

Diablo didn't see any issues. Counting Gobta and Geld, our eight tournament competitors were locked in—and if nothing concerned Diablo, I didn't need to hear anything else. With the right seedings, we could see some pretty neat battles. I'll take Diablo's advice and wait for the fun tomorrow.

Soei spoke next, telling me that the kids spent the day enjoying the festival. They'd paid a visit to the tournament preliminaries, cheering on Masayuki, then purchased a large amount of food and souvenirs. *Geez, Hinata... You sure that's how a guardian should act? Hope the kids don't all wreck their stomachs.* Now I was a little worried about how things would work out tomorrow.

So we conversed some more while waiting for Mjöllmile. Barring any problems, we'd be done with this meeting in under half an hour—or so I assumed, but given the way Mjöllmile rushed into the hall, pale as a sheet, I had to dismiss this as optimistic.

"S-sorry to make you wait," he stammered, and based on his body language, I could only assume something serious had come up. He was normally so unfazed, brazen even, but now he couldn't hide his panic.

Shuna offered him some chilled tea, and I waited for him to catch his breath before speaking up.

"So what's happening?"

"I'm deeply sorry, sir, but we have a serious problem. Here's the thing: We're out of money."

It seemed that the tradesmen were all hounding him for payment at the same time, and he had spent the past little while trying to deal with them. *Out of money? You're kidding me.* We had all kinds of lavish fixtures from Diablo's manor, not to mention all his gold and silver, and besides, Diablo had taken 1,500 stellars in restitution from Farmus. If we dipped into that, we could hold a hundred more festivals like this and *still* have money left over.

"About that," he replied when I brought this up with him. "It's not an issue of budget, Sir Rimuru. It's that we can't convert Clayman's assets into money—it's not in the

commonly used currency of the world. Gold coins from ancient kingdoms have great artistic value, and I know they're circulated around the Eastern Empire, but..."

But while they might be used over there, they weren't recognized as legal tender. The tradesmen could always have them converted, but this apparently wasn't to their liking. They wanted real gold coinage, as minted in the Dwarven Kingdom.

"So I paid them in regular gold coins at first, but partway through, I realized something had gone wrong. But by then, it was too late..."

Once our own vault was exhausted of common Dwarven gold coins, Mjöllmile dipped into his own fortune to handle payments. But even that was limited, so he consulted with some of his closer merchant friends to figure out what was going on. What they revealed was astonishing—according to them, the new, unfamiliar tradesmen these shopkeepers had started working with demanded payment only in the common currency.

In international trade, it was considered reasonable to make pure barter trades, one side's goods canceling out the cost of the other side's. They could also enact IOUs, contracts to handle payment later instead of exchanging cash on-site. Payment would be needed sometime, just not right at that moment—one common custom to cover monetary losses in this world, where the concept of charging interest was still in its infancy.

However, our nation hadn't built the trust to back up that custom yet. If our partners demanded cash, our only option was to pay them in cash.

Mjöllmile understood this well enough. That was why he so carefully managed our budget for this festival, meticulously selecting the merchants he worked with. He was apparently counting on more large-scale trade with a smaller number of partners, which would allow him to break down the stellars in our vault and use the resulting gold coins to pay out his other debts. Even if that didn't materialize, he had known the main sellers at the festival for years, and—not that it was an excuse, but—he figured they'd be willing to work with him a little more. He thought IOUs or payment in ancient gold pieces would be accepted—but the tradesmen working under the merchants balked at it, and that put even Mjöllmile's closest merchant friends in a bind.

"I see," Diablo said, nodding. "Something tells me this is being engineered by someone."

"And I agree. I never expected someone to meddle with us like this..."

So Mjöllmile thought this was deliberate, too? But who would do that...?

"I am sorry, Sir Mjöllmile," Rigurd rumbled. "Putting you through all this without even realizing it..."

Rigurd, too, was busy handling our foreign visitors. If he felt responsible for it, it's because he realized this was a bigger problem than just one man. No, it was no mistake on Mjöllmile's part.

"So someone's trying to ruin our reputation, then?"

"I would imagine so. The international rules set by the Council of the West stipulate that payments must be made with gold coins minted in the Dwarven Kingdom. Different rules apply in different nations, but under the Western Nations' laws, the tradesmen are making a perfectly valid claim..."

If these people were part of the Free Guild, we could get that organization involved. They received favorable treatment in customs-related matters, and our nation had a fairly good rep with them. But these were merchants from nations affiliated with the Council, and while they came from different countries, they had to work by international rules—on the surface, at least. Us saying "well, we go by *these* rules" wouldn't be very readily accepted.

But even before that—what if all these tradesmen were colluding to cause problems? If so, taking a my-way-or-the-highway approach would be even worse. It could be just what they wanted.

"If we force our rules on them, would that cause a backlash with the Council?"

"It'd be another matter if we were already part of the Council, but if we're thinking about joining it in the future, this would not paint us in a good light, no."

Normally, payment in ancient coinage wasn't a problem. But if someone wanted to mess up our reputation, what then? It almost felt like someone was testing us, seeing if we intended to follow international rules.

"Did someone from the Council do this?"

"I don't know who it is, but it's someone high up, yes. Someone with the ability to build connections with merchants far and wide and plant them among the tradesmen supplying us. Because pulling something like *this*, you'd need to resign yourself to enduring some losses. That takes guts, and it tells me this is about more than just tarnishing our reputation."

Mjöllmile wasn't from a large country, but he was still well versed in the underground economy. If he said this was someone "*high up*," someone we couldn't trace, it had to be seriously bad news.

"So we can't force our own rules on them?" Shion asked.

I nodded. "Right. You've gotten pretty clever, Shion. If we do force our rules on them, there's a chance the Western Nations won't count us as allies. And since we want to play nice with humans, we have to avoid that at all costs."

"But wasn't it your plan to build an economic bloc with Thalion, Blumund, Dwargon, Farmus—er, Farminus, and the demon lord Milim's domain? If Tempest is located in the middle of that, wouldn't ignoring us lead to even greater losses for them?"

Whoa! Is this really Shion?! Because I'm honestly surprised. She fully understood my thoughts so much, I genuinely wondered if this was a body double of some sort. Her sharp analysis was right on the mark.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... You truly are worthy of being head secretary, Lady Shion. You are correct."

"Aren't I? So why would they try meddling with us? If they can't ignore us, wouldn't it be better to try building trust with us?"

For once, Shion wasn't spouting off random junk. She really got the gist of this. Astounding. Plus, that was exactly the question on my mind.

"People can be very strange creatures," Diablo replied. "They all must work together to survive, and yet they can't resist building class systems among themselves. And if two groups of them live next to each other, they continually squabble until one proves itself superior to the other. The weak and pitiful fear nothing more than losing their own vital interests. And in this case..."

"Hmph," Benimaru grunted. "Are you saying that the Council's worried that our

economic alliance puts them in jeopardy?"

"Exactly."

Diablo's explanation was certainly easy to grasp.

Benimaru's question assured me of it, and the rest of my staff seemed convinced. A few of them were already getting worked up over it. "Comical," a smiling Diablo stated. "These foolish rulers, incapable of understanding their position, refusing to accept Sir Rimuru's kindness... They should all crumble to the ground."

It was a little extreme, I thought, but Shion still nodded. "Hee-hee! So the vice secretary agrees?"

I was glad to see them cooperating, and I was really starting to see Shion in a new light, although I suppose at her core she wasn't much different.

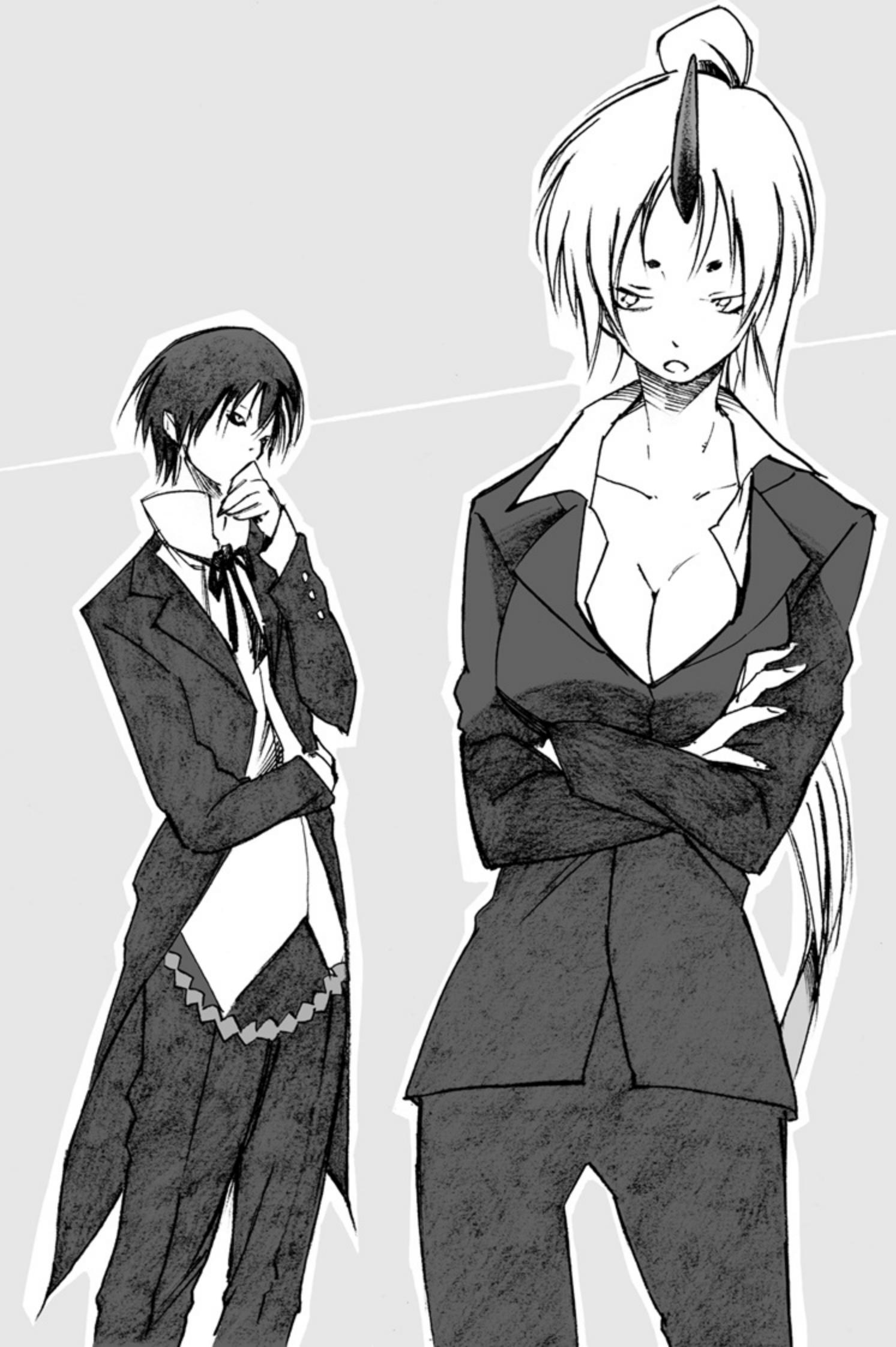
"That's not gonna happen."

They both gave me disappointed looks. They're so predictably *alike* with stuff like this.

"Either way," Soei said, "we cannot let this go unaddressed. Would you like me to thoroughly investigate these tradesmen's past employers?"

We'd probably need to. It might just turn up something. But that'd have to wait until after the festival. For now, it was likely best to avoid rash action, just so we could handle anything that came our way. Once we overcame the problem at hand, *then* we could figure out who was behind it.

"That's important, yes, but hold off for now. Mjöllmile, when is payment due for these people? Can you hold them off until then?"



First, I wanted to show them we'd stick to Council rules. If we couldn't avoid breaking them, we'd deal with matters then. It wasn't like this would turn into war or threaten anyone's lives. I didn't think it was too urgent.

"Yes, well, they're all enjoying the festival as well, so they are willing to wait until the day after it closes. My own friends have been talking with them, but that's as far as they were willing to compromise with us..."

The day after it closes—so three days away. We had two days to work with, essentially.

"And said friends are also helping me raise money at the moment. They're able to exchange ancient coins for Dwarven ones, at something of a loss to us, but as for whether they can come up with cash funds quickly enough, that's an open question..."

Sounds tough. I bet it was. Just taking it over here by wagon would be difficult enough. One of my staff could use Spatial Motion to hurry up the process, but scrambling around the world in search of gold pieces that may not even exist seemed ineffective to me. Besides, for all I knew (though I doubted it), maybe our foe was trying to lure my main advisers out of town. Again, rash moves were ill-advised.

Wait! Weren't there gold bars among the goods we'd imported from the Beast Kingdom? Could we use those to manufacture fake coins? My Analyze and Assess-driven copies would be exactly like the real things, right? Nobody could ever tell them apart, even with the Dwarven Kingdom's technology!

Understood. This is not possible. Dwarven coins are inscribed with a magical serial number that would make counterfeits easily identified.

...Oh.

I took a gold coin from my Stomach and looked at it for a moment. Raphael was right—there *was* a number inscribed on it. I could make an exact copy well enough, but two coins with the same number would be enough proof that at least one was a fake. Besides, um, wasn't counterfeiting punishable by death in most countries way back when? No wonder this world used magic and technology to regulate their coinage. I suppose they'd have to, to sustain a de facto universal currency like this.

"So we can't make our own coinage, and we likely can't buy enough in time..."

Everyone nodded at me.

"Well, even if it means taking a loss, can we pay them with pure gold, via the bars we have?"

Wouldn't the merchants be glad for *that*, at least?

"I imagine the more intelligent merchants would take that offer, but I *have* to say no to that!"

Mjöllmile was having nothing of it. I asked him why. It seemed like a good idea to me, at least.

"It's because then they'll see what kind of footing we're on. Every time we negotiate with a nation afterward, they'll look back at how we dealt with this matter, and they'll see that if we're presented with an impossible quandary, we'll try to force a solution even if it means taking losses. And once we gain *that* reputation, people will deliberately give us unfair offers. They won't see us as an equal trading partner. You can be sure they'll serenade us with their flowery words all day, but..."

Mjöllmile smiled a bit. But he was right. Show weakness to a merchant, and they'd fleece you dry. *He* sure would, I knew.

"Regardless, I'll try my best to assemble the coinage we need in the scant two days ahead. Fortunately, our visitors have been very generous to us so far. We might just be able to go on the offensive at the end of this!"

"Thank you."

For now, at least, there was no clear solution. Our only real choice was to remain defiant. We couldn't do anything *too* bold, and if it came to it, we'd just have to force our rules on them. Nothing told us we had to respect every single law people put upon us. This is Tempest, and we've got our own way of doing things. I mean, sure, if we could respect everybody's regulations, that was the best thing—but either way, we couldn't let those tradesmen go home empty-handed. We'd force the issue, but we'd do it fairly. Even if they didn't like ancient coinage, or IOUs, or payment in barter, I didn't think they had any right to complain.

"Well, no point worrying too much about this. This is *our* nation, and if worse comes to worst, we'll make them follow our rules. So don't overthink it and just do what you

can!"

"You got it."

Mjöllmile brightened a bit, apparently relieved. I don't know what the Council will say to us, but let's be optimistic—by then, we'll know who this enemy is, at least. Or maybe not an enemy, really, so much as someone feeling us out. It was too early to call them an "*enemy*."

"Right. Meeting adjourned! Good job, everyone!"

And with that, this evening's progress report was a wrap.

Procrastinating on our problems created some annoying issues for me, I felt, but it wouldn't do to fret about them too much. It looked like Mollie was really getting eaten up over it, so I figured I'd shoulder some of the load for him.

"Wanna head out for a little while, Mollie? And you guys, too."

None of the men in the room was going to say no. A few of them, like Benimaru, were already in their *yukata* and ready to have some fun.

"Ah, but I need to start raising money—"

"Oh, quit worrying about that for now! If it's not there, it's not there. If you get so worked up that it knocks you out, that'd be an even bigger problem for us!"

Mjöllmile snickered. "Ah, I could never say no to you. Well, all right! I, Mjöllmile, am ready to take your offer!"

So I managed to drag Mjöllmile with me to the festival for a late-night run. That ought to help him mentally recharge—from the heart, too. "Don't party too much, Sir Rimuru," I could hear Shuna say as we set off. "And you, too, my brother..."

Oh, and by the way, I saw a silver-haired girl have a verbal argument with the proprietor of a certain *takoyaki* stall that had come up in conversation earlier. But let sleeping dogs lie. I've said that many times before, but if you stick to that rule, you really *do* avoid a lot of danger and trouble in your life.

Thus I gracefully let them carry on and had my fill of everything the night had to offer.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
3

THE BATTLE TOURNAMENT

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THE BATTLE TOURNAMENT

I had way too much to drink.

As a rule, I can drink as much as I want and never get buzzed off it, but that problem was overcome by toning down my Cancel Poison ability a little. That was a trick Luminus had taught me, and at a festival like this, let me tell you, I was *treasuring* it. I used that trick last night as well, distracting Raphael just long enough to pull it off and enjoy the pleasant feeling of drunkenness for a while.

The result was this very unexpected headache. Can I do anything about this?

...Unfortunately, your Cancel Pain ability has also been weakened. The pain is likely to continue for the time being.

Oh, come on, that is so on purpose...

I knew how angry Raphael was last time. I bet it's even worse now...

Understood. This fact cannot be confirmed.

It's a "fact," huh? And why isn't Cancel Pain working? It's got nothing to do with any of that! It's crazy!

My complaints apparently weren't making it to Raphael. I was not-so-graciously ignored, and so I had to fight that headache for a while afterward. I regretted it—a little—and vowed to be more careful next time. Of course, I think that every time, so I'll probably make the same mistake again soon.

...

I'm sorry.

I know I did this, so please ease the pain a little!

.....

Raphael's exasperation was loud and clear—but after a little while, the pain went away. *Let's try being a bit more careful, for real, next time.* Food, after all, can be a sort of poison—not eating it will kill you, but eating too much can wreck your body. Drinking, then, is the same thing—or was that stretching it a little too much? I mean, I *should* just sit back and enjoy the buzz a little more instead of trying to force matters... but I just can't help but try keeping up with my friends.

After I stopped by a few places with Mjöllmile and the gang, I decided to go on an “inspection” of the members-only, elf-run club on the ninety-fifth floor of the Dungeon. This was the fanciest club in our nation, passing itself off as a place where only the truly elite gain entry.

For now, it was open to our foreign dignitaries for advertising purposes... and that turned out to be not so smart of an idea. The place was hopping, full of people who couldn't forget the music they experienced that day and people arguing over the new potion discoveries they just learned about. Gazel and Vester were among them, and once we were spotted, I had to hang out with them for a while. We hit it off, drinking and talking well into the night—and all the praise heaped upon my friends spurred me to get really drunk. I regret that now, but I think anyone there would understand.

And I wasn't the only one. All the other dignitaries were the same. Which, hey, they paid big money for the privilege, so it's all good.

Besides, something else good came from it. A drunken Gazel offered to help me with the gold coins we were missing—and then Archduke Erald came along and promised he'd bring our predicament under consideration.

It was all thanks to the power of alcohol.

....

...And so, with somewhat fatigued faces, all of us prepared to tackle Day Two of the Founder's Festival.

*

We were at the newly completed coliseum, a gigantic arena that comfortably seated fifty thousand. A roof that jutted over the stands kept direct sunlight from hitting them, extending in a U shape across the arena. It was composed of a thin, membrane-like sheet stretched over a framework that looked like the wings of a dragon—which, really, was designed that way because I thought it looked cool. I wanted something all ominous like that. It really *was* there to block the sun, but that wasn't what anyone in attendance thought. They looked up at the eerie sight, telling one another about how surprised they were. It even got some of our weirder attendees oddly excited.

The stands were full now, not an empty seat in the house. Mjöllmile had worked to get people into the coliseum, and now his efforts were paying off. He didn't leave a single stone unturned. He might've been down in the dumps last night, but there was no doubting it—he was a *damn* capable man.

The flat arena space the stands surrounded was our combat zone, the floor built from gigantic stones carved and buried in the ground. These hard rocks, each around six feet square, were placed in neat tiles to form the foundation. The spaces between them were filled with cushioning that also glued them together, forming what looked like a completely smooth rock surface.

I had crafted this in the short time we had to work with. Regular rock is over three hundred times as solid as concrete, but the type I used here was infused with a great deal of magicules, upping that hardness to ten thousand times—extending six feet into the ground. Not even a nuclear shelter could give you that kind of sturdiness. I haven't actually tried it, but I bet it would withstand a bout of nuclear magic without a problem—and it was impervious to both magic and physical attacks.

Around this rock-floor arena were two defensive barriers. The first one was a large magic circle that covered the floor and extended out below the stands—covering the whole ground area so we could use this arena for battle training later. The second one was a circular zone one hundred and fifty feet in diameter, where spectators could easily see it. It was within this magic space that the fighting would take place in this

tournament.

The purpose of these dual barriers was to ensure the arena stayed intact and keep stray fallout from hitting the stands. The first one blocked magicules from getting in or out but didn't block any abilities unleashed inside it. This created fears that a powerful-enough spell could impact the area around it, and that's where the second barrier came in. If things really got hairy in there, I could invoke Uriel, my ultimate skill, and use it to trigger Absolute Defense. I really didn't want to show it off in public, but it beat having to deal with injured spectators. The skill triggered in an instant anyway, so I doubted anyone would even notice.

With all these precautions, I figured we were set to go. The two barriers alone should handle matters well enough. When my own staff fought in the arena, all bets were off, but the other fighters who qualified for today wouldn't have enough firepower to break through them. Then again, I wasn't expecting Masayuki the Hero to join in...

Passions were high in the coliseum. Why wouldn't they be? The battle tournaments in Englesia were massive events, held every year and featuring contests divided by adventurer rank. In a world without many good entertainment options, a spectacle like this was a festival in itself. However, it wasn't actually open to the common classes. Only the monied were allowed in; the others had to sit tight and await the results. Some people would try getting a peek of the action from atop a roof or column, but I was sure it would've been too far away to see much.

Compared to that, our coliseum had tiered seating, providing space for all the throngs—and there were even giant screens on all four sides showing the action, a nice extra service. Optical magic was inscribed on these screens, making enlarged imagery like this a snap. Some of the attendees at yesterday's presentation must've guessed it was an adaptation of the projector they saw previously. The screens here were drawing even more interest—again, great PR for us.

It was important to cover all the little details like this for our sales pitch. That's the first step to success, one of the lessons I learned during my time working for a company.

So essentially, you could see the action from any seat in the arena, and the screens were there to give you a close-up vantage point, so I didn't think we'd be disappointing anyone here today.

And now the competitors were approaching the center of the stage, forming a line that faced the VIP boxes we were seated in. The screens showed each one in turn, in enough detail that you could gauge their facial expressions. They all certainly looked unique in their own way—and I knew at least a few of them. Gobta and Geld, of course, but that wasn't all...

I basked in the surprise as the introductions began. Each one would get their own little intro, the screens changing their viewpoints to offer a close-up view of the fighter being described. The announcer was Soka, a dragonewt working under Soei, and she began by announcing the six winners of the battle-royale rounds.

"First, our most popular competitor! Winner of the first battle yesterday, his name is Masayukiiii the Herooooo!"

She was really getting into it, standing right in front of the competitors with her face unmasked. This wouldn't affect her work as a covert agent of ours, would it?

"Not a problem," Soei, on standby next to me, said when I asked. "She is disguised when on duty, and Soka is particularly gifted at concealing herself. Besides, we need someone among our ranks to serve as a known figure, for the purpose of public events."

If that was his take, I saw no need for worry. She clearly had a gift for emceeing anyway.

"No one has seen his graceful sword skills in person. Why? Because the moment he takes out his blade, his opponent is already dead!"

So how did he win anything up to now? You could get away with that kind of hype in a street fight, maybe, but Masayuki was winning big tournaments, right? Maybe he would finish off a competitor in one blow, but could he trick an entire audience like that?

"How did his fight go yesterday?"

"To be honest, there was little we could learn from it..."

As Soei put it, Masayuki hadn't even unsheathed his sword. Some of his friends were among those fighting in his round, and they apparently dispatched all the other fighters—a good fifty of them—before conceding victory to Masayuki. There was no chance to gauge his skills at all. If he had this large a fan base, he clearly had to have *some* ability—but I still couldn't shake the feeling this was all a big put-on.

Ah well. We'll see what he's really made of in the match today.

"With his overwhelming force, he's become a household name, declaring himself a Hero at his tender age! But what does Masayuki have in store for us today?! Many are those charmed by his sweet face, and many are the women who swooned after one glance from him! Now it's time for all of us to count our blessings, as we're about to see him break out everything he's got!! It's Ma! Sa! Yu! *Kiiiii!!!*"

"Yaaaaah!!" the audience shouted, buying into Soka's hype. Masayuki was hugely popular, wasn't he? But... I mean, really? He's *actually* that popular? Also, did Soka come up with that script? If so, she's got a hidden talent. Half of that was pure garbage, the other half bare-faced praise. Where did "*Ma! Sa! Yu! Kiiiii!!!*" come from anyway? It all but melted my brain as I was listening to it. And it had to be hard for Masayuki, too—what if he got touted like that and lost in the first round? I'd be too ashamed to show my face. If anything, it was a really mean-spirited way to introduce him.

It had to be Soka backhandedly slamming him, I thought. No wonder she was Soei's closest assistant. Malicious.

The next contestant was Jinrai the Mad Wolf. He had a grizzled-hero feel, and despite his shabby equipment, he just *looked* like a badass. One of Masayuki's friends, too. By the looks of things, he wasn't an A rank in terms of strength, but I still felt like you couldn't go easy on this guy. There was a secret lurking around him, if you asked me, and I decided to keep a close eye on his match.

Contestant number three was a man named Gaiye the "Flowing Swordsman," whose skills with a blade were his main draw.

"He dances like a seasoned performer during battle, stealing the hearts of all who watch! Will he show us his graceful moves today, as the blood sprays around him like crashing waves?!"

Whoa! Scary! Dancing around spraying blood is kind of twisted, isn't it? He didn't look as muscular as Jinrai, but depending on those sword skills, maybe he could rank an A? He didn't *look* like that much of a threat, but I'm sure he was a talented adventurer.

The fourth and fifth contestants were familiar to me. They were the chiefs of the

bovoids and the equinoids.

"Um, why are they here?" I asked Soei.

"Well, there have been some rumors spreading around..."

"Rumors?"

"Yes. You know, your offer of naming the champion one of the Big Four..."

"...What?!"

For whatever reason, word had gotten out—I figured Gobta or someone must've blabbed about it. As a consequence, large number of monsters had requested last-minute entries in the battle-royale matches, apparently, resulting in over three hundred competitors and one raucous time at the arena yesterday. This included the bovoid and equinoid leaders, competing against each other as much as the rest of the crowd, and they were both lucky enough to reach the quarterfinals. Or maybe luck wasn't involved. They were both formidable creatures, easily worth an A rank, and an adventurer off the street probably wouldn't stand a chance.

Still, really, *both* of them?

There were a few monsters ranked A-minus in each of their preliminary rounds, apparently, but they literally trounced them all, throwing them around like rag dolls. That's what being such powerful bovoids and equinoids got for you. Or to be more specific:

"...The winner of the fourth preliminary, Boooooooovix!!"

...Ah, right. I'd named the leader of the bovids Bovix—and to keep from playing favorites, I'd also named the equinoid head Equix.

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This was, of course, so I could have them serve as bosses inside my labyrinth. I wanted

one of them to rule the roost down on Floor 50 or (as I suggested to them) maybe even swap duties regularly. They said they had sworn their faith to me, so I didn't hesitate to put them to work—in exchange for naming them.

I was used to how this process worked by now, so I tried to hold back my magicule energy as much as I could when naming them, but they went and evolved on me anyway. Bovix was now a tauroid, while Equix became a centoid—and given that both were A-ranked before, they had become far stronger than I expected.

Plus:

Question. Am I allowed to apply an experimental Skill Gift to the subject Bovix?

Yes

No

Raphael... er, Professor Raphael seemed awfully excited about the idea. Apparently, in addition to Combine/Disassemble and Ability Adjust, there was a high chance that Belzebuth's Food Chain ability could be reversed to grant a skill to a named target. The conditions and compatibilities involved were a bit tricky, but Raphael was eager to try it out, so I thought yes to myself.

Report. Granting the extra skill Ultraspeed Regeneration to the subject Bovix... Granted.

The professor pulled it off.

Bovix had already received the extra skill Self-Regeneration when he evolved, and Raphael just applied Ability Adjust to that. What a surprise—and, in much the same way, Equix just acquired Magic Interference, granting both of them a unique addition to their arsenal. It was clear that Bovix could become a melee-attack specialist now, while Equix would focus on magic attack.

And Raphael's experimentation didn't end there. The guy even managed to give them an ability I had never heard of before...

...the Unique Gift known as Determiner.

This gift allowed the user to create a space that restricted the powers of the target, a sapping skill that sort of combined the ultimate skill Uriel's Unlimited Imprisonment and Dominate Space. But it was an inferior version—easily resisted; the space it created was readily canceled out by the target. Not very restrictive at all, really. But if the caster was vastly stronger than the target, they could still drag them into a dedicated space where they'd have the advantage in battle, so a little innovation could still make it useful.

It'd depend on the opponent, really. In an evenly matched battle, it'd never succeed but could still trick a foe if you used it right. In fact, you might even be able to use it as a defensive barrier to reduce that foe's attack. And if you built a space around yourself where magic was prohibited... Hmm. You could do some really neat stuff with it. Equix would be working in the labyrinth, too, so maybe he could use this skill to dangle some bait in front of adventurers, offering to make more treasure chests appear or whatever.

With this skill, the pair looked more like boss-level foes than ever. And they joined this tournament only because they were attracted to the completely cosmetic title of "Big Four"?

So yes, apparently they had a bet going with each other. Whoever won it joined the Big Four, and whoever lost became the boss of Floor 50.

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It gave me a headache, really—but then I suppose those two were a perfect fit for this tournament.

"Next, we have Bovix's eternal rival, Equix!! They've fought for a hundred years, and still their conflict continues! Will we see a final resolution here in the arena?! Their combined powers will soon summon new winds of carnage, lashing across the entire tournament!!"

Soka nimbly weaved together the words. She was loving this, and clearly she had a

talent. She had good looks, too; the audience seemed to like her. There was the tail and wings and horns to consider, but that didn't get in the way of being "cute," really.

"And what's more, either Bovix here or Equix here will become one of the masters of the Dungeon, scheduled to open in town tomorrow!! So behold their strength today—and if you feel worthy of the challenge, summon your courage and plunge into the labyrinth in search of fame and fortune!!"

Actually, she was *beyond* loving this, advertising the labyrinth for me and everything. Tomorrow was its grand opening, and much of the audience probably didn't have any idea what it was yet. And given how strong this pair was, would there be anyone stouthearted enough to tackle it? I feared this was a tactical blunder on our part, but then, many adventurers in this world *did* tend to overestimate their abilities. Let's hope a lot of them will dive in, attracted by all the money and prizes. Mjöllmile had all kinds of plans underway for it. It ought to be fine.

So which of them was going to win? Depending on the draw, they might never actually face each other. After all this buildup, if one of them got whipped here, it'd sure make us look pretty lame. A lot would depend on the battles to unfold today, but if they didn't pan out, people might think the Dungeon was a big pushover. We'd have to tackle that possibility if it happened. Besides, if people thought they'd have an easy time in there, that'd just attract more challengers looking to strike it rich.

No need to rig the drawing, though. Let's just see how it works out.

Still, Equix was the fifth challenger. That left three to go, and just one from yesterday's rounds.

"Moving on, our fifth competitor—the mysterious masked man who showed unbeatable strength yesterday! Under his lion mask, he remains anonymous; is he a defender of justice or a servant of evil?! And how will he charm us all on the battlefield today?!"

Pffffttt!!

The moment I laid eyes on "Lion Mask," I spat out the juice I was drinking.

"S-Soei! Is that...?"

"Yes, there is no mistaking him..."

He didn't name him, but Soei was just as sure of his identity. Didn't Diablo tell me "*none of them would be a concern*"? What is he, blind?... That, or Diablo was being *way* overconfident.

...But forget about Diablo a moment. I could see a trio in the arena cheering Lion Mask on, tears in their eyes. One was tall, with a tensed-up body, a gentle face, and an earring. Another was a huge pile of muscle with a nose ring, and the third was short, squat, and straight-up fat, with a pierced lip. They had wild hairstyles in funky colors, and... well, why beat around the bush? These were Daggrull's sons.

You could tell because they had clothing on with slogans like SHION FAN CLUB!! and SHION 4 LIFE on them. That's them, all right. Ever since Shion beat the crap out of them, they'd become her biggest fans. Maybe this was some form of masochistic fetish they'd developed after getting their asses handed to them—I don't know; that's not a world I want to get intimate with.

I wanted to ask if they were feeling all right, but I suppose that if you didn't know Shion, you'd see her as this cool, intelligent beauty. That's how I had thought of her at first, too, actually. But ahhh, who cares? Let them be. It's a matter of time before they learn the truth and their dreams are shattered, but that was the life they chose. We had agreed to keep a half-hearted eye on them and put them under Shion's training, but...

"Hey, Soei, why is that trio cheering for Lion Mask?"

"...Because they all lost to him yesterday, I would imagine."

Aha.

They might've looked like jokes, but they *did* have the magical energy of a former demon lord. Shion had whipped them thanks to their lack of battle tactics, but they weren't pushovers at all. In fact, they probably *still* ranked above the recently evolved Bovix and Equix—and if this masked fighter beat all three of them at once, there was no longer much doubting his identity.

"How disappointing. I'll need to work them harder than ever now."

Shion seemed angry at them, but honestly, I had some pity for the brothers. They messed with the wrong guy, is all. They were too cocky for their own good, I'm sure, but against a former demon lord who still packed one of the meanest punches in the

world, it was like a grown-up pitted against a team of kindergarteners. It'd be crazy to expect them to win.

Still, though... All three of them getting thrown into the same match? Against *that* monster? Talk about bad luck on all sides. One of them could've had a chance at the grand prize if things had worked out otherwise. But Shion was revving to "train" them more than ever now, so let's look forward to that.

"...Ahhh, and I've just received a message from a certain anonymous fan. It says: 'I can't be here, but you better do your best for me! I know you know this, but don't let anyone discover your secret identity, no matter what! Good luck!!' Whatever could *that* mean? I don't know, but it sounds like a nice message of support for Lion Mask!"

Of course she knew. Soka knew, and she was enjoying it. Had Milim gotten in touch with her at some point?

Right now—according to what she'd told me, at least—Milim was busily applying the final touches to the labyrinth. I let her go, since it beat her getting in my hair over here, but I never thought she'd meddle with me like *this*. I hadn't called Veldora over here, either; he should be with Milim and Ramiris right now, having fun building the Dungeon and losing all sense of time. I didn't want him getting too excited and razing the place, which was one reason I didn't invite him. Milim throwing an underling into the arena was a surprise, but Veldora, at least, didn't have anyone like that to turn to.

So who would win it all here? Lion Mask had a massive strength advantage over anyone else, and while Geld couldn't match that, I figured he had the best chance at him out of anyone. I wanted him to win, but it'd be an uphill battle, huh? At least Lion Mask's victory wouldn't lead to any problems, unless there was some kind of double-KO situation with Geld. I also wanted to see what would happen if he drew Masayuki. The Hero had to fight *sometime*, after all, if he wanted to win, right?

Either way, good luck to the guy.

Those were the six qualifiers from yesterday. That just left the special entries.

"And now to introduce the strongest of the strong! The greatest among the government officials of Tempest, two titans joining us in the coliseum! Each of them boasts the offensive force of a thousand—and if they win, they've been promised a position in Sir

Rimuru's vaunted Big Four!"

The rumors had already spread like wildfire, but hearing the term *Big Four* get bandied about was honestly embarrassing. For Shion, though, it was a badge of pride—and I could see the monsters in the audience looking at Gobta and Geld with awe. Everyone seemed to see a lot more value in the Big Four than I originally envisioned.

"First, the elite fighter whose aloof demeanor makes all the girls go wild, the warrior captain who takes his genius in stride—Gooooobtaaaaa!! Ladies and gentlemen, what are we going to see from him today?!"

Aloof? Are you sure you're using that word right? And Gobta was visibly pale up there on the arena floor. I thought I could hear him internally shouting, *I'm outta heeeeeere!* I could see why. He was completely outclassed by Lion Mask. If they were to face each other in battle, he'd be beaten beyond half to death even if the guy went easy. *Sorry, Gobta. I wasn't quite expecting this. If you want to resent anyone for this, resent Milim for putting her ringer in on a total lark.*

But maybe... Hey, if Gobta really strove for it, maybe he could tap into some kind of hidden strength, you know? For all we knew, he might suddenly awaken to amazing powers, the likes of which not even I've spotted on him so far.

...

This ought to be fun! I could see the path ahead for Gobta was just beginning.

Anyway, that just left Geld.

"And with the warm-up acts introduced, I now present to you the star performer—Sir Geld, the high orc savior!! The guardian angel of Tempest, his iron-wall defense repels all would-be attackers!!"

Whoa there, Soka. Did you really call everyone up to now, Gobta included, "warm-ups" and give Geld more of a straight-up intro? He'd been a top official of mine for a while, yes, but... You know, Gobta's an old veteran by now, too. I guess it's just a matter of status. If Gobta somehow wins this, maybe Soka would start treating him a little differently.

“Now we have all eight competitors in the ring! Who’s going to reign supreme? The fateful moment is about to arrive!!”

Oops. If she was done introducing everyone, it was my turn to step up and give an intro. I forgot I was supposed to say some opening words in front of the fighters. But I didn’t want to look like I was panicking—that’d just be sad. Rigurd was taking care of our dignitaries for me, so I left Benimaru to guard them, ordering Soei to watch over the whole of the arena for me.

Then I stood up and headed over, trying to act calm and composed as I used Dominate Space to connect a path from the VIP seats to the main arena. When I passed through to the other side with Shion, I was greeted by deafening applause.

“Raaahhhhh!!”

The sight of me filled our residents, and those from nearby nations, with excitement. I had to respond to them. It gave me a little stage fright, but I worked hard to act all high and mighty, like a demon lord should. Taking the mic from Soka, I turned to the competitors.

“Fighters, if you survive through the end of today and win the final round tomorrow, I will grant you the glory of my nation...”

Does that work? I kept my pace slow, giving my best shot at a voice of authority.

Next up, I suppose I ought to give a little encouragement to each of the entrants.

“Masayuki the Hero... Win, and I will invite you to challenge me.”

We’d already worked out that promise. Masayuki didn’t look the least bit happy about it. In fact, he winced, as if to say, *What do I get out of that?*... Nope. It just didn’t seem like he wanted a fight at all. I couldn’t hate him for that.

My eyes went from him to the next fighter. “Mad Wolf” Jinrai, right? Masayuki’s friend.

“And you’re ‘Mad Wolf’ Jinrai, correct? Do you have any requests?”

Soka deftly brought another mic to Jinrai.

“Oh! I wasn’t expecting you to talk to me, too. I have only one hope, and that’s to help

Masayuki. Sorry, but there's no way I'm gonna be champion. But instead of that, I'm sure the Hero's going to defeat you for us!"

Um, okay. If Jinrai draws Masayuki, then that battle's pretty much decided already. No, I guess he's *not* gonna win.

"Very well. In light of your sportsmanship, no matter what results we see, I will prepare a new weapon and armor set for you. Please consider it a token of my respect for a gallant warrior."

Given the occasion, I figured a reward along those lines was suitable. Masayuki's band joining the tournament certainly put a lot more butts in our seats. I wanted to repay him for it... but more than that, I wanted to impress the world with how bighearted I was.

"Hmph! Well, if you're givin', I'm takin', but don't think you can win me over with bribery, okay?"

With a final snort, he handed the mic back to Soka. He had a lot of sass, but I thought my kindness came across to him. He wouldn't have accepted it at all otherwise.

Next I faced Gaiye the Flowing Swordsman. He spoke first.

"Demon lord, I am *far* more powerful than that 'Hero' over there! If I win, you'll fight with me, won't you?"

Um? That came out of nowhere. I was a terrible ad-libber, so I wasn't sure how to respond—but then I received some unexpected help.

"That is very rude to Sir Rimuru. If you insist upon it, then I will be glad to engage you after you emerge as champion. Win against me, and I will make the request to Sir Rimuru himself."

Diablo, our referee at the side of the arena, flashed a cold smile as he spoke to Gaiye. *Whew. Yeah, let's just leave this to Diablo.* I didn't need any more trouble in my life.

"At the moment," I said, "I've made a personal promise to the Hero. But if anyone else here wishes to challenge me, I invite you to defeat a Big Four member first to prove your strength. Do that, and I will gladly accept your request!"

This “Big Four” concept was proving kinda versatile. I could use it in all kinds of ways, this one included. The more you know.

Soka finally got around to giving Gaiye a mic.

“Heh. A fine way to dodge the question. So be it. To the Hero, to that demon, and to you, demon lord—know that you will all be bowing to me soon!!”

Hoo boy. Talk about being in way over your head. He should really save that talk for *after* he wins. Better end this conversation before Diablo loses his temper.

“...‘Flowing Swordsman’ Gaiye, if you should emerge as champion, I will grant you the special right to challenge me. How’s that sound?”

Screw it. Let’s move on. He’s not gonna, after all, so no need to overthink that promise much. I could hear Gaiye snort and say, “You better keep your word,” but my eyes had already turned to Bovix and Equix. The two of them promptly took a knee.

“I expect big things from you both. Even if you fail to win in this arena, remember that you will be rulers of your domain in the labyrinth. Do not disappoint us.”

Did that sound good? It came across a bit like a threat, but I couldn’t have a labyrinth boss fleeing for his life in public. They were free to lose, but I wanted them to show off at least a little before they did.

“Yes, my lord! By the name you granted me, I, Bovix, swear I will not stain your reputation as I give everything I have to the battle!!”

“And I, Equix, promise you we will honor your glory. As members of this great nation, we will bestow great prestige to it in our fighting!!”

Good, good. A little stiff, but at least they were prepared for battle. And even if they lost, they could take turns guarding the area halfway down the Dungeon. I didn’t think either of them had a chance here, but let’s just make sure they don’t embarrass themselves.

Which brought us to this guy.

“Uhhh, ‘Lion Mask’...Don’t be too reckless up here, okay?”

“Whoa, whoa, that’s all you got for me? Be serious!”

“I am serious. So, um... Yeah!”

There was nothing I could say to him. I could ask him to withdraw or wish him good luck, and it’d all just seem so weird. I’d be willing to cheer for him depending on who he drew, but if he got paired with (for example) Gobta, that’d be a nightmare. Masayuki would be a perfect opponent for him, but I wasn’t gonna pin my hopes on that.

If his identity got exposed somehow, that’d shake people’s faith in all of us. It’d be a huge wasted opportunity. Honestly, I couldn’t do much apart from hope for the luck of the draw.

Onward.

“Gobta! Great job making it this far!”

“Um, I had a bye—”

“I just know you can win this! I believe in you!!”

I gave him the best pep talk I could, completely ignoring his response. Nowhere to run for him. I was sure he’d do his best to win, in his own way.

And that just left Geld.

“Geld, you’re a strong orc. I want you to use that strength to the hilt in this tournament!”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru!”

I expected big things from him. “Wish I heard some of *that* from you,” I could hear Gobta say, but I was done with him. Geld was more the strong, silent type, so we were finished in short order. The rest, I was sure, he’d demonstrate with his actions.

After that, it was time to draw the matchings for the tournament. We’d be staging the quarter- and semifinal matches today, with the championship fight slated for tomorrow. That meant six fights today, and we weren’t going to hold a third-place match, so tomorrow would consist of a single bout.

The competitors all drew numbers at random—Masayuki number three, Jinrai number four, Gaiye number five, Bovix number one, Equix number two, “Lion Mask” number eight, Gobta number six, and Geld number seven. These were then put in a bag and picked, one at a time, the resulting pairings being added to an onstage bracket.

The results:

Match One: Bovix vs. Equix

Match Two: “The Hero” Masayuki vs. “Mad Wolf” Jinrai

Match Three: “Flowing Swordsman” Gaiye vs. Gobta

Match Four: Geld vs. “Lion Mask”

This drawing was completely fair, so I couldn’t complain... but *damn*, Masayuki was lucky. That was basically a bye he drew for the quarterfinals. Meanwhile, poor Geld, huh? Facing Lion Mask first thing and all. Could he win? I was honestly interested. It was definitely an exciting matchup, even though I couldn’t welcome it with open arms.

In terms of testing out Masayuki, it was pretty much the worst drawing possible. Whoever won Match Two would be facing him in the semis, and Bovix vs. Equix would be a hell of a match, too. The problem was, it was *too* good a match, one bound to exhaust both sides and leave the winner completely out of gas against a fresh, untouched Masayuki. Meanwhile, the top fighter from Matches Three and Four would go on to the finals, but if we wound up with Gobta duking it out against Geld in the semis, they’d also be too tired to thoroughly test Masayuki’s skill. Plus, Lion Mask was in the mix, and him versus Geld was, as I said, a fight up there with Bovix vs. Equix in excitement.

I didn’t know how serious Carill—um, “Lion Mask” was about this tournament, but Geld *did* have a lot of strength by now. Having them both fight each other in the first round? I just couldn’t believe that draw. It was like destiny itself arranged things so Masayuki would have as easy a time as possible.

Well, no point whining about it. I could make all the predictions I wanted, but nobody knew how this would turn out. And while I pondered that, the first match was already about to begin...

*

The other fighters stepped out of the arena, moving back to their waiting area. Bovix and Equix stood at the center, staring each other down and talking trash.

"Hey there, Equix. We should have settled this score long ago, just the two of us. Our fates have intertwined for far too long—I hope you're ready to end it here."

"Don't be stupid, Bovix. I, Equix, am the only one worthy to serve in Sir Rimuru's elite Big Four! It'd be far more suitable for you to hole up in the labyrinth, enjoying your retirement."

"Silence! Why would the likes of *you* ever deserve to be in the all-dominating Big Four?!"

Without warning, their battle began.

They were both close-quarters power types, ax and shield against spear and shield in a pitched battle. Seeing them fight, you could tell they were melee types, not the sort to cast magic or other arts. Bovix hefted his large ax upward, swinging it down toward the floor—but it clanged against Equix's shield as he pushed it back. It brought Bovix's body down, and Equix wasted no time advancing with his spear—but a nimble backstep from Bovix had its tip whistling through thin air.

The battle continued for a good twenty minutes, an edge-of-your-seat balance between offense and defense that showed no signs of letting up. They had fought for the past hundred years, and *this* duel didn't look like it'd end any sooner. The breathtaking monster battle kept the crowd rapt with excitement—after all, one rarely if ever had a chance to see two monsters of their level fight from such a close distance away. Normally, you could go your entire life without witnessing a duel between two A rankers like this.

They were evenly matched, and that was why the battle extended so long. It was fun to watch. But it came to an abrupt end.

"It's over!"

Bovix moved to finish things, throwing his great ax—a projectile attack that could pulverize boulders, capable of breaking both its target and the weapon they were holding. Equix's left arm exploded off him, flying through the air. He had sacrificed it

to stop Bovix's throw.

But he just smiled. That was exactly what Equix wanted, and in a single moment, he closed the gap between him and Bovix. Bovix was no doubt expecting Equix to dodge his ax entirely, and this new move left him unprepared for this assault.

"It ends here! Take this—*Equine Spear Flail!*"

Equix was at his chest, and the flurry of spear strikes he unleashed was impossible to avoid. With no way to dodge them, Bovix suffered a succession of stab wounds all at once. Equix was willing to literally give an arm for this victory, and now he had it—or so he thought.

"Not so fast! *Lightning Horn!!*"

With a roar, Bovix landed a headbutt on Equix with his horns. Lightning crackled up and down them as they extended out twice as long as before. They were vicious weapons, and they tore into Equix's right eye and arm. That settled the battle. The spear fell out of Equix's useless limb as electricity shot through where the horns had stabbed him, searing his wounds. It almost looked like the blood was being boiled out of him.

Equix had gained the Self-Regeneration skill during his evolution, but the lightning damaged him far faster than he could heal himself. Bovix, meanwhile, had Ultraspeed Regeneration, and the massive holes in his chest and stomach were already closing up.

The battle was his.

Injuries that'd normally cause instant death were no problem with Ultraspeed Regeneration. And with Self-Regeneration, even Equix's many wounds were starting to heal themselves. By the time they left the arena, they were both back to normal, Equix already groaning about how he'd get him next time. Glad to see he was well.

But it was over. Bovix was the first to advance, his masterful fighting earning him cheers from the crowd. What a way to kick off this tournament.

Seriously, though. Seeing it in action again, Ultraspeed Regeneration was almost like cheating.

Equix no doubt used the tactics that had served him well in the past. That onrush, followed by a flurry of spear stabs, would've ended most contests. That was why he didn't fear those obviously fearsome horns for a moment, and that cost him dearly. I hoped this taught him a lesson. He'd need, I thought, to be more careful, eyeing his foe and figuring out where his aces in the hole were.

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Match Two pitted the Hero Masayuki against Jinrai the Mad Wolf, and as everyone knew in advance, it ended with a forfeit for the Hero. The two of them just shook hands in the center of the arena—and that triggered wild cheering and applause.

It made no sense. Why would a handshake whip the crowd into such a frenzy? I could hear them shouting, “The Hero has done it again!!” and so forth. Why was he so popular? It was alien to me.

...Ah well. I resolved to stop thinking about things I couldn't change. On to the next fight.

Match Three was the Flowing Swordsman Gaiye against Gobta. How would it turn out?

By the looks of it, Gaiye qualified for the rank of A, if barely. His weapon and armor were all Rare-level goods, proving that as an adventurer, he was among the best in the business—but Gobta had a set of Unique-class armor. I didn't think he was Gaiye's match in skill, but add all their traits together, and you had a pretty decent matchup.

“Ready? And... begin!!”

The battle started at Soka's signal.

“Hah!!”

With a short breath, Gaiye planted his feet down and thrust his sword. It was a sharp thrust, and I saw where the “flowing” part of his nickname came from. Excellent work. But Gobta's chest guard blocked it.

“What?! Such fine armor for petty infantry...?!”

“Gahhh! That... that's too fast!!”

This happened just after the starting signal. Gobta didn't even have enough time to remove his dagger. *Goddammit!* I said to myself, scolding him. *You're leaving yourself far too open!* Gobta's armor staved off the blow, but it wouldn't next time. It was Gaiye's excessive self-confidence that saved him there, but next time he'd clearly go for a joint or some other unprotected spot.

"Pffft! How about this?"

He unleashed a dancing slash, striking at Gobta multiple times. Gobta managed to dodge them all, already at the end of his rope and practically on the verge of tears. By the look on his face, he was probably aiming to get run out of the ring and disqualified. Victory was quickly off the table; he was just trying to protect himself—and that might've been the right answer, but I wish he could've tried a *little* harder. Given how interesting a match this looked like on paper, Gobta's reaction was a disappointment.

I thought that settled it, but—tantalizingly enough—the battle just refused to end. Gobta kept sidling over to the edge of the arena, and Gaiye kept cutting him off.

"Is he toying with him?"

"He doesn't seem to be a very nice person, no. Gobta is hardly gallant himself, but I find this man's behavior quite distasteful."

Shion and I were in agreement. Hmm... Now I kind of wanted Gobta to win.

"Ha-ha-ha! Think you can run from me, you peon?!"

Gaiye fought with a bastard sword, its length somewhere between "short" and "long." He also had a gauntlet on his left hand that he landed punches with, no doubt to devastating effect. It was an unusual fighting style, and when he came at you with both arms raised, it was hard to guess exactly *what* he'd do. To Gobta, who learned more standard swordsmanship, it was no doubt a tricky foe to juggle.

Still, Gaiye never landed any decisive wound. The only real blow so far was the very first one on Gobta's chest plate.

"Gobta's being very observant," Shion remarked. "You wouldn't be able to dodge those sword strikes for so long unless you could keep up with how he moved his weapon."

She had high praise for him, and so did I. He did take a few punches, but any sword

slashes were always met, and deflected, with his dagger.

“All right! Come on, Gobta! Stay focused! Show me what’s in you and beat this guy! I’ll give you a raise in your allowance! And, um... If you win the whole tournament, I’ll give you that new fishing pole you wanted!”

“R-really?! Then I’m pulling out my last resort, okay?!”

If he had a “*last resort*,” I really wished he’d used it sooner... But regardless, my encouragement seemed to do the trick. He actually wanted to fight. I wasn’t exactly thrilled with resorting to bribery with him, but with someone as lazy as Gobta, that should’ve been my first tactic. I mean, I already had Geld in there; I didn’t expect much out of Gobta—but with things as they were, I really needed a full effort from him.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don’t try to look smart around *me*, peon! The likes of you could never beat the strongest out there!”

Gaiye continued to give chase, laughing the whole way. He was no doubt sure of his victory, not even bothering to keep an eye on Gobta. But now Gobta was prepared to do anything to win—and thus, Gaiye was doomed.

“Summon! Okay, come on over!”

Gobta was head of the Goblin Riders—and, of course, that meant he could summon a starwolf and Unify with it. This gave him magicule energy on the level of an A-minus monster, combined with the sword skills drummed into him by Hakuro. Against someone like Gaiye, he could more than hold his own.

Again, though... Why didn’t you just do this first, man? Damn it, Gobta! He just wanted to lose this ASAP, I knew it.

But at least now he was serious about...

Huh?

“Wha—?”

“Summoning, eh? But a dark direwolf is no threat to—”

Then Gaiye fell silent. The dark-colored wolf Gobta had summoned had smashed into

him at top speed. The swordsman was wrong—Gobta hadn't summoned a direwolf of any sort, a C- or D-level threat at best. Instead, this dark wolf, wagging his tail and pinning Gaiye to the ground as he licked him... It couldn't have been anyone but Ranga.

"Ranga... What're you doing?"

"Tch... Quite a tactic. I must hand it to Ranga. He's become quite the schemer."

I don't think so, Shion. I really don't think so. Gobta looked just as surprised as us, so I didn't think he meant to do that. This was purely Ranga's doing; he must have barged into Gobta's summoning without asking. And here I thought he was sleeping in my shadow—I had no idea he'd hatch *this* sort of plan.

Soka ran up to Gaiye, then turned toward Diablo. "Gaiye is unconscious. A brilliant move. I think the battle's over."

Diablo the referee, his face deadpan, ruled this a valid attack. He had to have recognized Ranga, right? I mean, I knew he was in his smaller, regular-wolf size, but... Oh well. They got along, that much I knew.

"And the winner is... Gooooooooob-taaaaaa!!"

Soka's proclamation was drowned out by the cheers. Given the lack of booing from the crowd, everyone must've accepted summons as fair game in this match.

"Really...?" whispered Gobta. Nobody heard him in the roar.

"But, um, can we really get away with this?"

"Summoning magic is explicitly allowed in the rules. I would think it is not a problem."

Well, if Rigurd thought so, then all right... but Ranga decided to join in, huh? *Hmm. Are you sure this isn't an infraction?* Because up to now, I'd given Gobta zero chance of winning his first round—but with Ranga, there was no telling any longer. Considering my initial goal of testing out Masayuki's skills, maybe this was a blessing in disguise.

Right! Time to stop worrying about it. I defiantly decided to let it go.

*

Match Four, Geld vs. Lion Mask, was another one worth watching.

"Heh-heh-heh... Nice to see I can kick ass for the first time in a while, huh?!"

Lion Mask was certainly ready for this.

"Being able to cross arms with such a vaunted warrior is a very unexpected surprise. I will make the most of this chance to fight such a seasoned opponent and tackle you with everything I have."

With that, Geld removed the top half of his armor and readied his fists.

"Hohh! You want to fight barehanded? Nice. That's another one of my specialties."

He took his own stance against Geld.

What followed was one for the ages, a battle that was sure to go down in the history of this tournament. It was fist against fist, generating great shock waves of force that sent howling winds across the arena.

Geld didn't use kicks at all, battling exclusively with punches and throws while shuffling his legs to maintain balance. No matter what attack was thrown at him, he didn't waver at all. It was... What do you call it? The peekaboo style, a term I remembered seeing in one boxing manga or another. At the same time, the punches he threw as he looked for openings, even the ones meant to keep his opponent in check, had the power of a cannon tucked inside. That was thanks to his lower body, the base of the cannon, transferring all the kinetic energy in his body to his fist. But his fists weren't his only threat—he had shoulder attacks, and if they got caught in a grapple, he could perform throws.

Lion Mask, meanwhile, was an all-around fighter who could launch just about anything at any time. His arsenal was extensive, his physique virtually the equal of Geld's; there would be no overwhelming him with power. In this world, magicule energy meant a lot more than external looks, so Lion Mask may as well have been stronger than Geld.

But not even he could stay on the attack for long, a testament to Geld's superior defensive skills. Kicks that could crush rocks slammed against his arms, attempting to throw him off balance, but Geld paid them no mind. So Lion Mask attempted every other trick in the book—jabs, chops, roundhouses, and ax kicks from all directions. All

this at speeds that fooled you into thinking there were multiple Lion Masks. The flurry of attacks all nimbly hit home, but none of them affected a defense-focused Geld.

“Ha! Man, this is fun! You’re taking my blows like they’re a passing breeze!”

“Heh-heh-heh... I am the one who should be complaining,” Geld replied, frustration in his voice. “You give me no chance to counter you. Your attacks seem rough, but each one is well refined...”

He was holding out well enough for now, but he must’ve felt that things would only go downhill from here. Lion Mask’s strength was the real thing—and there was no telling how deep down it went. The way he’d unleash blows that cut through his armor, far enough out of range to avoid counters—it reminded me of an attack helicopter. It was clear who had the upper hand, but it took more than strength to decide a battle. Sometimes, luck played a part—and who would Lady Luck smile upon today?

The crowd was growing more passionate by the moment.

“Wh-whoaaa!!”

“Wow, what is...? What is *that*...?!”

Someone shouted at the top of their lungs, a bag of fries from the food stalls in one hand. Others were excitedly cheering, their faces reddened from the beer they were drinking. The crowd knew just how amazing these fighters were, and it made them roar their approval. Geld, the calm, reserved professional, against Lion Mask, whose aura just made you want to worship him—this fight definitely made a known name out of the two of them.

The blows they exchanged were devastating, but they didn’t seem any closer to resolving this. It was two steps forward, two steps back, both fighters keeping it even as time wore on. The same held true after half an hour, an excited Soka offering her commentary the whole way. Even Diablo kept close watch over them, eyes deadly serious.

Twenty minutes later:

“You’ve done well to hold out against me this long. My compliments to you!”

"Heh, heh-heh... It—it is an honor, receiving such praise from such a lofty figure..."

"Enough flattery. But let me ask you something."

"...Anything."

"Why aren't you using any skills?"

"Isn't it evident? Because you still have not shown your true self to me."

"Heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha-ha! You call me a '*lofty figure*,' but you were aiming to win? Interesting. I can't show you my *full* true self, but I *can* show you some real moves!"

They spoke as they kept up the onslaught. The audience couldn't have heard it, but I picked it all up through Diablo's ears. Geld's lack of skill usage was a mystery to me as well, but *that* was why? Geld wanted to fight against Lion Mask and notch an unconditional victory?

Lion Mask—or, let's just say it, Carillon—could Animalize at any time to unlock his full force in battle. His current form was just a temporary one; he couldn't tap his full potential like this. Geld knew it, and that was why he fought strictly with his own body, not resorting to Protector or Gourmet even once. I was sure he didn't want to get *that* serious with the fight in public, of course—that anonymous letter read in the introductions all but ordered him not to.

Carillon was no doubt in agreement, and if it meant revealing his identity, then going all out in this arena was off the table. Even so, he was *strong*. Your average monster or magic-born didn't stand a chance; he could even conquer high-level elementals.

Despite that, Carillon was beginning to get a *little* serious.

"Let's go!"

"Yeaah!"

A golden burst of mystical force flashed for just a moment, focusing itself on Carillon's right hand. The fist plowed into Geld's arms, leaving afterimages behind. The force was shuddering, exploding against both his arms, sending them flying away from the now-exposed pit of his stomach. It was one of his weak points, and Carillon wasted no time throwing a right jab straight at it. The shock wave coursed across Geld's body

with an energy that was physically destructive.

“Well done... This is the end for me...”

Geld staggered back. But he did not fall. He was trying to make his way outside the ring boundary. Diablo ran over to prop him up, looking toward Soka.

“It’s over! The winner is Lioooooon... *Maaaaaaaask!!*”



Massive cheers. Massive applause. The crowd didn't hold back for a moment, screaming their praise at the competitors.

"I call that Lion Cannonfist. You should be proud, Geld. Not only did you take the full brunt of one of my secret moves and survive—you're still able to walk."

"Heh! Heh-heh-heh... I would love for us to fight no-holds-barred sometime."

"So would I. I haven't had a scrap this fun in a while."

Geld and Carillon both nodded, each treating the other with respect. I could tell they had a deep, heartfelt connection now. Neither of them thought this was the end—and it wasn't. If they both got serious and used their full arsenal of skills, the whole match would've been different. But the win went to Carillon this time, and Geld was out of the tournament.

Still, I wanted to tell Geld that I was proud of him. These cheers right now—this was what it was all about. That's how amazing a bout this was. I clapped as loudly as all the others as Geld left the arena.

*

The quarterfinals were in the books, and it was time for an intermission. The semifinals would take place after the lunch hour.

A lot of the next round would come down to how fatigued the winners from the last one were. We had healing potions for all the competitors, so their physical injuries were healed, but you couldn't tell how they were doing magicule-wise from the outside.

With the morning's excitement still on everyone's mind, the fifth match of the day was about to begin.

In the center of the arena, Masayuki and Bovix faced each other down, ready to fight for a berth in tomorrow's final. The big question for this bout: Were Masayuki's powers *real*, so to speak? Because unless my mind was playing tricks on me, it looked like Masayuki's knees were quivering a bit. Trembling with excitement for the upcoming bout, maybe? And the sweat coming down the back of his neck was almost like a river. Was he *really* as powerful as Hinata? I just couldn't convince myself of that.

As I observed him, Bovix helped himself to Soka's mic.

"So you're the 'Hero' who picked a fight with Sir Rimuru? A pity, then, you so fail to realize your place."

He was taunting Masayuki. But the Hero just gave him an aloof smile—or, to put it in a less complimentary way, his mouth gave an odd twitch—and let it slide. Then he extended a hand to Soka, asking for a mic.

"Heh. Your fighting was a marvel to see."

"Um... Yes."

He wasn't taking the bait. In fact, he was praising him. *Masayuki's more mature than I thought.*

"...But that makes it all the more a pity."

"A pity? What is a pity about it?"

The Hero didn't seem in a great hurry to start this match. What was he going to say next?

"If you were in peak shape, it would've been fine for me to fight with my full strength. But you used the majority of your endurance in the previous round, didn't you? I just find that to be such a pity."

I wasn't expecting him to announce that he'd not fight all out this round. It seemed like a sincere gesture—that, or maybe just making excuses?

"What are you—?"

"I, um, I just mean, if I fought and beat you right now, I wouldn't get any joy out of it."

"....."

"I've heard the demon lord Rimuru appointed you one of the masters of the labyrinth he's prepared? I guess you're more interested in joining the Big Four, but..."

"Fool! The role of master of Floor 50, the midsection of the Dungeon, is a great honor

for myself *and* Equix! But it will not prevent me from aiming for even loftier heights..."

"Oh? Well, sorry to say, but the way I see it, Geld yesterday looked far more suited to the Big Four than you strength-wise..."

"Nnnnnngh..."

First he praised him; then he dissed him. What was Masayuki thinking?

"If I fight you now, I'm likely gonna win. But at your full, rested peak, I don't know how it'd go—especially down in the labyrinth, your home turf. I just think, you know, it'd be *such* a waste if we had to settle this right now."

"Nnnnnh?!"

Whoa, man. I hate to think this, but does Masayuki have no intention of fighting at all...?

"I'll be tackling the Dungeon here, definitely, no matter how my fight with the demon lord works out. You know? So what do you think? You can get back to full strength, I can meet you down there, and you can try to fend me off."

Now I was sure of it. Masayuki was acting all breezy and self-confident, but to me, it looked like Bovix was scaring the crap out of him. Was he trying to sweet-talk him into conceding right now...? I had ordered Gobta and Geld to weigh Masayuki's talents for me, but Bovix didn't know that. Maybe...

"Hngh... heh... Gaaa-ha-ha-ha! Yes, I fully understand what you mean! And it is true—just as you surmised, I have no strength to spare right now. I defeated Equix by only a razor-thin margin, you see... But very well. I will trust in you and wait down in my labyrinth!"

Dahhh, I knew it! Bovix actually said yes to him! And even worse, he was grinning like an idiot as he shook hands with the guy! And the crowd was going wild for it, of course. You'd think someone declaring he had no interest in fighting would be greeted with boos and jeers, but for reasons I couldn't guess, they loved every bit of this. I heard people praising Masayuki's magnanimity, Bovix's wisdom for admitting his disadvantage, and all kinds of other strange things, across the whole coliseum.

It made no sense. I really had no idea what was going on. It was so clearly a bluff, but the audience thought it was a genius stroke. I guess he just got some kind of weird

charisma—

—Wait a second. If *that's* what I'm thinking, maybe I'm getting hoodwinked with everyone else. Was this all just an act? If he wanted to avoid combat with Bovix because he knew I'd be here and wanted to hide his abilities from me, I suppose that *did* make sense. I couldn't let my guard down yet.

So Masayuki was still in the running, already qualified for the final. Gobta and Carillon—I mean Lion Mask—were fighting in the second semifinal match, and I didn't need psychic powers to know how *that* would go. How well could a teenage hero manage against a former demon lord? Thinking about it that way, maybe this wasn't such a bad thing.

It helped reassure me a little, at least, as I watched Masayuki leave the arena, blanketed with applause.

*

Now for the final bout of the day: Gobta against Lion Mask.

This one was pretty much over before it began, but I still wanted to cheer on Gobta as much as possible. I *did* promise that fishing pole if he won it all, and let me tell you, I was proud of that pole. It was a new model with a reinforced reel, designed by me so I could catch up with him in our informal fishing competition. I wasn't about to give it up *that* easily. I could make another pole with little trouble, yes, but it's about the competition. Gobta wanted it, and that gave him the motivation he needed—which was great for me, so I had to root for him.

I mean... You know. Lion Mask—Carillon—was *so* gonna win. He was probably gunning for the championship; if not, he would've bowed out after that intense fight with Geld. That'd sure help quash my anxiety—about Masayuki, I mean. Carillon would be the perfect candidate to test him out with. I wasn't sure I could count on Milim's underling to pitch in for me, but right now, I felt there was nothing to worry about. He could get easily distracted, making me worry he might cut out of this tournament on a whim, but now it was clear I was too frazzled for my own good.

Geld and Carillon didn't knock each other out, and now all my worries were in the past. The rest, I figured, I could leave up to him.

But, as if reading my mind, Gobta was here and absolutely *burning* with passion. Why

is he *always* running contrarian to my needs? He never puts in an effort when I expect him to... Whoa. Wait. I was supposed to be cheering for him. Carillon was gonna win, but I couldn't laugh at Gobta's efforts, either.

I turned my eyes to him. Gobta, who had summoned Ranga from the beginning this time, had his back turned to me. Oh man, he was just gonna rely on him again, wasn't he? That's why he acted so confident—he'd just have Ranga fight for him. Not only was it legal, if Gobta wanted any chance of victory, that was his only strategy.

If I had to guess, Ranga was stronger than Geld. Carillon in no-holds-barred mode was one thing, but this stunted version of him? I thought Ranga had a decent shot.

Which... Hang on. If he *did* win, what then? If, on the tiny—I'm talking microbe-size—chance Gobta won, then *he* could reveal Masayuki's powers for me, and my original plan would finally pay off. In other words, it didn't really matter who won here, as far as I was concerned. Leaving matters to Gobta concerned me a little, but hey, what happens, happens.

So I started cheering my head off for Gobta.

The match began.

“I’m not the hobgoblin I *usually* am today!”

Then why were you running from your last opponent?

“Don’t make me laugh, kid. Listen, before anyone gets hurt, why don’t you just hurry up and forfeit—”

“Okay, Ranga, you’re up!”

“At once!!”

Brushing aside Carillon’s offer, Gobta made the first move. He and Ranga worked as a well-synchronized team; they must have strategized a bit over lunch. He was serious. He really wanted to win.

He did, but...

“Tiger Talon!”

Sharp, bladelike claws grew out from Carillon’s feet. He unleashed a tornado-like jumping roundhouse, aimed at both Gobta and Ranga. His long, sharpened claws offered no clue about their trajectory—and even if you dodged them, their tips emitted some kind of vorpal wave that cut through any target they faced. This skill was just something for Carillon to play with, but to Gobta, it’d probably make his life pass before his eyes.

“Byahhh?!”

Gobta fell off Ranga. I knew it. This was just asking too much. He frantically clambered away, attempting to scamper out of Carillon’s sight—but nobody had any right to laugh. I mean, yeah, the crowd was all laughing, but they could do that because they didn’t realize how fearsome Carillon was. Just facing him up and attempting a frontal attack deserved to be praised.

But Carillon left him alone. Or really, he had to—because Ranga, freed from the weight of Gobta, was now snarling at him. He was currently the size of a large dog, but even so, his teeth and claws were sharp enough.

“Tch!”

Carillon stopped those fangs with his left arm, letting it be sacrificed to his bite. Then he brought the arm straight down, sending Ranga crashing toward the ground. But Ranga didn’t relent. With a spin, he kicked against the stone floor and out of harm’s way.

“Wh-whoaaa... That’s some wolf there.”

“Yeah, but aren’t dark direwolves ranked C at best?”

“Oh, you mean the monster Sir Gaiye mentioned? But is that really a direwolf?”

The crowd was already stirring, astonished at Ranga’s moves. Some of them were already conjecturing on what he could be. *He’s a Tempest Starwolf, guys. Special-A grade and not the kind of thing you’ll see raiding your garbage at night.*

“Elephant Stampede!!”

Carillon broke out another attack. The aura kneaded into it smashed into the ground from the skies above, like random lightning strikes. There might've been room to escape in an open environment, but not in this arena—if a ring-out counted as a loss, your only choice was to take the blow. Or so I thought. But Ranga fled right away from it.

“Huhhh?”

Carillon was the most surprised of all. He probably didn’t expect Ranga to just give up the match. It disappointed him a little—and for just a moment, that left him open.

“Yeah, right there!”

Ah!

Was that Gobta talking? And that black shadow setting off on cue—it was Ranga. Just when I thought he’d fled outside the arena, he jumped right out of Gobta’s shadow, like nothing was amiss.

“Weren’t you out of the ring?!” Carillon shouted.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... A resummon is not against the rules.”

Diablo shot the ex-demon lord down. Carillon blew it. Yes, Ranga was much stronger than Gobta. In Carillon’s eyes, Ranga needed far more attention paid to him. But his *opponent* was Gobta, and as long as he didn’t step out of the arena, he hadn’t lost. It was an underhanded move, but ever since this match began, he had been toeing the boundary—this was what he’d aimed for the whole time: playing the fool while hungrily striving for victory.

This was how he’d do it, and the results changed the tide of the match.

A fang brushed past Carillon’s head. The attack caught him off guard, and he dodged it by a hairbreadth... or maybe not. I thought he’d fully avoided it, but then Carillon brought a frenzied hand to his face. Just as he intended to, Ranga had struck a successful blow.

The attack took its toll, too. Carillon was on his guard, of course, but he must’ve been confident that he could weather any blow as long as it wasn’t a direct hit. Instead of

clumsily staggering back to dodge Ranga, he dodged just barely enough to segue to his next move—a simple choice for someone as dominant as Carillon. As a masterful lord of the battlefield, he had to make it look easy—that's how he thought, and his powers made that naturally possible. That's why he had the strength and agility to dodge the attack that came after Ranga's surprise reappearance.

This time, however, Ranga wasn't aiming for Carillon at all but the mask he had on. With his honed instincts, Carillon decided to do the bare minimum necessary to avoid taking damage—and that let Ranga bite right through his mask.

Now Gobta was all smiles. "Sweet! Right on target!" he joyfully shouted. Then he whipped out his dagger and launched a shot of Icicle Lance.

"Take this!"

"Y-you little sneak!!"

The bolt wasn't meant to topple Carillon but to rip the mask off him. Likely realizing this, Carillon fought back with both hands over his face—and that gave Ranga free rein to attack. And with his hands essentially tied behind his back, fending off the starwolf was a herculean task.

"So dirty..."

"What a cowardly way to fight..."

"Fight for *real*, you bastard!"

The spectators weren't exactly satisfied with this. But Gobta didn't care.

"Shut up! In this world, might makes right! Sir Rimuru said so himself!"

He was playing to the audience now, shouting right at them. I *really* wished he wouldn't drag me into this...

"Tch. I can see why he's aiming for a spot in the demon lord's Big Four. Fighting like *that*, and not being ashamed of it for a moment."

"Yeah. In fact, he's acting like this is a completely normal tactic!"

"He looks kinda dopey, but he's sharp, you know? He was aiming for that from the get-go."

"Ahhh, I bet the demon lord suggested it to him. I mean, check out that stupid-looking face of his. You think *he* could've come up with that?"

"Scary, isn't it? A demon lord capable of bossing around the Big Four..."

Great. Now the crowd was making me out to be some trans-dimensional mastermind. *It's all Gobta, okay? All his fault.* And I really didn't need a Big Four who required my constant input in order to function, but the crowd would never get that. It was just sad.

Now Gobta and Ranga had the initiative—and when Carillon finally took a step outside the ring, it was over.

"Curse him! All right. You've outwitted me this time."

I could tell he was furious, but he still had his reason with him. Better to bow out, he thought, than to continue this farce any longer. And he was probably right—if it became known that a former demon lord lost in a tournament like *this*, it'd spark an international furor.

...Of course, he *did* lose only thanks to a publicly announced message from a certain anonymous benefactor. Without that, I doubted this strategy ever would've occurred to Gobta.

"Stunning! Absolutely stunning!!"

Soka's shouting revved up the crowd once more. I heard cheering, shouting, even laughter. Everyone had their own takes, but either way, they truly enjoyed this fight.

"Did that man really need to conceal his face so badly? That seemed rather exaggerated to me..."

Sounded like some of them were even advocating for Gobta. He was definitely the heel of the day, but between his lovable face, his nimble moves, and everything else, nobody could find it in their hearts to hate him too much.

The crowd was happy, for sure. Geld and Carillon's battle was praised for the high

quality of its combat; with this one, people would be talking about Gobta's antics for a while to come.

This world's starved for entertainment. Instead of the rule-bound tournament at Englesia, the anything-goes atmosphere of this one seemed to grab people's hearts a lot more. It was objectively a terrible bout, but in the end, I guess it kinda worked.

Later:

"As punishment for joining a match without permission, I forbid you from lurking in my shadow until further notice!"

Ranga, trotting up to me with his tail wagging, must've assumed I would praise him for a job well done. This was a shock to him, but I honestly wondered why he thought I'd like it. But... well... those pathetic, sad eyes he gave me... They tugged at my heart, I guess.

"Ranga, I know I gave you that punishment, but my final decision depends on tomorrow's contest."

"...!!"

"You're *theoretically* being summoned by Gobta, so listen to what he says and try not to do anything reckless, all right?"

"Yes, master!"

Ranga and Shion were good friends, and I think Shion's influence made him go overboard at times. I had to put my foot down here, or I couldn't guess what kind of terrifying things he'd try next. If he remembered his role as Gobta's summoned beast, everything should be fine—at least, he wouldn't overdo it against Masayuki, I thought.

"Gobta, I want you to work with Ranga and give me a hundred percent in the final tomorrow!"

"You got it!"

Perfect. I was sure Gobta would have no problem gauging Masayuki's true might. The worst-case scenario I pictured involved Ranga going into full "beast" mode in front of

the crowd and then having Masayuki beat his ass. That meant I'd have to step into the ring, and I doubted we could talk things out then.

I really wished we knew more about Masayuki's skills in battle. That worried me. Still, I hoped we could settle this without conflict. If Gobta could win, we were good—but that all depended on tomorrow.

*

Thus, despite a few unexpected twists and turns, Day Two wrapped up in an orderly fashion. Today's six matches were over, which left only the finals tomorrow—a, shall we say, *quite* unexpected matchup between Masayuki and Gobta.

Once the arena emptied out, the night stalls reportedly saw massive profits. The fanboys were crazy for Masayuki, so-called hard cores were devoted to Geld or Carillon, and a few dyed-in-the-wool arena-battle nerds tossed their hats in with Gobta. They were all smiles with one another on the streets, talking excitedly about the day's bouts.

The same was true at our own dinner, spent enjoying a multicourse meal at our tables with the other VIPs. All anyone wanted to talk about was today's tournament. Apparently, that Gaiye dude was pretty famous; Gobta's beating him very suddenly made him the focus of attention. A lot of people had high expectations for the final tomorrow, and my own table was no exception.

“That was *soooooo* great!! Just seeing Sir Masayuki stand there looked so crazily cool!!”

“You think so? I like Mr. Tempest more!”

“And Geld was so awesome. Talk about letting your fists do the talking!”

“Yeah! When Lion Mask did that all-out assault on him, his face didn't even move an inch!”

“Exactly! And Lion Mask was *fierce!*”

“That barrage was something, huh? I was amazed. Just one cool move after another. I wanna learn some of them!”

“You too, Gail? So do I!”

“Yeah, me too!”

Alice was all Masayuki. Chloe didn’t particularly care. Kenya and the other boys thought Geld was cool under pressure, but Carillon was the more popular choice. He was kind of like an action hero, actually, what with the “Lion Mask” bit.

Watching them carry on, I eyed the food on the table with anticipation. Instead of multiple courses, we were all being treated to a fried-shrimp special, along with meatloaf steak and cream-filled croquettes. A very kid-friendly menu, in other words, although I was definitely a fan, too.

If we were nobility, we’d have servants carting all of this over, but tonight we cut that out. Each table was separated by noise-dampening partitions—having to worry about manners every single meal was exhausting, so I had us go with this setup on Day Two. That let us chat all we wanted as we enjoyed dinner.

The kids were abuzz about the battle tournament—and if they were that excited about it, I’m sure ticket sales were through the roof. I had my concerns about tomorrow, but no point worrying too much about that.

I could see Carillon grinning at me from the next table over, no doubt hearing the kids carry on. Milim was there, too, looking a bit more peeved. Guess that noise dampening didn’t work too well after all—they heard every word from us, although the opposite was also true.

“Heh-heh-heh! Glad everybody saw how cool I was. Your kids there have good taste.”

“Don’t be silly! How can you be ‘cool’ if you couldn’t even win the tournament?”

“Oh, don’t be that way, Milim. I wanted to keep things nice and easy, all right? Nice and easy.”

“Pathetic! Have you forgotten your pride as a former demon lord?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Of course not. I got to take on a foe I’ve had my eye on for a while, and I didn’t care about winning anyway.”

“I’m quite jealous,” I heard Middray add.

“You said it! I should’ve just disguised myself and joined in instead...”

Dude, if Milim asked to join, I would've stopped her at all costs.

"Whoa there, Milim. That's way too reckless."

"He's right, Lady Milim. A demon lord as brimming with grace as you would never be able to hide her identity."

Carillon and Middray agreed with me, at least, immediately trying to dissuade Milim of the idea. I didn't think she was "*brimming with grace*," but oh well.

"Ah, whatever. Let's all watch the final match together!"

"Oh? Are you done with your labyrinth work?"

"It's all perfect! So I'm gonna go around with Rimuru and his gang tomorrow!"

"Would I be able to join you?" I heard Frey ask.

"I'll pass," said Carillon. "My staff invited me out. It's too bad I didn't make the final, but I want to take my time and look around town tomorrow."

So Milim would be watching, too. Carillon planned to go out with his Lycanthropeers, and I suppose Frey would be keeping an eye on Milim. Good thing there was only one round of the tournament left. Milim was excited for the labyrinth opening as well, so I figured we didn't have to worry about her.

"But if it was that engaging of a tournament, perhaps I should have joined in?"

"Ha-ha! Actually, what *were* you doing all day?"

"Hee-hee... Middray was in the concert hall the whole time."

So was Frey, it seemed, if she knew he was there. If they liked the music that much, I was sure the orchestra would be delighted to hear that.

"Huh? You mean that stuff that put me to sleep yesterday?"

"Carillon... A barbarian like you wouldn't understand high art, I suppose..."

"Whoa, Frey, don't talk to me like *that*!"

"Hey, which stuff was this?"

"Music, Milim. Remember that large band of musicians Clayman was so proud of, who played such beautiful music? Well, there's a band just like that here."

"I think *this* band's better than Clayman's, but..."

"Oh? So you know *that* much about music after all, Carillon?"

"That doesn't sound like much of a compliment to me, Frey!"

"Well, no, it's not. I didn't mean it as one."

"You people just treat me like crap..."

"I'll have you know, Luminus herself spent the day at the concert hall as well, in the best seat available. I doubt someone like *you* could fully understand that music, is all I'm saying."

"Really? Luminus? Wait, *she's* here?!"

"Hey! I like music, too, you guys!!"

Certainly a lively conversation. I was glad they were having fun.

As I listened in on the other guests, Hinata leaned closer to me.

"So? If you *do* wind up fighting that kid Masayuki, what're you going to do?"

Way to drive to the core of the issue, huh?

"Huhhh? You're fighting Sir Masayuki, Mr. Tempest? I know you're strong, but I don't think you're *that* strong!"

"Sure he is! I think he's way stronger!"

The kids promptly began to argue over who'd win in our theoretical fight. Alice and Kenya sided with Masayuki, the others with me. That gave me a one-vote advantage, which I thought I could gloat about, but:

"Oh, whatever. To be honest, not even I have a good gauge of Masayuki's strength. You should be wary of him, though, of that much I'm certain."

That sounded like a warning. She didn't go into great detail, since doing so would reveal several of her own skills, but apparently she had done some investigation into Masayuki. The results told her that even *she* would find him a difficult challenge.

"Of course," she said with a laugh, "I still think I'd beat him, nine times out of ten..."

Then things got worse.

"Oh yeah, I don't think you could lose to anyone, Hinata!"

"Uh-huh. I hate to say it, but you're amazing."

"I don't think anyone in the *world* could beat Hinata!"

"Me neither..."

"No doubt about it. Not even Lion Mask could put up a fight against her."

It was unanimous. Hinata was stronger than Masayuki. Me against him was a split decision, but Hinata against him? Five to zero. I was honestly hurt for a moment.

"Well," I grumbled to Hinata, "I do think Masayuki's interested in hearing me out, unlike *some* people. I don't think I'd have that much to worry about."

"...In what way?"

The air suddenly froze between us. *That* was a land mine. One that was plain as day, and I'd stepped on it anyway.

"Oh, um, nothing. Never mind."

"If you're calling me out, I'll fight you anytime."

Man, what a temper!

Realizing my mistake, I managed to placate her with the flan I was going to enjoy for dessert. A devastating loss for me. Loose lips, etcetera.

"But you're right. Masayuki seems open to reason. Yuuki said he was his guardian, so if need be, I can talk with him. But we may not need to."

"No?"

"Meaning, maybe he'll lose tomorrow."

"Hmm, I won't deny that, but this is Gobta we're talking about... He's got a knack for screwing things up right when it counts..."

He *was* pretty strong, if he'd only take a normal approach to things. But he kept getting these crazy ideas in his mind midway, and that put everything off-kilter. That's just who he was. And what if he tried something crazy in the final?

...

Hmm?

For a moment, it seemed like Raphael was about to say something. Did I imagine that? Ah well. I'm sure it was nothing important.

But we were talking about Gobta vs. Masayuki. Gobta, with Ranga, seemed to have a clear advantage. If Masayuki could beat Ranga, that definitely made him a serious threat—but somehow, I just couldn't see the kid like that.

"If you ask me, though, I think Gobta has a lot of potential."

"Oh, sure," I said. "I'll grant you, he has a lot of good sense. But... You know. He's *Gobta*."

Gobta, with a bad habit of doing something stupid and losing a fight he could've won.

"All right. Well, I'll be looking forward to tomorrow."

With that, she ended the conversation and took the kids out to the night market. *Please, I begged her in my heart, please don't spoil them too much...*

Hinata was concerned for me, in her own way. I appreciated that.

If Gobta lost, we'd work something out then. I was prepared for it, and I didn't think anything too bad would happen as a result. For now, I really ought to enjoy the festival.

We had tons of problems and tons of things to do, but these days really seemed fulfilling to me. I felt happy. So it was time to switch gears. I promised Gazel I would meet with him, and it was time to follow through on that.

INTERLUDE

THE MIDNIGHT CONFERENCE

I entered the reception room with Benimaru, Shion, and Diablo. Mjöllmile was already there, tension writ upon his face. Shuna was taking care of all of us, preparing some drinks once we arrived. “His Majesty should be arriving soon,” she said—and just as she did, the door opened and Gazel himself appeared.

“Did you wait long?”

“No, we only just arrived, too.”

With a few short greetings, we took our seats.

“So let us begin with my conclusion. I placed a contact early this morning asking my men to assemble all our current surplus coinage. This resulted in just a little over fifteen hundred gold coins. I cannot collect more from these people, so consider that the most I can provide by tomorrow morning.”

Compared to all the gold coins in circulation, this wasn’t very much—but as Gazel put it, that was the most they could provide without affecting the Dwarven Kingdom’s own economy.

I had asked him the previous night for help making change out of our stellar gold coins, and he had agreed to help.

“Thanks a lot. That’s actually more than I expected. Sorry to put you through that.”

“Mm. I’ll have it sent tomorrow morning via Heavenly Transport, so you’ll have it by evening.”

Fifteen hundred gold coins was a nontrivial amount of weight. I hated to put them through the trouble of delivering them, and with my Dominate Space skill, I could always just stop by Dwargon to grab them. That’d be safer and surer, besides.

“You know, I can just go pick them up for you. I’m the one asking for them anyway.”

“...Oh? Ah yes, you have Spatial Motion. That *would* reduce the chance of a mistake, yes. All right. I will contact them. That leaves the main question to discuss: Will this be enough to pay off your merchants?”

“Hmm, well...”

It was close, very close, but not enough.

This being the first year of the Founder’s Festival, we were sparing no expense to launch the event. This resulted in a need for more gold coins than expected—over 3,000 in all. In my mind, this converted to around 300 million yen. A staggering figure, given the scope of this world’s economy.

We had the money to cover this in our vault—1,500 stellar gold coins. If you exchanged these, they’d break down to 150,000 regular gold coins. This was why I didn’t hesitate to blow 2,000 or 3,000 on this festival. It wasn’t that we lacked the funds; if we could break down the stellaras into regular gold coins, payment was easy. But since we were dealing with newer, small-scale tradesmen for many of our services here, that just wasn’t possible.

As a result, we needed regular gold coins in our vault—but Tempest was not at the point where we could institute a currency-based financial system. There just wasn’t much gold coinage floating around yet. Silver coins of all sorts were everywhere, but Dwarven gold coins? We had fewer than a hundred of those.

To this we could add my personal stash of 300, plus the 1,000-ish Mjöllmile managed to put together. Around 1,400 in all. That, plus Gazel’s promised funds, didn’t make it to 3,000.

“Not enough?”

“Based on the accounting in my head, we’ll want a few hundred more.”

“*That’s* the accounting you ran this festival on? Why, I’m amazed you ever got it off the ground!”

“Yeah, I kinda made things up as we went along. We didn’t have much time to set it up, so what could I do?”

“...I don’t even know how to *begin* lecturing you.”

Gazel let out a long, theatrical sigh, his eyes despondent. *I mean... We were all really into it, you know... Nobody said no to me... Right?* But if I told Gazel any of that, I knew he would explode. The king, without some drink in him, could be kind of scary at times. I was intelligent enough to avoid excessive talk when he was like this.

“In that case, perhaps I could make up the difference?”

Suddenly, someone interrupted our conversation. I looked over to see who it was, only to find Elmesia, Emperor of Thalion, with Archduke Erald in tow. She sat next to Gazel, who visibly winced when he saw her—just for a moment, but still enough to give you pause.

Carefully, I turned to Erald. “Um, Duke Erald... and the Heavenly Emperor, too? What brings you both here?”

“Well, Sir Rimuru, when... I spoke about this with Her Excellency, she was kind enough to offer her support to you...”

Erald did all the talking, Elmesia just serenely smiling next to him. The archduke himself looked a bit pained as well, and I could pick up on why. She was making him say it himself, for reasons I better not pry into. Sleeping dogs and all that.

“Oh, no, um, this is a problem we should handle ourselves...”

“Is it? Were you not just wailing a moment ago that you lacked the money? I was only offering our support in light of the friendly relations our two countries will share going forward...?”

Her lips were smiling. Her eyes weren’t. My instincts whispered to me that this was trouble.

“Um, no, as I was saying...”

Trusting in those instincts, I leaned toward turning down the offer. I *did* need someone to trade us some gold coins, but the idea of owing Elmesia a favor spooked me. We were short only a few hundred, and if it came to it, we *could* leave a merchant or two in the lurch for the time being. As long as we didn’t lose face from it, and as long as nobody lost money in the end, I didn’t think people would resent us *too* much.

Such were the calculations behind my decision, but:

"Give it up. Once that woman speaks her mind, she won't relent until she's had her way. Trust me, you would rather make enemies with every merchant on the continent together than her alone. You are far better off accepting her offer."

Gazel spat out the words, looking just as pained about it as Erald. It was surprising from him, the Heroic King having so much trouble dealing with a fellow leader.

"My, my, Gazzie. You are taking my side? How wonderful!"

She smiled. It was so transparent. And given that "Gazzie" nickname, I began to understand what their relationship was like.

"Would you mind not calling me that, please? What is it you're after here?"

"Oh, you're always so formal! Your grandfather was much more freewheeling than that, you know."

"If he was, then my father must have led a *trying* life. Would you mind getting down to business?"

I thought Gazel was pretty uninhibited himself, but for the most part, he played the role of a sober, duteous king. Maybe it was his youth, growing up with such a harried father, that inspired him. When his father ruled, that was Gazel's last taste of true freedom, and it was then that he first met Erald and Elmesia. I imagine that's when he trained under Hakuro as well. The way Elmesia talked to him about that era—I could imagine Gazel picturing him like an annoying aunt showing up at every family event just to bug you. No wonder he found her to be trouble.

"My, my, so hasty. Were you always so impatient like that, hmm?"

He was doing a good job hiding it—it didn't look that way at all—but I was sure Gazel was intensely irritated. He might've fooled me, but Elmesia could see it bright as day. Reading someone's subtle body language was a piece of cake for nobility. What I was witnessing was an intense, high-stakes game of wits... and Gazel, something of a mentor to me, was like a deer in the headlights to Elmesia. Now I could see why he was wincing so much.

The emperor asked Shuna for a cup of wine. She was settled in her new seat now; there would be no shooing her away. Gazel and Erald exchanged glances and simultaneously sighed. Those two acted like they disliked each other, but they were in

total sync here. In terms of Elmesia treating them both like children, they shared a lot in common.

With my lack of experience, I doubted I could ever out-negotiate Elmesia. Gazel's advising me to give in made sense.

"Oh, this is good!"

"Thank you."

Elmesia smiled broadly at the wine Shuna had poured for her. It was one of Shuna's treasured varietals, a drink that seemed to change in taste with every sip. If the emperor didn't like this, it'd be hard to find anything better for her. That was a relief.

"Right, then," Gazel said, trying to shift the conversation. "Our time is valuable. We can't afford to consume it with your caprices. All right?"

"Yes," Elmesia said, finally yielding to Gazel's demands. "In exchange for providing my support, I have one condition to ask. Whenever you organize a festival as grand as this, I want you to invite me. If you promise me an invitation for your events going forward, I would be happy to help with your monetary exchange. Because, goodness me, why would you ever stage such a wondrous event and not let *me* know about it?"

Erald turned his eyes skyward, hand against his temple. Gazel looked like he'd just swallowed a bug.

"I'd be glad to," I casually replied.

Elmesia smiled at me, elated. The difference in enthusiasm between us was palpable. Maybe that was the wrong thing to do. But if she liked this kind of excitement and wanted to be part of the action going forward, I couldn't ask for anything more.

"Royalty aren't the slaves of the people, you know," she said. "If they can live freely, that makes their citizens happy as well—as it does me. I think it could help bring joy to everyone!"

"There is truth to that. I agree with you. It's reassuring to see people on my side... and I look forward to it staying that way."

We shook hands with a smile. Now she was part of the team—a team consisting of me,

Mjöllmile, and her. Call us the Three Pranksters, I suppose. Gazel and Erald shivered a bit as they looked on, fearing the worst, but they didn't matter to us.

Elmesia promptly took out what I could only describe as her magic purse.

"This is just my pocket money in here, so I only have around a thousand gold coins at the moment. If you need more, I can arrange for that, but...?"

"No, that alone will be more than enough," I replied, not skipping a beat. "Could we exchange those for ten stellar golds, then?"

What was this emperor thinking? Just carrying around 1,000 gold like it was spare change under her sofa? She was living on another planet from the rest of us, as close to an A-list celebrity as you got in this world. Gazel was right—I did *not* want to cross her.

"That's quite fine. Don't forget our promise, all right?"

"Of course not!"

I smiled and nodded at her—and right there and then, we made the exchange. Now, if I could get that 1,500 gold exchanged over at the Dwarven Kingdom tomorrow morning, we had the money we needed. I sighed, relieved. The problem was behind us.

"How nice, Sir Rimuru," Diablo said as he refilled my cup of tea. I watched him tend to Gazel's and Elmesia's cups as I savored the hot brew.

Benimaru intrepidly smiled. "If someone thought that Sir Rimuru wouldn't be able to play by the rules, we're about to prove them very wrong."

Yes. I was no longer going to be dunked on by someone. No need to kowtow to those tradesmen demanding their money. I had saved face pretty well, I thought; it was a heavy load off my shoulders. But then Elmesia started insinuating something else to me.

"You know, though, I think someone would have offered their help even if you couldn't prepare the gold coins in time, hmm?"

"Oh? What do you mean?"

I was being honest. I really didn't know.

"If you want someone to do your bidding, it's far easier to have them owe you a favor, rather than browbeating or scaring them into it. It's also successful quite a bit more often."

She smiled warmly at me. That was no doubt the smile of a ruler, and it elicited a swift response from Diablo.

"I see. You think, for example, someone might've swooped in at the last minute to mediate for us, uninvited?"

"That might be the case, yes. But if such an interloper did show up, who's to say that they weren't being controlled behind the scenes by someone, hmm?"

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... An interesting thing to consider. Causing the problem, then alleviating it while creating an obligation for us. That does seem like a viable scheme. But..."

"This interloper, perhaps, would've been willing to accept a signed contract allowing payment at a later date, even if you didn't have the gold coins. It would show world leaders that Tempest could not be trusted, while *they* could be. You would be quite obligated to them, yes."

"How greedy. Truly, a very *human* approach. I've learned a lot from this."

Um, so...? Did this mean someone might be putting the merchants up to this just so they could make us owe a debt to them? And they might be doing someone else's bidding here? They'd be more disposable that way? I see... If we trusted in this person, they'd reap the benefits; if not, they'd abandon the whole strategy. And maybe they were just doing this to make us look bad... but I felt like Elmesia might be right. I could see Diablo agreed, judging by the evil grin on his face.

"It makes little sense to me," Benimaru said, "but can you think of anyone who'd want to do that? Is some member of the Council of the West trying to test us or what?"

Elmesia smiled, not taking offense at his tone. "Oh, I wouldn't know! Thalion isn't part of the Council. But maybe *he* would know something?"

She was staring right at a pensive Mjöllmile.

"Um, me?!"

Being fingered like this unnerved him, but he quickly regained his composure.

"I have heard rumors," he furtively stated. "Rumors of a kind of shadow committee that enjoys de facto control over the Council. It's composed of the ruling classes, the highest-level leaders from the Council's nations... but I wouldn't believe it for a moment. The Council is composed of elected representatives from each country, but royalty's hereditary. They don't need to worry about losing their seat."

So Mjöllmile was familiar with a few rumors going around the merchants—rumors about a cabal of rulers who held the most power among the Western Nations. It smacked of a conspiracy theory, though, and Mjöllmile himself didn't lend it much credence.

"Well, *if* someone should appear tomorrow and attempt to mediate with us on this matter... I will give them a thorough examination and fully expose their backgrounds for you."

Soei was here, kneeling next to me. I never noticed him... but, hiding my surprise, I gave him a cool, composed nod.

"My goodness. What a shock. I hardly even detected his presence."

"This is why I *told* you, Your Excellency, the denizens of this domain are like nowhere else. Paying a personal visit is just too dangerous..."

"Tee-hee-hee! But it's offered such interesting experiences. May I ask you a question, Sir Rimuru?"

Hmm? What's she want to know now?

"Yes?"

"I am considering enacting a new pact with you, but before I do, I wanted to hear your thoughts."

Elmesia's demeanor changed. She was no longer hiding her real face—the face of a ruler, one she'd shown me for a moment earlier. It was turned straight at me. I could feel an overpowering pressure—Heroic Aura, at a level incomparable with Gazel's.

“Let’s hear it.”

I fought back with my own Heroic Aura. We exchanged stares—or more like fired them at each other like cannonballs. I tried to take the full brunt of hers, not averting my eyes for a moment.

“How do you plan to deal with that demon over there? That incredibly dangerous primal one...”

Primal? I didn’t know what Elmesia meant, but was she talking about Diablo? He’s pretty strong, yeah, but not *that* dangerous, no...

“Um... Nothing, really? I mean, Diablo’s doing a pretty good job for me, so what’s the problem?”

“...Let me rephrase the question. If that demon were to go out of control, how would you take responsibility for that?”

Out of control? I... um, could picture that, actually. She must’ve had perfect insight into what I was going through. No, there was no telling when Diablo might decide to go berserk. But did that apply to Diablo alone? It wasn’t a topic I wanted to think about much, but I had another problem child in Shion, too. And while I appreciated Elmesia’s concern, I wasn’t sure what she could do about it.

“Well, I’ll stop him before that happens. That’s all I can really do to prevent any fallout, isn’t it?”

If there *was* another way, I’d love to hear it. But the only option was to prevent it before it took place. Diablo looked content enough at my response, which I didn’t appreciate much—*this is about you, you know.*

And I wasn’t the only one perplexed here.

“Huh? Um... Wait a minute. Not to drop the act for a moment, but you’d *stop* that demon? You’d step up to do that?”

“Yes. I know it’s maybe a likely scenario, but lately he’s started listening to what I’ve told him more. I think he’s much more mature than previously.”

I felt confident about that. If they kept it up, Diablo and Shion wouldn’t cause any

problems at all, I didn't think. I didn't like how Shion was listening to this like it *wasn't* about her, but... Ahhh, it'd be all right.

Hearing my response, Elmesia started giggling like a young girl. "Oh my. Did you hear that, Erald? This demon lord's an even bigger piece of work than how *you* described him!"

Archduke Erald found a way to scowl even more than he already was. I pitied him. Speaking of overly freewheeling rulers...

"It is fine, Lady Elmesia. If that is what Rimuru says, then I'll support it. And should push come to shove, trust me, Gazel Dwango will come to Rimuru's aid."

Gazel stepped up to support me. It seemed like the first time in a little while.

Elmesia gave us a contented look. "All right. I understand your position. If you should ever become an enemy to mankind, I will exercise all my force to stop you. So instead, let us continue to deepen our bonds and maintain our current friendly relations. Erald?"

"Y-yes!"

"I, as representative of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, hereby officially acknowledge the Jura-Tempest Federation as close friends with our nation. Please handle the paperwork for me."

"Y-yes, Your Excellency!!"

That's an emperor for you. All that dignity, all that authority, as she ordered Erald around like an errand boy. I could stand to learn from that.

Elmesia turned to me. "Right. Should anything come up, feel free to confer with me or Gazzie. And *please* don't let yourself go out of control, am I clear?"

This wasn't making sense. We were talking about Diablo or Shion, I thought, and now she was referring to me? Since when? And *me*, going out of control? Man, that was just rude.

"Hey, um, you know, I'm a pretty prudent person. Why're you talking like I could go crazy someday?"

"Rimuru, *who* was the leader who decided to hold a Founder's Festival on a passing whim?"

Gazel's gaze burned into me. I'd have to say it was me, I suppose.

"Um, Mollie, right?"

"No it wasn't, Sir Rimuru!"

Mjöllmile didn't want to play along.

"All right, all right. Yes. I promise I'll talk things over with you guys in advance next time, okay?"

"Very good. I hope you will."

"This isn't the kind of advice I'd normally give to the king of another nation... but this time, we are. Don't think badly of us for it."

Griping about this too much, Gazel said, would be meddling with our internal affairs—but since a lot of my ideas often ran counter to commonly accepted norms around here, they wanted me to keep them in the loop a little more. It wasn't any judgment on how good, or bad, those ideas were—they just needed more warning.

And this wasn't a bad thing for me, either. In fact, it'd be good fortune for all the countries involved, given that we'd need to prepare for the angels attempting to destroy civilization sooner or later.

So we had gone from solving my gold-coin problem to the leaders of two nations lecturing me at the same time, but I didn't mind. The tough stuff was over.

I had a promise from Elmesia that we'd work to build good relations. What started as an informal chat turned into a great diplomatic coup for me. I figured things couldn't get any better, so I was about to end the night when Elmesia brought up another topic. She was staring straight at me, her expression a tad desperate.

"Um, was there something else?" I nervously asked.

"No, no, nothing major. It's just, um, I have a request... I want you to introduce me to

Mr. Yoshida!"

"Y-Your Excellency, what nonsense is this?! How shameless! Sneaking that into these high-level talks!"

I was expecting some other weighty political issue—but *this*? Erald was freaking out, but no, this was nothing major. Yoshida was cooking for us all through this festival on the invite of Shuna, but I hadn't heard anything about his future plans. I'd certainly like him to stick around, but that would be up to him. Connecting him to Elmesia, in itself, wasn't a big deal.

"Oh, that would be simple. But don't force him into anything, all right?"

"Of course I won't!"

That seemed to please Elmesia well enough, so we would introduce them to each other after the festival.

And so our impromptu three-way summit among some of the biggest superpowers in the world came to a quiet close.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
4

**THE FINAL
ROUND AND THE
LABYRINTH'S
GRAND OPENING**

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THE FINAL ROUND AND THE LABYRINTH'S GRAND OPENING

The morning of Day Three.

I had already completed my little jaunt to the Dwarven Kingdom and exchanged my stellars for gold coins. That takes care of *that*. Now we'll have to wait and see how the schemer behind this reacts.

So, all anxieties for the future quelled, let's go back to enjoying this festival. Kicking off, we had today's first main draw: the tournament final between Masayuki and Gobta.

The coliseum was already whipped up for this, people arguing and betting with each other over who would win. Mjöllmile was taking those bets, of course, and I looked forward to seeing how much we'd make off that. The most surefire way to win at gambling, after all, is to run the game. No matter who looked like the favorite, you were always going to profit that way.

I had made a bet on Gobta, in hopes of maybe earning some pocket money out of it. No, it wasn't because he was a long shot. Definitely not. I certainly didn't place a large sum on Gobta just because the odds were so crazily skewed against him. Uh-uh.

Um, but that didn't matter anyway, all right? I had a hobgoblin to cheer on.

"Aaaaaall *right*, ladies and gentlemen! The final match of the tournament is here at last!! Which of our two competitors will seize the championship for himself today?! Will it be 'Lightspeed' Masayuki or Gobta, the fighter rising up and making a splash as he vies for a spot in the illustrious Big Four?!"

Soka's commentating was as fresh as ever. She was talking up Gobta in such a breezily casual manner. It was, in a way, insurance to keep Gobta from ditching the tournament and hiding out somewhere—a cruel way of doing it but damn effective.

Diablo lifted up his hand. The arena fell silent. Was it me, or were some of the female audience members falling for him? I banished the thought from my mind.

If Gobta beat Masayuki today, all my problems were in the past. If, on the other hand, Masayuki really *was* a fighter on the level of Hinata, Gobta was toast—but we could still learn a lot from this battle. If Masayuki had, well, pretty much *any* trouble dispatching Gobta today, for example, we'd know that he was no threat at all to us.

Gobta had both Ranga and astonishing good luck on his side. It wasn't a bad way to test Masayuki out, I thought.

Soka was now busy introducing the competitors in detail. Once that was done, the fight would begin. I patiently awaited the moment. How much of Masayuki's *real* skill could Gobta pull out of him?



Masayuki was panicking.

When he saw Bovix and Equix's battle yesterday, realizing he'd be fighting whoever won, he turned pale as a ghost.

I'm dead. If—if I fight either of those monster freaks, they'll rip me in half!!

Somehow, he'd found the right words to turn Bovix against himself and forfeit the match. He really wanted to pat himself on the back for that one. But the match after *that* threw Masayuki right back into despair. *How the hell can I beat them?! Did they only open this country's tournament to insane monsters or what?!* Both the competitors at yesterday's closing match were more terrifying than even Bovix. It made him want to curse at the world.

He didn't eat one bit last night, feeling all the world like a condemned prisoner waiting for the call to the gallows.

Looking back, things really have been going too well...

Leaning too much on the strength of his friends, letting people bandy him around as a Hero and champion, he'd let it go to his head, figuring "it'll all work out somehow." And

it *had*, so far, enough so that Masayuki never really doubted it much... or maybe he deliberately strove not to think about it. He believed, without evidence, that his group was invincible and could defeat all comers. That was how Masayuki managed to maintain some sense of sanity about all this.

But how did I kid myself into trusting any of those stupid delusions? I gotta go. I gotta get out of here!

The urge had seized his mind again and again.

"Heh! Once you win your fight tomorrow, Masayuki, how 'bout you move right on and challenge the demon lord on the spot?"

The question from Jinrai was so innocent. Masayuki wanted to shout *You're crazy!* at him.

This was all that demon lord Rimuru's fault. He looked so kind, so vulnerable, that Masayuki wasn't as wary as he should've been. Otherwise, he would've taken more careful steps to protect himself.

"Either way," said Jiwu, "it's only a matter of time, Sir Masayuki. Soon, you will slap the demon lord silly, and this nation will finally be free!"

"But shouldn't we talk with Yuuki before he fights him? You're calling this an easy fight, but what if he somehow loses tomorrow?"

Jinrai looked up. "Whoa, Bernie, are you kidding me?"

"Yes, I'd be more worried if Lion Mask made it to the finals, but Gobta, this hobgoblin? It has to be in the bag. The battle will be over before he can even summon that beast."

No, it *wasn't* in the bag. Masayuki had no idea how he'd defend himself. All he could picture was a future full of teeth, claws, and daggers. But his companions had so much faith in him, he couldn't reveal his feelings to them.

So he just nonchalantly said, "Well, I'll try my best!" and bluffed his way through the evening.

And now, time had beaten its merciless path all the way to this moment.

Masayuki visited the bathroom several times in the lead-up to the final, just to make sure he didn't pee himself in the arena.

Gaaahhhh, what am I gonna do? How can I escape this coliseum alive?!

Facing him was a fighter who exuded coolness. His name was Gobta, according to the lady announcer next to them. Jiwu thought beating a hobgoblin was a cinch, but Masayuki just couldn't see it. *A hobgoblin? You liar! Goblins are the weakest monsters in the world! So what'd this guy do to evolve into such a heroic-looking dude?!*

"Ladies and gentlemen! The final round of the First Tempest Battle Tournament is about to begin! On one side, we have Gobta, young captain of the Goblin Riders and a member of the demon lord Rimuru's personal staff! On the other, Lightspeed Masayuki, Hero and champion of the Western Nations! What kind of battle will these two giants show us today?! You can see them staring each other down, here in the center of the arena. In just a few moments—"

When she stopped talking, the battle would begin.

Oh crap. I'm seriously running out of time.

He'd thought his bladder was empty. His nerves were telling him otherwise. They pounded against his mind, urging him to release himself. If he wasn't so worked up, he might've been interested in things like the cute butt lurking underneath the base of the announcer's tail, but now was no time for that.

Masayuki recalled his skill—Chosen One, his sole unique. He still didn't know much about it. The name had been reported to him by this cold, businesslike voice in his mind. Only recently had he come to know that this skill provided him assorted effects. He knew it made people react in ways that always benefited him, making him worshipped as a modern-day champion. But he couldn't find a way to turn it off—and now, it had brought him into this arena.

...Yeah. And that power did its stuff against Bovix yesterday, too. And if it can just get me safely through this one...

As far as Masayuki knew, Chosen One simply made everyone assume the wrong thing about him. He resolved to bet on it one more time. This inner decision helped calm him a little. He looked at his foe. Then—was it a coincidence? Their eyes met. And he saw that he was looking a bit agitated, too. Fidgety.

Huh? Wait, is this gonna work...?

Opponents reacted this way to him at the tournaments in Englesia, too, assuming Masayuki was all-powerful and throwing in the towel. It happened more often than he could count.

Now, maybe—just maybe—he could win this. And the moment he thought that, his legs stopped shaking.

Maybe, if all goes well, I can win without doing anything again.

His wits were returning to him as he thought it over. But in all too short of a time, he'd have to reconsider his wisdom...



“Ready? And... begin!!”

At Soka's signal, the battle kicked off.

“Woooo! Let's do it!”

Gobta acted first, plunging straight ahead. I feared this was some kamikaze move to get himself hurt (but not too hurt) so he could quit. I was wrong. I guess that fishing pole I'd dangled in front of him was pretty damn tempting.

Heading straight for his foe, Gobta slipped right past him in a baseball-style slide, taking position against the outer boundary like yesterday. His eyes were on his foe the whole time, but Masayuki didn't even react, slowly turning back toward Gobta with a distant smile.

“Whoaaa! Is handsomeness the key to strength after all?! Gobta's tricky maneuvers were totally ignored as the dashing Masayuki shows just how unfazed and comfortable he is!”

Soka's commentary hit hard. It'd make anyone with hang-ups about their looks cry, not just Gobta. Yeah, Masayuki was handsome, but this was playing favorites a bit too much.

“Heh... heh-heh... All part of the playbook... You're acting like nothing I can do will hit

you, huh? I wanted to see just how far I could go with my own strength today... but I can't even touch you, huh? Then it's time to use this—my new, ultimate power!!"

Oh lord. He was up to no good again. This was so going to fail. No one was around to stop him, but I *really* wished he'd actually try practicing something before busting it out in public like this.

Report. Last night, the subject Gobta obtained the unique skill Summon Demon Wolf. It is believed that the subject Ranga's forcing himself into yesterday's summoning is the cause, but it combines with the extra skill Unify to "unify" the summoned Ranga with the summoner.

Huh?

So wait, Gobta could use Summon Demon Wolf to, like, merge with Ranga? How did he...? Hey, wasn't Raphael about to say something last night but kept quiet instead? Was it about that?!

That accusation is—

That accusation is what, huh? If Raphael couldn't even drive himself to finish the sentence, something must be going on. Gobta suddenly awakening to this crazy new power out of nowhere was way too unnatural to believe. I was beginning to think Raphael may've helped grease the wheels a little, helping Gobta pick up this skill.

Raphael stayed silent. He never lied to me, but he was in no hurry to answer with the truth, either. I could force the issue, but maybe I didn't need to. *Let's just see what happens. Good timing, at least.*

"Check this out! *Transform!!*"

The air warped around him. Ranga appeared behind his back—and then they "unified," Ranga's body seeming to merge with Gobta's. To make a long story short, the results looked like a bipedal version of Ranga—and I'll admit it. It looked way cool. Dammit! Why does Gobta get to transform into something so awesome like that?!

"Whoaaa! Sweet! What *is* that? So cool!!"

Milim, next to me, was dancing in her seat. I could understand her excitement. Gobta drove me insane sometimes. Turning into some dashing fantasy creature like this...

"L-look at that! Gobta has transformed into something far from himself...!"

"Yes," a composed Diablo said to the excited Soka, whose voice had ratcheted up an octave or so. "The ability to infuse your own body with the power of a summoned creature. A very rare skill."

"So Gobta is using the power of the creature he summoned yesterday for himself? Amazing! We're witnessing something amazing here, folks!!"

"Wait," I whispered. "So it's kind of like Gobta extracting all of Ranga's force for his own use?"

"Impressive, isn't it? Ranga seems to be giving himself up to Gobta, but this combo might work a lot better than I thought."

"But we're talking Gobta here."

"Oh-ho-ho! And Gobta is *my* apprentice, remember. He may not be the greatest physical specimen, but he has experience fighting magic-born more powerful than he is. If he can ably harness Sir Ranga's power, he may grow in ways I cannot predict..."

My officials seemed impressed, at least. And the rest of the crowd was watching on silently, holding their breath.

"Heh-heh! Now it's *my* turn!"

It's been your turn, dude. Masayuki hasn't done anything.

My jealousy was driving me to pick on him internally.

Then Gobta disappeared before my eyes... figuratively. *My* eyes could follow him, but I'm sure most of the audience thought he vanished.

"G-Gobta is gone?" Soka shouted, very deliberately drumming up the tension. "Where did he go?!" I knew she could see him as well—nice performance on her part.

And then, right before her eyes...

Boooooom!!

There was a small explosion, accompanied by a thundering sound. It was located by the wall under the stands—right by the VIP boxes I was in, as it happened.



Thus, I had a close-up view...

...of Gobta, right after declaring it to be *his* turn, running straight for Masayuki—and then continuing to run right past him, until he smashed into the wall.

I knew he should've rehearsed that first. Even before he tried it, I knew there was a pretty big chance he'd screw it up.

"Whoa! Gobta isn't getting back up! Is he all right?"

He wasn't. In fact, bashing himself against the wall had knocked him unconscious—and the out-of-bounds line was far behind him. He was out.

That idiot had no control over that transformation at all. Everything worked great up to taking in Ranga's powers, but I could see those powers treated him like a chew toy. To put it simply, he wanted to start running, then stop running—but his brain was still judging these maneuvers based on his original body dimensions. A second of time in Gobta's world was far different from that same second in Ranga's. Before he could even think to stop, his head was against the wall.

Even worse, as Soka pointed out, he showed no sign of getting back up. It was the shock of the collision, rather than actual physical damage, that had knocked him out.

What can I say? First he reveals this supercool new monster, then he reveals himself for the dolt he is. Very true to character.

"....."

I was stunned into silence.

"That fool," Benimaru muttered, eyes turned upward.

"That's Gobta for you." Shion snickered.

"..."

Veins throbbed on Hakuro's forehead...

“Wow, so that’s your fighting apprentice, Dad?”

...and Momiji added more fuel to the fire.

It was, shall we say, a hard-to-describe sort of tension. And Gobta deserved it, frankly. The crowd around us was also having trouble parsing these events. I could hear one of them try to explain them, based on the sparse evidence at hand.

“Wait... Did he throw him aside in midair?”

The arena was so quiet, the words echoed oddly well.

“Amazing. Amazing, Masayuki!”

“Whoaaaa... That was awesome!”

“I barely even saw it happen. This is just too crazy!!”

The praise for Masayuki spread like a virus across the coliseum. Then, as if this explanation was the unvarnished truth, cheers began to erupt, heralding Masayuki’s victory before Soka and Diablo could even take action.

My neighbor, however, was quivering with anger.

“Is... Is this some kind of twisted joke? After looking all cool like that... I mean, what was *that*?”

After that radical transformation, this was the result. Gobta had shot expectations sky-high with Milim, then sent them crashing down to earth. It only amplified her anger.

“Now, now, I, um, I think he did his very best! In his own way...”

“Rimuru, you *know* spoiling him isn’t good for him!”

“That’s right, Sir Rimuru. I think I have been too lenient with Gobta as well. We should all be more stringent with him going forward.”

Hakuro agreed with Milim. This was the first *I* heard of him going easy on Gobta.

“Right! I’ll whip him into shape. Rimuru, let me borrow Gobta for a while. I’ll make him into the most wonderful fighter you’ve ever seen!”

Milim’s eyes were sparkling now. This was a rare monster, and she just *had* to have him, I was sure. If I nodded my approval here, that’d be so mean to Gobta... but then I thought of something else.

“Actually, I have a favor to ask of you. I’ll accept your offer if you accept mine; how about that?”

“All right. Let’s hear it.”

“So there’s this set of ruins in Clayman’s domain, right near his manor. I don’t want people poking around them without permission, and I think they’re packed with artifacts that’ll teach us about the ancient past, so I’ve been keeping them untouched for now.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And I’d like to explore these ruins, but I wanted to get your permission first.”

“Why’re you asking me?”

Because it’s your domain now, doofus.

“Milim, who’s the ruler of that domain right now?” Frey asked Milim quietly before I could even say it.

“Oh...” Milim shot straight up in her seat. “Oh, right! That’s me, isn’t it? Right! I knew that!”

Great. Glad she remembered.

“So...”

“Of course it’s fine!”

That was easy. Maybe Milim just wanted to put the subject behind her, but as long as I got her permission, anything was fine. Sorry, Gobta, but at least *I* was achieving something out of this. I mean, Gobta essentially self-destructed, and I *still* didn’t know

anything about Masayuki's skills. He wouldn't mind if I at least got *some* use out of this travesty, right? It'd help build him up, besides. All's well that ends well.

"But when you do this exploring, Rimuru, you'll take me along, right?"

"Ummm, that'll depend. I've actually reached out to an expert from the Free Guild on this topic, but if they give the okay, you can come, sure."

"Ooooh! Sounds like fun!"

"Yeah? Don't get your hopes up. It might turn out pretty boring."

I continued to chat with Milim as we awaited the certified results, which took a few minutes. Finally, Soka and Diablo wrapped up their discussions.

"The judgment is in! And while I'm concerned for the still-unconscious Gobta, the winner is..."

Don't remind me, I thought as I listened to Soka's announcement.



"Check this out! *Transform!!*" came the shout—and only then did Masayuki realize he was being far too optimistic.

Whoa, wait a second! What's that thing?! I heard nothing about this!!

There was no way he'd finish Gobta before any summoning took place. He was transforming his own body now—something Masayuki totally didn't expect.

The sheer power in the air was electrifying. To the amateur-level Masayuki, this looked like a towering monolith of strength. He knew there was healing potion on hand, but no way it could help him. It couldn't raise the dead.

Dude! If one of those claws tears through me, this armor's about as good as cardboard! If I knew this was gonna happen, I never would've turned down full-plate for being too heavy...

For that matter, he realized in the midst of his reverie, not even a full suit of magisteel armor could help much.

"Heh-heh!" Gobta shouted. "Now it's *my* turn!" Then, not waiting for a reply, he burst into action.

Masayuki was this close to saying, *Wait a minute! I give!* His life, he concluded, meant far more to him than his pride. Faced with this transformed monster, victory no longer mattered to him at all. But regardless of what he thought, events moved on without him.

Before he could say, *I forfeit*, a rumbling boom echoed across the arena as Gobta self-destructed. Masayuki, unable to react, just stood there dumbfounded. A small piece of the stone wall scratched against his cheek. The stinging pain told him this was all too real.

No... No way... I could never have dodged that. I know people misconstrue my words to my benefit, but if I wasn't able to get away with murder like this, it'd be hopeless for me...

It was clear what would happen. Gobta would be disqualified, and he'd be crowned champion. But Masayuki began to wonder if that was really good for him. Would winning this provide him with anything he wanted?

The right to battle a demon lord? You gotta be kidding. That's totally suicide!

Masayuki wasn't a fool. If he was named champion, it'd be him against the demon lord Rimuru. He understood what that meant for him. That black wolf who just whipped by him, as well as Lion Mask from yesterday, were both opponents he had no chance of beating—and they both worked under Rimuru. Pick a fight against *that* guy, and he'd just get pummeled.

Pummeled? More like killed!

It wasn't about whether his skill would work or not. The demon lord was in a whole other universe; it was hopeless. Thus, Masayuki decided he needed to get out of here, pronto. Seriously, the crowd thought he *threw* that freak into the wall? That was just depressing.

He had to do something fast, or else Gobta would lose. Masayuki's mind raced faster than it ever had before in his life. How could he arrange things so he could lose and remain in one piece?

"The judgment is in! And while I'm concerned for the still-unconscious Gobta, the

winner is..."

Oh crap.

"...Wait."

Masayuki went on the move, panicking internally but playing it cool on the outside as he brought his hand up toward Soka.

"Um...?" Soka figured Masayuki had something to say, so she handed him a spare mic.

"I think I lost, actually," he said, trying his hardest to keep his voice from shaking.

"Ummm... But, Masayuki, sir," Soka replied, bewildered, "it looks very much like Gobta took himself out of the match..."

"Perhaps. But you know, I couldn't keep up with that attack at all. I don't think I have the experience needed to challenge a demon lord quite yet; I just thought..."

He spoke slowly, trying not to get tongue-tied as the sweat poured down his entire body. It was a real stretch of an excuse, but he tried to make it sound as reasonable as he could. Then, without saying anything else, he walked out of the arena and never looked back. If someone asked him a question right now, he'd have no answer for it, so he decided to just leave without another word.

With my skill active, I'm sure the crowd will imagine some way to make that sound convincing for me. Right now, getting out of here's my best option...

Masayuki had never focused so much on moving his legs before now. But it worked. He was out of his potentially lethal pinch.



Gobta was just lying there, sprawled on the ground, but then Masayuki declared out of nowhere that he lost.

"What is he thinking?"

"Hmm... I don't know."

"He couldn't have been scared of Gobta. What's motivating him to do that?"

Benimaru and Shion had no clue what had happened, either, as they watched Masayuki walk off.

So was he just a big fake after all? Or was there something else going on in his mind? Ah well. If Masayuki was giving up on fighting me, then I'd call it a good way to settle matters.

The crowd, too, was confused at first.

"...Is it because he can't drum up the will to face the demon lord?"

"No, no! You saw that throw. It was masterful."

"He said he couldn't keep up with his attack. Is he hurt?"

"There *is* a small cut on his cheek..."

"What?! He managed to land a blow on Sir Masayuki?!"

The murmuring continued anon.

"Wait! I've got it!" one man screamed. "Sir Masayuki just gave the demon lord a reprieve!"

"What do you mean?"

"The demon lord declared he wants to be friendly with humans. You all know that, right?"

"Of course."

"Yeah!"

"So that's why," the man smugly said, "what Masayuki did just now was give a *warning* to Rimuru."

It *did* sound oddly convincing, as much as it irritated me. That's likely why the people around the man started nodding at him.

"I see... And that reminds me: Sir Masayuki didn't unsheathe his sword *this* time, either, did he?"

"Well spotted. You're right. That's his way of telling us he could win this tournament anytime he wanted to!"

"Right! And if the demon lord pulls any false moves, he's not gonna take that sitting down. That's what he's saying?"

"Probably. Of course, if they ever *did* fight, I bet he'd stop before landing a killing blow."

"So he's willing to lose some face just to bring the message across... What a wonderful young man he is!"

"*That's* the Sir Masayuki I know!"

"He's so cool!!"

They were starting to interpret this in very surprising ways. But soon, all of them were in agreement, singing Masayuki's praises like a church choir.

"Ma! Sa! Yu! Ki! *Masayukiiii!!!*"

What the hell? Was this a religion or what? I felt like I was getting a glimpse into something terrifying.

Masayuki answered the chanting with a raised hand as he exited. His motion was a bit awkward-looking, which struck me as curious. What a strange kid. Why does he get all this praise heaped upon him?

Understood. It is believed that this is the effect of a unique skill possessed by the subject Masayuki Honjo.

Just when I thought some things in the world couldn't be explained, Raphael stepped up and explained them for me. I guess the professor was doing a little analytical work on him.

Apparently, Masayuki's skill, when it takes effect, could manipulate the thoughts and feelings of people under its spell. He'd just forfeited the championship because he saw

how powerful Gobta had become, I suppose—and given how he'd won over Bovix yesterday, I imagined Masayuki hadn't thought he could beat *him*, either. I thought back to his performance so far, based on this new assumption. As far as I could recall, it was like he couldn't even react to what his foes were doing, could he? No wonder he never took out his sword.

I suppose the conclusion to make was that Masayuki himself couldn't fight very well. Hinata said she couldn't read his strength at all, and I could see why. There was no strength *to* read.

Still, it wasn't safe to look down on him. If he could influence the people around him *that* much, making him your enemy could be seriously dangerous. Definitely not someone to trifle with—if anything, I think I need to stay on his good side. Maybe I could threaten him, like “Heh-heh-heh, I know your secret”— Nah. Just joking. I bet he was racking his brain figuring out how to deal with Bovix later; no way his friends would let him weasel out of *that* rematch.

Maybe I'd offer him some sympathy. I could help prop him up as a Hero, even; it'd certainly be helpful advertising the labyrinth challenge to people.

“Soei! Make contact with Masayuki and tell him I want to meet with him.”

“At once!”

“Keep it courteous, okay? If you could invite him to lunch after this, then perfect.”

As a fellow native of Japan, I'd like to talk to him anyway. I'll ask Hakuro to whip up some sushi. Hopefully this hunch of mine turns out to be true.

While I was thinking about Masayuki, Gobta was finally coming to. As he did, Soka and Diablo, after some deliberation, apparently decided to accept Masayuki's request.

“Today's been a cavalcade of unexpected events, but with Masayuki's withdrawal, Gobta is our champion!!”

I could hear jeering from pockets of the crowd. Yeah, *I'd* be disappointed, too—here we were, the big final, and we'd gotten a champion who gave up and a half-wolf who almost killed himself. If I paid good money to see this, I'd find it totally valid to demand a refund. Luckily for me, they were in the minority. Masayuki made that decision

himself, and nobody was blaming me for it. I imagine Gobta proved his strength well enough that nobody was too dissatisfied with this result. Of course, Gobta was still the heel in everyone's mind, and with his antics today, that rep would be set in stone.

"So, Gobta! How are you feeling right now?"

"Uh... Huh? Really? I won?"

"You sure did! And you really put in an excellent performance today!"

Yeah right. All Gobta did was trip over himself and get knocked out, and Soka was trying her hardest to rev him up.

Regardless, though, the fight was over.

Afterward, I stepped back into the arena and gave out awards to each of the competitors, offering all eight of them my thanks and praising their performances. I also gave Masayuki's friend Jinrai the set of equipment I'd promised him. Gaiye said, "Give that to *me*, too!" when he saw it for some reason, but we had no such agreement, so I ignored him. Masayuki also agreed to my offer of a meeting—he looked more resolute to me now, but he didn't have the wrong idea about this, did he? If there was any misunderstanding, I'd take the time to unravel it for him.

That left Gobta.

"You did well, Gobta. I hereby name you a member of the Big Four as of today!"

He had taken a pretty rocky road on his way to it, but a championship was a championship. As promised, I appointed him to the Big Four, a title Gobta would no doubt find quite alluring. From now on, if he ever lost to anyone, I could just say, "Heh-heh-heh! He's the weakest of the Big Four! A disgrace to his team!" and people would accept it. It was the perfect role for him, one that'd no doubt make Gobta seem pretty cute and charming. In fact, it was almost *too* perfect for him. Scarily so.

"Thank you! I'll keep doin' my best!"

And with that, the First Tempest Battle Tournament came to a close.

If only it really *was* over for Gobta. But his personal hell was just beginning.

"Okay, are we ready now? 'Cause I'm gonna start training him *hard!*!"

Milim was beaming at me when we returned to the VIP boxes.

"Oh, uh, sure. Don't overdo it, okay?"

"Nothing to worry about! He'll undergo my special training inside the labyrinth, so he can die all he wants to!!"

Ah yes, she *could* use it like that, huh? I wasn't sure Gobta would see that as much of a consolation. All I can say is, it's gonna be tough for him. Not even death would offer sweet release for him. Just thinking about it made me shiver.

"Gobta, can we talk over there for a moment?"

Milim marched right over to Gobta... and picked him up with one hand.

"Pyahhh?!"

There was so much strength focused on her arm, I was surprised I didn't hear any bones crunch. Milim was smiling, but her eyes sure weren't.

"Congrats on the win. But that last match was pitiful. I'm not going to let *that* one slide! It's time to start training you!"

Milim really enjoyed Gobta's transformation—which was why his subsequent lamebrained acts angered her so much. Her reaction made it clear that her expectations and excitement had been deeply soured.

"You'll be facing off against me personally. You're gonna be stronger in no time!"

"Wh-whoa! Lady Milim?! I—I didn't ask for that!"

Gobta was panicking. I doubted anyone was listening to his input.

"This is a good opportunity for you, Gobta," Hakuro said with a forceful smile. "I want you to put everything you have into training with her."

"M-Master, are you selling me off—?"

"Silence!" Milim said, shutting him down before he could finish. How cruel.

"Oh-ho-ho... Don't make a disgrace of yourself like that, Gobta. This is all for your sake!"

I wasn't sure Gobta was listening to Hakuro any longer. This was him getting back at Gobta for acting like such a clown in front of Momiji, I bet. It definitely *wasn't* for his sake.

Thus, Gobta was now Milim's property. I turned my attention to the other party involved in this stunt.

"My master, my teamwork with Sir Gobta brought us the championship!"

Ranga ran up to me, abandoning Gobta without a second thought. Smart of him. He didn't want to get caught in the cross fire at all. Unfortunately, there was no fleeing from Milim.

"Hold it! Ranga was your name, right? Gobta can't complete his training without you!"

"?!"

Ranga looked at me, his eyes pleading. *Sorry, man. Once Milim gets an idea in her head, she tunes out everybody else.* Besides, he was the one who went into battle without my permission, so he had this coming. I didn't see any need to help him.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don't worry! I won't do ya no harm!"

And with that, Milim strode off, dragging Gobta and Ranga behind her.

Really, I thought Gobta relied too much on his own good luck. That, and Ranga had a tendency to fight on instinct. If they could polish their skills a bit and work with each other more, that transformation could really be something formidable, you know? Milim must've thought to train them because she spotted that. Here's hoping they worked on that, bit by bit, and gained something concrete from it. I'd be expecting big things from Gobta, and Milim's the girl who'd bring him there.

Farewell, Gobta. Farewell, Ranga. I'll never forget your courage! I vowed to say a prayer for them as I saw them leave with Milim.

*

It was time for lunch—a lunch I'd now be spending with Masayuki.

This was nothing that fancy, really. I told him I wanted to speak with him alone; the rest of his group could stand by in a separate room. We had a little trouble earlier, but I was sure Masayuki could smooth things over with them later.

"Um, well, good to make your acquaintance, I guess? My name's Masayuki Honjo, and people call me 'Lightspeed' and 'the Hero' and stuff..."

He was blushing a bit. Yeah, calling yourself "the Hero" in our old world would be about the most embarrassing thing ever. People would think you're a thoughtless moron if you tried it. I'm sure it made him feel creepy. That, and it looked like he was worried how I'd react to him. He remembered how he promised to defeat me, although that was mostly just his friends egging him on. This must've been awkward for him. I'm a demon lord, after all. He had to be scared out of his wits, fearing he'd picked a fight with a foe way out of his league.

He was no doubt conflicted, but he didn't need to worry about me. I was ready to leave the past where it belonged—in the past. A nice meal together should help us work out our issues.

"Yeah, I know we spoke before, but it's nice to meet you, too. I am Rimuru, a demon lord, but my real name's Satoru Mikami. I used to work for a building contractor."

Masayuki wasn't too keen on touching his food, so I decided to just blurt it out. I hadn't used that name in a long while, but it still felt like it fit me, a lot more than I anticipated. It wasn't like I was hiding it—I just never had the chance to use it much.

"...Huh? Are... Are you Japanese?"

Masayuki didn't quite seem to believe me. And yeah, I *did* look kind of like a cute little girl at the moment. I couldn't blame him.

"Yeah, more or less. But let's talk about that over lunch, all right?"

That finally inspired him to pick up his chopsticks.

"Um, this is okay for me to eat?"

“Of course. I had them whip up something Japanese for you.”

Sushi and tempura were on the menu today. They had wowed Hinata earlier, and I thought Masayuki would be just as grateful—he hadn’t been part of our pre-festival banquet, so I was sure it’d be the first time he’d seen sushi in years.

“This isn’t, like, my last meal before my execution, is it?”

“No. You seem sensible; we’re from the same place. I just wanna be friends with you.”

Seeing this spread must’ve given him the completely wrong idea. Maybe he thought this was the last meal he’d eat in his whole life. I told him I was from Japan, but he still doubted me.

“Well, um, all right...”

He finally took a bite—and the moment he did, he fell silent. His eyes looked different now, and his chopsticks, and his mouth, sprang into motion. He was so focused on his meal that it didn’t seem like the right time to start talking, so I waited until he was done.

And the moment he was:

“...All right. Satoru—um, I mean, Rimuru, I’ll gladly become your servant!”

I had no idea where this came from. I mean, I could tell he was starving for good Japanese food, but I hadn’t even said anything yet. Besides, he must’ve had his own thoughts about me.

“Servant? Uh...”

“No, it’s fine. I don’t have anything keeping me from abandoning this Hero crap. It’s just embarrassing when they do that ‘Ma! Sa! Yu! Ki!’ chant, and... Really, I’ve been constantly trying to figure out how to escape from all this.”

This sounded like the real Masayuki here. And as I enjoyed some post-meal tea, I let him tell me his story.

Masayuki was a pretty smart kid in his old world, going to a high school that put most

of its grads into college. He liked reading manga and light novels, something he kept a secret, and he complained to me about how it must've led to this for him.

"My skill's called Chosen One, you know? It's just so... *stupid*."

He'd wanted to be a hero, and as he saw it, that's why he wound up here. And his skill, Chosen One, was about what I figured it was. It let him naturally guide the thoughts of those around him, almost like brainwashing—and that's what brought him to Hero-dom. This ability was beyond his control; he couldn't turn it off even if he wanted to. That's not too user-friendly—or maybe it's a little *too* much so.

"Maybe it is, but that doesn't mean it's not incredible. You would've won the championship if you didn't bow out."

The tournament was ample proof that this skill worked. Victory was his if he wanted it.

"Yeah, but it's only caused me trouble. I do nothing, and people just make all these assumptions about me... That was the whole way I won over in Englesia, too."

As he put it, he let that get to his head. Even with his efforts crushing the Orthrus crime ring, he didn't actually do anything—people just treated him like a king. He could completely give up and things still worked out his way, so life was generally pretty easy for him. The experience at this tournament, though, made him realize that if this ever failed, even once, it'd end his life.

That was why he'd decided it was time for a reality check, and I thought he was right. But would Chosen One affect me?

Understood. Against ultimate skills, nearly all lower-level skills are canceled.

So it doesn't affect me. Good. Because I intended to go easy on him anyway, but I didn't realize he was a complete amateur in battle. I bet even a quick jab from me would be disastrous.

"Well, you made the right choice—and probably at the last moment possible. I think you should be proud of that."

"You think? But Gobta transformed into that terrifying... *thing* and... You know, I didn't

need brains to realize I could never beat him.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, actually. A pretty decent chunk of people were taking Gobta on regularly... But yeah, Masayuki did the right thing.

So we chatted some more, giving each other our stories and backgrounds. For the most part, though, I just gave a quick rundown of my life, spending more time listening to Masayuki talk. His friends worshipped him like a god, so he couldn’t really speak frankly with them. He had nobody to vent to except Yuuki, and his busy schedule made it difficult to meet up. It made the stress and irritation accumulate.

Basically, he revealed everything about himself to me, without me having to ask any questions.

“Well, I’d like to hear more from you, but my lunch break is just about over. So let me ask you this: What are you going to do now?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, you promised Bovix a rematch, right? Are you gonna tackle the Dungeon?”

“Ahhh!”

I guess Masayuki had forgotten all about it. He must’ve been planning to promptly skip town.

“Well... what *should* I do?”

“Ahhh, don’t worry. Bovix is only guarding the area around Floor 50, and the Dungeon’s super huge, so it’s gonna take a few days just to make it that far.”

“Oh. So if I pretend to tackle it, I’ll make it through today, at least?”

“Exactly. And all the dignitaries here right now are gonna leave town tomorrow.”

The festival ran for three days. The highways were going to be packed with people tomorrow, so we’d mainly be working to keep traffic smooth. The real cleanup work wouldn’t start for two days, once all the visitors were gone. The big Dungeon opening today was mainly a demonstration for the royalty and nobility in town—a pre-unveiling, really, or a temporary opening until it began normal operation.

Thus, I didn't think anyone would go more than a few floors down in the several hours it was open today. Besides, I also had an idea about that battle between Masayuki and Bovix. Not to disappoint him, but I didn't want Masayuki to get defeated. Since I had him here and all, I wanted him to function like a living, breathing billboard for me, leading the Dungeon-conquering adventurers down and getting them enthused about tackling the challenge.

"So I'd like you to grab people's attention for me, but do you think you can do that?"

"...Wow. That's pretty reassuring to hear. That's why you gave Jinrai all that great equipment, huh? And personally, if screwing up in there won't kill me, I can tackle the labyrinth worry-free. It sounds perfect!"

He gladly pledged his support. I'd meant nothing of the sort with Jinrai's gift, but that certainly worked out well, too. Going into the Dungeon de facto topless was just asking to be killed.

"And I'll be glad to leak some hints about conquering the Dungeon, too. If you can use them to get down pretty far for me, that'd be great. Also, if you see anything you think we could improve, don't be shy about telling me."

I wouldn't offer any help going beyond Floor 50—we wanted to keep things on the up-and-up here, so I advised him to keep that in mind. But even there, he'd never die as long as he held on to his Resurrection Bracelet, so it was all good.

"Sounds great! I feel like I'm beta testing a game or something."

"Ah... Now that you mention it, it *is* kinda like that. But no need to knock yourself out today. Try to reach, like, Floor 5 or thereabouts."

A game, huh? That's an interesting observation to make.

"All right," Masayuki said with a refreshing smile. "I'm glad we got to talk to each other, Rimuru. It's really put my mind at ease. Now I'm starting to think this world isn't so bad after all."

His skill had made things pretty easy for him before now, but he was still anxious a lot of the time. Having someone pledge their support for him must've eased his worries. That, and our nation was at the cutting edge of technology in this world. Our baths and toilets made our accommodations far better than anywhere else, and the variety

and quality of the food here must've surprised him, too.

"We have that orchestra, and we're teaching painting to people. Pretty soon, I plan to get some theater productions going. I want to have fun here, and I'm not gonna skimp on investing in that stuff."

"I really respect you, Rimuru! Um, what about manga?"

"Hee-hee-hee! Of course we'll have manga, Masayuki. That's a longer way away, but nobody else is gonna do it, so..."

"Whoa! I-I'll follow you wherever you go, Rimuru!"

And so Masayuki decided to remain in town for the time being. I planned to stay in close touch with him, passing on information and such. Hopefully we could have these talks regularly—I wanted to kick back and ask him about our old world, too. It'd be a nice nostalgia trip. That, and I wanted to prod his memory for manga. He was keenly curious about my collection, and I definitely hoped to stay on good terms with him.

Now I had a new friend.

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Our Dungeon was finally slated to open this afternoon, and I decided to perform one last check beforehand, just in case. Heading down to the open area at the bottommost floor, I was greeted by Ramiris, who came flying right up to me.

"We're just about to open things up, but how's it all going?"

"Ha! Who do you think I am, huh?"

She certainly sounded confident—and Veldora, lumbering out from his room, seemed pretty proud of himself, too.

"Kwahhh-ha-ha-ha! Fear not, Rimuru. We have overlooked nothing!"

Uh-oh. I was suddenly *very* worried.

"Whoa, are you sure about that? I don't want you guys doing anything stupid during the unveiling today, okay?"

“Ha-ha-ha! No worries! Just leave it all to us! I activated every safety feature.”

“Heh-heh-heh... But starting tomorrow, the labyrinth will bare its fangs!”

Ramiris and Veldora looked at each other and sneered. Were they really gonna be okay? Because they weren’t assuaging my fears at all.

“Um, I’m gonna say this just in case you forgot, but we’re closing the labyrinth right after this, okay?”

“Wh-what?!”

Why was Veldora saying “*Wh-what?!*” to me? I’d told him as much several times before, but I suppose he wasn’t listening.

After seeing how today turned out, I wanted to fine-tune the labyrinth’s difficulty levels. Thus, my plan was to close things up for two or three days, then reopen after that. We also hadn’t worked out admission prices yet, and we needed trained personnel in place to sell the Labyrinth Cards (i.e. the tickets) and other items. We didn’t have the free time or people for that so far, but I wanted to talk it over with Mjöllmile after we finished the post-festival cleanup.

Looking back, maybe it was a mistake to leave the final details to this pair. I mean, Ramiris and Veldora looked like they were having fun, and I was busy anyway, but... man, they were paying *no* attention at our meetings. But I didn’t want to yell at them, either. Everyone was a little flustered right now.

“Calm down, okay? I’ll do my best to get us officially open as soon as possible, so just sit tight until then.”

“Okay!”

“I will trust in you, Rimuru!”

Great. That ought to get us through today... Oh, but I almost forgot. I had something extremely important to ask.

“By the way, is Milim in here?”

“She is.”

"Yep! She took two unlimited-use Resurrection Bracelets from us and ran off."

"Ahhh. And I gave her control over Floors 96 to 99, right? The dragon chambers with the elemental-effect floors and everything?"

"That's right. She has been putting a great deal of work into them."

"She sure has! And she even gave me the rights to the dragons she caught for those floors! She said that if we raise them right and they evolve into Dragon Lords, they'll be intelligent enough to understand my commands!"



Ramiris was all smiles. I guess, in her mind, even Milim had some good facets to her.

The sight of Milim flying through the air, carrying captured dragons in her arms, must've given anyone who saw her quite a shock. Apparently, we'd received complaints about it the first two times, but people got used to it from the third time onward. I guess our town's residents just accepted it as normal.

Milim had found for us four dragons in all—a Fire Dragon, Frost Dragon, Wind Dragon, and Earth Dragon. These were elemental Arch Dragons, just as Milim had promised us, and even now they were about as intelligent as your typical farm animal. Give them care like you would any pet, and it'd be possible to connect with them.

“Huh. Did you put collars on them or anything?”

“For now, yes. These are my beloved servants, so I want to be darn sure we set up a clear master-and-servant relationship!”

I see. Ramiris was certainly thinking deeply about this, and what I heard sounded good enough to me. But back to the main topic.

“So is Milim in the dragon chambers right now?”

“Yep. She said she found some playmates to help my servants stay in shape!”

“Indeed. I believe I went fishing with one of them once. But how is someone like him going to play with a dragon?”

You're better off not knowing, I think. But all I needed was Milim's current location. If she was toiling away near the bottom of the labyrinth, I doubt she'd meddle with our opening at all.

“Right. She probably won't get in the way, then, so I'm fine with that. We're about to open the labyrinth right now, so can you come up top for me?”

“Yep! I'd be happy to,” chirped Ramiris.

“I will pass. It is the role of the labyrinth master to await his challengers!”

...Look, I told you, nobody's gonna make it to the bottom in one day! In fact, you'd probably have to wait many days before anyone shows up. I refrained from telling him

this, however. That's so kind of me.

"Great. Well, good luck, then!"

Leaving Veldora with some encouragement, I took Ramiris along as we teleported to the chamber up top.

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With lunch over, a large number of people had arrived at their seats. Ramiris and I were there to greet them.

"Welcome back, Sir Rimuru," Diablo said, smiling. He was done with his refereeing work, and I heard he was looking for me. I gave him a quick nod and hello of my own, then switched gears and took a look at our program. I had a lot of expectations for the Dungeon we were opening. It was one of the centerpieces of our nation's future development, so I wanted as many of our visitors to explore it as possible. Fortunately, it seemed like few to none of our invitees decided to take an early leave after lunch. The hall was nearly full, so I thought this would function as pretty decent advertising.

Turning toward the event space, I could see Soka and Mjöllmile, the latter of whom would take Diablo's place as guide and announcer during this event. It was time to go, so I gave them both my signal.

"All right! The time has come! The final event of Day Three of the Founder's Festival is about to begin!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. We are about to show you a small portion of our impregnable Dungeon, one of Tempest's greatest achievements. It is the ultimate challenge for adventurers, presented by our leader, the demon lord Rimuru. Will anybody out there be able to conquer it?!"

Mjöllmile was giving this spiel from center stage, mic in hand. He wasn't quite as much of a natural at this as Soka, but he looked well enough in his element.

What he had to say was this: Running a demonstration of the labyrinth was well and good, but taking all the visitors here inside the Dungeon was too dangerous. There were several hundred members of the ruling class in here; add our more nearby residents, and the number became several thousand. A crowd that size crammed into the labyrinth would be far too unruly to guide around.

Instead, we'd come up with the idea of sending several parties down there and showing their progress on a large screen. That presented a few technological challenges, but we had already succeeded at providing a clear picture on a huge screen at the battle tournament, and we could use the same tech for this.

The projector that Gabil and Vester built was proving useful for a variety of purposes. It's what we'd used to display the battles on-screen earlier, via a video-recording crystal ball stored inside the machine. This crystal was inscribed with magical communication spells that let it receive images recorded far away and project them here, allowing the audience to watch the challengers from a safe distance and enjoy the entertainment.

Getting a king or prince injured would be a huge problem; as a result, only a few selected parties would actually be experiencing the labyrinth today.

"And so," a smiling Soka shouted, "we'd now like to open the labyrinth up to adventurers! Are there any members of the audience courageous enough to delve into the Dungeon we're proud to offer you?"

That was our cue. Ramiris, perched on my shoulder, summoned a temporary doorway to the labyrinth in the center of the stage. We could've just brought any challengers down to the basement here, but it was important to put on a show for things like this.

""Oooohhh!"

See? The crowd was amazed, just as I hoped they'd be. A quiet sort of excitement was taking root among them, the adventurers in the audience sizing up one another. We were strictly accepting volunteers today, and if possible, I wanted to see a lot of participants—and even if nobody raised their hand, we still had Masayuki's group. That was part of why I wanted to negotiate with him earlier; he had already explained matters to his friends, and they were on standby right now. I had given them a map of the first five floors to ensure against any mistakes. Hopefully they'd serve as the advertising pitchmen I wanted.

So would we see any volunteers? As it turned out, my concerns were for nothing.

"Heh-heh... I dunno what a demon lord's labyrinth is all about, but I'm ready to rip the facade from it! You might think you've cowed us all, what with that phony battle tournament and everything, but you won't get us *this* time!"

“Yeah! Basson’s right!”

“If the highway wasn’t so jammed, Basson would’ve won the whole tournament!”

“Heh-heh-heh... You’re not forgetting about me, are you?”

“Ah, don’t be that way, Gomez. They know all about how strong you are. As long as you and I are together, our ‘Great Lightning’ team’s got nothing to fear!”

Oh? Looks like we’ve got all kinds of challengers. This Basson guy must’ve shown up too late to join the tournament. If he was around to see it, he should’ve known full well how powerful the competitors were... but with a couple of matches forfeited, the quality of the fighting was admittedly hit-or-miss. I was sure there were a ton of people like Basson who assumed they were invincible and so on. But that was fine. I figured we’d see a few skeptics who refused to believe in any of this. Those would be our future customers, after all.

“And Masayuki the Hero wasn’t anyone special in the end, either, was he? He’s strong, I’ll grant you that, but in a fight, you gotta see it through to the end! Letting the demon lord of this country off the hook like that... How half-hearted of him! It sickens me!”

Um... He admitted that Masayuki was “*strong*”? *Okay, whatever.*

“Yeah, this so-called labyrinth is a big con job—and Basson and I are gonna expose it for what it is right now!”

Basson’s group certainly had gusto.

“I refuse to allow them to berate you like this, Sir Rimuru.”

“Let me go over and shut them up a bit—”

“Halt!”

I couldn’t let my guard down. Shion was irritated, and Diablo came *this* close to going out of control. I hurriedly stopped them—but at least they didn’t threaten to kill them this time.

“They’re just a little overconfident, okay? Besides, I think it’ll be more fun if we get people like them.”

They might be a little dumb, I thought, but they were the right people for this job. Shion and Diablo nodded their agreement—I was used to handling them by now.

Basson was a fighter with a shaved head; Gomez, a sorcerer in a black robe. They had four others in their party, none of them worth writing home about. This sextet would be our first challengers.

Then someone unexpected spoke up.

“We’ll take the challenge!”

Three people jumped out of the audience. I thought I’d seen them before... *Wait, is that Elen?!*

I was having Elen’s trio help with the founding of Yohm’s new nation. They were going around the Free Guild locations in the former Farmus, and I had asked them to aid Yohm however they could. A B-ranked adventurer was a fearsome presence in itself, and Elen’s party was now rated B-plus. They were allowed to cross national borders unhindered, so I figured this was the perfect job for them. They hadn’t joined Yohm on the way here, so I assumed they had gone back home or something, but no. I had no idea they were planning this, in fact—they must’ve been hiding it so Archduke Erald didn’t stop them.

“We’re really going to do it?”

“Oh, of course we are! I haven’t had *any* adventures lately, so I’ve been waiting for this!”

“Let me ask—as leader, I have the right to say no, right? Right?”

“Um, no? Not at all. It’s already set in stone!”

Crazy. I felt so bad for Kabal. And I thought I’d just heard Erald screaming over in the other room, only to fall silent after the sound of something smashing. I could picture what had happened but chose not to. Hopefully, at least, Elen would be done before her father woke up.

Our third party here was led by Masayuki, hero of the day. They all calmly strode onstage, greeting the audience with smiles.

“Ma! Sa! Yu! Ki! *Masayukiiii!*”

Yes, yes, all right. They hear you. The applause in the room was deafening. What a stud he is.

Counting Masayuki, there were four people in the party, including the formerly topless Jinrai clad in the armor I’d given him—a suit of Mithril Armor, crafted by Garm and rated as a Rare on the scale. It was heavier than Yohm’s Exo-Armor and not quite as effective but just as durable. It even gave the wearer anti-poison effects.

I had also given Masayuki a rapier as a present. I’d asked him over lunch why he never drew his sword, and he flatly replied, “*Well, like, it’s heavy, so...*” Honestly, I was shocked by how much of a bluffer he was. He had some kendo experience but none with actual swords—and besides, in this world, slicing Japanese katanas weren’t as popular as heavy, skull-crushing blades, so they were all gonna have a little heft to them.

As he told me, even striking a pose with a sword for a long time was difficult for him. So I gave him this rapier, advising him to try working out a little more as well. This blade was a discarded version of the one I gave to Hinata—it had the same light weight and strength, but not her sword’s unique trait of always killing your opponent on the seventh landed attack. Just swinging this thing around was enough work for Masayuki; he didn’t need that sort of advanced feature anyway. Plus, the rapier also remedied exhaustion for its user to some extent. If all Masayuki would do was strike a pose and keep it steady, this sword was more than enough.

So the party of four was soaking in the cheers from the audience, none of whom questioned their change in equipment.

We planned to set a time limit of three hours, calculated back from my intended goal of keeping anyone from going past Floor 5. Masayuki’s party had a map, giving them an advantage over the others, and I was counting on them to advertise the labyrinth for me.

So three parties, then? That didn’t seem like too many, but of course, a lot of people would think twice about challenging a shady, demon lord-run labyrinth. We needed to address, and quell, that hesitation with this demo today.

But just as I was about to move the show along:

“Wait. I’ll join in, too.”

A man clad entirely in black appeared onstage—Gaiye the Flowing Swordsman.

“You’ve done a fine job trapping me in your bluffs and trickery, haven’t you? Heh-heh-heh... The demon lord’s Big Four, or whatever they’re called, certainly play dirty, do they not? I can understand if they’re afraid of my talents, but they picked a fight with the wrong foe. You can scheme all you want, but I’m about to crush your ambitions for good!”

Quite an introduction. I was wondering what he was doing here, and now I knew, I guess. Basically, he couldn’t understand how Ranga had beaten him and decided it was all a trap. He assumed I was up to something no good with this labyrinth, and now he was standing up to stop me in my tracks, I guess. And yes, I was up to something—but probably not the things Gaiye was picturing.

“Right. This time, I’m going to chop his little—”

“Yeah! Get ‘im, Diablo!”

“No. Don’t get ‘im. And stop imitating my voice, Shion.”

These people... I swear, why were they always like this? Whenever someone said something about me, they just give them no mercy. And Shion was getting so sensitive to every affront, too, imagined or not. Maybe it was time I thought of some more serious measures for her.

But whatever.

Gaiye looked like he wanted to go solo on this, but was he gonna be okay? I was honestly concerned. On the other hand, it’d be nice to get a sample of how a lone adventurer would fare in the labyrinth. We might as well make him the fourth “party” today.

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Now that we had our challengers, the long-awaited moment was here. It was time to open the Dungeon.

There wasn’t much time to work with, so all four parties would be going in at once.

Soka would stay here to commentate on the on-screen action. Inside guidance would be best handled by the dryads, who'd also serve as "cameramen" as they accompanied each party. We didn't have many of them, but there were a few—Treyni, Traya, and Doreth included. The others were young and inexperienced in battle but boasted tremendous magical force. Under Ramiris's management, they'd make for perfect labyrinth managers.

"These four people," Soka said, "are the curators of our labyrinth. Normally they will not accompany parties entering the Dungeon, but for today's run, we'll have one shadowing each team."

The quartet gave their hellos to the crowd. These were named Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta—not having names would be inconvenient, so I'd just pulled those out of my head. It didn't cost me any magicules; since dryads are high-level monsters, I could have them consume their own magic force for the job. Ramiris was their boss, so all I did was help come up with their names. As sisters, they all had the same looks, so telling them apart via visuals alone was a challenge. Monsters often rely on things like magical waveforms to identify individuals, but I thought that was asking a lot of humans, so names were more helpful.

"If you guys run into any trouble, feel free to ask them for advice! And now, let me run down the rules for you all! First, I'm going to give these to everyone!"

Soka pulled out a couple of items, Alpha and the other dryads giving the same ones to each party.

"These items here, you see, we're planning to offer for sale when people enter the labyrinth. Does everybody have them now?"

As she spoke, each item was shown in a close-up on the screen. This pseudo-television technology was really helpful for stuff like this. Currently, it was showing a set of ten High Potions, one Full Potion, and a bunch of Resurrection Bracelets and return whistles. These had been provided for free during today's beta test—if they were kind enough to volunteer, I didn't mind giving them some compensation. The dryad chaperones would have some backup items, too, just in case, so they could get whisked to safety if things went south.

Given the size of this thing, it was entirely possible that a party wouldn't get out of Floor 1 in the time allotted. Even if they took the shortest path to the stairway down,

we're talking a literal mile or so of walking—and given that this was a maze, they were gonna be covering much more distance than that. For the next three hours, it'd be best if the parties tried just hard enough to keep the audience entertained—and once time expired, they'd use their items to get back up top.

I had other rewards for them, too, of course. For advertising purposes, I had some treasure chests set up containing souvenirs in the form of decent armor and so on. During actual operation, these chests wouldn't show up until Floor 2 onward, but we were being generous today.

Finally, Soka explained the most important item in the lot.

"Now, take a look at this item. This is known as a Resurrection Bracelet, and we highly recommend you purchase this when you enter our labyrinth. What does it do? Believe it or not, it resurrects you from the dead!!"

The crowd immediately began chattering about this. ""Impossible!"" I could hear a few of them shout.

"Ladies and gentlemen, quiet, please! This is important, so I want to be sure everybody's paying attention, all right? The key thing here is that this item *only* works if you are inside Tempest's Dungeon! It doesn't do anything at all outside the labyrinth, and given the stakes involved, we want to be absolutely sure everyone's aware of that. Always remember that at all times—this doesn't work outside!"

That *was* important. If someone assumed otherwise, it'd make for some sad scenes if they tried using it and failed. I didn't want people to claim I was liable. *It's up to you to keep yourself safe, okay, guys?* But I knew that some people just loved to cause a scene and complain about anything and everything, so we needed to be 100 percent sure we drilled this point into everyone's minds. Nobody could be allowed to think this worked outside the labyrinth; we couldn't have some idiot think, *Hey, maybe it'll work somehow*. If you mess that up, hey, it's not our fault. The promoter—i.e., me—bore no responsibility.

You know, in my old world, I always felt like people foisted way too much responsibility on retailers and companies. If some fool breaks the rules, goes crazy, and gets themselves killed, all I can say is that they had it coming—but if we're negligent about providing guidance and cautions, then it *does* become our fault. That's why we needed to be thorough about our warnings here.

“...So once again, never, *ever* attempt to use this bracelet outside!”

Soka was being exactly as clear and thorough as I hoped. Good. The only unresolved item on my wish list was to have someone actually die in there—something people would admittedly be reluctant about. But Ramiris had upgraded the Resurrection Bracelets to the point that they even canceled out pain upon determining you were dead. They also gave you a delay of around ten seconds between when you died and when you got teleported back up, so if you or a fellow party member could take suitable measures in time, you could still get fixed up on the spot. Resurrection, being a divine skill and everything, was too high-level for most people to cast, but still.

By the way, Full Potions normally cannot regenerate the soul, but since your soul was stuck firmly inside your own body inside the labyrinth, you actually *could* “resurrect” people with a Full Potion to restore the body. I feared encouraging this, however, since (again) it may give people the idea they could pull that trick outside as well. That’s why, unless you resurrected a downed adventurer the standard way, their body and soul would get teleported topside after ten seconds. Just like Masayuki, one should just think of it like a dungeon-exploration video game.

Anyway, that wrapped up the initial briefing. Now I just needed someone to try out the Resurrection Bracelet for me.

“So who would like to experience this for themselves?”

I doubted anyone would, actually, but Soka brightly belted out the question anyway. Talk about thick-skinned.

Basson, the giant skinhead of a man, grunted at this. “Hmph! You’ll never die in the labyrinth? That’s a funny joke. If you think I’m gonna believe that and get myself killed in there, you got another thing coming!”

The people around him nodded their assent. This was just common sense. Not even Elen’s team was taking the bait.

“Heh... Well, who do you *think* should do it? *You* go first.”

Gaiye the Flowing Swordsman pointed a finger at Mjöllmile. He wanted someone else to go first, not him, and I guess that was to be expected. I wished he were more polite about it, though.

“Me? An understandable suggestion, I suppose. I’d be happy to.”

Mjöllmile, perhaps expecting this, wasn’t agitated at all. In fact, he’d already experienced it once. The members of Team Reborn under Shion had experimented with it many times, so he fully believed it was safe—and going through it one time removed any fear from the process. So, with as much stately majesty as he could muster, he put on the bracelet and set foot inside the labyrinth. The challengers followed behind him.

“Now, if you actually attack Mjöllmile in here—”

Soka took up the sword on her hip, preparing to slash at Mjöllmile. But before she could continue, Gaiye cut him off.

“You can’t trick me. Krahhh!”

There was an arcing flash in the air, and then he sliced Mjöllmile’s arm clean off.

“...Hey!!”

Soka tried to stop him, but nowhere near in time.

“Gaaahhh!”

Mjöllmile started shouting as well, bringing a hand to the gaping wound. The reduced-pain effect kept him from dying of shock, but I’m sure getting forcibly amputated wasn’t a very pleasant feeling.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! And now it’s almost time for the final blow!!”

Was he just playing with him? What a bastard. I almost lost my temper, but then I saw a smile on Mjöllmile’s face. That restored my cool—and just as it did, Gaiye’s sword hewed Mjöllmile’s head clean off. At once, his body turned into a collection of light particles, flowing up and gathering by the door at center stage. Mjöllmile, along with what he was wearing, formed anew from these particles, fully restored.

The crystal balls carried by Alpha and the other dryads recorded all of this, transmitting it to the large screen in the hall.

“And there you have it! I’m back in perfect shape!”

Mjöllmile stood there, as if he hadn't just been brutally murdered. His severed arm was attached to him as well. It couldn't have been a better performance.

"Whoooaaa!!"

The audience cheered for him. Some of them screamed that it was a miracle. I'd say the demonstration was a success. I didn't want people to think this was an elaborate trick, but thanks to Gaiye's penchant for sudden violence, I think everyone was more convinced than they would have been otherwise. If anyone still didn't believe it, we'd just have to let them experience it for themselves. Of course, it wasn't risk-free, so the best thing to do in the labyrinth was to simply not die. Take care of yourself down there, and you'll never have to go through it.

I figured we could let adventurers who challenged the labyrinth spread the stories for us, and things would work themselves out. I thought some curious daredevils would want to get killed just to see what the experience was like, and that was no problem to me, either. The important thing was that adventurers had nothing to fear if they took on the Dungeon—and I thought Mjöllmile had just ensured that for me. I gotta say, he's got courage. He put up with Gaiye's morbid antics because this is exactly how he wanted this to turn out. *Definitely need to thank him later for taking that role*, I thought as I looked at the screen.

*

"The Dungeon is now open for exploration! A brand-new world is waiting for you inside. What could be awaiting those intrepid enough to battle their way through to the bottom?"

Soka was onstage, kicking off her commentary, as the screen showed the viewpoints of all four parties. The live connections worked without a hitch, bringing the audience inside the labyrinth. She was taking a documentary-style approach to her announcing, and I really appreciated her attention to detail as I watched the parties set off.

The first one that caught my eye was Basson's, as they plunged past the orderly, well-built stone-type walls that defined Floor 1.

I figured at least one party member would be drawing a map on the way, but nobody was. They weren't even leaving marks on the walls to keep their bearings, instead just

pleasantly chatting as they strode down the corridors. Were they gonna be okay? I knew people like them explored caves and went on hunting missions in lush forests and so on—how did this party find its way to their destination otherwise? They didn't hire a guide every time, did they?

"Tch! It's the same damn kind of corridor over and over! And all these crossroads!"

"Weren't we at this intersection before, boss?"

Just as I feared, they were lost. I'd told them earlier how big this place was, but had they tuned that out?

"Whoa, this is bad news, Basson! This maze is bigger than I thought..."

Ah. Yeah, the first floor alone was over eight hundred feet long per side. They had been told this was a pretty big place, but I suppose they were picturing something cozier. I guess that, if you heard it described as a man-made structure beneath the coliseum, *you'd* likely think it wasn't that big, either. But oh well. It wasn't my problem—and again, it made for good advertising.

However, I really didn't want these parties to face instant death at the start of Floor 1. If we went that insanely hard on them from the get-go, nobody would want to take the challenge. They needed to get at least a *little* far in. They could always die to be transported back, and there was an SOS feature in their bracelets as well, which treated the wearer as dead and let them escape at any time. The dryads could also come to their rescue, and there was one accompanying each party, ready to promptly bring them back to the surface.

So I really wanted them to be serious about plumbing this labyrinth... but Basson was too busy getting irritated at his panicky party members.

"What are you people? Idiots? I've never heard of such an enormous maze before. That demon lord's just feeding us a tall tale. He's using magic or something to disorient us."

"Oh... Oh, he is!"

"You've convinced me, Basson!"

"Yeah, the magicule concentration around here is pretty high. You're probably right. This must be illusory magic or the like."

"You said it, Gomez. We've been following the right-hand rule religiously so far. Worst-case scenario, we'll just wind up back where we came."

Oh dear. Labyrinth difficulty was the least of their concerns. They might've thought they were thinking things through, but they sure weren't. I wouldn't be so harsh on them if they were taking notes on paper, but no way could they memorize a path through all these similar-looking corridors, packed with forks, four-way intersections, and dead ends. Between the uniform decor and the twistiness of the paths, simply going right at every opportunity wasn't going to get you anyplace.

These challengers were just way too idiotic. Couldn't count on them for too much, I guess...

...But then Basson's party disappeared. Or, to be more exact, they fell down to the next level.

"Wh-whoaaa! Was that a trapdoor?"

I was as quizzical as Soka. Did we set up any trapdoors on the first level?

"Ramiris..."

"Um... Yes? How can I help you?"

"...When I set up this floor, I really don't think I installed anything like that. You haven't been messing around with my design, have you?"

I tried to keep a smile on my face, so as not to scare Ramiris. That being said, I still found it prudent to grab her to keep her from flying away.

"Well, actually," she replied with a forced smile, "we wanted to make the labyrinth a more complete creation, so..."

Upon further interrogation, Ramiris admitted to placing a fairly decent number of trapdoors around. I had to chew her out for this. *A floor this large doesn't need trapdoors, all right?* The idea was to tire adventurers out and sap their endurance, but these kinds of traps had the opposite effect, essentially serving as time-saving shortcuts. Traps are only traps, after all, if their effect matches your intended purpose.

"But, um, but, I mean, you had a lot more fiendish trapdoors in the lower levels, didn't

you? So I thought, you know, perhaps you forgot to install some higher up. I just did it out of kindness, you see?"

I didn't need *that* type of kindness.

Sure, if they wanted to make this into a punishing gauntlet, I could get that. If I left everything in the hands of Ramiris, Veldora, and Milim, they'd litter the whole labyrinth with insane traps like that. But I didn't want that at the very start. That was the whole reason I worked on the topmost floors myself!

Quickly, I turned my attention to the other parties.

Elen's group was theoretically led by Kabal, but Elen herself had fully taken over the leader role. On the whole, they had no sense of direction at all, so I thought beating the first floor could prove difficult for them... and I was half-right.

The group didn't run into any traps, at least, as they carefully advanced. Amazingly, they were even writing down notes as they went, following the textbook method of dungeon conquering.

"Oh? Elen's party is sure taking this seriously. They didn't hit any trapdoors, and they're dodging the traps I set up as well. And they already looted three treasure chests? They're having a pretty smooth time so far."

"...Eh-heh-heh!"

Um? What's so funny? Why are they having such a smooth time of it? And something about Ramiris hiding her reaction with a laugh rubbed me the wrong way.

"...Uh, Ramiris?"

"Y-yes? What is it?"

"I trust in you, okay? I know you wouldn't hide anything from me."

"Of—of course not, Rimuru!"

"So let me ask: Did you do something to Elen's group?"

Nothing looked amiss on-screen, but they were performing a little *too* well. As one would expect in a dungeon, many of the treasure chests throughout contained nothing of value—but Elen’s party picked three chests in a row with killer loot. It stank of cheating.

“Well, actually...”

Not *that* again.

“What did you do?”

“Oh, um, well, Elen and her group gave me a nice little gift, so we really hit it off, you could say! So then—”

.....

The more I heard, the worse my headache got.

In the midst of labyrinth construction, Elen had given Ramiris a large number of cakes. These were baked by Mr. Yoshida, so I’m sure they were all delicious. Elen had made similar overtures to the dryads as well, and bit by bit, she had gleaned information from them about the first floor. Ramiris realized this after a while, but as she put it, the magic of those pastries was simply irresistible.

“I mean, what could I do?! I didn’t see it as a problem! And Master Veldora and Milim didn’t, either!”

Now she was firing back at me, trying to portray her actions as totally justifiable. But it was straight-up bribery. I was exasperated at how quickly corruption had become an issue down there.

Still, no need to catastrophize about it. I had adjusted the labyrinth today to skew easier difficulty-wise. Plus, only the first floor had been exposed to her. The treasure chests with the *real* top-shelf prizes weren’t on that level.

“Kabal’s party is doing a good job landing treasure, isn’t it?”

“That it is,” Mjöllmile told Soka, joining her in the announcer’s role. “Sir Rimuru mentioned that chests can sometimes be found in small side rooms and the like, but they need to watch for traps as well.”

"Good point! Do you think there are neat items in them?"

"There's some really good stuff in the lower levels, I would imagine... And speaking of which, I understand there are three types of treasure chests in all—gold, silver, and bronze. It seems only the bronze chests run the chance of being booby-trapped."

These three chest types contained different sets of items. Floor 1 contained nothing but bronze chests. Silver chests could contain items up to the Special level of rarity, but most of them were seeded with potions, silver coins, and other useful stuff. This included some of the lesser-quality swords forged by Kurobe, only ranking a Normal in quality. Overall, nothing that would really cost us much if someone was gunning for them.

"But it's the gold chests you really want, I suppose," Soka said.

"Quite so," agreed Mjöllmile, reading from some notes I'd given him earlier. "And apparently, those only show up on floor numbers that are a multiple of ten—the boss chambers, in other words."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, as all of you know, Sir Bovix has been appointed the guardian of Floor 50. In much the same way, we have other guardians, or 'boss monsters,' positioned in chambers in front of the exit stairway in Floors 40, 30, 20, and 10. The gold chests are only for those adventurers who can defeat such formidable foes, and they could even contain Rare-level weapons and armor!"

This was meant to be an advertising event, so I didn't want opportunities like this one to go to waste. The script here was admittedly kind of trite, like a late-night infomercial, appealing to people's greed with such refreshing alacrity that I was almost ashamed to be one of the writers. But it worked like a charm. The mention of Rare weapons sent a clamor across the audience.

"I imagine most people here got to see Bovix's strength for themselves. He is the kind of powerhouse challengers have waiting for them in here, so if anyone thinks they've got the muscle for it, I'd love to see them challenge this labyrinth!"

"That's right! And one more thing: As you can see on this screen, each floor is very large in size. I imagine you'd need to clear out several days if you wanted to fully conquer the Dungeon, huh?"

That was our basic setup—Soka asking leading questions, Mjöllmile answering them. The classic “play-by-play” and “color commentary” setup, and they were doing pretty well as partners.

Like I said before, Floor 1 had only bronze chests.

“...You didn’t mess around with the contents of the chests, did you?” I asked Ramiris.

“All good there!”

Ah, all right. I didn’t appreciate Elen gaming the system like this, but her party was advancing the “right” way, and it made for perfect advertising. I suppose she earned whatever she picked up down there today. Giving her a map and list of trap locations was a blatant rule violation, but I’d overlook it this time.

So I knew Elen’s party was safe. What about Masayuki, whom I’d given my own set of hints?

“And look at this! They’ve already made their way to Floor 4! What speed! We’re definitely seeing ‘Lightspeed’ at their quickest today, folks!”

Pffffthhh!!

Why, man?! It hasn’t even been thirty minutes since we began! Why was he already down to the fourth level?!

Masayuki’s party had hit virtually every trapdoor so far, as if aiming for them, which gave them a head start to the lower levels. And the crowd...

“Ma! Sa! Yu! Ki! *Masayukiiiiii!!*”

...I didn’t even need to look at them, really. Even audience members who laughed at Basson blundering into a trapdoor sang Masayuki’s praises whenever he found one. It was incredibly unfair, but that was just Masayuki’s power doing its thing. He was probably resenting me right now, given that the info I’d leaked to him was less than fully reliable. Sorry, man. It wasn’t my fault, not that that was an excuse.

By Floor 4, they’d start to see monsters patrolling the corridors. I was sure my map wasn’t looking too reliable at this point, what with those fearsome trapdoors at

random locations, but I still prayed they'd do their best with the situation.

That just left Gaiye, and he was using his physical gifts to rush through the labyrinth, Delta flying at full speed to keep up.

Being a demi-spiritual being, Delta could “teleport” herself using whatever nearby plant life there was—but doing that would cut off the video she was telecasting, so she was frantically chasing after Gaiye instead, I suppose. It was an impressive effort, and I was glad to see her so devoted to her post.

Gaiye, of course, paid her no mind, proceeding along at his own pace. Judging by how he wasn’t getting lost at all on his way to the stairways, I was guessing he had some kind of magical positioning system activated.

Understood. This is the elemental magic spell Automap.

Aha. You wouldn’t need a map at all, then, huh?

This magic flashed pinpoint positional data into your brain, sort of like what the Great Sage used to provide me. If Gaiye was keeping it constantly activated, he must’ve been well versed in magic, too, not just swords. Pretty gifted in both as well, I’d say.

Upon reaching out to Fuze, I learned that Gaiye was indeed an A-ranked adventurer, a very rare breed. Based on his performance, I’d call that more than fair. He was on Floor 2 right now but would be reaching the next stairway down shortly. If he kept up this pace, he should make it to Floor 5 in the two hours or so remaining. This was *much* faster than I envisioned; I didn’t see this speed coming at all.

But something caught my attention. There was something sparkling within Gaiye’s eyes—something unusual. His lips were twisted downward, his eyes bloodshot—and even when he hit Floor 3, he kept up his blazing speed. Unlike the first two floors, however, he started ducking into side rooms, checking them for treasure chests... or, really, just raiding the chests without hesitation, like he knew where they were all along. Strictly silver chests, too.

“Uh... How’s he doing that?” I grumbled. Raphael had no response, so not even he knew.

"I feel like that adventurer Gaiye's got this intense greed pushing him forward, y'know? Like his nose can smell out where the gold is."

Ramiris's appraisal was a tad vague, but I think I might understand what she was getting at. It was clear there was nothing normal about Gaiye, between this and the gruesome treatment he gave Mjöllmile. *Hopefully*, I reasoned as I watched him sprint forward, *I won't have to get involved with him much.*

*

We were now two hours in, and Basson's party had just found another hidden room.

"Basson! There's another chamber in here!"

A fellow party member happened upon the latch for the door.

"Not another trap, is it?" a doubtful Basson asked.

The adventurers had been stymied by a paralysis-poison trap I'd laid for them, as well as a treasure chest loaded with sleeping gas. They even got accosted by one of the weaker mimics in the labyrinth, so now they were eyeing every chest with caution.

"Hey, Ramiris, which chest was in that chamber? I'd really like them to find something good soon. It makes for bad advertising otherwise, and I'm kinda starting to feel sorry for them..."

Seeing them bumble around reminded me of my days of buying ten loot crates in a mobile game and getting nothing but crap from them. After all this failure, they just seemed pitiful to me. They'd never come back if they completely lost their drive to continue, so I wanted them to land *something* pretty soon.

"Um, n-no worries there. It's just, y'know, that challenger's party is really awful. Not that I'm one to talk, but I didn't expect anyone to be *this* reckless. But that chamber's got one monster and one silver chest. I don't remember what's inside, but it'll definitely be worth the trouble this time!"

Great. Today, at least, I wanted something good to come their way—

"Whoa, boss, it's a trap! There's a monster!"

“Geh. Wanna fall back?”

“We can’t, Basson. He’s already locked on to us!”

“A giant bear?! Yeah, no running from that...”

Both sides began to size each other up, gauging their first move. I... was concerned. Why would the simple presence of a monster spook them so much? No, you didn’t see creatures like this on Floor 1, and Floor 2 had nothing too powerful on it. But this hidden chamber had a silver chest with a fairly decent item inside, so we’d just placed a monster in there to protect it. Ramiris was right—this hidden room housed the best prize of the entire floor, and the giant bear guarding it was a C-ranked monster. Basson’s team was rated B; this would be easy pickings for them... and yet, the sight of that beast scared the pants off Basson and Gomez.

“Basson, I see a treasure chest on the other side!”

“And it’s silver...”

“It might be a trap, but we gotta do it. Brace yourselves, people!”

“Let’s go!”

Now the party of six was finally ready to fight, gripping their weapons tightly as they stared the bear down.

“I’ll distract it. You guys catch it off guard!”

Basson, as leader, intended to play the advance-guard role. The moment he jumped into the room, he let out a roar, drawing the bear’s attention. The two of them faced off.

“Whoa, Basson’s party has started fighting a monster! Is that a giant bear they’re up against? Those enormous claws could easily take your life with one swipe, it’s said!”

Soka’s commentary made me realize how wrong I was. Ah yes—this *wasn’t* a game. Basson’s party wasn’t proving it too well today, but they were professional adventurers, and they didn’t like getting hurt. The stakes dictated that one wrong move could end your life, so naturally, they wanted to avoid any combat that didn’t suitably reward them. I told everyone that dying in here was perfectly safe, but it looked like that’d take a while to sink in.

Maybe I needed to reconsider the pitch I was making with this labyrinth...

And then battle began. Basson was up in front, fending off the giant bear's attack. His face was taut. He had gone with a set of hard leather armor today, which left his arms and sides undefended—no wonder even a lower-level foe was making him sweat. The swipes from his ax were heavy and punishing, no doubt, but they didn't offer good defense against a clawed foe. Instead, he was deftly using his circular shield to push the giant bear's arms away.

Meanwhile, his companions were offering him support, focused on staying safe as they aimed for the enemy's eyes and footing with their barrage of attacks. It was Gomez the sorcerer who struck the final blow, however, with a Windcutter attack that hit home.

"And the curtain has closed on their battle with the giant bear! That was quite a battle, wasn't it?"

"That it was. Truly a textbook approach—not going in too far at any time. These are true veterans of the craft at work."

I listened to Soka and Mjöllmile's banter as I thought over the fight. The party *had* worked well together. They'd wrapped up that battle successfully in around five minutes, with nobody hurt on their side. To me, though, this was a serious problem. My head started to hurt again.

"Guys, this was a fight they would've dominated from the start. Why were they being so damn *careful* with it...?"

"...Yes, I'm a tad surprised as well. But that's the normal approach, isn't it?"

"I guess so. I was worried when I saw they weren't drawing a map, but I guess their approach to this is just too far removed from what we pictured."

"Right, right. It might take some people three days or so just to wrap up Floor 1..."

"Hmm... In which case, maybe we better start thinking about supplying food or something..."

Man. I sure wasn't expecting our plans to go awry like *this*. Basson's party had adventurers of assorted ranks, but as a team, they were equivalent to a B. With the right equipment, I figured Basson and Gomez could both merit a B by themselves. The

sight of a party of six experiencing so much trouble on Floor 2 was beyond unexpected. They were the clear victors of that battle, but five minutes? That was too long. Yeah, their emphasis on safety was probably the mark of professionals... but maybe they should focus more on healing injuries with potions and learning how to fight a little more efficiently.

As I fretted about this, the party approached the treasure chest.

"Looks like there's a treasure chest in the room. And that color's silver, isn't it? What could we find inside...?"

Soka's buildup filled the audience chamber with tension. Other parties had opened many chests by now, but it seemed like the crowd couldn't get enough of that moment when the chest swung open.

One of Basson's party members popped open the top. *Eesh, at least try to be on the lookout for traps, guys!* There weren't any on silver chests, but they wouldn't know that... They already had a dose of paralysis-poison earlier, along with sleeping gas before that. Now the party was taking turns picking someone to open chests, like it was a kind of punishment. It was so low-level, it scared me to look at them. For someone like me, used to the unwritten rules of video games, it was complete amateur hour. People here might not be used to uncovering chests in the middle of huge mazes... but was that why they were being so thoughtless about opening them?

Along those lines, Elen's party was looking far more sensible. They had Gido with them, so up to now, they had managed to raid the chests without getting caught in any traps. Not having a thief-type specialist in his party might be a problem for Basson. Hunter-type adventurers who made most of their coin from bodyguard work might not be used to situations like this. It'd be best for them to bring on a dedicated explorer or just expand the size of their party.

But... Hang on. Maybe the labyrinth really *was* more difficult than we pictured. I thought Basson's crew was just kind of low-level, but with nobody here well versed in this kind of dungeon hacking, perhaps things were just going to go slow at first. We'd need to reconsider that later.

"Oh! Ohhhh! Basson, it's a sword!!"

Nice! They'd finally drawn a winner—a *big* winner.

Top prizes for these chests included high-grade potions, ancient gold coins, quality armor, and so on. Starting on Floor 2, you also had a tiny chance at uncovering a Rare-level item, and that was exactly the kind of sword Basson's team had just found.

"Oh, actually, Master Veldora said that he adjusted the chests from Floor 2 down to give out more jackpots like that."

"Did he? Ah. But *this* party didn't find anything good until now..."

Veldora saw the problem and addressed it, but with a party *this* unlucky, it still didn't help. If he *hadn't* fudged the stats a little, Basson would've been finding nothing all day. Drawing a Rare item was certainly quite a comeback. It meant good PR for us, and I bet it'd drive Basson's party to try their luck some more. Thinking about it that way, I had to admit—Veldora did a good job.

"That was a smart decision on Veldora's part, though. People need to have *some* positive experiences in here, or else it'll affect our future strategy."

I'd have to thank him later.

Basson's party, meanwhile, was passing the sword around to one another, staring at it and whistling their astonishment. Seemed they liked it.

"Okay, guys," Basson said as he put his ax away and switched to the sword, "let's keep this up!"

The next chamber had three lesser bats flitting around, but Basson managed to swipe them all down with one hit. The blade must have helped, because they were starting to move faster. One of Kurobe's apprentices had crafted that sword, which just barely qualified for Rare status, but to Basson, it must've been a legendary piece. The same was true for Gaiye; I heard that even A-ranked pros had difficulty acquiring a full set of Rare equipment. If so, no wonder Basson was so excited.

The party was now proceeding more quickly, making up for lost time and accumulating a large number of magic crystals from the monsters they slew.

"This is nice. We're definitely comin' out ahead. I think we'll earn a lot more than I thought before the day's through!"

"Yeah, I definitely want to pay another visit here once it's fully open!"

Now the party was all smiles as they ventured farther into the Dungeon.

I turned my attention to Elen's group.

Since they were on Floor 1, they'd have trouble finding any Rare items. They were being very cautious as they proceeded—too much so, really—but the approach paid off with all the chests they got to raid.

Now, though, they were suddenly switching tactics.

"Are we about ready?"

"You're really going to do this?"

"Um... Do I get a voice in this...?"

"Here we go! Time to hook some big fish!"

Completely ignoring Kabal, Elen began to head for the lower levels. They had just under an hour to go, and I guess they chose this moment to go for broke. It looked like they'd focused on Floor 1 so much up to now because they were trying to gather as many potions as they could. Now it was time to make use of Ramiris's info and attempt to get all the way down to Floor 10.

"It looks like Kabal's party is on the move. They've been thorough in their work so far, proceeding bit by bit, but now they're making a beeline for deeper floors."

"Hmm... Are they looking for treasure chests with larger payoffs? But it'll be hard to discover chests out of sheer luck..."

"But it looks like you can find Rare items from silver chests, like Basson's party did earlier, right?"

"Right, but it's not something you can aim for, really. Sir Gaiye has opened something like twenty silver chests so far, but he still hasn't scored any Rares."

"So they'll need to look for gold chests to be guaranteed Rare items?"

"That's correct. But they'll only find gold chests in the designated boss-monster

chambers, mostly.”

“Mostly? Are they anywhere else?”

“Well... Actually, there are other powerful creatures in the labyrinth that you may run into at random. These are called ‘area bosses,’ and the rooms they guard could contain golden chests.”

Soka’s and Mjöllmile’s guidance convinced me of what Elen was after.

“Hey, Ramiris?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you leak out the locations of the area bosses as well?”

“Well, um...”

“Well?”

“...?! I—I think such a thing might have been included, yes!”

Oh lord.

But—hey, let’s stay optimistic. These area bosses, something I included mainly for fun, could also be good PR for us—and I knew I laid one out in Floor 4. Its position changes whenever it’s defeated, but those guys should still be where I left them...

Essentially, this floor housed a small monster lair inhabited by several giant bats, each ranked C-plus. If you weren’t aware of them, you’d have to face a torrent of monsters all at once, but if Elen’s party saw them coming, I suppose they could prepare for it well enough. I just didn’t want it to look like they knew in advance there was something in that lair—that’d seem a little too contrived.

But I had nothing to worry about. Elen’s party deliberately used trapdoors to go down to Floor 5, pretended to be injured so they could advertise the effects of potions for me, and claimed loudly to be searching for somewhere to rest all the way to the monster lair. The perfect act from start to finish. They had futures in the theater, I tell you.

"Guys, there's a small chamber around the corner. Let's rest in there."

"All righty! Are you okay, Kabal?"

"Y-yeah. Boy! That potion worked like a charm. I feel absolutely fine, but let's rest a little bit before we start farming some more."

Kabal's delivery was a touch wooden, but nobody noticed. The eyes of everyone in the audience were on the big screen as Gido opened the door.

"Whoa-ho-ho! Giant bats!!"

"Stay calm! Kabal, you're on!"

"...I don't want them sucking my blood, but..."

Despite Kabal's reluctance, he hefted up his Scale Shield, hiding behind it as he faced the full brunt of the bats' attack. It looked like a tricky situation at first glance, but Kabal was cool as a cucumber. The giant bats had no way of cutting through a shield that durable, so he shrugged off their strikes without breaking a sweat.

As he distracted them, Elen completed her magic spell.

"Here we go! *Icicle Shot!!*"

A flurry of small, sharpened shards of ice flew at the bats. In a room this small, they had nowhere to flee. With her magic amplified by her Dryad's Staff, Elen's blast of ice tore the entire flock of bats to shreds.

"Hmm... Too easy, by the looks of things."

"You may be right. If this were Basson's party, I bet it'd be a life-and-death struggle..."

"I feel like giving out a gold chest for this is costing us."

"Maybe, but let's not use Elen's party as our yardstick for this, hmm?"

Ramiris had a good point. Plus, if you think about it, this went easy for Elen only because she cheated; she wouldn't get this advantage normally. If she had run herself ragged all around the labyrinth before finally discovering a gold box, I'd be happy to

toast her good fortune then.

"That was a fine battle, wasn't it?" Soka asked Mjöllmile on mic.

"Yes, this is definitely a well-seasoned team of adventurers. They certainly made it look easy. Ah, and here's Sir Gido opening a treasure chest..."

"Ooooh! A gold chest! Are we really going to see a Rare item come out?!"

I focused in on Gido's hands. He was guaranteed a Rare, but exactly what, I couldn't guess.

"Looks like a sword..."

"Awww, I wanted some sorcerer's armor!"

"A sword?! Sweet! Someone up high must be watching how hard I'm working!"

Three people, three reactions. Gido couldn't care less, Elen was pouting, and Kabal showed his first real enthusiasm of the day. The sheer across-the-board variety made me laugh.

"...And it looks like a weapon, Mjöllmile!"

"Ahhh, I'm sure it is. The demon lord Rimuru has given me word that every gold chest is guaranteed to house an excellent item inside."

I didn't remember saying that, but I was glad Mjöllmile was kind enough to hype it up for me.

This chest contained a Tempest Sword—everyone thought it was a Rare, but it was actually a Unique. Like the Tempest Dagger I'd given Gido, it was a masterpiece of a weapon, forged by Kurobe from Charybdis scales. Veldora had made "jackpot" finds like this more common for today, and maybe that's why Elen's party scored a killer item that usually showed up just 1 percent of the time.

Then, their mission done for the day, the party promptly prepared to head back. Talk about a cold, calculated approach, huh? I dunno.

"We kind of lavished *too* much on them," I said as I laughed at their indomitable drive

for riches, "but ah well."

How were Masayuki's team and Gaiye doing?

Both were drilling deeper and deeper down, as if in a footrace, but it was clear who had the advantage. Masayuki's party was overwhelmingly ahead, already at the ninth floor by the time two hours passed by.

"They're just way too fast..."

"I'm sorry! I didn't think challengers would use trapdoors that way."

"Ahhh, I doubt Masayuki is deliberately aiming for them, but..."

Even as Ramiris and I spoke, the party tore their way across Floor 9. With over fifty minutes left to go, they reached Floor 10—and thanks to yet another conveniently placed trapdoor, they managed to get deep inside, right nearby the boss chamber. Masayuki's good luck again, no doubt.

"I never would've guessed they'd go this far in under three hours..."

Their speed just totally floored me.

By this point in the labyrinth, you'd start to encounter monsters in the middle of corridors as well, not just in rooms. Sometimes they'd appear in small groups, too—but Masayuki's friends did an impressive job against them. Nearly all their foes fell with one hit; at no time were they ever endangered. And since my map was accurate except for the trapdoors, they were still checking it to figure out the way ahead.

Finally, the party reached the last chamber in the floor. The stairs to Floor 11 would appear only once they defeated the boss lurking inside—a black spider, ranked a B in difficulty.

The party cowered against this fearsome sight...

"Yahhh!"

...and Jinrai then slashed it to death in one swipe.

Damn. *That* was frustrating. Against Team Masayuki, a black spider didn't even begin to pose a challenge. If it weren't for all those damn trapdoors, at least they would've had to spend more time getting here...

Thus the party picked up their gold treasure chest, grabbing a Rare-level dagger from it. That, and they even added their names to the floor's save point. I decided, right then and there, to just do away with all the trapdoors.

Once the boss was slain, Masayuki's group used their return whistle to head back to the surface, making them the second group to emerge after Elen's.

Just when the party exited the boss chamber, the door leading to it opened again.

"Masayuki's party is back with us, but now Sir Gaiye is going to challenge the boss!"

"Gaiye has traversed this far into the labyrinth all by himself. No traps or pitfalls have caught him yet, and he's been going at a breathtaking clip the whole time."

"Yes, at the speed he's going, he's racing past trapdoors before they can even open. That's an unexpected approach to take! I don't think most people could copy it."

The adventurer types in the audience nodded in agreement with Mjöllmile. Going solo was one thing, but a multimember team could never pull a trick like that. Gaiye didn't have the greatest of personalities, but he was every bit worthy of the A rank he was rewarded. He had run into no problems in these early floors, taking every measure available to score as many silver chests as possible. He was about the worst beta tester I could've picked, but I couldn't do much about that now.

"Pffft. That piece-of-garbage swordsman beat me here, eh? Oh well. Bring back that boss for me!"

Gaiye wasted no time copping an attitude. It was grating, but I was mature enough to put up with it.

"So what happens at a time like this, Mjöllmile?"

"Well, I'm told that the boss is resurrected in approximately thirty minutes."

"And the gold treasure chest with it?"

"That's what I understand, yes. Otherwise, Sir Rimuru was concerned people would start fighting each other for the right to tackle a boss."

"I see, I see. In that case, I'm afraid Gaiye may not have enough time..."

"No, there's not much time left. I imagine that'll be the end of this run for him."

Fifteen minutes remained out of the three hours allotted. Gaiye, once the situation was explained to him, did not take it well.

"Are you *kidding* me?! You think you can boss me around in here? I know how talentless all you people are, but I don't see why I need to stoop down to *your* level! Get this boss back here now!"

The greed was visible in his eyes as the self-centered vitriol continued. Delta took it all in stride, but the next thing Gaiye said changed matters for her.

"Hmph! The master of a talentless fool is a talentless fool. There's no need at all for me to abide by the rules of you buffoons!"

Oops. Shouldn't have said that. That's all but declaring to the master of the labyrinth that you aren't gonna play by her laws. Gaiye's shouting wasn't going to change anything, but was the master going to ignore that insult?

Doubtful.

"Your statement clearly violates the regulations set by us," Delta calmly stated. "I will let this go if you apologize, but I will not allow any more abusive language."

Gaiye snorted at her. "What? Why's a guide like you think you're so far above me? Don't make me laugh!"

"Clear rule violation confirmed. Executing punishment."

"Huh? Punishment? What could you ever do to—?"

At the next moment, Gaiye's body was bound and lifted into the air by vines that sprang up from the floor around him.

"...Wha—?!"

“I have removed the pain suppressor feature on your Resurrection Bracelet. Do you feel like apologizing yet?”

Small thorns shot out from the vines, piercing into the slits between his armor’s plating. The results were painful for him. This was the spirit magic Thornbind, and Delta was able to launch it with zero spell-casting delay.

“D-damn you! You think that’s all it takes to beat me?”

“This is your final warning. Do you have any interest in apologizing?”

“The hell I do! This level of magic could never—”

His shouting was cut off mid-sentence, as Delta used her slender hands to slice Gaiye’s head off.

He had chosen the wrong person to pick a fight with today. Yes, he was an A-ranked adventurer, but Delta was a dryad. Even without battle experience, her species had instincts that made her a threat beyond Hazard level. Once she was a bit more well versed, she’d be at the Calamity tier with Treyni and the others. Someone like Gaiye had no chance.

The sight of Gaiye, who had wowed in the battle tournament, getting destroyed by the gentle-looking Delta made the crowd audibly gasp. The Flowing Swordsman may’ve thought he was strong, but he was killed in an instant, unable to defend himself. Seeing that projected on such a large screen would scare the crap out of anyone.

“Ah yes,” Mjöllmile said in hushed tones. “In the labyrinth, the words of the maze master essentially serve as the law. Ignore her rules, and the managers will deliver a swift punishment like the one you saw just now.”

As he put it, if you followed the rules, you were perfectly safe.

“That, um, that’s pretty scary. So what happens to Gaiye, then?”

“Nothing at all, actually. He *will* be stripped of the items he’d acquired in this trip into the labyrinth, but otherwise, he is alive and well... Although without the pain suppression feature on his Resurrection Bracelet, I imagine it’s a rather grueling experience for him at the moment.”

There was no real punishment, you could say. All it meant was a reset back to what you were before venturing inside, and nothing else. Serious rule infractions might require us to ban you from the Dungeon entirely... but we planned to discuss that once we saw how things went.

"Ah! Gaiye's now out from the labyrinth—but unlike you, Mjöllmile, it appears he's unconscious."

Immediately after the decapitation, Gaiye dissolved into particles of light and was resurrected at the surface—still knocked out. That's because Delta exercised her right to restrict the functionality of his Resurrection Bracelet, a sort of nuanced way to mete out extra punishment. He was safe and unhurt, but his body would need some time to recover from the shock of "dying."

Between his mistreatment of Mjöllmile and outright contempt for Delta, Gaiye was proving to be one of the most distasteful people I'd ever met. Seeing him like this was, to say the least, gratifying. Hopefully, he learned his lesson a little.

"Yes," Mjöllmile continued, "as long as participants follow the rules, the Resurrection Bracelet always works perfectly. But as all of you saw, Sir Gaiye was deliberately flaunting regulations, so... The labyrinth has a number of rules for visitors to follow—for example, no conflicts among adventurers, and always follow the advice of the maze's managers. We plan to distribute a book of rules once normal operation begins, and our guides will also provide rule rundowns to those adventurers who can't read. We'll want all of you to follow the rules and behave well inside, lest you meet the same fate Sir Gaiye just did."

"Oh, I could imagine Gaiye might be a little disappointed about this result, but during normal operation, all you have to do is wait a short period of time, and the boss will reappear! It's against the rules to fight other adventurers, so it's important to wait your turn and conquer this Dungeon the *right way*!"

Soka used a melodious tone of voice to run all of this down. What's "*the right way*" mean here? She didn't specify. I thought the crowd felt kind of awkward about this, but Soka's follow-up largely steamrolled over all of that.

As she went on, Gaiye woke up again... then reeled back in shock, remembering what had happened to him. Seeing him recovered (if intensely frustrated) helped calm the crowd down a great deal.

Well, good.

It seemed like the crowd had accepted Mjöllmile's explanations for everything. He may have been a total prick, but the things we learned observing Gaiye were quite useful. If we could work out how to deal with high-level adventurers sprinting down just to raid treasure chests, hopefully we could avoid losing a mint on this. That, and everybody *certainly* knew how the rules worked now.

All in all, I'd say Gaiye's journey proved pretty satisfactory for all of us.

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Thus, each team wrapped up their runs, leaving only Basson's party inside. They had about ten minutes left, so I'd want them to wrap up shortly.

As I thought about that, one of Basson's companions screamed loudly and fell to the ground in the corridor. Someone in the adjacent room must've gotten him; he was alive, but there was an arrow straight through his right eye.

See? I *told* you going in all careless like that was dangerous.

There was a single skeleton inside this chamber, wielding a bow and taking potshots at anyone through the door. The second party member through the archway was rewarded with a bolt between the eyes; he fell as well, but unlike Gaiye, he disappeared into light particles after ten seconds. Nice. We'd have at least one challenger experience death before time expired, then.

The remaining four party members made quick work of the skeleton.

"Ahhh, look at this!" Soka said, talking quickly. "We haven't had anyone drop out yet, but that skeleton has just claimed two victims! But don't worry, because the deceased will be revived shortly back at the surface!"

The audience was riveted by the you-are-there viewpoint they had of the battle. Having it shown on such a huge screen like that really did make it feel like you were exploring the labyrinth with them. I heard screams here and there whenever a monster appeared, which I thought was a pretty cool reaction. Maybe it was like watching a horror film; people started shouting their heads off when that party member died, too.

Maybe staging viewing events of the action inside the labyrinth would be a fun idea. We'd work this out with the participating adventurers in advance, of course; we couldn't get away with showcasing their exploits without permission. Really, today was helping me come up with all kinds of little ideas.

For now, though, time was almost up. This offered a nice taste of the show to everyone, I thought.

Basson's party helped keep things tense throughout; in the end, they were pretty good challengers, actually. They may've dissed Masayuki and crowed about "*ripping the facade*" off the labyrinth and accused me of running a con job, but once they were in, they forgot about all of that and focused on their task. Now they were shedding tears and wailing the names of their fallen comrades. Not only did they have the wrong impression, they clearly weren't the kind of people who listened to anything they were told. As beta testers, they were tremendously helpful.

"All right, everyone, it's just about time to return to the surface."

Alpha, the guide for Basson's party, interrupted their mourning in her matter-of-fact voice. Basson looked livid at her for a moment, but Alpha ignored him and forced their return whistles to activate.

"Goddamn you!" Basson protested—but he swallowed his words back on the surface.

"Oh, hey, Basson. I guess I actually got resurrected."

Being greeted by his alive (and very confused) companion made Basson's anger vanish.

"Whoa! Awesome!! You really came back to life?!"

"Yeah, I thought I was done for, but it didn't hurt near as much as I thought, and now I'm back to normal."

"Man, are you serious? 'Cause if so, this is just amazing. There's so few people out there who can cast resurrection magic, and this bracelet does it all for us?!"

The group chattered on some more as they celebrated their revived companion.

"Ugh, dammit, my eye..."

“How about we use this?”

The man with his eye shot out had it all fixed up with a dose of potion.

“This is crazy. For people like us, you know, our bodies are our main asset. So having this sort of setup is like a dream.”

“Wow, so it’s true?! Man, we can *really* go all-out next time!”

You were going all-out, man. I don’t think I saw you check for traps once all day. Once they get nastier on later floors, you’re goners.

I could criticize their style all day, but I stayed mum for now. The key thing was how the crowd reacted, and after seeing how Basson’s party fared start to finish, I think they understood how safe the Dungeon was.

As an advertising stunt, I’d call today a success.

The challengers were all lined up onstage now. I headed up as well, standing in front of them, to offer some closing remarks.

“So what did you all think?” I asked, mic in hand. “Did you have fun today? Our Dungeon will be officially opening to the public in just a few more days. I guarantee to all of you that it’s perfectly safe, so if you’re interested, go ahead and give it a try for yourself. And if any of you can conquer the hundredth floor on the bottom, I will grant you the right to challenge me to battle!!”

With that, the event was over—and my instincts told me we kicked ass. The tournament final was exciting enough, but viewing these test runs into the labyrinth really did make it seem like you were there. It was a great way to round out the show.

Of course, it would’ve been perfect if the show actually ended then. But:

(Rimuru, what is the matter? I have yet to see any challengers. How long do I have to wait?)

Veldora, lord of the labyrinth, sent me a Thought Communication that clearly indicated he hadn’t listened to a word I said. *Way to ruin the moment, man.*

(Shut up! How many times do I have to tell you?! Listen to me: You're not gonna see anyone good enough to make it to the bottom for a while!)

(Wh-what?! That was *not* how I understood it!)

(Then you understood it wrong, dumbass! Why don't you try actually listening to me?!)

We argued about this for a little while afterward. You know how you sometimes see kids get yelled at during a fair or festival, because they get too worked up and all that? It's so regrettably common—so this time, I lectured Veldora until I was *damn* sure he was sorry.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
5

AFTER THE FESTIVAL

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It was the final night of the festival, and to cap it all off, we held a massive banquet. Shuna and Mr. Yoshida worked on full overdrive, sparing no expense to provide the best dinner spread yet. We wanted to leave a good impression at all costs.

Here, I started noticing more nobles chatting and laughing with one another. They must've made friends over the past three days, and the mood overall was much more convivial than the first night.

Right now, I knew that Veldora, Ramiris, and Milim were enjoying a fun night in the labyrinth, alongside Carillon, Frey, and Midday, too. Treyni and the elves were working hard to keep them fed and entertained, and I was planning to join them later, dessert in tow.

Over in town, there were visiting merchants, adventurers, nearby farmers, and residents all enjoying good food and drink together. The bars and restaurants were opened up for free, letting people drink, sing, and carry on all they wanted. Here, too, people were letting their guards down. Monsters, humans—it didn't seem to matter as the night wore on. There was music, along with singers following the beat and dancers moving to the rhythm.

In a way, it was painful to think that this moment was going to end. It seemed like such a waste, sort of. Starting tomorrow, everyone would be back at their old jobs. The thought depressed me—but, at the same time, made all the effort feel worth it. It was strange, and I didn't think I was the only one experiencing it, but everyone still looked like they were having fun.

That, I suppose, is what happiness is. And watching all the happy scenes, I hoped that this peace could last for a long time to come.

And so the night wore on...

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All too cruelly, the festival came to an end.

The highways had been full of people heading back home since morning. The security team, led by Rigur in place of Gobta, had been busy since before sunrise.

“I bet you wanted to sleep past noon the day after this festival, huh?”

“Ha-ha-ha! You can’t work security if you let the drink consume you, not the other way around!”

Rigur was serious about his job. No wonder he was Rigurd’s kid. If this was Gobta, I was sure he’d go right up to me and say, “Boy, don’tcha just want to sleep past noon the day after a festival?” I was in full agreement with that, so maybe I would’ve spoiled them a little along those lines, but silence is golden.

Unlike Gobta, after all, Rigur never complained about anything, briskly giving orders to his patrol. Thanks to that, our VIP visitors began their journeys home without major issues. The highways were wide enough, so as long as a wagon didn’t block the road, the waves of people shouldn’t stop. Some even planned to stay in town for a few more days, anticipating the rush back, so I didn’t think we’d have too many complaints.

Leaving the highways under Rigur’s management, I went back to my own work. Today, for starters, I had to pay out those gold coins. Over a hundred merchants were now seated in our main meeting hall, waiting for us. Rigurd and Mjöllmile were maintaining order and explaining matters for me, but it was about time I showed up as well. This was going to be a critical moment, and I knew I needed to nail it.

Arriving at the meeting hall, I could already hear people arguing from the outside.

“I told you, everybody is going to be paid today, so please stay calm and wait just a bit longer!”

“You think you can trick us like that?”

“I waited for you until the end of the festival. Hurry up and just pay me my due!”

“Whoa, whoa. I certainly understand your concerns, but can you show some deference to us, please?”

"Yes! Are you intending to drag our names through the mud for introducing you to our friend Mjöllmile?"

"No, sir, we're not. All we want is for what's owed to us to be rightfully paid..."

"And that's why I'm telling you to be patient. This nation isn't going anywhere, and they said they can pay everyone right now in anything besides Dwarven gold coins. Can you help us out a little and hold on until things are cleared up?"

"A likely story!"

"Yeah! Come on—pay up!"

It sounded like some of Mjöllmile's merchant friends were trying to smooth things over with the tradesmen we owed money to. Maybe this was just how they operated as merchants, but I couldn't have been happier to see it. It proved that Mjöllmile really *was* a good judge of character.

"All right, everyone, can we please take a few deep breaths? I, Meusé, representing the Kingdom of Ghastone, am here to tell you that not even a nation of monsters will default on their debts to any of you. Isn't that right, Mjöllmile?"

That sounded like a big shot. A noble from the Kingdom of Ghastone, one of the commercially active nations ringing Englesia.

"Y-yes, Duke Meusé, you are exactly right! However—"

Hmm. A prince from Ghastone—not a superpower but still decently sized. Any noble with a title like that was no slouch.

"In that case, I do hope you will put to ease the minds of everyone here and provide payment, following the international regulations of the Council of the West."

Duke Meusé was a powerful noble, but he was still acting like a gentleman in these negotiations. Mjöllmile was an important person in my government, but for now, he had no official title or noble name. He was still something of a guest, with some temporary power as my representative at times like this. Rigurd, one of my ministers, was also there, but the fact that this prince remembered Mjöllmile's name and dealt with him personally... It was literally the royal treatment. I mean, a noble remembering a commoner's name—oftentimes, even if they knew the name (which was frequently

not the case), they'd pretend not to. That was how nobility worked, apparently, the way Mjöllmile described it to me, so I bet he's the most surprised of all right now.

"P-please, Duke Meusé, just one moment. Our initial contract stipulated that payment via customary methods is acceptable. By '*customary*,' of course..."

"Mjöllmile, I am not here to concern myself with such trifling matters. When working with merchants, and with nations as well, trust is the most important thing. And trust is something created by keeping one's promises, is it not?"

"You are absolutely right, my prince, but—?!"

"Silence! These people engaged in business with you because they trusted your team. You have no intention of trampling over this trust, do you?"

"Of course not. But we have our own issues to deal with—"

"Heh-heh! I see, I see. So that's how it is, Mjöllmile? Well, fortunately for you, I've got an idea for how to solve those issues. Would we be able to talk in private for a moment? You can take Sir Rigurd there with you."

...Ah. So that settled it. It was exactly what Elmesia had warned me about. It was like when something I studied until I had it perfectly down showed up on the test—that feeling of total control. It was like I had that inside me.

I'm gonna ace this.

"Um, what do you mean?" Mjöllmile continued, making a grand act out of it. Like any veteran merchant, he was both cold-blooded and a born actor. He must've realized the same thing I did, but he didn't let any of it show on his face. I could probably just leave things to him and this problem would be solved, but I didn't want it that way.

It was time to take action. There was no point eavesdropping forever; I wanted to end this farce sooner rather than later.

Diablo opened the doors wide. "That will not be necessary," I said as I walked through them. Behind me was Benimaru, followed by Shion and then Diablo, who quietly closed the door behind us.

"Did you wait long?" Benimaru asked, nodding at the merchants. "You're being rather loud, you know."

The merchants looked surprised to see me, my words turning them pale. They must've figured I'd stay away and let Rigurd and the others handle matters—but here I was with my staff. I didn't think they knew what to do next.

"The demon lord Rimuru has entered the building," Rigurd said, glaring at the merchants. "Bow your heads!"

A few of them stood up and hurriedly bowed. The majority stayed in their seats, giving me funny looks. It figured. If you're a small-time tradesman, not educated in dealing with nobility, it's hard to react instantly.

Duke Meusé himself was about to rise, so I spoke up to save him the trouble.

"No need for such formality, Rigurd," I said with a smile as I looked around the meeting hall. Rigurd nodded and quietly stood aside.

Among the crowd, I saw not only merchants but a few journalists in disguise. I suppose they were going to report this far and wide if we disgraced ourselves as a country. Maybe I'd fall to my knees and tearfully admit that we couldn't pay; maybe I'd violently force the merchants to clam up. Either way, they'd play up the details in scandalous fashion in their articles, no doubt.

But we were on to them. A journalist more loyal to our side snitched about this to Diablo. Thus, he had praised the media assembled—"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh, how laudable of you all"—but they looked dreadfully scared, their smiles frozen in place. I could tell they had a strong desire not to antagonize Diablo; something bad must've happened to them before. It sounded a bit threatening of him, but that was an issue between Diablo and the press, not me. It'd be clownish if I was to intervene.

"Well, well, the demon lord Rimuru. I hope you are doing well at the moment? I apologize that we have not come to know each other before now."

He was the perfect prince, giving me an elegant bow. My presence threw him for only a moment; he regained his composure soon after. A gentle, relaxed expression was on his face as he greeted me for the rest of the group.

"Duke Meusé from the Kingdom of Ghastone? What brings you here? I'm not sure we

had any pressing business with you?"

I smiled back, beginning with the line I'd prepared in advance. I wasn't the type to wither in front of royalty, and here, too, I managed to smoothly handle the occasion. Advance prep and review are *so* important.

"Well, you see, there are some tradesmen here doing business with this nation for the first time at your festival, and they have come to me claiming their valid rights have been neglected. It is the job of the nobility to protect their citizens, and while I regret my rude directness, I have come to mediate on this issue."

So brazen. You could just tell he was completely blackhearted. I'm not far behind him, but since I'm a slime, I'm fetchingly translucent compared to him.

"I see, I see. But that's strange. Mjöllmile over there told me that our budget is ample enough. If people are still waiting for payment, then why is that?"

"Ah, well, these people only accept payment in Dwarven gold coins..."

Mjöllmile was just *meant* for the stage. He took my question meekly, attempting to explain the issue—only to have Duke Meusé interrupt him.

"Isn't that to be expected, Mjöllmile? A legitimate merchant from Blumund such as yourself should be fully cognizant of international commercial law, I would believe! Unlike the slipshod members of the Free Guild, the only currency these people trust is Dwarven gold."

Duke Meusé was on the merchants' side, not raising his voice a bit as he pleaded their case, making certain he remained a benevolent third party. I was sure he was waiting for the moment when he could intervene with me and make Tempest owe him a favor.

For now, on the surface, he was acting tremendously fair. But all he was really doing was pushing his own rules on us. I glanced at Diablo. He read my signal and nodded back, smiling. We were all set to go.

"Ah. Yes, I see. I had heard that members of the international media were here, so I was wondering what the issue was, but it was something that trivial?"

"That is why, Sir Rimuru, if you would be able to leave this matter to myself..."

Now Benimaru spoke up. His imposing presence visibly unnerved some of the merchants. They must've thought I was going to threaten them into doing my bidding, like their plan called for.

"Not so fast, Benimaru. Based on what I hear, I can understand the concerns of these merchants."

The audience looked a tad surprised that I held Benimaru back. Or dissatisfied, maybe. Things were going well, and then I had to rain on the parade.

"But, Sir Rimuru, I can't help but wonder... They may not be Dwarven coins, but we do have ancient gold coins. If they will not accept those, I think we could provide them with the equivalent value of our Tempest-made goods. Why are they not content with that?"

"I agree with you, but I'm sure the merchants have their reasons."

I gauged Duke Meusé's response as Benimaru and I bantered. He seemed to be waiting for a chance to speak up, unite the merchants, and entrap me.

"Then how about this? Perhaps you could place your trust in our nation and, as Benimaru suggested, accept IOUs or goods in equivalent value?"

Mjöllmile, seeking to end this quickly, got the ball rolling. If the other side agreed to this, then perfect—we had an amicable agreement in hand. But if not—if I was standing here at the negotiation table and they were willing to make me look foolish—then I was prepared for that.

"I—I don't believe a word of it!"

"Y-yeah!"

"This is a nation of monsters, and that is exactly why we seek payment in reliable, trustworthy Dwarven gold coins. I hope you will find it in your heart to understand that and, please, be generous in your—"

The merchants here ran the gamut, from complete neophytes to veterans familiar with manners around nobility. But either way, their responses were all one-sided, not taking me into consideration at all.

Ah, I thought. It's too bad.



Meusé thought the time had come.

He was worried the merchants might grow hesitant when faced with the demon lord's coercive ways, but so far they were following his instructions, just as he planned.

And if you think about it, it made sense. Meusé was a prince in Ghastone. He was young, just thirty-five years of age, but he had ties to the powerful Rozzo family. This made him one of the rulers of the Western Nations, part of just a small handful of upper-class nobility. Practically speaking, only a very few people could afford to turn their backs on his orders.

This plan came in the form of an order to him from the eldest member of the Rozzo family. Meusé was asked to make the demon lord Rimuru owe him a favor and gain his trust—and if he succeeded, he was promised a promotion to the Five Elders.

Yes. The Five Elders—the very peak of the entire world. Meusé was elated—and at the same time, he swore to tap every power at his command to execute this order, no matter what it took.

Thus he promised a lucrative future to the self-interested merchants he made contact with. He brought in newspaper writers from around the world to ensure his own safety. And now he was personally facing the demon lord, the lone job he couldn't leave to anyone else.

This Rimuru had made his presence known only a short time ago, but he had already killed Clayman, renowned for his cold cruelty, and declared himself a new demon lord. A fearsome one, said to be connected to the Storm Dragon that laid waste to an army of twenty thousand. Meeting him in person terrified Meusé, but when placed on the scales with the glory he could earn, it was easy to bottle up his fears.

Meusé himself knew exactly what he wanted. That's why he was being used like this, although he hadn't noticed. It was exactly the way Elmesia El-Ru Thalion pictured it.

Seeing the demon lord and his personal staff in person honestly came as a surprise to Meusé. He was planning to talk Mjöllmile into a corner and ask him to bring the demon

lord over. But while this wasn't quite in the script, it did save him some time. They had reporters in the audience, and there were many more in the hall below this one.

Everything was set up. Once the merchants rejected the demon lord's offers, Meusé's plan was all but complete. After that, he just had to assuage the merchants and start running this room. That's all it would take to make Rimuru start to thank him.

A calm smile emerged on his face as he began to speak, already convinced of his success.



"How about this, Sir Rimuru? If you are in something of a financial bind, then perhaps you could discuss matters with me personally? Indeed, fate may have brought us together here for a reason. If I could be of service to—"

It was just as I predicted—and a pretty shoddy acting job, too. Duke Meusé was making the request. My officials, standing behind me, looked on coldly at him. Noticing their gazes, the duke appeared a tad flustered. Maybe he felt something wasn't going to plan—but it was too late for him.

Time to serve things up.

"I appreciate the offer, but it will not be needed. Come in."

Following my order, Geld lumbered into the hall, carrying a large tray loaded high into the air with gold coins.

"Wha—?!"

"No..."

"Is all of that...?"

The crowd stirred.

The moment he laid eyes on the coins, the color of Duke Meusé's face visibly changed. He must have realized that his plan of action had failed.

"You were seeking payment, right?" Rigurd declared. "Very well. Here it is—all in

Dwarven gold coins."

You could hear a pin drop in the hall.

"Wa... Please wait. Wait just a moment, Sir Rimuru?!"

Duke Meusé looked pretty panicked. *It's a bit too late for that, isn't it?*

"Yes?" I coldly asked.

"Are... are these all Dwarven gold coins?" he asked, face contorting. "Counterfeit currency is a clear violation!"

Hmm... Is that really something you should be accusing me of? Because that really sounds pathetic, Meusé.

"Rather a rude thing to say to Sir Rimuru," Diablo said, stepping forward. Benimaru was looking angry as well, and I was starting to get bad vibes from Shion behind me.

"I... My pardons. But is this really...?"

"If you doubt them," I said with a smile to the withering prince, "feel free to have them appraised."

"In that case, if you'll excuse me, I will use my trusty magic tools to examine them."

It'd normally be unthinkable to interrupt a conversation between Duke Meusé and me, but... Ah well. No point quibbling over little details. This merchant who just spoke up must've been a protégé of the duke, a colluder of sorts. No doubt these events disturbed him so much, he forgot his manners. He was a faker, not the real thing—not that I'm much of a "real" king myself yet, of course. But let's move on.

"Sir Rimuru, these reporters told me they wanted to write an article about these negotiations. What should we do?"

Shuna, after receiving my Thought Communication, spoke to me from behind the closed door, just as we had rehearsed. The journalists had gathered outside the room at Diablo's behest—and when I gave the signal, they'd burst inside to serve as witnesses.

"Well, they have impeccable timing, don't they?" Benimaru replied. "If we are going to appraise the coins, then let the press be in attendance as well."

Then, as planned, the reporters entered the meeting hall.

"They... They're real!!" the shocked merchant/*colluder* bellowed. Of course they were.

"Indeed," one of the reporters said with a knowing look, "and these are some impressive gold coins at that. Some of these date back to quite a long time ago. They may not have been circulated before now."

Those were probably the ones Elmesia had traded to me. I was sure she must have tons of them squirreled away somewhere. And with the reporters attesting to their value, the merchant could do nothing else. Even if he wanted to try swapping real ones out for fakes, the media was practically breathing down his neck—and if he *did* try that, then Soei, watching on from the shadows, wouldn't let that go unaddressed.

"So is everything settled, then? I believe our merchants were concerned about their payments, so go ahead and settle our accounts for me, if you could."

"Yes, my lord!" Rigurd and Mjöllmile said, answering my rather stuffy-sounding command. Producing a sheaf of documents and receipts, they began the payment process. It all went smoothly, under the watchful eye of the reporters.

"And you're the last one, then."

Now we were all done. Our last piece of business for the Founder's Festival was settled.

"Ha... Ha-ha-ha... Impressive, Sir Rimuru. I have no idea how you managed to assemble such a fortune in Dwarven gold..."

Duke Meusé looked dreadfully stiff now. In front of him were all those piles of coins, shining even after we paid them out. The merchants looked a tad confused themselves, unsure what to do now that things were off script.

In the midst of this, the merchant I'd called the "*colluder*" spoke up.

"Well, as far as we're concerned, as long as you respect international law, we have nothing to complain about. We hope to continue doing business with you in the future—"

"Um, we'll pass on that, thanks," I replied.

The merchants stared at me, eyes wide open. So, for that matter, did my staff.

"Wh-what do you...?"

"Our business with you is complete," I said, as if stating the obvious. "There's not going to *be* any more."

My staff was now shocked. Only Diablo looked on with a smile. I suppose he was the only one who guessed what was on my mind here. That's too bad.

"I-I'm not sure I understand..."

"What is the meaning of this? If you pay us, we can trust in you anytime...?"

"Are you looking down on us simple tradesmen? You know that nations can hardly trade with each other without traveling peddlers?!"

The truth was beginning to set in, I suppose, as the merchants started shouting.

"*Don't... you think... you are being quite rude to Sir Rimuru, the king of our nation?*"

Shion burned with a quiet anger as she spoke. The merchants fell silent, no doubt sensing the danger. I figured I'd take advantage of the silence to finish things off.

"You know, I'm not into this cat-and-mouse stuff, so I'm just gonna come out and say it. *You guys were the ones going on about how you couldn't 'trust' our nation, weren't you?* Well, trust is a two-way street. It requires both sides to believe in each other. I don't think it involves one side meekly accepting everything the other says to it. Mjöllmile asked you all multiple times to trust in us, didn't he?"

"Th-that..."

"But..."

"I mean, I understand what you're thinking here. We're monsters, and you know we want to trade with the Western Nations, but you're not sure if we can truly abide by *human* rules—that kind of thing."

“Y-yes, exactly! And that is why—”

“But, you know, that’s why we suggested a compromise with bartering goods or using ancient coins. And you kicked all of that to the curb.”

“...!!”

“Ngh...”

Mjöllmile had practically thrown out his back bowing so much, trying to negotiate with them. But all the merchants here had laughed in his face. I wasn’t about to forgive that.

“You guys only want to do business with people you can trust. And you know what? So do we. We only want to do business with people we can trust. Therefore, I refuse to allow any of you to conduct work in our nation. I won’t ban you from entering, but don’t expect permission to conduct commercial activities anymore.”

It took this declaration for the merchants to realize just how serious this was. We had a new market here, one that lots of people expected would balloon in size, and there was no place for them in it.

The statement made Duke Meusé turn white. If he didn’t know yet that he had failed, he did now. “I—I refuse to allow such tyranny!” he shouted, unable to hold it in. “These people were only asking for their justified rights under international law—”

Did he see being unable to trade with us as a problem? I certainly had plans to make this into a giant new economic union, one bigger than all the Western Nations combined. That was probably why he wanted to join the bandwagon early and make friends with me—but if he could read us that far, he really shouldn’t have taken this approach. I never show mercy to my enemies.

“Their rights, huh? I think you may have the wrong idea, so if you’ll let me correct you real quick, our nation is not part of the Council of the West yet. I’d like to join them sometime, but if I can’t, then so be it. I’m not gonna mind.”

“Wha...?!”

“I mean, we’ve already decided this land’s going to be the center of a vast new economic bloc. Why? Because I want it to be.”

“Wh-what kind of nonsense are you...?! Such arrogance, strictly on your own volition—”

“It’s not arrogance. We’re all working together as a team toward the same goal, and we’re bound to see results from it. All I’m doing is helping out.”

I was trying to make it sound all cool, but really, I was prioritizing the stuff I wanted to make happen first, I suppose. I wasn’t sure I could deny claims of being arrogant, but I still had to lash back.

“And I want to be on equal terms with the Council of the West, too. But, you know, if they try to keep us down, then forget it. I’m not gonna force a relationship; we can just work through the Free Guild instead. Do you understand me?”

Besides, if we really needed to, we could sign individual pacts with each nation in the west, like we did with Blumund and the Dwarven Kingdom. There was no need to hurry things along. Just polish up our nation, make ourselves more valuable, and in time, we were bound to have a country that people would trust in. As far as I was concerned, that way of thinking was set in stone.

“All... All right. In that case, I will be glad to serve as an intermediary with the Council. I think we have had some regrettable misunderstandings, but I hope I can be of aid to you, Sir Rimuru.”

Duke Meusé is certainly a hard worker. Ah well. If he had retreated earlier, I wouldn’t have needed to say all that stuff, but *noooo*.

“Mm, I don’t think I can ask for your help, Sir Meusé. You’ve kind of lost your footing here already, you see?”

“Um?”

Duke Meusé froze, unable to parse what I’d just told him. Well, all right. It’s settled anyway. I didn’t want to say it myself, but at this point, explaining everything start to finish was probably the kindest approach.

“Once all the reporters here go back to their home nations, they’re going to write articles. Articles about this struggle related to merchant payments behind the scenes of the Founder’s Festival we held. They’re going to make the truth clear, and I’m sure all the stories are gonna be *very* entertaining.”

“.....”

Duke Meusé’s mind must’ve been racing. It was telling him what would come next, and the results made him look sicker and sicker. See, this was exactly why I didn’t want to say it.

“Here, we have merchants who rejected our requests and demanded payment only in Dwarven gold coins. Then we have this upper-crust member of nobility who comes swooping in to unite them, even though he’s not personally involved at all. If someone read *that* newspaper article, what would they think?”

“I, um, that...”

Of course, that was all Diablo’s doing. He had assembled the reporters, revealing the information in detail. That alone would prove we were justified as a nation, and most people would sense a conspiracy among the merchant ranks. I agreed with them. Information means something only if it’s used correctly. Instead of fabricating the facts and trying to spread them around, it’s always better to start with the facts and just hand them out.

It was my discussions with Gazel and Elmesia that helped me come up with this strategy, though. Diablo even personally thanked them, talking about how he “still had a great deal to learn” and all. I thought they both helped us a lot this time, and I wanted to more amply repay them sometime soon.

“So there will be no need for you. Mjöllmile, who you so thoroughly disrespected, has my full and utmost support—enough so that I trust all my nation’s finances to him. He’s been far more help to me than you have, for one.”

“Ah...?!”

Duke Meusé’s face twisted in humiliation as the merchants began to look desperate. Meanwhile, the reporters were having much more fun than they expected when they first filed in. Some of them were rapidly taking down notes of the event—one they didn’t mind recording, since they didn’t take any of the fallout. A few even had expensive magic items for recording images of our negotiations. This was definitely gonna spread wide. The prince may have called the press over to save his own hide, but it wound up having quite the opposite effect.

“You can take care of the rest.”

"I would be happy to, Sir Rimuru."

I patted the shoulder of the deferential Mjöllmile, whispering, "Thanks, Mollie," as I passed by and out of the room with my staff. It sort of felt like he smiled back at me, but I didn't see it on his face—his calculating eyes were back on Duke Meusé, then on the merchants around the room. I don't think anyone would mind if I made him our chief financial manager.

On the other side of the door, I could hear him speak: "Now, since all our business has been settled, if I could ask everyone to accept their payments..." His way of putting a final period on these events, I suppose.

*

Chasing the duke out of town was gratifying, but we still had many problems to deal with. Thus, it was time for our customary review meeting.

We were back in the usual meeting hall, not the fancier one for the festival's receptions and banquets. It was the night after the festival wrapped up, but a few guests were still around for this conference—Gazel, Elmesia, Yohm and his gang, Fuze, and even Yuuki, Hinata, and Masayuki. They were joined by a few other rare invitees, all here on my invitation, and the rest of my staff were all on hand as well, making it a packed house. Milim and the demon-lord crowd were not invited—if I had *too* many people here, we'd lose cohesion. We had a lot to talk about this time, so the itinerary was already pretty full.



One concern of mine, though, was Veldora. He was holed up in a corner of the room, pouting, and I was sure he was gonna say something—probably whining about how no challengers showed up. Hoping against hope that he wouldn't derail this thing, I got the meeting started.

“Umm, first off, thanks to everyone for your help!”

That was our signal to begin.

The first person to speak was Benimaru, surprisingly enough.

“That was quite a shock, however, Sir Rimuru—you penalizing the *merchants* that way as well. I was not expecting that.”

The rest of my cabinet nodded in agreement. I guess the majority figured it was water under the bridge once the coins were paid. Seeing how harsh I was must've surprised them more than I thought.

“Indeed,” Rigurd said. “I did not expect such draconian measures myself.”

Hearing this must have piqued Gazel’s curiosity. “What? How did you handle them, Rimuru?”

I explained the whole story to the audience. When I was done, Gazel rolled his eyes at me.

“That was certainly... drastic.”

But he didn’t get angry, at least, demonstrating he understood my view of things, if only a little.

“Hee-hee-hee! I think he did the right thing. If someone nips you, you nip them back. He was only thinking about what’s coming ahead, wasn’t he?”

Ahhh, there was no outfoxing Elmesia. Her intuition, and her knack for deciphering my mind, was almost scary.

“What’s coming ahead, Sir Rimuru?” Benimaru asked.

I shrugged. "Well, it's just like I said to all of them. I have no intention of sitting downwind from the Council of the West forever. If possible, though, I'd like to build a friendship where we're all on equal footing."

"Yes, we're aware of that. That is why we were prepared for a patient process, up to that point."

I nodded back at Rigurd. "Right. So listen: That duke, Meusé, was just an errand boy, like Lady Elmesia said. I rejected him, and I followed *their* rules while I did it. If they want to continue this, their only choice is to send someone higher up on the food chain."

"I suppose so, yes..."

"...So you think we will have another chance to negotiate with them soon?"

"Yep. And that round will come after the terrible mistake they committed today. I think we'll kick off our next round of talks with just as much of an upper hand."

"I see..."

"I think the other side doesn't want to make it look like they're clearly our enemy. That's why they wanted to put a dog collar on me, like we just saw them try—and now that they failed, they're gonna have to face up and admit we can be an equal partner. And with that..."

"Either they wage economic warfare against us or they go back to the table. And neither side is really prepared for the former. Each one, after all, has a fully functional economic bloc even if the other side doesn't exist."

Gazel was right. And in this case, once our negotiations ended next time, that would be it—and we'd have an overwhelming advantage.

"And if that's how things turn out, then we can start working independently with each member of the Western Nations, regardless of what the Council's laws or whatever say. It's not war so much as an economic invasion, I suppose."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... And you can leave that to me, Sir Rimuru. In fact, I could present you with all the Western Nations on a tray in short order!"

I'm not asking for that, Diablo. In fact, it's not what I want at all. He was freaking me out again.

"Look, if you do that, it's just gonna leave me with *more* garbage to deal with, all right?!"

No. Definitely no.

"M-my pardons, sir."

"Ugh, you little brownnoser. Enough butting in and go fetch some more tea for Sir Rimuru!"

Shion landed a follow-up blow to the dejected Diablo. I wasn't much a fan of *her* act, either, but let's ignore that for now.

"Admittedly, I *do* think we could execute Diablo's idea, if given ample time. But—for now, at least—there's no point in doing that. I could think about it if there's a bunch of conflict going on, but it'd involve a lot of pain on our part. If we're just trying to build friendly relations, I don't want to go through that much trouble for it."

That seemed to convince everyone. We had our hands full just trying to improve our own country. Our first priority right now, above everything else, was to establish a firm economic bloc for ourselves.

"Yes," Elmesia said, "your opponent will have no choice but to negotiate. But I have to sympathize with them a little. It's rather hard to extract good conditions from a partner for whom economic sanctions and military threats mean next to nothing."

The same could easily be said for Thalion, I think... but she was right. It's safe to say that our rivals' options were restricted at best.

"I see," Geld replied. "That makes sense to me. So why go down so hard on the individual merchants?"

Maybe he felt I was being vindictive. It wasn't like all of them were in collusion with Duke Meusé—and those who were might've been forced into it out of obligation or the like. Revoking their Tempest business licenses was the biggest surprise to my peers.

But I had a reason, of course. I smiled and tried to explain, but before I could open my mouth, Mjöllmile—his smile even bigger than mine—intervened.

"Heh-heh-heh... The reason is simple, everyone. Just like Emperor Elmesia said, if someone nips at us, we have to nip them back."

"How do you mean, Mjöllmile?"

"Nip them back?"

"I-I'm not sure that's enough explanation..."

Benimaru, Rigurd, and Geld were still in the dark. Diablo was not, but he just poured out his tea instead of commenting—maybe he was still a bit bent out of shape about before. Pretty weak-minded for a demon, isn't he?

"Sir Rimuru asked me to take care of the remaining details for him. What he meant by that was to make those stranded merchants obligated to us and turn them into forces for ourselves."

Wow, Mjöllmile. I figured my message would get across to him, but he perfectly understood my intentions the whole time. I was going to fill him in afterward for safety's sake, but it looked like I wouldn't need to.

"If you want someone to do your bidding, it's far easier to have them owe you a favor, rather than browbeating or scaring them into it. It's also successful quite a bit more often."

Those were Elmesia's words, and all I did was put them into action. There *might* have been a little scaring and browbeating added to the mix, but I don't think I made any mistakes.

"Ah yes. Well played, Sir Rimuru."

"Indeed, that makes sense to me, too."

"So, Sir Mjöllmile, did you succeed in winning them over to our side?"

"Heh-heh... Without fail, indeed. I told them I would intervene in their cases, and now they're all indebted to us. Thanks to that bit of threatening from Sir Rimuru, things went much easier than I expected!"

Mjöllmile grinned as he spoke, making him look a tad villainous. I was glad he was successful, but he was making me out like a mob boss or something. I wasn't too fond of that, but ah well.

Regardless, everyone seemed to understand my reasoning now, so we moved on to the next topic.

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The next topic... or really, the main topic, I should say.

"So as we've described to you, Mollie here has taken care of the merchants for us. It's a problem that's given me a headache for several days, and now that it's behind us, I'd like us to share some thoughts on how we feel about the Founder's Festival. Any feedback you have to offer is fine, so let's get talking!"

The moment I finished speaking, Gazel cleared his throat. "Rimuru, as the king of a nation allied to you, there's something I want to say. I think we talked a little bit last night about you going out of control, but what I saw during the festival disturbed me. What was the meaning of *that*?"

"Um, what?"

I had no idea what he meant, but judging by the grumpy look on his face, I had done something bad again. What it was, I really had no clue. Maybe my outburst against the merchants? It didn't seem that way.

"You aren't aware of it yourself, then? See, this is *exactly* why I can't take my eyes off you for a moment! Vester, you said that projector was developed by you and Sir Gabil, correct? And was it also you who came up with the technology to transmit images from remote locations?"

"Ah, er, Your Majesty, that..."

Vester looked like a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Did he get so wrapped up in research that he forgot to report back to Gazel? Probably so. "Careless as ever," I heard Kaijin say under his breath.

"My lord," Gabil said, "that is incorrect. Sir Vester and I did develop that technology, yes, but the idea of incorporating the demon lord Clayman's magical image-recording

items in the projector was none other than Sir Rimuru's!"

Oh, thanks, Gabil. Did he *really* think it was smart to blab about that? I winced as Vester looked like he wanted to crawl into a hole.

"...I thought so," Gazel replied, looking tired. "I *truly* wish you could've given me *some* advance notice before you revealed that thing."

We only saw it as a useful, and vital, invention for entertainment purposes, but to the assembled royalty and nobility from the Western Nations who witnessed it, the reaction was quite different. "Why, this technology has so many potential uses," Gazel ruefully continued. "I hardly even know where to begin with it. But trust me, not a soul in the audience failed to understand how valuable it was."

Really? Because to me, it was just—like—*hey, check out the tournament fights on this big, easy-to-view screen.* Everyone dug it, it was good, and that's that. But to the world leaders on hand, it was a pretty heavy dose of culture shock.

"Something like *that* could change the way wars are waged," Gazel's friend Vaughn chimed in, Dolph nodding in agreement.

It was all too easy, it turned out, to think of military purposes for it. Giving orders to armies from a safe location, for example, would provide a huge advantage. Generals could send in assault teams to conduct enemy recon and channel their findings over to the main force, all without exposing themselves to any danger. Compared to person-to-person magical communications, this provided far more information far more quickly. Everyone was provided with the same visual and audio data, vastly improving the accuracy of orders.

Thus, this thing that we casually revealed to them was actually a revolutionary technology, one that had the potential to completely revamp civilization as this world knew it. I made it because I thought it'd be kinda nice to have, but it was really a Pandora's box of ideas.

"I wish you told me earlier," I blurted out.

"I wish you told *me* earlier!" Gazel bellowed back.

Now I regretted it—but hey, that's what this meeting was for. Things don't go the way you want them to all the time.

"Well, um, it should be said that running that projector requires a lot of magicules, so it doesn't work unless the user's pretty powerful magically. The range and quantity of data also depend on the user, so I don't think this is gonna spread that fast, you know?"

I tried to deflect the issue as best I could. That issue was actually being addressed with the development of a new magicule-gathering system, but something told me I shouldn't mention that right now. I'd break the news to Gazel in private later.

For now, the Dwarven king sighed. "Regardless, please try not to present such militarily useful technology without a moment's thought again, could you? Why, I think you may be the only person in the world who'd think of developing this for *entertainment* purposes."

I thought that wrapped up the topic, but then Elmesia spoke up.

"Yes, if you have any other inventions like that, I'd be happy to buy them, you know. I believe the world you come from has what's known as a 'patent' system? I would gladly compensate you for the rights to this technology, if you would give us priority in harnessing them."

"You know, Ellie, I think Thalion could do a lot with Tempest's bath and toilet infrastructure!"

"I know, Elen. Our negotiations with Mr. Yoshida have paid off as well, so I hope to see you pay more visits to my manor in the future, all right?"

"Oh, of course!"

Before I could reply, Elen broke into the conversation. She was seated adjacent to Elmesia, and the way they carried on, they seemed like two loving sisters more than anything. I knew they were related by blood and all, but Elen was acting shockingly familiar with the emperor of a dynasty. Meanwhile Erald, her father, was already going pale and shouting "Elen!?" in a high-pitched voice.

"Your Excellency! I know Elen is my daughter, but please refrain from spoiling her, if you would! And, Elen, you will *not* call Her Majesty 'Ellie'!"

"Erald certainly can be loud, hmm?"

"Oh, I know! Dad's always exaggerating like that!"

Man. These two girls put together may be downright dangerous. I felt bad for Erald. It was really shocking, how perfectly in sync Elen and Elmesia were. They probably *were* close friends, not just acting that way. Given the high fives they occasionally gave each other, the class system hardly seemed to exist at all with them. Elmesia El-Ru Thalion, Her Excellency the Emperor of Thalion, a figure who not even national leaders from the Western Nations could gain an audience with, seemed like a much different woman here. The royal knight guard behind her looked just as surprised.

"Members of the Magus! What you are seeing here is a state secret. Do not divulge it to anyone else!"

Erald saw fit to give that order, but I wasn't sure how much it'd be followed.

"And so," Elmesia continued, paying him little mind, "I would like you to send engineers from Tempest to our nation. This is an official request, of course, so I will gladly pay you for the guidance they will offer."

"You want us to send manpower your way?"

"That's right. If you want to keep your core technology a secret, you could always just send us whatever complete tools or resources we may need instead."

"Hmm... So we'd need a way to export the parts we make here over to Thalion."

We needed to tackle a few issues before I could grant Elmesia's request. The pipes used in our kitchens, toilets, and bathrooms were manufactured using technology from Kaijin and the other dwarves; I wasn't sure if Thalion's engineers could re-create it, and teaching them from scratch would take too long. Instead, it'd be much easier to just manufacture the needed parts here and send them over to Thalion.

"And while you're at it, perhaps you could transport them via that 'train' system you were talking about? I can provide the funding, so I hope you can begin developing that at once..."

It was like she was reading my mind. Gazel had a mind-reading skill or two, I knew, but was that the case for Elmesia as well? It didn't seem that way to me, but I'd better keep my guard up. Regardless, though, her offer was worth considering.

"We haven't gotten around to developing an actual train yet, no. If some of your 'sorcerous science' experts might be able to help with that, I'd appreciate it."

"Of course they can! Erald?"

"Y-yes, Your Excellency! I will send word out promptly."

Erald was still undauntingly faithful to Elmesia. He seemed more like a useful servant to her than a high-ranking noble. Gazel looked at him, his eyes piteous—the Dwarven king told me not even he could boss Elmesia around, so Erald's behavior must've given him something to think about.

Thus Elmesia, Emperor of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, was interested in teaming up with us. We'd no doubt sign a technology-sharing agreement and begin tandem research before too long. With Thalion's sorcerous science and Dwargon's pioneering work in elemental engineering, linking these distant lands together might not be a dream after all. The "overcomers" Luminus planned to send our way might be able to help out, too—I'd need to see what they were like first, but maybe they'd provide some useful input.

"This is a great thing to hear, Lady Elmesia. It ought to vastly accelerate development. We may just see 'magitrains' become practical for regular use sooner than we think."

"Oh? You call those 'magitrains'?"

"Yeah. My basic idea is to develop 'spirit cores,' or spirit magic-driven power reactors, then install them into a sorcerous science-based control system. Sounds perfect, right?"

"Ha! You make it sound so easy."

"How fascinating! Very fascinating indeed. I hope we can see it sooner rather than later."

Gazel must've thought I was far too optimistic, but his smiling face told me he was sure I'd manage it. Seeing him like that, I don't think he was really one to talk about "going out of control" on projects like this... Elmesia, meanwhile, looked like a girl who found a new toy, her expression astoundingly bright. It left quite an impression, much unlike the depressed-looking Erald by her. This definitely *would* accelerate development, for sure.

"All right. In that case, we'll start by laying down rails to Thalion first. We can do that

alongside our highway construction, so that'll save us some time."

If we were leading the project, it'd be easy to make sure it was all unified under the same standards. Completing the rail network first shouldn't be an issue, I thought, but:

"Wait! Sir Benimaru suggested the concept of a 'tunnel' to me at our meeting. Will you be needing one of those in the future?"

The question came from Momiji, an unexpected participant. If she was asking whether tunnels would be necessary, was she saying Thalion was open to us blasting one into their mountains?

"If possible, I would like to open one in the future. Our first order of business is building a rail nexus in Blumund. From there, we'll go through the Kingdom of Farminus and connect to the western entrance into Dwargon. Meanwhile, we plan to lay track south of Blumund as well, eventually winding up in Thalion. If we try to go through the Western Nations, we'd get tied up acquiring land-use rights and such. In other words, if we detour the track around the mountains, it'll lead to huge losses. At the same time, though, we don't want to force you into anything you don't want to do."

"I understand. I will trust in you, Sir Rimuru. If you can guarantee that it will not affect our mountains, I am willing to give you permission to build this 'tunnel.'"

"For real?!"

"Yes. Um, for real. But as a personal request, I hope you will enlist Sir Benimaru to overlook this..."

Momiji's cheeks reddened as she spoke. I didn't need her to finish the thought.

"Benimaru!"

"W-wait a second! Are you trying to sell me off, Sir Rimuru?"

"Don't make it sound like *that*. Geld's in the middle of a big job, too, you know. We'll need someone good at leading people, and you're the best guy we have!"

Geld nodded at me. Benimaru, meanwhile, looked like I was driving him up the wall.

"I'm afraid it's just not possible. I don't know anything about construction!"

No, I bet not.

“Ah yes... Yes, it may not be possible, huh...?”

And here I thought I could sacrifice Benimaru and get this whole thing wrapped up fast. Things never quite work out like that, I suppose. I didn’t want Benimaru out of town for *that* long anyway, so this idea was a stretch from the start.

“Well, sorry, but Benimaru’s my right-hand man here. Perhaps he could join me during my regular visits to inspect our progress, but...”

“Oh, that’s fine, too. As long as he will visit our homelands when you do.”

Momiji was all smiles. And judging by Hakuro’s triumphant chuckle, I suppose that compromise was acceptable from the start.

“Are you giving in yet, Benimaru?”

“I am not, but if you need a bodyguard during your inspections, I will accept that position.”

He shrugged. That was as much as he was willing to give. But it still made Momiji happy, and I wasn’t going to force any more out of him. The rest, you could say, is up to them. I’d just reap the profits.

“So, Lady Momiji...”

“Just ‘Momiji’ is fine, Sir Rimuru.”

Hakuro nodded at me as well, not minding the informality.

“In that case, Momiji, I’d like to conduct some surveying work to see if a tunnel is possible. Is that all right with you?”

“Yes. Feel free to carefully inspect the range for any potential issues.”

And if we didn’t find any, that meant we could start digging. With the tengu rapidly softening their stance against us, it looked like construction would go far more smoothly than I thought. Good. Next time I’m over, I’ll be sure to say hello to Kaede, Momiji’s mother—and I’ll make sure Hakuro is with us.

"So, Lady Elmesia, if we have your permission to perform similar surveying and excavation work within Thalion's borders?"

"You may have any permission you like. Erald, please make the arrangements."

Elmesia so readily passed off responsibility to other people—truly, a living ideal for me to follow.

"Yes, Your Excellency. Sir Rimuru, I will prepare the necessary permits. However, when construction work begins within Thalion, I request that workers from our nation be brought in for the project."

Erald was looking more bedraggled by the minute. Working under such a free-spirited emperor would turn anyone into a gifted servant. But he never forgot to add his own conditions, making sure each of his bullet points was fulfilled. If we handled all construction, that might make things harder for him, I suppose—but I had no objection, so I accepted the offer. And with a promise to help out if we ran into trouble along the way, we wrapped up the conversation.

This had started as a review meeting, but now we were rapidly deciding on a variety of important issues. That's because, thanks to the political leaders in the hall, we were cutting through an astonishing amount of bureaucratic red tape all at once. Though, really, it was mostly Elmesia's doing.

In the midst of this, Yohm, who had been silent so far, spoke up.

"Hey, pal—er, Sir Rimuru. I got a question, but is now okay to ask it?"

Simply offering one's opinion in this room packed with the world's biggest names took a lot of courage. Yohm must've been maturing as he grew into his new role.

"What's up, Sir Yohm?"

"Well, I'd prefer to explain it myself, but I'm not too well versed in this stuff, so I'd like my lady here to go over it instead. That okay?"

By which he means Mjurran? Because Yohm doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who'd take in concubines. My mind was put at ease when Mjurran stood up.

“Sorry I haven’t been around lately, Sir Rimuru.”

“Me neither, um, Lady Mjurran. Glad you’re well.”

“After everything you’ve done for me, Sir Rimuru, you hardly need to add ‘Lady’ to my name.”

Um, actually, I do, don’t I? I knew everyone there, Elmesia especially, had been talking *really* informally all evening, but I didn’t think this was something she’d want to get used to. But it was a bit too late for that, I suppose. Let’s hear her out, then tackle *that* subject later.

“Okay, Mjurran, what’s your question?”

“Right. This is related to the highway from Blumund to Dwargon running through our nation, as you discussed earlier. Should we consider this a part of the Monster-and-Man Cooperative Alliance you’ve mentioned before?”

Monster-and-Man... Cooperative... Alliance?

I liked the sound of that.

“You can treat it that way, yes. And I think I like that name for it, too. It encapsulates the ideal we’re aiming for really well.”

Monster and man working together for each other’s benefit. The term *monster* covered a diverse spectrum, of course, including some species better termed *demi-humans*. But regardless, that was the exact ideal I had in mind.

In the center of this alliance was our nation, Tempest. To the east, the Armed Nation of Dwargon. To the west, the Kingdom of Blumund. To the south, Milim’s domain. This alone was a vast alliance of monsters, and to that we could add the human side, centered around Blumund and including Farminus up north and Thalion down south—an expansive amount of human-controlled land. Plus, Blumund was our interface to the Western Nations and the people who lived there. If these diverse lands could join hands and form a true team, then I thought the Monster-and-Man Cooperative Alliance was a fine name for it.

“Thank you very much. Now, my question. In order to realize this ideal, our nation is willing to cooperate with you as much as we possibly can. Luckily, Diablo has coerced...

um, I mean *convinced* our noble ranks to join our side, and they are now very submissive—er, *cooperative* with us, so I think they will listen to anything we tell them. Thus, as one of the first steps our fledgling nation takes, we are thinking of launching a new national-level project to help support you.”

Basically, her question was what kind of project they should launch.

“Well, it’d involve agriculture, I guess, like you’ve been talking about.”

“Everything is going well there. We’re having our people grow the designated crops without issue.”

“Um, so what else...?”

Was there something else? Everything I thought to ask her about was already taken care of. Diablo’s work cowing the noble ranks into submission was complete, and Yohm enjoyed overwhelming support among the people. The role of the military in his government was clearly defined, and the entire nation was now united.

The old Farmus was gone, and the new Farminus had taken root in its place. I thought that tying up the loose ends from that was job one, but as Mjurran explained, that was already finished. The citizens had by now been notified that agriculture would be the nation’s focus for the next little while, too.

I was impressed. Diablo may’ve set everything up, but Mjurran, taking over from him, had a greater talent for this than I thought.

“Okay, well, can you bring together anyone who’s still out of work for me?”

“Certainly, Sir Rimuru. We were hoping that we could help with the rail-laying work for you as well. This transportation network will be a lifeline for moving around the crops we produce, won’t it?”

“Yeah, I imagine so. You’ll probably be producing a lot more than we’d be able to consume internally, besides. I think it’s important for a nation to bring food to anywhere it’s needed before it rots.”

Back in the Farmus era, when the government had traded on the sly with the Dwarven Kingdom, the products involved were crafts, weapons, and other durable goods that didn’t deteriorate over time. Responsibility for their transport was assigned to the

merchants; the nation collected customs taxes as essentially free income for no work on their part. That would change now. The nation would need to boost its trust, guaranteeing goods alongside the merchants. It was the start of a new era, one where Farminus provided guaranteed logistics for trade.

"I look forward to the day when these 'magitrains' run across the grasslands of our nation. I think they will transform our merchant class and how they conduct their business. We have much to learn if we want to contribute."

"Yep. They'll run far faster than wagons—a journey that takes a week now will be run in less than three hours. And that's *with* carrying over a hundred times more goods at once, I imagine."

“““What?!“““

Gazel and Elmesia didn't seem surprised, perhaps assuming this kind of leap. Everyone else was stunned—it was just so unexpected. Yuuki, Hinata, and Masayuki, meanwhile, all cracked smiles for other reasons.

"So yeah, I'll want to purchase the land we need now and plan our rail lines out to be as straight as possible, for efficiency's sake. Geld's staff, and the beastmen studying here in town, should be mastering surveying before long. I'm thinking of leaving that work to them and just performing the final checks when they're done. Mjurran, I can put all the workers you can give us under their command. Divide them up into teams, led by whoever's literate out of them."

"Very well. This is getting a little exciting."

Mjurran sounded up for it. She seemed ready to offer her support from the very start, so things would go pretty smoothly with Farminus, I felt.

The next person to raise a hand was Fuze. He smiled at me.

"With all the leaders here, I haven't had a chance to introduce myself yet. Hello."

He had attended the full festival, including the prelaunch banquet, but all the celebrities I was hanging with apparently made him too timid to speak up. I had noticed him, actually, but sadly, the timing never quite worked out. He'd looked like he was enjoying the show, though, so I'd resolved—and then promptly forgot—to chat

with him later.

"Ahhh, sorry about that. I meant to say hello, but..."

"No, no, it's fine, Sir Rimuru. You looked busy regardless. But anyway, today I have a friend who wants to speak about the very topic we've been discussing."

He then introduced the Baron of Veryard, a man I knew well, to the audience. I remember how much of a hard worker he was, one I trifled with at my own risk.

"My name is Veryard, and I appreciate being granted the permission to attend. Thank you, Sir Rimuru, and thank you in advance to everyone else I am speaking to."

He stood handsomely upright, then gave the hall an elegant bow. It was an impressive performance. One could hardly believe he was a rank-and-file noble from a small nation.

"Now, on behalf of my lord, His Majesty King Doram of Blumund, I wish to ask a question."

Veryard took a moment to survey the audience. The king himself was in attendance, along with his wife, the queen. They barely even registered. I hardly knew they were in here. I had told King Doram that we'd plan an official conference shortly, but I suppose we didn't need to any longer. This was kind of functioning as one. He was all smiles, an affable old man in appearance, and I wasn't sure if that was a good look for him right here.

In his place, Veryard began to speak.

"I was informed by Fuze that Sir Rimuru would be speaking about matters related to our homeland of Blumund's future place in the world. I have also heard from King Doram that he plans to make Blumund into a hub for commerce and distribution. I have been thinking about what that might look like, but listening to everything discussed today, I now have a much clearer picture. It appears, Sir Rimuru, that you envision Blumund as a sort of clearinghouse for logistics. Now, the 'magitrains' you speak of will no doubt vastly change the norms of this field. If a hub in this new logistical network is built in our nation, I am sure we will see goods from every corner of the land gather within our borders. Naturally, we will need someone to oversee all these goods, as well as people to oversee what each nation is lacking and make the necessary arrangements to address that deficiency. Sir Rimuru, do you wish for us to

perform these roles?"

That's Veryard for you. A lot sharper than Fuze, to be sure. And he put exactly what I was thinking about into words.

"Yes, that's right, but can you manage that? Because I'm sure it goes without saying that if all you can provide is space for this, that's fine, too. In that case, we'd promise to pay you a percentage tax every year for use of the land, but...?"

"Oh, nothing of it. Staying out of this business and lazily living off the profits is something our citizens would never be satisfied with. Certainly, we are willing to offer education and prepare for the times to come!"

Man. How many years into the future was this guy looking? I had the good Professor Raphael watching over me, but this guy was using his *own* brain to keep up with all of this? That went beyond just being visionary; it was like his mind was more sharply refined than anybody else's in the room.

But he was right. Blumund was about to experience a paradigm shift that would make it reconsider its value system for just about everything. The same would be true for other nations, but for Blumund, I'd imagine the results would be dramatic. Veryard could see this, and he just declared that he was preparing for it.

What a guy this is. He had already bested me in one round of negotiations. Just as I thought, I definitely had to stay alert around him. *I swear, I'm really glad he's not my enemy right now.*

"In that case, by all means. I'd like you to examine what sort of goods will be imported and exported from each nation and build ways to transport products to places that need them. For a nation so gifted in gathering and manipulating information, you'll be uniquely qualified, I'm sure."

"Ah, there's no pulling the wool over *your* eyes, Sir Rimuru. Very well. I promise you that I will bring this issue home and deliberate over it in further detail."

Like you're one to talk, I thought as I nodded.

I was trying to hold a Founder's Festival review meeting here, but now it'd turned into a huge political war of nerves. But it was worth it, because I no longer had to negotiate with Blumund. I was expecting to take more time navigating all manner of tricky

issues, but Baron Veryard helped spring me from all of that. Was that a good or bad thing? I wasn't immediately sure, but if we were at this point, might as well throw all my weight into supporting it.

With that, I promptly began to agonize over what I would ask Veryard for first.

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So we had talked on end about thorny issues related to running our nations, but now it was *really* time to focus on the festival. I mentally changed gears, preparing to listen to everyone's feedback.

"All right, does anyone else have anything to add...?"

Someone shot to their feet, as if waiting for the signal. It was Veldora. I dreaded this moment so much, I thought about pretending I didn't notice him, but...

"Rimuru, what is the meaning of this?"

What's the meaning of what?

"How do you mean?"

"The labyrinth! You *know* what I mean. I was anticipating so much, and nobody even attempted to tackle the hundredth floor!!"

After all that lecturing I gave him, he still wasn't the least bit apologetic, was he? He just. Doesn't. *Listen*.

Already, he was going on about the lines he memorized for the fateful encounter and so forth. I wanted to snap back at him about how little I cared, but I didn't. If I did, *that's* when he'd start really throwing his weight around.

"Well, yes, I have my thoughts about that as well."

"Do you? How reassuring to hear. So what are you going to do about it?"

What? I dunno. At the very least, we'd have to start dividing adventurer groups by strength levels.

“We’ll need to work on it, that’s for sure. Because the challengers who came in were all *decent*, at least. Intermediate or better, you know?”

“Decent...?”

“That’s kind of rude...”

“But I’m not sure I can deny that...”

Kabal’s party gloomily sighed at me. Considering how devoted they were to robbing my treasure chests blind, I hoped they would forgive at least a little sass.

“Nah, nah. Me, all I had to do was walk a little bit, and we were on Floor 10. The next thing I knew, my companions beat the boss for me...”

I think Masayuki meant to comfort them with that, but it just came off as self-aggrandizing. Then again, Elen didn’t seem too despondent about the experience, so maybe it wasn’t a big issue. I figured I could leave them be.

“...So I wouldn’t count on anyone knocking on your door for a while to come.”

Of course, for Veldora, he might not *ever* get any visitors, but...

“What?! Then what did Ramiris and Milim and I work so hard for?!”

He really should’ve included me in that list, but ah well.

“Hey, don’t worry. In terms of worldwide advertising, yesterday’s unveiling was a big success.”

“Oh?”

“Can you give us the details, Mollie?”

Mjöllmile stood up, brimming with confidence as he addressed Veldora.

“The footage we revealed from inside the labyrinth drummed up interest from multiple nations. I think Rare items appearing from the treasure chests generated a great deal of attention.”

"And that was *my* doing."

Ummm... Actually, Veldora may have done something right, maybe...?

"If my guess is correct, the nobles in the audience will likely be sending the adventurers on their payroll into the labyrinth before long!"

As he explained it, the noble classes often hired adventurers or stout mercenaries to serve as bodyguards. Now that they saw the treasures potentially available in the labyrinth, they'd likely send those people over to collect the booty, earning the rights to whatever they picked up in exchange for supporting them. Even adventurers without wealthy patrons would likely take multiple trips in, searching for fortune and glory. As Gaiye so eminently showed us, Rare weaponry and armor really *were* that hard to pick up otherwise.

We wouldn't mention it here, by the way, but Mjöllmile had an even more vicious scheme in mind—bringing on shills who'd "score big" in the labyrinth for him, like a crooked lottery, to stoke everyone's gambling instincts. Having them obtain flashy items that everyone could see as valuable would no doubt drum up a competitive spirit among the adventurers. Between that and other little tricks, we were planning ways to get adventurers and nobles alike addicted to this thing.

And Mjöllmile had even more plans in store.

"That's not all, either. I am considering instituting a bounty system as well. If we announce that anyone who conquers the Dungeon down to the hundredth floor will win a vast sum of money, I believe many nobles will bring adventurers over and support their quest to win it all."

He grinned. Dangle a vast fortune in front of nobility, he suggested, and they're all too greedy to resist. Talented adventurers would quickly find patrons to hire them, no doubt, using their wealthy bosses' funds to shore up their equipment and tackle the labyrinth in better shape.

It'd be like athletes taking sponsorships, actually, wouldn't it? And if their adventurers performed well, that'd paint their patrons in a better light and maybe earn them more money elsewhere. That'd offer more than enough reason for them to step up, Mjöllmile thought—and the noble sponsors could kick back in the city, too, enjoying all the entertainment while their "team" hacked away.

It could be fun, too, to broadcast labyrinth runs to the coliseum seats. Between this, that, or the other thing, we'd likely be able to attract large audiences.

"*Sponsors*," though, huh...? Hearing that concept from Mjöllmile really impressed me. I always knew he was talented, but I didn't think he had *this* much insight into the future. There's no doubting that sponsors would love adventurers in their stable landing a huge item or scoring an impressive boss defeat. There's no telling what he'd think of next.

Now, just one more thing.

After a great deal of discussion, Mjöllmile and I had something we wanted to work on with the Free Guild. My financial partner had everyone in the hall enthralled; even Veldora had shut up. Realizing this was his chance, he spoke up.

"Now, while we have Grand Master Yuuki Kagurazaka here, I have a request, or an offer, to present to you."

"An offer? What's that?"

"As I said, we are planning to offer bounty prizes in the labyrinth—and that's something we would like the Free Guild to manage."

"Why is that?"

"Mainly for the advertising effect, you see. With all the Guild locations out there, you'll be able to spread the word quickly worldwide."

"Yeah. That's certainly true. But what else?"

"Well, in addition, I wanted to use Guild membership cards to manage the challengers."

"Ah. Wow. Yeah, that's quite an idea..."

Yuuki sighed, either amazed or exasperated.

We had thrown around the idea of issuing "Labyrinth Cards" to challengers, but this actually required a lot of work. This way, we could reduce running expenses and give some of the workload to the Free Guild's staff. In a way, it was Mjöllmile's quest to

palm off responsibility for it on someone else.

“But this offers certain advantages to the Free Guild as well.”

“Oh?”

“You see, the monsters in the Forest of Jura are managed by the orders of Sir Rimuru. That management will be expanding to the edges of the forest’s expansive borders in the future...”

“...Ah. And when it does, there’ll be less monster-hunting work to be had?”

“Precisely. But that won’t be a problem, because the labyrinth will be home to a vast number of monsters in time. Hunting them down provides magic crystals, as well as pelts, fangs, claws, and other components, all on a regular basis...”

“...!!”

“And wouldn’t that boost the Guild’s profits as well?”

Defeating monsters let you obtain parts and ingredients from them. Selling them to the Guild earns adventurers income. When the Guild sells them to shops and so on, they earn the resulting profit margin. And meanwhile, we’d leave adventurer management to the Free Guild and collect taxes from them.

Going forward, there was likely gonna be a lot of out-of-work adventurers going around. This labyrinth can help create new outlets, and new jobs, for them to take advantage of. *Nobody loses*, I thought.

But how would Yuuki respond?

“I’m sure Rimuru gave you a few suggestions about this, didn’t he? Well... Mjöllmile, was it? I’d like to think about this idea, but it’s likely that we’ll accept it and establish a new location in town here. Would you be able to provide a building for it?”

“Of course. Once you know who you’ll assign here, we can work out all the details later.”

“Man, there’s just no beating you, Rimuru...”

Yuuki grinned at me. Mjöllmile and I had our deal.

*

I turned back toward Veldora.

“Did you hear that? Once that’s accepted, we’re gonna have a ton more adventurers going in.”

“Mm-hmm...”

“And a year may be asking too much, but in two or three years, I think we’ll see some pretty formidable challengers.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Well, it’s simple logic. They’ll be polishing their skills in a labyrinth where there’s almost no chance of dying. It’d be weird if they *didn’t* get stronger.”

“Ah yes. Well said, Rimuru. I look forward to this!”

To someone as long-lived as Veldora, two or three years went by in a flash, I imagined. He was smiling now, chatting about how exciting this could be. Right. If that placated him for now, then we were good.

As I gloated internally, Hinata raised her hand.

“May I have the floor?”

“Yes?”

I didn’t think she’d complain to me at *this* point, but I still tensed up anyway. Once I decided I had a hard time with someone, it was difficult to shake that image from my mind, I guess.

“I have a request... or a suggestion.”

The way she put that wasn’t exactly encouraging. Mjöllmile’s eyes were averted, sweat running down his head.

“...I’m listening.”

“Thank you. If you’ll excuse me—”

Hinata’s concern was for labyrinth users failing to conduct adequate safety measures during outside work. If they grew used to not dying inside there, she feared, they might wind up unprepared when they’re in the “real” world. This had occurred to me as well, but I concluded it was just a “play at your own risk” thing and that was that. Having Hinata point it out left me tongue-tied.

“Hmm... Well, apart from warning people, I didn’t think I could do very much...”

“It’s an issue that could affect people’s lives, you know. You can’t just let it go unaddressed.”

“Um, yeah, but...?”

“No.”

“Y-yeah, but, Hinata?”

Before I could plead with her, Hinata offered a suggestion of her own.

“...But if you accept the suggestion I’m about to make, I’ll be fine with what you’re doing here.”

“All right. I’ll listen. What is it?”

I tried to be reserved with her. I shouldn’t have worried.

“Ha-ha-ha! You are such a... Never mind. You don’t have to tense up like that. This could be useful to both of us.”

“Huh?”

“Challenging this labyrinth is a fine idea. It’ll help improve your core skills, and I think you can learn how to effectively dispatch assorted monsters better this way. But I’m concerned that it’ll reduce people’s awareness of the potential lethality involved. So I’d like to send over a Priest or two from the Western Holy Church.”

“A Priest?! No! Have you lost your mind, Chief Paladin Hinata?!”

It wasn’t me shouting but Fuze. A lot of other people were surprised as well, so I asked why. It turns out a Priest, in Church parlance, was a kind of magic user, a religious healer. I think I had actually heard about them before—they were a rarity, in fact, one of the few individuals in the Church hierarchy able to harness “holy magic,” which the organization kept a guarded secret. Those ranked a bishop or higher could apparently perform “divine miracles,” including the replacement of lost body parts.

“I am quite serious. Yes, their abilities are classified, but they, too, need to learn and grow. No matter how much genius-level talent they have, only a very few manage to master the divine miracle of Resurrection. At this rate, we risk losing skills and lore that have been passed down for ages. Times of war are one thing, but it can be frustratingly difficult keeping this knowledge alive during peace.”

So basically, raising the dead as a skill was dying out because there were fewer dead to raise? Maybe it wasn’t *exactly* that, but I understood what Hinata meant well enough. Her idea was to use my Dungeon to help improve her people’s holy magic.

It was heaven-sent, exactly what we needed here. Even if they never learned Resurrection, having Priests with high-level healing spells around would help keep people safer during work outside the labyrinth. If I wanted to fully learn the “*secret skills of faith and favor*” Luminus turned me on to, seeing and analyzing a Priest’s skills in action would be a good shortcut as well. I had no reason to turn Hinata down.

“Well, they’d all be welcome here.”

“Hee-hee! I thought you’d say that.”

Ignoring the gasps of surprise around us, Hinata and I came to an agreement. Priests were now going to be lurking around the labyrinth.

I thought that was the end of the meeting, but Hinata had one more suggestion.

“Also, changing the subject a little, I’d like to have the paladins try conquering the labyrinth as part of their training.”

“Huhhh?”

“We could have Sir Veldora over there—say, weren’t you selling *takoyaki* at one of the food stalls?”

“That... That doesn’t matter, does it? Just go on with what you were saying!” I begged.

“Y-yes! I was certainly *not* running a *takoyaki* stand under the name ‘Alias’!”

“...Oh. And here I was trying to kid myself that it was someone else... Well, all right,” Hinata grumbled, looking a bit tired out. But there was no fooling her. Although, really, anyone who knew Veldora would’ve spotted it.

The Storm Dragon insisted that he wanted to run a food stall with a grill during the festival, so I asked Mjöllmile to get him a space and someone to help out. Then, for reasons that were beyond me, Veldora convinced the busy Kurobe to craft a special grill top for him—one made for cooking *takoyaki*, the balls of batter and octopus, more popularized in the city of Osaka.

I allowed this provided that nobody found out it was Veldora running it, but—really—everybody in town knew the guy anyway, so I begged everyone involved to just keep it a secret from the coworkers at the stall. Along these lines, I asked him to come up with a fake name for the festival, and he decided upon “Alias” for it.

Thus we had “Alias Takoyaki” among the stalls, and from what I heard, it was actually a huge success. But now we were going *way* off-subject.

“So, um, if we can forget about that for a moment, can you tell me more about the paladin training you’re picturing?”

I lobbed the conversation back toward Hinata. She didn’t protest, thankfully.

“Based on what I’ve seen, new paladin recruits likely wouldn’t be able to win against that Bovix guy from the tournament. So I’d like to group them in parties of five or six and let them go inside. It’ll give them more on-the-field training, and it’ll also help train the Priests I mentioned. And if I had to guess, our higher-level paladins could probably make it to Floor 50 right now.”

“Oh? That is quite fine by me. In fact, bring them on!!”

Veldora was certainly up for it. And paladins were all ranked A or higher. With that kind of force, a few of them in a team could probably get past Bovix.

“I’d also like some of our captains to join in.”

More murmurs of surprise from the crowd.

“Do you mean that, Lady Hinata?!”

“You would have *us* dive into the labyrinth as well?”

Arnaud and Bacchus, the first paladins to ever stay in Tempest, immediately fired back at Hinata. She didn’t relent.

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s the perfect training ground, and you’ll never get killed in there. If foes that strong are found around Floor 50, they’ve got to be even stronger below there. Maybe even *you* couldn’t win.”

Veldora contentedly nodded. The paladins, meanwhile, were livid.

“N-no, um, I don’t think so, Lady Hinata. We’re the Crusaders, the most powerful army out there... and we have a Saint among us, the complement to a demon lord.”

“Exactly. The demon lord’s personal leaders are one thing, but a typical dungeon monster would be cannon fodder to us—”

“Then prove it to me.”

Arnaud and Bacchus’s defense was pulverized by Hinata’s perfectly fair argument. Certainly, if they could beat Floor 100 and conquer the whole labyrinth, that’d prove they were correct, all right. That was the pure truth, and there was no possible way to spin it.

Sadly, though:

“W-wait a minute! But isn’t the guardian of the hundredth floor...?”

“Heh-heh-heh... Kwaah-ha-ha-ha! It’s supposed to be a secret, but I will let you in on it—it is I, Veldora the Storm Dragon!!”

He was certainly enjoying himself, as Arnaud and Bacchus turned pale with despair. There was no turning back now. I gladly accepted Hinata’s request.

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That seemed to finish up most of our business, so I decided to take this opportunity to get one thing straight. In fact, this was the main reason I'd called so many people in here.

"Now, there's one thing I'd like to ask all of you..."

My question was about the merchants from eastern lands. I had a suspicion they were plotting something, so I wanted to discuss this as I cautioned the rest of the hall about them.

"Our nation is open to anybody, and we allow people to go in and out as they please, so I'm sure Eastern merchants are taking advantage of that. But..."

"Yes, King Gazel, we have been putting them all under surveillance."

Henrietta, knight assassin and head of Dwargon's intelligence organization, had been keeping tabs on them. That kept them from doing much, I'm sure. Taking any action would be suicide, in fact.

"Unfortunately, we have only a small presence as a trade partner, but we *do* have a talented intelligence agency. We do receive goods from the East, but not many of their merchants are seen within our borders. Perhaps they do not see us as worth the effort."

"Um, should you really refer to yourself in those terms...?"

So they came to Blumund, too, if not in great numbers. It sounded like they were watched over carefully, so no worries there.

"And is my own kingdom safe from them?"

"Of course, Your Excellency. All imported goods are kept internally by our dynasty. The thirteen kingdoms are not given the right to access them."

The Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion's borders were all but closed to foreigners. It barely even interacted with other nations, and there was no way for merchants from the East to get inside. I sincerely doubted any of them could hoodwink Elmesia, so they were likely fine as well.

My main worries were for Farminus, the new nation I'd left to Yohm.

"Hey, by the way, did Razen check our account books like Diablo asked?"

"You need to stop speaking so informally, Yohm... Sorry. He said he examined them all, investigated how much impact there was from the merchants, and severed ties with them all."

Of course Diablo had it handled. It's scary how talented he is. I thought about giving him some praise, but not in front of all our guests.

"And as far as the Free Guild goes, we'll have to leave those decisions to each office."

I was sure they'd have to. Not all Eastern merchants were government agents; some of them were just conducting regular business, no doubt. The Guild headquarters couldn't tell every regional base to cut off all current trade with them. Their members needed work, after all. Thus, Yuuki instead promised he'd make sure the headquarters provided guidance as best they could, so I'd leave matters to him.

"And the Western Holy Church—or, I should say, the Holy Empire of Lubelius has halted all business with Eastern merchants."

"Oh?"

I wasn't expecting that from Hinata. I asked why, and she replied that they came close to being taken advantage of.

"There was a merchant named Damrada, a fairly important one, so we trusted in him... I never thought he'd actually try to trick me."

"Trick you?"

"Yes. On the night of the Walpurgis, someone snuck into Lubelius. I happened to be around to chase him away, but I was actually supposed to be meeting with Damrada then."

"Hmm. And those two events have to be connected, huh?"

Listening to Hinata's rundown, Gazel agreed with her—Damrada and this intruder must be related. I thought so, too. But how was this mystery foe involved with the

Eastern merchants? And wasn't that when the demon lord Roy was killed, too? Was that this intruder's doing?

"Well," I concluded, "either way, I think we all know what we're dealing with."

Everyone nodded. Good. Building a network of nations on the alert for Eastern activity would help us get a grip on their future moves. And now that I knew we were all on the same page, I officially adjourned the meeting.

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Now, only my own staff remained in the meeting hall.

"So, Sir Rimuru, have you come to a conclusion?"

"Yep," I said to Benimaru. "No doubt about it. The 'patron' Clayman refused to identify is Yuuki Kagurazaka."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I agree. The lack of evidence is an issue, but I have no doubts, either."

If Diablo agreed, there was no room for questioning it. I had only become sure of it after Luminus gave me her advice. The other woman I was reserving judgment on for now, but Yuuki was definitely suspect.

I mean, only a very few people knew about what had happened between Shizu and me. I wasn't sure who leaked that info to Hinata, but she told me herself that it was a merchant from the East. Then, as I conducted my own investigations, I came across some interesting information.

"Mjurran told me that she never heard of the Moderate Jesters."

"Clayman was always a careful demon lord," Geld said. "He didn't trust his own men one bit. I think he kept that company of clowns a secret from them all."

He was right. Clayman believed nobody, and he wanted the Moderate Jesters to remain unknown to his entire bureaucracy.

"However, as Shuna proved in her investigations, he and the Eastern merchants had public connections to each other. Mjurran saw them herself. She even advised them a

few times."

"Hohh. Which means..."

"The clowns approached Clayman disguised as merchants?"

Geld and Gabil seemed convinced. I nodded back at them.

"I got some testimony from Adalmann on this subject. Apparently, the Jesters showed themselves to him."

The Jesters did not go through any particular pains to hide themselves. They certainly didn't disguise themselves as merchants, and if Adalmann saw them, they must have at least ventured near Clayman's manor. No one had seen them inside, however—which made my theory more likely.

Diablo's smile widened. "The Moderate Jesters and the Eastern merchants... There's little doubt these two groups are connected."

"Right," Benimaru said with a smile of his own. "And if Laplace didn't show up in that battle, then it was likely him who killed Roy."

Out of the three Jesters I knew, Footman and Teare were busy behind the scenes in the battle against Clayman's forces, looking for and killing any magic-born liable to betray the demon lord. What was the third among them doing, then...? Benimaru had to be right—this other Jester was infiltrating Lubelius, in search of something.

"Everyone who knows about Shizu and me was present at today's meeting. That was why I asked the last question I did."

Kabal, Elen, and Gido were out of the question. Gazel and Elmesia could be crossed off the list. Fuze, Veryard, and Blumund's royal couple were beyond a reasonable doubt—they had no clear motive and only trivial connections to the merchants. And Hinata, being almost victimized herself, couldn't have perpetrated this.

That just left Yuuki.

"He admitted that he has connections to Eastern merchants, yes."

"He couldn't have pretended otherwise. That high-quality paper they've got is made

in the Eastern Empire, apparently, and Yuuki always had an ample supply of it. There's no way he could've denied it."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... We could've extracted something more from him today. A written confession or the like. A pity we didn't."

It was, but I wasn't too sad about it.

Shizu and I had a unique relationship. Nobody who knew about it was the kind of person who'd breezily gossip about it to complete strangers. If someone leaked the news, it had to be someone opposing me. And if you considered the list of people who were sure that information leak would make Hinata act—Yuuki was the only one I could think of.

To tell the truth, I *had* suspected Kabal's group at first. But it was Elen's advice that made me decide to become a demon lord in the first place. Plus, with Elmesia backing her up the whole time, there'd be no reason for her to tell the Eastern Empire about me. Revealing such a vital secret would benefit the enemy alone, not her at all—and the same was true for the Blumundians. If they wanted to oppose me, they wouldn't have signed a treaty with me. They would've just held back, avoiding deep ties with us, and profited from the fallout.

"If I had to guess, the Eastern merchants are trying to expand their influence in the Western Nations. And the Church forces got in the way of that, didn't they?"

"I think so, too. If they pitted you against Hinata, Sir Rimuru, chances are they hoped you would kill each other off."

"Yes. It is clear that it didn't matter to them who killed whom."

Benimaru and Diablo were in agreement with me. I went on.

"The two main influential groups in the Western Nations are the Council and the Church, and I'm guessing the Eastern merchants are trying to work on both of them, slowly expanding their clout over time. And working with them..."

"...is the Free Guild, then?"

I briskly nodded at Diablo. As motives went, this was the biggest and most plausible one. I had no physical evidence to back it up, but my conclusion was already made.

“So what will you do?”

I thought I could hear Diablo offering to assassinate him at once, but I pretended not to.

“That’ll depend on what our foe does. I wondered if I was wrong for a moment, judging by how much support he offered us today, so let’s just be very careful with him and see if we find a way to grab him by the tail.”

“Very well. I will ensure the Guild building in town is kept under constant surveillance.”

“Thanks, Soei. Everyone else, I don’t want to see *any* unauthorized moves from you!”

“““Yes, sir!“““

Excellent.

Honestly, I wanted to corner the guy right now and interrogate him. But without evidence, if he talked his way out of it, I’d be sunk. Yuuki ran the entire Free Guild, and I couldn’t accuse him out of the blue with nothing to fall back on. And besides, *maybe*—I mean, it’s not a nonzero chance—*maybe* I really was wrong about all this.

Understood. The chances of that are believed to be extremely low.

They’re *believed* to be, that’s for sure. Without real evidence, not even Raphael could make a firm conclusion.

“Well... In my old world, we had a concept called ‘presumed innocence.’ In other words, someone’s always innocent until it can be proved that they’re guilty. But even so, don’t let up on them.”

My staff nodded their understanding.

I had no idea what Yuuki was thinking. Hinata, Clayman too, the Eastern merchants, the Free Guild, maybe the Council itself, and I—perhaps we were all dancing on the palm of his hand. We couldn’t be sure of that right now, but that was about to change. We knew who to watch out for, and now we just had to quietly prepare and wait for the confrontation to come...

The excitement of the festival was over. Normal life rushed back into the scene all too quickly. We had a mountain of things to do; problems kept piling up, no matter how many we solved. There was no time for me to wallow in melancholy.

I heaved a gloomy sigh as I thought about the game of wits Yuuki and I were likely about to engage in.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

EPILOGUE

FLAMES OF AVARICE

EPILOGUE

FLAMES OF AVARICE

Duke Meusé staggered along. He had just tasted fear. Fear and despair.

The demon lord Rimuru was no one he had any hope of handling. The plan was to make Rimuru owe him a favor, then tame him into doing exactly what he wanted him to. But, looking back, he couldn't have been further out of his league.

It made Meusé feel laughable. He thought he had him wrapped around his finger, but the shoe had been on the other foot the whole time. He couldn't help but laugh about it, but he no longer had the mental fortitude.

And thinking about it, those people have it worse than I do...

He recalled the merchants gathered up for him. A handsome man came from behind the demon lord's shadow, reading off their names, birthplaces, and the type and price for each and every one of their goods. His voice was like an accursed spell binding Meusé's heart.

How deep did they search...?

If they were disallowed from dealing in the demon lord's domain, they'd all have to return to their home nations. And Rimuru knew that. Reading off all their nationalities was his way of applying that extra beat of pressure to their threats.

The demon lord's domain would no doubt develop further in the future, as would any nation working with it. It was the creation of a new, and powerful, economic bloc, and it meant any nation shut out of it would immediately fall behind in competitiveness. No nation had the luxury of sheltering its own merchants and ignoring a new alliance like this.

Having just experienced the Founder's Festival, Meusé could see that as the unvarnished truth. Such wonderful music, such innovative science. The gourmet delights, all rarities in the Western Nations, were a shock to him. Monster nations, rural towns, and so on... He'd looked down on them all before he came here, but now he felt

pathetic for doing so. Sensing all this culture he had never seen before made his heart throb.

Being spurned by this demon lord was a serious issue, one that had to be remedied no matter what. But so confident was Meusé in his scheme that he misjudged how Rimuru would react to it.

Those merchants may have nowhere left to go, but I'm just the same...

There would be no more advancement in his career. The Five Elders weren't forgiving enough to allow failures in their midst. He would lose his fortune; perhaps he'd even be purged. But all Meusé could do was report the truth. Because no matter where he went in this wide world, there was no fleeing the eyes of the Rozzo family...



"I see he really *did* fail, Grandfather."

"That he did, Maribel. I should have let you handle that. When I first heard the news, I thought that nation was too valuable to destroy, and *now* look..."

"You couldn't help it. I saw and heard it, too... and I felt it. The aroma of a culture from my past. But that's why we need to erase it all before it becomes known."

It was Maribel's indirect way of telling Granville Rozzo his orders were too half-hearted. And as head of the Rozzo family and chief mediator among the Five Elders, Granville bitterly agreed with her.

The Tempest Founder's Festival was attended by the world's ruling classes. It was Granville who ignored Maribel's warnings and decided to see it. If they could bring the demon lord Rimuru under their wing, they could've invited him onto the Council—in a way that benefited them, of course.

That was their decision... but with far fewer movable pawns available at the moment, Granville grew timid. That was why Maribel stopped him from taking action, instead having a third party feel this demon lord out. And as a result, Duke Meusé failed.

If only Maribel was there, the Rozzos would never have lost. Granville was sure of it, but Maribel looked like a young child... and instinctively, he hesitated to let her go off alone.

"Grandfather, I need to make a move of my own."

"...That's the only way?"

"Don't worry, all right? I am Maribel. I am *greed*. I wish for everything, and I take it all for myself. This world belongs to the Rozzo family!"

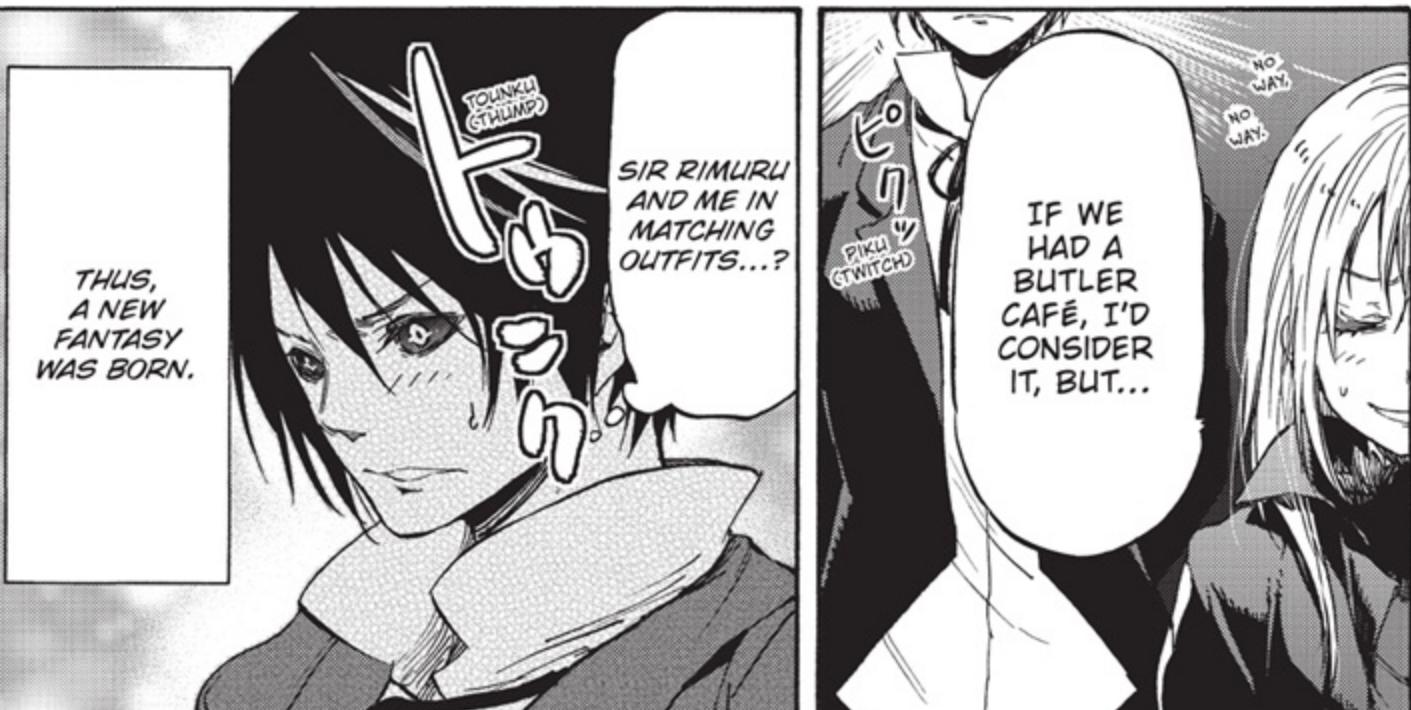
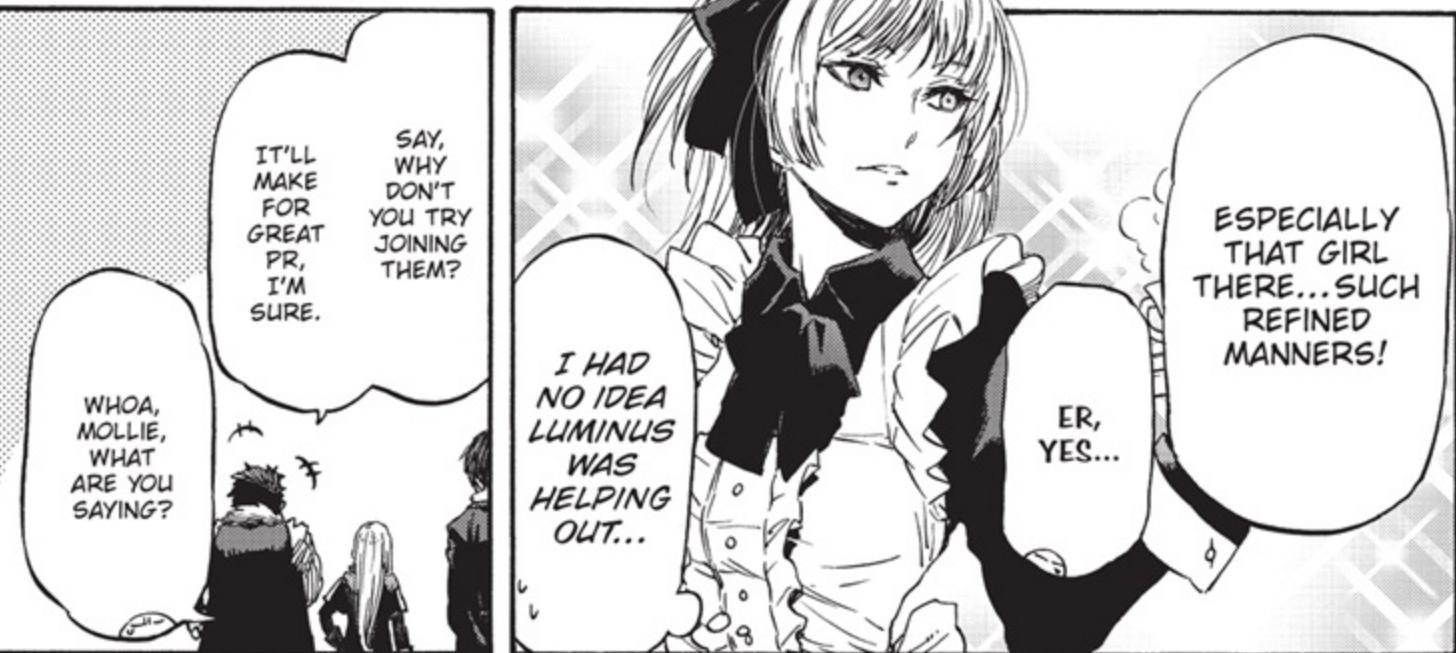
"That it does. You're right. It's all in your hands."

Granville gently caressed Maribel's head.

Thus Maribel the Greedy took action. And then, one month later, a letter arrived in Tempest from the Council of the West.

The OOOOOO Café

Art: Taiki Kawakami



AFTERWORD

Long time no see. Here we are at Volume 9. The deadline for this one came early for me, so it's a relief that I got it submitted in time.

Volume 9 counts as the continuation of the “Demon City Opens” arc from the web novels, and really, now that I’m done writing it, it was absolutely crazy that I thought to cram the contents of Volumes 8 and 9 into a single book. The last volume had returned back to normal with fewer pages, but this one has, well, yo-yoed back up. Yes, yo-yoed. My diet was successful, I let my guard down, and *boom*, I’m right back where I came from. My own weight’s the same way, actually; I yo-yoed back up around fifteen pounds because I don’t have the free time for exercise when writing. Next time, I’ll try to spread things out some more so it doesn’t turn out like this.

Really, the first thing here needs to be the plot. Of course, the term *plot* is a little nebulous, so let’s use some more concrete terms.

First, write out the characters and events that’re appearing!

You gotta do that, at least. It’s very important, as I learned the hard way; time lines and relationship charts play second fiddle.

Why am I saying this? Because toward the end of writing, I kept on making serious errors along the lines of “Ah, I forgot to put this event in!” or “Ah, I haven’t inserted this character yet...”

Honestly, there are too many characters in this volume. I regret that a little, but I’m just going to say it. I couldn’t help it. This volume depicts a big festival, and it was hard to cut anyone out.

This makes me recall a conversation I had with my editor, Mr. I, early on in this series—while I was writing Volume 2, maybe.

“I like how you aren’t introducing too many characters for the first time in this volume.”

“Oh, you think so?”

“Yeah. If readers don’t remember characters, they’ll start to have trouble figuring out who’s who. Then they won’t be able to focus on the story.”

“I see...”

“That, and designing visuals for them all can be difficult, among other reasons.”

“Should I maybe remove some? People like Kurobe don’t appear much. Maybe I could combine Hakuro with the blacksmith character?”

“Nah, you’re doing fine now. *Slime* has a lot of unique characters, so I think it’d be more of a problem if you cut them in weird ways!”

...That sort of thing. I’m not as confident with my memory skills as I used to be, so I think I’m filling in some of the hazier points, but that was the gist of the conversation.

At the time, I just thought, *Ah, neat, so I don’t have to cut anyone*. Kurobe exists as he is today thanks to Mr. I. So, with this get-out-of-jail-free card, I no longer restrained myself from introducing new characters.

Then, while writing Volume 7, I contacted him one day...

“Ummm, if we could talk...”

“Sure, what is it?”

“I’m going to have some more people serving Hinata, but is that okay?”

“...How many are we talking?”

“You see, I’m planning for six captains, plus around three other people.”

“That sounds like a lot to me—”

"Well, wait a minute. You know Hinata is responsible for two different groups, right? Don't you think we're gonna need to name a fair amount of people under her?"

"If you put it that way..."

"Also, I want to beef up the Luminus side, so I'd like to add some other main characters to it!"

"I see! All right. In that case, let's go with it!"

Thus, although he realized I was favoring my beloved Luminus, Mr. I was convinced to let me add Arnaud and the other paladins, as well as the Three Battlesages.

Now, going from Volume 8 to Volume 9, all these characters are getting woven in with new ones, and it's turning into a huge crowd. The thought was, *Oh man, it's gonna be chaos*. If I had given names for everyone first thing, I could've avoided these kinds of mistakes. I learn something new every day, I suppose, and I'll be using that knowledge going forward.

So I remembered all of this as I completed my final check, and then I realized:

Wait, the Three Battlesages don't appear at all, do they?

Come to think of it, Glenda double-crossed Luminus and shacked up with the Rozzos, but what have Saare and Grigori been up to in the meantime? As all of you saw in Volume 9— Oh wait, you didn't, because they never showed.

Ah well. These things happen. Characters who even the author almost forgot about who didn't appear this time are bound to come back in the future, so keep an eye out for their exploits!

*

Moving on, I need to give everyone a notice about a mistake I made.

In the Japanese edition, Emperor Luminus refers to herself in the first person as *warawa*, which (in my mind) reflects a very prim, fussy noblewoman. However, it turns

out that *warawa* in the Japanese language is actually a self-deprecating, humble personal pronoun. I had the completely wrong impression.

I actually knew this by the time Luminus appears in the print novel version, but I thought changing things at this point would be too strange, so I'm still going with *warawa*.

There was a time in the web novel version when I used the Japanese term *yakubusoku* to mean “not up to a task” when it actually means “overqualified for a task,” which a lot of people pointed out was wrong. Honestly, I wish I could’ve kept that in the print version. I hoped that readers would understand what I meant even though I misused the term. However, deliberately misusing vocabulary in a printed piece of literature might prevent people from learning the correct meaning of words later on. I think a writer should be allowed freedom of expression, but yes, it’s important to use vocab correctly, or at least discourage incorrect usage.

As for Luminus, nothing’s been altered for her, so I just want to make it clear here:

Luminus *has no intention of acting humble or deferential toward anyone!!*

Just think of her as *arrogantly* calling herself *warawa*, as befits her atmosphere. Thanks.

*

Now I’m almost out of afterword pages. Once again, Mr. I just called me up and said, “Hey, six afterword pages please, okay?” Hoo boy. My first draft already had a ton of text, and as we revised it, I expanded my depictions of some characters—and now this afterword. It looks like Mr. I has once again lost any resistance to these volumes getting thicker and thicker.

I can’t complain, since it beats being asked to pare it down. Okay, that’s not entirely true. But I’m a little concerned about how the next volume will turn out. The plot’s really going to start moving, I think, so...

With all the events in store, I’m excited to see how I’m going to piece the story together. I’m hoping to really focus on the plot this time, starting with a scene in the labyrinth I couldn’t quite flesh out in this volume.

See you in the next volume!

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